

CHAPTER X: TROUBLE BREWING

Cloud woke to the sound of voices. He lifted his head off the couch and saw Red and Nipala near the doorway to the hall. They saw him look up.

"I'm sorry," Red apologized. "Did we wake you?"

Cloud yawned and shook his head.

"What time is it?" he questioned.

"A little past eight," Nipala replied.

Cloud nodded.

"It's time I got up anyway," he said.

Red nodded and he and Nipala walked into the kitchen. Cloud stood up, getting off the couch while stretching his arms over his head. His neck was a little sore, but nothing that would trouble him. With all of them sacked out at Barret's house he couldn't be too choosy about where he slept. He was lucky he hadn't ended up on the floor.

A short time later, after a quick shower and a change of clothes, he entered the kitchen as well. Barret stood by the stove, whipping up a large patch of pancakes. Marlene, Red, Nipala, and Reeve were gathered around the table, and they had already made a large dent in an earlier batch. Cait Sith stood against the wall nearby. Only Cid was missing.

"Grab yourself a seat, Spike," Barret growled.

Cloud obliged, realizing that his stomach was growling almost as loud as Barret. He piled some pancakes onto his plate and dug in. After a few bites he looked up.

"Barret, these are really good. Keep it up and you'll make Tifa jealous."

They had all at one time or another made fun of Barret's surprising cooking ability. No matter how often he did it, no one could get used to seeing the big man in front of a stove.

Barret snorted.

"Anyone can make pancakes," he said. "All you have to do is try. I don't think Tifa has anything to worry about."

"So what's on the agenda for today?" Nipala spoke up. "Are we going back to that area where all those monsters were?"

"Seems like the most reasonable course of action," Red replied.

"Yes," Cloud agreed. "And I hope you're all rested up, because I got a feeling we're not going to have an easy time of it."

"How reassuring," Reeve muttered.

They were interrupted by the ringing of the phone. Marlene got up and scampered over to it.

"Well, it might not be easy, but I think this time we might finally be on to something," Cloud continued. At least, he hoped they were. Perhaps it was just wishful thinking. He wanted to get this over with. He wanted to find out whether there really was something to this, and if so, deal with it and get back to Ifalna, back to Tifa. All this time he had been gone he'd had an uneasy feeling. He didn't like leaving Tifa and Aeris alone, especially with what was going on with the Church of Humanity. He knew they could take care of themselves, but it just grated him the wrong way to think they might have to deal with any trouble on their own.

"Let's hope so," Red said. He was just as anxious to get back to Cosmo Canyon as Cloud was to get back to Ifalna. He hadn't heard anything from the Elders, but he was still uncomfortable with the talk that was taking place there. He wanted this resolved as much as Cloud.

"Daddy, it's Mr. Middleton," Marlene interrupted them. "He wants to talk to you."

Barret frowned. Middleton was the Deputy Mayor. He was a good man but a little hesitant when it came to making decisions. He had called Barret many times with problems he was perfectly capable of handling himself. Barret looked down at the stove. The next batch of pancakes was nearly done.

"Well, what does he want?" he said distractedly.

There was a pause.

"He says he has to talk to you," she replied. "He says it's urgent."

"Great," Barret muttered. He looked at the pancakes, then looked at the others sitting at the table.

"Reeve," he decided. "Come over here and keep an eye on these pancakes."

"Huh?" Reeve said, his look making it obvious he did not feel worthy of such an honor.

"You heard me," Barret snapped. "Get over here and make sure these pancakes don't burn. I'll be back in a minute."

Without waiting for Reeve to comply he walked over and picked up the phone.

"Yeah, Landon, what's on your mind?"

Cloud sat back in his chair, looking at Reeve fumbling in front of the stove, glad that Barret hadn't chosen him. His observations were quickly interrupted, however, by an explosive outburst from Barret.

"What?"

All heads turned toward him. He didn't say anything for a moment, just stood there, apparently listening. Then he looked at Cloud.

"Do me a favor," he said. "Go outside and see if the paper's here."

"I'll get it," Marlene volunteered.

"No!" Barret said, surprising her. "Let Cloud."

He saw the puzzled look on her face.

Cloud looked almost as puzzled as Marlene, but he got up and walked out the door.

"Don't you have to clean up your room and make your bed?" Barret questioned, still looking at Marlene.

She stood there a minute looking at him.

"Yeah," she said slowly.

"Then hop to it."

"Aww, Dad."

