

CHAPTER VI: THE INVESTIGATION OF INSPECTOR WALLACE

The stairs creaked and groaned as Barret walked down them. Each step he put his foot on sagged ominously. One day this whole damn place was going to collapse, he thought. And he wouldn't be sorry to see it go.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and looked down the corridor. He immediately spotted the same door that Tifa had seen the night before. The one they had never noticed before.

"What the hell is this?" he muttered as he went over to the entrance.

He walked into the room and looked around for a moment. Then walked out again and continued down the corridor. He'd check that room out more carefully later. He wanted to take a look in the library first.

The bodies were gone, of course. Taken out in the morning after they had been discovered. But the floor was still covered with dark streaks of red. A lot of them.

He had already seen the bodies, the horrible wounds, before he had come here.

Now he paced around the room slowly, looking for something, but not exactly sure what. Cloud and Tifa had been here, that much was certain. The owner of the Inn said they had been in the previous night, but he had not seen them since. From the wounds on the bodies it was obvious that the scientists had been killed with a large sword or some other sharp object. It was all very convincing.

He stood in the center of the room and shook his head.

But what was he to make of it all? The obvious conclusion, of course, was that Cloud had now totally lost it and was on some kind of mad rampage. The fact that this was exactly what Sephiroth had done sent a shiver down his spine. He had never known Sephiroth, had never been friends with him. He had only known him as a ruthless adversary. Could he now look at Cloud, who he had known all this time, after all they had been through, in the same light? Could he stand against his friend if it came down to it? If it was the only way to stop the killing?

In spite of all the similarities to Sephiroth, there was one significant difference.

Sephiroth had been alone.

He couldn't help but wonder what part Tifa would play in this. It was obvious she was going to stand by Cloud no matter what happened. Could she help him overcome this if he couldn't himself? Would she be a steadying influence, or would he turn on her as well? Barret gritted his teeth. If Cloud hurt her he would have to answer for it no matter how they might feel about him.

An even more disturbing possibility presented itself. What if they confronted Cloud and she sided with him against them? How far would she go to protect him, even if he was obviously wrong? He couldn't bear the thought of having to oppose both of his friends.

It was all too damn complicated!

"Shit," he muttered. There was just too much thinking involved in all this.

Nothing else seemed to have been disturbed in this room.

He walked out of the library, slowly making his way back to the secret room he had glanced in before.

Even when Sephiroth had gone crazy, there had still been method to his madness. He had had a plan in mind, no matter how twisted, and had not killed without reason.

If Cloud were following the same pattern, what was his reason for coming here? Was he searching for the Promised Land as well, or did he have an even more mysterious plan. What was his reason for killing?

The library left nothing but questions. Perhaps he could find some answers in this other room.

He walked in and looked around. He saw the same lab equipment Tifa had, and was just as in the dark as to its purpose. The fog caused by the escape of the liquid nitrogen was long gone.

He looked at the container. Was this what Cloud had come for? Had there been something in this chamber that Cloud needed for some unknown purpose. Barret had no idea.

There was a desk in the middle of the room with a computer on it. The screen was dark, but he noticed that the computer

itself was on.

He reached down and pressed one of the keys.

The darkness on the screen was replaced by a list of names.

He bent forward and looked more closely. It was a list of fifteen names, numbered from 0 to 14. At the top of the screen was the heading: JENOVA PROJECT.

He looked at the names. Hojo was the first one on the list, and his name was highlighted. The next name was Sephiroth. He quickly scanned the list. The last two were Red and Cloud Strife.

Beside the computer was a small plastic case for storing CDs. He opened it up. Inside were fourteen CDs, a number on the case next to each one of them. The very first slot, the one labeled with a zero, was empty.

He sat pondering this for a few moments. He didn't know what was going on but the more he saw the less he liked it. He was getting too much of a déjà vu feeling.

He pulled out the last disk and placed it in the computer. Then he narrowed down until Cloud Strife was highlighted.

He hesitated for just a moment, then pressed the enter key.

The screen immediately started to fill up with letters. Lines and lines of them, scrolling up the screen until it was full, then continuing, the lines being replaced from the bottom and scrolling up. He looked at the lines as they quickly scrolled by, but the letters made no sense. There were no words here, or any punctuation. Just line after line of letters, over and over. He sat there and watched them for a while, but they just kept going and going.

Just like that damn rabbit, he thought.

There must have been hundreds of them, thousands.

He pressed the release and removed the CD. Whatever was going on here, it was way over his head. The only one he could think of who might be able to make some sense out of this was Red, but he was off on his own little adventure. Barret didn't want to call him unless things really got desperate. He knew how important Red's quest was to his furry friend.

