

CHAPTER VI: THE NOT SO BRILLIANT PLAN

"You went to the Church of Humanity? Whatever possessed you?"

Tifa looked at Elmyra sheepishly.

"I'm not sure," she replied hesitantly. "I guess...I guess I just wanted to see for myself what the place looked like."

She, Elmyra and Aeris were sitting at the kitchen table at Elmyra's house, having just finished dinner. Tifa glanced at Aeris, who seemed unperturbed by Tifa's confession. Not that Tifa had expected any different.

"Well, I think that was a very dangerous thing for you to do," Elmyra admonished. "A girl in your condition, running around taking chances like that."

Elmyra gave a shake of her head for emphasis.

Tifa just sat there looking contrite. She didn't think she'd done anything all that dangerous. Just because she was pregnant didn't mean she had to sit around all day doing nothing. But she had a feeling pointing that out to Elmyra wouldn't do a bit of good.

"So what happened while you were there?" Aeris asked.

Tifa didn't reply for a moment.

"Kind of hard to say," she said finally. "I thought I'd just look around a bit, but Gilan Bradford recognized me."

At that Elmyra looked even more upset.

"He didn't do anything," Tifa continued quickly. "He was quite polite, actually. He took me into his office and we talked for a bit."

Elmyra looked at Tifa as if she had willingly walked into a den of lions.

"Tifa..." she began.

"It's alright mother," Aeris interrupted. "For all they've said, the Church of Humanity hasn't done anything to hurt anyone."

"And that rock through the window of your church?" Elmyra couldn't help but remind her.

"We don't even know if the Church of Humanity was responsible for that," Aeris replied.

Elmyra looked at her daughter for a moment. Who else could it have been? But she didn't say that. Aeris was right. They had no definite proof the Church of Humanity was responsible for that rock, even though every instinct told Elmyra they were. Even if they weren't directly responsible, Elmyra was certain that incident would never have happened if the Church of Humanity hadn't been saying the things it was saying. But she knew it was no use arguing with Aeris about it.

"So go on," Aeris prodded. "What did you talk about?"

For some reason Tifa felt uncomfortable continuing.

"He asked a lot of questions about you and the Cetra," Tifa replied slowly. "Wanting to know what you were like. It was strange."

"What was strange?" Aeris questioned.

"I don't know," Tifa replied. "I was kind of in a fog the whole time I was there. For some reason I couldn't seem to think straight. I don't know, maybe it was nothing. Maybe I was just a little bit sick. But it just seemed weird, almost like I was drugged or something."

"Drugged?" Elmyra said, the look on her face souring even more. "Did you have anything to eat or drink?"

Tifa shook her head.

"I don't think so. He offered me something to drink, but I declined. And then after I left, I had this splitting headache."

"Headache?" Aeris said, looking at Tifa carefully.

"No, it wasn't like those others," Tifa replied quickly. "The one's I was having earlier because of the mako infusion. This was different. This was just an ordinary headache, though it did seem to come on rather abruptly."

The headaches Tifa had been suffering from since the mako infusion had gradually diminished over time, until now they hardly bothered her at all. Red had surmised they were just been a residual effect of her body acclimating itself to the mako.

"But you're alright now?" Elmyra questioned.

"Yes, I'm fine," Tifa replied.

"So what did you tell him?" Aeris asked, getting back to the subject at hand.

Tifa frowned. To tell the truth, she couldn't remember very well what they had talked about.

"Nothing really," she replied. "I just told him you didn't seem any different to me than anyone else."

"That's all?" Aeris said, sounding a little disappointed. "How long were you there?"

"I...I'm not sure," Tifa replied, a bit defensively. "I told you, it was all very confusing. We talked for a few minutes, I guess, and then he told me he had business to attend to..."

Tifa fell silent, feeling flustered. She really hadn't said much to Gilan Bradford. It wasn't like she had told the man any dark secrets. So why did she feel like a schoolchild being questioned after having done something wrong?

Aeris looked at her thoughtfully, but Tifa could not read her expression.

"It does seem rather odd," she mused. "Perhaps I should pay them a visit myself."

"You'll do no such thing!" Elmyra blurted out.

Aeris head jerked up to look at her mother. For a moment neither one said anything.