"Go."

She sighed and, dragging her feet, left the room.

"What's going on?" Reeve questioned. It was obvious Barret had sent Marlene away for a reason.

Barret just shook his head, looking at the back door. A moment later Cloud came in. He had the paper in his hand, staring at the front page. He put it down on the table, which was close enough to the phone for Barret to see. The lead headline read: MAYOR IMPLICATED IN MASSIVE KICKBACK SCANDAL

Reeve, unable to contain his curiosity, came over as well. He looked down at the paper and then at Barret.

"What's this all about?" he said in surprise.

"Damned if I know," Barret shot back. "What the hell is going on, Landon?"

Barret listened again to the reply while Reeve read the article out loud.

"An investigation has revealed that the Barret Wallace, the Mayor of Corel, may have accepted kickbacks totaling thousands, and perhaps millions of dollars for providing selected contracts for dozens of area businesses. According to reliable sources, the district attorney's office has already asked the courts to grant a subpoena for all records that might be relevant to this fast breaking case. Although Mr. Wallace has received unprecedented support from the populace in his first two years on the job due to his role in the downfall of Shinra, his popularity has waned lately due to a recent downturn in the economy. Even so, no reports of misconduct have even been brought to light about him prior to these events. Though we haven't heard any word from Mr. Wallace himself, a spokesmen for the Mayor's office stated that these charges were

malicious and totally without merit. Whatever the outcome, this reporter is sure the Mayor will have his hand's full until this is cleared up, one way or another."

Reeve looked up again.

"I don't care what they say," Barret snapped, still talking to Landon, "Just tell them...yes, I know. Yes. Look, would you just...Dammit, Landon, we all know it's bullshit. I don't care what the Governor or anyone else says! You'll have to handle it. I can't come in now. I've got...I'm telling you, there's nothing to worry about. It's all a bunch of lies. I'm sure they'll get it all straightened out. Landon would you just...Goddammit. I'll talk to you when I can!"

And with that Barret slammed down the phone and launched into a string of curses. The others waited patiently until he stopped to catch his breath.

"Barret," Reeve said slowly. "We all know there's no truth to this, but where did these accusations come from?"

"How the hell should I know," Barret snapped, throwing his arms up in the air in frustration. "This is all news to me. I have no idea where any of this could have started. I've never done anything like that. It's all a bunch of lies!"

"Barret, calm down," Cloud said. "We all know you didn't do anything like that. It's all got to be some stupid mistake."

"Mistake!" Barret exclaimed. "That's some doozy of a mistake. That's a mistake to end all mistakes. A lost contract is a mistake. Placing funds in the wrong account is a mistake. This ain't no mistake! This is a deliberate attempt to destroy my credibility. I've been set up!"

"Is it possible, just possible, mind you," Red said calmly, "that someone in your administration might have done this without your knowledge?"

Barret paused for a minute. That was obviously a thought that had not occurred to him. But then he shook his head.

"No, I don't believe that. Only a few people have the clout to pull something like that off, even with me gone, and I trust all of them."

The others were silent for a moment.

"I don't have time to deal with this now anyways," Barret said, still obviously enraged. "I got a feeling there's gonna be a ton of reporters descending on the place any minute now. I'll never get out of here if I have'ta deal with that. We better get going while the going is still good."

They all looked at him in surprise.

"Barret, you can't seriously tell us you're going to leave," Reeve burst out. "You have to stay here and handle this."

"I don't give a damn about any o' this!" Barret snapped. "We got a job to do. We gotta find out what the source of that mako is. If there's another reactor out there, it's endangering the planet. That's much more important than being the Mayor of this damn town. And if they don't realize that, or like that, then they can just go and get themselves a new man for the job. If they want to fire me, they can go right ahead. I'd be happy if they did. It'd be a relief to not have to put up with all this crap anymore."

"Barret, you can't be serious!" Reeve protested.

"Why the hell not?" Barret shot back. "It's not like anybody in this town ever appreciated anything I've done here. All they ever do is complain. I swear, the harder you work, the more they want. Sometimes I don't know why I've bothered to put up with all this for as long as I have!"

"Barret, you know that's not true," Reeve said vehemently. "When you became Mayor of this town it was just a hole in the wall, and you've built it up to be one of the leading cities in the country. You can't tell me there aren't plenty of people out there who don't realize what you've done. I don't care about any accusations anyone may have made, I know you love this town, and I think most of the people here do to. Electing you Mayor was the best thing that could ever have happened to this place, I don't think anyone could do half as good a job here as you have. Deep down inside, we all know you love this job. So don't just throw it away now, after you've come all this way. There's no doubt in my mind there are plenty of people here who still believe in you, if you just give them a chance."

