

## THE MIND SLAYERS

By Frank Verderosa

### CHAPTER I: A MALL TO DIE FOR

"Mr. Wallace?"

Barret flipped on the intercom.

"Yes?"

"There's a Mr. Van Cleff here to see you. He had the appointment for two thirty."

Barret glanced down at his watch. Two fifteen. He hesitated for a moment, looking blankly at the intercom. He had finished with his previous appointment almost an hour ago, and had gotten most of his paperwork caught up in the last week. There really wasn't any reason to make the man wait, yet he was tempted. Mr. Van Cleff represented the Vanguard Corporation and although Barret was not sure what he wanted, he suspected it was just more businessman's bullshit, the kind of thing he least liked to get involved with. But he had determined to rebuild Corel as best he could when he had taken the job as Mayor, and whether he liked it or not, big industry was a large part of that.

"Send him in," he said.

A moment later a man stepped into the office. He looked to be in his late thirties. He wore an immaculate grey suit and was blonde with nary a hair out of place. He wore black shoes recently polished, and carried a black attache case. Nothing Barret hadn't seen before.

"Good afternoon, Mayor Wallace," the man said, coming forward and extending his hand.

Barret stood up and shook hands, then indicated for the man to have a seat. Barret eased himself back down into his own chair.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Van Cleff?"

"Well, first off let me say that the owners of Vanguard Corporation have been looking at what's been happening at Corel for some time now, and I must tell you, they are quite impressed. You've done a fine job here, Mr. Wallace, you've really turned things around for this town."

Barret sighed inwardly. His first suspicion had been correct. This one was just like all the others.

"That's very kind of you," he replied. "But I'm sure you didn't come here just to flatter me."

The man looked at him, and for just a moment the smile that seemed to be permanently drawn on his face faltered, but he recovered quickly.

"I most certainly did not," Van Cleff responded. "As I said, Vanguard is quite impressed with what you've done here, and with the town itself. They think it's an up and coming town, a town that is going to grow very quickly. And Vanguard would like to be part of that."

He paused for a moment, looking at Barret, but Barret just sat there looking at him.

"I'm sure you're aware of the products that Vanguard produces," the man went on. "They are one of the largest makers of electronic parts in the country. What you may not be aware of is that they recently began expanding into real estate. I don't know whether you were aware of it, but they've already bought some prime land in the downtown area of Corel."

He looked at Barret again. Barret had not been aware of this, but again, he said nothing.

The man hesitated a moment. Then he set his briefcase on Barret's desk and opened it up.

"Anyway," he went on. "Vanguard has a proposal that I think you will find very exciting."

Van Cleff pulled half a dozen papers out of his briefcase and laid them out on the desk in front of Barret. The last paper he pulled out he had to unfold. Barret saw immediately that it was a hand drawn picture of some kind of large building. Across the top was written 'Corel Valley Mall'.

Barret looked at Van Cleff.

"A mall?"

"Yes, a mall," the man replied, the ludicrous smile still painted on his face. "But not just any mall. The biggest mall on the continent. Room for over 400 stores. A food court. A children's play area. We've already lined up four major department stores to act as anchor stores. This could be a windfall for Corel. Not only would it bring in major business and rake in millions of dollars in taxes, but it'll spur even further growth with satellite business growing up around it. This could be the move that could put Corel on the map. This could take this city into the big time!"

Barret just looked at him skeptically. For some reason he didn't share the man's enthusiasm. He picked up the picture and looked at it carefully. Finally he spoke.

"This is all well and good, but I don't see what it has to do with me, at least, not yet. There are channels to go through with this. You'd have to obtain the permits before I even consider looking at this."

Van Cleff nodded slowly.

"True," he said. "But there is one little glitch that we were hoping you could help us with."

Here it comes, Barret thought.

"And what might that be?"

The man lifted another of the papers and placed it in front of Barret, who could see that it was a map of downtown Corel, showing all the parcels of land.

"Okay, the red outline is the minimum area we will need to build the mall, including all stores and parking lots. The green shaded areas are all the parcels of land that Vanguard has already purchased."

Barret looked over the map, hiding his surprise. He had no idea that Vanguard had purchased so much land in Corel.

"And these red shaded ones?" he asked.

