

CHAPTER VI: THE PROMISE

"I'm not sure this is such a good idea."

"Would you relax," Reno replied. He stood bent over the lock on the door in front of them, fiddling with the small tool he had inserted into the keyhole. Tifa looked around nervously.

"Are you sure no one's home?" she said.

"Nobody answered when I knocked, now did they?" Reno said.

Tifa nodded.

"Yeah, but maybe they're in the bathroom or something," she suggested.

"You worry too much," he replied.

"Well, maybe I've got good reason," she replied. "Suppose someone comes out of the other rooms?"

"That's what you're here for," he answered. "If someone does, let me know."

"So I've got to be the lookout?"

He glanced up at her.

"Hey, you were the one who insisted on coming along. You might as well make yourself useful. Now be quiet a minute, I'm trying to concentrate."

She glared at him but did not reply. Then she looked back and forth down the hall. They hadn't seen anyone since they had entered the building. She sincerely hoped it stayed that way.

There was a click. Reno turned the knob and pushed the door open. He stood there for a moment, but nothing happened. Then he stepped into the room.

Tifa waited in the hall, hesitant to follow, but then Reno stuck his head out and looked at her.

"Well, c'mon," he said. "Get in here."

She walked into the room. Reno closed the door behind her and quickly disappeared into another room. She stood there looking around, hardly believing she was doing this. She was actually standing in some stranger's apartment. She was half scared to death, and yet she felt a thrill of excitement as well.

She walked slowly around the room, looking around. The apartment was well furnished, but not extravagantly so. She stopped for a moment to examine half a dozen glass figurines on one shelf of a bookcase.

Reno glanced in from the other room.

"See anything useful?" he asked.

She turned toward him. He was holding something in his hand.

She shook her head.

"What have you got there?" she said.

"A sandwich," he replied, holding it up for her to see.

"How can you think of eating at a time like this?" she questioned.

Reno shrugged.

"I was hungry."

She stared at him for a moment. Now that she thought about it, they hadn't eaten all day.

"Are there any more?" she said.

"Help yourself," he replied, and disappeared again.

She walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. There were some cold cuts in there, and she took some out and made herself a sandwich. She got something to drink and sat down at the kitchen table. She still couldn't believe she was

doing this.

Reno entered the room a short time later.

"So what did you find?" she asked.

"Not much," he replied. "About forty gil in the dresser in the bedroom. Some nice jewelry, but I don't think that would do us much good. By the way, the name of the city we are in is Dunlan."

Tifa did not reply. She wasn't too happy to be doing this, and had told Reno so before they had come here, but they really didn't have much choice. They needed the money, but there was only one other quick way to get it, and Tifa was not that kind of girl.

She stood up.

"So are we all done?"

"Yeah," Reno replied. "Let's get out of here."

They walked back into the living room, and were headed for the door when it suddenly opened. Tifa stopped in her tracks, staring at the man who was looking at them with pretty much the same expression she had on her own face. Her heart seemed to have suddenly forgotten how to beat.

"Who the hell are you?" Reno exclaimed.

"What do you mean, who am I?" the man said angrily. "Who are you, and what are you doing in my apartment?"

"What do you mean, your apartment?" Reno said accusingly. "You're not Mr. Harris."

"Who the hell is Mr. Harris?"

"The man who owns this apartment," Reno replied. "The man who told us to meet him here."

"I own this apartment," the man said.

Reno stood there staring at him for a moment.

"This is 212A Ventura Ave, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes," the man replied.

Reno turned to look at Tifa.

"That was the address he gave you, wasn't it?"

Tifa just stood there. Her heart was beating now, in fact it seemed so loud to her that she couldn't see how the others could not hear it. Now it seemed to be trying to make up for lost time. Finally she shrugged.

"Oh great," Reno said in exasperation. "Don't tell me we got the wrong apartment! Didn't you write it down?"

She looked at him for a moment. Then she slowly shook her head.

"Wonderful," he said sarcastically. "I guess we'll have to go call him."

