

CHAPTER VI: I'LL TAKE CETRA FOR FIVE HUNDRED, PLEASE

Reeve and Aeris eased the Cetra down into a chair in front of the Tiger Lily Weapons shop. Reeve walked back over to the doorway and looked out. He could see Zack and Cloud retreating up the stairs. He looked back at Aeris and the newcomer.

"The monsters are in the canyon," he said, his voice strangely flat. He never thought he would see such a thing.

The Cetra nodded. He seemed to be recovering his strength.

"There are too many of them," he said slowly. "You cannot win."

Reeve looked at him uneasily.

"Can't you do that...whatever it was you did to the riders? Can't you do that again?"

The man slowly shook his head.

"Banish evil," he gave it a name. He looked at Aeris. "You will learn it someday. But no," he continued, turning to face Reeve again. "I do not have the strength. I'm not as young as I used to be. It took nearly everything I had just to do it that one time."

"Who are you?" Aeris spoke up.

The man turned toward her once again and smiled.

"My name is Ellengio," he replied simply.

"I'm Aeris," she nodded toward Reeve. "And this is Reeve."

The man looked at Reeve again.

"Yes, we've met," he said slowly.

Reeve returned his gaze but did not reply. He had seen the man twice on the southern continent, and chased him through the train once, but suddenly it came to him that that was not what the man was referring to.

"You saved my life," he said with sudden certainty. "When I was shot in the alley. It was you!"

Ellengio nodded.

"I do not like to see needless death," he said. "And I could tell you were important to the...to Aeris."

"Thank you," Reeve said.

Ellengio did not reply.

"And the warnings," Aeris said suddenly. "In Mysteele I thought it was a dream, but it was you. There, and in Ifalna. It was your voice I heard warning me of danger."

Again Ellengio nodded.

"You've been watching over me," she stated.

"Yes," he replied.

"But where did you come from?" she questioned. "I mean, I know you were on the southern continent, but how did you get there? I thought I was the last Ancient."

"As did I," he replied. "Perhaps I should start from the beginning."

Reeve walked slowly back over and stood beside Aeris

"It was almost forty years ago," Ellengio continued. "Our people were scattered and few. We began to realize that unless we brought what was left of our people together again it could mean the end of our race. We had heard some rumors of some of our kind having been seen on the southern continent. We knew about it of course, but it was wild and largely unexplored land at that time. We settled there, searching for more of our people. There were six of us to begin with. Two gave up the search and returned here. We never heard from them again. The three others died from accidents and illness. I was the last one."

"I continued the search," he said, looking at Aeris. "But I never found any sign of Ancients on the southern continent. I had given up hope that I ever would, until one day in Pangir I ran into you."

"At first I wasn't sure what to make of you. In fact, I wasn't even sure at first that you were an Ancient. When I was with the others, I could always sense them. It was very strong, but with you I hardly felt anything at first. I had to concentrate, more than I ever did with the others. But after a short time observing you I became convinced you were one of my people, though not from the southern continent. Perhaps from some long lost northern branch. That might explain why I don't sense you as strongly."

"My father was human," Aeris explained.

Ellengio's eyebrows went up.

"Indeed?" he said. "That would go a long way toward explaining it. At any rate I followed you back to Ifalna, still watching you cautiously. At that time I decided to reveal myself, but then I sensed the danger and warned you of the assassins, and then you hurried off. I've been trying to catch up with you ever since."

Suddenly they heard the pounding of footsteps outside. Reeve turned, shotgun ready, but then relaxed as Cloud and Zack stepped into the room, along with almost two dozen Canyon guards. Most were so weary that they collapsed to the ground as soon as they entered the room. Almost all of them were wounded. Zack was limping, and blood was dripping down Cloud's neck from a gash above his ear.

"They've taken most of the canyon below," Cloud said. "But they don't seem to be interested in attacking the caves yet. But more keep coming in. It's just a matter of time."

He leaned wearily on his sword and looked at Ellengio curiously. Aeris and Reeve took out restore materia and walked around the room casting cure on the wounded. Aeris told them what Ellengio had said to her as she made her way around the room.

"Looks like you got here just in time to get caught up in this mess," Zack observed when Aeris had finished.

"Good thing he did," Cloud stated. "Things are bad enough now. I don't even want to think what would have happened if you hadn't killed those riders."

Ellengio shook his head.

"Oh, they're not dead," he said. "I don't have the strength to do that. I merely sent them back to Jenova. They'll return once more, stronger than ever."

Cloud just looked at him.

"Great."

"But what of you, Aeris?" Ellengio focused his dark green eyes on her once again. "How is it that you are here, the last of my people?"

"I'm the daughter of Ifalna and Professor Gast," she replied.

"Ifalna?" Ellengio said in surprise.

"Did you know her?" Aeris said quickly.

Ellengio thought for a moment.

"One of my mother's sister's had a daughter named Ifalna," he said. "What was your grandmother's name?"

"I don't know," Aeris replied sadly. "My mother died when I was very young. She never told me anything about my relatives."

Ellengio nodded.

"Go on," he said.

Aeris explained about what had happened with Hojo killing Professor Gast, her and her mother's imprisonment, and her mother's subsequent death. She went on about how Jenova had been found buried in a 2000 year old rock stratum and Professor Gast and Hojo's subsequent experiments. How that had led to the birth of Sephiroth and the trouble he had caused.

Ellengio listened with interest, but interrupted suddenly when she mentioned what Sephiroth had done to her.

"Killed?" he exclaimed, looking at her in surprise. "Surely you don't mean that."

"But I do," Aeris replied. "Sephiroth ran me through. I was killed and returned to the lifestream, but my friends brought me back."