"Those are parcels of land whose owners have refused to sell to Vanguard," Van Cleff replied. "And that is the crux of our problem."

Barret looked up at him.

"You mean your problem," he corrected.

Van Cleff nodded in concession.

Barret continued to look at him.

"So what do you want me to do, pressure these people to sell?"

Van Cleff cupped his chin in his hands and looked down at the map.

"Actually, we were hoping for more active intervention," he said slowly.

Barret was starting to like this less and less.

"What did you have in mind?"

"We were hoping you would use your powers of eminent domain," the man responded.

Barret's look turned sharp.

"You want me do condemn their land...and then sell it to you," he stated.

"To Vanguard," Van Cleff replied.

"It's not something that hasn't been done before," the man continued, seeing the skeptical look on Barret's face. "Cities do this all the time. It's quite common."

"Other cities maybe," Barret replied. "I don't think I can help you."

"We've offered these people more than fair market price for their land," Van Cleff said. "I've told you already what a boon for Corel this could be. If you don't do this I'm afraid Vanguard will have to build it's mall in another city."

Barret shrugged.

"We've been getting along fine here without Vanguard, and it's mall. I suspect we will continue to do so. You are perfectly free to offer these people whatever price you wish for their land, but if they refuse, then there's nothing I can do. As long as it's not for a city project, it would be misuse of power for me to condemn their land."

Van Cleff folded his arms across his chest and shook his head slowly.

"Are you seriously telling me that you're going to give up a multi-million dollar project, a project that can add huge revenues into Corel's city budget, just because of a few misguided private citizens? Don't you think the greater good of Corel is more important?"

Barret gave the man such an openly hostile look that Van Cleff involuntarily took a step back.

"The private citizens of Corel are the one's who elected me," Barret said, surprised at how calm his voice sounded. "I don't represent the city, I represent the people, including those 'misguided' ones, as you refer to them. I own it to each and every one of them to do the best I can. I will not trample the rights of a single one of them, not even in the name of the city of Corel. Like I said before, we've been doing fine without you or Vanguard, so I suggest you take your plans and...look elsewhere."

Van Cleff stood there for a minute looking at him. He started to open his mouth, but the look Barret was giving him apparently convinced him that further argument would be futile. The man closed his mouth, reached down and gathered his papers together, shoving them quickly into the suitcase. Without another word he turned and walked quickly out of the Mayor's office.

He passed the secretary without a glance. In silence he continued walking swiftly until he was out of the building altogether. Once out on the street he paused and pulled out a cell phone. He dialed, looking around carefully as it rang, but there was no one nearby.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, it's me," he said. "I just talked to the Mayor. You were right, he didn't go for it. I guess we'll just have to go with the alternate plan."

There was a moments pause.

"See to it," the man at the other end of the line said before hanging up.

"Are you ready?"

Tifa nodded. She went to pick up her bag that held what few possessions she had with her but Cloud stepped forward and lifted it up first, slinging it over his own shoulder.

He looked at her, and for a moment he thought she was going to protest, but then she just smiled and slipped her hand into his. He squeezed her hand, finding pleasure in the simple feel of the soft skin of her fingers against his own.

"Then lets get out of here."

As they stepped toward the door Tifa paused for a moment to take one last look around the hospital room she had spent the better part of the last two weeks in. There was nothing extraordinary about it. It looked like any other hospital room you would find in just about any city on the continent. By tomorrow the room would most likely be occupied by someone else. But she couldn't help feel a certain possessiveness toward it. Now that the bar was gone, it was the only home she knew.

"Forget something?" Cloud said, with just a trace of impatience. He had never been completely comfortable in the hospital. There was just too much going on here that he didn't understand, that he had no control over.

"No," she replied, turning toward him once more. It was just a hospital room, and she was healed, no longer in need of it. She had been chafing to get out of here all week. Now that they had finally released her, there was no point in dragging it out. "Let's go."

They walked out into the hallway, hand in hand. The nurses came over to say goodbye and wish Tifa good luck. She had gotten to know some of them well in the time she had been here.

They took the elevator down to the first floor and walked silently down the hallway to the main lobby. On their way down the hall they ran into Dr. Samuels coming in the other direction. He smiled when he saw Tifa.

