

## CHAPTER XVII: SHOWDOWN IN IFALNA

"Tifa, find someplace safe."

Tifa frowned.

"I told you, I'm not going to abandon you," she said.

"Tifa, don't be stupid," Aeris said angrily. "It's not Gilan this time. Wisteria is after you. You can't face her and you know it."

Tifa just stood there for a moment. She wasn't used to hearing Aeris use that tone of voice.

"Aeris I.." she started to protest.

Aeris took a step toward her.

"Think about the baby!" she said.

Tifa didn't reply. She didn't know what to do. She knew Aeris was right, but she was loath to leave her friend to face the danger alone.

"Aeris!"

Aeris turned at the voice to see Elmyra running toward her.

"Mother," she said.

"What's going on?" the older woman asked as she came up. "I heard there was some kind of trouble..."

She saw Gilan standing nearby and frowned.

"It's all right mother," Aeris replied. "But we can't stay here. I want you to take Tifa and find someplace safe."

"Aeris, what do you..." Elmyra began.

"I don't have time to explain!" Aeris exclaimed. "Just do as I say, the both of you."

No one responded.

"Please!"

Elmyra looked at her daughter for a moment longer, then nodded.

Off in the distance there was the sound of another explosion. It sounded much closer this time.

Aeris turned away and started down the street, heading toward the sound.

"Aeris," Tifa said. She took a step forward, but Elmyra reached out and took her arm. The older woman wasn't sure what was going on, but it was obvious from the sound of the explosions and what she had heard so far that Aeris was headed for danger. And though she was afraid for her daughter, she didn't want to see Tifa and her baby exposed to danger either.

"It's all right dear, Aeris can take care of herself," she said as reassuringly as she could, hoping that her voice didn't give away just how unsure she was of the truth of that statement.

Aeris didn't look back. There was no time for that now. She just had to hope that her words and Elmyra would keep Tifa from following.

She turned the corner. She could see smoke rising about the houses not far ahead. She quickened her step. Who knows how much damage Wisteria had already done. Aeris held no title here, but she still thought of Ifalna as not only her home but the last refuge of the Cetra. Even though the people here were human, she still felt a special bond with them, and an obligation to protect them. She wasn't about to let anyone destroy it without a fight.

She tried to remember everything she knew about Wisteria. It wasn't much. Aeris had never met her. She was the daughter of President Gram, or President Elect Gram, or whoever he had been. She was spoiled and vindictive, but apparently hadn't been much of a threat on her own.

Aeris shook her head. That wasn't much to go on. Even if she had know more, too much had changed. With the mako infusion and what it had done to her mind, there was no predicting just what kind of threat Wisteria would really pose.

The sound of another blast echoed through the air. It sounded like it was right around the corner.

Aeris glanced back and noticed that most of the crowd had followed her, including, to her surprise, Gilan Bradford.

"Stay back," she called out.

She didn't stop to see if they obeyed. She had to concentrate on Wisteria. She pulled out a red materia orb, then stepped around the corner.

Her adversary was not far away, walking down the center of the street. Or at least, Aeris assumed the woman in front of her was her adversary. She looked perfectly ordinary. The woman had shoulder length blonde hair and was wearing a dark business suit. Aeris wasn't close enough to notice much more than that.

For a moment Aeris hesitated. She couldn't help but wonder whether this was really Wisteria or some innocent bystander.

But it had to be her. There was no one else in the street. The woman was walking casually down the center of the road. Behind her Aeris could see three or four buildings in flames. If she was a bystander why would she be out in the road in the middle of all this? That didn't make any sense.

Still, the woman in front of her did not appear any different from most anyone else in Ifalna.

Behind the woman the door to one of the burning buildings suddenly was pulled open. A man rushed out into the street. He looked around for a moment, then turned and ran.

The woman turned at the sound. She extended her hand. For a moment green light flashed around her, followed immediately by the crack of thunder as lightning erupted around the man. He fell to the ground.

"Stop it!" Aeris shouted.

Wisteria spun around. She lifted up her hand, but then stopped, staring at Aeris. Suddenly she began to walk rapidly forward.

Aeris' materia orb glowed readily.