Barret paced back and forth. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Finally he slammed his fist down on the table.

"But dammit, I can't stay here," he exclaimed. "We need to find out what's going on with that mako. That's more important than Corel."

"Barret, we can manage without you," Cloud spoke up. "We have enough people."

"No you don't," Barret retorted. "You and I both know it. We've been talking for the last week about how we didn't have enough of us searching to begin with."

"True, but that was before we found this concentration of monsters," Red pointed out. "It could very well be that we are close to the source."

"And what if you're not?" Barret replied. "What if this turns out to be another dead end."

"If it does, it does," Reeve stated. "We'll just keep searching. One person isn't going to make or break this. We'll manage without you, Barret. You have to take care of this."

Barret looked around hesitantly. It seemed his resolve was wavering. He drummed his fingers on the counter.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "What do you guys think?"

"I think you should stay," Reeve said immediately.

"I don't think this is something that can be handled by your subordinates," Red stated. "I too think you should stay."

Nipala nodded in agreement.

They all turned to look at Cloud. He hesitated for just a moment.

"Of course you should stay," he said finally. "Everyone is right. You have to handle this yourself. For all we know, we could just be on a wild goose chase. You don't want to lose your job over that. We'll get by."

Barret made a face. He knew how important it was to Cloud to find out what was going on. How important it might be to all of them. But he had to admit they were right. Landon was a competent man, but he wouldn't have a clue how to handle this, and Barret could just picture the kind of press he would get if he ran out in the face of this. If he wanted to remain Mayor he had to stay, even if he felt like he was letting his friends down somehow.

"Seems awfully strange this all had to come out right in the middle of everything else that's going on," he muttered. The thing that galled him the most was that he knew the accusations were without merit. He knew they wouldn't stick, and that it would all blow over. But in the meantime, he had to waste precious time defending himself.

"True," Red stated. "Does seem like an odd coincidence."

Cloud nodded but said nothing. What was going on? The Church of Humanity, Red having problems with the Elders, and now this. It seemed like everything was going wrong all at once. Was it all coincidence, or was there some kind of strange conspiracy going on. If so, what was its purpose, and who was behind it? Or was he just being totally paranoid now?

"What are you going to tell Marlene?" Reeve said slowly.

"I don't know," Barret replied grimly. "I know it's bullshit, but I'd rather not have her exposed to it at all. But I suppose that would be impossible. I can't shield her from this, it'll be all over the papers, TV. They'll be reporters everywhere. Guess I'll just have to tell her the truth."

"I'm sure she'll understand," Nipala stated.

A movement caught their attention. Cloud turned to see Cid standing in the doorway. His hair was disheveled, his eyes still puffy from sleep. He looked around the room, blinking from one to the other.

"What the hell's going on?" he questioned. "And why's it so damn smoky in here?"

They all turned around, their eyes falling on the stove.

"The pancakes!" Reeve shouted.

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"Color," Aeris said.

"Pink," Tifa replied.

"That was an easy one," Aeris stated. "And yours is orange."

"How'd you know that?" Tifa questioned.

"You said so, when we were on Grouchoon," the Cetra replied. "When Jinn gave you that flower."

"Oh yeah."

They were walking down the street in Ifalna, heading towards the lake.

"Music."

"I don't know. Umm, classical?" Tifa suggested.

"Nope," Aeris said with a shake of her head. "Country. Although I like just about anything."

"I had no idea," Tifa said, surprised again.

"Any you like...alternative."

"You're right," Tifa conceded.

"Okay, food."

Tifa looked at Aeris thoughtfully.

"Some kind of salad," Tifa declared.

"Actually it's an ice cream sandwich," Aeris admitted.

"Really?" Tifa said in surprise. "I never see you eat ice cream."

"I don't usually," Aeris replied. "It's sort of a forbidden pleasure."

Tifa smiled.

Aeris stopped suddenly. She turned slowly to look behind them, a puzzled expression on her face.

"What's wrong?" Tifa asked, turning to look back as well. She didn't see anything out of the ordinary, just a woman walking away.

"I...I'm not sure," Aeris replied slowly. "I felt...something."