"I'll bet you can't wait to get out of here," he said. "So I won't keep you. I just wanted to say good luck. In spite of the little run in with those weird Jenova guys, you were a good patient. Everyone is glad that you pulled through."

Tifa nodded her head, looking slightly embarrassed. Cloud stepped forward and extended his hand. Dr. Samuels took hold of it.

"Thanks, Doc," Cloud said. "For everything."

"You're welcome. You two just take care of yourselves. I don't want to see either one of you back here again for a long long time, if ever."

"Nothing against you, Doc," Cloud replied. "But I couldn't agree more."

With one more nod to Tifa, the Doctor walked past them down the hall. Cloud took Tifa's hand again and they walked out of the building.

Tifa looked up at the sky as they walked slowly down the street. It was early evening, the last rays of sunlight had just faded away above the hills to the west, leaving the sky a deep purple color. To the east dark billowing clouds filled the heavens. A flash of lightening could be seen occasionally pulsing through them, back lighting the clouds closer to them, though they could hear no sound of thunder. The air was heavy with the threat of rain.

Tifa felt a sudden tension gripping her as she looked ahead and saw that they were nearing the bar, or rather, where the bar had once been. She didn't remember the explosion, of anything after it prior to waking up in the hospital. She had not seen what had happened to it.

Cloud seemed to sense her unease and gripped her hand more tightly. For a moment he was going to suggest they take a different route, but then Tifa took a deep breath and started forward, leading him on. As always, she would meet this head on.

The land had been cleared, she saw as they approached. There was no debris, no charred timbers left. Grass had been sown and was even now starting to turn the brown earth green. A concrete path led from the street to the center of the property, then circled around what looked to be a large stone set in the ground.

"It's a memorial to those who died," Cloud said slowly. "I thought it would be fitting. We can rebuild the bar somewhere else. I didn't think you would mind."

Tifa looked at him quickly.

"Of course not."

They walked along the path until they stood in front of the stone. In the center of it, facing the street was a bronze plaque. On it were set the seven names of those who had been killed in the explosion.

Tifa reached down and touched the plaque, her head bowed.

"Poor Mikko," she said softly.

Cloud put his arm around her. They stood there in silence for a long time, both of them thinking about the young girl who had been their friend as much as an employee. Cloud had seen plenty of death in his lifetime. More than his share, really. But it was not something that ever became easy. It was not something he would ever get used to.

Finally he stirred when he felt the first fat drops of rain begin to spatter about him.

"Let's get going," he said.

Tifa nodded and wiped away her tears. They walked a little further down the street, until they came to Elmyra's old house. She was living in Ifalna now with Aeris, but she still owned her old house here in Kalm, and she had told Cloud that he and Tifa could use it for as long as they needed.

The rain still was only coming down in scattered drops as they entered, but they could hear the first far off rumbling of thunder.

The house was dark. No lights had been left on. Tifa walked over to a window and looked out to the east. A flash of lightening cast a stark white light through the room suddenly, outlining her until it faded a moment later.

Cloud walked over and reached for the light.

"No," Tifa said quickly.

He looked at her. She turned back toward the window.

"I...I want to watch the lightening."

Cloud nodded, then walked over and stopped behind her as she gazed out the window. He stood there, watching her as she was watching the sky outside. When she had been in the hospital he had spent hours just gazing at her, memorizing every detail of her face. And gradually it had come to him that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Why hadn't he ever noticed that before?

He reached out and caressed her long silky hair. She turned toward him and smiled, but then looked back out the window, a pensive look on her face.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"So much has happened," she began, then hesitated a moment before continuing. "I'm just a little depressed, I guess. Mikko..Mikko's gone. The bar is destroyed. It seems like I have nothing left, again."

He nodded in understanding and put his arm around her shoulder.

"Like at Nibelheim?" he asked.

He pulled her closer and she rested her head against his chest. He could smell the fresh scent of her hair.

"Like in Nibelheim," she repeated softly.

He was silent for a moment, looking down at her. He had never realized how satisfying the simple pleasure of holding her in his arms could be.

"You've still got me," he stated.

She looked up at him, then dropped her gaze once more until it fell on the ring on her finger. She smiled and slipped her arm around his waist. She looked up at him again.

"I know," she said, "I didn't mean to..."

