

CHAPTER IV: THE CHURCH OF HUMANITY

Red dust swirled in the air as the Slipstream settled down just outside of Cosmo Canyon. The door slid open and Cid stepped out, waving his hand in front of him and coughing.

"If you really want this place to grow, you're going to have to build a real runway instead of having everyone land in this dustrap. I can hardly breath," he said to one of the two red beasts that stood not far from the plane, their russet coats blending so well with the canyon walls that they were nearly invisible from more than a few paces away.

"With all those cigarettes you smoke, it's a wonder you even noticed," Nipala spoke up wryly.

"She's got you there," Cloud stated, sticking his head out of the plane behind the pilot, who gave them both a withering look.

"Nobody asked you!" he snapped at Cloud. Turning to the two in front of him again, he continued. "Well, whatcha waitin' for? We ain't got all day to dally here. Get on board."

Without a word Red and Nipala entered the plane. A few moments later Cid was back in the pilot's seat and the Slipstream was back in the air.

"So what exactly is going on?" Nipala asked from his seat beside Cloud. "The details you gave us on the PHS were a bit sketchy."

Cloud filled then in on the call he had gotten from Vincent.

"Very peculiar," Red muttered when he was done. "It does seem to explain some things."

"Huh?" Cloud said, looking at him. "What are you talking about?"

Red shook his head.

"I'll have to see the man first," he said cryptically.

Cloud was about to press, but decided against it. It was only minutes from Cosmo Canyon to Corel. It wouldn't take them long to get there.

He looked out the window. Below them the country was rough. They were flying right over the southern arm of the Nibel Mountain range. Few people lived in this area. A few sheep herders, some subsistence farmers eking out a living high up on the slopes. The land was mostly deserted. To the right he could barely make out the tall ring of mountains that held Lucrecia's falls and the lake below it. The land below was not good for farming or building. It was some one of the most desolate areas left in the world. At least as far as human occupation was concerned. If there was a mako source still out there to be discovered, he wouldn't be surprised if it was hidden in the mountains and narrow valleys below. Perhaps that was all there was to this after all.

They crossed over the crest of the tall range, the snow capped mountaintops only a few hundred feet below them now. Then the land plunged steeply downward. Ahead Cloud could now see a broad grass covered plain, resting between the arms of two mountain ranges. At the northern end the two ranges converged, and there on the plain below, Corel was nestled.

The city had grown, and now covered the entire northern area of the plain, and some of the surrounding foothills as well. Save for Wutai, Corel had been the fastest growing city in the world since the fall of Shinra. It covered nearly four times the area it once had, and had been completely modernized. As the Slipstream streaked toward it, Cloud could see office building rising up in the center of the business district, gleaming in the sun. Wutai produced most of it's revenue from trade and tourism. Corel, on the other hand, had become a major financial center. It's central location made it an ideal meeting place for businessmen from all areas of the world. The downtown area itself had dozens of luxury hotels filled with conference centers with all the modern conveniences.

All of which made Mayor Wallace very proud, but didn't matter all that much to Cloud.

The Slipstream dropped down lower, slowing down for it's landing approach at the Corel airport. Cloud remembered a time, not too long ago, when the only place to land an aircraft here had been the plain outside of town.

Cid brought the Slipstream down smooth as silk. The plane taxied down the runway and came to a halt beside the main terminal. As Cid shut down the engines, Reeve pulled open the door and they stepped out onto the tarmac.

A limousine was parked nearby. Barrett stood next to it. He waved them over when he saw them disembark.

"Hello Barret," Nipala said when they reached him.

"Good to see you all," he replied, his face serious. "Vincent and Elena are waiting at the hospital. There hasn't been any change in the man they brought in. The doctors don't give him much of a chance."

Without any more preamble than that, he piled them into the limo.

"Uncle Cloud!"

Cloud looked up as he entered, surprised to see Marlene sitting in the corner of the limo. He smiled.

"Marlene! What are you doing here?"

"No school today," she replied. "And when dad told me he was meeting all of you at the airport, I kinda begged him to come along."

