

CHAPTER V: WANDERINGS

Barret awoke and stretched his arms with a groan. One arm had been pressed up against the wall while he slept, and it was now painful to straighten it out. He looked over at the others.

Yuffie was still asleep in the stern of the rowboat, the cloth wrapped tightly about her. The front doors of the boathouse were partially open, bright sunlight shining in. Cid stood by the doors looking out, a cigarette perched in his mouth.

"Looks like you found some dry ones," Barret said.

Cid took the cigarette out of his mouth, looked at it for a moment, then dropped it and crushed it underfoot.

"Yeah," he replied.

Yuffie opened her eyes and looked around. She yawned and untangled herself from the cloth.

"When do we eat?" she questioned as she stood up.

"Maybe not be for a while," Cid replied.

"I'm starved," she said.

Barret looked at Cid.

"Get any sleep?" Barret asked.

Cid shrugged.

"Looks like the storms over," was all he said.

Barret glanced out the door. They both stepped outside and looked around. The sky was clear, the sun shining brightly. Barret took a deep breath.

He stuck his head back inside and looked at Yuffie.

"Well, are we ready to go look for the others?"

She stepped out of the rowboat and walked through the doors to stand beside him. She looked around.

"Yeah, but first things first. I'm hungry. Let's find someplace where we can get some food!"

"I couldn't agree more," Cid stated.

A trail ran into the woods behind the boathouse. They walked along it and soon came out into a large clearing. They could see a two story house ahead of them. The trail ran alongside it and then down to a narrow road.

Yuffie was walking down the trail rapidly and now was quite a ways ahead of them.

"Hey, wait up," Cid called.

She turned to look at them.

"Well hurry up then," she exclaimed. "Just my luck I had to end up with you two old geezers. We could have just followed the trail to this house last night and slept in comfort."

"You didn't seem too anxious to leave the boathouse once we found it," Barret commented.

Yuffie did not reply, but stood waiting impatiently until they caught up with her

They walked over to the house. It had a sharply peaked roof and was covered with faded grey wooden shingles. Cid glanced in the window as they walked by, but no one stirred inside.

They went around to the front. There was a wide porch held up by square wooden posts. The floorboards creaked as they stepped onto it.

Cid strolled over to the front door and banged on it.

They stood there waiting for a few minutes. Yuffie paced back and forth impatiently.

Cid knocked on the door again.

Yuffie went over to the window and peered inside.

"See anything?" Cid said after a moment.

Yuffie shook her head.

"Looks like nobody's home," Barret observed.

Yuffie looked at Cid.

"So what do we do now?" she asked. "Should we break in?"

Cid shrugged.

"Don't see much point to that. C'mon. There's the road right there. I'm sure we'll be able to find someplace else."

Cid and Barret walked off the porch. Yuffie looked the house up and down once more, then reluctantly followed them.

When they reached the road Barret nodded to the west. The other two turned to look in that direction and saw a thin line of smoke rising up over the treetops.

"Wonder what that is," he said.

They stood there looking for a few moments. Finally Yuffie started off in that direction.

"Might as well check it out," she said. "Where there's smoke, there may be food."

Cid looked at Barret.

"Sounds good to me," he said and they hurried after her.

They walked about half a mile through rolling hills surrounded by tall pine trees. Soon the smell of burnt wood filled the air around them, and they saw dark ashes wafting by on the mild breeze.

They came around a wide turn and saw the blackened remains of a burnt out house in a small clearing ahead. As they approached they saw other houses beyond it, all of them destroyed by the fire as well.

"What the hell happened here?" Barret muttered.

No one answered. They walked slowly down the street. It looked like what must have been a small village. There were perhaps a dozen or so houses all together, with one building near the center of town that looked to have been bigger than the others. It was from here that the smoke rose, for some of the timbers from that building were still smoldering. A half charred sign lying on the ground in front of it read General Store.

Not one building had escaped the flames.

"Whatever happened here, it wasn't too long ago," Cid observed.

Barret nudged him and pointed over to the left. Near one of the houses Cid could see the charred remains of what looked like two bodies.

Cid looked at him but said nothing. Then he looked at Yuffie, but she hadn't noticed.

Still, she couldn't miss the man lying near the center of the road a little further down.

He showed no sign of being burned. But when Cid bent to examine him he found the cause of death almost immediately. He stood back up and looked at the others.