He dismissed it with a shake of his head. He could see the faint glow in her brown eyes in the darkness. Her eyes had been closed, of course, when he had sat by her bedside. That was one thing he had missed, seeing her eyes. Now he was glad for the Mako glow, glad because he could see them even in the darkness. Those eyes so filled with life, and love. He could spend the rest of his days just looking into those eyes, and he would be happy.

Her smile faded.

"Cloud?"

"Uh huh?" he replied, still looking into her eyes. He brought his other arm around her and pulled her closer still.

"Do you think it's finally over this time?"

Cloud did not answer right away. It seemed sometimes that their old enemies had an unlimited capacity to return to haunt them. First Sephiroth, then Hojo, or at least, a computer program spawned by Hojo, and then Jenova had all returned, had all had to be defeated a second time. How many more lives did this evil have? How many more times would they be forced to battle their old enemy before they could finally rest? The fact of the matter was, at this point it wouldn't shock him if Rufus walked through the door and started blasting away with his shotgun.

"I don't know," he replied. "I hope so."

Lightening flashed outside once again. For a moment he saw her features outlined in the light. Those features he had come to know so well. Then they were shrouded in darkness once again.

"It doesn't matter though," he said. "It doesn't matter if it never ends, if we have to fight for the rest of our lives. I know we can't be defeated. I know I'll always be able to go on, as long as I have you."

She hugged him more tightly, the smile returning to her face once again. He could feel the warmth of her body against his, the soft skin of her arms wrapped around him. The scent of her hair was stronger than ever, and he ran his hand through it one more time. And once again he wondered what had possessed him to wait so long.

"Cloud..."

He brought his hand around, under her chin and lifted it up. Then he slowly slipped his hand behind her head again, and brought it forward until their lips met.

They stood there for a long time, unmoving in the dark, neither one of them wishing for the moment to end. But suddenly there was a flash of light and a boom of thunder. Tifa shuddered and Cloud lifted his head as the heavens finally opened up outside, and a torrent of rain came pouring down, spattering loudly against the window and the roof above them. For just a moment they looked around, then their lips met once more and they kissed again. Cloud felt his hands slipping down around Tifa's bare waist, moving gently along her tender skin as passion flared up inside both of them. His hands reached for her shirt and started to lift it.

She brought her hands down, gripping his and stopping him. She looked at him for a moment, embarrassment reddening her cheeks, though he could not see it. Then she turned away.

Cloud just stood there for a moment, not understanding and surprised by her actions. Then he put a hand on her shoulder once more.

"What's wrong?"

She did not reply for a moment. He could not see her run her hand lightly down her shirt between her breasts, along the scar Sephiroth had left. The scar that would remind her of her encounter for the rest of her life.

"Tifa?"

"It...it's nothing," she said slowly.

Aeris had been stabbed as well. But she bore no scar. The lifestream had healed her. She was still...perfect.

Cloud put both hands on her shoulders and gently turned her around to face him once more.

"We've hid our feeling long enough," he said. "Don't you think?"

She looked at him for a long time. He had a reassuring smile on his face, and though his eyes held a hint of puzzlement, what she saw mostly was tenderness.

She chewed on her lower lip for a moment, then smiled in return. He was right of course. There was no need to let old fears come between them anymore. After all that had happened, was she *still* jealous of Aeris?

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's the scar. Sephiroth's scar. It..it's ugly."

He reached out and pulled her to him once more.

"Is that all?" he said. "For a moment there I thought it was something serious. Sepiroth has caused enough trouble. You think I'm going to let this come between us? I don't care about your scars. Hell, I've got dozens of them myself from all the fights I've been in. It's nothing."

She slipped her arms around him again, knowing she was being foolish but still reassured by his words.

"I just want to be perfect for you," she said softly.

He reached down and lifted her chin once more until she was looking up into his eyes.

"I don't want you to be perfect, Tifa. I just want you to be you."

She looked at him for a moment. Never in her life had she felt so comfortable, so happy, so needed.

"I love you."

He kissed her again, and once more their arms wrapped around one another. His hands slowly came up to grip her shirt once more, just as a flash of lightening through the window illuminated them in it's cold light. She reached out, but not to stay his hand this time. Instead her hand went to the window, and she pulled down the shade, shutting out the harsh light and the world outside. A place neither one of them would be thinking about for quite some time.