A giant machine-like creature appeared behind Aeris as the summon took effect. Wisteria just stared up at the creature, making no move. A pure white light shot from it suddenly, engulfing Wisteria in a blast of incandescence.

Alexander faded away, as did the light from its attack. Yet when it was gone, Wisteria still stood, apparently no worse for the wear.

She continued walking forward until she stood right in front of Aeris.

"Where is she?" she questioned.

"Where is who?" Aeris replied.

"You know who!" Wisteria shouted "That bitch friend of yours. Tifa!"

Aeris just looked at her for a moment. If she was intimidated by Wisteria, it did not show.

"She's gone," she replied finally.

"Gone?" Wisteria shouted. "Gone where?"

Again Aeris paused before responding. Wisteria's eyes were boring into her, demanding an answer.

"Someplace safe," Aeris said calmly.

Wisteria's face darkened with rage.

"Tell me!" she screamed.

Her hand shot forward again, and a blast of lightning knocked Aeris to the ground.

Before Aeris could recover another blast struck her. She cried out in pain. She tried to lunge out of the way, but yet another blast knocked her over before she could move. Aeris fumbled with her materia, trying to cast wall, but she couldn't concentrate. The attacks were hitting her wave after wave, almost nonstop. She didn't have time to concentrate before another blast struck her. She had never felt anything like this. She had been in battles before. Had fought against others who used materia. There was always a pause between each attack. Always a moment where her adversary had to focus on their materia to unleash an attack. Ordinarily, if you were fast, that moment could be taken advantage of to launch your own attack. But now there was no let up. Wave after wave of offensive spells slammed into Aeris. Not giving her a chance

to counter, not giving her a chance to dodge, not giving her a chance to do much of anything. How could she fight something like this?

And then abruptly, it stopped. She found herself lying on her side, though she had no idea just how she had ended up that way. She was panting heavily. She tried to lift herself up, but fell back with a cry of pain. Both her arms and legs were badly burned. Her chest felt like it had been struck with a hammer. The scent of burnt flesh filled her nostrils, making her nauseous.

She turned her head and saw Wisteria looking at her.

"Where is she?" Wisteria screamed.

Aeris did not reply, just lay there panting, struggling for breath.

Wisteria took a step closer.

"Tell me!" she demanded.

She raised her hands again.

"You'll never...you'll never find her if...you kill me," Aeris managed to say finally.

Wisteria's face turned red with rage. She lifted her hands above her head.

"Then you'll *die*!" she shouted. "And I'll destroy this whole city along with you. I'll kill everyone here. I'll dismantle this place stone by stone until I find her. You can't hide her from me! Now tell me where she is!"

Aeris coughed. She felt something wet trickle from the corner of her mouth. She wiped it and saw her arm was red.

She looked at Wisteria, who stood above her, a wild look in her eyes. A look devoid of sanity.

Aeris lowered her head and nodded.

"All right, I...I'll tell you," she said slowly.

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"Tifa, please calm down."

Tifa didn't reply. Elmyra had led her away from the church, in the opposite direction of the battle, but they hadn't gotten very far. Tifa's feet dragged. She kept looking back. She could understand Elmyra's argument. Her priorities were different now. She had a baby to think about. But still Tifa felt torn in two. Every fiber of her being told her to go back, to help her friend.

"I can't help it," she said finally. "I promised you I'd look after her..."

She stopped, staring behind them. She could still see smoke rising there. Wisteria was after her. It was her fault that woman was here. It was her fault Ifalna was being torched. These other people were just innocent bystanders. How many people was she going to kill?

"Tifa, please..."

But Tifa wasn't listening. She felt like she was near tears. All those people, all those homes. And Aeris... Aeris was facing her, facing Wisteria. Alone. Red had said that Wisteria had beaten both Vincent and Elena. Aeris was good with magic, but how could she stand against this? It was suicide.

"Tifa!" Elmyra said, grabbing hold of the young girl's arm again. "Are you listening to me?"

Tifa didn't reply, just stood there shaking her head.

"How many people were going to die?" she finally said softly. "I've been responsible for enough deaths. The people killed when we blew up the Midgar reactors. The Shinra soldiers we fought. Shinra dropped the plate on Sector 7 because of us. I don't want to have any more blood on my hands."

