

CHAPTER IV: THE OLE SWIMMIN' HOLE

"Tifa."

She felt someone shaking her. She wished they'd stop. It was very annoying.

"Tifa!"

She opened her eyes and blinked in the bright sunlight. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. Her head throbbed.

"I feel terrible," she said.

"You don't look much better," Reno stated.

She held her head and glared at him. They were both covered with sand and salt residue. Reno's hair was plastered to his head on one side.

"You should talk."

Reno looked at himself and grinned.

"Yeah, I guess we both look like a pair of drowned rats."

She smiled ruefully and looked around.

"Where are we?"

Reno shrugged.

"I don't know," he replied. "You're the one who got us here. I suspect that in a fit of drunken madness you dragged me up onto the beach to have your way with me."

She gave a short bark of laughter.

"Yeah, that's likely."

She looked around. They were in a shallow depression amid the dunes just off the beach. She could hear the surf, but she could not see the ocean from here.

"Have you seen any of the others?" she asked.

Reno shook his head.

"I just got up myself," he replied. "Haven't really had a chance to look around."

Tifa tried to brush the sand out of her hair.

"Did we really sleep here all night?"

Reno just shrugged. He didn't think that was a question that needed to be answered. He had been kneeling in the sand beside her, but now he stood up. He stumbled slightly.

"How's your leg?" she questioned.

"A little sore," he replied. "But I'll live."

He was about to continue when he stopped. They both heard someone talking. Tifa realized immediately that it was no one they knew. She could not make out what they were saying.

Reno put his finger to his lips.

She looked at him.

"Maybe it's someone who can help us," she said quietly.

"Maybe," he replied doubtfully.

He slowly climbed up the dune that hid them from the beach. Tifa got up and followed. As they neared the crest of the dune they heard the voice again, closer now.

"If we don't find anything here we'll sweep the beach further west. Don't get too far apart. Remember, these people are armed and dangerous."

There was a clump of marsh grass running along the top of the dune. They slowly raised their heads and peered through the grass. They could see a dozen men walking slowly along the beach, all dressed in uniforms they did not recognize. Two men were standing closer to them watching the others. It was obvious that one of them was the man who had spoken.

They slid back down the dune until they were out of sight.

"Do you think they're from the ship that fired at us?" Tifa whispered.

"Probably," Reno replied.

"Do you really think they'll still be anywhere near the beach," they heard. The voice was not the same. It must have been the other man talking now.

"I don't know," the first man replied. "We don't know how much they know. One thing for sure, they're not going to get very far on the roads. After what happened, Gram is sealing up the area tighter than a drum."

"I know. I can't believe they killed six of our people."

Tifa looked at Reno in surprise, but he did not respond.

"Yeah," the first man continued. "I heard Gram threw a fit about that. But they can't get very far. It's just a matter of time before we catch them."

"Unless they're being helped by the Brotherhood."

"Don't even suggest that," the first man responded sharply. "But I think even the Brotherhood would have trouble getting them out of this one. Gram sent Kendal himself to supervise the search, and you know how thorough he can be."

"Kendal?" the second man said in surprise. He whistled. "If they sent the Bloody Hand to find them, I feel sorry for them already."

"Well don't. Worry about yourself. If they don't find them, they're going to have to blame someone. The last thing we need is for Kendal to be looking over our search procedures with a fine tooth comb."

"Hey, stay together I said," he suddenly called out, then, less loudly. "And we don't need to lose any more men through stupid mistakes. C'mon."

The voices faded away. Reno slid back down the dune. Tifa followed.

"Looks like we're at the top of the popularity list," he said when they reached the bottom.

"Six of them killed," Tifa observed. "Looks like some of the others have already had a run in with them."

"Looks that way," Reno agreed. "And they haven't made things easier for us. It appears the natives are most definitely hostile. Sounds like that Kendal guy is someone to be avoided."

Tifa nodded.

"Yeah," she replied. "But what about that Brotherhood they mentioned?"

"Sounds like some kind of underground movement," Reno replied. "They might be able to help us, if we can find them. But that may be a big if."