He turned toward the man.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We must have gotten the wrong apartment."

He walked over and grabbed Tifa by the hand.

"My wife must be a little confused," he said, turning back toward the man once more. "She just hasn't been herself lately. Under a lot of pressure you know, what with the job and the kids and all." He lowered his voice. "And the little drinking problem, but she's been going to her meetings, and we're not really supposed to talk about that. At least she doesn't get violent anymore."

He led her quickly past the man, who just stood there, looking at them oddly.

"Still, her memory just isn't what it used to be. I'll just take her home where she can get some rest." He turned to Tifa. "We'll just have to meet with Mr. Harris another time."

They were out in the hallway now. They walked quickly down it. Reno glanced back once. The man had stepped out in the

hall and was staring at them. Then they turned the corner.

Tifa smacked him in the back of the head.

"Owww," he said. "What the hell was that for?"

"Violent indeed," she exclaimed. "Why did you have to say those things about me?"

"It was the first thing that popped into my head," he replied. "Hey, it got us out of there, didn't it?"

Tifa just shook her head. She would have never told Reno, but in truth she thought it had been pretty clever. When the man had walked in, she thought they were dead for sure.

They had walked on as they talked. Now they exited the building and started down the street in front of it.

"Do you really think he bought it?" she asked.

Reno shrugged.

"Well, it got us out of there, at least," he replied. "The story doesn't have to be that plausible, just enough so that it might be true, and most people will hesitate. But I don't think we should hang around here. Eventually he's going to wonder how we got into his locked apartment. And if he notices that money missing..."

Tifa nodded.

They had almost reached the end of the street when three patrol cars suddenly pulled around the corner in front of them and stopped. A man stepped out of one and looked at them.

"You!" he called. "Stop right there."

Tifa looked at Reno.

"I guess he noticed," she said.

"Damn, that was fast," he replied.

They both turned and ran back down the street.

Tifa heard a shot behind them and a bullet whizzed by her head. They looked ahead and saw another patrol car come around the corner that was now in front of them.

Reno wheeled around and ran into the nearest doorway, which happened to be a shoe store. Tifa was right behind him. A few startled customers looked up as they ran by. The owner yelled 'Hey' when they ran through a door marked 'Employees Only', but of course, they didn't pay any attention. They ran out the back door.

They were in a wide alley that ran along a loading dock at the back of the stores. To the left the alley ended in a high concrete wall. To the right they saw half a dozen guards running towards them.

They bolted straight across the alley into another building. This one appeared to be some kind of department store. They ran down the aisle, past a surprised stock boy. A man came around the corner just as they reached the end of it and Reno ran smack into him, knocking them both down.

Two guards were right behind the man. One of them reached down and grabbed hold of Reno.

Tifa came around the corner and kicked the man in the head. The other guard swung his fist at her, but she ducked under it and then struck him in the chin with an open palm. He jerked back and fell to the floor. Reno stumbled to his feet. He turned and pointed his nightstick at Tifa. There was a flash of electricity, and a third man who was coming up beside her hit the ground.

They turned toward the front door, but more guards were coming in that way. Reno looked around.

"Over here," he said.

He led her through a door and into a stairwell. He started up the stairs, Tifa close behind. She wasn't sure going up was such a good idea. She couldn't help but think they would have to come down again somewhere along the line.

They went up three floors. When they reached the top of the last floor there was a ladder that led up to a trapdoor.

Reno looked at it for a moment.

"C'mon," he said and climbed up. She followed, but she was starting to like this less and less. In a few moments they were on the roof.

There was a large antenna in the southwest corner, but other than that, the roof was flat and featureless.

The trapdoor opened. Reno turned and kicked it closed. They heard a cry and a loud crash below them.

"What now?" Tifa asked.

Reno shrugged. He looked to the left. There was another building nearby. He ran over to the edge and looked down. He could see more guards in the narrow alley below. He looked across at the other building again. It didn't look too far.

He looked at Tifa and nodded at the other building.

She stared at him and shook her head.

