

Chapter Twenty-One: The Dogs of War

"All they give us are artillery and stupid excuses... What's left is a world of despair and emptiness..." — *Dyne*

"[All hands! Brace for impact!]"

Reeve's heart almost stopped at the shrill echo of Cloud's voice that emanated from the speaker mounted on the ceiling above him. He knelt before the giant mechanical cave moogles that comprised one half of the dynamic duo affectionately referred to as 'Cait Sith'. He was attempting to make adjustments to his robots' receivers so to reduce the risk of losing contact with them as he had before.

The steel floor of the submarine's cargo hold trembled violently as something outside the craft struck it with incredible force. Reeve crawled over to where Shera, a mechanic from Rocket Town and Cid's house mate, was sleeping after her ordeal earlier that day. She groaned and blink her eyes for a few seconds while the rattling of the vessel faded. Reeve knelt next to her and made sure her makeshift head rest was intact.

That being done, he reached over to the intercom and held his finger to the button.

"What's going on up there?"

"Reeve!" Cid barked into the tiny speaker mounted next to him among sea of dials and buttons, "We don't got time to chat about it! Heidegger's comin' after us! Head to the engine room and help Barret and the others!"

Cid switched off the intercom and turned back to the business at hand. He, Cloud and Tifa sat on the bridge of the small submarine that the team had stolen from the Shinra years ago. It was a small miracle the vessel still functioned: after the threat of Meteor subsided, Cloud had left the sub at Nibelheim where it collected mothballs.

When the airship Highwind crashed into the ocean outside Rocket Town, Cloud journeyed to Nibelheim and retrieved the vessel. He was little more than relieved to discover it still worked. However, no sooner had he arrived with the submarine and rescued his friends - than a fleet of ships and submarines from Junon Inc. was hot on their tails.

So here they were, running for their lives.

"That torpedo missed us by a nose," Cloud called, "But it busted something back there! We're taking on water!"

Cid looked up from the OPs station, "Tifa, where's the nearest land formation?!"

"Thirty degrees north by west!" answered the buxom barmaid from her navigator's seat.

"Then that's where we're headed," Cloud spoke in a steady manner while pushing forward on the control sticks mounted on either side of his chair.

The modest submarine altered course, with the enemy fleet still gaining.

The coastal military base known as Junon trembled continuously as soldiers and civilian employees alike hastily gathered belongings and supplies for emergency evacuation. The front sections of this massive structure were severely damaged,

the mighty cannon that had once been a proud testament to the might of Junon was bent to the side like a meaningless trinket.

At the heart of this destruction? Weapon. The gigantic monster had struck the base with all its might, and then continued to burrow into the Planet beneath the complex, leaving a very large chasm in its wake. The terrified citizens of Junon frantically decided to vacate the premises with due haste.

"Have you contacted Colonel Heidegger yet?" a decorated officer barked to an evacuating staff on the top floor of Junon.

"No, sir," a young cadet turned away from a computer screen, "The Nibel mountains are interfering with our signals, sir. Most likely the high makoro concentration, sir."

"Alright, then," huffed the old officer, "We'll pack up here and send a chopper out to tell the Colonel." And at his command, the rest of the soldiers continued gathering their equipment to abandon the imperiled base.

"Sargent Kreetz!" a female voice bellowed from the doorway.

The elder officer turned away from the cadet to face the speaker, "Yes, sir?"

Elena the Turk weakly held the side of the door frame to maintain her balance. Her blue suit was scuffed and torn, a look of scorn rested upon her pretty face. "What the hell's going on here?!"

"It's Weapon, ma'am," answered Kreetz, "He's attacking the base."

"I was heading this way with Reno when the hallway behind me exploded! When I looked back, there was nothing but rubble!" The female Turk almost looked like she was upset, "Heidegger's got pretty much the whole army out for a joyride! Get everyone still here packed up! If that thing thinks it's gonna nest here, it'll be in for a surprise!" The angry young woman stormed over to a computer and punched in a series of numbers and characters. Kreetz carefully glanced over her shoulder and read the words 'self destruct' on the screen.

However, Kreetz did not see the malevolent smile that began to form on Elena's face, or more accurately, Jenova's face.

Vincent Valentine squinted and clenched his teeth as he peered into the machinery on the modest submarine. He, Barret, one of the mechanics from Rocket Town, and the Highwind's chief engineer were stationed in the engine room while the vessel raced through the icy waters away from the attacking Junon fleet.

