

CHAPTER III: LAND HO!

Cloud followed Magnus slowly into the building. Three other men had gone around the back.

Cloud looked around. They were in a large warehouse-like structure not far from the harbour. The room they had entered appeared to be a small office. The front wall of the room was covered with glass panels, and Cloud could see a large room filled with crates and motorized equipment beyond it.

Magnus held up a hand for him to wait and slowly made his way across the room. He opened a door, grimacing at the slight squeak it made, then stood there for a moment listening. Satisfied, he waved Cloud over. Cloud came up beside him and they both stepped into the next room.

Cloud glanced to the left and right, but he could not see very far. Machinery and crates blocked his view in all directions. Magnus waved for him to move to the right. Cloud drew his sword and held it ready as they slowly worked their way forward.

He stepped around a corner and saw movement ahead of him. He brought his sword back, ready to strike, when he realized it was one of Magnus' men, one of the ones who had gone around back.

Magnus came up beside him.

"Find anything?" he asked.

The man shook his head. The other's came up and gathered around them. Magnus looked around.

"There's no one here. Perhaps our 'source' was in error."

Just then they heard a sound behind them.

Both Magnus and Cloud turned to see dark figures stepping out from behind the machinery in the direction they had just come from. There were a dozen of them. They spread out in front of a large stack of crates, their weapons ready.

One of the men near the center of the group spoke.

"You're outnumbered. But there is no need for you to die uselessly."

He looked at Cloud.

"Hand him over to us and we'll let you go peacefully."

Cloud looked at him, but Magnus did not appear surprised at all. He folded his arms across his chest.

"You know I can't do that," he replied. "But perhaps there is something else I can give you."

The man frowned. Magnus brought his hands forward, and green light glowed inside them.

The crates behind the men burst into flames. Immediately Magnus dropped the fire materia and grabbed hold of Cloud, dragging them both down to the floor, with Magnus on top.

Suddenly Cloud was deafened by a tremendous explosion. He felt intense heat, and the world spun around him. Both he and Magnus went tumbling across the floor. He came to rest again when he banged roughly against a group of barrels banded together with long metal strips.

For a moment he lay there, stunned. Then he slowly turned and looked around. The crates that Magnus had set on fire were gone, turned to splinters by the huge explosion. He pulled himself to his feet, noticing blood dripping from his arm, but he felt no pain. He could see a few bodies lying on the ground.

Magnus slowly stood up beside him. He had a long scrape across his cheek. He looked around and shook his head.

"What the hell was that?" Cloud asked.

Magnus turned toward him.

"I noticed that the crates they were standing in front of were the ones used by a mining company to ship their explosives. I thought igniting it would even the odds a bit."

Cloud looked around again. He could see the body of one of Magnus' men lying nearby.

"I think they're all dead," he said, nodding toward the body.

Magnus looked at him with no hint of emotion in his eyes. He shook his head and said nothing.

"Why did he want me?" Cloud asked.

Magnus shook his head again.

"I don't know," he replied. "Obviously they know a lot more about you than we suspected. I didn't think you would become a target, but thinking back on it now I can see that was foolish. We'll have to be more careful from now on."

They heard a low groan.

"Looks like someone may still be alive," Magnus observed.

They walked over to where they had heard the sound. There was a man half buried in a pile of debris nearby. Cloud could see his hand moving feebly.

"Here he is," he said.

He stepped beside the man and lifted off the broken piece of a crate. It was the man who had spoken to them.

Magnus came over quickly. He looked down at the man.

"I'll do what I can for him," he said. "You go see if you can get us some help."

Cloud nodded slowly and then turned away. Magnus watched Cloud until he disappeared from view, then he bent down beside the man and slowly lifted his head. The man groaned and opened his eyes.

"Magnus," he said slowly, the words coming with difficulty. "What have you done? This wasn't the way it was supposed to work. You have betrayed us!"

Magnus did not reply, just looked at him silently. Slowly he drew out a dagger that had been hidden in his belt. The man's eyes widened as Magnus leaned forward.

The man cried out and then slumped to the floor. Magnus stood up. He looked down for a moment, but the man no longer moved. Then he slipped his dagger back into his belt and walked out of the room.

~*~

Shivering and dripping wet, Aeris walked slowly along the shore. She and Zack had climbed up on deck as soon as they had heard Cid cry out. The others were already in the water. She could not see them, but she could hear their shouts. Zack had grabbed her hand and they had plunged in. She tried to stay with him, but almost immediately the waves had dragged them apart, and instead she had found herself using all her strength just to stay afloat. She heard both Zack and some of the others calling out, but each time they had sounded farther and farther away, until she heard them no more, and she had found herself alone in the dark water.

