

## IC HAPTER XVIII: THE CALM AFTER THE STORM

"Make sure you change the bandage twice a day. I'd like you to come back in two or three days so I can check to make sure the wound is healing properly. Stay off your feet as much as possible, and of course, no strenuous exercise. Here's a prescription for a pain killer in case you need it. Do you have any questions?"

Aeris looked up at the doctor from her hospital bed and shook her head.

"I understand."

"All right," the doctor replied, handing her the prescription. "Good luck to you, Miss. Gainsborough."

"Thank you."

The doctor walked out the door. A moment later Reeve and Elmyra entered, Reeve pushing a wheelchair in front of him.

"How are you dear?" Elmyra questioned. "Looks like a night in the hospital did you some good."

Aeris smiled.

"I'm fine," she replied. "The doctor said I can go home. See, I told you there was nothing to worry about."

"That's great," Reeve said.

"That's fine," Elmyra said a little less enthusiastically while looking at her daughter closely. "But don't make light of it. It's a serious wound. The doctor said you were very lucky. Just a little deeper and you probably would have had to have surgery. You're going to have to take it easy until it heals."

"Yes mother," Aeris said contritely. "So the doctor was telling me."

"Are you ready to go?" Reeve said, with a nod at the wheelchair in front of him.

"I really don't think that's neces..." she began, but stopped at the sharp look Elmyra gave her.

"It's hospital policy," Elmyra informed her.

"Oh very well," Aeris conceded.

She slid her feet onto the floor and stood up. She stopped for a moment, her hand coming up to her side, feeling the bandage that was there under her clothes.

"Are you all right?" Elmyra said immediately.

"Yes," Aeris replied with a nod. "It was just a twinge."

Aeris slowly sank down in the wheelchair while Elmyra looked at her skeptically.

"All right, who should we go visit first?" Aeris questioned.

"Cid and Vincent are in room 315, Elena in 322 and Tifa is up in the maternity ward," Elmyra intoned.

"We've certainly got a lot of choices," Reeve commented. "Seems like half of Avalanche is hospitalized. Even Sephiroth didn't do this much damage. I guess we should consider ourselves lucky that none of us were killed."

"How many did die?" Aeris said after a moment.

Reeve paused before answering.

"Three people," he replied finally. "And Wisteria. It could have been a lot worse, Aeris."

The young Cetra nodded but did not reply. Three people killed. Three innocent civilians. Reeve was right, it could have been worse. It could have been a lot worse, but she couldn't rejoice over their success in defeating Wisteria if anyone died at all.

"So, where to?" Reeve questioned again. Aeris wasn't sure if he said that to find out or to prod her mind away from the direction it was taking.

"I know you'd probably like to see Tifa," Elmyra commented. "But I don't think she's awake yet. Cloud's up there and I don't think we should disturb them right now."

Aeris nodded. They probably had a lot to say to one another.

"All right," she agreed. "I guess Cid and Vincent first. They're the closest.

"315 it is then," Reeve said amiably.

They made their way down the hall. Before they even entered the room, they heard Cid's familiar voice.

"Well, it wouldn't be so goddamn bad if they'd at least let me have a friggin' cigarette. Yes, I know we're not supposed to smoke, but what harm could one little cig do? I mean, I could close the door, and Vincent's certainly not going to complain, right?"

They reached the doorway and saw Cid lying very unhappily in bed with Shera sitting on it beside him. In a second bed in the room, Vincent lay quietly. Shera turned to look at them as they entered.

"Would someone please help me talk some sense into this man?" she pleaded.

Reeve shook his head vigorously.

"We learned a long time ago not to get between Cid and his cigarettes," he said. "I thought you would have too by now."

"Ordinarily yes," she replied. "But this is a hospital. There are *rules*."

"Rules!" Cid snapped. "I'm so sick of hearing about rules. Can't a man just do what he wants, if it doesn't bother anyone else? It's bad enough I can't smoke around the house anymore cause of the kid."

"Cid..." Shera admonished.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. It's for the best. I don't do it, do I? Isn't that enough rules to follow though? There should be a limit and I think I've reached mine."

"I see you're feeling better," Aeris piped up.

"I'm a resilient old bastard," Cid answered. "Ain't no damn reactor gonna do me in!"

