

CHAPTER IX: SURPRISE, SURPRISE, YET ANOTHER PERSON BENT ON WORLD DOMINATION

The harbor of Mysteele was not particularly crowded this time of day. Most of the fishing boats were still out to sea, and would not return until the sun had sunk below the horizon. Even so, there were still plenty of dockworkers as well as tourists and other passerby's wandering the street beside the wharf.

Magnus walked slowly down the street, his eyes sweeping back and forth, glancing at everyone he passed and then discarding them, until his eyes fell on a woman standing at the side of the pier looking out into the harbor.

He walked up until he stood directly behind her. He remained there for a long time, just looking at her back. She was standing by a wooden piling, a line of which ran along the street here, the dividing line between solid ground and the sea. Her hands rested lightly on top of it. Her blonde hair cascaded down around her shoulders, glinting in the late evening light.

"Lenore," he said softly, a trace of a smile on his lips. Even after all these years he still felt that twinge of excitement just uttering her name.

She turned, a look of surprise in her gray eyes that melted away the moment she saw him, to be replaced by a warm smile.

"Magnus," she said. "You're back."

"I came in a few days ago," he said slowly. "I would have told you sooner, but things have been rather hectic."

Her gray eyes looked at him over carefully.

"So he's here then?"

Magnus looked around quickly, but no one was near. He turned back toward her and nodded.

Neither one of them spoke for some time. She had a questioning look in her eyes, but whatever thoughts she held behind them, she kept to herself.

"And some of his friends," Magnus said finally.

"What do you mean?" she asked, a puzzled look on her face.

"Some of his friends followed him in a submarine," he said grimly. "It was sunk off the coast."

Her eyes widened.

"At least some of them survived," he said quickly. "They've been stirring up trouble all over the county. They've managed to elude capture so far, but I'm afraid it's only a matter of time. I didn't anticipate this."

He looked down at the ground for a moment.

"I should have listened to you," he finished.

He lifted his head to look at her, searching her eyes for some sign of reproach, but all he saw was sympathy.

"What's done is done," she said slowly. "You chose the route you thought best from many difficult possibilities. But what happens now?"

He smiled and took her hand. They started walking slowly along the pier.

"I don't know," he said finally. "Things have gone to hell pretty quickly, and it's all my fault. It was my idea to bring him here in the first place, and that was bad enough. I should have realized that someone might follow him."

Magnus stopped walking and looked thoughtfully down the street. There were two men loading some crates onto a truck nearby, but he wasn't really paying any attention. It wasn't like he hadn't known what kind of risks he was taking. He knew very well that Cloud might not survive this, that in fact he himself might not survive. He had been willing to accept that. It was unfortunate that Cloud had been brought into this unwittingly, and now his friends as well, but Magnus just had to harden his heart and get on with it. Things had gone too far to turn back now, or to have any second thoughts.

"I will try to help him and his friends as much as I can, but I can't allow that to interfere with what needs to be done. We'll just have to go on and hope for the best."

He looked at Lenore beside him, saw her looking up at his face. Saw the questions in her eyes, the questions he knew she would not ask.

No, he would not regret his actions, not even if Cloud or any of his friends were to die. At least, even though they might know it not, they would die in an effort to prevent a war. If he could only succeed.

He stood there for a long time, looking into Lenore's eyes, while she remained unmoving beside him. There were thin lines on her face now, the only mark of age upon her, but even these did not diminish her beauty.

He reached out and caressed her cheek gently, and was rewarded with a smile.

And he would succeed, the thought. They had fought one war long ago, and she had nearly lost everything. He would not let that happen again. Nothing, no one else mattered to him. If he had to sacrifice Cloud and all his friends to obtain this he would do it. He would do it all for her. Only for her.

~*~

Captain Tremaine looked up as the young man rushed into his office. He was one of a network of boys the Captain used to get messages to and from the many informants they had crisis crossing the city. He had found that young boys seemed to be particularly suited for this chore, being both enthusiastic and unlikely to draw suspicion.

"Yes?" he questioned.