"Something?" Tifa prodded.

"Something," Aeris repeated. "A cold feeling on the back of my neck. I don't know..."

She fell silent.

"Well, there's no breeze down here," Tifa pointed out.

"I know," Aeris said. They stood there for a moment longer, then Aeris shrugged.

"Oh well, it was probably nothing."

They turned around and continued on their journey.

"And yours is..." Aeris went on, looking at Tifa. "I don't know, you make so much good stuff. Probably something exotic."

"Pizza!" Tifa said.

Aeris laughed and shook her head.

"I should have known."

"Place," Tifa went with.

Aeris made a face.

"That's a hard one," she said. "You used to spend a lot of time outdoors when you were a child, didn't you? Out in the open. In the forest around Nibelheim, or up in the mountains, I would imagine. Someplace like...Icicle Inn."

"Not exactly," Tifa said. "Outdoors, yes. But it could be anywhere, as long as it's at night under the stars."

"I'm not sure that qualifies as a place, exactly," Aeris said critically.

"It does too," Tifa insisted.

"Fine," Aeris replied with mock severity. "What about me?"

"I don't know. I would think right here in Ifalna."

Aeris thought for a moment.

"Yes, I guess so. Here in the church, with my flowers."

"Flower," Tifa said.

Aeris looked up.

"Hmmm. I tried exotic before and it didn't work. How bout...carnation."

"Carnation?" Tifa said. "What made you pick that?"

"I don't know," Aeris replied. "They're very pretty."

Tifa smiled.

"But I guess it would have to be a rose," she said. "Although I'm not much of a flower person, to tell the truth. Good thing too."

"What do you mean?" Aeris questioned.

"I've never gotten a rose," Tifa said.

"Never?" Aeris responded. "Cloud's never given you one?"

"Cloud? Nope," Tifa replied. "I think there's as much a chance of that happening as Elena has of getting one from Vincent. I mean, I love Cloud and all, but sometimes he has about as much romance in him as a wet rag."

Aeris giggled.

"I know. It reminds me of..."

She stopped. Tifa looked at her expectantly, but she did not continue.

"Of what?" Tifa prodded.

Aeris didn't reply. It reminded her of when Cloud had fallen through the roof in the church, and how he had gotten all nervous when she suggested a date as his reward for being her bodyguard. But she wasn't sure Tifa would appreciate that particular story.

"Oh nothing...never mind," she stammered.

Tifa just looked at her, obviously not impressed with that answer.

Aeris sighed inwardly. They knew so much more about each other now. It was true she had been attracted to Cloud, but at that time she hadn't known about his feelings for Tifa. It was stupid to feel bad about it now, wasn't it? It was obvious Tifa felt she was hiding something, and she didn't want to leave it at that. She realized the truth would probably be the best course of action right now.

"I'm sorry," Aeris said. "I was thinking about when I first met Cloud. When he fell through the roof of the church into my flower garden. I asked him to be my bodyguard. You knew that. And you know from when we were in the cell at Shinra headquarters that I promised him a date as a reward. I just...you just reminded me of that, and how funny he acted at the suggestion. Like he'd never been out on a date before."

She stopped, looking at Tifa, who just stood there for a moment. She could understand Aeris hesitation in bringing this up, and to tell the truth, she did feel a bit of resentment still. But it quickly passed. That had been so long ago, almost like another lifetime. When Aeris had realized how close Tifa and Cloud were, she had stepped aside. When it counted, she had done the right thing by her friend.

"It's alright," Tifa said with a reassuring smile. "He was kinda funny, wasn't he? With the both of us being so shy about it, it's a wonder we ever got together at all."

They had reached the edge of the lake. Aeris turned to the left. Tifa looked up and saw the gazebo was in that direction, not far down the road.

"Umm, if it's okay with you," she spoke up. "I'd rather go this way."

She pointed in the other direction.

Aeris shrugged.

"Fine by me," she replied.

They turned and walked along the lake, away from the gazebo. It was funny, Tifa thought. The sight of the place where Sephiroth had stabbed Aeris still make her uncomfortable, even though Aeris, who was the one who had been stabbed, after all, didn't seem affected by it at all. Tifa just couldn't see how Aeris could have, not forgotten, but so totally gotten over what had happened there.

They walked for a minute, getting closer to the lake, onto the grass. Tifa looked back, but the gazebo was no longer in sight.

"Let's rest a bit," she suggested.

