

CHAPTER X: THINGS ARE STARTING TO LOOK BLEAK

The bar was perhaps three quarters full. Mostly soldiers, but that wasn't unusual considering the barracks that stood just down the street. There were the usual young women in the crowd as well, some there to have a drink and a good time dancing, others there for a different kind of good time. There were a few other men who were not soldiers as well. One sat with his legs propped up in a dark corner of the tavern, complete unnoticed by anyone else. He seemed to be lost in thought, looking down at the drink in his hand, not paying much attention to what was going on around him, but that impression was far from correct.

Vincent took another sip from his drink. He had spent most of the evening sitting at one bar or another, unobtrusively trying to gather some information that might help them to find Cloud. This was the third bar tonight, and by far the most promising, with all these soldiers here, but the most dangerous as well, for the same reason. He had been listening to two men in particular who sat not far away. They were talking loudly, obviously beginning to feel the effects of their drinks. Their conversation had been pretty innocuous so far, but then he heard something that made him take notice.

"I heard Captain Tremaine's squad took a beating yesterday," the first man said.

"Yeah," his companion replied. "They had gotten a tip about some spies. He took his squad to try to capture them by himself. I guess he wanted all the glory. What he got was something else entirely."

The man didn't seem to be broken up about it.

"I heard it was a girl that whipped them," the first man continued.

"Yeah," the other replied with a chuckle. "She had some kind of materia. Very powerful. I had heard that the spies didn't even know how to use materia properly. There's all kinds of rumors flying now."

"I'll say," the first man said thoughtfully. "I wonder if this has anything to do with the guy with the sword."

"Who?"

"The guy with the sword," the first man repeated. "Up at the Presidential Palace. You mean you haven't heard?"

"I heard that something happened up there yesterday. Some kind of assassination attempt?"

"That's it," the first man said, nodding. "Right in the main lobby of the Presidential Palace. They don't know how he got in, but security was caught with its pants down. They didn't suspect a thing. Heads are gonna roll for that one, that's for sure. Apparently he fought the assassin off by himself, the guy with the sword, I mean. I don't know his name. Drove that sword of his right through the guy. Heard it made a huge mess. The guy with the sword was wounded, but he's supposed to be all right. Gram was flipping out."

The second man nodded slowly.

"So who is this guy?"

"I don't know," the first man replied, shrugging. "No one seems to know who he is or where he came from. It's all been hush hush up there, but there's something going on. Something big. Everybody's been walking around on pins and needles. I don't know, maybe it has something to do with Gram officially taking office as President, but somehow I don't think so."

Another song started on the jukebox, and the rest of the conversation was drowned out. Still, Vincent had heard enough. He got up to leave. Behind him a man pushed his chair back, just as the waitress walked by. She twisted out of the way, but one of the bottles on her tray tipped and fell to the floor with a crash.

The two men Vincent had been eavesdropping on turned to look at the commotion. Vincent walked quickly away, but one of the men looked at him. He turned back to his companion and jerked a thumb in Vincent's direction.

"Was that guy sitting by us?"

The second shrugged.

"I have no idea."

The first man watched Vincent as he headed for the door. Then he stood up.

"I think he was," he said. "C'mon."

The second man looked up skeptically but then reluctantly rose.

They walked out onto the street. The first man looked around and saw a dark figure down near the end of the block.

"Hey you, hold on a minute," he called out. "I'd like to have a word with you."

The man did not turn or look back, in fact he did not acknowledge at all that he had heard the call. A moment later he disappeared around the corner.

The two soldiers followed, suddenly running now. They reached the corner and looked around. They could see the man farther down the block. He had crossed the street.

"Hey you," the first man called out, more authoritatively this time. "Stop!"

The person in front of them did not pause or look back. Either he was deaf or he was ignoring them.

They took off down the street after him.

The man did not run. There was a low stone wall running along the street next to him. The men following him could see the dark outline of trees beyond it. Suddenly the man turned and disappeared over the wall.

The other two came up to the spot where he went over and stopped. There was a gate in the wall just a few paces in front of them. The gate was closed and locked, but they could make out the name above it and knew what lay beyond.