"I don't think there's any danger in my..." Aeris began.

"I don't care," Elmyra stated bluntly. "You know how they feel about you there. They've said flat out that the Cetra are evil. I don't want you going anywhere near that place."

Tifa saw a hint of exasperation on Aeris face.

"Mother, don't you think you're overreacting a bit?"

"No, I don't think I'm overreacting," Elmyra returned adamantly. "You know what they've been saying about you. In spite of how you may feel about it, a lot of people, myself included, wouldn't put physical violence past them. What would be the point of you going there anyway, except to stir up trouble?"

"I'm not trying to stir up trouble," Aeris replied. "I'm just curious as to what happened to Tifa."

"I don't care!" Elmyra shot back, her voice tinged with anger. "I won't have you running around putting yourself in danger. Things are already bad enough as it is. I want you to promise me you won't go over there."

Aeris was silent, the both of them just looking at one another again. Finally Aeris turned to Tifa, who looked at her friend helplessly. The last thing she wanted in the world was to get involved in this argument.

"Promise me!" Elmyra repeated.

Aeris hesitated.

"I can't do that," she said finally. "You're not being reasonable."

"I'm not being reasonable?" Elmyra snapped. "Aeris, you've seen how dangerous these people can be."

"No I haven't," Aeris replied calmly. "I've heard a lot of talk and I've seen a brick thrown by *someone* through the window of my church. That hardly constitutes an assault. Tifa has been there and no harm came to her. She even said herself that they treated her politely."

For a moment Elmyra seemed at a loss for words.

"Treated *her*, maybe," she said finally, an edge of desperation in her voice. "But she's human. She's not a Cetra. How can you even think of going there when you know they're out to get you?"

Again they were silent. Tifa looked around for a convenient hole to disappear into, but there was none handy. Finally Aeris sighed.

"I can't talk to you when you're like this," she said softly. "I'll be out in the garden."

"Aeris!" Elmyra said, but the young Cetra had already turned away. Elmyra just stood there staring as Aeris walked out the door. For a long time she said nothing at all. Finally she looked at Tifa. She seemed close to tears.

"Am I wrong?"

Tifa didn't know what to say.

"No," she said gently. "There's nothing wrong with being concerned about your daughter. But Aeris is...different. You know that. You know she's going to do what she thinks is right, no matter what anyone else says."

Elmyra stood there for a moment looking at the door Aeris had disappeared through, then sat down heavily beside Tifa.

"I know," she said softly. "She'll do what she thinks is right, no matter what it might cost her. Or those who love her."

She looked up at Tifa.

"Was Ellengio like that?"

"Like what, exactly?"

"Always willing to sacrifice his own will to a 'higher calling'," she replied. "I wonder if it's, like, a trait of the Cetra or something."

Tifa was silent for a moment. She hadn't really ever thought about that. She really didn't think of Aeris and Ellengio being similar at all. But what had Ellengio done? He had tried to release his people from their prison, no matter how misguided it might have been. And she was also certain that he would have done just about anything to succeed, even if it had meant sacrificing himself.

What that so different?

And if that were so, what exactly was Aeris' 'higher calling', Tifa thought abstractly. She had always admired Aeris. Her ability to stand up for herself, her single mindedness in pursuing what she believed was right, no matter what anyone else said or thought. Elmyra wasn't even Tifa's mom, but if she had said to her what she had said to Aeris, Tifa knew she would have agreed. Perhaps she was just weak, but she thought it was more than that. She just didn't have Aeris rock solid conviction that what she was doing was right. Tifa had doubts, about almost everything. She could understand how Aeris felt, but she could see Elmyra's point too. Reeve had made some good points in his argument that the Church of Humanity had overstepped it's bounds and deserved to be shut down. At least to her, they had sounded reasonable. She didn't know who was right. She just didn't have the kind of faith Aeris had in her own beliefs, and sometimes she wished she did.

Aeris had sacrificed herself for the Planet. But how does one determine what's best for the Planet? Obviously with Sephiroth calling meteor, the situation was pretty clear cut. But what if it wasn't? What about now? Would it be in the best interests of the Planet for the Cetra to die out? Or was there some other motive here that Tifa might not even be aware of? She hadn't mentioned what Gilan Bradford had said, hadn't mentioned his belief that Aeris was trying to control the human race, trying to enslave them somehow. She wondered now why she hadn't said anything about it. Just because it was so preposterous? What other reason could she have?