"Four people fitting the description of the foreigners who escaped from Unthor have been spotted near an abandoned building on Salinor Street."

The Captain sat there motionless, the look of surprise disappearing from his face almost the moment it appeared.

"Very good," he said in obvious dismissal. The boy turned and hurried from the room.

Captain Tremaine stood up, a grim smile slowly forming on his lips. This was certainly interesting news, and welcome too. He was an ambitious man, a fact that he had never tried to hide. He was proud of the fact that he had made Captain at a younger age than anyone else in the cities history, and he certainly had no intention of stopping there. He had heard rumors that these spies from the other continent were headed for Mysteele, and he had secretly hoped for something like this to happen, especially after he had heard that Kendal had already set up a trap for some of them in another district. A trap that was being sprung at this very moment. Which also was good news. With Kendal occupied, he would be too busy to come and take command of this foray. No, they would have to depend on Captain Tremaine to capture these spies on his own, which would be quite a feather in his cap.

He walked out of his office, the smile still on his face.

This could turn out very well for him indeed. The only thing he had to worry about was that this might be a false alarm. Which would be disappointing, but would, after all do no real harm.

"Lieutenant Chisholm," he called. "Get the men together, we've got a little job to do."

Still, he was an optimist, and the sources the boy was in contact with were usually reliable. He had a real good feeling about this. He could smell a promotion in the air. The possibility that they could fail never even entered his mind.

~*~

Cid sat by the window, looking outside thoughtfully while puffing on one of his ever present cigarettes. Barret sat nearby, but Yuffie and Mosato where nowhere to be seen.

They had landed the night before in a small field not far from the outskirts of Mysteele, then had made their way on foot into the city. They had stumbled upon this building through blind luck, and had holed up here for much of the day.

Though Cid looked relaxed, the truth was he was troubled. They were in Mysteele, but what were they to do now? They didn't know anyone here, they didn't know where Cloud was, and they had no identification if they were confronted. They had stayed inside for most of the day because of this, but they couldn't just sit here forever. They had to come up with some kind of plan.

Cid glanced over at Barret, who had paced and grumbled all day, wandering around like a caged tiger. Cid couldn't think of anyone he would rather have beside him in a fight, but thoughtful consideration and planning were not exactly Barret's

forte. Give him a weapon and a line of enemies and he was in his glory, but he would be of no help at this point.

And as for Yuffie, well, just the thought of asking for her advice made him shudder.

No, it was obvious to Cid, even without the looks the others had given him, that it would be up to him to come up with something.

Unfortunately, at this point, he had no idea what that something would be.

Barret stood up and stretched. He had only been sitting for about ten minutes. He looked over at Cid.

"What are we going to do about Mosato?" he asked.

Cid was a little surprised by the question. He hadn't really given much thought to the youngster. Actually, he hadn't given any thought to him at all. That bothered him a little, now that he thought about it, but he had to admit they had bigger problems. But it didn't surprise him that Barret was worried about Mosato. Once again Cid wondered how his perspective would change once his own child was born.

He shrugged.

"I guess he comes with us for now," he replied. "I'm not really happy about it but there doesn't seem to be much else we could do, short of abandoning him. Actually he might be better off without us, but I can't think of anyplace we could leave him in safety. He already told us he doesn't know anyone in Mysteele."

Barret looked unhappy, but he said nothing more about it.

"If only there were one person here we knew we could trust," Cid mused. He removed the stub of the cigarette from his mouth and flicked it out the window into the darkness outside. As he did so he noticed half a dozen figures moving quickly toward the building. He stood up and grabbed his spear. Barret perked up, immediately noticing his actions and the grim look on his face.

"Looks like we might have some company," Cid muttered.

They stepped quickly out into the hall, just as two men appeared at the other end of it.

Cid heard a shot as the other men opened up, but then any sound was drowned out by the return blast from Barret's gun. Cid turned and they ran rapidly in the other direction.