She had no idea how long she had struggled in the storm. But eventually she dragged herself to shore. Now she peered into the darkness, but saw no sign of her friends. The wind still howled around her, and she had given up calling. She had to get off the beach and out of this wind.

She took one more look around. The rain had stopped, but the wind had not lessened. She could not see far in the darkness, but the beach around her was empty.

Reluctantly she made up into the dunes. She had hoped to remain on the beach on the chance that she would see any of her friends who might come ashore here, but she was too cold and wet to stay any longer. She needed to find some shelter.

There was a dark line of trees beyond the dunes. She could see no lights, or any other sign of civilization. Although the rain had stopped, the clouds were still thick over her head. She could not see very far ahead. But to her left she could make out the dark form of a bluff overlooking the ocean. Perhaps she would be able to see something from that vantage point.

She made her way through the darkness, slowly climbing up the slope. The ground was rough and covered with short twisting pine trees and a low growing shrub with sharp spiky leaves. More than once she felt them jabbing into her ankle.

At the top the foliage disappeared, except for a few wind beaten tufts of grass. The wind was stronger than ever here, and it whirled around her, making her shiver uncontrollably. She couldn't stay here long.

She looked out over the ocean. She could hear the waves crashing on the shore below, but all she saw was a sea of blackness. She turned in a slow circle. The forest inland was just as dark as the ocean, but then she saw the twinkling of three or four pinpoints of light off to the south. It appeared to be quite a ways off in the forest.

She shrugged and started back down the slope, this time angling away from the beach toward the dark treeline. But she hadn't taken more than a few steps when she stopped and turned, listening suddenly.

"Aeris!"

It was Vincent's voice, but for a moment she did not see him. Then three figures suddenly materialized out of the darkness. One of them immediately came over to her.

"Aeris, are you all right?" Reeve questioned. He looked at her closely. "Oh, you're shivering."

"We're all cold," Elena stated, coming up beside them as well. "C'mon, let's find some place out of this wind."

"Looks like that may be a town over there," Aeris said, pointing toward the lights. The others turned to look.

"Do you think we should go there?" Reeve questioned.

Aeris looked at him..

"Well, we can't stay here," she replied.

"We need to get out of the wind and find some dry clothes," Vincent agreed.

"But they already blew our ship out of the water," Reeve stated. "How do we know these people will be any friendlier?"

"We don't," Vincent replied. "But it seems like we have little choice. That ship may have actively been seeking intruders, but they may not be interested in us at all in some small village."

Reeve did not reply, realizing that Vincent was right. Whether the villagers were hostile or friendly, they had no other choice.

Aeris started toward the forest, the others close behind.

"Have you seen anyone else?" Elena asked.

"No," Aeris replied. She hoped everyone had made it safely to shore. She wondered what had happened to Zack.

"The way the wind was blowing, they could have come ashore far away from here," Vincent said. "But if they did land nearby, it's likely they'll head for the town as well."

"Let's hope so," Aeris said. She didn't like being separated from everyone, especially since she didn't know if they had all made it to shore. She couldn't even be sure everyone made it out of the sub before it sank. Under the circumstances, it seemed it would be a minor miracle if they all survived.

But there was nothing she could do about it, and worrying would not help the situation. They would just have to go on as best they could and hope for the best.

The forest was pitch black under the trees. Aeris could hardly see more than a few paces in front of her, yet she soon found out the others were even worse off. Apparently the Ancients had eyesight better able to penetrate the dark than that of ordinary humans, and this was realized after some stumbling about. Soon Aeris found herself leading them slowly through the trees. But even though she could see a little better than the others, that didn't make the going easy. The underbrush was thick and tangled around them, and it was difficult to penetrate, for there were no trails. On top of that the plants were still wet from the recent rain, and every branch they moved splashed them with cold drops of water. Even though they were all already soaked, it was an uncomfortable experience.

They went on like this for some time. Aeris didn't know how far away the town was, but at the rate they were going she was beginning to think it would take them all night to get there. But just when she was about to suggest that perhaps this wasn't such a good idea the forest suddenly opened up ahead of them and they found themselves standing beside a narrow dirt road.

"Well, this looks promising," Vincent commented.

"Thank God," Elena muttered.

They started down the road, marching much faster now. It wasn't long before they saw the twinkling of lights through the

trees ahead.

They reached the town. There really wasn't much to it. They passed half a dozen wooden cabins perched in small clearings cut from the forest. Just past them they came upon a larger building standing right by the side of the road. A single street light stood in front of it, but the building itself was dark.

A sign above the front door said 'General Store'.