"Oh no," she said slowly.

"Oh yes," he said, then turned and ran for the edge.

"Oh my God," she said as he leaped through the air. He landed easily on the other side, then turned to look at her.

"Hurry up!" he called.

She looked back. The trapdoor had opened again and she could see someone coming up onto the roof.

She looked at Reno once more.

"I knew this was a bad idea," she muttered.

She ran to the edge and launched herself into the air. She made it easily, it really wasn't that far, but she made sure she didn't look down.

Reno grabbed hold of her to steady her when she landed.

"This way," he said.

She followed him through a door and then down another staircase. They ran through the building and back into the street again, and right into another group of guards.

Reno's nightstick flared. Tifa lunged to her left, then kicked one man in the side. Another tried to grab hold of her, but she twisted round and hit him in the face. A third tried to bring a gun to bear on her, but she grabbed his arm, twisted round and drove her hand into his elbow. She heard a crack and the man screamed in pain. He dropped the gun and stumbled away from her.

She looked over at Reno, who had just dropped another man. There was a second guard coming up behind him. She scooped up the gun that had dropped nearby and fired three times. The man turned to look at her.

Reno twisted round and gave him a jolt of electricity. Then he turned and glared at Tifa.

"How could you miss?" he exclaimed.

"Well, excuse me," she replied. "I'm trained with my fists, not with a gun."

Reno just shook his head. They ran down the street, but stopped when they saw more patrol cars.

"Here we go again," Tifa muttered. They couldn't keep this up forever.

They turned and ran back the other way. A guard on a motorcycle came racing around the corner ahead of them. Reno blasted him with his nightstick. The man fell off and the motorcycle skidded to a halt in front of them.

Reno looked back down the road. There were at least three patrol cars coming towards them. He ran over, picked up the motorcycle and hopped on. He looked at Tifa.

She ran over and jumped on behind him. She put her arms around him. He turned to look at her.

"Ohh, squeeze me tighter, baby," he said.

"Just shut up and go," she replied.

The engine sprang to life. Reno swung the bike around and roared off, the patrol cars in hot pursuit.

Tifa looked back. There were at least three cars behind them. In spite of the roar of the engine, she heard the retort from someone's gun. She ducked her head and held onto Reno. They were going a lot faster now, but she wasn't sure they were any better off.

They shot around a corner and saw traffic ahead of them. Reno did not slow down. Tifa held her breath as he sped between the rows of cars, missing them by inches. They raced across the road, against the red light. Tifa closed her eyes.

When she opened them a moment later Reno turned the bike sharply and drove into a narrow alley, nearly crashing into a couple of garbage cans. They came out the other side and onto another road, this one surrounded by single family homes.

She looked back but no longer saw any sign of pursuit.

They drove on for quite some time. Tifa kept looking back nervously, but she saw no one. The houses around them became scarcer as they left the city behind. They rode on for about an hour before they felt confident that they had escaped.

Reno stopped the bike at an intersection surrounded by open fields. They could see a farmhouse down the road, but it was the only structure they had seen for some time. He shut off the engine.

Tifa stepped off the bike and stretched. She could hardly believe they had gotten away.

Reno got off the motorcycle and opened up the compartment in the back. He started rummaging through it. Then he pulled something out with a grunt of satisfaction.

"What's that?" she said, coming over to him.

"A map," he replied, unfolding it and laying it down on the bike. They both looked at it.

"Here's Mysteele," he said, pointing.

"Uh huh."

"And here's Dunlan," he continued. "Hmmm. Looks like we're only about thirty miles away."

"We could be there in no time," Tifa said excitedly.

Reno nodded. He looked around. The sun hung just over a low line of hills to the west.

"Yeah," he agreed. "But I don't think it would be a good idea to make a run there now. The roads are bound to be crawling with patrols. Let's find some place to hole up for the night. We'll figure out what to do tomorrow."

Tifa hesitantly agreed. She realized that what he said made sense, but she was anxious to get to Mysteele, especially now that she knew they were so close.

Reno hopped back on the bike.