Cid had been thinking of trying to find Yuffie to warn her, but the gunfire would certainly make that unnecessary. Yuffie was on her own now, they had to worry about their own skins. He angled down the corridors toward a door that led out into a back alley. Hopefully their enemy had left it unguarded. Belatedly he wished they had agreed on someplace to meet later on if something like this occurred, but the truth was he just hadn't thought of it. Some leader he was turning out to be.

They entered a large room that looked like it may have been a lobby. A curving staircase led up to a hallway that ran along the second floor on their left. Ahead of them was the entrance to a short hallway that Cid knew led to the door he was looking for. He turned to look back, and though he could hear pursuit he did not see anyone. He looked ahead once more and slammed on the brakes as half a dozen men emerged from the hallway he was heading for, the hallway that led to the exit.

Barret nearly ran right into him when he halted. Stumbling to keep his balance he brought his gun up, but even as he did so a dozen men ran out onto the balcony above them, all bringing their guns to bear.

Cid turned to look behind them and saw that the men that were following them had caught up as well. They were completely surrounded.

For a moment they all stood there motionless. Then one of the men on the balcony started down the stairs toward them.

"Drop your weapons," he said evenly. "It's over."

Cid looked at the man, then glanced around once more. He sighed and dropped his spear. They were caught...again.

Beside him Barret lowered his arm.

The man on the stairs came down until he was standing in front of them.

"Where are the others?" Captain Tremaine asked.

Cid paused for a moment before answering. Where the hell was Yuffie?

"Probably long gone by now," he replied.

The Captain looked at him, a thin smile on his face.

"Unlikely," he said. "I'm sure they're skulking around here somewhere. We'll find them soon enough."

He had read the reports from Unthor. Two men, a girl and a young boy. The two men were the one's he had been concerned about, and here they were, safely in his hands. He didn't think the girl or the kid would pose much of a threat. He turned to the man beside him.

"Lieutenant, make sure every room is searched carefully. I want them all. We'll show Kendal he's not the only one who can catch spies."

"What do you mean?" Barret said abruptly.

Tremaine gave them a superior look.

"Kendal was informed earlier of two more of your little crew wandering around the city. I have to admit that I find your foolish attempts at infiltrating pretty pathetic."

Cid bit back a sharp retort. He could see Barret was shaking with anger.

"All right," Tremaine said. "Get them out here, and find me the others!"

Two soldiers came up to lead them away, but just as they approached there was a thump from behind the counter that looked like it must once have been a reception desk. Tremaine's head snapped in that direction. He held up his hand for the men to stop, then motioned for the lieutenant to go around behind the counter. The other men readied their guns.

Yuffie looked at Mosato angrily. They were both wedged under the counter behind the desk. Mosato's leg had gone numb and he had shifted it just slightly to try to get his weight off of it, and in doing so his foot had slipped off the ledge it was on and banged against the counter.

Yuffie had hoped that they would not notice the sound, it had not been very loud, after all, but the sudden silence made her suspect otherwise.

She reached into her poach and withdrew a materia orb.

The lieutenant reached the end of the counter. He cautiously looked around behind it. There was no one there, but he could see there was a great deal of space under the counter.

Yuffie heard a scrapping sound at the end of the counter. She stared at the materia orb, concentrating fiercely, focusing her mind. The orb should have blazed with light, but it barely flickered. All she saw was the faint glimmer of light that had produced the stunted version of her summon spell by the brook earlier.

She glanced up and saw someone's legs from under the counter. She also saw Mosato staring at her.

She looked back at the materia. Focusing her mind again, but this time looking into the orb differently. Look into a well, Mosato had told her, look deep into it until you could see the bottom.

This had better work.

For a moment nothing happened, but then she saw the glow begin to brighten, and she felt the power infusing her. Suddenly the orb shone like a beacon in her hands, and she jumped up triumphantly from behind the counter as everyone turned toward her.

"Tidal wave!" she cried even as they brought their guns to bear.

And suddenly it was there, towering over their heads where Yuffie had stood, the great turquoise sea beast. With a scream of rage that rang in their ears, it called forth it's wall of water. And even before it came down upon his head, Tremaine realized that he wasn't going to get that promotion quite as soon as he'd anticipated.