Elmyra frowned.

"What are you talking about?" she said. "You weren't the one who blew up the reactors. That was Barret and Cloud. You had no choice when you fought the Shinra soldiers. If you hadn't killed them, they would have killed you. And it wasn't your fault Shinra dropped the plate, just like it's not your fault Wisteria has gone berserk."

"But it's because of me she's here," Tifa replied. "And now I'm running away, letting my best friend face her alone. When Jenova's disciples were after me, Aeris risked her own life to come to my aid. I can't just leave her!"

"But it's not the same," Elmyra pleaded. "She had that Banish Evil thing."

"But she didn't *know* that," Tifa shot back. "As far as she knew, she didn't have any defense. She didn't think about it. She knew her friends were in trouble and she came to their aid, no matter what the consequences to herself. How could I not do the same?"

"Tifa it's foolish," Elmyra said. "You're no match for Wisteria in your current condition, and we all know that. Do you want something to happen to your child?"

"Aeris can't face her alone," Tifa went on, as if she hadn't even heard Elmyra. "She doesn't stand a chance. I promised you I'd look after her. I can't...I can't do this. How could I look *any* of my friends in the eye again if something happened to her and I didn't try to help her? How could I look at Reeve..."

"Tifa, be reasonable. There's nothing you can do to help. Aeris will be all right. I don't know how, but somehow she'll manage to get through this."

"No," Tifa said, shaking her head. "That's not true and you know it. You're just saying that. You're just saying that so I don't go back. Elmyra, I have to help her."

"Tifa, no..."

Tifa took a step away. Elmyra tightened her grip on the younger girl's arm, but Tifa suddenly pulled it free with a jerk. Elmyra looked up and saw tears in Tifa's eyes.

Tifa stepped away from her, shaking her head.

"I have to. I'm sorry...I have to go back." She turned and started to run awkwardly down the road, back the way they had come.

"Tifa! Tifa, please!" Elmyra shouted, her voice choked with emotion.

She started to follow, but then stopped. She was deathly afraid. Afraid for Tifa, afraid for Aeris, afraid for the baby. She sank down slowly to her knees, feeling tears running down her own cheeks. She knew deep down inside that she couldn't stop Tifa. And deep down inside, she wasn't sure she wanted to. She knew Aeris was in deadly danger, and she also thought that perhaps somehow Tifa would be able to help, that together somehow the two of them could overcome Wisteria. Deep down inside she couldn't help but feel a little relieved that Aeris would not have to face this threat alone. And at the same time, that thought made her feel terribly guilty. Tifa coming to Aeris' aid would put her and the baby at risk. A risk Elmyra knew her own daughter had wanted to avoid at any cost. What if even with Tifa's help they couldn't defeat Wisteria? What if, by going to her friends' aid, Tifa had signed both her and her unborn child's death warrant?

Elmyra brought her hands up to her face, choking back the tears that threatened to suddenly overwhelm her.

"Be safe," she said softly. "Please, all of you, be safe."

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Wisteria lowered her hands.

"Where?" she demanded.

Aeris didn't reply. She stared at the ground, breathing heavily. Her hand came up and clutched her side.

Wisteria didn't notice the soft breeze that suddenly wafted through the air, down here where there were no breezes.

"*Where?*" Wisteria screamed, taking a step closer.

She was only a few paces away now. Suddenly Aeris lunged up, her powers having rejuvenated her enough to continue the fight. She drove her rod forward and into Wisteria's stomach. Her adversary cried out and fell backwards.

Aeris sprang forward, raising her rod to strike again. But Wisteria was even quicker than she suspected. Even as her rod came down, Wisteria's eyes glowed green and her hand shot out. Before the rod could strike her a second time, the blast of Ultima hurled Aeris backwards. The young Cetra flew through the air, her rod spinning away. She came crashing down in the rubble of a nearby building. She cried out in pain as her back slammed hard against a concrete wall.