Vincent walked up and tried the door. It was locked. He banged on it. They waited several minutes, but there was no answer.

He walked back to the others.

"Looks like it's closed," he said. "I wonder what time it is?"

Aeris shrugged. She knew it had to be late. She looked around. The streets were deserted.

"So what do we do now?" Reeve questioned.

"Well, it's a general store," Elena said. "It's bound to have what we need inside. A locked door never stopped a Turk."

"You mean break in?" Reeve said nervously.

"Why not," she replied, looking at him sharply. "It is an emergency."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Reeve replied uncertainly.

"I wasn't asking for your opinion," she said and started toward the building.

"Wait," Aeris said.

Elena turned to look at her.

"You too?" she questioned. "Look, they shot at us first, remember? I don't think anything we might take from that store is going to make up for the loss of our submarine. They owe us."

"These people didn't have anything to do with that," Aeris replied. "I don't know what they're like, but to assume they are all hostile is foolish. We're far from home, and as you so clearly pointed out, we have no way to get back to our own land. We're at a real disadvantage here. I don't think giving them cause to treat us like criminals is going to help our situation. Why don't we just ask one of the townspeople if the owner can open up the store for us? It couldn't hurt to try, after all, what you said was true, this is an emergency."

"I agree," Reeve stated immediately.

Elena stood there with her hands on her hips and glared at Aeris, obviously not thrilled with the idea. She looked at Vincent.

"I'm going to go find someone," Aeris said, and started off before Vincent could say anything. Reeve followed her. Vincent looked at them for a moment, then turned to Elena and shrugged. Then he too walked off after them. Elena stood there, glaring after them all angrily. Then she shook her head and followed as well.

Aeris walked down the road until she saw a house with a light on inside. She went up to the door and knocked.

After a few moments a man opened the door. He looked at her in surprise. Then he glanced at the others behind her. They were all soaked to the skin and covered with dirt and scratches from the beach and the forest. They must have been quite a sight.

"Hi," she said. "Sorry to bother you, but we need help. The ship we were on sunk off your coast. We're cold and tired, and we need shelter and some warm clothing. I know it's late, but do you think someone could let us into the general store? We'd be happy to purchase whatever we need."

The man just stood there looking at them for an uncomfortably long time.

"Your ship sunk?" he finally said.

"Yes," she replied. "In the storm. Can't you help us?"

The man again said nothing, just looked at them all slowly. His gaze lingered on Vincent for a moment, but when Vincent glared back at him he quickly turned away.

They heard a woman's voice from in the house. The man glanced inside then turned back toward them again. He held up his hand.

"Just a moment," he said, then turned and walked back inside.

Aeris could hear the man and woman talking. She could not make out what they were saying, but it sounded like they were arguing. Vincent came up beside her and stood there listening carefully. The voices stopped and she heard the man approaching once again. She looked at Vincent, but he just turned toward her and shrugged.

The man reappeared in the doorway.

"I'll take you over to the storekeepers house," he said. "I'm sure he'll be able to help you."

"Thank you," Aeris said.

The man led them silently down the street past three more houses. They reached a fourth one and the man walked up to the door and knocked. The door opened and Aeris saw a woman standing inside. She looked at them for a moment, a frown forming on her face.

"Hello Bull," she said. "What's this all about?"

"These people need some help," he said. He turned toward Aeris.

"Be out in a moment," he said.

Then he stepped into the house.

"Here we go again," Elena muttered.

But he was only gone a moment. When he came back out another man was following him. The second man looked at them. Vincent glared back and he turned away even faster than Bull had.

"C'mon," Bull said.

They walked back up the road to the general store. The second man produced a key and opened the door. He turned on the lights and they walked in.

"Take whatever you need," the man said. "I'll light a fire so you can warm up."

"That's very kind of you," Aeris replied.

The man walked over and started a fire while they picked out some clothes. Then he walked over to the counter. Bull came up beside him and they both stood there talking quietly, glancing over at Aeris and her friends occasionally.

Elena stepped up beside Vincent.

"I think you make them nervous," she said softly.

He glanced over at the two men.

"Something is making them nervous," he stated.

Aeris took a long red dress off the rack.

"I think I like this one," she said. She walked into the dressing room.

She came out a short time later and walked over to the fire. Soon all of them had changed into new clothes.

"That feels much better," Reeve said.

"Thank you so much for all the help," Aeris said. The shopkeeper just nodded to her.

Suddenly Vincent saw a flash of light outside. He turned and looked out the window. There was a vehicle out there, stopped down the road. The lights blinked off.

"I've got to get back to the house," the storekeeper said. "You can stay here as long as you like. I'll come back later to lock up."