"It's nice to see you again, Marlene," Red said politely.

Cloud plopped himself down beside her and looked her over with a critical eye.

"Dang, you get bigger every time I see you," he observed. "Keep this up and pretty soon I'm going to be looking up at you."

Marlene giggled.

"Where's aunt Tifa?"

"She stayed at Ifalna," he replied. "To keep Aeris company."

Marlene looked disappointed.

"I was hoping to see her," she said. "I'm so excited about the baby, aren't you, Uncle Cloud?"

"You bet I am."

Cid was the last to get there, having made sure the Slipstream was in good hands. Barret stepped in after him and sat down. The limo was spacious, but even so it was still kind of cramped with the seven of them. Barret by himself practically took up two spaces. He fingered the intercom.

"Let's get going, Dannor."

The driver in front nodded through the smoked glass and the vehicle pulled smoothly away from the curb. Cloud sat back beside Marlene. The leather seats were very comfortable. Though Barret still carried his trademark gun attachment, almost everything else about him had changed. His hair was still cut short, but it no longer had a ragged look. He was dressed in a dark grey business suit, complete with black and white striped tie. Everything about him exuded a word that Cloud would never have thought to use with the Barret he knew. Respectability. Things sure had changed.

The ride to the hospital only took minutes. The limo parked in a parking garage beneath the building. Barret led them to an elevator and up to the fourth floor, then down a hall and into one of the rooms.

Vincent and Elena were already there. Vincent stood up when the others came in. The man they had brought in lay in the bed in the middle of the room. Cloud walked over to him curiously.

The man's eyes were open, but he did not look at Cloud. He was staring at the ceiling. The hospital had cleaned him up when he had been brought in. He was no longer covered with dirt and grime. He looked to be in his late twenties, early thirties. Other than the glowing eyes and the catatonic state, there didn't seem to be anything unusual about him. Not that that wasn't unusual enough.

"Looks just like you did," Cid said, coming up beside Cloud.

"Uh huh," Cloud muttered.

"The doctors confirmed it," Vincent stated. "It's definitely mako poisoning."

"What do you make of this, Red?" Reeve asked. "Can you tell what caused it?"

Red came up beside them, looking at the man, his nose nearly touching the man's arm. For a long time he didn't say anything.

"No," he replied. "There's no way to tell how the mako poisoning occurred, if that's what you mean. But I suspect this is a very bad development."

"How so?" Cloud questioned.

Red sat down on his haunches.

"I've been studying the planet in the observatory," he replied after a moment. "Unusual things have been happening."

"Unusual?" Elena said.

"Yes, unusual," Red replied. "Some kind of disturbance in the lifestream. I haven't seen anything like it since before Shinra."

"Could you be a little more specific?" Vincent questioned.

Red sighed.

"The lifestream is always hard to interpret," he replied. "But the last time I saw disturbances like that was when Shinra was trying to manipulate mako in their reactors."

"Reactors?" Elena exclaimed. "But there are no more. They were all shut down!"

"They were," Red agreed. "But they were not destroyed. Even after being abandoned all this time, it's still possible they might be functional, if someone decided to start them up again."

"Who would do such a thing?" Elena continued. "Everyone knows how dangerous they are."

"Who knows?" Red replied. "They were dangerous, yes, but as Shinra showed us, they could also supply someone with a lot of power, if they were unscrupulous enough."

"But aren't there safeguards?" Reeve said. "Aren't the old reactors watched over?"

"The ones in populated areas, yes," Red responded. "I don't think anyone could fool with the one in Junon or the rebuilt one in Gongaga without being noticed. Although Midgar is abandoned, it's right out on the open plain, and plenty of traffic goes by it every day on the way from Kalm to Junon. I think if something happened there, someone would be bound to notice. But there is one reactor that I don't think anyone pays any attention to."

"The one in the Nibel mountains," Cloud said hollowly.

Red nodded.

"Uh oh," Cid said suddenly.

"What?" Cloud said, turning to look at him.