In seconds it was done, the room going deathly silent.

Yuffie turned to see Mosato looking at her with wonder in his eyes.

"Big and dangerous," she said. "That's more like it."

Yuffie turned toward Cid and Barret, who were the only one's left standing. The others were scattered across the floor, most completely still, but a few groans and feeble movements showed that some had survived, barely.

Tremaine was one of them. He lay on the floor nearby, one leg twisted and bent in a direction a leg does not normally bend. Barret stepped over and looked down at him.

"The others," he said grimly. "Where are they?"

Tremaine slowly lifted his head to look at him. Though he barely seemed to realize where he was, his voice was surprisingly strong when he answered.

"Go to hell."

Barret brought his gun arm brutally down across the man's face. He slumped to the ground. Barret turned toward the lieutenant, who lay nearby, also badly hurt, but conscious and watching them carefully. Barret pointed his arm at the man.

"At the Grafton Hotel on Sherbrook Boulevard, on the west side of town not far from the water," the man blurted out, talking so fast he almost stumbled over the words. "A man and a woman. The man has red hair and a blue suit, the woman was a brunette wearing a black skirt."

Barret looked at Cid.

"Reno and Tifa," he said.

Cid nodded.

"Let's move!"

They ran through the short hallway and then out the exit into the alley beyond. Cid led them around to the front of the building.

"There might be more of them there," Barret warned.

"You're probably right," he replied. "But they won't be expecting us."

They reached the street out front. They could see a couple of jeeps parked down at the corner, a man standing near them. Cid ran straight for him. The man looked up at them, but in the dark he didn't realize who they were until it was too late. Cid stepped past the fallen man and hopped into the jeep. He crouched down to look under the steering column, but then realized the keys were in it.

"Let's go," he said, looking at the others.

Barret grinned fiercely and hopped in behind him, Yuffie and Mosato following. In seconds the jeep was roaring down the street.

One of the few things Cid had done since they arrived was study the layout of the city. They had seen maps posted near bus stops at a few street corners when they had arrived, and Cid had taken the time to look them over carefully. It didn't take him long to find Sherbrook Boulevard.

Cid brought the jeep to a screeching halt in front of the hotel. They quickly piled out and ran inside. The manager was standing by the door when they came in. He glanced out and saw the jeep. He took a step back and looked at them in dismay.

"Not again," he said. "If you're looking for the others, they were upstairs in room 215. But I think they are gone now."

Cid rushed past him without a word, the others close behind. He ran up the steps, taking them two at a time, then down the hall. The door to 215 was ajar.

He stepped into the room, looking around quickly, spear ready. Reno was lying on his back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Cid came up beside him. Reno turned toward him, looking at him blearily, barely registering his presence. His jacket was gone, his shirt untucked and disheveled. He held a bottle of liquor in his right hand, almost empty. Another stood on the night table beside him. That one was empty.

He looked at Cid and his eyes slowly focused.

"I failed her," he muttered.

Barret was beside Cid in a moment. He looked down at Reno, instantly realizing the state he was in. His eyes filled with rage.

"Where's Tifa?" he said angrily.

Reno looked around for the source of the new voice, but he could not seem to find it. He looked back at Cid.

"They've got her," he said, barely understandable. "They wanted her, for some reason. They took her. I told them where she was. I was weak. They..." he looked back up at the ceiling.

"I was weak," he repeated.

"What happened here, Reno," Barret demanded, his voice urgent, and filled with anger. "What happened?"

But Reno just stared at the ceiling.

Barret reached down and grabbed hold of him, pulling him up roughly by the collar.

"You sold her out, didn't you?" he said, his voice thick with accusation. "You gave her to them to save your own skin. You son of a bitch!"

Barret brought his gun arm up. Reno just looked at him, making no attempt at resistance. But suddenly Cid reached out to stay Barret's arm.

"Hold on," he said. He was looking at the bed where Barret had lifted Reno up. It was stained red.

He bent down and looked closer.

"Damn," he muttered. He reached forward.

"Help me get his shirt off."