"Hey, I want to drive," she protested.

He looked at her, and for a moment she thought he was going to argue. But then he grinned and stepped off the motorcycle.

"Fine," he said.

She got on and he slipped back on behind her. They drove over a low hill, headed towards the farmhouse. Reno had his hands wrapped around her waist. But as they came around a sharp turn they suddenly slid up higher.

She jerked one arm back, almost knocking him from the bike. She slammed on the brakes and hopped off. She turned to look at him, her face red with rage.

"You are such an asshole!" she shouted.

She turned and stomped off down the road.

He stood there looking at her for a few moments. Then he started off after her.

"Hey, it was an accident," he called. "My hands slipped when we hit that bump."

She ignored him and continued walking.

He ran to catch up with her.

"Hey, c'mon," he tried again. "Can I help it if I find you irresistibly attractive?"

She gave no indication that she heard him. He reached out to grab her but then thought better of it. Things hadn't gone so well the last time he tried that.

"C'mon Tifa, where are you going?" he said. "We've got to get back to the motorcycle and find someplace to hide. It's dangerous out here."

A wooden post and rail fence ran along the road here. Suddenly she stopped and sat down by the fence. Reno came up beside her and looked at her, but she just stared blankly at the road.

"Tifa!" he said.

Still she did not speak.

He stood there looking at her for a little while longer. Then with a sigh he sat down beside her.

"Tifa, this is stupid," he said.

"Get away from me," she said sullenly and turned away from him.

He sat next to her for a little while. He kept glancing back and forth down the road, but saw nothing. Still, he was starting to get nervous. They couldn't sit here all day.

"Tifa, let's go," he said. "Come on, we're never going to find your precious Cloud this way."

"Shut up, Reno," she said. "Just shut up!"

He looked at her, but she was facing the other way.

"Geez," he said.

He fell silent. The minutes dragged by, but still she did not move. He kept looking down the road, back and forth, then at her. He tapped his hands idly on his knees. The longer they sat there, the more likely it was that someone would come by.

"Well, I just don't understand what you see in him," he finally blurted out. "I don't understand how you can be crazy for a guy who's ignored you his entire life! I mean, c'mon, it's pretty obvious he doesn't give a damn about you. I hate to say this, but I really think you should take the hint. You've known each other for what, twenty years now? Don't you think that if he cared for you at all he would have said something to you by this time? What, do you think he's just waiting for the right moment? When's that going to be, when you're both eighty?"

He stared at her, but she didn't move or speak, just sat there with her back to him.

"C'mon Tifa, wake up!" he continued. "He never cared about you. He's just stringing you along until someone else comes along, and then it's sayonara. Even coming here, he just took off without a word. Doesn't that tell you something? You've traveled hundreds of miles, almost drowned, and now you're being hunted down like an animal, and for what? For all you know, he doesn't even want you to be here. For all you know, he came here by himself just to get away from you."

He slid over closer to her, until he was right behind her back.

"He doesn't deserve you," he said softly. "That's been obvious from the start to the people who really do care about you. I just wish you would realize that. If you keep this up, I'm afraid all that's going to happen is he's going to end up screwing you and then dumping you."

A shudder ran through her body, and she bowed her head.

Hesitantly he reached out and touched her shoulder. She did not react. He sidled up next to her and slowly put his arm around her.

"It's about time you took a hard look and realized who your friends really are," he said.

For the first time she turned to look at him, and though there were tears in her eyes, her face was expressionless.

"You're not my friend, Reno," she said slowly, taking his arm and removing it from her shoulder. "If I know anything at all, I know that. It's true, I don't know how Cloud feels about me, and I don't know why he left without telling me, but that doesn't mean I believe the hateful things you've said. I don't know whether he loves me, but we'll always be friends, and he wouldn't treat me like that. To tell you the truth, I think it's pretty pathetic of you to suggest such a thing just to try to have a roll in the hay with me."

He looked shocked.

"Why I never would have suggested such a thing!"

