

## CHAPTER XV: TIME TO GET OUT OF DODGE

"What exactly is a friend? It seems like a simple enough question. Most people know who their friends are. Or, at least, they think they do. A friend is someone you can depend on, someone who will come to your aid in times of trouble. To put it simply, a friend is someone you can trust."

Gilan Bradford stepped from behind the lectern and looked at the people who filled the pews in front of him.

"But sometimes we give trust to people who don't deserve it. I'm sure you've all had an experience like that, with someone who you thought was your friend who, when the chips were down, you found out wasn't as much of a friend as you hoped."

"And this is with our own kind. Obviously, we know ourselves, our own species, better than anyone, or anything else. Yet, even though we know ourselves so well, we still find that there are people out there who can deceive us. Maybe we don't know ourselves as well as we think."

"And if we don't know ourselves, how can we expect to know the motives of another species?"

"I'm sure no one will disagree with me when I say that who you trust and who you don't trust can have a major impact on your life. At it's worst, trusting the wrong person can result in disaster for you. I can ruin your life. Admittedly that's the worst case. Most of the time the worst that happens is you learn a hard lesson and move on with you life."

"But, unfortunately, when it's comes to trusting another species, the stakes are higher. When you're betrayed by a human, you yourself have been betrayed. When you are betrayed by another species, the entire human race is betrayed, and the entire human race can suffer for it."

Gilan looked down at the faces in front of him. He saw that, as usual, all eyes were upon him.

"So, the question we have to answer is, are the Cetra our friends?"

He stopped down and looked right at a young man in the front row.

"Can they be trusted?"

He stood up again.

"I admit that at first glance, you might be tempted to say yes. One could make an argument that they've helped us. That they've done a lot of good. The Cetra came here thousands of years ago, but some records do survive. Most of those records indicate that the Cetra aided us. They taught us how to build and grow food more efficiently. They used their healing powers on our sick. And especially, they joined with us in the fight against Jenova. When they first came here humans were savages. Our civilization was in it's infancy. The Cetra were far superior, yet they did not try to dominate us. If they were here as conquerors, surely they would have conquered us then. Does that not prove, indeed, that they are our friends?"

"But if you look at it more deeply, if you look at the truth, the picture becomes much less clear."

"Yes, the Cetra came here thousands of years ago. Yes, our civilization was young then. But even at their height, the Cetra population on this planet was never very large, at least, not compared to the human population. Yes, they were far superior technologically. Yes, they could have killed thousand, maybe millions of us in a war of conquest, but even so they were so outnumbered that victory was far from assured. A war against humans would have been long and bloody with no certain outcome. The Cetra knew they couldn't afford that."

"And they couldn't afford that because of Jenova."

"When the Cetra first came here we were awed. The humans who first met them thought of them as gods. We have learned since that they are far from that. But even a short time ago many humans saw something noble in the Cetra. To many humans they weren't quite gods, but still far superior to us, and not just technologically, but morally."

"And yet, since that time we have discovered that the Cetra were far from perfect. We have learned that it was the Cetra, in fact, who through their own folly released the scourge that is Jenova upon the universe. We've found that Jenova was in fact, created genetically by the Cetra."

"Which, I might point out, was never disclosed to us by the Cetra themselves. They kept that information from us."

"Although that is a hint that perhaps they are not the friends they claim to be, I suppose that is forgivable. After all, no one likes to disclose their personal failings to others, even if the other person is your friend."

"And if that were the only reason they have shown that they are not as trustworthy as they claim, I wouldn't be so concerned."

"But I'm afraid it's not."

"As I mentioned before, when the Cetra came here their technology was far in advance of ours. A lot of the things they did we still haven't obtained, and my question is, why not?"

"The Cetra showed us rudimentary building and farming skills. But why didn't they give us more? The buildings outside were made by the Cetra. We don't know how to make buildings like that. Why not? Why didn't the Cetra teach us? The Cetra could heal our sick, but did they ever teach us how to do it ourselves? The Cetra had space travel, but did they ever give us the secrets of that? Why is it that they came here in a spaceship thousands of years ago and yet we have only just recently taken our first steps into space ourselves?"

"If the Cetra were truly our friends, wouldn't they have shared that information? If you had information or skills that you knew could help a friend, wouldn't you share that with them? Isn't that what friendship is all about?"

He looked up and held up his hand.

"Oh, I've heard the arguments before. We weren't ready for that kind of information. A race has to progress at its own pace. The Cetra were merely trying not to interfere with human development."