Tifa looked around.

"So what do we do now?"

"Well, we can't hang around here, that's for sure. They'd be bound to find us eventually."

He looked to the south, away from the beach. The forest was about twenty yards away, the ground in between uneven and covered with dunes.

"C'mon," he said.

He headed for the trees, Tifa trailing behind, but soon the dunes diminished to low mounds, before they reached the forest. Reno looked down the beach. He could see the searchers, not very close, but still there.

"Should we wait for them to leave?" Tifa asked.

Reno shook his head.

"For all we know they may come back, and search higher up on the beach this time. They're too far away to see us if we crawl. C'mon."

He got down on all fours and slowly started through the sand. He looked back at her. She had made no move.

"C'mon," he repeated. "You're already covered with sand. It can't get any worse."

That didn't make her any less reluctant. But she knew he was right. With a sigh she lay down and crawled after him.

It didn't take them long to reach the cover of the trees. As soon as they were behind a thick clump of them they stood up, then hurried into the forest. In minutes the sound of the surf faded away.

For a long time they walked through the woods, Reno leading them directly away from the beach. Tifa was silent, knowing that Reno was just trying to put as much distance between the beach and themselves as he could. But eventually they were going to have to come up with some sort of plan.

"So where do we go from here?" she asked.

Reno shrugged.

"Not sure," he replied. "From the way those people were talking, we won't be safe anywhere near civilization. But on the other hand, we can't just wander through the woods with no supplies. We won't last long like that. Eventually, we're going to have to find a town, even if we have to sneak in and steal what we need."

"And we don't know how to get to Mysteele," she pointed out.

"I know," he replied. "I think our only chance may be to try to contact these Brotherhood people. Though how we are going to do that I have no idea. We're not going to get very far with the whole countryside against us. We're bound to get caught sooner or later unless we find someone to help us."

"But how would we know who to trust?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "But first things first. We need food and some clean clothes. I don't remember the last time I've eaten. Are you hungry?"

She shook her head. Her stomach was still a bit queasy from the seawater (and perhaps other things), and just the thought of food made it worse.

"No," she replied. "But I've love to get out of these clothes. This sand is driving me crazy."

He turned and looked at her.

"Well, don't let me stop you," he said with a grin.

She looked at him angrily.

"Of everyone on board, why did I have to end up with you?" she questioned.

Reno raised his arms and shrugged.

"I guess it was just meant to be, honey."

Tifa sighed and looked away from him.

"I just hope we find the others soon," she muttered.

The trees around them seemed to thin out a little. They came out into a small clearing covered with knee high weeds. To their left the ground rose up, and they could see a line of hills in that direction.

Reno nodded toward them.

"Let's head that way. We may be able to see more from the top of one of those hills."

Tifa nodded and followed him as he headed in that direction. Soon the ground sloped up steeply ahead of them. The trees closed in around them again, but as they neared the top they became scarce once more. The ground became rough, with large areas of exposed rock. Tifa looked back down the hill as they were crossing one such expanse.

"Look," she said.

Reno turned in the direction she indicated. He could see the trees covering the ground like a green roof, but not far beyond

the base of the hill in the direction she indicated he could see a wide field of gold. It looked like wheat. And beyond it he could just make out two buildings.

"Looks like a farm," he said.

Tifa nodded.

"That should do," he stated with satisfaction.

He started back down the hill in the direction of the farm, Tifa right behind him. It didn't take long for them to reach the edge of the farmland. There was no fence, just a dirt track, and then row after row of wheat, or what Tifa took for wheat. She wasn't much of a farming expert, and who knew what kind of plants might grow on this continent. But it looked like wheat to her. The stalks were higher than their heads. She wondered if wheat grew that tall.

Reno did not seem much interested. He forged ahead, quickly disappearing beneath the golden stalks. After a moment, she followed.

They walked for what seemed to Tifa to be a surprisingly long time, but eventually they reached the other end and came to clear grassland. They could see one of the buildings clearly now over a small rise. It was very close.

Reno looked at the building narrowly. Then he turned to her.

"You wait here. I'll go check it out."

