

Chapter Eighteen: Assault on Rocket Town

"The hope of tomorrow is not the light of heaven but the darkness of the depths of the earth." - Vincent Valentine

Technology - is it good or evil? This question has plagued philosophers for hundreds of years. Is man in control of the force of invention, or is he a prisoner beneath its neon claws? Has man lost control of technology like the age-old monster of Frankenstein? Is it a rampaging force destined to wipe the world clean of all traces of humanity? Or is it something more; something beyond our comprehension?

Questions like these had no place in Cid Highwind's head as the Junon-1 rocket on which he was trapped aboard raced towards the heavens at increasing speeds. The temperature of the engine room was rapidly rising, Cid's flesh had begun to turn red and streams of sweat covered his entire body. The rocket itself was in fact not really a rocket - it was something far different. Rufus Shinra had created the Junon-1 to orbit the Planet as a weapons platform. It was equipped with high-powered lasers and missiles and various other instruments of destruction designed to enslave the populace of the Planet through threats of global annihilation.

A tattered blue flight jacket hit the metal floor of the engine room. The heat was unbearable to the old pilot. Cid wiped the sweat from his forehead with his arm and wheezed. He moved over to the machinery and tanks lining the small space on shaky legs. The rocket trembled under his feet as the afterburners roared violently. He saw a familiar access panel, quite similar to one found on the Shin-Ra 26. He grasped the hot, metal handle and pulled with all his might. No use.

He grunted and wheezed as he anchored a foot against the panel and continued to pull as if his very life depended on it - because it did.

No use. Cid's vision began to get dark.

No.... not yet... I have to save them...

The pilot weakly gritted his teeth and made a last, desperate attempt. In one burst of strength, Cid howled above the roar of the Junon-1's engines! Still, his efforts were futile, to put it politely. The old Captain realized his hearing had left him. His was a darkened, silent world.

.....Shera.... I'm sorry..... I couldn't.....

Cid Highwind lost consciousness, but the deadly rocket continued heavenward, its disastrous path unaltered.

Vincent.....

"What is it?"

You must help me....Please.....

"Lucrecia?"

"What the hell are you saying?" Reno snapped at the crimson-clad warrior helping him along the dark, damp cave. The spiteful Turk impatiently eyed the man who had rescued him from certain death - but now seemed to be conversing with phantoms. "Damnit, Valentine, I swear if you don't stop talkin' to yourself I'll ram my nightstick up your ass!"

Vincent jolted back to reality and glowered at the red-haired Turk. Reno's normally sloppy blue suit was littered with dried blood stains and holes, and the man inside it had seen better days.

"I could easily leave you here if that is what you wish," said Vincent in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Nevermind," Reno grimaced, still in pain from the torture he had received earlier, "Let's just go."

The unlikely pair resumed their arduous trek through the almost completely black cavern, nothing less than destiny awaiting them at the end.

The silvery rocket ship Junon - 1 soared toward the grey clouds that had gathered around the sky above Rocket Town. On the ground below, a blonde-haired man in a bright white suit grinned with pride.

Rufus Shinra could not help but admire the sheer brilliance he had exercised in his latest campaign. The rocket, which was really a weapons satellite capable of holding the Planet itself hostage, would be his ticket to limitless power. He deserved no less, in his own opinion. Whether others shared such a supposition concerned him very little.

He furrowed his brow in displeasure as the sky above him rumbled quietly. The low reverberation echoed throughout the thick, grey clouds above him. Rocket Town's rainy season - one annoyance his power would not be able to correct. Not that it mattered, Rufus' business in this pathetic little hamlet was almost at an end. Then he would burn it to the ground.

But no raindrops descended from the heavens above, as the Junon Inc. CEO anticipated. The sky instead rained havoc!

A barrage of at least two dozen missiles broke the grey clouds above Rocket Town and pounded the side the Junon - 1! The silver ship rocked and trembled as it was assaulted by projectile after projectile mercilessly raining from the wild blue yonder itself!

Rufus growled in anger at what he saw next:

The massive airship Highwind broke through the dense stratus and descended toward the Junon - 1. The large vessel unloaded its full compliment of weapons at the rocket, lighting the sky with burning fury! The Highwind had arrived with a vengeance, and she was angry!

On the other side of town, a densely-packed circle of soldiers, mechanics and other Junon employees roared with excitement around a large pit covered with iron bars! The bloodthirsty crowd bellowed, fists clenched amounts of gil, bet on the outcome of the event taking place beneath their feet!