Both he and Bull walked out the door, closing it behind them.

Vincent walked over to the front of the store and looked out the window next to the door. He could see the men walking

down the street rapidly, then they suddenly broke into a run.

He turned and walked over to Elena.

"Get ready," he said.

Elena looked at him for just a moment, then stood up and stepped directly in front of him. She put her hands behind her back.

Reeve looked at them curiously for a moment, but then the front door suddenly burst open. Six men, all armed, ran into the room and spread out in front of them.

"By order of the Imperial Government of Mysteele," one of the men shouted, "you are hereby ordered to lay down your weapons and surrender to us immediately."

For a moment the room was completely silent. Then Reeve dropped his gun to the floor with a thud.

Simultaneously Elena crouched down, bringing her own weapon around from behind her back. Vincent already had his out, concealed behind Elena until she ducked down. There was a rapid blast of gunfire as they both opened up, and Reeve stumbled back, stunned by the loud blasts that went off right beside him, so close they made his ears ring. It took only an instant, but when he looked up again the guards lay crumpled on the ground. He saw blood starting to pool beneath one of them.

Elena holstered her gun and looked at Aeris, who had stood unmoving throughout the episode.

"So much for being nice," she growled.

"Let's get out of here," Vincent said.

They walked out the door and quickly made their way down the street. When they reached the storekeepers house Vincent suddenly stopped.

"Be back in a moment," he said.

He pulled out his gun once again and ran over to the door. He kicked it and the door flew open. He rushed inside, Elena right behind him. Aeris followed, with Reeve bringing up the rear.

Aeris found Vincent in the bedroom, standing in front of the storekeeper, his gun pointed at the man's head. The storekeepers wife stood against the wall to one side, her hands up over her mouth, tears in her eyes.

"Vincent," Aeris exclaimed.

"Get out of here, Aeris," Elena said savagely.

Vincent held up his hand for them to be silent, but he did not look at them, but instead stared at the storekeeper.

"Why did you betray us?" Vincent said.

"Please," the man replied, his legs shaking violently. "I had no choice. We have to report any strangers immediately. If we don't, and they find out, the whole village would be destroyed."

"What do you mean?" Vincent questioned.

"We have to report any strangers," the woman spoke in a quivering voice. "It's the law. If we don't the entire village can suffer. It's happened before. There used to be a town about ten miles north of here. The government found out that some strangers had come into the town that had not been reported. They sent troops in and destroyed the entire village, killed everyone there and burned the town to the ground."

"But why would they do such a thing?" Aeris stated, obviously horrified by the notion.

"It's the law," the man repeated. "They don't want us talking to anyone from the other side."

"Other side?" Elena said

The woman looked at him with a shocked look on her face.

"Well, it's obvious from their clothes and their talk, now isn't it?" he said, looking at her.

"You know, the other side of the ocean," he continued. "The other continents. We're not even supposed to know they exist, but no matter what the government thinks, we're not complete fools."

"But why would they want you not to know about us?" Reeve questioned.

"How should I know," the man replied. "I'm just a simple storekeeper. I don't know what heads of state are thinking. I'm just trying to mind my own business and survive. That was hard enough before, but it's almost impossible now that Gram had taken over."

"Martin, you talk too much," his wife interjected.

"Well, what difference does it make?" the man replied sharply. He looked at Vincent. "You might as well just shoot me now and save the government the trouble."

"No one is going to shoot you," Aeris said, stepping forward. She looked at Vincent. He stood there for a moment, then slowly lowered his gun.

"Who is this Gram person?" he asked.

"Vice President Gram," the man replied. "Well, acting President now that the real President has been assassinated. To tell you the truth I wasn't real sorry to see the man go, but now that Gram has taken over things are ten times worse. Taxes have gone up and government troops are everywhere, taking whatever they want. It's gotten so an ordinary citizen can barely survive anymore. Almost makes me want to go and join that Brotherhood."

"Martin!" his wife exclaimed.

"Brotherhood, what's that?" Elena said.

The man glanced at his wife, but then continued.

"It's a resistance movement. Don't know much about it. But if the government finds out you have anything to do with them, they come down even harder than if you'd been harboring strangers. Between the government and the Brotherhood, you can't trust anyone anymore."

"How do we get to Mysteele?" Vincent asked.

"It's about fifty miles west of here along the coast. But after what you've done here, the roads will be crawling with government troops."

"Are there any towns closer?" Vincent questioned. "Large towns?"

"Yeah," the man replied after thinking for a moment. "There's Dunlan and Tyril, they're both west of here along the road. Dunlan is on the coast, but Tyril is a little inland. Then there's Pangir, that's south of here, and out of your way if you're going to Mysteele. They're all pretty large towns."