"Cid, calm down before you give yourself a relapse," Shera said. She looked at Aeris. "He just regained consciousness this morning. The doctors said he was very lucky."

Aeris nodded, glancing at Elmyra. She found it comforting to see that she wasn't the only one who was being mother-henned.

"I guess we were all lucky," she said, glancing over at Vincent. "How are you doing?"

Vincent shrugged.

"Though it might be some time before I am back on my feet again, the doctors say I will recover fully. That is, if I can survive my roommate's constant complaining."

"Hey, I don't complain that much," Cid complained. "And when I do, it's for a damn good reason!"

"I give up," Shera said. "I guess you've earned the right to complain, in this case. After all, you did manage to stop that reactor from exploding. Even though you nearly gave me a heart attack when they brought you in here suffering from mako poisoning. And even though you got through it this time, if you ever do something so stupid again, I swear I'll smack you silly!"

Cid looked at Shera in surprise.

"Yes ma'am," he said. He turned his gaze toward Reeve. "How's Cait, by the way?"

"He'll be fine," Reeve replied. "He shut down when his circuits got too hot, but he was fine once the reactor stopped and the place cooled off."

"So we all made it out okay," Cid said, shaking his head slowly. "Hard to believe. Oh yeah, what about that Calin guy?"

Vincent perked up at that.

"Calin guy?" he questioned.

"Yeah," Cid answered. "One of the scientists at the reactor. Apparently the one who infused Wisteria with mako in the first place. Anyway, he went into the reactor with me. If it hadn't been for him, we would never have made it."

"Interesting," Vincent said slowly.

"Interesting? Is that all you have to say?" Cid questioned.

"Wasn't Calin the name of the man Amanda said was her surrogate father when she was with the Fog?"

Cid frowned.

"Yes," Aeris replied. "Now that you mention it."

"You think it's the same guy?" Reeve questioned.

"Well, he did infuse Wisteria with mako, and that was the same procedure that Amanda underwent. Seems like an interesting coincidence, don't you think?"

They were all silent for a moment.

"I suppose, but it still could be a coincidence," Aeris said thoughtfully. "I'm sure there's more than one person named Calin around."

"Well, either way, what difference does it make?" Cid cut in. "The Fog is gone and the guy did help us stop the reactor. As far as I'm concerned, he's all right in my book."

Aeris propped an elbow on the arm of her wheelchair and rested her chin in her hand. "And isn't it true that Amanda told us that Calin was the only one who treated her well?" she reminded them.

"True," Vincent replied.

"So when are you getting out?" Reeve questioned.

"Not sure," Vincent replied. "The doctors don't seem to know. To tell you the truth, I don't think they've seen anyone quite like me before."

Reeve nodded silently. That was an understatement if he had ever heard one. He looked at Cid.

"How 'bout you?"

"About the same," Cid replied, sounding none too pleased at the prospect. "That is, if the nurses don't get sick of me and throw me out before that."

"You'll stay here as long as the doctors says you should," Shera proclaimed, in a voice that brooked no dissent. She turned toward Vincent. "You too!"

"Yes mother," Cid grumbled.

Vincent said nothing.

"Well, I'd like to stay and chat, but the doctors told me I was free to leave," Aeris said, unable to pass up the chance to rub it in a bit. "And now I'm going to stop and say hello to Elena. Is there anything you'd like me to pass on to her, Vincent?"

"Just tell her I am well," he said simply.

"And tell her the escape plan is set for tonight at midnight," Cid added.

Aeris smiled and Reeve chuckled behind her.

"It's good to see that at least you haven't lost your sense of humor," Aeris said. "We'll have to have a celebration party when everyone gets out."

"Now you're talking!" Cid said, his face brightening.

"That's not going to be for a while yet," Shera pointed out.

"Don't remind me," Cid muttered.

Aeris pointed to the door.

"Onward my faithful chauffeur."

"Yes indeed ma'am," Reeve replied with the tip of an imaginary cap.

They left the room, heading down the hallway once again until Reeve turned into Elena's room.

She was lying in bed talking with Rude and Lai Li, who were sitting in chairs beside her. Her left arm was in a cast. She looked up and smiled when she saw them.

"Hi!"

"We've come for a visit," Elmyra said.

"Vincent says he's well," Aeris stated.

Elena nodded.

"How informative," she replied. "If you see him again, tell him I have a message for him too."