Barret eased Reno back down, the anger fading from his eyes. He removed Reno's shirt. The back of it was soaked with blood. Reno just lay there mumbling incoherently. They turned him over.

"Oh God," Yuffie said, coming up next to them.

Reno's back was a red mass of twisted flesh.

"Yuffie, we need a cure materia," Cid stated.

"Yeah," she agreed, reaching into her pouch, her hand trembling. She brought it out and concentrated on it. In a moment it glowed a bright green.

Cid saw a shimmering green light run along the crisscrossing wounds on Reno's back. When it faded the wounds had closed.

Barret leaned forward again.

"Reno, what happened?" he said, but there was no anger in his voice this time.

Reno stared at him, and for a moment they did not think he would respond. But then he spoke, and his voice seemed a little bit stronger.

"We tried to contact the Brotherhood, but it was a trap. I drugged Tifa so she wouldn't go..."

"You what?" Barret exclaimed.

"I was afraid it was a trap," he continued. "When I got there they tried to talk me into telling them where Tifa was. I went along for as long as I could to buy time. I was hoping she'd wake up and escape before they got there. Eventually they caught on that I was just playing for time and resorted to more direct methods."

Reno turned away again.

"I tried not to tell them. I couldn't..." he shook his head slowly.

"I was weak," he said yet again.

Cid patted him reassuringly on the shoulder. Never in his life had he thought that he would ever feel sorry for this man.

For a moment no one spoke. Cid looked at Barret and saw him struggling with his feelings as well.

"Who is the Brotherhood?" Cid asked.

"Some kind of underground organization," Reno said, his voice fading at the end. He closed his eyes.

"Why did they let you go?" Yuffie asked suddenly.

Reno opened his eyes again, and suddenly he started to laugh. It was so sudden, they all just looked at him in surprise.

He stopped laughing abruptly and grimaced.

"I'm a warning," he said. "They let me go to tell you to get out of town. They've got what they want now. They told me to tell you all that they will not bother you anymore if you stay out of the way."

He closed his eyes once again.

Yuffie seemed about to ask another question, but a look from Cid cut her off.

"I think it might be best if we let him rest," he said slowly.

They walked over to the other side of the room. Cid looked at them all carefully.

"Do you think he's telling the truth?" Barret asked.

Cid nodded slowly.

"I think he's too drunk to make up any elaborate stories," Cid replied. "The question is, what do we do now?"

"We've got to rescue Tifa," Barret said immediately.

"I agree, but how?" Cid replied. "We don't know where they're holding Tifa or Cloud. I'm afraid we're not any better off now than we were before."

"What about the Brotherhood thing that he mentioned?" Yuffie asked.

"I don't know," Cid said. "It sounds like they may be able to help us, may be our only chance, in fact. But how do we contact them? Reno tried it and look what happened to him."

"I don't know what to do," Barret weighed in. "But I do think we should get the hell out of here. They came here to get Tifa. They know where this place is. They could be watching it right now."

Cid looked around, suddenly realizing just how true Barret's words were. He walked back over to Reno, who seemed to have fallen asleep.

"Well, we've got one of our little company back. Maybe the others are not too far away either. Barret, give me a hand with Reno. It's time to hit the road once again."

~*~

Cloud had just reached the top of the stairs in the Presidential Palace when he heard someone call his name. He looked back to see Gram coming toward him. The President, Vice President, Cloud wasn't sure what his exact title was at this point, was smiling broadly, yet for some reason it did not strike Cloud as being a friendly smile.

"I need to speak with you," Gram said coming up to stand beside him.

Cloud looked at him but said nothing.

"Come," Gram said with a nod of his head. "I have something to show you as well. It's very important."

"All right."

Gram led him down the steps and turned left.

"I'm afraid we've haven't been completely honest with you," Gram said as they walked. "There is more going on here than meets the eye, but I have a feeling that I can safely tell you the truth now."

Cloud said nothing, but just followed along behind. He had a feeling he wasn't going to like what he was about to hear.

"Your father was never a member of our government," Gram said. "In fact, he was never on this continent at all. It was all a fabrication made up by Magnus."