"This man was shot," he said.

Yuffie looked around.

Barret said nothing, but his face was pale.

"Do you think the fire was deliberate?" Yuffie asked.

"It sure looked that way," Cid replied slowly. "There doesn't seem to have been any attempt made to fight it. I think this town was purposely destroyed."

"But why?" she asked.

Cid shrugged. He had no idea, but he had a bad feeling about it.

Yuffie suddenly looked up.

"What was that?" she said.

"What?" Barret asked.

She stood looking at the remains of the house in front of them.

"I thought I heard something," she said slowly.

She took out her shuriken and walked slowly toward the blackened remains. Cid and Barret readied their weapons as well and followed her.

She reached the edge of the house and stared through the charred timbers. She thought she saw something move behind what was left of the back wall. Suddenly she ran straight through the building, jumping over a pile of burnt wood and cloth of what must once have been furniture. She jumped over the back wall and raised her shuriken.

Cid and Barret hurried around the house to the back. They saw Yuffie with her weapons poised to strike, but she did not move.

They came up beside her. Crouched with his back to the wall stood a young boy, covered with soot and holding a pitchfork larger than he was in front of him. He looked to be no more than ten years old. He stood over a woman who lay unmoving amid the broken timbers.

"D..don't come any closer," the boy said in a quivering voice.

They stood there looking at him for a few moments. Barret lowered his weapon. The others did so too.

"No one is going to hurt you," he said.

Yuffie took a step forward. The boy jabbed at her with the pitchfork and she had to leap back out of the way.

"Hey, watch it with that thing," she exclaimed.

The boy looked at them with grim determination.

"I said stay away!" he said.

"Relax kid," Cid said. "I told you, we're not going to hurt you."

The boy did not respond, but just stood there holding the pitchfork defiantly.

"Who did this?" Barret asked.

"C'mon, kid, put the pitchfork down," Yuffie said. She stepped toward him and he jabbed at her again. She sprang back, a look of anger on her face.

"Hey, cut it out. You're starting to piss me off!"

Barret came up beside her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Leave him be," he said.

Suddenly the woman moaned and opened her eyes. The boy turned toward her. Yuffie lunged forward and wrenched the pitchfork from his hands. He started toward her with a cry, but when Cid stepped forward and bent over the woman, the boy suddenly wheeled and started to pound on his back.

"You leave my mom alone!" he cried, his voice shaking.

Cid ignored him.

Barret stepped forward and grabbed hold of him.

"Hey, let me go!"

The woman looked at Cid for a moment. He could see she was badly hurt. She had burns over most of her body, and the left side of her face was covered with blood. She turned toward the boy.

"It's all right, Mosato," she said. And it seemed a great effort for her just to get the words out. "These people are not from the government."

Cid turned toward Yuffie.

"You have a cure materia?"

Without a word Yuffie reached into her poach. In a moment she pulled out a green materia and handed it to Cid. He quickly cast it on the woman, but it seemed to have little effect.

"What's wrong?" Yuffie asked.

Cid did not answer for a moment.

"It doesn't seem to be working," he said finally. "She may be too badly hurt, or maybe it doesn't work properly on this continent. I don't know."

The boy had stopped struggling. Barret let him go and he ran over to stand beside Cid.

"What happened here?" Cid asked.

The woman coughed and took a deep breath.

"Some people came into town yesterday," she said slowly. "Strangers like yourselves. The government sent troops to arrest them, but the troops were killed. I guess they suspected we helped the strangers somehow, so last night they came in and burned the town down. They killed everyone they could find. I sent Mosato to hide in the woods. I don't think anyone else survived."

"They destroyed the entire town because of that?" Cid said.

"It's happened before," she replied. "The government doesn't want us to have anything to do with people from the outside. I don't know why."

Cid just shook his head.

"Strangers like us, you said," Barret spoke. "What did they look like?"

"I didn't really get to see them," she replied. "Just a glimpse as they were leaving town. One of them seemed to have some kind of metal arm."

Cid looked at Barret.

"Vincent," he said. He looked at the woman.

"How many of them were there?"

"Four," she replied. "At least one woman, but I didn't get a very good look at them."

"Well, we know at least some of the others made it," Barret said. "Can you tell us where they went?"

She shook her head.