"Please," she said. She wiped the tears from her eyes. "It's much too late to try the innocent routine with me."

He shrugged and looked down the road again.

"Okay, I'm pathetic, what can I say?" he admitted. "So can we get out of here now?"

"No we can't," she replied. "You have to do something for me first."

"And what might that be?" he asked, sure he wasn't going to like the answer.

"You have to promise me something," she said. "You have to give me your word as a Turk that you will not lay a hand on me ever again."

He looked at her for a moment.

"C'mon Tifa, you know I was just kidding around," he said.

"Promise!"

He sighed.

"All right."

"All right what?"

He signed again.

"All right, I promise never to touch you again. I give you my word as a Turk. Now can we get out of here?"

She looked at him carefully before answering.

"Yes," she said.

They both stood up and walked back to the motorcycle.

"By the way, did you really mean what you said back there?" Tifa asked when they arrived.

"About what?" he questioned as he stepped onto the bike.

"About me being irresistibly attractive?"

He turned to look at her.

"Of course," he replied with a smile.

She hopped on behind him and he started it up.

"You are so full of shit," she said as they roared off down the road.

~*~

"As far as we can determine, the sub went down somewhere off the coast not far from here," Magnus said.

They stood on the beach looking out over the wind swept water. An endless line of white breakers rolled in at their feet. Except for themselves, the beach was empty.

Cloud looked out over the water, but all he saw was a few seagulls circling over the ocean in front of them.

"And you found no sign of them?"

Magnus shook his head.

"We scoured the beach, but we found nothing. The weather was rough. If they came up on the beach, their tracks would have been washed away. We know some strangers were spotted in a nearby village, so I think it's pretty safe to say at least some of them survived."

"A nearby village?" Cloud said. "Can we go there?"

"Yes, but it won't do any good," Magnus replied. "The town was destroyed by the Brotherhood."

"What?" Cloud said.

"It's not uncommon around these parts," Magnus continued. "The Brotherhood will use any tactics it can to strike fear into the community. A lot of smaller towns have been wiped out because they refused to cooperate with them. It's possible they may have even captured your friends."

"What would they do with them?" Cloud said, concerned.

"I don't think they'd kill them, at least not right away," Magnus replied. "They'll make valuable prisoners. I would think they would try to use them as a bargaining chip. But I don't really know."

"They may even try to recruit them," he continued. "After all, your friends don't know anything about this continent, they don't know how savage the Brotherhood can be, or what they've done."

"But wasn't it the Brotherhood who sank their ship?" Cloud asked.

"Yeah, but they may not know that," Magnus replied. "For all we know, the Brotherhood may tell them the government sank their ship."

Cloud did not respond. Things had gotten out of hand, and it was all his fault. He had agreed to come here, and by doing so accepted the risks. He hadn't wanted to drag his friends into it, however. But now they were the one's who were in danger.

The problem was that he was almost as much in the dark as his friends must have been. He really didn't know anything about the political going-ons on this continent. He had no way to judge what kind of danger they were all in. He didn't know anything about this Brotherhood. But now that he thought about it, he really didn't know anything about the government here either, or Magnus, or his father, for that matter. How did he know that anyone was telling him the truth?

"How did my father get here?" he asked.

"Huh?" Magnus said, seemingly surprised by the sudden change of subject.

"From what you've told me, you've tried to avoid contact with the other continents, and obviously you've succeeded, because no one I knew had ever made any mention of your existence. So how did my father get here?"

They had been walking slowly down the beach. Now Magnus stopped and looked out over the ocean.

"It was a long time ago," he said slowly. For a moment he just stood there looking thoughtful.

"There have always been a few ships from your shores that strayed upon us," he continued. "The waters to the north of our continent are notoriously stormy and unpredictable. A lot of times the ships that make it here are in bad shape, or are sunk off our shores. There have been many times that people from your continents have washed up on the shore here after one of their ships went down. Your father was one such person."

"It was during one of your many wars, I believe. I'm not really sure. It was a troop ship that got blown off course in a storm. The ship went down almost two miles out to sea. Your father was the only one to make it to shore."