"In a way, yes," she replied. "They were similar. I guess that's to be expected. Still, I don't know whether you would consider that a trait. I'm certainly not an expert on the Cetra, but my impression is that they're a lot like us. They're all different, all unique. Some of them are caring and loyal and brave, and some are selfish and cowardly, and some are in between. I don't think you can draw any conclusions on Cetra behavior from just the two of them."

Elmyra nodded slowly.

"I suppose," she said. "I just wish...oh, I don't know what I wish. Aeris has given so much. You all have. I know she doesn't listen. She never did. And I hate to admit it, but usually she's been right not to. But still, sometimes I don't think she realizes what she does to those who care about her. I think in her zeal she tries to take on things too much by herself. Even...even when you were fighting Sephiroth, if she hadn't left you behind, if she would have told you her intentions, you all might have been able to help her. And she might not have...died, in the first place."

Elmyra looked down at the ground, her face gray. Even after all this time, even after Aeris had been resurrected, her death was still something that Elmyra had difficulty talking about.

"I know," Tifa replied, putting her hand on the other woman's arm. "But we don't know that. For all we know, Aeris made the only choice that could save us all."

Elmyra did not reply for a long time. Finally she looked up, a wistful expression on her face.

"She was always so different. I remember once when she was six years old. She was playing out front, and I was making lunch. But when I went out to get her she was gone. I looked all over, but I couldn't find her. By afternoon we had practically the entire sector looking for her. It was hours she was gone, and I was worried sick. I finally found her in that old church. You know, the one back in Midgar. Even then it was abandoned and broken down, looking ready to collapse at any moment. I was so relieved to find her and yet so angry. I wanted to strangle her and hug her to death at the same time. I couldn't help but cry, but she didn't seem to understand why I was so upset. When I told her that I was afraid something might have happened to her, she just said for me not to ever worry, cause the Planet would always take care of her."

Elmyra sighed and played nervously with her hands.

"The Planet would take care of her," she repeated. "She's not afraid to die. To her death is just another step on her journey. Something that needn't be feared. For her that may be true. But what about us? What about me? It seems I've spent my whole life worrying about her. When she...when Sephiroth did what he did, I could hardly stand it. If I hadn't had Marlene to be concerned about at the time I don't think I would have survived. All I know is I missed her so much I couldn't stand it. And then when she came back to me. When you all brought her back. That was the happiest day of my life. But it seems like, if anything, I'm even more worried about her now. I lost her once, I don't know what I do if it happened again..."

There were tears in her eyes now. She wasn't looking at Tifa, just staring down at her hands, looking defeated. Tifa had never seen her look like this, her face so grey, the lines of worry so prominent.

"I'm sorry," Tifa said. It didn't seem to mean much, but it was all she could think of. "She's not my daughter, but I feel the same way sometimes. All her friends do. We all worry about her."

Elmyra sniffed and looked up into Tifa's eyes. She managed a pale smile and patted Tifa's hand.

"I know you do," she replied. "And I'm glad I have someone here who I can talk to about this, someone who will understand. I'm so glad she has a friend like you."

Tifa smiled in return, yet these words did not comfort her, instead they left her feeling vaguely embarrassed. She didn't really feel worthy of this praise. She considered Aeris her best friend, but she really couldn't say exactly how close they were. Like everything else when it came to Aeris, it seemed, it wasn't simple to define. When they first met they had been rivals for Cloud's affection. Even now, she had to admit she still felt jealous sometimes of Aeris' beauty and ability to become the center of attention merely by entering a room. She had never talked about it with Aeris, but she wondered if the Ancient was even a little bit jealous of her. After all, Cloud had chosen her, and though Aeris had taken it graciously, who was to say there wasn't a little bit of hurt or anger still lingering there? It was only human right?