Inside the pit - Barret Wallace, Yuffie Kisaragi, and Red Nation. The third participant was a former ally of the first two, but had been brainwashed, stripped of its soul, nothing less than a killing machine resided within its crimson hide. One thing the three had in common - each fought for their very lives!

Red Nation glowered with hollow hatred at the two opponents before him in the darkened prison, a low growl rumbling beneath its sharpened fangs.

The blood-thirsty gatherers howled inhumanly, their cries of violence surely the product of mob mentality, almost overshadowing the threat that lurked in the pit below. Suddenly, the Highwind soared far above them, assaulting the rocket they had all gathered to launch. Almost as a group, the Junon employees reacted in utter shock at the abrupt appearance

of the large airship, and began to hurry toward the other side of town, perhaps to join the fight or even just to get a better view.

Rude took one last glance at the three occupants beneath the cage before rushing after the fleeing mob. Duty before pleasure, that was the motto of the Turks, even if it was not shared.

Red Nation gazed at the two people in the subterranean prison with it. Its soulless, yellow eye almost seemed to glow in the shadows cast by the iron bars above them. Like any good predator, Red Nation was sizing up its prey. Barret and Yuffie would make an ample feast indeed.

Without warning, the crimson beast leapt across the dungeon toward Yuffie! She screamed in horror as sharp teeth began to descend upon her!

Barret tackled the creature in mid air and landed beside the young ninja! He struggled with the beast, trying to pin it to the ground. Red Nation sunk its teeth into Barret's good arm, clenching as hard as it could! Its powerful jaws began to crush and grind bone, and the large miner roared in agony!

Finally, it freed itself from the man's grasp and eyed Yuffie. She had moved to the opposite side of the hole, still trembling at the sight of this soulless monster! Foam began to form around its mouth as it tasted the blood of its last victim, anticipating its next morsel! Barret watched helplessly through pain-blurred vision as Red Nation moved toward her and prepared to pounce. The large miner attempted to move but was paralyzed by a blast of fiery anguish from his mutilated arm!

And Red Nation soared into the air, his maw open wide to bite into the soft white flesh that awaited him below! Barret bellowed as loud as he could above the final shriek of the young girl and the thunderous roar that accompanied it! In the sky above the cage, a flock of ravens escaped into the air, frightened by the echoing tragedy below.

Cid bolted up into the land of consciousness as the rocket in which he was trapped shuddered and trembled by the onslaught it had been receiving outside. He whipped his head around to quickly examine the surrounding engine room. As the rocket continued to rattle by impact after impact, he noticed the metal hatch swinging on its hinges, somehow dislodged by the attacks. The pilot mustered all his strength to pull himself over to the access panel and then crawl inside the cool maintenance shaft.

This was it. Just like in the Shinra 26. Those morons Rufus had working for him followed the blueprints a little too closely when they were disguising pretty-boy's satellite to look like a rocket. If he was not mistaken, and he wasn't, there should be something that passed for a control room just up this ladder.

Suddenly, the rocket lurched hard to one side!

"Damn!!" Cid managed to hold onto one metal rung while the shaft around him shook hard! "Whatever's hittin' this thing, it ain't takin' prisoners!"

Shera was not taking prisoners. She co-ordinated the crew on the bridge of the Highwind with all the moxy of a decorated admiral! She stood behind the two crew members at the operations station and barked orders to others scattered around the ship. Cloud and Tifa watched in sheer amazement at the way this timid little tea servant became a match for Cid Highwind himself when everything she held dear had been threatened.

Rocket Town was overrun with Junon soldiers and employees, Cid and his friends were in trouble. And then, when the Highwind intercepted a transmission from Rocket Town to the Junon Base, Shera was able to decode it. That was when they learned of the true nature of Rufus' rocket. She could not stand quietly by while this viper jeopardized the very Planet itself!

Cloud and Tifa were more than relieved when the Highwind appeared in the sky over Zangan's desert dwelling. As soon as the couple climbed the rope ladder, the airship raced toward Rocket Town without hesitation.

Ground forces fired rifles into the sky at the massive vessel, with very little effect. A squadron of sleek, black choppers rose into the sky from the far end of town and tore through the heavens on a direct intercept course with the lone ship! Cannons thundered from the ground, filling the sky with shells accompanied by the steady fire of the Junon helicopters! The copters were like gnats in comparison to the behemoth Highwind, and they buzzed about it in circular paths as such.