"Yet by coming here, interfering with human development is exactly what they did."

"When the Cetra first arrived here, they were not a noble race filled with good intentions."

"No, they were a desperate race on the verge of extinction, running from a menace of their *own* creation, that had already taken their home world from them."

Gilan let his hands slip behind his back as he walked back to stand beside the lectern.

"Look at it from their point of view. Almost their entire race had been destroyed in the war against Jenova. They shoot off into space in a desperate attempt to save whatever they can of their civilization. And where do they end up? On a planet with a budding civilization. Not very far advanced, but with a large population. In other words, a civilization that can be easily impressed with Cetra knowledge, and also large enough to make a difference in the war against Jenova."

"And make no mistake, the Cetra knew Jenova would come. They knew Jenova would stop at nothing to wipe out the last remnants of the Cetra civilization. And of course, they were desperate to prevent that."

"No, the Cetra didn't dare make war against us. They *needed* us. We were the only thing that stood between them and final extinction. It would have been to their advantage to make us as technologically advanced as they could. The more advanced we were, the better an ally we would be in the coming war with Jenova."

"And yet, they still held back. Even though it was obviously to their benefit to give us their secrets. And if you think about it, I mean, really think about it, there's only reason they could have for that."

"Even though it would have been to their benefit for us to be their technological equal in the fight against Jenova, they didn't want that. They didn't want us to be their equal. Because they knew that once we were their equal, they would have no more sway over us. Because they did have plans of conquest, they just couldn't carry them out as long as the threat of Jenova hung over them."

"And now you might say I'm jumping to conclusions that are not born out by the facts. That I'm being ridiculous, even. But let's just stop and look for a minute at the *facts* about how the Cetra have conducted themselves in their interactions with other species."

"The Chadara would be a good example, for the circumstances of their interaction with the Cetra mirror our own. Both were young races, both technologically inferior to the Cetra, yet both well on their way to making their mark, at least on their homeworld, before the Cetra appeared. Like us, the Chadara too were recruited in the Cetra's fight against Jenova, a fight they really had no part of. If the Cetra hadn't gone to Grouchoon and talked the Chadara into helping them, for all we know Jenova might have completely ignored them."

"But they didn't. The Cetra used their technological and intellectual superiority to convince the Chadara to help them fight Jenova, and what was the result?"

"The result was the Chadara became a target for Jenova as well. The result was that Jenova came to their world. Came to their world and enslaved them for over *two thousand years*."

"Who can say how far the Chadara might have advanced on their own in that time. Who's to say how far they might have come. Who's to say that even now, even after the threat of Jenova has been removed, they can ever recover from this setback. No one can know the answer to those questions. But one thing we can know, without doubt, and that is that the Cetra, for all their talk, did not help the Chadara. That they were in fact, just as responsible for what happened to the Chadara as Jenova, if not more so."

He stopped and looked around for a moment.

"I don't think any man or woman here would question the truth of that."

"And then of course, there's Jenova itself."

"Again, I don't think anyone would question the truth of the statement that the Cetra treated Jenova less than graciously. In fact, I think abominably would be closer to the truth. The Cetra *created* Jenova. They used their scientific know how to try to play god. They failed, and they couldn't live with that. Jenova wasn't even a separate species, it was their own flesh and blood. Yet even so, because Jenova didn't come out the wonderful being that had been expecting, they tried to shove it under the rug, they tried to wipe it out of existence, merely because it didn't live up to the standards they had expected."

Gilan shook his head in disgust.

"If a race can treat it's own like that, how you expect any better when they are dealing with another species entirely?"

"No, from the Cetra's own track record, it's obvious they can't be trusted. Sure they helped us, but they only helped us for their own benefit. Some people say that they helped us fight Jenova, but the reality is it's the other way around. We helped them fight Jenova. Every other race the Cetra have encountered they've treated with nothing but disdain. It would be folly for us to think they'll treat us any differently. In all the crucial tests of whether they are trustworthy, they've failed."

Gilan paced back and forth in front of the lectern. No one else said a word. No one fidgeted or looked bored. Though the church was packed with people, he seemed to have the rapt attention of every single one of them.

"And yet you might say, so what? All that happened thousands of years ago. The threat of Jenova had ended, and the Cetra are gone too, or just about. What difference does it make if the Cetra can be trusted. They can't cause any trouble anymore."