"Barret," Vincent turned to the larger man with narrow eyes, "I can hear Lucrecia. There is danger about."

"Tell me something I don't know!" barked the former miner. "As soon as we get outta this one, you, me an' Lucrecia can all sit down and discuss the news over tea! But right now, I could use an extra pair a' hands here to help me get these bilges workin'!"

The shadowy man moved over to his sizable comrade and assisted him in turning several iron handles in an attempt to drain some of the water they had started taking on.

"Guys!" Reeve hurried into the already-crowded engine room, "They're gaining on us! Cid says to get the engines roaring as hard as we can, wether they break or not!" Reeve joined the two crewmen on the other side of the room and hastily set to work.

"What the hell good will it be if we bust the motor in this thing making an end run?!" snapped Barret.

Reeve turned back and eyed him evenly, "He said if we don't make it to land, we're not going to need the sub where we're going."

"You idiot!"

Rufus Shinra brushed the mud and soot from his normally-pristine white suit. The enraged CEO barked at the frazzled pilot responsible for their safety. The two men climbed up on shore toward Junon after making an emergency landing in the muddy coastline off the Junon continent. The angered executive nonetheless scowled in outrage at the one person to whom he owed his life.

"When we get back to Junon, I'll personally see to it that you -"

Rufus' voice trailed off as his eyes met with the activity taking place at the military base. Several helicopters lifted from landing areas at various points on the structure. Ships and vessels departed from her harbors on a direct course out into sea. A gaping hole rested on the front of the base where the village and the shops should be. It was then that Rufus felt a slight tremor beneath his feet.

Any questions the cold-hearted industrialist may have posed were cut off by a series of thunderous explosions that started at the top of the installation and worked their way to its foundation. Rufus and the pilot were thrown to the ground by the sudden shock wave that rocked the coastline in all directions.

As they picked themselves off the ground, the pilot was the first to break the flabbergasted silence:

"Rufus, I quit!"

"Land ho!" Cid's voice reverberated through the modest bridge on board Cloud's submarine. Cloud raised his head just as the trusted vessel broke the surface of the icy water. The sub's engines roared in protest to the strain she was being put through as she tore a path through the crystalline liquid. "Shit! We've got company!" added the foul-mouthed pilot. Cloud turned his head and saw several gunboats almost on top of them. No sooner had the little craft emerged from the ocean than they started bombarding it with munitions and charges. The water around them erupted with explosions as Cloud pushed the engines beyond the already unacceptable levels. One such eruption lifted the entire submarine out of the water where she landed with a violent splash.

"Tifa! How long until we reach land?" called the blond-haired captain.

"Only a few - Cloud! Look!"

The young warrior turned his gaze forward and his face went pale. In front of them, barring their escape, three Junon cutters moved into position between them and land. The massive ships formed a solid wall to stay their path while at the same time firing lines of ammunition at the approaching fugitives.

That was it. Enemies from all angles. No possible means of escape. There was nothing they could do to avoid the inevitable. Death comes for all creatures of the Planet. This time it came for Avalanche.

"Tifa," the young leader turned to his navigator and extended his hand. The love of his life firmly grasped his hand and stared into his eyes. She wished there was something she could say at a time like this. But there was nothing more to be

said. He knew how she felt, and she knew no less. All of their lives they avoided that which was right in front of them. But there was no need to now. At last they would be together, if only for precious seconds.

“Holy shit!!” erupted the thunderous voice of their operations officer.

Cloud turned back to the windshield and watched in awe as the very sea exacted its retribution on the Junon vessels. The trio of ships were tossed into the air by insurmountable waves like mere playthings. They landed into the water with such a force that waves washed up on the beaches of the nearby coastline and continued past the grayed hills that christened its waterfront.

In the spot where the three ships had once drifted, towered a mighty creature: a large blue eel. The Leviathan. Protector of Wutai and all her waters.

Cloud’s submarine raced past the incredible giant and scraped up onto land with an earsplitting squeal. The enormous water god allowed the vessel to pass with all the grace of a welcoming king before turning its attention back to the sea, and the crafts approaching therein.

Heidegger’s ships fired upon the great creature with everything they could muster, but it continued to charge. Several other ships had made it past the Leviathan and were launching boarding parties to the island continent just as Cloud and the others had begun to disembark from their vehicle. The blonde-haired fighter narrowed his gaze at the vast amounts of soldiers making their way to the shores on lifeboats, some of whom were already firing their weapons. It seemed their astral protector had only delayed the inevitable.