He looked at Cloud, measuring his response. He had to admit the young man took it well. He saw only a glimmer of anger flash in his eyes.

"To what purpose?" Cloud asked.

"To get you here, of course," Gram replied. "You see, the people have been safe here for a long time. We have spent all this time building up our strength, and now we are very strong indeed. The people here are the finest in the world, unsullied and uncontaminated by lesser races from the other continents. We have kept ourselves pure. But we cannot remain hidden forever. Eventually we are going to have to interact with the others, it is inevitable. And what will happen then?"

He paused, but he really didn't seem to be waiting for a reply.

"Contamination," he continued. "A merging of our peoples, with the watering down of our superior genes. Once it starts there will be no stopping it, and we will end up weak and inferior, just like everyone else from your continents."

Cloud looked at Gram to see if he was deliberately trying to provoke him, but the man seemed perfectly serious.

"And I cannot allow that to happen," he went on. "It would be a repudiation of everything I've lived for. The merging of our peoples is inevitable, but the method can still be controlled, and the method is everything. Our continent and the others must meet, but to think we would meet as equals would be preposterous. The only proper way for us to be received is as a conqueror."

They were still walking as they talked. They were now in a section of the palace Cloud had never seen before.

"Do you understand that that could be the only proper way?" Gram asked, and now he sounded like a teacher trying to reason with a wayward child. "We are the naturally superior people. It is our nature and our right to rule all the inferior races, over all of the other continents. We have built ourselves up for this express purpose, we have hidden ourselves away for the time when we would be strong enough, and then when the time was right we would reveal ourselves in a sudden unstoppable onslaught. We are near that point, but we are not there yet. We are a numerous people, but we still do not have the population of the other continents. We are still greatly outnumbered. Our soldiers may be superior to yours, at least to your ordinary ones, but there are still not enough of us, and there may not be for some time to come. I am afraid we will not have a large enough army when the time comes to reveal ourselves, and I'm afraid we must reveal ourselves soon, or we will be discovered. I cannot produce more soldiers out of thin air, but there may be a way to make the ones we have stronger. A way to make them strong enough to offset your superiority of numbers."

Cloud looked at him grimly.

"You want to infuse them with Mako energy."

Gram nodded.

"We have many spies on your continents. We followed the progress of the SOLDIER program very carefully, but security around that project was always high. We could never get a man in to get a look at the research. To tell you the truth it caused quite a panic here. We knew we could never defeat you if you decided to create an army of these people."

"Fortunately that did not happen. The scientists who created the program were killed, and the entire project was ended after the fall of Shinra. A bit of luck for us, you could say, but we still didn't have the secret ourselves. Since we couldn't get the scientist or the research we decided to do the next best thing."

"You went looking for someone from SOLDIER to kidnap and bring here," Cloud said.

"Entice," Gram responded. "Not kidnap. You did come of your own free will."

"Led here by a lie," Cloud replied.

"The details were not up to me," Gram said. "I just requested that they get you here. It is regrettable, but necessary. We are going to have to perform some experiments on you. Some of them may be quite painful, I'm afraid. But there really is just no way around it. You may be damaged, you may even die, but you can take comfort from the fact that your sacrifices will be used to the greater glory of all the people of the southern continent. You will be a hero."

Cloud laughed at that. He couldn't help it. He could no longer contain himself. But it was a laugh without humor.

"And if I refuse?" he said, his hand straying toward his sword. There had to be some reason they were telling him this now.

"I don't think it will be necessary for you to resort to violence," Gram replied. "Remember, I have something I wanted to show you. Please come and take a look before you do anything rash."

They seemed to have been walking endlessly through a maze of corridors, but now Gram stopped and motioned to a set of double doors set in the hallway to the right. He looked at Cloud expectantly.

Cloud walked through the doors. It seemed to be some kind of observation room. It held a few chairs and table, with a vending machine next to the door. The far wall held large windows that looked out and down upon another room that seemed to be some sort of laboratory, or some kind of operating room. He could see Kendal standing below wearing a lab coat. He stood beside a gurney and Cloud suddenly felt a lump form in his throat when he saw the figure strapped to it. She was motionless and her eyes were closed.