Magnus turned and started walking slowly down the beach again, Cloud right behind him.

"It was a particularly bad time of year. In the autumn the storms are at their worst, and can rage on for days or even weeks. He was befriended by a nearby village, but no one was willing to risk the weather in a boat. He could not return."

"As it was we were fighting a war of our own at the time. To repay the villagers who had saved him, your father agreed to help them. He was pretty good with a sword, a trait he seems to have passed on, and fought well enough to be offered a position of command. By the time the storms had died down enough he had risen up in the ranks, and had made a name for himself here. To go back would have meant starting over. It just didn't seem..."

He lapsed into silence. Cloud looked at him, but he just kept on walking, seemingly lost in thought. Suddenly Magnus turned to look at him.

"Well, for whatever reason, he stayed," he said abruptly. "He's been working for the government ever since. I know he wanted to go back. He told me many times. But he just never seemed to get the chance. He always wondered what happened to you, and your mother."

"My mother was killed by a man named Sephiroth," Cloud said with more than a trace of bitterness. "Nibelheim, my hometown, was destroyed. Almost everyone I knew was killed."

Magnus looked down at the sand.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Cloud shrugged.

"It had nothing to do with you."

He looked closely at Magnus.

"How well do you know my father?"

Magnus shrugged and fixed Cloud with his gaze once more.

"About as well as anyone," he replied. "He was always kind of a loner."

Cloud nodded but said nothing more. Magnus looked down the beach, back the way they came this time.

"Well, I've got to get back to Mysteele," he said. "There are just too many things I have to take care of, and we still need to find your father. As you can see, there's not much going on here. Are you going to come back with me, or do you want to stay here?"

Cloud thought about it for a minute before answering.

"Are you going back right now?"

"Not right this minute, but soon. If you want to stay and look around for a little while, and then meet me later, that would be okay."

"I think I'll do that," Cloud responded.

"All right then," Magnus said. "I'll see you in a little while. And don't worry, we're doing everything we can to find your friends."

Cloud nodded and Magnus walked away. He looked back once to see Cloud staring off into the ocean. He shook his head slowly and continued walking. He had just reached the edge of the forest when he saw a man standing in the shadows of the trees.

Magnus stopped dead and looked quickly behind him, but Cloud was no longer in sight. Then he took a few steps toward the man.

"This is not a good place for you to meet me," he said with a hint of anger.

"What happened at the warehouse?" the man asked calmly. "You were supposed to hand Cloud over to us."

Magnus hesitated and looked around, but there was no one else in sight.

"Someone must have suspected something," he said in hushed tones. "Kendal had his own men there. They surprised us. I was lucky to get out of there alive myself. One of your people must have turned on us."

"Everyone involved was trustworthy," the man said sharply. "We made sure of it."

"Obviously they weren't as trustworthy as you thought."

"How do we know it wasn't one of your men?" the man questioned sharply.

Magnus sighed.

"I guess there's no point in arguing about it," he said. "We'll just have to come up with another plan. It won't be easy though, Kendal is going to be even more on guard now that he knows the Brotherhood is after Cloud."

"Well, you better come up with something, and fast," the man replied. "Is Kendal anywhere near getting what he wants?"

Magnus shook his head.

"They haven't even started," he replied. "They're playing it very carefully. They're doing everything they can to convince Cloud that they are his friends. They're handling him with kids gloves."

The man stood in silence for a moment.

"Very well," he said finally. "But we can't let him stay with them much longer. Ormando is getting nervous. He wants him

out of their hands within the week."

"I don't know whether that can be done," Magnus said.

"It better be," the man replied sharply. "We can't take the chance that they'll find out what they want to know. He's valuable to both of us alive, but if we can't have him, we're going to make sure nobody does. Am I making myself clear?"

Magnus nodded, but he looked plainly unhappy.

"Yes," he said.

"We'll be in touch," the man replied, then he turned and hurried off into the woods. In a moment he was gone.