"I'm coming with you," she responded.

"There's no need for us both to go," he replied. "It just increases the risk of our being seen. I'm just going to have a look around. You won't be missing out on any fun."

Tifa stood there for a minute before answering.

"Fine," she said finally. "But if you get yourself in trouble, don't expect me to come running."

He didn't respond, but trotted slowly up over the hill until he disappeared from view. Tifa stood there at the edge of the field, looking around. She didn't much like the idea of splitting up, and in spite of what she had said, she hoped he hurried back.

As it was it didn't take long before he reappeared over the rise. She could see he was carrying something. As he came closer she realized it was clothing.

"Where did you get that?" she questioned when he reached her.

He dropped the clothes on the ground.

"They had a clothesline beside the barn," he replied. He stooped down and separated what he had. Then he handed Tifa a pair of shorts, a green blouse, and a towel.

"Thanks," she said. She held up the towel. "What's this for?"

"I found something else," he replied. "C'mon and take a look."

He picked up his things and they headed back over the hill. On the other side the ground sloped sharply downward to the right into a shallow depression. Tifa could see a circular patch of tall grass at the bottom. Reno led them down and into the grass, which, like the wheat, rose above their heads. In the center was a small pond.

"Look," he said, waving his arm at the water. "A bathtub."

She looked at him skeptically.

"Reno, this is a pond," she replied.

"Well it's the closest thing you're going to get," he replied. "You do want to get cleaned up, don't you?"

She just stood there, looking dubiously at the water. She was really uncomfortable, and the thought of jumping in the water was incredibly tempting. The grass concealed them from view, but that seemed unlikely to stop Reno's prying eyes.

"I don't think so," she said slowly shaking her head.

He stood there looking at her for a moment, then shrugged.

"Suit yourself," he replied. "But I'm going to take a dip."

With that he started to unbutton his shirt.

"Please," Tifa said, raising her hands. "I don't need to see that. I'll go wait over there."

Reno shrugged again.

"Fine."

She hurried back into the grass until she could no longer see the pond. Then she sat down and rested her head in her hands. In a few minutes she heard some splashing, and then a very contented sigh from Reno.

"Oh, this feels sooooo good," he said.

Oh shut up, she mouthed.

She heard more splashing.

"Mmmmmmm."

She pressed her hands to her ears. She could still feel the sand in her hair.

She sat there for what seemed like a lifetime, but eventually she heard him step out of the water. In a minute he came back out to her, looking very refreshed.

"The water is wonderful," he said.

She stood up and looked at him, then back towards the water, then at him again. He could tell she wanted to say something. Finally she stepped toward him until she was inches from his face.

"All right!" she snapped. "But you better stay right here. Do you hear me? Don't move from this spot. If I find you've moved an inch from this spot, I'll kick you so hard in the crotch you'll be singing soprano for the rest of your life! Do you understand me?"

He snapped to attention.

"Loud and clear," he said, and saluted her.

She stared at him for a moment longer. Then she turned and started toward the pond. She turned back again and glared at him one more time.

"I mean it!"

Reno nodded rapidly.

She turned and walked over to the edge of the pond. She looked back, but Reno was not in sight.

"Oh God, I know I'm going to regret this," she said.

She looked at the water.

"Okay," she said to herself. "Just in and out, real quick."

Then she slipped off her clothes and stepped rapidly into the pond. The water was cool but very refreshing. At least he hadn't lied about that. She dunked her hair and pulled it back, finally succeeding in getting rid of the sand. Then she eyed the grass around her for any sign of Reno.

Actually, it would have been a pleasant experience if she hadn't been so nervous. The water did feel wonderful, but she didn't take the time to enjoy it. She stayed in just long enough to wash off the sand, then she quickly reemerged and grabbed her towel. Even as she did so she heard a stirring in the foliage.

She threw the towel around herself a moment before Reno leaped out of the grass.

She looked at him, livid with rage, and was just about to shout at him, but the look on his face stopped her.

"There's someone coming," he hissed. "Please, this is no trick. You can kill me later if you wish, but we have to get out of here now."