But the steady rain of punishment being doled out unto the airship had begun to take its toll. The craft had already been damaged in recent attacks by the Onyx Weapon and getting caught in a sudden thunderstorm, its makeshift repairs were barely holding together as it was. The Junon forces would outmatch the larger opponent by sheer numbers if nothing else! "Shera," A static-riddled voice broadcasted through the intercom on the OPs station, "The ammunition levels are running dangerously low! We can't keep this firefight up much longer!"

"Copy," Shera pressed the speak button as she answered the crewman manning the lower deck. The female engineer slowly turned to Cloud and Tifa, "It's time."

"Right!" Tifa and Cloud answered in unison and hurried off of the bridge.

Reno eyeballed his supposed leader with disgust. Rufus Shinra. What a crock. The Junon CEO had no more business ruling the Planet than he did breathing. His survival of the Diamond Weapon's attack over a year ago was nothing more than a petty complication. The time had come for history to be corrected.

Reno watched as Rufus threw a fit outside his lavish tent in the center of Rocket Town. He was irritated by the childish manner in which the CEO carried himself.

But for now, Reno would have to tolerate such nonsense. The time to act was soon approaching.

The metal door that led to the upper deck of the Highwind clanked loudly as its mechanical locks disengaged. Slowly, the iron door was pushed open by a large, metallic cave moogles. Its comically thick arms forced the weighty door completely open, just as a spray of machine-gun fire showered the deck! Bullets spattered the lumbering moogles, but harmlessly ricocheted off its iron hide. The husky creature slowly bounded across the deck of the ship, shielding the three adventures carefully following behind.

Cloud Strife, Tifa Lockhart and Cait Sith ducked behind their moving barrier as missiles and bullets flooded the air all around the Highwind. When they reached the side of the deck, the moogles stopped, and outstretched its arms on either side to maximize protection.

Without warning, they leapt over the railing and plummeted to the earth below. Tifa and Cloud clasped their arms in perfect skydiving formation, their dark green parachutes flapping in the breeze on their backs. Cait simply clung to the metal head of its giant moogles as it too dived over the railing.

Once the quartet were safely away from the Highwind, Tifa and Cloud pulled their parachutes and gently touched ground. Cait, however, simply sunk through the sky like a heavy stone! Its moogles hit the earth with a thunderous boom! After a few seconds, the iron juggernaut strode out of the small crater it formed undamaged. The cat component simply snapped its fingers in a cocky manner, a wide grin decorating its face.

The interior of the deadly Junon - 1 shuddered intensely as a lucky shot from the Highwind dealt it a serious blow. Cid staggered to regain his balance, holding a metal handle with all his strength. When the tremors subsided, the old pilot turned the handle and pulled hard! Lights flickered to life, instruments awoke from their dormant state, ducts vented blasts of steam on the outside hull of the rocket!

Suddenly, a circular object disengaged from the rocket's outer surface. An escape pod - almost identical to the one Cid used to escape the Shinra 26 - would save the pilot one more time.

The mechanized orb hurtled through the clouds just as the Junon - 1 broke through the upper atmosphere. The Highwind roared after it at full speed, expending all of its energy to catch its quarry!

On the bridge, one crewman carefully took aim at the escaping silver cylinder. Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead as he cautiously armed the last major warhead in the Highwind's impressive arsenal. When the target was locked on, his thumb found the trigger.

"Wait!" Shera stepped between the crewman and the viewscreen, obstructing his aim. "Don't shoot!"

"Shera, what-?" The young cadet reacted in shock!

"There's an escape pod out there!" The female engineer raised a finger to the monitor at a tiny speck in the sky, between the airship and the rocket. "There was only one person who knew how to operate the Shinra 26's escape pod! That could be Cid up there!"

The rest of the crew looked up from their respective stations at the main window. Sure enough, the tiny speck grew larger and clearer as it descended toward them. It was an almost exact copy of the one that had saved their Captain once before. The first escape pod had been designed by Cid himself, and only Shera and some of the Rocket Town mechanics knew what it was. Whether on purpose or not, this new rocket possessed the very same *deus ex machina*.