Elena walked over to the door and glanced out.

"I think it would be best if we got out of here as soon as possible," she said.

Vincent nodded.

He turned and walked out, followed closely by Elena. Aeris looked at Martin, shrugged and followed them out, with Reeve right behind her.

"Do you really think it was a good idea to tell them where we are going?" Elena asked Vincent once they were outside. "I'm sure more troops are going to come, and I've no doubt he'll tell them everything."

"We don't seem to have had much choice," Vincent pointed out. "We had to know how to get to Mysteele. We wouldn't be any better off wandering around the countryside aimlessly."

"I suppose," she replied after a moment. "Why did you ask him if there were any other large cities nearby?"

"I don't think we can make it to Mysteele after what we've done. At least not now. I'm sure that guy wasn't lying when he said the roads would be crawling with government troops. We've got to find some place to lie low for a while. We're strangers here, and we'll stick out like sore thumbs in a small town, where everybody knows everybody else, but we may be able to blend in better in a big city."

Elena nodded.

"I suppose you're right. So where are we headed?"

"Well, if he does talk, then they'll know we're interested in getting to Mysteele, so they'll cover the roads west of here. I

think we should head south to Pangir, it may be a little out of the way, but it's less likely we'll be spotted."

"Sounds reasonable," Elena agreed. She turned to look at the others, who were trailing behind.

"What about her?" she said, nodding toward Aeris. "Isn't there something you can do to keep the girl scout from getting in the way?"

Vincent looked at her narrowly.

"Leave Aeris alone," he replied. "You don't know what she can do. We should be thankful that she's with us."

Elena looked at him for a moment, anger showing in her eyes.

"What, do you like her or something?"

Vincent laughed. The others looked at him in surprise.

"Aeris?" he said. He glanced over at her. Both she and Reeve were looking at them with puzzled expressions.

"She is a very beautiful girl," he continued. "But no, we live in completely different worlds. We would not be a good match. I prefer a woman a little more..."

He reached out and put his arm around her.

"...down to earth."

Elena smiled and slipped her arm around his waist.

"And beautiful too?"

Vincent smiled.

"Of course," he replied. "Not let's get a move on. I think we've worn out our welcome in this town."

~*~

"Goddamn!"

Barret looked over at Cid in the darkness.

"What now?"

"My freaking cigarettes are wet," Cid replied. He tossed the pack away in disgust.

Barret growled.

"We just lost a submarine and you're worried about your cigarettes?" he said.

"I didn't say I was worried," Cid replied. "I was merely venting my displeasure."

Barret suddenly turned and looked toward the ocean.

"What was that?"

"What was what?" Cid asked as he checked his other pockets.

"I thought I heard something," Barret replied.

They both turned and looked out into the ocean. Cid listened carefully, but all he heard was the waves crashing on the shore.

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

Barret held up his hand. Finally he pointed.

"There," he said.

Cid looked where he was pointing. At first he didn't see anything, then he caught a glimpse of what looked like a figure bobbing in the waves. Simultaneously he heard a voice call out.

"Sounds like Yuffie," he said.

Barret ran out into the surf. He stood there for a minute until he saw her again. Then he plunged into the water. In moments he had reached her and pulled her to shore. They both stumbled up the beach, Yuffie coughing and gasping for breath. When they reached Cid Yuffie sat down to catch her breath.

"You okay?" Cid asked.

"Do I look it?" she replied sharply, when she could finally speak. "Gawd, that was awful. I thought I was going to drown for sure. You sure got us into one fine mess this time!"

Cid looked at her thoughtfully.

"I told you it might be dangerous," he replied.

"Yeah, but I thought we would at least reach land before that," she commented. She looked around.

"Where are the others?"

"Don't know," Barret replied. "We haven't seen them. In this storm they could have come ashore anywhere. I hope they're all right."

Cid looked around. The wind swirled about him. Yuffie shivered.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's walk down the beach. Maybe we can find some of the others."

"It's too cold," Yuffie protested.

"We won't stay on the beach for long," Cid replied. "If the others are nearby, I'd like to find them."

"If the others are nearby, they'll have sense enough to get out of this wind," Yuffie muttered, but she got up and followed them as they walked away.

Cid and Barret scanned the water and the shore constantly as they made their way along the beach, but they saw nothing in the darkness around them. They walked on for quite some time, Yuffie slowly lagging further and further behind. Eventually she stopped all together. The turned to look at her.

"I'm freezing!" she exclaimed.

Cid and Barret looked at one another.

Cid shrugged.