The cemetery.

The two stood there looking at each other. The wall was just barely higher than their heads. One man grabbed hold of it and hauled himself up to look over. He paused for a moment then dropped back down.

"I don't see anything," he said.

They looked at each other, and both of them seemed to come to the same conclusion.

"It was probably nothing," the first man said.

"Yeah," the second man agreed. "Probably. Besides, the guy could be anywhere by now. We've got better things to do than go running around on some wild goose chase."

"Absolutely," the first man responded. "Let's head back to the bar. We've still got a couple of hours to get some drinking in."

The two walked away from the cemetery, thus saving themselves from becoming residents.

Vincent slowly put his gun away and walked out of the shadows of an overhanging willow tree. He slipped back over the wall. The street was now deserted. Quickly he hurried off.

It didn't take him long to reach their hotel. It was not the same one as the other night. He thought it prudent that they didn't remain in one spot more than a day or two. He walked slowly up to the side of the building, then, after looking around carefully, climbed quickly up to a window on the third floor.

Elena's hand automatically went for her gun when she heard the tapping on the window. She relaxed when she looked over and saw Vincent outside. She got up and opened the window. Vincent quickly slipped inside, and she closed it behind him.

"The place has a front door you know," she commented.

He shrugged.

"I didn't want to draw attention to myself," he replied.

She looked at him.

"So you thought climbing up the side of the building would draw less attention than walking in the main entrance?"

Vincent paused for a moment to think it over.

"Yes," he replied. "If no one sees you."

She smiled.

"You have a flair for the dramatic," she stated.

"On the contrary," he replied. "I am trying to be as unobtrusive as possible."

She decided not to pursue it.

"Did you find out anything?"

"Yes, I know where Cloud is."

She looked at him in surprise. She waited, but he said nothing.

"Well, are you going to tell me?"

"In the Presidential Palace," Vincent replied. "Apparently he is an important man. Important enough for someone to try to kill."

"Huh?" Elena said.

Vincent recounted the conversation he had heard in the bar.

"Looks like he's got himself mixed up in something big," Elena commented when he had finished. "So what do we do now?"

Vincent sat down on the bed.

"I suppose we should try to contact him," he said. "For all we know, he isn't even aware that we are here."

Elena sat on the bed behind him and started to massage his shoulders.

"Won't he be surprised," she said.

"Of course, we will have to be discreet," he continued. "I'm sure they wouldn't be too happy if we just walked in the front door."

She leaned forward and kissed him on the neck.

"Security will be tight," he went on after a moment. "It is the Presidential Palace, after all. And after the assassination attempt, things will be even tougher. It's not going to be easy to get near him."

"Uh huh," Elena said softly, whispering it directly into his ear.

He turned toward her and pulled her around in front of him, into his lap. He leaned forward and kissed her. She slowly slid her arms up around his neck.

Their lips parted. He looked at her.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable wearing...less?"

She disengaged and stood up, looking at him coyly.

"How much less?" she asked.

He sat there and his eyes ran up and down her body.

"Much less," he said slowly. "Much, much less."

Some time later Elena lay in bed, her head resting on Vincent's chest. She felt so comfortable there, and safe. For a short time all the danger and worries of the world around them had disappeared. It had been good to forget about their troubles. She needed that every once in a while, to be able to retreat from the world.

"Do you think everything will turn out all right?" she asked.

Vincent was stroking her back lightly with one hand.

"Are you looking for an honest answer or reassurance?" he asked.

A smile crossed her face for at that.

"Reassurance," she said after a moment.

"Everything is going to turn out wonderful," Vincent replied immediately.

She lifted her head and looked at him. The lamp was out, but enough light from the streets outside crept in for her to see

he was looking at her as well.

"What about for us?" she asked. "Do you think everything will be all right, between us."

She looked at him closely, but she could not see the expression in his eyes in the dark.

"Reassurance again?" he asked eventually.

She smiled.

"Most definitely."

He leaned forward and kissed her. When he sat back again she continued to stare at him. She didn't speak for a long time.