He turned to look at Gram, who had followed him in, and for the first time there was rage in his eyes.

"What have you done to her?"

Gram held up his hand.

"Relax, Mr. Strife, your precious Tifa is unharmed. But I'm afraid it is up to you as to whether she stays that way."

Cloud stood there looking at him, and Gram could tell that he was weighing the odds.

"You cannot save her," Gram stated. "The gurney is attached to a power source. With a flip of a switch Kendal can send enough voltage through her to kill her in seconds. You couldn't possibly get down there in time."

Cloud didn't reply for quite some time.

"What, exactly, do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Just cooperate with the experiments," Gram replied. "We need to discover how to infuse someone with Mako. We're hoping to use your body to figure it out. If we succeed, and you still live, both you and any of your friends will be free to go."

Cloud said nothing. That didn't sound particularly reassuring, even if he could believe it, which was unlikely considering Gram's track record. Once again he cursed himself for not letting his friends know what he was doing, for not warning them somehow, for their stubbornness at following him.

He looked down at Tifa one more time. She appeared to be sleeping peacefully. He wanted to go down there and hold her so badly it made his temples ache.

Why did you have to follow me?

He turned away.

"All right," he said.

Gram nodded. There really had been no other alternative. He saw the fire had faded from Cloud's eyes, but they still smoldered. The man was still dangerous, and he would have to be watched carefully.

"Very well," Gram said. "We will start tonight. Kendal will be along later to tell you what needs to be done."

Gram turned abruptly and without another word walked out of the room.

Cloud stood there for a long time looking down at Tifa. He walked over to the window and slowly ran his hand along the glass, as if he could reach out to her from there. He shook his head, then slowly turned and walked out of the room.

He made his way back to the main entrance. He was deep in thought, not really paying much attention to what was going on around him. He would go along with what they wanted, but that didn't mean he wouldn't try to get them both out of there if the chance presented itself.

He reached the bottom of the curved staircase and slowly started up.

It was a polished brass knob at the top of the staircase that saved him. As he walked past it, his head bent, he happened to see the distorted reflection of the man behind him, a man who pulled something out of his shirt and lifted it above his head.

Cloud dodged to the left as the knife descended. He felt a sharp pain along his left arm. He swung around, grabbing the knife hand and twisting. The man stumbled to the ground, but held onto the knife. Cloud leapt back and drew his sword as the man sprang at him again, making no attempt at defense. Cloud's blade drove straight into his chest. But to Cloud's amazement, the man kept coming, pushing himself down the length of the sword that had impaled him. His knife came up again.

Cloud shoved with all his might. The hilt of the sword struck the man and drove him back. He stumbled, and then he was falling, tumbling down the stairs, the sword still embedded in him.

He came to rest at the bottom, no longer moving. Cloud could see a dozen people staring in his direction, and at the staircase that now was spattered with a long trail of blood.

Suddenly Magnus was beside him. He had not seen him come up, or where he had come from.

"Thank God you're alive," he said. "I thought I would get here too late."

Cloud said nothing, but just stood there looking at the man at the bottom of the stairs.

"You're hurt," Magnus observed. "C'mon, let's get you out of here."

He took Cloud's arm and led him away. Cloud did not resist. As they walked down the corridor Magnus continued.

"I got a message saying your life might be in danger. I got back here as fast as I could."

"You lied to me," Cloud said, his voice holding no hint of emotion.

Magnus stopped and looked at him.

"What's happened?"

"Gram told me everything."

"I don't understand," Magnus said slowly.

"Of course you do," Cloud responded. "He told me it all. How you deceived me to get me here so they could experiment on me to discover how to infuse your own soldiers with Mako energy. About the plans to make war on the other continents. About everything."

Magnus stood there for a long time without speaking. He looked in Cloud's eyes, but he saw nothing. No reproach, no anger, no expression at all. But his own eyes were filled with puzzlement.