"But can't they? Look around you. There is only one Cetra left, yet she has a whole city to command. There is only a single Cetra left on the planet, yet Cetra religion and ways are flourishing. The Cetra may have lost most of their technological edge, but a lot of people are still foolish enough to believe in their alleged moral superiority. A lot of people are following Cetra ways. A lot of people don't see their flaws, or the danger. The Cetra talk of helping the planet, of being healers, of bringing people together. But to those of us with eyes to see, those of us who have looked back at their history, we see a different story. We see an arrogant race. A race convinced of their superiority to all others. The Cetra are not a force for good. On the contrary, if allowed to continue, if allowed to spread, their philosophy will contaminate the human race, and in the end, make us just as bad as they were. Does anyone here want that to happen?"

For a moment no one spoke. Someone near the back spoke out loudly in the negative. A chorus of no's followed.

"Of course not," Gilan said. "No one does. From what you can see here in this very city, I think it's obvious how much influence even one Cetra can have. Someone has to speak out about that, someone has to stem the tide. and I've done what I can."

"And a fine job you've done," he heard. The same voice that had been the first to agree with his earlier statement.

Gilan nodded in response.

"But unfortunately, it hasn't been enough," he continued. "The Cetra continues to make inroads here in Ifalnia, even as I fight against her as best I can, but now I have word that she has even more ambitious plans."

Gilan paused, letting that sink in for a moment.

"I have it on good authority that the Cetra is planning on expanding her church to other cities," he said simply.

He paused again to gauge the audiences reaction and was pleased to hear a murmur of discontent.

"Yes, Kalm, Icicle Inn and Rocket Town might soon have a Cetra church as well. And my question is, why?"

"Why should the Cetra need to expand her church? She's just one person. I can understand here in Ifalna, in the ancient home of the Cetra. The ancient home of her people. It makes sense for her to have a church here, even if I personally don't agree. But these other towns? Why there? The Cetra did not live in those places. She already has this city, why would she need churches in any others?"

"And the answer of course, the only answer, is that she feels she has done what she can here in the City of the Ancients, and is now trying to expand Cetra influence. She is the only Cetra left here. Yet she's just like the rest. Her arrogance tells her that the Cetra way is the right way, the only right way. So she's doing everything she can to make this world more like her own, make *us* more like her own, like the Cetra. Does anyone here want that?"

This time there was no hesitation. The no's were loud and immediate.

"Does anyone here now think the Cetra came here with noble intentions?"

Again the no's rang out.

Gilan nodded, then bowed his head.

"With the knowledge that the Cetra is going to expand her influence the situation has reached the crisis point. I've said I've done all I could but I can't stop her. I need help."

He looked up.

"I need your help."

For a moment there was silence once again.

"What do you want us to do?" someone called out.

Gilan did not reply for a moment, just stood there looking at them all, and to everyone there, he seemed with just a glance to make eye contact with every person in the room.

"I don't consider myself a violent man," he said slowly. "I don't condone violence, but on the other hand, I realize that there are times when violence might be the only answer."

"Self defense, for instance. You have a perfect right to defend yourself. No one would blame you for being violent under those conditions, if someone attacked you."

"And in a way, that is exactly what is happening here. The Cetra are attacking us. The Cetra are attacking the human race. It may not be open violence, but if we don't do something about it the results will be just the same, the defeat of the human race. There's much more at stake here than honor, or pride, or even life itself. We're talking about nothing less than the fate of humanity. I don't know about you, but I'm proud of what I am, I'm proud to be a human. And I'll do anything in my power, *anything*, to protect that."

This time there was a chorus of agreement.

"Like I said, I've tried to stem the tide, I've tried to fight the Cetra on her own terms, with words. I'm sorry to say I'm not up to the task. Perhaps no one would be. The Cetra are just too clever. No, words aren't going to work. We need more than that now. I don't suggest this lightly, but I don't think we have any choice anymore. We *must not* let the Cetra expand to other cities. It's clear she's not going to listen to reason. I'm afraid the time for talk is over. Now it's time for action."

There were more yells of agreement. Some of the men stood up. The place seemed to be in a frenzy, which was just what Gilan had been shooting for.

"What should we do?" a large bearded man shouted.

"We have to go to the Cetra church," Gilan replied. "We have to go there and tell the Cetra we will not tolerate an expansion to other cities. We must tell her, in fact, that she must close down the church she has here. We must tell her that all humans reject Cetra ways, that this is our planet, and we're not going to let her take it from us."