"I love you, vampire," she said softly.

He looked at her for a second and then turned away, and suddenly she was afraid she had said the wrong thing. She knew how difficult this was for him, how hard it was to let himself have feelings for someone after so long and all that had happened to him. For a moment she could almost feel the wall slipping down between them.

But then he pulled her slowly to him, his hand caressing her hair lightly. He did not say anything, but she could feel him struggling to keep from slipping back into his shell, back behind his armor.

"I...I'm sorry," she said. She didn't want to push him too much. She knew what he had gone through. She could not blame him.

"No," he said. She could not see his face, but she felt him slowly forcing himself to relax. "No, it's not your fault."

They lay there in silence, his right hand now resting on the back of her head. His left arm lay at his side, and she could see the metal hand at the end of it dimly in the darkness. It struck her at that moment that she really didn't know what he had gone through. She could understand, but she could never really know. She hadn't asked him what Hojo had done, she was determined to never mention it, never to bring it up, no matter how curious she might be. And she was curious, she couldn't help it. She was going to wait for him, no matter how long it might take, even if he never told her.

She didn't need for him to say it. She didn't need for him to say anything.

~*~

Aeris awoke and sat up, looking around slowly in the dark. She could see the dim shape of Reeve in the other bed. He seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

She took a deep breath. She had been having an unpleasant dream, though she could not remember what it was about. She could only recall a strong sense of danger. Someone had been trying to warn her. She could almost hear the voice even now. It had not been the voice of anyone she knew.

She got up, feeling oddly restless. She went to turn on the light, but then looked over at Reeve and thought better of it. No need to disturb him. She walked over to the sink, the light from outside more than adequate for her. She poured herself a glass of water and was surprised to see that her hand was trembling slightly.

She turned around and leaned against the counter. She could not shake the feeling of danger. It had seemed so real, so urgent. But it had just been a dream.

Or had it?

She put down the glass and walked slowly across the room, being careful to be especially quiet as she passed the foot of Reeve's bed. She had heard her mother's voice at times of need. This had been similar to that, but not the same, and it certainly had not been her mother. Still, she felt that there was more to it than just a simple dream.

She reached the door to the room. Her hand slipped around the knob. Then she opened it as slowly as she could, just a crack, and looked out.

She could see men in uniform down at the end of the hallway.

She closed the door and slipped over beside Reeve.

"Reeve," she hissed.

He was facing away from her. She saw a slight motion.

"Aeris," he said softly.

"Reeve, there's someone outside. We've got to warn the others," she said.

He did not respond.

"Reeve?"

She bent closer. It took her a moment to realize that he was still asleep.

"Reeve!" she said as loudly as she dared. She reached down and shook him.

"Huh?" he said, sitting up suddenly. He remained there blinking for a moment, then looked at her.

"What's wrong?"

"They've found us," she said. "They're outside in the hall. We've got to get out of here."

He scrambled out of bed and turned on the light. Aeris winced and shaded her eyes.

"You trying to blind me?" she protested.

"Sorry," he replied. "What about the others? Does Vincent know?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I don't think so."

"We've got to warn them," he said, starting for the door. Then he stopped.

"We can't get to their room without being seen," Aeris stated.

He nodded.

"So what do we do?" he asked.

She stood there hesitantly. Whatever they were going to do, they had better do it fast.

"We could call them," he suggested, pointing to the phone.

Aeris shook her head.

"The men outside would be sure to hear it. It would give us away."

"But at least they'd have some warning," Reeve countered.

He looked over at the window. They could probably slip out, and maybe get away without being seen. But could they really abandon Vincent and Elena? They were the only reason they had gotten this far in the first place. What would they do without them?

On the other hand, wouldn't it be better if some of them got away? It wouldn't help Vincent and Elena if they were all caught together.

He walked over and looked out the window. He didn't see anyone in the street below.

"Reeve?" Aeris said quietly, but he could hear the urgency in her voice.

He looked back at her, then at his shotgun propped up on against the wall by the side of his bed. The shotgun Vincent had given him.