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"Mom?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"I need to talk to you."

Elmyra stopped sorting the laundry and looked at Aeris.

"It's been a long time since you asked me for any advice," she said.

Aeris looked troubled.

"I know, and I'm sorry. It's just that so much has happened..."

Elmyra held up her hand.

"Don't apologize," she said. "You were never one to ask much advice anyway, even when you were little. You always marched to your own tune dear, and only seemed to heed voices that I could not hear. But you're a grown woman now. Able to make up your own mind and draw your own conclusions. I can't say I don't miss the little girl I used to know, but I suppose that's the lament of all parents. To tell you the truth, I'm quite proud of you, and what you have become."

She motioned for Aeris to follow her into the other room. She sat down and Aeris eased herself down beside her. Elmyra looked at her questioningly.

"Now what was it you wanted to talk about?"

Aeris hesitated, seemingly not quite sure how to begin. Finally she looked straight at Elmyra.

"How did you meet your husband?" she asked.

Elmyra raised an eyebrow, obviously not expecting that question. She hesitated a moment, and the hint of a smile appeared on her lips as she remembered her late husband.

"I used to work at an Inn. The Tip Toe Inn, it was called. Yes, I know that sounds silly, but that was the name of it. It was in sector 4 in Midgar. Oh, it was so long ago."

"Sylvester was hired as the handyman about a year after I started working there. I used to have to call him whenever we had a problem and then go over it with him when he arrived. Eventually we started seeing each other. A year after that we were married."

Aeris nodded slowly.

"But how did you know? How did you know he was the one?"

Elmyra looked at Aeris with a sudden knowing expression.

"Is this about those two men of yours?" she queried.

Aeris hesitated a moment before nodding.

Elmyra looked at her thoughtfully.

"I don't really know what it was," she replied. "I don't think anyone does, really. He was always in such good spirits, his personality seemed to match mine like a pair of gloves. But it didn't happen immediately. We were both kind of shy, and it took us a while to get to know one another. But the more we learned about each other the more we liked."

Aeris looked down at the ground.

"But that's just it. I know both of them and I like them both. Zack is so strong. He makes me feel safe every time I'm near him. He has an air of leadership about him. He seems to demand respect, and yet he can be arrogant at times. Reeve is almost the complete opposite. He's almost painfully shy, never seeming to want to step on anyone's toes. And yet he can be courageous as well. I'll never forget, nor be able to repay, what he did for me in Mysteele."

Elmyra put her arm around her daughter's shoulder.

"Nobody ever said life would be easy."

Aeris nodded.

"I know, but I want to ask you, what do you think of them?"

Again Elmyra was surprised. She had never thought that Aeris would come to her for advice about this sort of thing.

"I don't know," she said hesitantly. "To tell you the truth, at first I was partial to Zack, mainly, I think, because he is closer to your age. But Reeve is not that much older, and the more I learn about him the more I like him. I think either one of them would be a fine choice."

Aeris looked at her for a moment.

"You're not making this any easier," she said with a rueful smile.

"I know," Elmyra said with a laugh. "But I'm afraid the choice is not up to me. You've got to make up your own mind Aeris."

She gave Aeris a squeeze and looked at her reassuringly.

Aeris nodded slowly and smiled again.

"The one time I come to you for advice, and you say 'It's up to you'"

Elmyra laughed again.

"Sorry. I really do wish I could help you with this. But this matter must be settled by your own heart, and only you know what's locked inside it. You've got to look inside and decide for yourself."

"But I have looked," Aeris replied rather plaintively. "And I still can't decide. I love them both very dearly."

Elmyra looked at Aeris thoughtfully for a few moments.

"I can't tell you who to pick, but one thing I can say. Do not decide because one was your first love, or because one was willing to give his life for you. It doesn't matter how you felt for someone in the past, it doesn't matter what anyone has done or not done for you. Harsh as that may sound. I know you Aeris. I know you would never want to hurt anyone. But don't get involved with someone because of sympathy, because you don't want to hurt them. What matters is what you feel in your heart. If the magic isn't there now, no matter how you felt about them once, or what they've done for you, then you should wait."

Aeris sat there pondering what Elmyra said. Finally she asked; "But how long must I wait?"

