

CHAPTER V: THE INVESTIGATION BEGINS

"Hey Rude."

Reno was at his desk. More specifically, he sat in a luxurious leather chair behind it, but he was not facing the desk. Instead his chair was turned around to face the plate glass window behind. His feet were propped up on the windowsill. A drink in his hand, he was admiring the panoramic view of Junon that lay beyond.

He took a leisurely sip from his drink.

"Rude," he called out again.

"What is it?" Rude replied in an irritated voice.

Reno pushed off the window sill, spinning slowly in his chair with his feet in the air. As they drifted over the desk he plopped them down on it with a thud, stopping his motion. Rude was sitting nearby, his feet planted firmly on the floor, a pile of papers strewn across the top of the desk in front of him.

"What's with you?" Reno questioned.

Rude frowned at Reno and tapped his pen on the desk.

"In case you hadn't noticed there's a ton of paperwork to do," he stated. "It would make things a lot easier if you could help instead of sitting there daydreaming."

"I'm not daydreaming," Reno protested. "I'm thinking. That's what a CEO does. He doesn't do paperwork, he comes up with ideas. He's got to look at the big picture. He's got to focus on that and let others take care of the little details. I'm thinking about the future of the Turks here man."

Rude just stared at him for a moment.

"Yeah, right," he said finally, going back to his papers. "I bet that little blonde girl you were talking to last night at that bar hadn't entered your thoughts at all."

Reno stared at him for a moment.

"Why are you doing that anyway?" he questioned. "You're a partner in this company. You should be looking at the big picture too. We have secretaries to do that stuff."

Rude stopped and looked up again.

"Yes we do," he agreed. "Unfortunately these papers are of a rather delicate nature. I could let one of the secretaries do this, but then I'd have to kill her afterward. Be tough to find good replacements with that kind of policy."

Reno downed the rest of his drink.

"So get Elena to do it," he suggested.

Rude shook his head slowly, not looking up.

"Unfortunately, these need to be done right," Rude replied ruefully. "Besides, do you see Elena around anywhere?"

Reno frowned.

"Yeah, she has been missing a lot lately. I'm gonna have to give that girl a little talking to. She can't expect to reap the rewards when we do all the work."

Rude looked up again. He didn't bother to point out that Reno wasn't doing all that much work either.

"What did you want, anyway?"

"Huh?"

"What did you want?" Rude repeated. "When you called me?"

"Oh, that. I wanted to know if you wanted to go check out that new bar later on."

"What new bar?"

"The Beer Stein," Reno replied. "The one down on Freemont St. They're having a wet t shirt contest tonight."

"What time?"

"I believe it starts at nine, but that doesn't mean we can't get there a bit early so we can get a good spot to observe from."

Rude looked at his watch.

"I don't think so Reno. I'm meeting Lai Li later."

Reno made a face.

"Lai Li, Lai Li, Lai Li," he muttered. "That's all I hear from you lately. You've known the girl for what, two months now, and already you're whipped?"

"I'm not whipped," Rude countered. "That's got nothing to do with it."

Reno plopped his feet onto the floor. He rested his elbows on his desk and leaned forward.

"Didn't you just see her yesterday? And the day before?"

"Yeah, so?" Rude answered.

"Whipped."

Rude just shook his head and went back to his paperwork yet again.

Reno stared at him. They had been sitting in the office all afternoon, Rude diligently doing his paperwork. When did the man become such a businessman?

"What's with you?" he said suddenly. "You've been doing paperwork all day long. You haven't even had one drink. You'd rather go see some girl than go out to a bar with your best bud. I'd just like to know one thing. Who are you and what have you done with the real Rude?"

Rude looked up at Reno, his face serious, but then he broke into a grin.

"I guess I have been taking things a little too serious lately," he admitted. He dropped his pen on the desk. "I don't have to meet Lai Li until eight tonight. We've got plenty of time, if you want to go down there now."

Reno pondered this for a moment.

"I guess that's as good as I'm going to get, isn't it?"

He stood up.

"All right, let's get going then. Perhaps after you've had a few drinks you'll come to your senses."

"Don't count on it," Rude replied, getting up as well.