Unfortunately, before anyone knew it, the Junon - 1 was out of range. The rocket screamed through the ozone layer and raced into space. The massive airship slowed as it reached the upper atmosphere, gradually coming to a stop in mid-air. The iron behemoth hovered for moments in the thin stratosphere and then turned to descend to the Planet below.

But it was not to receive a warm welcome. The entire contingency of Junon helicopters tore through the sky in perfect formation on an intercept course! Streams of bullets preceded the squadron to punctuate their hostile intentions!

However, fate, it would seem, was smiling on the crew of the Highwind just this once. The thick grey clouds above Rocket Town rumbled and parted, slightly. A graceful female descended from the heavens and cast her malevolent gaze upon the attacking forces. Her elegant blue skin tinkled in the light emanating from the opening in the stratus above her. She gently raised her hand at the formation of sleek black helicopters and concentrated.

Almost as if from nowhere, thick chunks of ice spontaneously formed on the first wave of choppers, sending them crashing to the cruel earth below! Almost a third of the attacking fleet plummeted uncontrollably, leaving the rest to continue their charge!

Shiva had done her part, and the glowing form of Tifa Lockhart on the ground miles below, allowed herself a fleeting sensation of triumph. She looked up at her fading summon spell with satisfaction, a small smile forming on her lips.

The second wave of helicopters would not be so lucky. A deafening roar filled the sky around them! From out of the thick clouds lunged Bahamut, the chaos dragon! Its massive wings were folded at its back as the beast hurtled toward the enemy

vessels! Suddenly, it spread its enormous wings, stopping in mid air. The great dragon opened wide its maw and unleashed searing fury on the approaching crafts!

Helicopter after helicopter hit the wave of intense flame and burned! Glass and steel on the outer shells began to melt and bubble! Pilots and soldiers within the ravaged choppers screamed in agony! Smoldering remains fell to the Planet as until the skies themselves had been washed of activity!

Cloud's glow faded just as his summon spell had, and the young warrior fell to a knee after the effort of the call.

Cait's work, however, was not finished. The metal moogles fought its way through a sea of attacking soldiers and employees that had just arrive from the other side of town! The little fury cat clasped a red orb in its glove and called to the heavens!

In the middle of the fray, a large lightning bolt ripped up from the Planet and struck the sky! At the very same spot, a mountain began to burst upward, taking shape as more lightning bolts filled the air all around it! On top of this new mountain, the elder-looking Ramuh summon creature. The wise old conqueror collected a shower of bolts with his staff and rained its electric judgement on the combatants below! The mob reeled in agony, one after another falling before Ramuh's ire!

And then, he was gone. And the fight, it seemed, was over.

"No!!!" Rufus Shinra raged, "This can't be happening!!" The angry villain kicked over the oak table set up in the center of his lavish tent. "No matter," Rufus turned to one of his bodyguards, "Get the word out, we're pulling out of Rocket Town." Let Avalanche fool themselves into thinking they've won. Rufus still held all of the cards. "For now."

"Yes sir!" The soldier obediently hurried out of the tent to carry out Rufus' orders.

The white-suited industrialist confidently strode out of his tent and over to the massive control station set up outside. He grabbed the arm of one of his scientists, who had until now been preparing to leave. The employee was surprised by Rufus' sudden interruption.

"Before you go," Rufus smiled, "There's something I need taken care of."

Cait cheerily bounded over to Cloud and Tifa. Both were visibly weakened by their incredible magic spells. Tifa carefully helped Cloud to his feet, and the two smiled at each other.

"[If you two are through makin' googly-eyes]," The little cat grinned, "[We should go find Cid and the others!]" The couple nodded, each scowling at their friend's comment.

"GODAMMIT!"

Cloud was instantly alert! "That sounded like Barret's voice!" The three heroes sprinted toward the source of the cry. After some time running through the streets of fleeing Junon employees, they arrived at the pit. Cloud gasped in horror at what he saw.

The ex-mercenary stabbed his massive Ultima sword into the dirt and hurried to the hatch. He violently slung it open and leapt inside! Tifa watched in horror, her hands covered her mouth. Cait lowered his head sadly.

Barret sat on the floor of the pit, cradling the young ninja Yuffie in his massive arms. The girl was sobbing uncontrollably, black tears covered her rosy cheeks.

“Shhh,” He whispered, “It’s alright...”

Cloud carefully stepped to the other side of the pit. There, on the ground, the charred body of Red Nation. The normally crimson beast was blackened and smoking. Cloud slowly knelt next to the heap and placed two fingers on its neck.