Cid told them about his families encounter with the monster outside of Rocket Town

"That's just over the mountains from that reactor," Cid finished. "If the monster came from there, it would be a simple matter for it to come downstream right to where we were."

Cloud scowled.

"It is possible someone might have reactivated that one without anyone noticing," Red said.

"To what purpose?" Elena asked.

"We don't know for sure," Red replied. "Any number of reasons. To perform mako experiments. To create SOLDIERS. To use as a power source. Or maybe something we haven't even thought of yet."

"Just like Shinra?" Barret blurted out. "Goddamn, I thought we were through with all this shit."

"Let's not jump to conclusions," Reeve said reasonably. "It could still be just a natural source, right Red?"

"It's possible," Red replied. "I suppose if a natural source was strong enough, it would cause the type of reaction I've seen at the planetarium. But to do that, and to do what it did to this man, it would have to be huge, much larger than anything we've seen yet."

"But how could something like that just suddenly appear?" Cid questioned.

"I'm not sure," Red answered. "There's still so much we don't know about the mako. Perhaps it's always been there, just buried underground, and some natural event, like a rock slide or an earthquake, exposed it."

"How likely is that?" Elena questioned skeptically.

"Not very," Red admitted. "Yet we can't rule it out entirely."

"Unless we find some activity at the Nibel reactor," Cloud stated.

"It does seem the likeliest possibility," Red said.

"But what if..." Elena began.

The man in the bed had been quiet since they had entered. In fact, Cloud had nearly forgotten he was there at all. But suddenly, as if someone had turned a switch, he started to scream.

The all turned toward him, startled by the outburst. Cloud's hand went automatically to his weapon. He couldn't understand what the man was yelling. It almost seemed like words, but he couldn't make out any of them. They all just stood there staring at the man. Restraints had been holding him down, for when he had first been brought in he had been difficult to control. Not only was he screaming, but now he was straining against the restraints, trying to push himself up.

"Get the doctor!" Barret called out, rushing over. He grabbed hold of the man to try to get him to calm down, but it only seemed to agitate the man farther. He turned and looked straight at Barret. With a sudden wrenching movement he pushed himself up again, and the restraints snapped.

Before anyone could move the man had grabbed hold of Barret's arm. Instinctively Barret tried to pull away, but the man's grip was like a vice.

"What the hell..." he began.

Before he could say anymore the man twisted his arm, and Barret felt excruciating pain shoot through his forearm. He cried out, but even as he did so the man pulled on his arm, wrenching him forward, and throwing him tumbling over the bed as if he were a child.

The man sprang to his feet as Barret crashed against the far wall. Cloud could hear the others all shouting, though he really didn't hear what they were saying. Elena had her gun out and was slowly backing away. Vincent had stepped in front of her. Cid had his spear out and was advancing on the man. Reeve, pushing Marlene in front of him, had run out the door, calling for the doctor. Cloud stepped up beside Cid, facing the man. He had not drawn his own weapon. The man stopped for a moment, looking around as if confused.

"We're not going to hurt you," Cloud said, trying to keep his voice calm. They were only a few steps from one another. He could easily have lunged forward and grabbed the man, who did not look particularly strong nor wary. But Cloud had seen what he had done to Barret, whom he had tossed across the room as if a rag doll. The mako made him much stronger than he looked.

The man screamed again. This time Cloud could pick out a few words. He distinctly heard the sentence, 'you're not going to get me' and at least one other word.

"We're not trying to get you," Red stated in a calm voice. "No one is going to hurt you. Please try to relax."

The man turned and looked straight at Red.

"I don't believe you!" he screamed, then lunged forward right at the red beast.

For a moment Cloud thought Red was going to stand his ground, but at the last instant he leapt out of the way. The man swung wildly at him, managing to make contact. The red beast spun in the air and tumbled to the ground, then leapt up, apparently unhurt.

The man did not hesitate. He turned and lunged again for the closest person, who happened to be Elena. She cried out and pushed herself against the wall behind her, as if trying to push straight through it. Her gun was trained on the man, but she was obviously reluctant to fire.