Despite the pain Aeris somehow managed to pull herself to her feet. She dodged out of the way of blast of fire, trying to put some distance between herself and her adversary. But again the attacks came almost on top of one another. She didn't take more than a few steps when she was knocked off her feet again by a hail of ice. Wisteria was screaming something incoherent but Aeris could barely hear it. Her mind raced desperately, trying to think of something else she could do, anything else. Her ploy had failed, she knew Wisteria wouldn't fall for another delay. She had been hoping that Wisteria had used up her strength, that she wouldn't be able to keep up her level of attack. The spells had to be sapping her strength. That was the way materia worked. At least, that was the way regular materia worked. Was it different for Wisteria? Could she use spells at will, at no cost to herself? If that were true, was there anyone who could beat her?

Aeris cried out again as lightning hit her one more time. She almost blacked out from the pain, but forced herself somehow to remain conscious. Even so she knew she couldn't take much more. Yet what could she do? Her materia was useless. Her rod was lost in the rubble around them. She barely had time to think between attacks, much less fight back.

Green light flared again. Aeris tried to pull herself to her feet, but her legs would not obey her. She rolled over, finding partial cover behind a large slab of concrete. But a moment later the blast of Ultima struck, smashing the concrete to rubble. Pieces of it flew like shrapnel, and one stuck Aeris in the abdomen. Agonizing pain shot through her and she cried out yet again. She fell back, her head banging on the road, sending sparks shooting through her brain. Her head was spinning, but again she forced herself to concentrate. Forced herself to remain conscious. She looked down and saw that her hand was clutching her stomach. Her dress was red beneath it.

She looked up and saw Wisteria walking toward her again. She tried to get up, but the pain was too great. She looked around, desperate for some kind of solution, but there was nothing she could do. She had no weapon to fight this. She was helpless.

Wisteria stopped and raised her hand again. Aeris was badly hurt. She knew she couldn't dodge. She braced herself for what would probably be her enemies final attack.

"No!"

Wisteria spun around at the sound of the voice. The light in her eyes blazed when she saw who stood there.

"You," she hissed.

Aeris lifted her head. Her vision was blurry, but she could still make out Tifa standing a short distance away. Even with the pain, she felt a knot form in the pit of her stomach. Why was she here? What was she doing?

"Oh god Tifa, no," she groaned.

Tifa stood there, staring at Wisteria. In hindsight, it might not have been wise to give herself away. She might have been able to get a first attack in if she hadn't called out. She might have been able to strike Wisteria before she had a chance to defend herself. It might have been wise to have her material prepared already. It might have been wise to plan ahead.

But she hadn't. Her hands were empty. She hadn't made any plan, she hadn't thought this through. She didn't know what she was going to do. All she knew was her friend was hurt, was in danger, and she couldn't let Wisteria finish off her attack. She hadn't thought beyond the point of just getting here.

And she paid the price. With a burst of cackling laughter, Wisteria's eyes turned bright green. A moment later a blast of Ultima flung Tifa backwards.

"No!" Aeris screamed. She somehow managed to lift herself up to her knees. But when she tried to stand her leg gave out. She looked around desperately. She didn't think she had the strength to cast anymore spells. She didn't see her rod around, and beside that, Wisteria was too far away.

Tifa landed hard on the pavement of the street, finally coming to a stop when her back banged against the curb. She rolled to the side and pulled herself to her feet, just as a hail of ice flew toward her. She tried to dodge to the side, but she wasn't used to carrying as much weight as she had. Her reflexes were not at their usual sharpness. The ice struck her in the side, knocking her down once again.

Wisteria was walking slowly toward Tifa. Aeris struggled forward on hands and knees. She had to stop this somehow. She had to do something. Wisteria seemed to have forgotten all about her now that Tifa had appeared. Now was her chance, now was the time to strike a blow. But her head ached. Her left leg did not respond at all, and the wound in her abdomen sent sharp tendrils of pain shooting throughout her body with every movement. She pulled out a fire material, her hand trembling. She tried to concentrate, but all she could get from the orb was a faint glow. She was too weak. The battle had taken too much out of her.

Aeris hadn't paid much attention to the crowd that had followed her since she confronted Wisteria, but now she looked around and saw that some of them stood a short way down the street, in spite of her warning to stay away. Still, they had not interfered with the battle. But now, suddenly, one of them sprang forward to stand in front of Tifa.