But that was when they came.

As if from the very air itself, the shores of Wutai became saturated with warriors from the village. It seemed that every clan member ever to hold a sword in the entire history of the eastern continent was there, fighting against the onslaught from the sea. Each clansmen was equipped with a vast arsenal of materia, every weapon glistened like a precious treasure. Magic and bullets filled the skies around them as more soldiers arrived to face the sea of warriors coming to the aid of Avalanche.

Cloud carefully helped Cid pull Shera out of the narrow opening of the submarine just as the others - Tifa, Barret, Reeve, Cait and Vincent - heartily joined the surrounding fray.

“Need a hand with her?”

Cloud turned his head to the direction of the voice and was startled by the speaker. “Yuffie?”

The young ninja grinned at her two comrades, “Seems like I gotta do everything around here!”

“Well,” Cid said with mock anger, “Maybe next time you can stay and help me fish out my airship!”

“Yuffie,” Cloud broke in as they helped Shera away from the battle, “What happened to you?”

“I was - upset,” she began, “By what happened to Red. So I came here. My father was gettin’ ready to take the fight to Junon, but it seems that lardo Heidegger came to us!”

Godo Kisaragi narrowed his gaze at the battlefield ahead of him. Junon ships seemed to pour an endless supply of soldiers on the coastline of Wutai. But he and his clans had united and trained hard for this day. At long last he would reclaim the honor of his people. The honor that was callously torn from them by the Shinra Corporation so many years ago.

Godo would have his pound of flesh - and this was it. This time, the serpent would run out of heads. He watched as a tiny fleet of Wutai junkets sailed out toward the Junon ships that kept their distance from the besieged land mass. Most likely Heidegger was not willing to exhaust his forces for the sake of a land already raped of its profitable resources. But it was not resources they were fighting for - it was justice. The sky above the enemy vessels opened up and poured white hot fury upon them, Bolt spells of the highest caliber tore through the turbulent waters creating craters of air that instantly refilled with sea. The iron ships rocked and swayed under the insurmountable attack.

The boats that were not being assaulted by lightning were being ravaged by the so-called water god of Wutai, the Leviathan. The mighty creature continued to tear through the ships with unparalleled rage as some began to turn away. But it was too late for that. Death comes for every creature on the Planet, and today, it was here for Junon blood.

Then the Wutai leader's eyes fell upon a familiar figure among the battle. His face was partially covered, his hair was longer, different, and he possessed a prosthetic limb that took the form of a menacing iron gauntlet. But his weapon, however, his weapon was quickly recognized by the Wutai lord. The familiar reverberating boom thundered through the air like the wrath of God. And this time, he was fighting the villainous empire, and not a part of it.

Godo raised his mighty sword as his gaze fell upon a squad of soldiers intent on ambushing Vincent from behind. He charged across the chaotic battlefield carving his way through the rows of soldiers and mercenaries until he was almost upon him. As soon as he was close, Vincent whirled around and aimed his rifle directly at the approaching warrior's head. But the ex-Turk did not fire. He stared into Godo's eyes for a small eternity, and the world around them seemed to melt to a stop.

At length, he lowered the Death Penalty.

"So," Godo began, "You now fight on the side of angels?"

"Yes," Vincent answered evenly, "It seems even the devil himself can turn his back on the darkness."

"Indeed." A small smile formed on the Wutai warrior's lips and he turned back to rejoin the battle. With a nod, Vincent likewise resumed the fight. This time, they fought not against each other, but on the same side.

/Boy, you got a good head on your shoulders. Too bad it's screwed on backwards!/

Cid Highwind gritted his teeth as he made his way through the battlefield with his impressive Venus Gospel spear. His thoughts drifted to his father, and some of the 'words of encouragement' he often heard the old man spout. He wondered what the codger would say if he heard his only son was here helping the "Wutai savages", as his father would often call them.

The last time Cid was fighting on this land mass, he was fighting against the Wutai clans. But now, he was fighting for them. The same water god Leviathan that once sent shivers up and down the pilot's spine now filled him with a sense of hope, a sense of pride. The astral giant had not changed, no, it was Cid who had undergone a metamorphosis. Maybe the time he spent in Rocket Town served as a cocoon where the Captain learned to cast off his thick hide and truly spread his wings. Lost in thought, Cid failed to see the Junon mercenary leap at him from behind with his knife drawn. Cid's throat would be cut before he could know what was happening. A roar of gunfire echoed from nearby, and the would-be assassin fell lifeless to the ground like a rag doll. Cid whirled around in shock and saw Barret, grinning wickedly, with a trail of smoke rising from his gun arm.