Before she had to make that decision, however, Vincent suddenly slammed into the man from the side. The both fell to the ground in a heap. Vincent tried to keep the man down, but he was like a wild animal, a wild animal with fierce strength. Legs and arms flailing, he was moving so fast Vincent couldn't get a decent grip. The man suddenly spun around, driving his arm back, smacking Vincent in the head, almost making him lose his grip.

Without waiting any longer Cloud leapt into the fray. He tried to grab hold of one of the man's legs, and was rewarded with a kick in the face. Ignoring the pain, he tried again, this time his hands managed to close on the man's leg, but it was like trying to hold a tornado. Cloud felt himself being pulled around helplessly as the man tried to get out of his grasp, and was reduced to just trying to hold on for dear life.

Cid had dropped his spear and was now also trying to subdue the man, but didn't seem to be having any better luck than Cloud or Vincent. Even with the three of them on top of him, the man managed to pull himself up to his feet. With a wild cry he twisted around, and Cloud felt the man's leg tear out of his grasp. All three of them tumbled to the floor.

Red flew through the air, crashing his five hundred pound frame into the man. They both fell to the floor, the man slamming against the wall and cracking the plasterboard. But even that didn't stop him. Unbelievably, the man grabbed hold of Red and tossed him to the side, almost as easily as he had Barret. The man sprung to his feet again and started screaming once more.

The others had gotten to their feet once again as well. They all stood there for a moment, reluctant to attack. Cloud had never felt such brute strength before, not even when he had faced Sephiroth.

"Please stop," Nipala spoke up, trying to reason with him again. "No one here wants to hurt you."

Just then Reeve reappeared in the doorway, followed by the doctor and a number of orderlies.

The man screamed again when he saw the reinforcements. He looked around wildly, like a trapped animal, and suddenly his eyes fell on the window.

He sprang for it. Elena, who was standing right beside it, cringed back. Cloud, realizing what the man's intentions were at the last moment, lunged for him, but he was too late.

With an enormous crash the man burst through the window, sending glass flying. Elena cried out. Cloud ran up to the window and looked down.

Even the man's iron strength apparently couldn't save him from a four story fall. He lay splayed out on the pavement below them, unmoving.

"Oh my god," Elena said softly.

The doctor ran to the window and looked down. Already they could see other hospital workers gathering around the body.

"Get down there and see if you can help," he told the orderlies. The men nodded and left the room.

"What happened here?" the doctor questioned, looking around at them.

"He just went bananas," Barret said, getting up and rubbing his arm.

"That sums it up rather concisely," Red agreed. "We were just standing here talking, and suddenly he went crazy. I can think of nothing we did or said that might have set him off."

The doctor nodded slowly.

"It has been known to happen in these sort of cases," he said slowly. "It's rare, but then again, I don't think I've seen anyone quite as bad as he was. It wasn't likely he was going to live anyway, but it's still a shame."

"Indeed," Red agreed.

"I better get down there and see if I can do anything," the doctor said. He turned and walked out the door. The others stood there in silence for a long time.

"It doesn't appear we have anymore to learn here," Vincent said pragmatically.

"No, it does not," Cloud said slowly. "Did anyone hear what he was saying?"

"It didn't make much sense," Cid replied. "I heard him say that we weren't going to get him."

"I also heard him say something else," Cloud replied. "It sounded like *en garde*."

"*En garde*? Like he was fencing?" Barret said with a frown.

"If didn't sound like *en garde* to me," Vincent said. "It sounded like *Vanguard*."

"*Vanguard*?" Cloud said slowly. For some reason it sounded vaguely familiar.

"Are you sure?" Barret questioned.

"I think so," Vincent replied.

"Why, does that mean anything to you?" Reeve questioned.

"Yes," Barret said. "It's a big company that has been buying up property in Corel. They wanted me to condemn some land so they could buy it and build a mall a while back, but I wouldn't go along."

"It's not only Corel where they're buying up property," Elena cut in. "They also took over the Junon Power Company, and they've been buying land in Wutai and Gongaga like there's no tomorrow. They've become a major player in the business world, although no one had even heard of them just a few years ago. It's like they came out of nowhere."