“Barely a pulse,” He looked up to Tifa and Cait, “He needs medical attention!”

“She had a piece of Bolt materia hidden in her headband,” Barret’s words were monotone and without emotion, “Her father taught her that.”

“He...,” Yuffie tried to speak through choked sobs, “He wouldn’t stop coming!” Yuffie buried her head in Barret’s chest, launching into another fit of sobs.

“[Look out, Tifa.]” Cait’s giant moogles bent down and firmly clasped its massive hands on two main bars. After a few seconds, the iron juggernaut lifted the entire structure from the top of the pit. With little effort, the mechanical moogles tossed the makeshift stockade aside.

Tifa jumped into the open pit and helped Yuffie to her feet. Cloud climbed out of the pit and waved Barret from Yuffie’s side. The large miner gently picked up Red’s charred body and carefully passed the limp creature to Cloud’s awaiting arms.

“Reeve, have Shera bring the Highwind around,” Cloud spoke seriously at the tiny cat, “We have to get Red back to Cosmo Canyon.”

“[Right.]” Reeve’s voice sounded hollow through the mechanical toysaurus. “[We’re just looking for Cid’s escape pod.]” Tifa glanced upward at the distant airship circling the sky above Rocket Town. “[The scanners must’ve been damaged in the attack....]”

Cloud and the others began to move toward the town, Yuffie still whimpering at Tifa’s side. Barret knew what it was like to have hurt someone you care about. All he had to do was picture the crazed look on his friend Dyne’s face, and the memories became all too clear.

“[Wait!]” Cait’s voice echoed from behind the group. The cat and moogles hadn’t moved an inch; obviously Reeve had his attention elsewhere. “[The sensors are detecting a massive power surge coming from the Junon – 1.]”

The rest of the group turned and regarded their artificial teammate.

“[It’s coming right for us! Shera, look - !]”

Without warning, a bright bolt of energy directly struck the Highwind with unimaginable force from above the gray clouds! The blast rocked the colossal vessel, continuing to pound the already damaged hull! A series of explosions erupted throughout the airship, thick black smoke poured into the sky!

Cloud and the others choked in horror, as the airborne behemoth began to sink through the sky. A thick trail of smoke and flame followed the plummeting craft as it turned downward into a nosedive to the ocean below.

The Highwind struck the water with an unparalleled force! A wave of water gushed from where she hit, flooding the beach near Rocket Town and all the land surrounding it. Bubbles of air escaped the submerged parts of the ship, as it steadily continued to descend into the aquatic environment. The fires burning all around it steamed angrily as each part of the Highwind was overtaken by the ocean depths.

Tifa couldn't believe her eyes. Three quarters of the airship were underwater, the last portion filling the sky above it with a heavy trail of thick, black smoke.

Tifa's attention was diverted from the bewildering sight on the ocean before them by a strange sound. More specifically, by the powering-down of Cait Sith. The cat's eyes were hollow, its head as well as the moogles, lowered gradually as it completely shut down.

"Cait?" Tifa approached the 'dead' android with trepidation, "Reeve? Are you alright? What's happening?"

"Reeve!" Cloud shook the furry feline carefully, "Reeve, is everyone alright?!"

Nothing. The lifeless automaton had no answer for the worried fighter. Cold oblivion had once again taken it from their company.

Technology - is it good or evil? This question has plagued philosophers for hundreds of years. Is man in control of the force of invention, or is he a prisoner beneath its neon claws? Has man lost control of technology like the age-old monster of Frankenstein? Is it a rampaging force destined to wipe the world clean of all traces of humanity? Or is it something more; something beyond our comprehension?

When you get right down to it, technology isn't good or evil. Its potential for either side of the coin rests in the hands of those who wield it. One cannot blame the weapon, when clearly, it is the man who is at fault.

You'll see what I mean.

Author's Notes: Another long-delayed chapter, I certainly hope it was worth the wait! After finishing this chapter, I'm off to write chapter 4 of "The Emerald Orb", hopefully you're enjoying my other offering as much as you like Crisis! It's a whole different cast, striving to save the very same Planet!

Next time: "The Morning After".

The remaining members of Avalanche have to learn to deal with survivor guilt. And there's that pesky matter of saving the imperiled Planet! Heidegger, Vincent and the Onyx Weapon collide, next time!

Comments, of course, always welcome!