Again, there was a frenzied chorus of agreement.

"We've got to stop it, and we've got to stop it here. Now!" Gilan continued. "We're not going to listen to anymore of her talk. We're not going to be deceived by her words. We're not going to be weak. The Church of Ifalna must be closed, or destroyed. This isn't about a difference of opinion, this is about saving humanity, it's about everything we hold dear. So come, my children, let us confront the Cetra. Do not fear her. She can do you no harm, for we have right on our side!"

With that he stepped down off the dias. Head held high, he walked proudly down the aisle of the church and out the front door, his flock right behind.

~\*~

"Where do you want these petunias?"

Aeris looked over to see Tifa kneeling in front of one of the trays of flowers that had just arrived at the church. She smiled.

"What?" Tifa said.

"Those are daffodils, silly." She indicated another tray. "These are petunias."

Tifa looked down at the plants in front of her, then look up again and shrugged. She had never made any claims to being a horticulturist.

"Okay then, daffodils. Where do you want them?"

Aeris looked around for a moment, then pointed to the left.

"Mix them in with that bed of clover over there," she said.

Tifa nodded, picking up the tray and carrying it over. She dropped down on her knees again, then, small spade in hand, began digging a hole for the first one.

Aeris looked at her for a moment.

"You don't have to do this you know," she said.

"Do what?" Tifa questioned without looking up.

"Help me plant flowers," Aeris replied.

"Why wouldn't I?" Tifa returned. "Otherwise I'd just be sitting around doing nothing. And we all know how boring that can be."

"Yeah, I know, but you're okay right? You're not going to strain yourself?"

Tifa looked up.

"Please. Don't get like Cloud on me," she exclaimed. "I may be pregnant, but that doesn't mean I'm going to keel over from exhaustion from a little bit of manual labor. I'm fine Aeris. If I need a rest, I'll take one, okay?"

Aeris looked contrite.

"Okay, sorry."

"Ah, that's all right," Tifa replied. "Actually, I'm having a good time. We've had a lot of fun together these past few days, haven't we?"

Aeris looked at her friend for a moment, then nodded. It was true. She thought they'd talked more these last few days than they had in the whole time they'd known each other before that. She had to admit it felt good. All her life, she had never had anyone she could confide in. All her life she had never really had any close friends. She had always had other things on her mind. When she was very young, of course, she had been a prisoner of Hojo. And after she and her mother had escaped, she had always been pursued. The Turks had never been far away. And besides that, she had been different from the other kids. They had known that as much as she. Somehow she had never really managed to fit in, had never really managed to make a connection with anyone. She wasn't sure who's fault that was. Her only real friend she had had growing up had been both her mothers.

"Yes we have, haven't we," she said slowly. "I'm glad you decided to stay here with me Tifa."

"I am too," Tifa replied, returning to her gardening. But she was only at it a moment before she stopped. She help up a small green plant.

"Hey look, a four leaf clover," she announced.

"Lucky for you," Aeris replied.

"Let's hope so," Tifa replied. She looked down at it for a moment. She didn't really believe it would give her good luck, but hey, it certainly couldn't hurt.

"You know, I wonder..." she began.

She was interrupted by the ringing of her PHS. It was on one of the pews by her pocketbook. She sighed.

"I'll get it," Aeris said, hopping up nimbly. She stepped over to the pew and picked up the PHS.

"Hello?"

She listened for a moment, then turned to Tifa.

It's Red, she mouthed.

"Uh huh," she continued as Tifa lifted herself to her feet, much more slowly than Aeris had.

"You're where?" Aeris continued. "We have to what? What do you mean, leave? Red, I don't...Who? Wisteria?"

Tifa frowned.

"What?" she said.

Aeris gave her friend a puzzled look. She held out the PHS.

"Maybe you better talk to him," she said.

Tifa quickly walked over and took the PHS from the young Cetra.

"Red?"

"Hi Tifa. Listen, we found the reactor..."

"You did? That's great."

"Listen to me. That's not important now," Red said quickly. "You and Aeris have to get out of there."

"Out of here? What are you talking about?"

"Please, do not interrupt," Red said sharply. "It's a long story. Remember Wisteria, from the southern continent?"

So it *had* been her name Tifa had heard Aeris say.

"How could I forget," she said, hoping Red wouldn't consider that interrupting.