Vincent looked at her curiously.

"I heard it around the office," she stated. "The Turks keep up with that sort of thing."

Cloud looked at the others with a deepening frown. He didn't like at all what he was hearing.

"So we've got a mysterious source of mako, a disturbance in the lifestream, and another giant company that seems to have an unlimited source of revenue. Does anyone else besides me think this adds up to serious trouble."

No one disagreed.

"So what should we do?" Reeve questioned.

Cloud saw the others were waiting for him to speak.

"We have to go check out the reactor in the Nibel mountains," he replied. "But we also need to find out more about this Vanguard company."

"So you think we should split up?" Barret questioned.

"Yeah," Cloud nodded. "But I also think we could use some help. We need someone to infiltrate this Vanguard company and get us some information."

He turned to look at Elena.

"I believe you have some friends who are adept at that sort of thing."

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If Ifalna hadn't already had a name, Tifa would have chosen City of Gardens. Everywhere you went, you were surrounded by flora. Every other block seemed to contain a park. Every sidewalk had a line of trees along it. Almost every building you passed had a small garden filled with flowers in front of it. And such flowers! The plants that grew here were unlike anything else in the world. All of them seemed larger, healthier and more beautiful than seemed possible. Their colors brightened the city, their scent filled it. That was unusual enough in the portion of the city that was above ground, where there was plenty of sunlight, but if anything, the greenery was even more lush in the underground portion of the city. Perhaps it had something to do with the light that the Cetra structures gave off, or perhaps it was the extra care that everyone seemed to take when tending the plants, or perhaps it was more basic than that. Perhaps it was the mere fact that the Cetra had made their home here. Either way, she didn't think she had never laid eyes on a city more beautiful, and she didn't think she ever would.

The street she was on now was no exception. The road here was lined with trees as well. She had no idea what kind of trees they were, but like all the other plants here, they were breathtakingly beautiful. Their trunks were white as snow, and smooth to the touch. Their leaves, hanging down like a canopy above, were silver in color. They seemed like young trees, none larger than six or eight feet tall. Each one the same, yet completely different.

Streetlamps above her cast silvery shadows through the leaves of the trees. Even though it was the middle of the day, just past noon actually, sunlight did not penetrate into the underground city. Yet she did not miss it. The bright light of the streetlamps, and the glow of the Cetra buildings had an appeal all their own

Even so, not all of the buildings glowed. The secret had been lost. And even if the human builders used the exact same type of stone that was used to create the Cetra buildings, they could not duplicate the strange illumination the Cetra engineers had created.

Now she stood right in front of one such building. Like many of the structures on this block it was made of simple concrete. It did not glow, did not look significantly different from any of the other new buildings that had been put up in the last few years here. Above the door was an unremarkable sign that read 'Church of Humanity'.

Tifa hesitated, looking up at the sign above her. She wasn't sure it was such a good idea to come here, but she had to admit she had been curious.

She slowly walked up the steps until she stood right in the entrance way. The doors were open, and she could see inside. It didn't look any different from any other church she had ever been in. She could see a few people sitting in the pews near the front, but no one else.

Slowly she walked in. The ceiling curved high over her head, long wooden beams running the length of it. Stain glass windows lined the walls. Except for the obvious human architecture, it wasn't much different from Aeris church. A few heads turned to look at her, and then turned away again in disinterest. She looked around nervously, not exactly sure why she was so nervous. So this was the place, the center of all the talk against Aeris and the Cetra. Yet everything seemed quiet and peaceful.

She shook her head slowly. What had she expected? Acolytes dressed in black robes appearing suddenly to take her prisoner? Evil priests offering sacrifices to satanic gods?

Besides, she was human, not Cetra. No one here knew her. To them, she was just another ordinary worshiper.

"Mrs. Strife?"