"Wisteria, leave her alone!" Gilan commanded. "No matter what may have happened between you, no matter how she might have hurt you in the past. You can't do this now. Even if you feel your hatred for this woman is justified, the unborn child inside her is innocent. If you kill her you destroy that life too. Are you that much of a monster?"

"Get out of the way, fool!" Wisteria spat out.

"I will not," he said. "You cannot do this. There is no justification for destroying this child. Think of the child!"

For a moment they both just stood there looking at one another. Aeris could feel it. The same thing she felt before, when Gilan was in front of her church. He was reaching out somehow. He was touching Wisteria's mind, trying to bend it to his will.

Unfortunately, whatever powers of persuasion he might possess, his influence did not extend to someone who was insane.

The now familiar blast of Ultima knocked Gilan backwards. He stumbled and fell to the ground, but somehow forced himself back up. But Wisteria didn't hesitate. Just like before, like all her other attacks, one strike was not enough. She unleashed a blizzard of attacks, slamming into him, forcing him down again.

Aeris had crawled forward until she was just a few paces from Wisteria now. Still, she wasn't even sure what she was trying to attempt. She looked around wildly. The road was full of pieces of concrete. She picked up a hand sized one and flung it at Wisteria.

It struck the barrier around the woman and bounced back.

Tifa had pulled herself to her feet behind Gilan. She tried to run to the side, but a sharp pain in her abdomen made her slow to a walk. As Wisteria unleashed her barrage of attacks against Gilan, she pulled out her own Ultima materia.

The blast of Ultima struck Wisteria, washing over her shield. She took a step back, but recovered quickly. She sent a parting shot at the now still form of Gilan, then once more turned her attention to Tifa.

Aeris struggled to keep up. Both Tifa and Wisteria had moved away from her once again. She still had no idea what she could contribute to the battle. But one thing had given her a ray of hope. When Tifa had hit Wisteria with Ultima, Wisteria had taken a step back, had felt the blow, if only lightly. She had recovered almost immediately, but it was the first time any of their attacks had had any effect at all. Perhaps Wisteria was finally weakening.

She heard a groan, and was surprised to realize it didn't come from herself. Her vision was foggy. She could barely see straight ahead. She was afraid she was going to lose consciousness at any moment. She turned her head to look around, and found herself staring at Gilan Bradford.

He was lying on his back, staring up at the sky.

"Gilan" she called out.

He did not reply, did not even look at her. He just lay there moaning softly.

She turned her head. Smoke rose up all around them, obscuring her view. She could barely make Wisteria out, but she could hear the spells, hear the sounds of battle. If you could call it such. She had to do something to help Tifa. Wisteria would kill her.

She bowed her head, trying to clear the cobwebs one last time. Trying to concentrate with all her remaining strength. The pain her body felt had faded to a dull ache, perhaps because she was just too weak to feel much of anything anymore. She looked down and saw her dress was soaked with blood. She hadn't realized just how badly she was injured.

She grit her teeth, trying to block out the pain, the blood. One last time she tried to focus her will.

She had been foolish. She realized that now. In spite of the warnings, she had underestimated Wisteria. She had used the summon materia in her initial attack. She should have used her own powers instead. Perhaps she could have used Banish Evil, or a strong protection spell. But she had thought she would have time to use them if necessary. She hadn't. She hadn't expected the explosiveness of Wisteria's attack, or the quickness of it. She hadn't had time to respond until Wisteria had turned her attention to Tifa. And by then Aeris had been hurt. Now she was too weak to use any but the simplest spell, if that.

And finally she did manage it. Once again the refreshing breeze momentarily moved the air around her. Her pains diminished, though they did not disappear completely. Beside her Gilan stopped moaning and turned to look at her.

"We've got to do something," she said. No matter how they might feel about each other it was obvious to Aeris that Gilan's anger was turned toward the Cetra alone. He didn't seem to want to see Tifa hurt anymore than she did. At this point she would grasp at any ally.

Aeris somehow managed to get to her feet. Smoke swirled around them. She could see Tifa. She was down on the ground, a common position for someone facing Wisteria, or so it seemed to Aeris. She was not moving.