"For as long as it takes," Elmyra replied. "You're still so young! Some people wait almost their whole lives for the right person to come along. Some people never find him. But it's better to wait, and maybe never find him, then settle for someone else and then run into him later on. Whatever you do, don't do anything until you are sure."

Aeris sat there in silence for a long time. Finally she looked at Elmyra once more.

"Thank you."

Elmyra smiled.

"No, thank you," she said. "For making an old woman feel like she still can be useful in this world."

Aeris looked at Elmyra for a moment, then reached out and hugged her.

"You'll always be important to me," she said softly. "After my own mom died, I didn't know what I would do. But you unselfishly took me in, and if I would have been able to choose from anyone in the world, I don't think I would have been able to pick anyone better. I love you."

"And I you," Elmyra replied, looking down at Aeris with moist eyes.

They sat there for a moment in silence. Then Elmyra stood up, wiping away her tears.

"Well, I really should be getting back to my laundry," she said, composing herself. "Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?"

"Ellengio is leaving tomorrow for the southern islands. He says the Cetra preserved the cave where the crystal materia was found, and he wants to go take a look at it. He asked me to go along, and I think I'm going to accept."

"Will it be dangerous?" Elmyra asked.

"I don't think so," Aeris replied. "We should only be gone a couple of days."

Elmyra nodded.

"Just be careful," she said.

"I will," Aeris replied. She continued to look at Elmyra as if she had more to say. Elmyra gave her a questioning look.

"I'm not going to tell Zack or Reeve that I'm going," Aeris stated. "And I'd rather they didn't find out. They'll just want to come along, and frankly right now I'd rather not have to deal with it. I don't want to be mean but..."

"I understand perfectly," Elmyra replied. "Take all the time you need. They won't get any information out of me."

Aeris smiled again.

"Thanks," she said and disappeared out the door. Elmyra stood there looking at the spot Aeris had vacated, thinking about all that had happened to her daughter, and what might lay ahead for her. Whatever else would happen, she had a feeling it would not be dull.

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Reno sat with his feet propped up on the desk in front of him, leaning back in his chair and staring out the window at the streets of Junon when the door to his office suddenly opened. He sat up in his chair, startled by the sudden intrusion, and started to lift his feet off the desk, but then eased them back down again when he saw who it was.

"Yuffie, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I was in town, I figured I'd stop by to annoy you," she replied, looking around idly as she strolled into the room.

Reno leaned back in his chair once more, hands behind his head.

"Just can't keep yourself away from me, can you?" he said with a droll grin.

"Yeah, that's got to be it," Yuffie replied casually as she sat herself down on the corner of the desk.

She looked around.

"So this is your big shot Turk office, huh? Not too shabby actually, Hard to believe. Could it be that you actually do have some taste?"

She picked up a small crystal chocobo figurine that was on the desk nearby.

Reno reached over and snatched it out of her hand, then very deliberately put it down at the other end of the desk.

"Hey, relax," she said. "I'm not going to break it."

"I'm not worried about you breaking it," he replied. "I'm worried about it mysteriously disappearing."

Yuffie smiled innocently.

"C'mon," she responded. "I'm not that much of a kleptomaniac, am I?"

He didn't respond, but the look on his face spoke volumes.

"Yuffie, what do you want?"

She looked out the window for a moment, then turned back toward him and half shrugged.

"I just...", she turned away again. "Kind of had a thought."

"That's a first."

She ignored the barb, looking at the far wall, as if carefully studying the wallpaper.

"I just thought..."

He waited patiently.

"...that maybe...."

Her gaze wandered to the ceiling.

"...it might be fun if..."

"For christ sake, Yuffie, just spit it out!"

She turned and faced him.

"...I became a Turk."

"What?"

Again he sat up in his chair, and this time his feet came off the desk to land solidly on the floor.

"I'd like to join the Turks," she repeated.

"You can't be serious."

"Of course I am," she replied. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Reno sat there staring at her. This was so out of the blue that he didn't know what to say. He had never thought she even entertained the idea of becoming a Turk, had never thought she was in the least bit interested. He had never considered that she would ever ask, or what he would say to her, or how he even thought about it. But now that he was thinking about it, the thought that was uppermost in his mind was that it would be a very bad idea.

"Yuffie, I think that's a very bad idea," he said.