She spun around at the sound of the voice. A man dressed in priests robes stood by the entrance, just a few feet from her. She had just walked by where he stood, but she had not seen him. He was tall, though not quite as tall as Barret. His hair was long, and almost black, and a mustache and beard covered most of his lower face, but the most striking thing about him was his eyes. They were dark, though she couldn't say afterward exactly what color they were. They seemed to almost reach out and grab her.

"How...how do you know my name?" she stammered, flustered.

The man stepped closer, so he was right in front of her.

"You're quite famous you know," he replied easily. "Since you saved the planet from Sephiroth and Jenova, everyone in AVALANCHE is well known."

Tifa just stood there, not sure how to reply. Of course they knew her. How silly to think they wouldn't.

The man's eyes strayed down toward her stomach.

"I heard that you and Mr. Strife were going to have a baby," he said. "Let me add my congratulations to those of others. It's a wonderful thing, isn't it? God's greatest blessing."

Again Tifa did not reply. She still didn't seem to have recovered from her initial surprise.

"Let me introduce myself. My name is Gilan Bradford," the man continued. "I have to admit it's quite a pleasant surprise to see you here. I couldn't be more pleased, actually. I've been meaning to speak to one of you."

"Uh huh," Tifa said slowly.

"Come," he said. "Let us find someplace more comfortable to speak. I'm sure you don't want to stand here and talk."

He raised his hand, motioning for her to walk with him. He started walking toward the front of the church and she followed without protest. Again it struck her that maybe this wasn't such a good idea, but the thought seemed abstract, almost as if it was someone else thinking it.

Gilan led her into a small office near the front. He offered her a seat, which she took without a word. Then sat down himself behind the desk.

"Comfortable?" he asked. "Do you want something to drink?"

"I'm fine," Tifa replied slowly, beginning to wonder how she had suddenly found herself in this position. All she had wanted to do was walk into the church and take a look around, and here she was suddenly, sitting in a private office with the man who was saying all these nasty things about Aeris. Was this really him, she wondered. Strange, but he certainly didn't seem threatening in any way.

"I'm sorry to pry, but I'm very curious," Gilan went on. "You've known Miss. Gainsborough a long time. And you also were acquainted with that Ellengio fellow. What is your impression of them?"

Tifa looked at him for a moment without answering. She was over her surprise now, but she still felt strange. She still felt like she was in sort of a fog, like she couldn't think straight. It took all her concentration to say anything at all. He was looking at her still, and she couldn't seem to pull her gaze away from his.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"It's really very simple," Gilan responded. "How do you feel about the Cetra. What is your general impression of them?"

"I...I don't know," she replied, not even sure she should be answering. "They're just like everyone else, I guess. They have faults and problems just like the rest of us."

Gilan nodded slowly.

"You've never seen them exhibit unusual behavior?"

Tifa didn't reply for a moment. Of course she'd seen them exhibit unusual behavior. Nobody else she knew could speak with the planet. Sometimes almost everything Aeris did seemed like unusual behavior to Tifa. She wanted to ask him what he was getting at, but for some reason, she didn't say that.

"They're Cetra," she replied. "Of course they exhibit unusual behavior."

Gilan smiled.

"Yes, I suppose that's true," he replied. "You've become quite close to Miss. Gainsborough, haven't you?"

"Yes," Tifa replied.

"You consider her a friend?"

Tifa felt she should be angry at this question. What business was this of his anyway?

"Yes," she replied again.

"And she's your friend?"

"Of course."

Gilan looked at her for a long time.

"Are you sure?"

Again Tifa felt an abstract anger. She wished he'd get to the point. She wished he'd just say what he meant to say. Why was she even listening to this? Why didn't she just get up and walk right out the door?

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Do you know that when the Cetra originally came here, their purpose was to enslave the human race?"

She just looked at him for a moment. What was he trying to say? She felt strangely confused. What was wrong with her?

"That's ridiculous," she finally managed to say.

"Is it?" Gilan responded. "How can you be so sure? You of all people should know the Cetra weren't saints. They were the ones who created Jenova in the first place, remember?"

He leaned forward, staring at Tifa.