"And what might that be?" Aeris inquired.

"Tell him he owes me dinner for saving his ass when we fought Wisteria."

Aeris smiled.

"I'll be sure to let him know."

"Where's Reno?" Reeve questioned, directing his inquiry to Rude.

Rude shrugged.

"He was in earlier," Lai Li spoke up. "But you know Reno, he can't stay in one place for more than a few minutes."

"Unless it's a bar," Elena added.

"So when are they springing you?" Reeve asked. "Cid and Vincent are going to be released in a few days, at least. Something they're not very happy about."

"They said if they don't find anything else wrong, I'll probably be able to go home tomorrow," Elena replied. "I'm surprised they haven't thrown me out already, actually. I feel fine, and I'm sure they can use the bed, what with all the damage Wisteria did."

"Yeah, I heard you had your hands full here," Lai Li said. "How many people did she hurt?"

"I'm not sure..." Aeris said slowly. She looked at Reeve.

"There were fifty three people treated for injuries at the hospital," he said. "That doesn't count those who were treated at the scene and released. Nor the three dead of course. There was also over \$500,000 in property damage to the buildings in the area. Or at least, that's what it's been estimated at so far, but I'm sure that figure's bound to increase."

"Hard to believe one person could do so much damage," Elmyra commented.

"Yeah," Reeve agreed. "Looking at the damage, you'd think an army went through town. She must have had tremendous strength of will."

Aeris nodded.

"It seems a shame. If she had turned that strength toward more socially acceptable pursuits, she could have done a lot of good."

"Perhaps," Reeve stated.

Elena didn't say anything, but she thought that comment just like Aeris. Always looking for the best in everyone. But she was used to it by now. She had never really liked Aeris. She thought of her as too much of a goody two shoes who let others fight her battles. And of course, probably more significantly, there was the whole Tseng thing. In fact, she had thought the whole cutesy attitude was just Aeris way of manipulating those around her to get what she wanted. Looking back on it, she realized now she had been wrong about that. Aeris had saved her from being shot on the southern continent. And the Cetra had stood her ground against both Jenova's disciples and Wisteria. Even more surprisingly to Elena, she had accepted Cloud and Tifa being a couple without any protest at all, or any sign of jealousy. Elena had to wonder if she would have handled it as well, and had to admit she had gained a newfound respect for the Ancient. She and Aeris were never going to be the best of friends, but they could tolerate each other.

"All right, well, I'm glad to see you weren't hurt too badly. I guess we better get going though. I really want to see Tifa," Aeris said.

"By all means," Elena replied.

They nodded to Rude and Lai Li and left the room.

"I guess we should head up to maternity," Aeris said. "Do you think Cloud and Tifa have had enough time to talk? Oh wait, is Gilan here?"

Reeve frowned at the sound of that name.

"Yes," he said after a pause. "In 354."

"I want to talk to him."

Reeve's lips formed a thin line. Aeris glanced at Elmyra and saw she had pretty much the same expression as Reeve.

"He *did* try to help Tifa," Aeris reminded them. "We fought together against Wisteria. Perhaps we both learned a little bit about each other, enough to realize that we shouldn't be enemies."

Reeve was tempted to tell her he didn't really think it was a good idea. Even if Gilan's attitude had changed, he wasn't about to forgive the man for what had already occurred. If it hadn't been for Wisteria's interference, who knows what kind of damage the man could have caused?

But looking at Aeris, he knew it would be pointless to argue.

"Perhaps," he said slowly. Aeris had told them about how Gilan seemed to be able to manipulate people. He had to admit, the thought of someone being able to influence him without his knowledge made him very nervous.

"But you'll be able to tell if he tries to use that influence thing, right?"

Aeris nodded.

"And he can't use it by just looking at you. He has to talk, right?"

"I think so," Aeris concurred. "I don't know why but it's something about his voice, about the words he uses."

"I still don't understand that," Elmyra said. "How is he able to do it?"

"I'm not sure myself," Aeris replied. "I don't know if we'll ever know. He seems to be able to project his wishes to others through spoken words, although I've never heard of anyone ever having such a capability. I think it works in a similar fashion to the Cetra ability to talk to other Cetra who have passed on into the lifestream. I think that's why I can detect it. But as to how it's actually accomplished, I have no clue. I guess it's just some kind of gift."