She hesitated for just a moment, but the look he gave her was very convincing. She reached down and grabbed her clothes, then followed him as he made his way rapidly around the pond and into the grass on the other side.

They had barely passed from view when she heard a loud splash in the pond, and then the laughter of what sounded like two or three young boys. Reno looked back, and stopped when he saw that they were safely concealed from view.

He looked at her and saw the rage in her eyes.

"What can I say?" he defended himself. "Who knew the pond was the family swimming pool."

"You are such an idiot!" she hissed, coming toward him.

He took a step back.

"Aww, c'mon. It's not my fault! What was I supposed to do? Did you want me to just do nothing and let those kids get an early education?"

She stood there for a moment and her whole body shook beneath the towel. Reno looked her up and down and smiled.

"Ugggh!" she said in frustration. She turned and walked away from him without another word. He followed slowly behind as she headed back to the wheat field. When she reached the edge of it she turned toward him once more.

"You wait right here!" she said. "And I don't care if the entire population of the continent is coming, you will not move. Understand?"

"Yes ma'am," he said contritely.

She turned and disappeared into the wheat. She came out a few minutes later, dressed in the new clothes.

"This blouse is way too tight," she said.

He shrugged.

"Who's fault is that?"

She glared at him.

"C'mon, let's get out of here before they notice their clothes are missing," he said.

He walked past her, headed for the wheat once more.

She suddenly noticed he had another small bundle beside his old clothes.

"What's that?" she asked.

He unwrapped the cloth to reveal the body of a small chicken.

"Dinner."

~*~

Cloud had just finished breakfast when Magnus appeared and sat down beside him.

"We've tried to get in touch with your friends," he said.

Cloud looked at him, but Magnus did not continue, just sat there looking at him.

"And?"

Magnus hesitated a moment more.

"Turns out they are more determined than you thought. They followed you here."

"What?" Cloud said. "How?"

"In a submarine," he replied. "Though how they found out where you were I have no idea. You didn't tell anyone where you were going?"

"No," Cloud replied. "I didn't have time. I wanted to make it to Junon before it was too late. So where are they?"

Magnus hesitated again.

"We don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"The Brotherhood found out about them somehow. Their ship was sunk just off the coast."

"What!" Cloud exclaimed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "If we had know they would follow you we could have provided for their protection. But don't give up hope. We have good reason to believe that at least some, if not all of them survived. The ship went down right off the coast, and they could very well have all made it safely to shore. We have people looking for them even as we speak."

Cloud did not say anything for some time. He should have know they would do this. He should have warned Magnus of the possibility. But he had no idea what he was letting himself in for when he had left. He had thought he would just be going on a quick trip to Junon. Who would have thought he would end up here, hundreds of miles from Kalm? He didn't know what he would do if something happened to his friends. If something happened to Tifa.

"Where did this happen?" he asked.

"About fifty miles east of here."

"I want to go there," he said immediately.

Magnus looked at him sympathetically.

"I understand your concern. Of course we can do that if you wish. But I'm afraid there isn't much you can do there, and it will take you away from us if you are needed here."

"I don't seem to be doing much here anyway," Cloud replied.

"That could change very quickly. We don't know how much longer your father has to live. We may have to move at an instants notice."

Cloud stood up.

"My father has been a stranger to me for all my life," he said harshly. "The people on that boat were more important to me than he could ever be. I need to go there now."

Magnus said nothing for a moment, then he nodded.

"Of course. I understand how you feel. I'll go make the arrangements immediately. Believe me, we will do everything in our power to find your friends."

"Thank you," Cloud said.

Magnus turned and walked swiftly out of the room. He made his way up the wide staircase and down the hall, back to the room where Cloud had met Gram. Gram and Wisteria were in the room once more, along with one other man. Gram looked at him sharply as soon as he entered.

"What did you tell him?"

"What we agreed," Magnus replied. "He wants to go to the site."

"I was afraid of that," Gram muttered.

"Relax, Mr. President," the fourth man said. "It shouldn't be a problem. He may actually be helpful. Perhaps there is something he can tell us that could lead us to them."