They walked over to the door, but just as Reno reached for the knob it opened of its own accord. Elena stepped in, almost walking right into him.

"Oh, hello," she said, stopping in her tracks. Behind her Vincent came to a halt as well.

Reno stepped back a pace.

"Well well well, the prodigal daughter returns," he stated. "To what do we owe this visit? I know you didn't come back here to get any work done."

Elena gave him a dark look.

"Actually, that's not exactly true," she said.

She stepped farther into the room, allowing Vincent to enter as well. Yuffie was right behind him. Reno eyebrow raised at the sight of her, but she ignored him.

"I got us a job," Elena announced.

"Oh really," Reno said. "Doing what?"

"Getting the dirt on Vanguard."

Reno thought about that for a moment.

"Vanguard," he repeated. "Isn't that that company that bought the Junon Power Company?"

"Uh huh," Elena replied. "And a lot of other companies as well. Not to mention they've been gobbling up choice pieces of land in a number of major cities like there's no tomorrow."

Reno nodded. Actually this wasn't really much of a surprise. Companies were always spying on one another. And he had heard a lot about Vanguard lately. It seemed to have appeared suddenly out of nowhere, and a lot of people were curious about the ownership and where it had come from. Actually he was surprised that no one had approached them sooner.

"Who's the client?" he asked.

"AVALANCHE," Elena replied.

Reno looked as if he were going to choke.

"AVALANCHE?" he repeated.

"Yes," Elena responded.

"What the hell do they want to know about this company for?" he blurted out, his eyes falling on Vincent and Yuffie.

Elena quickly told him about the man they had found in the forest and what had happened to him.

"That's all well and good," Reno said when she was done. "But...AVALANCHE?"

"Their gil's as good as anyone's," Elena pointed out tartly.

"Yeah, but..." Reno stammered.

"What's the matter, don't think you can handle the job?" Yuffie cut in suddenly.

Reno looked at her and frowned.

"Of course we can handle it," he said dismissively.

"So then what's the problem?" Vincent questioned.

Reno stood there for a moment, looking from one to the other. He really didn't have any valid protest, but for some reason, this prospect had never occurred to him.

Finally he shrugged.

"Fine," he said. "But if you think I'm going to take orders from Clod Strife, you've got another thing coming."

"Cloud's got other things to do right now," Vincent replied, ignoring Reno's mispronunciation. "I'm in charge."

"Great, we're going to have to take orders from fang boy?" Reno muttered. "That's hardly an improvement."

Vincent's eyes flickered dangerously, but he did not reply.

"Oh Reno, quit your whining," Elena cut in. "We've worked with them often enough by now. You should be used to it."

Reno folded his arms across his chest. They'd worked with them, yes, but never *for* them before. Still, as Elena pointed out, their gil was as good as anyone's. Cloud wasn't with them. In spite of what he said, working with Vincent, a former Turk, probably wouldn't be too much of a hardship. Besides, it might be fun to go along with it just to annoy the hell out of them.

"Whatever," he conceded. He looked at Vincent. "So what brilliant plan do you have in mind?"

He was looking at Vincent, but it was Elena who spoke.

"We've already done a little checking," she said. "Vanguard's main headquarters is in Gongaga. Even that was difficult to pin down. They've got holdings all over the world, some of them in other company's names. They also have a large office here in Junon that runs the former Junon Power Company. It would probably be wise to check out both of those places."

"And just what is it that we're looking for?" Reno questioned. "You think they're starting up the Mako reactors again? You think we're dealing with another Shinra here?"

"That's the general idea," Vincent replied. "We'll split into two groups. Elena and I will go to Gongaga and see what we can find out at Vanguard's main office. Reno, you and Yuffie see what you can find out about the Power Company here in Junon."

Yuffie looked at Vincent sourly, but kept her mouth shut.

"Rude, you stay here and act as their back up," Vincent finished. "Do you think you can get us fake ID's?"

"I can do it," Rude replied. "But everyone in AVALANCHE is well known. You especially, with that metal arm, are instantly recognizable. I don't think either you nor Yuffie could pass yourselves off as someone else."

Vincent pondered that for a moment, then nodded.