"Some gift," Reeve muttered.

"Sounds like he'd make a great used car salesman," Elmyra tried to lighten the mood.

"Yeah," Reeve agreed ruefully. "Maybe we should try to convince him that's his true calling in life."

They reached the room and entered. Gilan was sitting up in bed reading a book. He looked up at them as they entered. If he was surprised, he didn't show it.

"Hello Gilan, how are you feeling?" Aeris asked.

"Well," Gilan said noncommittally.

They were silent for a moment.

"Gilan, I realize we probably got off on the wrong foot.." Aeris began.

Gilan held up his hand.

"If this is regarding my feelings about you and the Cetra, let me make it plain right from the start that nothing has changed."

Reeve's face clouded with anger.

"How can you say that?" he blurted out. "How can you still question Aeris motives after what just happened? She saved dozens of lives, perhaps hundreds, including yours, I might add. Human lives. If it wasn't for her, you'd all be dead and Ifalna would be rubble! Are you still trying to tell me that she's planning to take over the world?"

"All that you say may be true. She did the people of Ifalna an invaluable service. But nothing that she did contraindicates any of the accusations I have made against her. Of course she helped the people of Ifalna. Why wouldn't she? Most of them are her most faithful converts. Any loss of life her in Ifalna would be a setback for her and her plans."

For a moment Reeve glared at Gilan. This was so infuriating. The man absolutely refused to listen to reason, refused to see the truth even if it was shoved right in front of his face. The stupid part was, he was right. Nothing that Aeris had done could disprove his accusations. If he didn't know better, he'd have found Gilan's argument at least logical, if not reasonable. He glanced over at Aeris to see if Gilan was trying to influence him, but she made no indication. Perhaps there was one hole...

"But she saved your life as well," Reeve went on. "And you're not one of her followers. In fact, if she was as devious as you claim, it would have been in her best interest to let you die. But she didn't. She used healing wind to save you. Why would she have done that unless she's really not as bad as you say?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Gilan replied. "At the time we were both fighting Wisteria, someone who posed a more immediate threat than we did to each other. Aeris had already seen just how powerful Wisteria was, and knew she needed all the help she could get to fight her. She didn't let me die because at the time, she needed my help."

Reeve just shook his head in frustration. The man was unbelievable.

"I can see how you might look at it that way," Aeris said slowly. "But I assure you it is not true. I would have helped you even if you weren't fighting with me against Wisteria. I give you my word on that."

Gilan just looked at her for a moment.

"The word of a Cetra," he said.

"She's half human!" Reeve snapped.

"Reeve, please," Aeris said.

"So nothing has changed?" Reeve said, ignoring Aeris. "When you get out of here you're going to go back to your church and start in again with all the anti-Cetra rhetoric? Let me tell you something, if you try that mob thing again I'll make sure..."

"Reeve!" Aeris said sharply.

"I bear you no ill will, Mr. Mayor," Gilan said. "In fact, the truth is, I pity you. The spell of the Cetra is alluring, and it's not surprising to see good men fall under her sway. I can only hope that someday you will wake up and realize the truth."

For a moment Reeve didn't know how to respond. How could you argue with someone who twisted everything around to fit his own warped view of the world?

"Look," he said sharply. "What will it take to get through to you? Aeris isn't trying to take over the world. She isn't even going to expand the church into other cities. That was all made up by Wisteria, just like she made up the accusations about Barret taking kickbacks in Corel and how she stirred up trouble for Red in Cosmo Canyon. She was just doing it to try to hurt anyone in Avalanche."

Gilan shrugged.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps there was a seed of truth in it."

Reeve opened his mouth, then shut it again. He stared at Gilan for a moment, then turned to Aeris.

"I knew this would be a waste of time," he said.

"I couldn't agree with you more," Gilan said. And, as if that was a dismissal, he lifted up his book and started to read again.

"I really wish we could have worked this out," Aeris said, sounding genuinely unhappy. "But I see now that it's probably impossible. We're never going to see eye to eye, Gilan, but I'll tell you this, no matter what you do, I'm not going to let you shut down my church."

Gilan did not look in the least bit impressed.

"You may do as you wish. It's a free country," he said.

"Yeah, unless you happen to be Cetra," Reeve said pointedly. "C'mon Aeris, let's go. We're finished here."