He glanced at Aeris once more, then back out the window again. He felt his throat going dry, but he knew they could not abandon their friends. He walked over and picked up the weapon.

"Call them," he said. "Tell them to unlock their door."

Aeris hesitated for a moment, looking at Reeve with just a hint of surprise, but then she lifted the phone.

He stepped over to the door, checking to make sure the gun was loaded. It was. He looked over at Aeris, feeling his heart suddenly thumping against his chest. His hands trembled as he held the gun, a gun he had never before fired in anger.

Aeris heard the ring at the other end of the line. Reeve heard it more faintly through the door. It was picked up almost instantly.

"Yes," she heard Vincent say sharply.

"We're in danger," she said rapidly. "Unlock your door, but don't open it until you hear us."

He hung up.

She picked up her rod and quickly came over to stand behind Reeve. He looked at her and took a deep breath. He couldn't change his mind now.

He turned the knob, as silently as he could. He could feel sweat beading on his brow.

He flung the door open and stepped out into the hall. He saw some soldiers standing in front of Vincent and Elena's door. He didn't really notice how many. They turned to look at him as he fired.

He had braced himself for the blast, but the noise was louder than he expected in the narrow hallway. He saw the soldiers crumple to the ground as blood splattered the wall and hallway behind them. Even after that viscous blast, he could see that some of the soldiers, who had been shielded by the one's in front, still stood.

Suddenly the door to Vincent and Elena's room opened. Vincent stepped out, a pistol in each hand. He rapidly fired half a dozen shots. When he had finished no soldiers remained standing in the hallway. He turned toward Aeris and Reeve. He was wearing just a pair of pants.

"There's bound to be more of them," he growled. He looked back in his room.

"Hurry up, Elena!"

She came out a moment later, trying to button the top few buttons of her blouse while still holding her gun in her hand.

"This way," Vincent exclaimed. He led them down the hall, away from the soldiers. There was a door at the end of the corridor that led to a back stairway. Vincent led them inside and then stopped for a moment, listening carefully, but he heard no sound.

He started down the stairs, signaling for the others to be silent. At any moment Aeris expected them to run into another group of soldiers coming up the stairwell, but they made it to the bottom without incident. They stood in a small vestibule with two doors on opposite walls, one leading back into the hotel and the other outside. The latter was padlocked.

Vincent looked at Elena.

"Do you have your equipment?"

"Of course," she said, stepping forward and taking a pouch out of her pants pocket. She opened it and removed a small tool. A minute later the padlock was open.

Vincent pulled the door open and they stepped out into the night. It was colder than Aeris had expected, she shivered and looked at Vincent, but he didn't even seem to notice.

They were standing in a narrow alley that ran along the back of the building. There were no streetlights here, and the tall buildings around them cut off the moonlight, making it difficult for even Aeris to see. She looked back and forth down the alley. Vincent had already started to lead the others off to the right, but she did not move. Looking in the opposite direction she thought she could make out dim forms.

Suddenly the alley was inundated by a blinding white light.

Aeris shaded her eyes and turned away. The others all turned around in surprise. Two large spotlights had been turned on, revealing both them and the alley around them.

"You are surrounded."

A man stepped into the light. Vincent brought his gun up, but he did not fire. His eyes were beginning to adjust, and he saw that beneath the spotlight the alley was crowded with soldiers.

"I'm afraid that there are too many of us for even you to kill, Vincent Valentine," the man said. He came up closer to them, until he was but a few feet away.

"Put down your weapons."

Vincent looked around. He saw that there were more soldiers coming into the alley now from the other direction.

He turned back to the man and dropped his gun. Reeve and Aeris put down their weapons as well. After a moments

hesitation, Elena followed suit.

"A wise decision," the man said. "My name is Kendal."

"How did you find us?" Vincent asked.

"I'm afraid I can't reveal my sources," Kendal replied. "Don't want to give my informants away. They might be needed another time. But suffice it to say that someone noticed you. I have to admit it was very clever of you to make it this far."

Vincent did not reply.

"How do you know who we are?" Elena questioned.