Whatever Cloud was after, Barret had a feeling the key to it was on the missing CD. If they could figure out what these were it would probably go a long way toward helping them understand what the hell was going on.

He slipped the CD into his pocket, then quickly stalked out of the room

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"This is pointless," Cloud muttered.

Tifa looked up from the papers strewn on the table in front of her.

They were sitting in a huge room, one of dozens that were contained in the Hall of Records in Cosmo Canyon. Cloud had a similar stack of papers in front of him.

"The only way we're going to get to the bottom of this is to look through this stuff," she replied patiently.

"But there's thousands of papers here," he protested, waving his hands at the shelves around them. "It could take us months to find anything, years. We don't have that much time."

Tifa looked at him without saying anything.

"Besides," he continued. "Illyanova said she'd have some of her people look into it for us. I'm sure they'll have a much better idea of what to look for."

Still she did not reply. Finally she sighed.

"I suppose you're right," she said. Illyanova was the senior elder now that Bugenhagen was gone. She had promised to help them as best she could, knowing how close they were with Nanaki. They probably were just wasting their time.

But what else could they do? She didn't think just sitting around waiting for someone else to come up with something would be any better. In fact, she thought it would be worse. At least this kept them occupied.

"But this is better than just doing nothing, isn't it?" she asked. "I don't want to just sit around and worry. At least now I feel like I'm trying to help solve the problem."

Cloud shook his head.

"I'm going back to my room," he stated.

He got up and walked away. She looked at him until he left the room, then her head slowly sank down, and for a moment she was almost overwhelmed with a feeling of helplessness. She was doing everything in her power to make him better, and he seemed not to care.

She knew it wasn't his fault, but that didn't make it any easier for her. She wished some of their other friends were with them.

She shook her head and stared at the papers on the desk in front of her.

Okay, that's enough feeling sorry for yourself, she thought grimly, now get to work.

She wasn't sure how long she sat there. All the papers from the Jenova Project that had been found in Nibelheim and Midgar, or copies of them, were stored here, and she was sure that somewhere in this information would be a clue as to what they could do to help Cloud. But the amount of information was tremendous. The chances of her finding something seemed vanishingly small.

Eventually she looked up and saw that darkness had fallen outside. She rubbed her eyes and stood up slowly. She had done enough for one day.

She left the Hall of Records and headed back to the Inn. She found Cloud sitting at the bar. She sat down beside him and ordered something to eat. Cloud sat beside her staring into space, a drink in his hand, not speaking at all. She hated feeling uncomfortable in his presence.

After a while he got up and muttered that he was tired and was going up to his room. She watched him leave then turned and ordered a drink for herself. She drank it down swiftly, then walked up to her own room.

She was tired. Tired of trying, tired of worrying, tired of everything. She tossed off her clothes and slipped on a nightgown, then turned off the light. She laid down on her bed and stared up at the ceiling. Tomorrow would be better, she thought. Tomorrow they would find something.

She didn't know how much longer she could go on this way.

Hours later, of so it seemed to her, she was still awake. Whether from worry, nervousness, or perhaps because she had fallen asleep so early yesterday, sleep eluded her. She lay on the bed, listening as the sounds of the Inn slowly diminished, until all was silent. The papers she had looked through earlier in the day cluttered her mind with thoughts of Shinra, Hojo, and Jenova.

She wasn't sure how long she lay there. She might even have actually dozed off for a while. She could not be sure. But suddenly she found herself sitting up in the dark, listening intently. She was sure she had heard the door of the room next to hers slowly open and close.

Cloud's room.

Instantly she got up and opened her own door, peeking out. She looked down the hall just in time to see the back of Cloud's head as he disappeared down the stairway.

She immediately followed, gripped by a sudden fear. What could he be up to now? Whatever it was, she was determined to find out for herself. If he was going to lose it, she was going to be right by his side this time.

She reached the top of the stairs and looked down. She could see him clearly now. He walked through the lobby and out the front door. She went quickly down the stairs. The Innkeeper gave her a curious look as she walked by. She realized she was still in her nightgown. Well, she wasn't going to worry about that right now.

She stepped outside and looked around. The night was cool but not unpleasantly so. A gentle breeze billowed out her nightgown for a moment. She saw Cloud walking down the street to the left.

She followed cautiously. She didn't know how he would react if he saw her, but she had a feeling he would not be happy. She didn't want him to know she was there until she found out what he was doing.