Aeris didn't reply for a moment, looking at Gilan, but he ignored her. Finally she nodded her head. Reeve turned the wheelchair around and pushed it out of the room.

"Building a church without the proper permits. Inciting a riot. Destruction of property. Assault. I can have him in thrown in jail for a very long time.." Reeve growled, not really caring if Gilan was still in earshot.

"Just leave him alone," Aeris said.

Reeve stopped pushing.

"You know, I can understand it with him. He's a fanatic. He's got his own little warped perspective of life and he's dead set on seeing nothing else. But you, I do not understand. He incited a mob against you Aeris. He was ready to tear your church down no matter what anyone said, or who might get hurt. You told me before you didn't want us to condemn him without evidence, that he was just talk. Well, we all know that's not true now! Are you still trying to tell me he's not going to harm anyone?"

Aeris just looked at him for a moment.

"Well, do you?"

Still Aeris didn't speak. She looked at Reeve, who stood there, his look demanding an answer. Finally she looked down.

"It's kind of hard to explain," she said.

"Try," Reeve suggested, sounding a bit more conciliatory.

Aeris sighed.

"He's not an evil man. He really believes what he's saying. There's no doubt in his mind that he's doing the right thing. I can relate to that. I have a lot of faith in what I do to, in believing I'm doing the right thing. I'd hate to believe I'm wrong."

Reeve just shook his head.

"Even so. Even if he's not evil, what he's doing is still wrong. We can't let him run around doing any damn thing he pleases just because he believes he's right."

"I know," Aeris replied. It was obvious she was not comfortable talking about this. But Reeve wasn't going to let up. This was too important to him. "I guess I'm just sympathetic. Except for this obsession with this Cetra thing, he's not a bad person. Look at how he tried to help Tifa. Should we just forget about that? I guess I'm just hoping that he will somehow come to his senses. Maybe I'm just being naive, but I think he deserves another chance."

Reeve shook his head. He might have thought so too, before they had talked to the man.

"I think he made it pretty clear that's not going to happen," he said.

"Just give him a little time," Aeris replied. "That's not asking for too much, is it?"

They looked at one another for a minute. Finally Reeve shrugged.

"No matter what he's thinking, I don't think he's going to try anything anytime soon. We've got some time. We can talk about it some more after he gets out of the hospital. After he's had a chance to talk to his congregation, we'll probably have a better idea if he's changed at all. Until then, why don't we agree to drop the subject?"

Aeris nodded.

"If you wish."

"All right. I guess we should go up to maternity now and see how Tifa's doing."

He looked down the hallway.

"Elmyra, could you take her up there? I have to use the bathroom. I'll be right up."

"Sure," Elmyra said. She replaced Reeve behind the wheelchair and pushed it forward. Reeve walked over to the restroom and entered. A few moments later he stepped out again and looked down the hall. Seeing that Aeris and Elmyra were gone, he walked back to Gilan's room.

This time Gilan did look surprised. Especially when he saw Reeve close the door behind him.

"I'm surprised to..." he began.

"Shut up!" Reeve snapped. Aeris wasn't with him now. He wouldn't be able to tell if Gilan was trying to influence him. But if he didn't allow the man to talk, he knew that wouldn't happen.

"I'm not here to have a discussion," he continued. "I'm here to tell you the facts."

"I don't..." Gilan tried again.

Reeve stepped forward. He reached down, grabbed hold of Gilan collar and pulled it tight.

"I said shut up!" he snarled. "Aeris might want to give you a second chance, but I'm not so generous. I don't give a damn what your beliefs are, you have no right to say the things you've said about Aeris, or try to incite a riot to destroy her church. I've put with you for this long because Aeris didn't want me to interfere. But this time you've gone too far. You've proved that your a danger, a danger to Aeris, and I won't have that. So I'm putting you on notice. If I hear you say anything inflammatory about Aeris or her church, I'll throw you in jail for inciting a riot and tear your church down brick by brick. And don't think I won't be able to do it."

He pulled Gilan closer, until their faces were only inches apart.

"And if you *ever* threaten Aeris, or try to hurt her or get someone else to try to hurt her, I swear to God I'll hunt you down and kill you with my own hands!"

For a moment they just stared at one another, then Reeve pushed Gilan away. He turned, and without another word, walked out the door.