"You're probably right. Just for Reno and Elena then. Yuffie and I can snoop around outside and see if we can sniff anything out, or help them out if they get in trouble."

Reno looked skeptical. He was obviously of the opinion that Yuffie wouldn't be of much help if he got into trouble. He would have protested being paired up with her, if he didn't know that it must bug her a lot more than it bugged him.

"And what if we find out that they are using Mako reactors, what then?" Reno questioned.

Vincent paused for a moment, then a feral smile appeared on his lips. Reno had known Vincent for some time now, and though he knew the smile was not directed at him, he still couldn't help but feel uneasy. He glanced at the others and he had a feeling most of them felt the same way.

"What do you think?" Vincent replied. "We call the others and we take them out."

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Cloud stepped out of the Slipstream onto the grassy plain, the whine of the aircraft's engines slowly winding down. As the others exited the plane, he looked up at the familiar outline of the rooftops of Nibelheim.

He always got a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach whenever he came back here. Which was probably why he avoided returning to this place as much as he could. Any fond memories he may have had were overshadowed by the horror of what had taken place here, and what it had become.

"Sorry we had to come here, but there was no way to land any closer to the reactor," Cid said, coming up beside him. They were all aware of how both Cloud and Tifa felt about their old hometown.

Cloud shrugged it off. Cid was right, there was no place to land the Slipstream up in the mountains. They would have to go through Nibelheim to get there.

"It's no big deal," Cloud replied. "Let's get going."

Without another word he walked swiftly toward the town. The others looked at one another, then followed.

Cloud tried to look straight ahead as they walked through the town, concentrating on their goal. But even with his tunnel vision he couldn't help but notice some of the details around him. He had been here before, so he knew what to expect, but that didn't make him anymore comfortable. Though the town had changed. New buildings had sprung up. The core of it was still there, however. When he reached the center of the town, it looked almost identical to how he remembered it.

He led the others onward as fast as his feet could carry him. The others followed a few steps behind. They all realized that the faster they passed through town the better off Cloud would be. He only paused once, as they passed by the well. He stopped for a moment and looked up at it. It hadn't changed at all. He could almost picture himself and Tifa sitting up there, that last night before he went away to join SOLDIER. A lot had happened here, but there were still a few fond memories. For a moment a smile almost appeared on his lips.

A sudden movement caught his eye. He looked down to see a small rubber ball bouncing along the ground. It hit the base of the well and bounced back, coming to rest just a few paces from his feet.

"Hey Mister!"

He turned to see a young blonde boy standing in front of a nearby house, looking at him. Two other children stood behind him, in the entrance to the house.

"Could you get my ball please?"

Cloud didn't reply, just stood there for a long time. After a while, the boy's face grew puzzled.

"Mister?" he said questioningly.

Cloud stepped forward, then stooped down and picked up the ball. He looked at it for a moment, but there was nothing remarkable about it. Then he lifted his head and tossed it back. The boy caught it.

"Thanks Mister!" he called out, then he and his two friends ran into the house.

Cloud stood there looking at the rather plain house they had disappeared into.

His house.

Reeve came up beside him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"You alright?"

For a moment Cloud didn't reply. He felt a strange constriction in his throat.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he managed to say. He brushed Reeve's hand away. "Let's go."

He started down the road again, walking even faster than before, if it was possible. They passed the old Shinra mansion without a word, and soon enough they were on out of the town once again, on the path that led from Nibelheim up into the mountains. The whole time, none of them said a word.

Cloud felt a little better once the streets of Nibelheim fell behind them. Still, he wouldn't really feel better until they were far away from here.

Apparently, the new inhabitants of Nibelheim had little reason to come up into the mountains. The trail was overgrown and in places barely recognizable. Cloud could understand. Now that the reactor no longer working (or at least, as far as they knew) there really wasn't any reason for anyone to come up here. The folks in Nibelheim (at least the one's he had known) had always had tales of dark creatures inhabiting the Nibel mountains, even before the reactor had been built. It was possible things might not be that different now.

Still, this was a trail Cloud wasn't likely to forget, no matter how long he had been away.