"I suppose she's right," he said. They were both feeling the cold as well. "It's no good stumbling around in the dark like this. We've got to get out of this wind. We'll try to find the others in the morning."

Barret nodded. They started to head up the beach, but even as they did so they spotted the dark shape of a building not far ahead of them.

"What's that?" Cid questioned.

Barret did not reply. They walked forward slowly until they could make out the shrouded features of a small wooden building.

"Looks like a boathouse," Cid stated. He looked around. There was no other buildings nearby.

Yuffie caught up with them as they walked up to the structure. There were large double doors latched closed in the front. There was no lock.

Barret unlatched the doors and pulled them open with a creak. He peered in for a moment, then stepped inside.

Cid and Yuffie followed him in. They could barely see inside. Barret could make out a long table and what looked like a rowboat taking up most of the room. He stepped further inside and banged his leg against a chair.

"Damn," he muttered.

The others said nothing.

Barret continued to stumble forward in the dark. Cid just stood there, waiting for his eyes to adjust. Yuffie walked slowly over to the table. It was just a dark shadow in front of her. There was a window over it. She could here the wind whistling

through a small crack in the pane. It let a faint light into the room, just barely enough to see by, but even so she thought she saw something on the table.

She reached out and confirmed her suspicion. She felt around on the table nearby, and was rewarded when she found the small item she was looking for. She opened up the pack of matches and struck one, then she used it to light the oil lamp on the table in front of her.

They looked around, blinking in the new found light. Most of what was in the room they had already discovered. A wooden rowboat with the paint flaking off stood in the middle of the room, taking up most of it. The table Yuffie stood in front of, covered with fishing equipment. An empty barrel at the back of the room. Nets covered the far wall.

"So where do you think the owner is?" Barret questioned.

"Safely tucked away in his nice comfortable bed," Yuffie replied.

Cid nodded.

"Probably true. I don't think he's going to be using his boat in this storm."

"So you think we should stay here for the night?" Barret asked.

Cid looked around.

"Well, it's not the best accommodations in the world, but it could be worse. Does anybody want to go back out there to look for someplace better?"

"Not me," Yuffie replied quickly.

Barret shook his head.

"All right then," Cid said. "Make yourselves comfortable and let's try to get some rest."

Yuffie looked around, then stepped into the boat and sat down near the stern, her back propped up against a seat cushion. She pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. Though they were out of the wind, she was still cold and wet.

"I just wish we had some dry clothes," she muttered.

"Yeah," Barret agreed. He was still poking around, looking in the corners and under the table. Then he reached down and pulled out a thick cloth sack. He shook it in the air and dust swirled around him. Then he sat down in the corner of the room and wrapped it around himself.

He looked up. Yuffie was looking at him forlornly.

"It sure is cold," she said softly.

Barret turned away and wrapped the cloth around him more tightly. He tried mightily to ignore her, but he could feel her eyes on him.

He shifted uncomfortably back and forth for a few minutes.

He glanced over at her again.

She shivered.

"Oh good grief!" he exclaimed. He got up, walked over and handed her the cloth. She grabbed it and wrapped it around herself. She smiled at him.

"Thank you Barret," she said politely.

He just grumbled in return and sat back down in his corner.

Cid walked over and blew out the lamp. Then he stepped over to the door and pulled it closed. He could still hear the wind howling outside. He slowly sat down with his back against the wall. He wished he had a cigarette.

"It's going to be a long night," he muttered.

Zack walked along the shore, peering into the darkness. He had been walking for quite some time now, but he had seen no sign of the others.

He had tried to stay with Aeris, but the current had pulled them apart, and he had quickly lost her. He could only hope she had made it to shore safely.

He continued along the beach, the wind whipping around him. It was cold, but he gritted his teeth and endured it. He had to find her.

The beach turned north, and looking to the right he saw that he was on a narrow promontory of land jutting out like a finger into the water. He could see the ocean on the other side of it, over the ragged grass and marsh weeds that grew there. He was tempted to just cross over the top and continue on the other side. He looked around. The beach was narrow here, the current flowed east along the shore, and this narrow strip of land acted like a natural jetty, standing directly in the way of the natural flow of the water, and anything being carried in it.

He walked on. The beach here seemed to be strewn with dark objects. Mostly pieces of wood, seaweed and other debris that had been blown ashore. But then he spotted another dark mass ahead, one much larger, large enough to be a person.

As he approached he saw that he had been right. It was someone. They were sprawled in the sand, unmoving.

He rushed over and bent down. It took him a moment to realize it was Rude. He was lying on his stomach, his eyes closed. He was unconscious, or worse.