Kendal stopped to look her over for a minute. Reeve looked over at her and noticed her shirt hadn't been buttoned properly.

"We know all about you, Elena," Kendal replied. "We know about everyone who was on board your submarine."

He looked back at Vincent.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

"We don't know," Vincent replied. "We were separated."

Kendal did not look pleased with that response.

"I'm not sure I believe you," he said. "It is foolish to try to protect them. We're going to find them anyway, and it will be much easier for you if you tell me what you know."

"He's telling the truth," Reeve spoke up. "We don't know where they are."

Kendal looked over at him, then back at the others.

"It appears that I am not making myself clear on this matter," he said slowly. "Perhaps a little demonstration is needed to convince you of the seriousness of the situation."

He scratched the back of his head, then looked up.

"Kill..." he said slowly, his hand coming up, and looking at each of them slowly in turn, "...that one."

A man came up behind Aeris and pushed her forward, then placed a hand on her shoulder and forced her down, until she was on her knees.

"No!" Reeve cried out, looking at Kendal and taking a step forward.

"We don't know where the others are," he exclaimed. "I swear it's true."

Neither Vincent or Elena spoke, nor moved at all, for that matter.

Kendal walked over and stood in front of Reeve, looking at him carefully.

"We were separated when the submarine sank," Reeve said. "We haven't seen them since. For all we know, they could all be dead."

Kendal stood there looking at him for a long time. Finally he turned away.

"I believe you," he said. He looked over at Aeris.

"But six of my men are dead," he continued. "That's put us all in a bad mood. I'm afraid someone is going to have to pay or my men will be very unhappy."

He paused for just a moment.

"Kill her anyway."

The man behind Aeris brought up his gun. Aeris remained on her knees, her head bowed. Reeve could not see her face.

"No!" Reeve cried again. "She had nothing to do with that. I'm the one that shot them."

The man standing behind Aeris looked at Kendal, who raised his hand for him to wait. Kendal looked at Reeve again.

"It appears you have rather strong feelings for this girl," he said.

Reeve hesitated, looking over at Aeris.

"She hasn't hurt anyone," he said.

Kendal took his own pistol out and suddenly aimed it at Reeve.

"So what?" he said. "You think because she is innocent she shouldn't be hurt? It happens all the time. Innocence is no protection. People who have done no harm die every day. Life isn't fair, but that's the way it is. How far would you go to see her live?"

He pulled back the hammer on his gun. It was pointed now directly at Reeve's chest.

"How much do you care for this girl?" Kendal continued. "Do you care enough to take the bullet for her? It's your choice. Just say the word. Are you willing to die for her?"

Reeve looked over at Aeris again. She was not looking up. He turned back to Kendal.

Kendal took a step closer.

"Oh this is so delicious," he said, a smile on his face. "What'll it be? I'm afraid I can't wait much longer. My finger is getting itchy on the trigger. Just say the word, and I'll lower my gun. Just say the word."

Reeve felt sweat on his temple once again. His heart was thumping in his chest and his mouth was dry. He turned once more to look at Aeris, and this time he saw she was looking at him. Her dark green eyes staring at him with a mixture of sympathy and horror.

"Well?" Kendal said, but Reeve barely heard him. He continued to look at Aeris, focusing only on her, her gentle face and soft, soft green eyes. He refused to let himself think of anything else, of anything but her. It wasn't fair for her to be hurt, not again, not ever again.

There was a noise, then pain. He felt his legs moving, stumbling back. but all the while, even as he fell to the ground, he kept his eyes focused on her. He felt himself gasping for breath, but it didn't matter, as long as she was safe. He tried to lift his arm, but he found he no longer had the strength. The pain was incessant now, but that didn't matter either. He had promised to keep her safe, even if she didn't need or want it. He had promised.

He had kept his word.

Her image slowly started to fade, and suddenly the pain began to melt away, replaced by a deep feeling of peace. He had done what he could, and with that he could accept the darkness that was now descending around him.

It didn't matter anymore.

He would be her bodyguard...