Magnus looked back toward the beach, but all he saw was the low line of dunes. For a moment he stood there, a troubled look on his face, but then a look of resolve hardened his features. He turned away from the beach and continued on his way. Whatever happened, he knew it was too late to turn back now.

Cloud walked slowly down the beach, back the way he had come. He kept looking around, hoping to see some sign, some clue as to what had happened to his friends, but the beach was empty.

"Cloud."

He turned to see Wisteria walking across the sand toward him. He stopped and waited until she came up beside him.

"Did you find any sign of your friends?" she asked.

"No," he said.

She looked at him carefully.

"You really care about them, don't you?"

He nodded.

"They're the only family I have," he replied. "The only real family," he added, thinking about his father.

She came closer and took hold of his hand.

"You look so sad," she observed. "Is there something I can do to cheer you up?"

He turned toward her. She was gazing at him with a sympathetic look on her face. He could smell her perfume.

He shook his head slowly.

"Not unless you can find them for me," he said softly.

They started walking up the beach, away from the water, still hand in hand. Magnus had been right, there was nothing he could do here. Whether he liked it or not, he was going to have to depend on other people to find his friends.

"I'm sure they're all fine," Wisteria said.

He did not reply. The water had disappeared behind them now, hidden by the dunes. Suddenly she stopped.

"Isn't there anything I can do for you?" she said slowly. "I know you're worried about your friends."

She was right beside him, but now she moved even closer, until her body brushed up against his. She looked into his eyes and smiled.

"I can't find them for you," she said slowly, "but maybe I can do something that will take your mind off them for a little while."

She slipped her arms around his neck. Then she leaned forward and kissed him.

He stood there motionless for a moment, then he gently pulled her arms down from around him. He stepped back and turned away, his face red.

She tilted her head and smiled again.

"Still shy?" she asked. "I told you I liked that in a man."

"I...I really don't think this is a good idea," he stammered.

"Why not?" she asked. "Don't you find me attractive?"

She looked at him and her smile faded.

"Or is it someone else?"

He didn't answer for a moment, but he suddenly realized she had given him a way to say no without hurting her feelings.

"Yes," he said.

She stood there for a moment, then nodded her head slowly.

"One of your friends on the ship?"

He nodded.

"If anyone came at all, it would be her," he replied.

Wisteria looked down at the ground and dug her toe into the sand.

"What's her name?"

For some reason Cloud felt a strange reluctance to tell her.

"What difference does it make?" he asked.

She looked back up at him. Then she smiled again and stepped toward him.

"I don't think there's really anyone at all," she said. "I think you're just playing hard to get. I warn you, I don't give up easily."

He looked at her as she stared into his eyes again.

"Her name is Tifa," he said finally. "Tifa Lockheart."

Wisteria did not reply, just stood looking at him for some time. Then she nodded.

"No wonder you look so worried," she said. "But I'm sure we'll find her."

"Thanks," Cloud replied, suddenly feeling greatly relieved.

"Okay," she said. "I guess we better head back now."

She held out her hand.

"I don't suppose this Tifa would object if you escorted me?"

He slowly reached out and took her hand.

"I suppose not," he said with a faint smile.

They walked back up through the dunes. Kendal had set up a command post in a beach house that stood in a small clearing among the trees. It only took them a few minutes to return to it. When they arrived Wisteria excused herself and quickly walked off. It didn't take her long to find Kendal. He was standing over a map spread out on the table in front of him, looking it over carefully.

"Kendal," she said softly as she came up behind him.

"Hmm," he replied, not turning to look.

"I have a favor to ask," she said.

He turned to look at her with a frown, but she just smiled sweetly at him.

"A favor," he said dubiously.

"Yes," she replied. She stepped closer to him. "I'll make it worth your while."

He didn't reply for a moment, just stood looking at her. He hated the fact that he could not resist her.

"What is it?" he said resignedly.

"When you find Cloud's friends," she said, still smiling, but now it had an evil look to it. "I want you to bring me Tifa

Lockhart, and I want her alive."