"They headed west out of town, but that's all I know. If they stayed on the road, they'd be bound to be caught. And you will to. If the troops find you, they'll kill you."

Suddenly she cried out in pain.

"Mom!" the boy exclaimed as tears welled in his eyes.

"Be strong, Mosato," she said. She looked at Cid.

"Please, help my son. We have relatives in Unthor. He's only ten years old. He won't survive by himself..."

"Of course we'll help," Barret said immediately.

"But we don't know where Unthor is," Cid said, looking at her.

"It's about ten miles southeast of here," she told him. "Just follow the road east and turn south at the first turn off. No, that's not right. You can't stay on the roads. The troops will be guarding them. You'll have to head cross country."

"Where do we take him once we get to Unthor?" Barret asked.

"To his Uncle Tybor. He may be able to help you too. He knows some people."

"Do you know how to get to Mysteele?" Cid questioned.

She started coughing. A thin line of blood ran from her mouth.

"It's west of here," she replied with difficulty. "About fifty miles."

"Are there any other towns nearby?" Yuffie asked.

She nodded.

"Yes, but you can't go there. They're bound to be guarded. You have to stay...."

His voice faded and she fell silent.

"Mom!" Mosato exclaimed once more. He knelt down beside her, tears running down his face.

Cid bent closer to examine her, then shook his head. He stood up slowly.

No one spoke for quite some time. Cid, Barret and Yuffie just stood there with their heads bowed while Mosato cried quietly over the body of his mother. Finally Barret put a hand on his shoulder.

"We better get going," he said gently.

Mosato did not reply, but he stood up and allowed Barret to lead him slowly away.

When they reached the road Cid turned east.

"Mysteele is in the other direction," Yuffie pointed out.

Cid nodded. He knew that going to Unthor would take them out of their way, but what choice did they have? They couldn't just abandon the boy.

"Hey kid," Yuffie said. "Don't you know anyone in Mysteele?"

The boy did not look up, but he shook his head.

"What about the others?" Yuffie continued. "I'm sure they're all headed for Mysteele. What if they need our help?"

Cid stopped and looked at her.

"Even if we head straight for Mysteele, the chances of our running into any of the others is slim," he said. "I'm afraid they'll just have to take care of themselves. There's nothing we can do about it."

Yuffie did not reply, but did not look convinced. Cid had to admit he was reluctant to go out of his way like this. Who knows what could happen while they were delayed. For all he knew Yuffie could be right, and their friends might desperately need their help. But what could he do? For all he knew at this point, no choice might be the right one.

They walked down the road a ways, heading east, with no one saying anything. When they passed the last of the burnt buildings Cid stopped and looked around.

"I suppose it would be best if we got off the road before we run into a patrol," he said.

He led them into the wood to the south. Mosato walked in front of Barret with his head bowed. He was no longer crying.

"I'm starving," Yuffie commented before they had gotten very far.

Cid did not reply. He was hungry as well, but right now he just wanted to put some distance between themselves and what was left of that town.

"I know where some food is."

They all stopped and looked at Mosato.

"You do?" Barret questioned.

Mosato nodded.

"C'mon. It's this way," he said, pointing to the left. "It's not far."

Cid looked at Barret, who shrugged. They followed Mosato as he led them off through the trees. Before long the underbrush thickened about them, and soon they found the going difficult. But suddenly they came across a narrow trail, and Mosato turned down it and let them rapidly along.

The trail was easy for the boy to follow, but more difficult for the others. It seemed to have been blazed by someone who was not very tall. Even Mosato himself had to crouch down to get through the tangled and twisted branches that covered

the trail just a few feet off the ground. Barret in particular was having a hard time, and practically had to go down on hands and knees to get by some spots. He soon fell far behind the others.

Cid wasn't doing much better. Only Yuffie seemed to be getting through without too much trouble.

Eventually they arrived in a small clearing with a huge tree in the center. The tree was surrounded by dense undergrowth. Yuffie stood looking up at it. Cid soon joined her and they stood there until Barret stumbled into the clearing, cursing and covered with scratches.

Mosato pulled a few branches aside beneath the tree and disappeared from view. Yuffie followed him. Cid pushed the branches out of the way to reveal another small clearing around the base of the tree, totally concealed by the undergrowth. Mosato was sitting on a large root with a plastic bag in his hand. He reached in and started handing things to Yuffie. Slowly her expression changed from anticipation to surprise.