He disappeared around the corner ahead of her. She heard some voices to her left. She hesitated and turned to look, but it

was just a couple of people sitting by the eternal flame. She could see them silhouetted against the light. She sped up and reached the corner just moments later, but when she looked around she did not see him.

She started down the road slowly, looking around, praying that she hadn't lost him. But suddenly she saw him again, up ahead on the left, and walking back toward her.

She hastily stepped into the shadow of a doorway, hoping she hadn't been spotted. She was surprised to see him coming back. She had been sure he had some purpose in mind when he had left, but now she thought that maybe she had been wrong. Perhaps he had just come out to get some fresh air and take a late night stroll.

He came closer, and she saw that he had not seen her, for he did not look her way. If he was just taking a stroll he might be a little more relaxed than he had been earlier. Maybe he would like some company.

She was about to call out his name when she stopped. Something was not quite right. The way he was walking, the way the sword hung on his back, was somehow unfamiliar. The moon hung low on the horizon, hidden behind the buildings to her left. But suddenly he crossed between two buildings and the moonlight fell on him, momentarily illuminating his face.

Tifa almost gasped aloud at what she saw.

For a long time she stood there completely still, until the figure had disappeared around the street corner down the road.

She slowly walked back out into the road, her face pale in the moonlight. Could that possibly have been who she thought it was? Had her eyes, or some trick of the moonlight, deceived her, made her see something that could not exist, someone who could not possibly be alive?

Or were there ghosts walking the streets of Cosmo Canyon?

She walked down the road a little further, looking for some sign of where Cloud had gone. She reached the next intersection and looked around. She saw no sign of him, but the Hall of Records was just down the road to her right.

She hurried down the road until she stood in front of it. The main entrance was open, and there were lights on inside. She could see someone standing just inside the door.

She ran up the steps that led up to the entrance. Cloud was standing in the doorway, looking inside, his sword in his hand. He turned to look at her as she came up beside him, a look of shock on his face.

Just inside the doorway she could see a man laying on the ground.

"Not again," she said softly.

She stepped past him and looked inside. There were at least two other bodies. She heard Cloud moan softly.

She turned to look at him. He returned her gaze, his eyes filled with anguish.

"Tifa, I didn't do it," he said slowly.

She grabbed hold of his hand.

"I know," she said, looking straight at him. "It was Zack."

She saw the look of surprise on his face, but before he could say anything a deep voice called out from behind them.

"Cloud Strife, lay down your weapon!"

They turned to see six members of the Canyon Guards standing at the foot of the steps, weapons drawn and ready.

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"I'm so glad you're here."

Barret did not reply, just looked at Tifa with concern. He had never seen her looking so tired and worn. She looked almost ill. What had she been going through these last few days?

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I'm fine," she replied.

"How many did he kill this time?" Barret asked grimly.

"There were four people killed in the Hall of Records, and the guard at the entrance to the Canyon. But Cloud didn't do it," she answered sharply.

Barret looked at her sympathetically.

"Tifa, I know how you feel about him, but sometimes you've just got to face the facts. Even if it's not his fault, it's pretty obvious..."

"It was Zack," she interrupted him.

"Who?"

"Zack," she repeated. She quickly explained what had happened the previous night.

He looked at her thoughtfully when she was done, but she could still see doubt in his eyes.

"You mean the Zack that Cloud was always talking about. The one who was killed near Midgar?" Barret said.

Tifa nodded.

"Have you spoken to anyone else about this?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied. "I told Illyanova last night, but she told me she still had to hold Cloud anyway. To tell you the truth, I don't think she believed me"

Barret nodded. He could understand that point of view.

"Well, you have to admit it's very....odd," he had almost said convenient, "that some guy who is supposed to be dead would suddenly reappear and start killing people just when Cloud happened to be here at the same time."

He looked at her carefully. Even he thought her story pretty far fetched. He could imagine how it had sounded to Illyanova. Again he had to wonder how far Tifa would go to protect Cloud. He didn't think she would lie for him, but it didn't have to come to that. Maybe she had seen someone who looked similar to Zack and in her present muddled state had convinced herself that it had in fact been him. Could he trust what she was telling him?

"Are you sure it was Zack?" he questioned. "You said it was dark."

"Yes," she answered immediately. Then she looked at him suddenly. "What, you don't believe me?"

The pause before he answered spoke volumes. He realized only the truth would do now.

"I believe you saw someone," he said slowly. "Someone you believe was Zack. I'd like to think it's true, that you really did see him. But I know how you feel about Cloud, I know you'd do just about anything to get him out of this. Isn't it just possible, just possible," he repeated, "that the person you saw was only someone who resembled Zack? You said it was dark, you only saw him for a moment. Maybe you wanted so badly to believe it was Zack..."