"Well, she's here. She's the President of Vanguard. She's probably behind all the trouble lately. She had a mako reactor built secretly underground in the forest near Costa del Sol. She used the reactor to infuse herself with mako. And now she can use materia spells without any materia. She has tremendous power."

"What?" Tifa said, forgetting Red's admonishment not to interrupt. "You mean like Amanda could?"

"Exactly," Red replied. "But she's gone crazy. The infusion has caused her to lose her sanity. But that just makes her more dangerous. Cloud thinks she's after you, that she's coming there."

Tifa just stood there for a moment, hardly believing what she was hearing. Wisteria was here? She was infused with mako? What the hell was going on?

"You think she's coming here? For revenge? But, how would she even know where I am?"

"Cloud seems to think she knows," Red replied. "He and Reeve are on their way, but it's going to take them a while to get there. He's afraid she'll get there before him."

Tifa nodded, feeling relief from the fact that Cloud was on his way, no matter how long it would take him to get here. She wasn't sure what to make of the rest. Wisteria hadn't been much of a fighter. Tifa had knocked her through the window without much trouble. But if what Red was saying was true, if she had Amanda's power, she could be much more dangerous.

"So what do you want us to do?" she asked.

"I think it would be wise if both you and Aeris got out of there as fast as you could."

"Out of here?" Tifa said. "You want us to run?"

"That would seem to be the prudent thing to do," Red answered. "Please don't take this too lightly Tifa. Wisteria is extremely dangerous. Calin thinks that none of us are a match for her at full strength."

"Calin?"

"The scientist who infused her," Red replied. "But that's not important. The important thing is, he doesn't think you and Aeris by yourselves can stand against her, and I would tend to agree with that assessment. She's already taken on Vincent and Elena and beaten them pretty convincingly."

"Vincent and Elena? Are they hurt?"

"I'm fine," she heard Elena's voice.

"No she's not," Red contradicted. "She's got a broken arm and possibly some other injuries. And Vincent is seriously hurt."

"Seriously hurt?" Tifa said slowly. "How bad is he?"

"We don't know at the moment," Red answered, which in no way allayed Tifa sudden fear. "Reno and Rude are on their way in a helicopter. We'll be taking him to a hospital in Costa del Sol, and then be on our way to Ifalnia. But Cloud and Reeve should get there ahead of us."

"Are they in the Slipstream?"

"No, unfortunately, it's back at Corel. They're going to Costa del Sol to try to find a gold chocobo, or some other water crossing fowl."

"I see," Tifa said. "So how long do you think it will be before they get here?"

"There's no way I can tell," Red replied. "If all goes well, and they find a bird quickly, I'd say the fastest they can be there is another hour and a half, two hours."

"But if we leave, how will you find us? Where should we go?"

"I don't know," Red said. "Icicle Inn maybe. But if she doesn't find you in Ifalna, that might be the first place she looks. You'll have to use your own judgment. I'm sure we'll be able to find you eventually. The important thing is to get out there as soon as you can. It doesn't really matter to where."

"But.."

"Please Tifa, we don't know what kind of transportation she has. She could be there at any time. I don't think you have time to stand here and discuss this. You have to get out of there. Now."

Tifa hesitated a moment.

"All right, I understand," she said finally.

"We'll be there as soon as we can."

"Okay. Bye Red."

"Goodbye, and hurry."

Tifa let the PHS drop to her side. She looked at Aeris.

"We have to leave," she said slowly.

"Yeah, I got the drift," Aeris replied, her face filled with concern. "Wisteria. That's the girl from the southern continent, right? I remember you talking about her once."

"Yeah," Tifa replied. "She's the President of Vanguard, and the others think she's behind all the trouble we've been having. She's infused herself with mako and now can cast materia spells without materia. The others think she's coming here, that she's after me."

"In that case, I guess we better go," Aeris said, pulling off her gardening gloves and dropping them on a tray.

"I suppose," Tifa said slowly.

Aeris looked at her.

"What, you don't think you should?"

Tifa hesitated. It was hard to think of Wisteria as a formidable enemy. She had to keep telling herself this was an improved version.

"I guess they're right," she said. "From what Red told me, she's much more dangerous than she was when we first met. But the others are coming here. How will they find us if we run off. Ifalna is a big city, maybe it would be best to hide here somewhere. Even if she comes, she can't search everyone. She won't have time. Cloud and Reeve can't be too far behind her."

"We can always call them and tell them where we are," Aeris said quite logically. "If Red thinks it best we leave, then I'd tend to follow his advice."