"Potato chips, candy and warm soda?" she said finally. "Don't you have any real food?"

Mosato shook his head.

Barret laughed. Yuffie looked at him angrily.

"Well, what were you expecting?" Barret said. "Steak and lobster? He's just a kid."

Cid took the bag of potato chips Mosato handed him and tore it open. He looked at Yuffie.

"Beggars can't be choosy," he said. "You better eat up. This may be the best meal you get for quite some time."

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"How you feeling?"

"Much better," Rude said slowly, glancing up from the cup of tea he had cradled in his hands.

"Good," Zack replied. Rude sat in the kitchen of Jourdain's house. Emma stood nearby, frying some eggs and humming softly to herself. Red and Nipala were resting in the other room. They hadn't seen Jourdain all morning. When Zack had asked Emma about him she just shrugged and told him that he was out making arrangements.

Rude looked at Zack.

"What happened?" he asked.

"How much do you remember?" Zack questioned.

"I remember being on the sub," he said slowly. "Reno had been hurt. We had gotten him up on deck when a wave crashed into us. When I looked up Tifa and Reno were gone. What happened to them?"

Zack shook his head.

"We don't know. We haven't seen them."

Rude looked upset by this news.

"Another wave hit the ship," he continued. "and I banged my head, for the second time. I don't remember much more after that. I remember being in the water, and the wind. But that's about it."

Zack nodded slowly.

"You're lucky you didn't drown," he said. He filled Rude in on what had happened to them since he had found him on the shore.

"So what are we going to do now?" Rude asked when he had finished.

"Not sure," Zack replied. "We've got to get to Mysteele somehow. Jourdain has apparently done this before. We'll just wait to see what he has in mind."

Emma brought the eggs over and filled up their plates. Rude looked at them and suddenly realized how famished he was. It didn't take him long to clean his plate.

He looked over at Emma.

"That was delicious."

"Thanks," she replied. "Do you want any more?"

"No," Rude replied. "I've had enough."

They heard a door open in the other room. A moment later Jourdain walked in. He looked over at Rude.

"Feeling better?"

Rude nodded.

"Good," he replied. "Because I've arranged a little trip for you. We've got to get down to the docks."

Rude looked at him unhappily.

"Not another boat ride," he said.

"I'm afraid so," Jourdain replied. "But this will be down the river, not on the open ocean, so I don't think you have to worry about any more storms. Of all the roads to Mysteele, the river seems to be the one most often overlooked by government troops. It should be the safest way to go. So get your gear together, the boat leaves in half an hour."

It took them only a few minutes to collect their things. They really didn't have much in the way of possessions with them at the moment. As they were about to leave Emma rushed up to them.

"It was nice meeting you," she said. "Maybe we'll see you again some time?"

Zack smiled at her.

"I'd like that very much," he said. "It was very nice meeting you too. And a lucky thing for us. Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome."

They walked out the door and started down the road. Zack looked back to see Emma waving to them. He waved in return and then turned back toward the road. Soon the house faded from view behind them.

The town was just down the road to the north. When they reached it they headed quickly for the docks. It wasn't long before they stood beside a long wharf that ran along the river. There were half a dozen boats lined up in a row along it, but up ahead they could see some kind of commotion in front of one of them.

"That's our boat," Jourdain said slowly. "But something's wrong. There's too many people there."

He stopped and looked around. There was a long line of crates on their left, on the other side of the road from the wharf. He hesitated for a moment, then started toward them.

"C'mon," he said.

They slipped behind the crates and then made their way forward once more, concealed from view to anyone on the ships or in the road in front of them. They reached a break in the line of crates and Jourdain peered cautiously around. He stepped back immediately and looked at them.

"Mysteele guards!" he hissed. "It looks like they found out about us somehow. We've got to get out of here!"

He started back the way they had come, but Zack stepped forward and took a look for himself.

"What are you doing?" Jourdain said, stopping suddenly to look at him. "We've got to go."

"But what about the crew?" Zack said.

"It's too late for them," Jourdain replied. "They all knew the risks involved. There's nothing we can do for them."

"But I only see about a dozen guards," Zack pointed out.

"That's not enough?" Jourdain responded. "There are only five of us, and that's if you count those two," he finished, pointing at Red and Nipala.