His voice faded to silence, seeing the look on her face. Anger mixed with something else. Disappointment?

"It was Zack," she said, firmly but softly.

They walked on in silence for a few minutes. Finally Barret spoke again.

"So what do you want me to do?"

She walked on. When she spoke this time she did not look at him.

"I was hoping you would go plead our case to Illyanova," she responded. "I was hoping you could convince her to let him go. As the Mayor of Corel you've got a lot more pull than I do. I was hoping you could get her to see that Cloud did not do this. But I guess I was just wasting my time."

He looked at her angrily, stung by her words.

"Of course I'll go talk to Illyanova," he said sharply. "Cloud is still my friend too. I'm not about to abandon him, if that's what you're thinking. Even if he is responsible for this I know there's some kind of explanation. I know he wouldn't do this on his own. I'll do everything I can to help him."

She did not respond for a moment. But then she turned to him, the anger no longer in her eyes

"I'm sorry."

Barret's face immediately softened as well. He put his arm around her.

"It's okay," he replied. "I know what you're going through. I know this is hard. But just remember, you've got friends. You're not in this alone."

She looked up at him and smiled weakly.

"Thank you," she said, wrapping her arms around him as well. She looked away. She hadn't realized how much she missed her friends.

"Okay," Barret said, releasing her. "So I guess I'm off to talk to Illaynova. Are you coming along?"

She shook her head.

"No, I've already spoken to her. I don't think it would be helpful for me to talk to her again. I'm going to go see how Cloud is doing."

Barret nodded.

"Okay, I'll meet you at the Inn as soon as I'm done," he replied. "And tell that spiky haired little troublemaker that he's got nothin' to worry about. Barret'll straighten this all out."

Tifa smiled again. Somehow she didn't think it would be that simple, but she knew Barret's words were meant to cheer her up, and she did feel better now that he was here.

Barret turned and walked swiftly away. She watched him for a moment and then started off toward the Hall of Justice, where Cloud was being held since he had been taken away by the guards.

She found him in a small holding cell, sitting on a narrow cot staring off into space. When he saw her he immediately got up.

"Is Barret here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, walking up next to the bars that separated them. "He's talking to Illyanova now."

Cloud reached through the bars and took hold of her hand.

"Do you think he can get me out of here?"

The look she gave him said it all.

"He's going to try," was all she said.

He let go of her hand and turned away.

"I've got to get out of here," he said anxiously.

"We're doing all we can," she replied. "But the evidence against you is pretty convincing. I don't think they believed what I told them about Zack. I suspect they think I made it all up just to protect you."

He turned back toward her.

"But they have to believe you. I've got to get out of here as soon as possible. Something is going to happen."

She frowned.

"What do you mean?"

Cloud shook his head.

"I don't know. I'm not sure. But I know something is going to happen. Something bad. Do you think it's a coincidence that Zack and I both showed up here at the same time? No. Something drew us both here. Something is manipulating us, trying to control us. I can feel it. Even now it's calling me, drawing me..."

"Drawing you where?" she asked.

"I don't know!" he said sharply. "To the east this time. Back the way we came. Whatever we came here for, whatever

purpose there was for us here, Zack has accomplished. Now he's heading back. Back east somewhere, but I'm not sure where. I just know I have to follow. He's...we're both being forced to do something, something evil. Now I'm stuck here and he's out there finishing the task, and he must not accomplish it. You've got to get me out of here now. Even waiting a day could be too late. I'm afraid I'm the only one who can stop him!"

Tifa looked at him. The desperation was obvious in his voice.

"Barret's talking to Illyanova now," she said. "I don't know whether he can help. He didn't sound very hopeful, but who knows? Maybe he can come up with something."

Cloud came over to the bars and grabbed her hand once more.

"You've got to get me out of here," he said, looking straight into her eyes. "You've got to. People are going to die unless we do something. Do you..."

But then he suddenly clutched his head and fell back with a cry.

"Cloud!" she exclaimed.

He stumbled and collapsed onto the floor, head in his hands. A low gurgling moan escaped from his lips.

"Guard!" Tifa called out, looking into the other room. She turned back toward him. "Cloud, are you all right?"

He lay on the floor, another moan escaped from him. But then he became still. The guard came in and looked at them both.

Cloud shook his head and looked up at them, the pain subsiding. He stood up slowly, grabbing the bars for support. Then he looked slowly at Tifa.

"You've got to," he said grimly.

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Barret saw Tifa sitting at a table by the bar when he walked into the Inn. He went over to her immediately.

"So how did it go?" she asked as soon as she saw him.