Thus it was that even when all sign of the trail vanished entirely, Cloud led them unerringly forward, until finally they came to the foot of the bridge at the base of the mountain the reactor stood on.

Cloud looked up eagerly, for the first time they could catch a glimpse of the old reactor. But if he thought the view would tell him anything he was disappointed. They were still far away, and couldn't see much, but from what he could see the reactor looked unchanged. If anyone was working on it, or if it had been reactivated, they couldn't tell from here.

"How are we supposed to get there?" Cid questioned.

The bridge was gone, having long ago fallen into disrepair. Only the posts that once held the ropes in place and a few rotted planks lying on the ground indicated that it had existed at all.

"There's another way," Cloud said. "Though the caverns. We're better off going that way anyway. Even when this bridge was here, it had a habit of collapsing at the most inopportune moments."

Barret was staring at the reactor.

"It doesn't look any different," he stated.

"I noticed," Cloud replied.

"This trail we've been following has obviously not been used in years," Red pointed out. "And with the bridge gone, there's no way anyone could have come through here recently. Not more than one or two people that is. Certainly not enough traffic has passed through here to restart the reactor. They'd need dozens, probably hundreds of people, and a lot of equipment too."

This wasn't a fact that had been lost on Cloud.

"I know," he replied. "Who knows? Maybe they came from the other direction, or maybe they built another way up here. They only way we're going to find out is to go to the reactor ourselves. This way."

He started down a steep slope, right along the edge of the cliff. The others followed carefully. After climbing down the slope a ways they came to a wide area where another old trail could be discerned. Cloud led them along that for a while, the reactor disappearing behind the mountains once again. To Cid, it seemed like they were going in the wrong direction now. He was tempted to ask Cloud if he was sure of the way, but didn't. Spike hadn't led them astray yet.

A short time later they came to an opening in the cliff face, a natural cavern carved in the rock. Cloud walked in without hesitation. The others followed, Cid last. The farther along they went, the more of a bad feeling he had about it.

A dim greenish light illuminated the cavern. Cid couldn't identify the source. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. It wasn't very bright, but it was light enough for them to see by.

Cid caught up with Red, who was next in line in front of him.

"What's that light?" he questioned.

"Mako," Red replied. "The hills here are filled with it. That's why Shinra built the reactor up here to begin with. There's tiny veins of it running through the cavern walls. Not enough to be worth extracting, but enough to give us some light to see by."

The party continued forward while the two talked. Cid noticed they passed a number of turn offs.

"Are you sure Cloud knows where he's going?" Cid questioned.

"It's alright Cid," Red reassured him. "We've been through here before. Right before we met you, actually. I remember the way too. Cloud is taking us in the right direction."

Cid felt silence, his concern appeased, at least for the moment.

A few minutes later they emerged from the caves once more into a shallow bowl of land surrounded by tall hills. Cid looked around, but at this point he had no idea where they were.

Cloud led them up through the rocks. Cid could see no sign of a trail here at all. He wondered just how much longer this was going to take.

The ground leveled off again. Cloud had picked up the pace, walking forward rapidly now, but suddenly he stopped.

The others came up beside him. Cid looked around, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"What's up?" he questioned. "Why are we stopping?"

For a moment none of the others replied.

"The fountain..." Cloud said finally.

"The what?" Cid questioned, but Cloud had already started forward again.

They all gathered around a circular outcropping of rock. Cid came up beside them. The rocks almost looked like some kind of well. He looked inside. The rocks formed a shallow bowl, but there was nothing in there except a few dead leaves from some of the nearby shrubs.

"It's gone," Cloud said.

"What is?" Cid asked, on the verge of exasperation. Of the others, only Nipala also looked puzzled.

"There used to be a natural Mako fountain here," Reeve answered him. "It must have been compressed in the hills and forced out."

"And Shinra didn't gobble it up?" Cid questioned.

"They didn't know about it," Reeve replied. "Otherwise I'm sure they would have."

"But didn't you tell me once that you came through here with Sephiroth?" Cid asked, looking at Cloud.

"Yes," Cloud replied after a moment. "But that was before Sephiroth went nuts. President Shinra had never exactly been a favorite of his. I don't think he would have told them."

They stood there for a moment in silence.