"I guess so," Tifa nodded. "But will it be okay for you to leave? What about Gilan and the Church of Humanity? Do you think they'll cause any trouble?"

Aeris looked thoughtful for a moment, then she shrugged.

"We can't worry about everything," she replied. "The Church of Humanity hasn't done anything but talk so far. I'd say Wisteria is the greater danger right now. Let's just take care of one thing at a time."

Tifa nodded. It made sense.

"So where do we go then?"

"I'm not sure," Aeris replied. "Let's just get our things together. We can figure it out on the way."

"All right," Tifa agreed.

Aeris picked up the Princess Guard from where it had been leaning against one of the pews and they walked quickly out of the church and turned down the road, headed back to Aeris and Elmyra's house. But they hadn't gone more than a few paces when they saw half a dozen men running down the road toward the church.

"Aeris!" one of them called out.

The two girls stopped. Aeris recognized the man as Talbot, one of her regular parishioners. Tifa looked at Aeris with a puzzled expression, but Aeris hadn't any better idea than her friend what this was all about.

The men came to a stop in front of them. They were all breathing hard, as if they had run a long distance, or a short distance very quickly.

"There's a mob coming from the Church of Humanity," Talbot blurted out.

"What?" Aeris said.

"A mob. From the Church of Humanity," the man repeated. "It looks close to a hundred, and more are joining them as they go. Gilan has them whipped up into a frenzy. They're headed here. It looks like they're looking for a confrontation. They're all shouting about how the Cetra must be stopped and the church of Ifalna closed down."

Aeris stood there for a moment, looking from Tifa to the men. Talk about bad timing...

"I sent some of the others to gather more people loyal to you. In spite of Gilan's lies, there are still a lot of people who don't agree with him," Talbot continued. "But I don't know how successful they'll be. They don't have much time."

Still Aeris did not speak. She didn't doubt Talbot's word, but she had a hard time believing this was happening. After all this time, she had thought that perhaps the Church of Humanity was all talk. But it appeared now that wasn't the case. If there was a mob coming, if Gilan was leading them here, she would have to face him. She couldn't possibly leave now.

She turned to look at Tifa.

"You go on. I'll catch up with you after I take care of this."

Tifa's eyes widened.

"You want me to leave you here? No way!"

Aeris took a step closer to her friend.



"Tifa, be reasonable. I don't want there to be any trouble, but it sounds like Gilan might not listen to reason. It's too dangerous for you to stay."

"It's no more dangerous than it is for you," Tifa exclaimed. "They're not after me, remember? If it's dangerous then that's all the more reason for me to stay. I'm not going to abandon you when need help the most."

"Tifa, think about the baby! No matter how much you may want to deny it, no matter how much you'd like to think of yourself as the old Tifa, you're still seven months pregnant. If it comes to a fight, just what do you think you're going to do? You have different priorities now!"

Tifa just looked at her friend, stung by the words, although deep down she knew they were true. She just didn't want to admit she wasn't the fighter she was used to being.

Still, there was no way she was going to leave her friend now.

"I don't care," she said slowly. "I told Elmyra and Reeve I'd keep an eye on you, and I intend to do just that."

"You're being ridiculous," Aeris said. "I'm hoping it doesn't come to a fight, but if it does, I don't want to have to worry about you."

"You don't have to worry about me!" Tifa snapped. "I can take care of myself."

"Can you?" Aeris exclaimed. "Look at yourself!"

Tifa resisted the urge to look down. She was perfectly aware of her condition.

"And what if Wisteria shows up?" Aeris continued. "Gilan might be after me, but Wisteria isn't. You can't face her."

Tifa folded her arms across her chest and looked down the road.

"Tifa!"

Tifa just shook her head.

"You're not the only one who can be stubborn," she said.

A man who had been with Talbot stood down by the street corner. Now he turned toward them.

"Here they come!" he called out.

He left the street corner and came running toward them.

"What do you want us to do?" Talbot questioned.

Aeris looked at him for a moment. She didn't want Tifa to stay, but things were happening too fast. She didn't have time to think.

"Do? I don't want you to do anything," she said. "I'll take care of this myself."

Talbot looked at her doubtfully.

"Yourself?" he said. "Gilan has a hundred people with him. Maybe more. They're coming to destroy your church. You can't stop them alone. If things get violent we need a plan. We need..."