Except Aeris wasn't human, at least, not completely, she reminded herself. So who could say? Tifa had been willing to give her life for her friend, but in truth, she had been doing that for Cloud more than Aeris. And it wasn't like they engaged in a lot of 'girl talk'. Aeris hadn't struck her as the type of person who would be interested in that sort of thing, and since Sephiroth destroyed Nibelheim, she hadn't been either. Tifa had never opened up to Aeris about how she felt, just like it had taken her forever to open to Cloud. She was just too shy. And Aeris had never brought it up. She really couldn't say just what their relationship was, exactly. She knew Aeris cared for her. But that was to be expected. Aeris cared for everyone she knew.

Still, Tifa realized Elmyra didn't need to hear any of that. What she needed was some comfort.

"She'll be fine," she said as reassuringly as she could muster. "Perhaps she's right. Perhaps this thing is being blown out of proportion, and nothing will come of it in the end. But even if it does, we're still here for her. I'll keep an eye on her, and make sure she doesn't do anything rash."

Elmyra smiled again, a smile that looked much more genuine this time.

"Thank you Tifa," she replied. "You're a true friend."

She looked up again, at the vacant doorway. The smile quickly faded from her face, the years seeming to press on it more than ever.

"I just don't know what's going to become of her."

So what's the plan?"

Reeve looked at the others gathered around the table. They sat in the living room of Barret's house in Corel. On the table in front of them lay a map of the region that Cloud was pondering intently. Barret sat beside him, not paying much attention to the map. Red and Nipala lay on the floor nearby. Marlene lay on her back on the floor beside them, her head resting against Nipala. Cid had gone to pick up Yuffie and drop her, Vincent and Elena off at Turk headquarters in Junon.

"Or do we have a plan?" Reeve finished.

After finding the mako reactor deserted they really hadn't had any idea what to do, so they had decided to head to town to regroup and think things over. Nibelheim had been the nearest town, but they all knew how Cloud felt about his old hometown, and none of them had suggested they stay there. Corel, with its central location, had seemed the next logical choice. So here they were, sitting in Barret's house pondering their next move. Pondering for quite some time now, actually, but none of them were exactly shouting out ideas.

No one replied. Cloud just continued to stare at the map, as if he looked at it long enough the answer would just magically come to him. Barret seemed bored with the entire process, and seemed just to be wanting for someone to come up with an idea so they could get going. Red seemed to be asleep. Nipala was looking down at her paws.

"Marlene, what do you think?" Reeve asked. She seemed to be the only one who was paying attention.

"Huh?" Marlene questioned, turning her head to look at him.

"Nothing," Reeve stated with a smile.

"Well, it's obvious that none of the old reactors are the cause of the problem," Cloud finally said, stirred out of his lethargy. He still had his eyes on the map, even as he spoke.

"So what are we left with?" he continued. "Either this is some natural phenomena or there's a reactor somewhere that we don't know about."

"But where?" Reeve questioned. "A mako reactor isn't something that's easy to hide."

"I know," Cloud replied. "Whatever the source, from the contacts we've had, it's got to be somewhere in the Nibel Mountains. The monster Cid and his family ran into came down the river from the mountains, and the guy Vincent and Elena met was near Lucrecia's falls. In his condition, I don't see how he could have traveled very far."

Barret, finally seeming to take an interest, peered down at the map.

"That still leaves a lot of room to search," he stated. "The mountain range covers a large area, and it's some of the most rugged country around. There's nothing there."

"Which would tend to indicate a natural source," Red spoke up. Reeve glanced over at him. It seemed he wasn't asleep after all.

"Unless that's what they want us to think," Cloud said slowly.

"So, you think someone has built a new reactor somewhere in the mountains?" Reeve questioned.

"I don't know," Cloud replied. "But if they are their intentions can't be good."

"And if it's just a natural occurrence, then we're all getting worried over nothing," Nipala pointed out.

"True, but can we take that chance?" Cloud replied. "We all know what kind of danger a mako reactor represents. If we hunt for it and it's a natural occurrence, then we're just wasting some time. If we don't hunt for it, and it's a new reactor, well, I think you can all come up with your own consequences."

None of them replied for a moment. They all knew Cloud was right. They had to find out, one way or another. Reeve leaned forward and looked down at the map as well.

"So you think we should search the entire area?"

The Nibel Mountain range covered a huge area. Trying to find something even as large as a mako reactor would be like searching for a needle in a haystack. Well, maybe not quite that bad, but it would still be a daunting task.

"I don't see that we have much choice," Cloud said.

Red frowned.