"Leave my friend alone!" Aeris shouted.

Wisteria didn't even turn to look at her. Aeris grimaced in pain and stumbled forward.

Gilan looked the other way. He wasn't the only one from the crowd who had followed. Dozens of people stood near the street corner, looking at the battle, their faces white with fear at the power of Wisteria's attacks.

Gilan pulled himself to his knees.

"Help her!" he implored. "Wisteria has lost her mind. She's mad with power. She'll kill Tifa and destroy us all. The Ancient can't beat her by herself."

Aeris was turned the other way, but she suddenly stopped and glanced back. She could feel it. She could feel it again. Gilan was reaching out, this time to the crowd. Whatever it was that he did, he was doing it again.

And this time, he got a response.

A dozen people in the crowd started forward. At first their steps were tentative. But when each person saw he was not alone, his step became surer. Their pace quickened, and a moment later they were running forward. Most of them were unarmed, but some of them brandished weapons. With a shout, they converged on Wisteria.

Wisteria suddenly turned, the sound of the crowd finally drawing her attention from her prey. For a moment her eyes widened in surprise, then they glowed with green light.

A wave of fire washed over the crowd. Aeris heard screams. The people broke, most of them falling back in panic. But Gilan was on his feet now. He urged them on. Urged them to continue. And some did. In spite of the attack, in spite of the pain, some pressed on. Aeris stood there, staring in disbelief. She didn't want this. She didn't want to see her people hurt. She didn't want to risk their lives. Every time Wisteria cast a spell someone went down. Each time that happened Aeris grimaced. But still they surged forward. She couldn't see how Wisteria could stop them all now. In spite of the damage Wisteria was doing, it looked for the first time that they might have a chance.

Wisteria suddenly bowed her head. She no longer seemed to be paying attention to the crowd that was rapidly converging on her from all directions. A green mist formed around her, shimmering in the air. She was concentrating all her power. Aeris could feel it. She wasn't done yet. Aeris stared at her. How could she still have the strength to do this?

"Get down!" she cried out, dropping to the ground herself.

Suddenly Wisteria lifted her arms and with a crack that rocked the ground released the power of Ultima in all directions around her.

Those in the front were flung backwards like leaves in a storm. They slammed into those behind them, knocking them down and in some cases, snapping bones. The ground shook beneath them, causing the few who still remained on their feet to fall as well.

Aeris lifted her head. Wisteria was the only one standing. She heard groans, and cries of pain. Those still able to move stumbled to their feet, or tried to crawl away. None of them pressed the attack, they all seemed to have only one thought, to get away. Gilan's influence over the crowd had been broken by a stronger emotion.

Fear.

Aeris shook her head. She couldn't believe it. How could one person have so much power? How much would it take to defeat Wisteria. Aeris had no idea how long they had been fighting. She had no idea how much energy Wisteria had expended, but it had to be a huge amount. It seemed impossible that one person could be so strong.

And for the first time, Aeris began to harbor a fear that maybe they couldn't win.

She found herself stumbling forward. Slowly making her way toward Wisteria, who had turned her back to her again. Aeris could see Tifa crumpled on the street in front of Wisteria. Aeris couldn't tell how badly she was hurt, but she could see blood on her friend's forehead.

Even if it was hopeless, she couldn't just stand by and watch Wisteria kill Tifa. She had to try, no matter how useless her attempt was.

Suddenly she heard a familiar voice call out behind her.

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Cloud ran forward heedlessly, his heart in his throat. The trail was easy to follow. Wisteria had left a path of devastation behind her. He had seen flashes of light from up on the stairs, and now he could hear the sounds of battle, or perhaps it was just Wisteria destroying things. He hoped that was the case. The thought of Aeris and Tifa facing Wisteria alone sent a cold chill down his back.

He glanced back. Cloud was sprinting as fast as he could go now, and Reeve was starting to fall behind. Even so, Cloud wasn't going to wait. Not now. Not when he was this close.

He came around another turn. One of the buildings lining it was burning fiercely, filling the air with acrid smoke. Cloud plunged onward. The sounds of explosions sounded just down the road now.