Zack examined him closely and realized he was breathing faintly. There was a dark clot of blood on his forehead, but Zack could see no other obvious injuries. He turned him on his back and lifted his head. Rude groaned.

"Rude, are you all right?"

He did not reply.

"Rude!" he said sharply.

Rude shook his head and moaned again, but gave no other response.

It was obvious Rude wasn't going anywhere under his own power. Zack couldn't just leave him here lying in the wind. He had to get him someplace safe. But he couldn't do that and continue his search.

Zack looked around, but all he saw around him was darkness.

He grabbed hold of Rude and lifted him up, supporting him at the shoulder. He started forward. Rude stumbled but then steadied himself. He mumbled something that Zack couldn't make out. But he did seem to understand what they were trying to do.

Zack walked back toward the forest. There was no other place to go now. They could not remain out here on the exposed beach. He didn't know whether they would be better off in the woods, but he didn't see that they had much choice. But before he reached it he noticed a pinpoint of light off to the east.

He stopped and stared. It was far off down the beach, a dim flicker of light, but it was there.

He tightened his grip on Rude and tried to walk faster, hurrying along the shore. As they approached he saw that the light stood at the end of a narrow dock. He could make out the dark shapes of a few buildings beyond it.

Suddenly Zack detected a sound in the sand behind him.

He eased Rude to the ground, then swung around quickly, bringing his sword out in front of him. He could see two dark figures coming up behind him, both barely detectable in the darkness. But he recognized them immediately.

"Red," he said, lowering his sword.

Red and Nipala padded up beside him. Nipala looked at Rude.

"Is he all right?"

"I'm not sure," Zack replied. "He's been hurt pretty bad, I think. Can't tell in the dark."

"Yes, we do seem to have landed ourselves in quite a predicament," Red stated.

"Have you seen anyone else?" Zack asked.

Red shook his head.

"We emerged from the water about a mile west of here," he said. "We were following the coast when we picked up your trail. We saw no sign of any of the others."

Zack sighed. About what he had expected, really. He looked back at the buildings. It was probably a fishing village.

"I thought maybe we could get some help here," he said.

"A reasonable supposition," Red agreed.

Zack reached down and pulled Rude to his feet once more. They made their way through a short stretch of dunes until they found themselves beside the closest building. There were no windows on this side. He started towards the front, but when he reached the corner he stopped. Someone was walking down the road in front of the building toward the dock, clothed in a dark raincoat and hood.

He eased Rude down once more and then stepped in front of the building. The figure continued toward the dock.

"Excuse me," Zack said.

The person whirled around, and then stood there in silence. Zack could just make out the features of a young girl under the hood. She brought her hand up to her chest.

Zack stepped forward.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you. We need some help."

She was just a few feet away now. He realized that she was even younger than he had first thought. She looked no more than twelve or thirteen. She said nothing, but continued to stare at him wide eyed.

"Don't be frightened," Zack said reassuringly. "We're not going to hurt you."

He walked forward and she took a step back. He stopped.

"You're strangers," she finally said, so softly he could barely make it out.

"Yes," he replied. "We were on a ship that sunk off the coast. My friend is hurt, and we were wondering if there was a doctor nearby."

"A ship? You were on a ship?"

"That's right," he replied. "It was sunk off the coast."

She looked past him down the road, then she suddenly stepped toward him.

"You mustn't be seen," she said with sudden urgency. She still seemed afraid, but she no longer seemed afraid of him.

"What are you talking about?" he said, surprised by the sudden change in her attitude.

"If they find you, they'll kill you," she said. "We've got to get you out of here before someone sees you."

Zack just looked at her with a puzzled expression.

"Get your friends and come this way," she hissed. "Hurry!"

Zack had no idea what to make of this, but he wasn't about to argue with her. He went back and pulled Rude up one more time. The others followed him as he started after the girl.

She was standing in front of the building. Her eyes widened when she saw Red and Nipala.

"What manner of beast is this?" she said in wonder.

Zack looked down at Red.

"I haven't quite figured that out myself," he replied.

"We are what you see," Red said simply.

The girl gave a squeal of surprise.

"They talk!"

"Sometimes too much," Zack said. "Now what is this all about?"

She looked around again.

"No time to explain it now. You are in danger. Follow me."

She turned and hurried down the road. Zack and the others followed as swiftly as they could. The girl kept pausing to look around, but they saw no one else out on the streets. But even so they had not gone far when she turned off the narrow street. She walked between two buildings and then into the darkness of the forest beyond.

Zack could barely see his hand in front of his face beneath the trees, but the girl was waiting for him.

"This way," she said, leading them down a narrow trail. "Don't worry. I've been this way many times before."