They both sat down by the edge of the lake. Suddenly Tifa's hand came up to her stomach.

"What?" Aeris questioned.

"The baby's kicking," Tifa said.

"Oh, let me feel!"

Aeris scrambled over. Tifa took her hand and placed it on her stomach. Aeris stood there for a moment, then a thrill seemed to travel through her.

"I can feel it!" she exclaimed.

They both stood there for a few moments, until the kicking subsided.

"Frisky little fellow," Aeris observed.

"Just like his dad," Tifa said.

"His?" Aeris questioned.

Tifa shrugged.

"I have to call him something. 'It' just doesn't sound good. But I don't really care if it's a boy or a girl."

"Do you have a name picked out?"

"Not really," Tifa replied. "I assume if it's a boy it'll be Cloud Jr. And a girl...I don't know. We haven't really discussed it yet."

"Well, there's still plenty of time," Aeris said.

Tifa lay back, putting her hands behind her head and looking up.

"What is it about guys that they always want to name their kids after themselves? You never hear of a girl wanting to do that with a daughter. I mean, it's so stupid, and confusing."

"I don't know," Aeris replied. "Some kind of ego thing I guess. That's their namesake you know. Carry on the family tradition and all that. Seems to be a big thing for them though."

"Yeah," Tifa replied. She looked above her. There was no sky here, of course. They were underground. Though it was almost as light as day here on the ground, it faded out quickly into darkness above them.

It almost seemed like a dream sometimes, Tifa thought. She was married to Cloud. She was about to have a child with him. It seemed like all her dreams had come true. It was funny. She had thought for a longest time she would never be happy, she would never obtain her dreams. And now that she had, she didn't seem to be able to enjoy it. She kept thinking that something was bound to go wrong, that this was too good to be true. That somehow she didn't deserve this, didn't deserve to be happy. This should be the best time of her life, but every time she talked about the baby, in the back of her mind she remembered the nightmares she was having, and the predictions Jinn had made. It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair that this should haunt her now. Not now.

Aeris looked over at her.

"You got awfully quiet all of a sudden," she said. "What are you thinking about?"

Tifa shrugged.

"About stupid things," she replied. "About those predictions of Jinn's. I know. I know you all told me they weren't going to come true. But I can't help but worry. Even...even if the baby is perfectly normal, the world is still a dangerous place. I know we tried to make it better, but how well have we really succeeded? Sure we got rid of Shinra, but there's plenty of other companies out there ready to take its place, plenty of other people willing to hurt others for their own gain. I'm just scared sometimes Aeris. I'm scared of the world I'm bringing this baby into. I never realized before how many things there were to worry about."

Aeris nodded slowly.

"All life is a risk," she said. "No one has any guarantees. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't take the chance. We'll all be here for you, you know that. With Avalanche looking after it, I'd say the baby has some pretty powerful protectors."

Tifa smiled.

"I guess," she agreed. She had to admit it was a comfort to know that what Aeris said was true, that she had such a group of friends. But that also reminded her pointedly of their absence, and how much missed them. How much she missed Cloud. More than anything she wished this was all over and they could be together again.

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The blonde haired woman walked slowly down the street. She didn't like the City of the Ancients, or Ifalna, as it was now more commonly called. The odd architecture, the strange alien glow. It wasn't normal. It was like being on another planet, in fact. If some weird alien creature sauntered by, she suspected no one would give it a second glance. The whole place gave her the creeps.

She looked around slowly. It was mid afternoon on the surface. The streets were crowded with people going about their business. She paused for a moment to watch some of them, but the people at least seemed perfectly normal, perfectly at ease, appearing not at all affected by the strange surroundings. She supposed, given enough time, a person could get used to just about anything.

Still, she couldn't help but wonder whatever possessed them to move here in the first place. There were plenty of other cities to choose from. Plenty of other cities on the surface, filled with normal humans, just like they ought to be. Given the choice, why would any human want to come live in an alien city? It certainly wasn't someplace she would have chosen as a home.

She shook her head and walked on. She couldn't comprehend why these people would want to live here, in a city controlled by a Cetra, controlled by a non human. Her only conclusion was these people were weak. Just sheep, that's all they were. And as such, of no consequence.

She turned a corner, picking up her pace. The Church of Humanity was just down the block. She wanted to get there and then out of here as quickly as possible.

Suddenly she froze dead in her tracks. She was still glancing at the people as she walked. Coming down the street in front of her she saw someone she recognized.