"Reeve!" Aeris screamed. She pulled out of the man's grasp and ran toward him, but Kendal suddenly reached out and pulled her back savagely.

"Leave him," he exclaimed. "Leave him for the rats."

He looked at Vincent and Elena, who still had not moved, but Elena's face was pale.

"Bring them along," he said to his men. "I have orders to kill you all, but that can wait, at least for a little while. It may be true that you don't know where the other's are, but you still might be able to help us find them. We might be able to lure them in using you as bait."

He let them away. Vincent and Elena following silently, Aeris still held in Kendal's grip, looking back at the slumped figure lying on the cold street and crying softly, until they turned a corner and the alley disappeared from view.

The other soldiers quickly followed, and soon the alley was deserted and dark once more. But almost as soon as the last soldier had gone, a figure slipped out of the shadows of a doorway. A doorway no one had paid any attention to earlier. The figure walked slowly over to Reeve and stooped down beside him, and if Reeve would have been able to notice such things, he would have immediately recognized him as the man he had followed on the train. Now the man examined Reeve quickly, almost immediately noticing the shallow rise of fall of Reeve's chest.

The man bent his head and seemed to be concentrating on something. A light breeze suddenly seemed to blow through his graying hair. Then suddenly it blew stronger, until it swirled around him, quickly building until the entire alley was filled with gusting wind. Papers and other debris flew up into the air, caught up in the sudden gale. Then, as quickly as it had

appeared, the torrent of wind subsided. In moments the alley was silent again.

The man slowly got to his feet. He looked down at Reeve, and saw with satisfaction that his breathing was much stronger and regular now. He turned to hurry away, and as he did so the moon rose over the top of one of the buildings to his left. He looked up at it, and it gleamed faintly in his deep green eyes.

When Reeve opened his eyes he was alone in the alley.

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"Is this what you guys normally do?" Nipala asked.

"Huh?" Red said. They were alone in a room in Orlando's headquarters.

"Well, I've just met you and already we've run off to some strange continent and find ourselves being hunted by practically everyone here," she clarified. "I think I might have been better off before."

Red smiled.

"We do seem to have a knack for getting ourselves in trouble," he replied. "Do you wish we hadn't come."

"No," Nipala said immediately. She had been chased in the past, many times. In fact, she had been on the run all her life. But this was different. All those other times she had been alone.

"No, not at all," she continued. She didn't want to go back to that life, not ever.

Rude entered the room and walked over to them slowly. They could see one of Orlando's men appear outside the door. Rude nodded toward the man.

"I don't think they trust us."

Red nodded.

"They do seem to be keeping a close eye on us," he said. He had noticed that at least one of Orlando's men always seemed to be around.

"I think everyone here is paranoid," Nipala commented.

"And they may all have good reason," Rude added. "Have you seen Zack?"

Nipala shook her head.

"No," she replied. "We saw him go off with Orlando a while ago, but we haven't seen him since."

"Do you know where they went?" he asked.

Red shook his head.

Rude fell silent. He wanted to talk to Orlando himself. Since they had arrived here yesterday they had done nothing, and Rude was restless. He wanted to know what Orlando had in mind, if anything. So far, no one here had told him anything.

Suddenly Dr. Lee appeared in the doorway. He looked over at them.

"Come," he said, his voice conveying a sense of urgency. "We have to leave."

They all looked at him.

"What happened?" Rude said.

"We've been discovered," Dr. Lee replied. "Hurry."

He turned and stepped back out into the hallway. When the others followed he hurried down the hall.

"How did they find us?" Rude asked.

"I don't know," Dr. Lee replied without looking back. "The government has spies everywhere."

They reached an intersection. Dr. Lee led them straight across. They could hear gunfire to the left.

"Hurry up," Dr. Lee said, increasing his pace.

A few minutes later Dr. Lee opened a door that led out into the night. He stepped out and looked around, then motioned for them to follow. There was a van parked on the curb, it looked like the same van they had come here in. Dr. Lee opened the door.

"Get in."

Red and Nipala padded inside. Rude hesitated and looked back at the building they had just left.