"That would probably take months," he observed.

"I know," Cloud said, obviously not pleased himself with the prospect. "But what other choice do we have?"

Red seemed about to answer, and then apparently changed his mind. He looked away. It was hard for Cloud to read the red beast's expression, but he seemed unhappy.

"Can you come up with a better idea?" Cloud pressed.

Red paused for a moment, then shook his head.

"Unfortunately no," he replied.

Cloud didn't answer. It wasn't going to be easy, but Red would have been one of the last one's he would have expected to object. Barret would have been at the top of his list, considering the man's patience, or lack thereof.

"Well," Reeve said slowly, still looking at the map. "It's not entirely random. Like Cloud said, the man who Vincent and Elena met probably didn't travel very far. I think we should concentrate our search near Lucrecia's falls, at least in the beginning."

"Why don't we just get Cid to overfly the area?" Barret suggested. "If there's a mako reactor down there, don't you think he'd be able to spot it?"

"We can certainly ask him to do that," Red replied. "It might greatly simplify things."

"But we don't have any guarantee he'll see anything," Cloud said. "Those mountains are rugged, with lots of deep valleys. Plus, if it really is a reactor, they might be deliberately concealing it from the air."

"Like with camouflage?" Barret said.

"Yes," Cloud responded. "It's not certain an air search will turn up anything."

"But it couldn't hurt to try," Barret said.

"No, of course not," Cloud replied. "In fact, I guess that'll be at the top of the 'to do' list, as soon as Cid get's back."

"It would have made things a lot simpler if that guy had survived," Barret lamented. "He could have just told us what happened to him."

"If we could ever have gotten anything coherent out of him to begin with," Red replied. "Most people who have that large an exposure don't survive anyway."

"That's all water under the bridge anyhow," Cloud pointed out. "The fact of the matter is, he didn't. If we're going to solve this little mystery, it's going to be without his help."

"I have another suggestion," Reeve spoke up. "It will be difficult for us to search through the mountains no matter what we do, but I can get Cait to help. He'd probably be ideal for the task, now that I think about it. He doesn't have to rest, he just has to come in and recharge his batteries. But he only has to do that about every third day. He could search twenty four hours a day, every day, otherwise."

"That would be great," Cloud responded. "Are you sure you can get him to do it?"

"Of course," Reeve said. "I think his program can handle it without any alterations. We'll just have to go pick him up."

"Okay," Cloud said, satisfied that they were at least getting somewhere.

"Even with Cait, it still won't be an easy task," Red said. "It might still take months."

"Oh don't be so pessimistic," Reeve spoke up. "We might find it right away."

"Not likely," Red replied, ignoring Reeve's request.

"I don't care how long it takes," Cloud said. "I'm going to find out what's going on. One thing's for sure, I'm not going to let Vanguard turn into another Shinra."

Reeve nodded. He supposed that was the thought in the back of all their minds. They had already had to put up with a company that was trying to run the world. They had beaten Shinra, but it hadn't been easy. In fact, Reeve suspected that good luck had had a lot to do with it. They couldn't depend on their luck remaining that good a second time. If Vanguard was up to something, better to find out now, before they became too powerful, than later on, when it might be too late to stop them.

"In the meantime, maybe the Turks will find us something to go on," Nipala said.

"Maybe," Cloud replied. "There's too many maybes. I guess it's too late to start looking today. But the time Cid gets back it'll already be dark. We'll have to get started tomorrow morning."

He didn't look too happy about that. And in truth, he wasn't. He wasn't happy at all. He wanted to get to the bottom of this, as quickly as possible. He didn't believe for a minute that this was a natural phenomenon. He was certain it was man made, and he was just as certain that Vanguard had something to do with it. Perhaps he was being cynical, but with all that had happened, who could blame him? His thoughts paralleled Reeve's. He suspected the rise of another Shinra, and no matter what he had to do, he wasn't going to let that happen.

With the brainstorming session over, Barret went over and flopped down on the couch, grabbing the newspaper and opening it up. Marlene got up and went over to sit beside him. Red padded over to the window and looked out to the south. Cloud stayed where he was, continuing to look over the map, the wheels still turning. Reeve glanced at Red and then went over and crouched down beside Nipala.