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It was dark.

Tifa blinked her eyes and looked around slowly. The lights were out, except for a small one above a sink. She was lying in bed. That much was obvious. In the hospital, which was again obvious. She turned her head and saw Cloud sitting in a chair beside her. His head was resting on his chest and his eyes were closed. His left hand rested on her arm.

She turned toward him. The covers shifted and Cloud's eyes immediately opened.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Tifa didn't reply. Even that little movement had caused an ache in her abdomen. She looked down, running her hand across her flat stomach. So it hadn't been a dream.

"The baby..." she said softly.

"He's alive," Cloud said. "The doctors say it's going to be touch and go for the next few days. He's kind of small, but they say he's got a decent chance of making it. Like I said, he's kind of small, but other than that, he's perfectly normal."

Tifa let her head fall back onto the bed, relief flooding through her.

"Perfectly normal?" she said slowly.

Cloud nodded.

"No sign of any strange tentacles, or mako eyes, or anything like that."

"I was so scared..." she said slowly.

Cloud gripped her hand.

"I know," he said. "I was too. But I think he's going to be okay."

"I hope so," she replied, then; "He?"

"Yup, it's a boy."

She smiled.

"Our little Cloud Jr."

Cloud looked at her for a moment.

"Actually, I was thinking about that..."

She waited for him to go on.

"We never really decided on a name."

Tifa nodded.

"True, but I thought if it was a boy, you'd want to name him after yourself. I don't mind, you know."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "But like I said, I was thinking. I remember I got teased a lot when I was young about that name."

"I remember too," Tifa said.

"You do?" Cloud replied. "I thought you had forgotten about that."

"I remember the kids making fun of you," she said. "I did notice, though you might not have known."

Cloud looked at her for a moment, then nodded.

"Anyways, I was thinking about alternatives, and I think I've come up with one. How would you feel about naming him Zangan?"

Tifa looked at Cloud in surprise.

"Zangan?" she said. "Why, I...I think that would be a really good idea. But Cloud, you surprise me. You didn't know him all that well."

"Yeah, but I knew him well enough to know he was like a father to you," Cloud replied. "I don't know, it just seems...appropriate to me."

"I think it's a wonderful ideal," Tifa stated.

"All right, well I guess that's settled then."

"Now I want to see him," Tifa said. She hadn't even gotten a chance to hold him.

"I'm sure you will soon enough," Cloud said. "But right now both of you need your rest. Like I said, he's just a little guy. He's only four pounds and three ounces. He looks so small, even compared to the other babies. The runt of the litter, just like his dad."

"Cloud..." Tifa admonished. "You may have been the runt of the litter, but you certainly turned out well. If he's half the man his father is, he'll have plenty to be proud of."

Cloud smiled and patted her arm.

Tifa looked down and shook her head.

"What?" Cloud questioned.

"Nothing," Tifa replied. "I just can't believe we have a baby."

Suddenly she looked up at him.

"Cloud, I'm sorry."

He frowned.

"Whatever for?"

"I went to help Aeris," she said. "I put the baby at risk. I don't know what I would have done if we'd lost it. It would have been all my fault. I can understand if you were mad..."

"Tifa! Don't be ridiculous!" he said, gripping her hand tightly. "I don't blame you for that. How could I? You were trying to help a friend. For all we know, if you hadn't been there Aeris might have been killed, along with a lot of other people. If I would have been in your shoes, I would have done the same thing."

Tifa nodded. She really didn't feel like Cloud would blame her, but she had to hear it herself, just for the reassurance. Yet even so, even if he didn't blame her, she still wasn't sure she had done the right thing. It was easy to say she had now, now

that she knew their child was all right. But it was true, she had put the baby at risk. Would he be so magnanimous if something had happened, if they had lost the baby? Would she ever have been able to forgive herself?

"I just hope I'm cut out for this mother thing," she said softly.

Cloud put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him.

"I think you'll be a great mom," he said.

"I hope so," she replied. "I'm just going to have to realize that I've got responsibilities now, that I can't go running off to save the world every time it needs saving."

"Well, I do too, now don't I?" Cloud responded. "But hopefully, we won't have to run off to save the world anytime soon. Hopefully we're done with that sort of thing."

"We've said that before," Tifa said ruefully. "And look how wrong we were."