"Why?" she questioned immediately, as if that response was exactly what she had expected.

Why? Good question. He wasn't sure exactly. Think fast Reno, think fast.

"Because you're immature, undisciplined and you would probably get us all killed if you didn't drive us crazy first," he replied.

Yuffie gave him a sour look.

"Immature? Look who's talking. You're not exactly Mr. Maturity yourself. Half the time you're drunk off your ass and the other half you're running around chasing every skirt in sight."

"Hey, say what you will about me, but when it comes time to do the job, I'm ready."

"And I would be too," Yuffie replied, looking at him earnestly. "Look, I know you've always just thought of me as an annoying pest, and in the beginning I admit the description was accurate. But I've grown up a lot lately. I've thought about this for a long time and I really think it's something I want to do."

Reno did not reply, just sat there looking at her. That at least was true, she had matured in the time he had known her. The question was, how much?

"C'mon," she said, leaning forward. "I know I'd make a good Turk. And whether you want to admit it or not, you and I are a lot alike. You're greedy, I'm greedy, and we both can be major pain in the asses."

Reno said nothing. Him and Yuffie alike, now that was a scary thought.

"You know I'm a good fighter," she continued, leaning forward even more until her elbows rested on the desk, her head propped on her arms and right in front of him now. "And you're well aware of my other talents, seeing as how I cleaned you out the other day."

"Hey, that wasn't fair, I was drunk," he replied defensively.

"Well, it's so rare that you're not..." she replied with a smile.

He stood up and stepped away from her, uncomfortable with their proximity. He had the distinct feeling he was being bamboozled into doing something he definitely did not want to do.

"I don't think so Yuffie," he said. "I really don't think you're Turk material. Besides, I've already got one dizzy female to deal with. I don't need two."

Yuffie just gave him a skeptical look. She slipped off the desk lightly onto her feet again.

"That's a pretty pitiful argument, even from you."

Just then they were interrupted by a knock on the door.

Reno walked forward, grabbed hold of her, and immediately led her toward the door.

"That must be a real customer," he said, taking full advantage of the interruption. "Why don't you just run along now. And please put this Turk idea out of your head."

"I'll go for now," she replied. "But I'll be back. This isn't over yet."

"Whatever you say," he replied. He opened the door. Yuffie saw an older blonde man in a gray suit standing in front of her. Then Reno had ushered her out and the man in. He closed the door with a silent sigh of relief.

"You're Reno?" the man said, looking at him as if he wasn't much impressed.

"The one and only," Reno replied. He walked back over to his desk and sat down again, motioning for the man to take a seat as well. Instead the man walked up and stood in front of the desk.

"I don't have much time," the man said. "I just flew in from Corel and I have to get back there as soon as possible. I've heard a lot about your organization and I was wondering if you could do a little job for me."

"The Turks are always willing to help out," Reno replied. "For the right price, of course."

"Of course," the man replied with a small nod.

"So what did you have in mind?" Reno asked.

"There is a certain gentleman who has been causing problems for me. I need to have him removed from the equation."

Reno looked at the man carefully, a thin smile forming on his lips.

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "Permanently?"

"That would be preferable."

"Uh huh," Reno nodded. "You realize of course that that kind of service does not come cheap."

"Indeed," the man replied. "How does one million gil strike you?"

Reno forced himself to remain expressionless with a great deal of difficulty.

"One million gil, that's quite a generous offer. Who exactly is this gentleman?"

The man hesitated for a moment.

"I really would rather not discuss that until we are certain we have a deal," he said.

Reno leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk in front of him.

"Well, I'm afraid I'm going to need to know that. The price we charge is dependent upon the target."

"I would think that one million gil would be enough for just about anyone," the man stated rather dryly.

"Maybe," Reno replied. "Maybe not. I'm afraid I'll have to be the judge of that. I assure you, the name will be kept in the strictest confidence."

He man hesitated, looking at Reno carefully. Finally he nodded.

"I don't doubt you. The Turks confidentiality is legendary. I would not have come to you if I thought otherwise."

He looked around for a moment, and fell silent, as if listening for the sound of anyone in the hall, but he detected nothing, then he leaned forward and said in a calm voice.

"The man I want eliminated is Barret Wallace, the Mayor of Corel."