"Red seemed a little...I don't know, uneasy," he said, soft enough so that only she could hear. "Is something bothering him?"

Nipala glanced over at Red's back before replying.

"He didn't know this was going to take so long," she replied.

"I see," Reeve said. "He misses the canyon."

"It's not only that," Nipala continued. "He's been under a lot of pressure lately. The canyon is expanding, and he's been asked to make a lot of decisions. Yet he's away quite a bit. Some of the Elders are discontent."

Reeve looked surprised.

"Discontent?" he repeated.

"At Red's wandering," she said. "They think he should stay at the canyon, should be taking care of business there, instead of gallivanting all over the countryside with AVALANCHE."

Reeve pondered that for a moment. He had had no idea that kind of pressure was being exerted on his friend.

"But Bugenhagen wanted him to go with AVALANCHE," he said. "His grandfather wanted him to experience the world."

"And he did," she replied. "But now some of the Elders think he's gone too far in that direction. They say Red's travels should only have been a temporary thing. He has seen the world, but now it's time for him to return to his people and put what he has learned to good use for the canyon."

Reeve shook his head. Nothing was ever simple, was it?

"So what could the consequences be? They can't like, throw him out as the protector, can they?"

"That would not be an easy thing," Nipala replied. "Though I believe it would not be impossible. I'm sorry, I'm not an expert on Cosmo Canyon law. I haven't lived there long enough. I don't know for sure what they could do, if anything. But even if they don't do anything, I know it bothers Red to even hear that sort of talk, to have someone suggest he's not doing his best for the canyon."

Reeve nodded. He knew how much Red loved Cosmo Canyon. After all Red had done, it annoyed Reeve that the Elders, of all people, would say such things about him. Hadn't he been willing to give his life for the canyon the time the Healer's minions had overrun it? Hadn't his going with them originally helped save the entire planet? Hell, if Red hadn't been with them when they had faced Sephiroth, they might never have succeeded in defeating him. Wasn't all that enough the give the poor guy a break?

"All the Elders think this?" he asked.

"No, of course not," Nipala replied. "Some support him wholeheartedly. Most do, I think. But there is a small but vocal minority, led by Elder Hargo, who disagrees. But even that is enough to upset Red."

As it would anyone, Reeve supposed. Still, it sounded like a disagreement, but nothing earth shattering.

"Well, you can't expect everyone to agree with everything someone does, no matter who they are," Reeve stated. "It's probably all just much ado about nothing."

"Perhaps," Nipala replied, with a tilt of her head. "But I know it bothers Red, even if it's nothing important. He wants to do what's right, and if this really is what Cloud suspects, then he'll be perfectly justified in helping out. No one wants a repeat of what happened with Shinra. But if he spends a lot of time on this and it turns out to be nothing, I'm afraid they're going to give him a hard time once he returns to the canyon."

Reeve rubbed his chin thoughtfully. First as a Shinra employee, then as Mayor of Ifalna, he had learned all the ins and outs of the political game. He was used to people trying to undercut his authority, usually for their own gain. But he had a feeling Red wasn't used to that sort of thing. He was still young in the years of his people, and had really only borne the burden of leadership for a short time now. It was natural as the leader to try to please all your people. But Reeve knew from long experience that was impossible. No matter what you did, or what good you attained, there was always someone more than willing to tear you down. You got used to it after a while. Expected it, even. But it did take some getting used to.

"I've had some experience with this sort of thing," he said aloud. "I'll talk to him. This is the right thing to do, no matter what some of the Elders might say. He shouldn't take it personally."

Nipala nodded.

"Thanks Reeve," she replied gratefully. "Since Bugenhagen died, he only has me to confide in, and like I said, I'm a newcomer, I'm not really up on Cosmo Canyon politics. The Elders are helpful, but they're obviously more concerned about the canyon than about him. I think it would help if he had a friend to talk to."

Reeve nodded. It appeared the mysterious source of mako was not their only problem. Aeris still had to contend with the Church of Humanity back in Ifalna, and Red was having trouble in Cosmo Canyon. It seemed they had a host of issues to deal with. But the easiest way to solve all their problems was just to find the mako source as quickly as possible. Then they could deal with the other issues that much sooner. One thing was for sure, he had a feeling they were going to be putting in some long hours in the next few days.