"Quit day-dreaming, Highwind!" the large man hollered.

With a mirthful nod, Cid turned back to the battle at hand. Barret watched the pilot for a moment to make sure he was still rolling on all cylinders before likewise resuming the fight. He was worried his comrade was still shaken by the events on the shattered bridge of the Highwind only hours before. The crazed look on Cid's face could not help but remind him of his lost friend Dyne. He'd wondered that if they were unsuccessful at reviving Shera, would Cid's mind be reduced to the state that Dyne's was when he lost his wife? Fortunately, they did not get the chance to find that out. Shera had been returned to them by what seemed to be a miracle of the Planet. Cid made an impassioned plea to the beyond, and it was answered by no less than the tears of the Planet. Inexplicably, the Phoenix appeared to them and restored not only Shera's life, but Cid's as well.

With a low grumble, Barret turned and fired on the Junon squadrons.

"What is happening?!"

Heidegger was watching his military career unravel before his very eyes. The husky Colonel slammed his fist into the metal table before him. Casualty reports were coming in from all sides of the battlefield. So far two-thirds of his fleet were lost, and the punishment continued. This was to be a simple operation, the complete annihilation of that accursed band of rebels, Avalanche. But fates, it would seem, had destined something different for the military man. Instead of an easy victory, he was to be handed a crushing defeat. His forces were crippled, his army was being dismantled brick by brick.

How could this have happened? This was the very same group of peons that had been crushed under the heel of Shinra many years ago. This should not be happening. It was his destiny to rule. His was to be a new dynasty that would reshape this Planet in his own image. The fool Rufus was a petty obstacle he would have easily cast aside when the moment was right. But that was then, and this is now. Now, there would be no dynasty.

And as the metal deck of the flagship began to buckle under the force of a Bolt3 spell, Heidegger recalled a quote once spoken to him by his predecessor that would be his last thought on the Planet as he knew it:

'Beware the dogs of war, for they may nip at their master's heel...'

Cloud narrowed his gaze as he ran a soldier through with his massive Ultima Sword. The battle seemed to be going in their favor. But Cloud learned long ago not to mix confidence with conceit. He slowly carved his way through the crowded war zone, swinging his sword in perfect, crosswise arcs. He stopped short and turned, his senses focusing on the click of a weapon behind him. His eyes fell upon a Junon sniper, taking up aim across the battleground, and Cloud was the obvious target. The young warrior focused his full attention on the rifle, poised and ready to fire on him. He readied his sword. The timing would have to be perfect. And it would have been.

But a sudden ringing erupted from his pocket, momentarily distracting the ex-mercenary and giving the Junon soldier the chance he needed. The rifle discharged with a series of sharp cracks, and Cloud's shoulder exploded with blood just as he tried to duck the barrage. Cloud growled in pain through clenched teeth as the piercing ringing continued. With an exasperated, desperate burst of strength, he threw the enormous sword toward the enemy soldier with a raspy cry. The ivory blade dug into the villainous sniper, leaving him pinned against the ground like a helpless insect. And the ringing continued.

Through a haze of pain, Cloud reached into his pocket and retrieved the ringing PHS phone. "...Yes?"

"[Cloud Strife? This is elder Hargo. Of Cosmo Canyon.]" "Hargo," Cloud's voice was strained and annoyed, "This isn't a good time."

"[None of that matters, now. You and your team must get to Midgar immediately!]"

"What?" Cloud struggled to a seating position and took out an elixir potion for his shoulder. "What are you talking about?" There was a pause on the other end while Hargo collected himself.

"[Weapon is about to destroy the Planet.]"

Author's Notes: So ends the career, and life, of Colonel Heidegger. It occurred to me while I was writing this chapter, Heidegger kept the rank of Colonel, even after he was in charge. My theory on that is that it was a title given to the executive in charge of Shinra's Peace Preservation Force, so it really didn't hold much meaning in way of rank. Or maybe a Colonel is something different in the world of FF7. It doesn't matter now, anyway, since the old war horse had his final curtain drop on him with this chapter.

And if you're wondering where that quote about the dogs of war came from, I made it up, so save your research!
Rufus got bumped around a bit these past two chapters, but he still has a few tricks up his sleeve, so stay tuned!
Next time: Party at Midgar, and everyone's invited!