"What about Zack?" he questioned.

"We can't worry about him now," Dr. Lee replied. "He's with Ormando. I'm sure they'll both be fine. Hurry!"

Rude paused for just a moment more, then stepped into the van. Dr. Lee hopped in the front, and in moments they were driving away.

"Where are we going?" Red questioned.

"A safe house on the south side," Dr. Lee replied. "We've got quite a few of them in the city."

"Just how safe is this 'safe' house," Rude asked.

Dr. Lee shrugged.

"As safe as possible," he replied. "There are no guarantees."

They fell silent. Rude looked out the front window of the van, but he wasn't really paying much attention.

"The girl you mentioned when we first met," Dr. Lee said, not looking back at him. "The brunette. That was Tifa Lockhart?"

"Yes," Rude said immediately.

"She's been captured. They brought her up to the Presidential Palace. She's not the only one who's here. Some of your other friends wiped out a squad of soldiers down by the waterfront. Some others may have been captured to, or worse, but I'm not sure. There are all kinds of rumors flying around. The whole city is in an uproar."

Rude did not reply, just sat there in silence. Red wanted to say something to reassure him, but he could not think of anything to say.

Ten minutes later Dr. Lee pulled the van to a halt in front of a large apartment building. Before it had even stopped a man had run up to the drivers window. Dr. Lee rolled it down and the man said something to him hurriedly. Red could not make out what the man was saying.

Dr. Lee nodded and then pulled the van out into the street again.

"We've got a pickup to make," he said. "It's not far from here."

"Who?" Rude asked.

"I don't know," Dr. Lee replied. "One of your friends."

It was only a few minutes later that Dr. Lee pulled to the side of the road. Three men appeared out of the darkness. The back of the van was opened and someone stepped in.

"Reeve!" Red exclaimed.

The doors slammed shut, and the van was moving again even before Reeve had a chance to sit down. He did sit down, and then looked at them slowly, shaking his head.

"You don't know how good it is to see you," he said.

Red looked at him closely. He had a strange look on his face.

"What happened?" Red asked. "Have you seen any of the others?"

Reeve just looked around slowly. He acted like he hadn't even heard the question.

"Reeve, are you okay?" Nipala asked.

"I don't know," Reeve replied. His hand came up and touched his chest, moving around as if searching for something. He

looked down.

"It's gone," he said softly.

"What?" Red questioned. "What's gone?"

Again Reeve did not respond. Finally he dropped his hand and looked up at them.

"The bullet hole," he said.

"What?" Nipala exclaimed.

"I was shot," he said. "I should be dead."

Red looked at him thoughtfully.

"Maybe you should start from the beginning," he said.

Reeve nodded. He gave them a brief sketch of what had happened to him and the others, leaving out most of the details. At the end he just told them that Kendal had shot him and taken the others.

"Then I woke again in the alley," he finished. "I had a pain in my chest, but there was no wound. I was fine. It took me a while to realize that it was all real, that I wasn't dreaming and I wasn't really dead. A short time later some men came and got me. They said they were with the Brotherhood and were friends. We waited until the van came, and here I am."

"Do you think Aeris healed you?" Rude asked.

"I don't know," Reeve replied.

"I don't think her spell is strong enough to have healed him so completely," Red commented.

"So then what happened?" Nipala asked.

"I don't know," Reeve repeated. "It almost seems like some kind of miracle."

They fell silent as the van came to a halt again. Dr. Lee turned toward them.

"Okay, we're here."

They all got out and walked into the large apartment building. As soon as they entered they saw Orlando coming toward them. He had a bandage wrapped around his left arm and a grim expression on his face.

"Where's Zack?" Rude asked.

Orlando did not reply, just stood there for a long time. Just by the way he was looking at them they could tell something was wrong.

"We were caught in an ambush inside the building," Orlando finally said. "It took us by surprise. Half the men that were with me died almost immediately. Most of others were wounded. It was a miracle any of us got out of there at all."

He looked from one to the other of them, his face grim but his eyes showing no emotion at all.

"I'm afraid your friend didn't make it."