"Things aren't going to get violent," Aeris said sharply. "At least, not if I can help it. Gilan will listen to reason. He has to."

Talbot stood there for a moment, just looking at her. He looked like he was going to say something, but then changed his mind. He had doubts about what Aeris was saying, but she looked so sure of herself, it allayed his fears.

"Very well," he said slowly. "But just remember, we're here if you need us."

Aeris nodded.

"Just make sure no one does anything stupid," she told him. "I won't tolerate any violence from my supporters."

"Yes ma'am."

There was no more time for talk, for even as he said that, Gilan Bradford strode around the corner ahead of them, followed closely by his supporters.

Tifa stood silently by Aeris side, glad that the issue of her presence had been dropped. Still, she had her doubts about Aeris tactics. The mob behind Gilan looked angry and well organized. It didn't look like they had come here to talk. Tifa didn't want any violence either, but she thought they should at least have some kind of plan in case it did break out. Still, there was no time to discuss anything like that now.

Gilan strode up until he was just a few paces in front of him. The mob behind him filled the street. Talbot had been right, Tifa thought, there had to be hundreds. She glanced behind her to see that Talbot and those with him had formed a line behind her and Aeris, between the mob and the church. There were perhaps twenty five to thirty of them. If it came to a fight, they were sorely outnumbered.

For a moment Gilan and Aeris stood face to face in silence.

"What are you doing here?" Aeris said calmly.

Gilan looked at the church behind her.

"We've come to right a wrong," he proclaimed. "This is a human world. The Cetra have no business here. We know what you're trying to do. We will not accept the Cetra influence. We will not let you take our planet from us."

"I have no intention of taking anyone's planet from them," Aeris said.

"Is that so?" Gilan said. "Then why is there a Cetra church here at all? The Cetra are gone. You are the only one left. Yet Cetra culture dominates this entire city. Why is that? Why is it that one non human has so much influence here?"

"I can't say," Aeris replied. "Perhaps it's the message and not the messenger. Perhaps it's just the fact that all people, no matter what their species, can relate to a church that preaches peace and universal tolerance."

Gilan laughed.

"Ah yes, peace and tolerance. What a wonderful concept. Is that what we can expect from the Cetra? Tell me, is that the same thing you said to Jenova before you tried to destroy it? Is that the same thing you told the Chadara before you brought the wraith of Jenova down upon them? Is that what you told humans when you first came here, even though you were at the very same time preparing for war against Jenova?"

Aeris just stood there for a moment.

"I admit the Cetra had a dark past," she replied. "But everyone makes mistakes. Humans have had more than their share of war as well."

"Yes, but we've never fought against another species. At least, we hadn't until the Cetra came here. And we certainly never attempted genocide against a species like you did with Jenova."

"Aeris didn't do that!" Tifa said suddenly. "All that you say may be true, but it happened thousands of years ago. All those people are gone now. They have nothing to do with what happens now, or with Aeris."

Gilan turned his eye toward her.

"Don't they?" he questioned. "They were Cetra, and she is a Cetra. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"Don't be ridiculous," Tifa said. "Aeris isn't like that. She's never done anything to hurt anyone."

"That may or may not be true," Gilan said. "But tell me, when the Cetra first came here, did they hurt anyone? No, they didn't. They helped us. When Jenova first came here, did it hurt anyone? Not at first. At first it appeared as our friend. The first Jenova didn't turn against us, didn't show it's true colors, until humans refused to hand over the crystal materia. And the second Jenova, the one that came to Gongaga more recently. Did that appear to be an enemy? Not at all. That Jenova helped the people of Gongaga. At least at first. It wasn't called the Healer for nothing. When Ellengio took you out into space, he told us you were going to destroy Jenova, but that wasn't his real intention at all. His real intention was to release his own race from their trap on their homeworld."

He stepped closer, staring right at Tifa.

"The devil has many disguises, and often appears to be a friend at first. But appearances are not always what they seem. We know the Cetra are clever with words. We know they've used their intellect to deceive us before. We know they've withheld the truth from us. With all this evidence against them, how can you be so sure that this Cetra's motives are any different from the others?"

Tifa just stood there. She suddenly felt like she couldn't think. She had to admit that Gilan's argument made a lot of sense.

"I...I don't know," she said hesitantly. "I just know Aeris. And she wouldn't do anything..."

She fell silent.

Aeris suddenly stepped forward, a frown on her face.

"What are you doing to her?" she accused.