"Most people think that there are no records of what happened when the Cetra first arrived here. But they're wrong. The human race was primitive at that time, but they did know how to write. Some records have been found of that era. The Cetra didn't come here out of any benevolence on their part. They fled here to escape Jenova. They weren't looking to help us, they were trying to help themselves. They used our people to help us rebuild their own civilization on our planet. Sure,

they gave us new technologies, but only things that we needed to know to help them. All the time they were helping us, they were planning on using us in their war against Jenova. A war that had nothing to do with us. Oh, they were clever, I'll give them that. The whole time they were here they fooled us into believing they were helping us. They pretended to be our friends to get us to do what they wanted us to do. We were slaves, and we didn't even know it. What better situation could you have?"

"That's...that's not true," Tifa said. The whole thing was just ridiculous. But if so, why did it sound so reasonable? Still, did that really matter? "We're not slaves of the Cetra. It didn't happen."

"No, it didn't," Gilan replied. "But only because a Jenova arrived here and interfered with their plans."

Tifa shook her head. This whole thing just seemed too complicated to her right now.

"Are you saying that Jenova was the good guy here?" she questioned.

"Not at all," Gilan replied. "Jenova wouldn't have thought twice about enslaving the human race, and would have been much more brutal about it. We wouldn't have been better with Jenova, oh no. But that doesn't automatically make the Cetra the good guys either. Neither of them gave a damn about the human race. They were only interested in their own gain."

Again Tifa did not reply. Something wasn't right. She was sure of it. She couldn't think clearly. She was sure this wasn't normal, but she had no idea how to snap herself out of it.

"Even so," she continued slowly. "Even if that's true, what difference does it make? All that happened thousands of years ago. What's it got to do with here and now?"

"There is still a Cetra left," Gilan replied pointedly. "I have no reason to believe her agenda is any different from what the Cetra agenda was originally."

"I don't understand," Tifa said. "Are you telling me that Aeris is trying to enslave the human race. By herself?"

"Don't underestimate the power of the Cetra," Gilan warned, his voice perfectly serious. "They can bewitch you without you even realizing it. What do you think she's doing here, with her church? What do you think her purpose is?"

"I don't know," Tifa replied, very confused. "I didn't think she had any purpose. She just wants to live her life, just like everyone else."

"That's exactly what she wants you to think," Gilan pressed. "That's the beauty of it. You do her bidding without even realizing it. As long as Jenova was a threat, we were safe, because she needed our help. You went out into space to stop Jenova, and you succeeded. but don't forget what Ellengio did. He was willing to start a war, to perhaps kill thousands or even millions of human beings, to save the Cetra."

"But Aeris was against it," Tifa replied. "She was horrified with what Ellengio did."

"Was she?" Gilan questioned. "Are you sure? How do you know that wasn't all set up, that she didn't do exactly what Ellengio wanted her to?"

Tifa shook her head. She didn't want to sit here arguing with the man. She wanted to leave. But for the life of her, should couldn't get herself to get up and walk out the door. It was as if she were rooted in place. She knew that was wrong, but she didn't know exactly why.

"Ellengio wanted her to oppose him?" she said. She couldn't follow what he was saying at all. "Why would he do that?"

"To cover all bases," he replied. "There was always a possibility his plan would fail. In that case, he knew there'd still be a Cetra around that you would trust. That's just the way the Cetra work."

Tifa shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts.

"What you're saying just doesn't make sense," she said. "I still don't understand why Aeris would want to enslave us. The whole idea is just...just..." she searched for the word. "Nonsense," she said finally. Yes, nonsense. That was it. Why had she had such a hard time thinking of that word?

"It may seem so," Gilan said calmly. He got and and stepped around the desk, coming up to stand right in front of her. "The Cetra are very clever. They make everything they say, everything they do, sound very reasonable. But there are different types of slavery. Let me ask you something. If someone locked you up in a very beautiful place, took care of all your needs, treated you fairly, yet never let you make any of your own decisions, how would that make you feel?"

Tifa frowned. It seemed a very difficult question.