He passed the burning building, and the smoke in front of him cleared. He could see some people running down the street in his direction. As they came closer he saw that most of them were obviously hurt or wounded. He pulled out his sword, swinging it experimentally in preparation for combat.

He raced around another turn, and stopped.

This street was in even worse condition than the last. Smoke filled the air once again, but this time, not from one building but from half a dozen. The fronts of half the buildings had been destroyed, and rubble filled the street. And bodies. Dozens and dozens of people. He could hear groans, and cries of pain. He couldn't tell who was dead and who was alive. They seemed to be scattered all over the place.

Not far away one woman was still on her feet.

"Wisteria!" Cloud snarled.

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Tifa lifted herself to her knees. She was dizzy, and for some reason couldn't see out of one eye. She reached up and wiped away the fluid that had blinded her. Her hand came away red.

Like everyone else who had faced Wisteria, she had been shocked by the ferocity of her attack. It didn't seem possible that one person could have such power. Tifa had been in many battles, but she had never seen anything like this. Even Sephiroth hadn't had this kind of power.

Wisteria slowly walked over to her until she stood just a few paces away. Tifa painfully pulled herself to her feet. To stand and face her enemy. It made her head spin, but she managed it.

Tifa had been scared when they fought Sephiroth. She had been afraid they might not be able to beat him. It had been a difficult fight, but deep down inside, she never had given up hope. She always thought they had a chance.

There were people lying all around, all of them wounded. Those who were unhurt had scattered, not able to stand against Wisteria's power. Aeris hadn't been able to stand against her either, even with Gilan's help. And Tifa knew full well she was no match for Wisteria. She didn't even think she would have been if she hadn't been pregnant, if she had been at full strength. It seemed that no matter what they did, nothing they could do could hurt Wisteria. She had been scared in battle before, she had felt fear, but never before had she felt helpless.

"Wisteria!"

A shock ran through Tifa at the sound of that voice. She looked past her adversary and saw Cloud running toward them.

Wisteria didn't even turn around. She stood in front of Tifa, a look of triumph on her face. She lifted her hands up again, and green mist formed around her. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and Tifa noticed she was breathing heavily. This struck Tifa as funny, of all things, though she didn't laugh. After all this, after battling for what seemed like hours, all Tifa and the others had done was give Wisteria a bit of a workout.

"Did you like my little Ultima attack?" Wisteria shouted. "Maybe you'd like to see it again. Only this time, you get the full effect!"

Tifa didn't say anything. She looked at Cloud, racing toward them, sword upraised, and she knew he couldn't reach her in time.

Wisteria was only a few paces away. If Tifa had been her old self, if she still had her strength, she would have lunged forward, would have tried to get to Wisteria before she struck. But she didn't have the strength or the speed. Not this time.

She heard Cloud cry out, but she couldn't hear what he said.

She couldn't run, she couldn't fight. All she could do was lower her head.

Wisteria's arms shot forward and...

Tifa braced herself. She had tried to do her best. She had come to her friend's aid. It had been useless, but she had tried. For all the good it had done. She hadn't been able to help at all. The best she could hope for was that Wisteria would be satisfied with her life. That once she had her revenge she would leave, that she wouldn't take it out on the other members of Avalanche. There was some comfort that by giving up her own life, she might save her friends.

Her life...and the life of her child.

*Forgive me Cloud*

She waited.

But nothing happened.

For a moment no one moved, as if time had frozen in place.

Wisteria eyes widened.

Tifa lifted her head. The look of resignation on her face was replaced by one of determination. She stepped forward.

Wisteria held her hands in front of her face, staring at them, a wild look in her eye.

"No," she muttered. "Not now..."

Tifa looked her adversary in the eye.

"Looks like you're out of gas," she commented.

Wisteria opened her mouth, then shut it again. She looked around wildly. She glanced back only to see Cloud bearing down on her, sword raised.

Tifa looked down at her fist and concentrated.

"No!" Wisteria screamed.

She pulled her pocketbook off her shoulder and opened it, fumbling for something inside. A moment later she pulled out a knife and raised it in the air.