"Hmmm," Zack said thoughtfully. "Twelve against five. Hardly seems fair."

He looked at Rude, who had pulled out his pistol and was checking the ammo.

"True," Rude said. "Should we give them a chance to call more troops?"

Zack seemed to ponder this for a moment.

"Nah," he said finally. "If they didn't bring enough people, that's their own stupid fault."

Zack drew his sword.

"Ready?"

"Let's kick ass," Rude replied.

Jourdain just stared at them.

"You people are insane," he said.

No one bothered to respond. They were all too busy. Zack had sprung out from behind the crates and was rushing over to four guards that were nearest to them. They turned toward him a moment before he reached them, but not soon enough to react. Two went down almost before they knew what had happened. The two others hastily turned their weapons toward him, but he twisted out of the way, slicing with his sword through one of them. The fourth man actually got a shot off at him that missed wildly before he too fell with a cry.

Rude had climbed up onto a crate and now stood above them, firing down at another cluster of guards, who scrambled desperately for cover, three falling before they could find any.

Nipala and Red had used their speed to race around the other side of the crates while Zack and Rude had kept the guards' attention. Now they suddenly fell upon the last group of them, who had taken refuge behind a large crate, from behind. Zack heard a ferocious roar and then screams of anguish. A few moments later Red and Nipala calmly emerged from behind the vehicle, their fur a bit ruffled, but otherwise none the worse for the wear.

Rude turned to see the single guard who was left running down the street away from them as fast as his feet could carry him. Rude fired off a shot, but it missed. Suddenly they saw Jourdain spring out from behind the back end of the crates right in front of the man. His fist shot out, and the man fell to the ground.

Jourdain walked slowly over to them as they gathered in front of the ship. When he reached them he looked at them and shook his head slowly.

"If everyone from your continent can fight like that, it's no wonder our government doesn't want you to know about us," he said. "I had no idea you were such proficient warriors."

Zack shrugged.

"We've had a lot of practice."

"All right then," Jourdain said. "Let's get you out of here."

He led them on board the ship. They released the crew, who had been locked in the hold. The captain was the last man out. He looked them over, his gaze lingering on Red and Nipala.

"Thanks," he said. "They would have executed us all."

Zack stepped forward.

"My names..." he began.

The captain raised his hand.

"No names," he said. "We don't need to know, and if we get captured, we won't be able to tell anyone."

Zack nodded.

"How did those guards find out about you?" Jourdain asked.

The captain shrugged.

"I don't know," he replied. "There must have been a spy. Can't trust anyone, as you well know. I think it would be best if we got out of here as fast as possible."

Jourdain turned toward Zack.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye then. The captain'll get you safely to Mysteele, and will get you in touch with people who can help you there. Good luck."

"Thanks," Zack replied. "You take care of yourself, and that little girl of yours."

"I will," Jourdain said, then turned and hurried away.

"All right you sluggards," the captain called loudly, looking at the rest of his crew. "Let's get a move on. I want to be out of here in fifteen minutes."

The crew dispersed, scurrying away to attend to their duties. The captain looked at them once more.

"You just sit back and relax now," he said. "We'll take care of the rest." Then he hurried off after his men. A short time later they felt the boat pull away from the pier.

Zack sat down at a nearby table. Nipala came over to him.

"So what do we do now?" she asked.

Zack leaned back, put his hands behind his head, and propped his feet up on the table.

"There's not much we can do," he replied. "I suggest we take the captain's advice and sit back and relax."

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"We need some rooms please."

The clerk looked up at the young woman who stood in front of him. She had long light brown hair and striking green eyes. A man with dark hair and a short goatee stood next to her.

"Certainly," he replied with a smile. "I just need to see some ID."

They both produced some papers which they handed to the clerk. He gave them a cursory examination and nodded.

"You're in luck," he said, handing the ID's back. "We've been awfully busy lately. If you would have come in yesterday we wouldn't have had anything available. As it is we've only got two rooms left today."

He turned to look at them.

"Do you want both of them, or just one?"

"Both, if you don't mind," Aeris replied.

"I don't mind at all," the clerk responded. He rummaged under the counter and then produced two room keys.

"That'll be one hundred gil."

Reeve paid the clerk and took the keys.

"Up the stairs and down the hall on the left," the clerk said helpfully.