She'd thought it was over. And yes, she'd thought that before as well. All their old Shinra enemies had been defeated. But she hadn't thought about what they had done on the southern continent. She hadn't thought about what other enemies they had made, besides Shinra. Who else might be out there, even now, plotting against them? She tried to think back to what else they had done, who else they had opposed who might come back to haunt them. She couldn't think of anyone. But maybe now she was being a little too paranoid.

"Yeah," he replied. "But look at the bright side. The baby is normal. Which proves once and for all that Jinn's predictions were lies. You don't have to have any nightmares anymore about the baby turning out to be some sort of monster. All our enemies are defeated or gone. We've got as good a chance as anyone of living happily ever after."

Tifa smiled.

"Like in a fairy tale? I can think of nothing I'd like more Cloud, but forgive me if I'm skeptical. After all we've been through, I just don't think that our settling down and living out a normal life is in the cards, do you?"

Cloud looked at her for a moment.

"You know, you used to be so optimistic," he observed.

Tifa laughed.

"I know. I sound like...well, I don't know who I sound like. Some very depressing person, I guess. I'll try to stop. After all, even after all that happened, things have turned out pretty well. I've got you and the baby, and all our friends. Looking at it that way, I've got a lot to be grateful for."

Cloud nodded.

"That's more like it."

"So when do we get to go home?"

"I'm not sure," he replied. "Wisteria beat you up pretty badly. And the baby's still not out of the woods yet. A couple of days at least, I should think. But don't worry, you'll have plenty of company."

"How so?" she questioned.

"Aeris, Cid, Vincent and Elena are all in here with you," he replied.

"Really?" Tifa said. "Wisteria did that much damage?"

"Yeah," Cloud replied. "And she hurt a ton of other people here in Ifalna too. Well, all except Cid. He wasn't hurt by Wisteria, but that's another story, and I'm sure he'll be glad to elaborate on it for you. But it looks like they're all going to be okay."

Tifa nodded. All those people hurt by one person. It seemed hard to believe. They had been lucky to beat Wisteria. They had been lucky to beat Sephiroth. How much longer before their luck ran out?

There you go again, she silently admonished herself. It was over, and there was no reason to believe it wasn't for good this time. Maybe it was time to leave the shadows of the past behind them and look ahead to the future. Maybe now they'd finally get their chance to live in peace. There was no reason to think otherwise.

"I tried to save you, but I was too late again."

She looked at him for a moment, wondering if that was going to bother him, like it had so many times in the past, but he didn't seem upset.

"I can take care of myself," she said slowly.

"So I saw," he replied. "You pack a mean punch, Tifa."

She smiled.

"I guess so, at least, when I'm *really* mad."

"But the point is," Cloud went on, "that we can all take care of ourselves. Even Aeris. I can't be everywhere at once. I can't protect everyone, nor should I need to. It's taken me a long time to realize that."

For a long time she just looked at him. She hadn't thought he'd ever say such a thing.

"So does that mean you've forgiven yourself for Aeris death? That you've finally realized that it wasn't your fault?" she said slowly.

He looked down at the floor for a moment, then raised his head to meet her gaze again.

"Yes," he replied. "And now it's your turn to do the same thing."

Tifa looked puzzled.

"Huh?"

"Many times you've mentioned the innocent people who died when we blew up the reactors at Midgar. I know you blame yourself for that. You've mentioned it more than once. But that wasn't your fault Tifa. It was war. We were doing it to stop Shinra. You know that. And you weren't the one who pressed the button."

For a long time they just looked at one another. He was right. And she knew it. But even if she hadn't pressed the button, she felt just as responsible. And yes, it had been war, or the nearest thing to it, but that didn't change the fact that they had killed innocent people. This was different than what happened to Aeris. But that wasn't really the point. Hadn't she just said to herself it was time to forget the shadows of the past and look toward the future?

"All right," she said. "I'll try."

Cloud nodded.

"You do that."

She looked into his eyes.

"I love you," she said.

He brought his hand up to her cheek and lifted her head toward him. He kissed her.

"I love you too," he said.

"And we have a baby," she said happily.

"Yes we do," he agreed with a smile. "And we're going to live happily ever after, no matter what you say. All three of us. Understand?"

She smiled at him.

"Yes, I understand," she said. "All three of us."

**THE END**