He shook his head and sat down beside her.

"She says there's nothing she can do. She not going to release him. At least not without a hearing first. No one has ever violated the sanctity of the Hall of Records like that before. If she let him go now, the entire population of the Canyon would be up in arms."

"So when's the hearing?" she asked.

"In two days," Barret replied.

Tifa shook her head.

"We can't wait that long," she replied.

She told him what Cloud had said to her.

Barret rubbed his forehead.

"Well, they're not going to let him go," he said.

She did not reply, but slowly stood up, a look of resolve on her face.

He stood up too.

"Tifa, I know what you're thinking, and it's just going to cause more trouble" he said.

"Well, I've got to do something!" she said. "He says that Zack has to be stopped, and I believe him. I can't just sit here and do nothing."

Barret said nothing but looked at her. He could see the determination in her eyes. He had seen that before, and knew right away that argument was useless.

"I'll come with you," he said.

"No," she replied. "It's better if I do this myself. You're the Mayor of Corel. You've got a reputation to uphold."

Barret snorted.

"Besides," she continued. "Cloud is still behaving erratically. I don't know what he will do. I know he won't hurt me, but I wouldn't want to endanger anyone else. It'll be better if you get in touch with the others and tell them what's going on. We may need everyone's help before this is over."

Barret seemed reluctant, but finally he nodded. She turned and started for the door, but then she turned back as he called her name.

She looked at him and for a moment it seemed he was hesitant to speak.

"Look," he finally said, "I know you think Cloud wouldn't hurt you and isn't responsible for any of the deaths. But we both know he isn't acting like himself. Even if Cloud hasn't done any of the killing you can't tell me that Zack was responsible for everything that's happened. Cloud threatened you with his sword, and I don't think Zack snuck into Cid and Shera's house and cut off the heads of those stuffed animals. It's obvious Cloud is being influenced by something. I know you may not like this, but I have to say it. What if Cloud is being influenced to talk you into helping him? What if he's just using you to help him escape? What if you get him out and he really does end up killing someone?"

Tifa looked at Barret for a long time before answering. He could tell his words had struck home, for even when she finally spoke it was with difficulty.

"I guess I'll just have to live with that," she said softly.

Then she turned and walked out of the room.

Barret watched her leave, not happy at all with the way things seemed to be going. His best friends were in trouble, and there seemed to be nothing he could do to help them.

He walked out of the Inn and wandered down the street.

But maybe there was something he could do. They had been so focused on who was responsible no one had seemed to have asked why. Whether it had been Cloud or Zack who had killed those people in the Hall of Records they must have had some reason. What was it?

He strolled down the street until he stood in front of the Hall of Records. He walked up the steps. There was a guard at the door, but he let Barret pass.

He looked around. There were no bodies, and the blood had been cleaned up here. But he had been told that nothing else had been moved.

There were papers and books strewn across the tables, but a row of computers along the far wall was what caught his eye.

He walked over to them and looked at them one by one. He noticed that one of them was turned on.

Barret looked at it, but all it had on it was a welcoming message.

He lifted his head and looked around. There were no disks of CD's stored nearby. All the information here was stored in the main computer.

He looked at the screen again. When he did so he realized the welcoming message wasn't quite the only thing on the screen. Along the bottom was a list of choices. One of the choices was 'back'.

What the hell, he thought. His hand reached for the mouse and he clicked on it.

The screen changed. The welcome message was replaced by a banner that read 'Physician Database'. A password needed to be entered to proceed.

He clicked on back again. Then a few more times. All the screens had to do with doctors and hospitals. But suddenly a screen came up that said 'Shinra Employee Genetic Coding Archive'.

Barret looked at the screen for a moment. This database required a password as well.

He clicked on back again. More information on Shinra and its employees.

Suddenly he heard a commotion outside. He could hear some people yelling something, their voices growing louder as

they came near. He did not turn around to look.

He heard the guard by the door shout out a question asking what was going on. The man who replied must have been close by, for Barret heard the answer quite clearly.

"The prisoner from last night's massacre has escaped!"

Barret clicked the back key a few more times. Each time he saw more information about Shinra. Until finally he clicked it again and saw the now familiar welcoming message.

He got up and walked slowly back to the entrance. He could see guards running by outside. He didn't think all that running around was going to do them much good.

He stepped outside and looked around. He had no idea what to make of what he had seen on the computer, but he knew he was on the right track. He didn't know what was going on, it was just too complex for him, but he knew without a doubt that it was something big. More than ever before he felt they had to get to the bottom of this as fast as possible. Things were starting to look desperate.

It was time to call Red.