"Thank you," Aeris replied.

Reeve looked nervously back at the clerk as they walked up the stairs, but the man seemed to be paying no more attention to them.

"Do you think he suspected anything?" he asked.

Aeris glanced back for a moment.

"I don't think so," she replied. "Vincent was right. In a big city they see strangers every day. As long as we have ID, ordinary citizens aren't going to be too concerned about us."

Reeve nodded.

"How did Vincent get these papers anyway?"

"I didn't ask," Aeris replied. "I have a feeling I don't want to know."

They reached the top of the stairs. Aeris turned left and Reeve followed her down the hallway until they found the rooms. They were across the hall from one another.

They went inside and looked around for a moment. Then Reeve turned to Aeris.

"Well, we've got the rooms, let's go find Vincent and Elena."

Aeris nodded.

They retraced their steps back out onto the street. They had arrived in Pangir a little less than an hour ago, just before dusk. It was a large city built on the curve of a river that ran down from the mountains to the south. They had seen troops along the main road into town, but they had simply avoided them by going around. They had found another narrow road leading in that was unguarded. Once in the city no one had seemed to pay much attention to them. In a city like this you passed people you didn't know every day. They had just lost themselves in the crowd.

Once here they had decided to split up. Even though they seemed safe enough for the moment, they didn't want to stay here any longer than was absolutely necessary. So, while Aeris and Reeve had gone to find a place for them to stay, Vincent and Elena went looking to find some sort of transportation.

When they had arrived the streets had been quite crowded, but now that night had fallen, the crowds had thinned out. The roads were still far from deserted, however. They walked down the street through an open air marketplace, most of whose shops were in the process of closing up for the night. They reached the place where Vincent said he would meet them, but there was no sign of either him or Elena.

Reeve looked around for a moment. There was a restaurant on the corner opposite them.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, pointing to it. "We can get something to eat while we're waiting."

"All right," Aeris agreed.

The restaurant had tables outside on a wide veranda. They sat down at one which gave them a view of their meeting spot. The waitress came over and they ordered.

"I wonder where Vincent and Elena are," Aeris said. "I hope they're okay."

"Me too," Reeve replied quickly. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to them. I don't think we'd get very far without them. Although I have to say that I don't really like the way Elena's been treating you."

Aeris looked at him in surprise.

"What do you mean?" she said.

Reeve paused for a minute before answering.

"Well, you've got to admit she hasn't been very nice to you," he said slowly. "I don't think she likes you at all, and it kind of pisses me off."

Aeris did not speak for a moment. She was kind of surprised at him.

"But why would you feel that way?"

Reeve shrugged.

"Well, I don't see why she should be like that," he replied. "You've never done anything to her."

"You forget that Avalanche and the Turks have been enemies for a long time," Aeris replied. "Besides, I don't think she's been particularly mean to me, that's the way she acts toward everyone. That's the way she is."

Reeve looked at her and shook his head. Then he smiled.

"Let me ask you something, have you ever gotten mad at anyone?"

"What?"

"Have you ever said anything nasty about anyone?" he asked. "I've never heard you utter a bad word about anyone since I've known you."

Aeris seemed at a loss for words for a moment.

"C'mon," Reeve said. "There must be someone who pissed you off sometime of another. What about Sephiroth?"

"Sephiroth was driven mad by what Hojo did to him," Aeris replied. "It wasn't his fault."

"See!" he said. "You're not even mad at Sephiroth. Aeris, don't you remember what he did to you?"

"Yeah," she said slowly.

"Well?"

She just shrugged.

"What about Hojo?" he asked.

She thought for a moment.

"Hojo was not a very nice person," she said.

"Is that the best you can do?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"He's not a nice person? Don't you ever feel angry over what he did? Doesn't it make you furious?"

"Maybe," she replied. "But he's dead now. He's paid for what he's done, as much as he can pay. It wouldn't do me any good to get upset about it now."

He leaned back in his chair and stared at her. Then he smiled again.

"You're amazing," he said.

"Why?" she said, but couldn't help smiling as well.

He didn't reply, but just sat there shaking his head.

"Well, all I can say is, I'm glad you're with us," he finally said. "I don't think I'd be having much fun with just Vincent and Elena."

Aeris looked at him with just a hint of embarrassment.

"Well, thank you Reeve," she said. "I'm glad you're with us too."