Gram paced nervously back and forth a few times.

"Very well," he said. "But I don't like it. This whole operation is making me nervous. Kendal, are you sure we can't extract the information we need from his dead body?"

"Oh, you can't kill him yet!" Wisteria objected.

Gram looked at her and frowned.

"Try to control yourself," he replied. "The last thing we need is for you to do something stupid. Don't forget you have a job to do."

"So who says I can't do my job and have a little fun too?" she questioned.

Gram did not respond, but looked at Kendal.

Kendal shook his head.

"There's no way to tell at the moment. We don't know whether the mako infused cells would still be viable after he died. I don't know if I could get a proper analysis."

Kendal's eyes darted about the room as he spoke. He glanced at each of them in turn. He always looked at you as if he knew you were hiding something, and he knew exactly what it was, Magnus thought.

Gram shook his head.

"You may have to kill him anyway. There's no telling how much longer he's going to cooperate."

He looked at Magnus.

"Is he still buying the story about his father?"

Magnus nodded.

"Okay," Gram continued. "But we don't know how much longer that is going to last. He hasn't asked any questions at all yet?"

"No," Magnus replied. "But I'm sure it's just a matter of time. Still, I am prepared for that."

"I'm kind of curious as to how you came up with the story in the first place," Kendal said, looking at him carefully.

"It's my job," Magnus replied simply.

"Well, it's your baby," Gram said. "Which means it'll be your head if things go wrong. Kendal is going out the the site today to take over the supervision of the search. I suppose you could go along with him. Whatever happens, make sure Cloud does not come into contact with his friends. They've been wandering around the countryside. Who knows who they've come into contact with, or what they've learned. They must be eliminated as soon as possible."

"Don't worry about that," Kendal said with a smile. "I'll find them if I have to tear the countryside apart. They must have come into contact with someone out there. There is no doubt that I will find out who. I have some very interesting deaths planned for them."

Magnus said nothing. He was well aware of Kendal's excesses, and his perverted delight in the painful death of any who opposed him.

Gram turned to look at Wisteria.

"I want you to go too. Stay close to Cloud and find out everything you can about these friends of his."

Wisteria nodded.

"It'll be a pleasure," she said, and smiled sweetly.

"All right, then that's it," Gram said dismissively.

He sat back down at his desk and started looking over some paperwork. As the others exited the room Wisteria found herself walking beside Kendal.

He looked back at Gram for a moment, but the man seemed engrossed in his work. He turned toward her.

"It's disgusting the way he uses you," he said.

She looked at him for a moment before she spoke.

"I didn't know that word was in your vocabulary," she replied.

He smiled humorlessly.

"Besides," she continued. "He doesn't make me do anything I don't want to."

This seemed to upset Kendal even more, just as she had intended.

"Look," he said. "I've still got some details to take care of, but it's going to be a while yet before we leave. I should have some free time in about an hour. What say you and I..."

They both stopped and she looked at him, the smile still on her face. She reached out and ran her finger down his chest. Then she shook her head.

"I don't think so," she replied coldly. "You know it's over between us. You're just too weird for me."

He looked at her angrily.

"And you don't think a man who uses his own daughter as a slut isn't a little strange?" he said harshly.

He eyebrows went up, but she showed no sign of anger.

"I told you, he doesn't make me do anything I don't want to," she replied. "Besides, that doesn't hold a candle to some of the things you asked me to do in bed, now does it? The truth is I found your unusual fascinations cute to begin with, but now they just strike me as..."

She leaned forward until she was right beside him.

"...childish."

She turned and walked away.

He stood there for a moment, his face turning red with rage.

"Wisteria!" he snarled.

She turned back to look at him, seeming completely unfazed by his anger. He just stood there looking at her. She shook her head.

"Give it a rest, Kendal," she said, then turned and walked down the hall.

He stood there for a long time, fuming. It was obvious from the looks she was giving the spiky haired kid why she had lost interest in him. But that would soon be remedied. After they learned what they needed to know Cloud would become expendable, and when that happened he would take great pleasure in seeing that he died a very excruciating death.