A shock ran through her whole body, snaking up from her toes to her head, and seeming to settle in the thin scar that ran across her cheek. Her hand came up absently to touch it. Did it feel warmer to her hand than it usually did? Did it somehow feel the presence of the one responsible? Or was that just her face flushing with heat from her hatred?

There were two of them, the blonde woman noticed. Though she had never seen the second girl, she recognized her from the description. Aeris Gainsborough and Tifa Lockheart, or Strife, or whatever the hell her last name was now. They were walking down the street straight toward her, talking as if they didn't have a care in the world.

She turned away, staring into the window of a nearby storefront. She wasn't sure if she would be remembered, but she certainly didn't want to be recognized now. She bowed her head, opening her pocketbook and fiddling with her make up. They were walking right behind her now.

"Actually it's an ice cream sandwich."

"Really? I never see you eat ice cream."

Their voices faded as they went past. The blonde turned around to look at them as they walked away, her eyes narrowing. She felt her hand begin to hurt. She looked down and saw that her knuckles were white, her fingers aching from the compact whose edges were digging into her hand, her hand that had involuntarily tightened around it. She was so close. They weren't paying any attention to her. She pushed aside some of the items in her purse to reveal a knife at the bottom. She looked up again at the two girls walking away from her. They were oblivious. She could just walk up right behind them. She could practically feel herself driving the knife into the woman's back, forcing it deep into her, twisting it vengefully, and the look in her eyes as she turned to see who it was, who it was that was snuffing out her life.

Suddenly the two of them stopped. One of them turned around toward her. The woman immediately turned away and started down the street in the opposite direction. Feeling her heart suddenly pounding in her chest, she took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. How many times had that fantasy played out in her head? But she wasn't ready. This wasn't the time. She had a plan, and she intended to stick to it. It had served her well so far. When her revenge finally took place, it would only be that much sweeter.

She hurried on her way. A few moments later she stepped through the doors of the Church of Humanity.

She eyes scanned the interior. The place was nearly empty. Not surprising considering the hour. Not too many people frequented church in the late afternoon, especially on a weekday. A young man passed nearby dressed in some kind of robes. An altar boy or something, she supposed.

"Excuse me," she said. "Could you tell Mr. Bradford that..."

"Ahh, Miss Gram, so good of you to drop by."

She spun around at the sound of the voice to see Gilan Bradford standing behind her. She looked around for a moment. She hadn't seen him when she came in. Where the hell had he come from?

"Hello Mr. Bradford," she said. "Nice to see you."

Gilan smiled. But that didn't put her at ease. He had come to her attention when one of his parishioners who worked for Vanguard had come to her soliciting gil for the church. Ordinarily she would have thrown the man out on his ass, but the man had caught her attention when he had ranted about how the Cetra were poisoning the human race and how every true human being owed it to themselves to do something about it. She didn't give a shit about what the Cetra were up to, but the fact that Aeris Gainsborough was a member of the hated Avalanche was not lost on her. Anyone who was against one of them couldn't be all bad, and might be useful to her somewhere down the line. She had ended up donating generously. In fact, it had been funds from Vanguard that had allowed Gilan to build the church here in Ifalna in the first place.

She had met Gilan a few times in person, but not often. She wasn't sure what it was, but something about him made her uncomfortable. She couldn't quite put her finger on exactly what it was. Every time they had spoken he had been a perfect gentleman. She had only met him here in Ifalna. Perhaps it was the surroundings and not the man himself that bothered her.

Gilan escorted her into his office and offered her a seat.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked.

She wanted to say whiskey, but somehow she didn't think that was quite what he had in mind.

"No thank you," she replied, sitting down. "This isn't exactly a social visit. I have some information."

Gilan sat down behind his desk and looked at her. She fidgeted in her chair, feeling vaguely uneasy, though she had no idea why.

"I have it from a good source that the Ancient is looking to expand her church into other cities," she said.

Gilan did not reply, but his face showed a look of concern, and he leaned forward in his chair.

She placed her briefcase on the desk and opened it up. She sifted through the papers for a moment, then pulled some out and placed them on the desk.

"Yes," she continued. "Her followers have already petitioned to start construction of new churches in Icicle Inn, Rocket Town and Kalm. I have copies of the requests for permits. And I have it from reliable sources that they are looking into Wutai and Gongaga as well. It looks to me like the Miss. Gainsborough is planning a massive expansion of her influence."