"So you think this happened naturally?" Barret asked. "Could it have disappeared on its own?"

They all looked at Red.

"It's possible," the red beast replied. "Any number of geologic events could have cut off the supply. Although the fact that the land around the fountain seems unchanged would indicate against that."

They fell silent. Cloud reached out and pushed some of the rocks around inside what remained of the fountain, as if looking to see if he could find any remains. Finally he stood back up again.

"All right, I guess there's nothing more to see here. Let's keep going."

They followed him as he once again started off. He led them steeply upward now.

"Are we there yet?" Cid grumbled.

No one paid any attention to him. They wound their way up, coming over a steep ridge. The land leveled out, then rose yet again up another slope, on top of which the reactor stood.

"Yes we are," Cloud stated.

They paused for a moment to look at it again. They were much closer this time, but it still looked the same. They could make out some details now, enough to see that the place was still in disrepair. The paint was scratched and faded, the metal rusted. All around in front of the entrance lay debris.

Cid frowned.

"Looks pretty deserted to me," he stated.

Cloud nodded, but started forward nevertheless. He wasn't going to make any judgments until he'd thoroughly inspected the place.

Cid started to follow, but suddenly felt something strike him hard in the back. He fell forward into the dirt with a cry, his back stinging. He spun around, and for a moment saw a large hairy...something, but a second later it vanished.

"What the hell...?" he began.

Red was looking right at Cloud when a shaggy beast blinked into existence right behind the spiky haired warrior. Before Red had a chance to shout a warning the monster struck, slashing a clawed hand into Cloud's shoulder. The young man stumbled and spun around, but even as he did so the beast disappeared yet again.

Only to reappear behind Barret. It raised it's arm to strike, but Nipala had noticed it, and turned and leaped at it. It vanished immediately, and she landed on the ground, looking around wildly.

As if by instinct Red suddenly spun around to see that the beast was now right behind him. He leaped at it, and it vanished once again.

"What the hell's going on?" Barret shouted.

A clawed hand raked across Reeve's back. He cried out and fell to the ground, trying to pull out his shotgun. Cloud, who was nearby, raced over and swung his sword. It whistled through empty air.

"Some kind of teleportation beast!" Reeve yelled. He looked around. The beast suddenly reappeared behind Cid again. They were all looking around wildly now, and Cid spotted it before it could strike. He brought his spear forward, but it disappeared again. Red shook his head. It was all happening too fast. He didn't have time to think.

"So how do we fight it?" Barret exclaimed. He stood his ground, spinning around every few seconds. But even so the beast managed to appear behind him once more. It struck again. Barret cried out in pain as blood flew from his arm.

"Dammit!" he shouted, opening up with his gun, but it too late. The beast was already gone.

"Quick!" Red shouted. "Back to back everyone!"

Cloud spun around next to Reeve. Barret pulled Cid to his feet and they turned to face away from one another, while Nipala stood behind Red.

They all waited, weapons ready, but nothing happened.

"Is it gone?" Barret questioned.

Red shrugged. They didn't have enough information. He had never heard of a beast that could teleport before. He didn't know what distance it could travel, or how long it could vanish before reappearing. For all he knew, it could be miles away by now, or it could be just waiting for them to let down their guard. One thing was for sure, they couldn't stay like this forever.

Cloud suddenly turned around to face Reeve's back, lifting his sword.

"Cloud, what are you..." Cid began.

Almost immediately the beast reappeared, but almost at the same time, Cloud suddenly thrust his sword backwards, straight into the beast's abdomen. A high pitched shriek pierced the air, and the beast stumbled backwards and vanished. Almost immediately they heard something clattering in the rocks not far away. There was another shriek, and then all went silent.

Cloud climbed up onto a ledge where the sounds had come from. He looked around for a moment, then turned to the others.

"It's up here," he confirmed. "It's dead."

Red padded up the slope as well. He stopped in front of the creature and started to examine it.

"What an intriguing creature," he muttered. "The Elders will be very interested in this. And look at those protrusions on its back. I wonder if they have anything to do with the teleportation process?"