"He's got Tifa," Cloud said. "He's got my...friend. He'll kill her if I don't do as they say. You don't have to keep up the charade any longer."

Magnus looked down at the ground for a moment. When he looked up again, he did not look in Cloud's eyes.

"C'mon, let's get that wound looked at."

Magnus reached for his arm again, but Cloud pulled away this time.

"I don't need any help from you," he said evenly.

He turned and walked away. Magnus stood there looking at him. He hesitated for a moment, then called out Cloud's name.

Cloud did not respond, just kept walking until he disappeared around a turn in the hallway. Magnus lowered his head.

"I didn't want it to be like this," he said softly.

~*~

The light was so bright.

Tifa opened her eyes and squinted. There was a large light directly over her head. She went to bring her hand up to shade her eyes, but something prevented it.

She twisted her head to the side, her mind clearing. She looked around. She was strapped to a bed in some kind of laboratory.

"Ah, you're awake."

She turned in the other direction. A man in a lab coat stood nearby. She recognized him as one of the men she had seen in the hall of the hotel.

"Dr. Frankenstein, I presume?" she said.

Kendal walked over to her and looked at her seriously.

"My name is Kendal," he said simply.

A door opened behind him. He turned and they saw a young woman with blonde hair enter the room. She quickly came over and stared at Tifa. It was not a friendly look.

"So you're Cloud's little slut, uh," she said, looking Tifa up and down. "You don't look like much to me."

Tifa looked at her for a moment.

"I guess you must be Igor," she observed.

Wisteria stepped closer. Then she suddenly slapped Tifa hard across the face. Though the blow made her head swim, Tifa kept her face expressionless.

Wisteria stood there looking at her a moment more, Then she turned to Kendal.

"Hurt her," she said. "Hurt her badly."

Kendal looked at her sardonically.

"Relax my dear, there will be plenty of time for that later. I have specific orders from your father that she is not to be damaged."

"Not to be damaged!" Wisteria said in surprise. "Why not?"

"It seems we need her in one piece to keep Cloud in line," he replied. "As soon as we have what we need I assure you she will suffer indescribable agonies."

This seemed to mollify Wisteria to some extent.

"Very well," she said. "I suppose I can wait for a little while longer."

She turned to look at Tifa, then bent close to her, until she was right beside her.

"Enjoy your stay while you can," she said. "I hope you don't get too lonely. I know I won't. I intend to show Cloud very soon what it's like to have a real woman."

Then she turned and sauntered out of the room.

Kendal watched her until she was gone. Then he turned and came slowly over to Tifa.

"Looks like you've made one enemy already," he stated, looking her up and down slowly. He had not expected her to be so attractive.

"Wisteria is not a good enemy to have. She's the daughter of the President, you know. Or maybe you didn't know. No matter. It might be helpful if you had someone on your side."

He was no longer looking at her face as he spoke now.

"I do have some influence here myself," he continued. "I may be able to help you out some, in exchange for certain favors, of course."

He ran his hand slowly up her thigh until it touched the hem of her skirt.

He raised his eyes to look at her face.

"Drop dead," she said.

Kendal laughed.

"Full of bravado. I like that."

Suddenly he stopped laughing. He grabbed hold of her shirt, twisting it savagely and lifting her partially upward. She heard a ripping sound. He stared into her eyes, and she could see nothing in his but cold fury.

"You are a fool," he said grimly. "The truth is, if I wanted you I could take you. Now! And no one would stop me, or care for that matter. You are completely in my power."

He pulled her closer, until their faces were inches apart. He stared at her, and for just a moment, he saw a glimmer of what he was looking for. It lasted for just a second before it was concealed again, but he had seen it. Had seen the fear in her eyes.

He let her go, and she slumped back down on the table.

This was going to be an interesting one, he thought. A very interesting one. It had been a long time since he had had a challenge.

"I've never taken a woman against her will," he said, looking at her slowly once more. "But I promise you this. By the time we are done, you will be with me. In fact you will be begging me. And after that, you will beg me to kill you."

Kendal laughed again, then he turned and walked quickly out of the room.