But this time, it was Wisteria who was too late. Tifa's fist shot forward, the full brunt of her technique and mako enhanced strength behind it. It struck Wisteria in the center of her face, and Wisteria's face *deformed*. For a moment Tifa could feel

sinew and bones tearing and snapping, could feel her fist driving *through* Wisteria's head. Then Wisteria was flying backwards, tumbling through the air. She hit the street and skidded along it. It took a long time before she finally came to a rest in a lifeless heap.

Tifa fell to her knees. It seemed all her strength had drained out of her body with that blow.

"Tifa!"

Cloud was beside her. He had dropped his sword. Now he pulled her into his arms.

"Cloud," she said softly, her arms going around him as well, and pulling him to her tightly.

"Tifa, thank god you're all right," she heard him saying. "I was so scared. I thought I would be too late. I'd thought I was going to lose you."

Tifa didn't say anything at all. She didn't have to, didn't want to. All she wanted was to feel his arms around her, his body against her own. She never wanted to let him go.

She felt a sharp pain in her abdomen.

Cloud felt her body stiffen. He pulled back so he could see her face.

"Are you all right?" he questioned sharply.

Tifa didn't reply for a moment. The pain came again, even more sharply. She grimaced.

"Tifa!" Cloud said.

Tifa's hands wrapped around her stomach.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "The baby..."

Suddenly it felt like someone had driven a knife into her abdomen.

"Ahhh!" she cried out.

"Tifa!" Cloud shouted.

"What's wrong?"

The voice barely registered with Tifa. All she could feel was the pain.

"It's Tifa," Cloud shouted back to Aeris. "I need your help! We have to get her to the hospital!"

~\*~

Something was wrong.

Tifa lay on a stretcher, staring up at the roof of the ambulance. She could see both Cloud and Aeris faces hovering over her, but she barely noticed. The pain was agonizing. Every time it came, she felt like she was being stabbed. It couldn't be this bad. Giving birth couldn't hurt this much. If it did, no one would be able to stand it. It had to be more than that. Something had to be wrong. And besides, it was too soon...

"Cloud!" she cried out.

~\*~

She was moving. The ceiling was passing over her head. Where was she? She tried to look around, but everything was foggy. She saw someone looking down at her. A doctor? She saw Cloud's face too, and tried to concentrate on that. Sweat beaded on her brow. The pain came again.

~\*~

Light. It was so bright. She couldn't look at it. She had to keep her eyes closed. The pain came yet again. She felt her muscles tighten. She heard someone say something. Relax? It sounded close by, but she couldn't be sure. What a stupid thing to say! How could she relax? How could she when she felt as if her abdomen were being torn apart.

Her thoughts flew wildly from one thing to another. Was she going to have the baby now? Could it survive? What was causing this pain? Unbidden, Jinn's predictions rose up in her mind. What was she giving birth to? Would it be human, or some kind of Jenova? Was she in pain because of injuries suffered in the fight, or was she about to give birth to some kind of monstrosity? Could fate be that cruel?

~\*~

"Get her into surgery! We've got to get the child out. Prepare to perform an emergency C section"

Somehow those words made their way through the fog that enveloped Tifa's brain. Surgery? Were they going to cut her open? They wouldn't do that. They wouldn't do that unless something was seriously wrong. She tried to open her eyes. Tried to speak, to ask them what was going on. But she couldn't. The pain seemed to be diminishing, but she felt like she was drugged. Had they given her something? If she was going into surgery, they'd have to knock her out. She didn't want to be. She wanted to know what was happening. She wanted to know if her baby was going to be all right.

*My baby...*

~\*~

Sounds. Metal jangling against metal. People's voices. The sound of feet thumping on the ground. There was no coherence. Tifa didn't understand. Couldn't tell what was going on. She felt hands, hands touching her. She didn't know what they were doing.

The baby...

It didn't matter. It didn't matter what it was like. She didn't care. She didn't care if it was human or Jenova, or some combination of both. It was hers. That was all that mattered. It was hers and she wanted it to live. She wanted it to live more than she had ever wanted anything in her entire life.

*Please don't let it die.*

*Please, I'll do anything.*

*Don't let it die. Take me.*

*Take me instead.*