They followed the girl through the woods. It seemed to Zack that they were looping around the village, and he suspected she had gone this way just to stay out of view. Eventually they came out of the woods into a wide field. There could be seen the dark outline of a house not far away.

"C'mon," the girl said. "We're almost there."

She led them across the field. It looked to Zack like a cow pasture, but he couldn't be sure. He thought he made out the dark bulk of a barn to the left.

They reached the house. Zack could see light shining through a window. The girl ran up to the back door and flung it open, ushering them in.

Zack walked in, the others close behind. The girl closed the door and called out.

"Papa, I'm home, and I've brought some guests."

In a moment a short balding man with a beard walked in from the other room. He looked at them in surprise.

"Emma, what have you done?" he exclaimed. "No one saw you, did they?"

"Of course not, Papa," she replied. "We took the back trail."

"Thank God for that," he said.

Zack eased Rude down into a chair.

The man came over to them.

"Is he hurt?"

"Yes," Zack replied.

The man bent down and examined Rude.

"Help me get him upstairs," the man said.

They both helped Rude to his feet. The man stared curiously at Zack and Nipala but said nothing. He looked at Emma.

"Get them some warm clothing."

"Yes, Papa," she said.

They brought Rude upstairs and laid him on a bed. The man looked at Zack.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Zack. We were on a ship that sunk off your coast. There were others, but I don't know if they survived."

"Sunk by the government?" the man asked.

Zack hesitated for a moment.

"I don't know," he finally said. "But it was no accident."

The man shook his head. He slowly looked Rude over, carefully examining the cut on his head.

He stood up.

"Looks like your friend has been banged up a little, but I don't think there's any permanent damage. With a little rest he

should be fine.

"Thank you," Zack said.

The man looked at him carefully.

"You're from the other continents, aren't you?"

Zack nodded.

"Thought so. Your accent gives you away. We'll have to work on that. What are you doing here?"

"A friend of ours was brought here. We were following him."

"Brought here, what do you mean by that?"

Zack explained what had happened to them.

"Interesting story," the man said when he was finished. "By the way, my name is Jourdain."

"This is Rude," Zack replied. "And the two downstairs are Red and Nipala."

"Yeah," Jourdain said slowly. "It's going to be a little more difficult to explain those two."

"Explain them to who?"

"You don't know anything about us, do you?"

Zack shook his head.

"But obviously, there are some things I need to know, aren't there?"

"There certainly are," Jourdain agreed. "The government here wants no contact with the people from the other continents. In fact, it mandates it. Any strangers at all are supposed to be immediately reported to the central government. And if they are not, the entire town can suffer, in some cases, even be destroyed."

Zack looked at him.

"So we're putting you in danger," he said.

Jourdain shrugged.

"That's nothing new," he replied. "Our government doesn't want any of your people to know about us either. Occasionally a ship from the other continents comes into our waters. It is immediately destroyed. Any survivors are executed when they are found."

"Why are they doing this?" Zack asked.

"I don't really know," Jourdain replied. "For some reason they don't want to have contact with any outsiders. Maybe they're just paranoid. I can't say."

"Not that I don't appreciate it, but if this is so dangerous, why are you helping us?"

Jourdain looked at him for a moment.

"Some things are just wrong, no matter what the government says, no matter what anyone says," he replied. "I just can't condone killing people because they happened to be unlucky enough to end up here. And I'm not the only one."

"I've got the clothes, Papa," they heard Emma call.

"Okay," Jourdain replied. He led Zack back downstairs. Emma had already gotten a fire going. Now she handed the clothes to Zack.

"Go back upstairs and change," Jourdain said. "Emma, warm up some soup for our guests."

He turned to look at Red and Nipala, who were lying in front of the fire. He studied them for a moment, then turned back to Zack.

"Do your pets have any special needs?"

Nipala turned to look at him.

"I assure you, we are quite content."

The man nearly jumped out of his skin.

"The...they talk," he stuttered.

"Indeed they do," Zack said. He had a feeling he was going to get tired of saying that before this adventure was through.

"They are not pets," he continued. "They are companions. I assure you, they are just as intelligent as you or I."

"At least," Red agreed modestly.

Jourdain scratched his head.

"Well, if that don't beat all," he said. "You people are just full of surprises."

Zack looked at him and smiled.

"You're pretty surprising yourself," he said. "Thanks for the help."

Jourdain nodded.

"Don't thank me yet. You're in danger every second you remain here. But don't worry about that now. You're safe for at least tonight. Relax and get some rest. You're going to need all the strength you can get. I've got a feeling you've got a long hard road in front of you."