"I don't think I'd like it much," she replied eventually.

"No you wouldn't," he replied. "Because no matter how well you were treated, you still wouldn't have your freedom. The Cetra had their own planet once. They have no one to blame but themselves for squandering it. This is *our* planet. Humans. But now the Cetra want a say here as well. A say they have no right to. The Cetra are very powerful. We all know that. Even one Cetra can have a disproportionate effect on human affairs if she's allowed to interfere. I'm not going to allow that!"

For the first time, Gilan's voice took on an edge.

"But I don't think Aeris would be like that," Tifa replied, feeling helpless to dispute him.

Gilan looked at her for a moment, then took a deep breath. He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. When he spoke again, his voice was very calm.

"Of course you don't," he replied. "As I said, the Cetra can sound very reasonable. It is difficult for a human to see through them. I don't expect you to change your attitude toward her in a day. All I ask is that you watch over her. Try to analyze what she does and why she does it. Perhaps you will see nothing at all. But on the other hand, if you do notice anything unusual, or see anything that might make you suspicious, then I'd like to ask you a favor."

"What is that?" Tifa asked.

"If you see anything like that, I'd like for you to tell me," he replied. "I'm not asking you to spy on her. I know you think of her as a friend. And maybe she's good enough to hide her real agenda from you. But you're probably closer to her than just about anyone else on the planet. If she's got any secrets, you'd be the most likely person to find out. If you happen to find something that shows that she really does have a hidden agenda, that she really is plotting against the human race, then don't you think your duty to your own race would be more important than your friendship? If she's plotting against us, then hasn't she already betrayed that friendship?"

Tifa lifted her hand and rubbed her forehead. She felt dizzy.

"She's not plotting against anybody," she insisted. "She hasn't betrayed my friendship. Nothing like that is happening."

"Maybe not," Gilan replied. "But if it were, and you found out, will you tell me?"

Tifa dropped her hand and looked up at him. This was almost funny, the whole ridiculousness of the idea. She thought she should be laughing, but his seriousness seemed infectious. He really believed what he was telling her. How could he? How could he believe such nonsense? To think that Aeris, honest, open Aeris, could be plotting against them? You might as well accuse Marlene. It was preposterous.

Wasn't it?

"They'll be nothing to report," she tried again. "Aeris isn't like that."

"But if she is, if you do find out something?" he persisted.

Tifa looked at him nervously. She felt so uncomfortable, so confused. She didn't want to be here anymore. All she wanted to do was leave. Why wouldn't he let her go?

"All right, fine," she said finally. "I'll tell you if I find her plotting to take over the world. But she's not doing it, so I'm not going to find anything."

Gilan smiled.

"That's all I ask," he replied.

He glanced at the watch on his wrist.

"Thank you for your time, Mrs. Strife," he said. "It was nice to get to finally meet you. I'm afraid however, that I have some rather pressing church business to attend to. I must rush off. I'll have one of the alter boys escort you out, if you wish."

"No, that's fine, I can find my way," she said, getting up. She stumbled as she stood. Gilan reached out and grabbed her arm to steady her.

"Easy," he said. "Are you sure you're alright? You can stay here and rest, if you wish."

"No," she said, waving him away. "I'm...fine. I'll just be on my way."

The truth was, she wanted desperately to get out of this place as quickly as possible.

"Very well," he said. "Good day, and God bless."

Tifa just nodded. Gilan turned and walked out of the room. Tifa stood there for a moment. She still felt dizzy and disoriented. Taking a deep breath, she steadied herself, then walked out of the room as well. She strode down the aisle and out of the church as quickly as she could manage. When she was out in the street once more she stopped again. She looked around. She had to stop for a minute and concentrate to decide where she was going now. Back to Aeris church. That was it.

She glanced back at the church, biting her lower lip. Everything that had happened in there almost seemed like a dream. Had she really met Gilan Bradford? Had she even gone in there at all?

Shaking her head, she turned and started down the street. Something had happened, though she was not quite sure what. The only thing she was really sure of was the splitting headache that now throbbed between her temples.