Gilan turned toward the Cetra.

"I'm not doing anything to her," he replied. "I'm just telling her the truth."

"No," Aeris said, shaking her head. "There's more to it than that. You're influencing her." She looked around. "You're influencing all of them...somehow."

Gilan smiled.

"Don't be ridiculous," he replied. "I am merely opening their eyes to the truth. I'm not influencing them, I'm removing all influence."

"No, that's not true," Aeris said, now taking a step toward Gilan, staring at him. "I feel something. Something coming from you. What are you doing?"

Gilan turned and looked back at those behind him.

"Hear the power of the truth," he called out. "She can't refute my arguments, so she resorts to some kind of 'magical influence' to explain it. Is this not the last refuge of the desperate? Does this not prove once and for all the truth of my words?"

There were shouts of agreement.

He turned around to face Aeris once again.

"We are not here to talk," he proclaimed. "We've heard enough of your Cetra lies. We demand that you close the church of Ifalnia immediately, never to reopen its doors. We also demand that you yourself promise never to preach again, or to spread Cetra influence anywhere in the world for the rest of your life."

Tifa looked back and forth between Aeris and Gilan. Her head hurt, and she couldn't seem to think straight. She knew Aeris needed her help, but she couldn't seem to find anything to say. What Gilan said couldn't be true. And his demands were ridiculous, weren't they?

Suddenly a voice shouted from the crowd.

"I say, no more talk, let's take that church down now!"

There was a murmur of assent.

"Even if she agrees, how do we know the Cetra will be true to her word?" another man called out.

"Yes, we know we can't trust them!"

"We've heard enough lies. Let's finish this!"

Gilan turned toward the crowd and held up his hand.

"Let's hear first what the Cetra has to say!" he called out.

He turned back and looked at Aeris.

"You yourself said no more talk!" a man suddenly shouted.

There were more angry shouts from the crowd. Suddenly a rock whistled overhead, smashing through one of the windows of the church.

This elicited a response from Aeris supporters. They had been quiet the whole time, but now they stepped forward, shouting angrily themselves. Tifa turned to see that their ranks had swelled a bit, but they were still far outnumbered.

Another rock flew overhead, cracking against the side of the building. A lot of the people in the crowd on both sides had some sort of weapon, and now they held them up menacingly.

"Stop it, all of you!" Aeris shouted.

But no one seemed to be listening anymore. A third rock flew through the air, but this one was not directed at the church. It whizzed right past Aeris head and struck Tifa on the shoulder. With a cry, she fell to her knees.

"Tifa!" Aeris shouted.

She bent down beside her friend, forgetting the crowd around them. Tifa gritted her teeth and clutched her shoulder. It hurt like hell for a few moments, but slowly the pain began to diminish.

"Are you all right?"

Aeris looked up in surprise to see Gilan standing next to them, his face filled with concern.

Tifa rubbed her shoulder as the pain subsided.

"Yes, I'm okay," she said slowly.

She looked up. The air was full of angry shouts now, and cries of pain. Rocks flew through the air. Not far away she could see that both groups had closed on one another and had come to blows.

Gilan held up his hands.

"Stop it!" he called out. "No humans are to be hurt. Restrain those who oppose us but do not harm them. Concentrate on the church!"

But for once his words seem to fall on deaf ears. He could no longer be heard above the shouts of battle. Even he couldn't control the crowd anymore.

Beside him Aeris was screaming for them to stop too, but she had no more luck than Gilan.

Suddenly the ground shook beneath them and they heard the sound of an explosion.

Aeris looked around. It wasn't the church. It had been farther away than that. The crowd heard it too, and that got their attention. The fighting stopped, everyone suddenly going silent. Those looking to the south could see a plume of black smoke billowing up into the sky.

"What was that?" Gilan said slowly.

Suddenly a man appeared around the corner. When he saw the crowd he ran toward them, shouting something. As he got closer they saw that his shirt was red with blood.

The crowd parted in front of them, and the man stopped in front of Gilan, Aeris and Tifa.

"Ifalna is being attacked!" he gasped. "Some woman, some woman with enormous power is destroying everything in her path. She says.." he paused to take a breath. "She says that she'll destroy the whole city unless Tifa Strife is brought to her."

Gilan looked at the man with a puzzled expression. Aeris looked at Tifa, who's face had gone suddenly pale.

It was too late. It was too late to run.

"Wisteria," Tifa said slowly. "Wisteria is here."