Cloud looked at him for a moment, then shook his head and scrambled back down the slope. In the meantime, Reeve had taken out a cure materia and treated everyone's wounds, which, fortunately, all turned out to be minor.

"How'd you do that?" Barret questioned, looking at Cloud.

"It was obviously smart enough to attack us from behind," Cloud explained. "Earlier, we didn't know who it would show up behind, so we couldn't counter. But with all of you back to back, when I turned around I was only target available. I knew it would attack me."

"Very logical," Reeve agreed. "Now I suggest we move on. We don't know if there's any more of those creatures around."

Cloud turned to look at the ledge above them.

"You done up there Red?"

There was a moments hesitation, then, somewhat reluctantly, Red padded back down the slope.

They headed up the slope toward the reactor, Cloud convinced more than ever that something was going on. They had met another monster. It was true, not many people came up here anymore, it was possible that creature had just been a leftover from the old Shinra reactor, but the coincidences seemed to be mounting.

They reached the base of the reactor. They could see the whole thing now. It looked in even worse shape now that they could see it up close. Debris was strewn everywhere. The metal structure of the building itself was badly damaged, leaving gaping holes in the superstructure. Cloud stopped and listened, but he could not hear the deep throb of a running Mako reactor. All was quiet.

"If this place is running again, they're hiding it damn well," Barret muttered.

Again Cloud could not disagree. Still, they had come this far, he wasn't about to turn back now. His sword still in his hand, he walked up the steps and pushed open the rusted door.

The light was dim inside. Cloud looked around slowly. In spite of appearances, he held his sword out in front of him, ready to strike at a moments notice. The first thing that met his eyes were the rows of pods. They were still there, apparently unchanged, except now covered with a thick layer of dust. There was no sound in the room, no sign of occupation. The dirt covered floor looked like it hadn't been disturbed in years.

He slowly made his way farther inside, down to the base of the steps. He looked up at the door to the inner core, memories flooding back to him. He looked down at the steps and saw dark stains under the dust. He felt this throat going dry, remembering finding Tifa severely wounded there. He remembered lifting her up gently and moving her to the side, where she would be out of harms way. But he hadn't have time to tend to her. He had had to stop Sephiroth.

He looked up the stairs. The door above was open. A gaping hole of darkness beyond. Gritting his teeth, he slowly mounted the steps.

He hesitated a moment when he reached the top. The others were behind him, but he didn't turn to look at them. It almost seemed like they weren't there at all. Still there was no sound, no sign of occupation. Feeling strangely reluctant, he stepped forward again.

The next room was even darker, so dark he could barely see at all. The light filtering in from the other room, and a beam of light from one small hole in the wall producing the only illumination. Blankly he looked around. The empty podium where Jenova had been placed, where he had confronted Sephiroth what seemed like a million years ago, in front of him. All around it the machinery that ran the reactor, silent and dark. No one moved there, no wheels spun, or lights blinked. The place was deserted. There was nothing here.

He stood there a long time before finally turning to see the others standing in the doorway.

"There's nothing here," he said emotionlessly.

"It would appear that way," Red agreed, looking around.

The others said nothing. Without a word Cloud walked past them, and didn't stop until they were once more outside the reactor.

"I don't get it," Cid spoke up. "I thought sure the reactor would be reactivated."

"So did I," Reeve said slowly. "Barret, what about the reactor in Corel? I know that's not as close, but it's the next nearest one."

"No way," Barret replied. "I had that thing dismantled. It was one of the first things I did after becoming Mayor."

"And no one could have rebuilt it?"

"Not a chance," Barret said bitterly. "I was out there just a month ago myself. There's nothing left there but an empty field."

"So what are we left with?" Nipala questioned. "Could this all have just been natural occurrences?"

"Again, it's a possibility," Red responded. "Seems like a strange set of coincidences, but it's possible."

Cloud was just standing there, staring off into space, looking at the mountains around them.

"What do you think, Spike?" Cid questioned.

They all turned to look at the blonde swordsman. Cloud didn't answer for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

"I don't know," he replied. "To tell you the truth, I was sure we'd find something here to. But no, I don't think all these things are a natural occurrence. Something is going on, and no matter where we have to look or how long it takes, we're going to get to the bottom of it."