"Really?"

"Yes, really," she replied. "You know, it might do you some good if you showed a little more confidence in yourself."

He shrugged.

"That's kind of hard to do when I feel like I'm way out of my league," he replied, looking at her carefully.

"But it's no different for any of us," she replied. "Not really. No matter what has happened before, this is all new to me as well."

"I suppose," he said slowly. "It's just that it's so different from when I controlled Cait. But I do think I'm getting better at it. Slowly."

"I think you are too," she said supportively.

Just then the waitress came over and placed their food on the table.

Every once in a while as they were eating Reeve looked up to see if there was any sign of Vincent or Elena, and though he saw no sign of them, he did eventually notice something else.

"I think that man is watching us," he said.

"Who?" she asked, almost turning to look.

"That man over there in the shadows of that building," he said.

She glanced over in the direction he indicated, trying to be discreet. She saw the man he was talking about. He stood in the entrance way to a small clothing shop across the street, just to the left of their meeting place. He was leaning against the doorway, looking down the road at the moment. Then she saw him look over at them. She turned away.

"How long has he been there?" she asked.

"Not sure," Reeve replied. He continued eating for a few minutes, glancing casually at the man every once in a while.

"He's definitely watching us," he said nervously. He still saw no sign of Vincent or Elena. Now he was suddenly worried that something had happened to them.

The man abruptly stepped into the street. He glanced at them one more time, then walked away rapidly.

"He's leaving."

Aeris turned to look. A moment later the man was gone.

She turned back to Reeve.

"What do we do now?"

Reeve did not reply for a moment. Were they just being paranoid? Maybe it had been nothing at all.

But could they really take the chance?

He stood up.

"C'mon, let's get out of here."

Aeris got up as well.

"But what about the others?"

"We won't go far," Reeve replied. "Just around the block. We'll come back and check later. I don't think it's a good idea for us to stay in one spot."

Aeris nodded. They paid for their dinner and walked down the street. Reeve felt uncomfortable. It suddenly seemed like everyone they passed was looking at them. For just a moment, sitting with Aeris, he had been able to forget that they were lost and being hunted in a foreign land. But now he suddenly felt more nervous than ever. In spite of how he felt about Elena he wished she and Vincent were with them. If it hadn't been for them, he and Aeris wouldn't have made it out of that first village.

They circled slowly around the block. As they came back to their starting point Aeris suddenly grabbed his arm.

"Look!"

She was looking at the restaurant. The man they had seen stood on the veranda, talking to the waitress, two uniformed guards beside him.

They ducked back into the darkness provided by an overhang above a closed up fruit stand.

"So he was watching us," Reeve stated.

"It's a good thing we left," she said, looking at him.

"Yeah, but what do we do now?" he replied. "I don't think it's a good idea to hang around here, but how are we going to find Vincent and Elena?"

Aeris shook her head.

"I don't know," she replied. "Maybe if we come back later."

Reeve did not reply. He didn't like that idea at all. Someone had become suspicious, and who knew who would be watching the restaurant from now on. Returning could just lead them right into a trap.

But what else were they to do? Vincent and Elena had no way to tell where they had gotten a room, and they had made no plans for a second meeting place in case something like this happened. Stupid, now that he thought about it, but it was too late to do anything about it now.

He looked over at Aeris. She didn't seem particularly worried. But then again, she never did. Just another thing he admired about her. What would they do if they couldn't find the others? Could they go on by themselves?

Did they have any choice?

The question was suddenly rendered moot when two figures materialized out of the darkness behind them. Reeve felt his heart race for a moment, until he recognized their two friends.

"We were afraid you had gotten caught," Vincent said.

"We thought the same about you," Aeris replied.

"What happened here?" Elena asked, looking back toward the restaurant.

"I'm not sure," Reeve replied. "We were eating at the restaurant when I noticed a man staring at us, but I don't know what it was that attracted his attention. He left and we walked around the block, and when we came back the guards were there."

"Good thing you left," Elena commented.

Reeve nodded.

"Did you find us a place to stay?" Vincent asked.

"Yes," Reeve said. He looked at Aeris.

"You don't think it was the clerk at the hotel that put them on our trail, do you?"

Aeris shrugged.

"I don't think so, he didn't act suspicious. Besides, how would he know where we went?"