Gilan sat there for a moment with a frown on his face. This news of course, was extremely upsetting. He hadn't realized the Cetra had any plans at all to expand. It was bad enough to have the Ancient influence in just one town. How much more difficult would it be stop her if she expanded to other cities? He had not expected this. It was a complete surprise.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I had no idea of her intentions. This is very serious."

The woman nodded in agreement.

"I'm sure you realize how much more difficult it will be to stop her once this takes place. I think it would be best if we prevented this from happening in the first place."

"Yes," Gilan agreed, standing up slowly. "That would be best, but it will be difficult. Unfortunately, there are no laws to prevent non humans from doing such a thing. Though I have been doing all I can to make the people see the truth about the Ancients, to make them see how misguided they are to support them, I'm afraid she still has a large following in the general population."

"You have to do more," the woman said quickly. "I know it's not easy, but you're our only line of defense against her. No one else has the courage to stand up and speak the truth. All the others are intimidated by her, or have fallen for her charms. If you don't stop her here, then I don't think anyone will be able to."

Gilan nodded again.

"I'll do what I can," he said. "It's not easy, but of course you are right. Though we have many followers, there is still a long way to go. She still has many friends, but even they may listen to reason. Mrs. Strife seemed like she might be willing to have an open mind about this when she came in here..."

"Tifa Strife was here?" The woman cut him off, standing up suddenly.

"Yes," Gilan replied.

"And you let her go?"

Gilan looked at her curiously.

"Of course I let her go," he replied. "What did you expect me to do, lock her up until she saw the light? She may be misguided, but she's a human being, just like you and me, not a Cetra. I'm not going to hurt any humans if I can avoid it. Besides, she may be able to help us."

The woman looked down at the ground. She was here. Tifa was here, probably standing in this very spot. She felt her hands tighten into fists, and had to will herself to relax once again.

"Of course," she said, forcing a smile onto her face. "I don't want anyone to get hurt either, if it can be helped. But you and I both know it's naïve to think they won't be any casualties. Whether these people know it or not, this is war. War for the soul of the human race. If people have to die to save us, then isn't that better than falling to the will of the Cetra? If someone has to sacrifice themselves for the human race, wouldn't it be an honor to do so? If this turns violent, it will be because the Cetra won't listen to reason, not because of anything we did. You know that."

Gilan placed his hands behind his back, looking past her at the bookcase on the wall.

"Yes," he agreed. "We all know that violence might come of this. In a holy war someone has to be willing to pay the ultimate price. Evil can not be stopped without sacrifice. Still, I will not hurt humans unless there is no other choice."

The woman looked at her watch.

"Fine," she replied. She wasn't all that happy with his reply. She had hoped that he would be a little more pragmatic about this, a little bit more willing to sacrifice for his cause, for the good of the whole. She had hoped he would be fanatical enough to do just about anything to stop the Cetra. She had hoped that her story would be enough to force him into drastic action. She didn't seem to have quite attained that goal, but that didn't mean that she would give up hope that she could eventually. But apparently that would have to wait.

"I'm afraid I have to be going," she said. "I have some meetings to attend. I just wanted you to be aware of this. Whatever you do, I suggest you do it soon. The permits in Kalm and Icicle Inn are already up for review. Although I have people

working on it, they say there probably isn't much we can do to prevent them from going through. I'm afraid if you don't put a stop to this here, pretty soon you're going to have a multi headed monster on you hands."

"I understand," Gilan said. "I'm only one man, but I'll do what I can."

The woman nodded. She wanted to say more, but for some reason held her tongue. She felt a little disoriented, and she wasn't sure when it had started, but she felt an ache in her temples, not a splitting headache, but just enough to be discomforting.

"I guess that's all I can expect," she said. "Good day."

"To you too," Gilan said. He sat back down in his chair as Miss Gram walked out the door, his chin propped up on his hand. It was obvious that the woman had more on her mind than she had let on. She had been very helpful so far, but she was not a true believer. He had a feeling her motives were a lot more personal than that. She seemed to have something against Miss. Gainsborough, or perhaps one of her friends. It might make her more difficult to deal with, but he didn't mind. It really wasn't any of his business. As long as she supported the church, he didn't care what her motives were. And so far she had been very supportive. More disturbing was the news she had given him about the Cetra's plans to expand her church. That was extremely upsetting. No matter what Miss Gram's motives may be she was right about that. He would have to do something about that, and he would have to do it soon.