"Let's hope not," Vincent replied. "Because if it was him then we'll be walking right into a trap if we go back there."

"So what do you suggest?" Reeve asked. "That we find another place to stay?"

Vincent looked at Aeris once more. She shrugged.

"I don't think so," he said. "We can at least go back and take a look. I don't know whether we'd be able to get a room anywhere else this late."

"What about you two?" Aeris said. "Did you find us any transportation?"

"There's a train leaving for Mysteele tomorrow morning at eight o'clock," Elena replied. "That might be the easiest way."

"But won't the trains be guarded?" Reeve asked.

"Of course they will," Elena said. "But unless we want to stay here forever, we have to try something. I don't plan on walking all the way to Mysteele."

Reeve did not reply. He and Aeris led them back to the hotel. They stopped outside and looked around, but they saw nothing unusual.

"I'll go check it out," Reeve said suddenly. He really wasn't all that happy with the idea, but it would obviously be foolish for them all to go, and since it had been he and Aeris who had gotten the rooms in the first place he realized he was a logical choice. Besides, he was afraid if he didn't go Aeris would have volunteered.

Steeling himself he walked into the hotel and looked around. The clerk they had seen earlier was gone, and the person there now only glanced up at him briefly. He went up the stairs and looked in one of the rooms. Everything seemed to be in order.

He returned to the others and reported his findings.

They followed him back into the building and up to the rooms. Reeve gave Vincent one key and opened the other door himself. Aeris walked into the room. Reeve hesitated, feeling suddenly awkward. She turned to look at him.

"Well, are you coming?" she said.

"Yeah," he replied after a moment. She disappeared into the room. He was about to follow when Elena grabbed his arm.

"You only got two rooms?" she questioned.

"Well, yeah," he said hesitantly.

"And she went along with that?" Elena said in surprise.

"They only had two available," Reeve replied, feeling suddenly embarrassed.

Elena looked at him for a moment, then smiled and leaned closer to him.

"Go get her, tiger," she whispered.

Then she turned and followed Vincent into the other room. She turned when she reached the door, winked at him, and then closed the door behind her.

He walked into the room, his face red. Aeris was standing by the dresser. He turned away, but she saw his look.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"N..nothing," he stammered.

She stared at him.

"It's just Elena," he said.

"Is she bothering you?" Aeris asked.

He shook his head and looked at her.

"Are you sure you don't mind sharing a room with me?"

She looked puzzled.

"Why would I mind?"

"Well, you know. The two of us, alone together for the night. People might talk..." he ended lamely.

"You mean Vincent and Elena?"

"Well, who else?"

She waved her hand in dismissal.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "What was I supposed to do, make you sleep out in the hallway? These were the only rooms available. Besides, there's two beds"

"Yeah, I know," he said, grinning sheepishly. "But still. I feel kind of uncomfortable about it."

"Well, you shouldn't," she said firmly. "Elena can talk all she wants. It's not going to bother me. I don't think we need to say anything more about it. Now I'm tired, I'm going to get some rest."

Reeve looked around.

"So, you want the bed by the window or the door?"

"Window," she said.

"You got it," he replied.

A short time later they both settled into their beds and Aeris turned off the light.

"Goodnight Reeve."

"Goodnight Aeris," he replied slowly.

He lay there in bed, staring up at the ceiling as his eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. Occasionally he turned to glance over at the other bed, but Aeris did not stir, and soon the soft rhythm of her breathing told him that she had fallen asleep. He could see clearly enough now to dimly make out the soft features of her face, and he couldn't help but think that this was the face of an angel.

He turned away and looked at the ceiling again. He would never have admitted it, but he had been secretly pleased when they were only able to get two rooms. Though they were lost in a strange land, and one false move could lead to their deaths, just being near her almost made him forget all that, almost made it worthwhile to him.

He was being an idiot, he knew. There was no chance that she would have even the slightest interest in him. But whatever the future held, they were together now.

He looked back over at her again. She looked so beautiful, and yet so vulnerable too, but Reeve knew that was deceiving. She had great inner strength, and had proven in the past that she could take care of herself. Yet even so he made a vow to himself. No matter what it took, no matter what he had to do, he would look after her. She might not need one, but he would be her bodyguard. Even if he had to sacrifice everything else, he would do all that he could to see that she came out

of this unharmed.