"Brought you back?" Ellengio said, and suddenly he seemed very agitated. "How? How did they accomplish this?"

"A special kind of materia," Aeris replied. slowly. "Crystal materia."

Ellengio looked at her for a moment, his eyes wide and his face going pale.

"What?" Aeris said. "You know something about the crystal materia?"

Ellengio did not reply for a moment. Slowly the surprise on his face melted into an expression of thoughtfulness.

"That would explain a lot," he said slowly. "But go on. I'm sorry to have interrupted. Finish your tale."

Aeris waited for a moment, but he just sat there looking patiently at her.

"There's not much more to tell," she continued. "My friends followed Sephiroth after my death. They confronted both him and Jenova and defeated them. We thought at that time that Jenova was gone for good, but we were wrong. Somehow, she has returned."

"No," Ellengio corrected. "The Jenova you killed is dead. This is a new Jenova. One that has just recently arrived here."

"Another Jenova?" Cloud said in surprise. "I don't understand."

"That's because you are thinking of Jenova as an individual, but that is the name of the species," Ellengio replied. "The Jenova you killed was a separate individual from the Jenova you are now facing."

"Is that why it can't control us?" Zack said.

"What do you mean?" Ellengio asked.

"Cloud and I both had cells from the original Jenova implanted in us by Hojo. Jenova and Sephiroth both could use those cells to influence us, even to control us. But this one can't seem to do it."

"Yes," Ellengio agreed. "This one would not be able to control the cells from another individual. But it can feel their presence, as you must be able to feel it."

Zack nodded.

"But why is it here?" Aeris asked. "What is it doing?"

"Yeah," Zack agreed. "The last one came what, 2000 years ago. What, can we expect them to show up every couple of thousand years?"

He didn't look too happy with the idea.

Ellengio shook his head.

"No," he said. "It came because it was alerted by changes in the lifestream."

"Changes in the lifestream?" Cloud repeated. "What changes?"

Ellengio stared at Aeris once more.

"Changes caused by the use of the crystal materia," he said slowly.

"What?" Cloud exclaimed.

All of them looked at Ellengio in surprise, while he just sat there shaking his head slowly.

"It all started long ago," he said, still looking at Aeris. "Over two thousand years ago humans and Cetra peacefully coexisted on this planet. But one day human miners broke into an ancient chamber deep below the earth and discovered what is now called the crystal materia."

"They quickly realized it was a stone of enormous power. A gift from God, it was called, and those who wielded it became kings. Some humans continued to investigate the cave where it was found, and soon discovered the body of an unknown

creature. Human science didn't even exist in those days, but some of them were friends of the Cetra, and asked them to investigate. The Cetra's conclusion was that the body in the cavern was not of this planet and had undoubtedly brought the stone with it when it had arrived here. I do not know what kind of creature this was, but it was not of Jenova's species."

"They discovered nothing more, but it was not long after this when Jenova appeared. At first, she came as a friend, wielding extraordinary power to help both mankind and the Cetra. It was obvious right from the beginning that she knew of the existence of the crystal materia, and in fact told us that the materia had been stolen from her people and she had been sent to retrieve it. She asked for it back, but the king who held it balked, knowing that it would seriously diminish his power, and he did not want to give it up even for the friendship of so powerful an ally. It was then that Jenova's true nature became apparent, for she transformed into a hideous beast and killed the king and most of his court. But one man managed to escape and brought the materia to the Cetra, even though he died from his wounds soon after. The Cetra hid it away where Jenova could not find it."

"You all know the results," Ellengio said sadly. "Jenova demanded the Cetra hand over the materia. When we refused Jenova manufactured and released a virus that devastated our population, reducing us in just a few years from a robust society to a race on the edge of extinction. But through it all Jenova never learned where we had hidden the crystal. Eventually, an army of humans and the few Cetra who were left managed to overthrow and defeat Jenova. But they did not kill it completely. It was laid in the ground, and remained there dormant until your Professor Gast and Hojo found it 2000 years later."

"With Jenova defeated the crystal materia remained in Cetra hands, and we had time to study it and learn its true properties. The fact that it could resurrect an Ancient was discovered, along with many other attributes that the humans had never even suspected. But we also found out that each use caused a disturbance in the lifestream. A disturbance so great that it could not only be felt on the planet where it is used, but on other worlds as well. Every use upset the balance, and this could be felt on worlds far away. So far away, in fact, that it could be felt on the Jenova home world."

Aeris chewed nervously on her lower lip. She did not like the way this discussion was going. She looked over at Cloud, who was just looking at Ellengio with a puzzled expression.

"It was determined that the crystal materia probably originated on the Jenova home world," Ellengio continued. "The best theory that we could come up with was that the creature that we found in the cave with the crystal materia was a foe of Jenova and had stolen the crystal and fled, landing on our planet only to die. Apparently the crystal was a danger to the Jenova species, and they were intent on destroying it, but they didn't know how to find it. But when it was discovered and used they were able to pinpoint it through the disturbance in the lifestream and send one of their own to destroy it. She failed, but since the crystal was not used by the Cetra after that they may have assumed she succeeded. They felt no more disturbances until..."

Once again he looked at Aeris. She stood there, her face suddenly gone pale and a look of horror entered her eyes.

"Until it was used to resurrect me," she finished for him, her eyes wide and her hand coming up to her mouth. "Jenova has returned because of my resurrection. The attempts on our lives, what's going on in Gongaga, the destruction here at Cosmo Canyon. It's all happened because of me. It's all my fault!"

"No," Cloud said quickly "It's my fault. I was the one who wouldn't let you go. I was the one who found the crystal materia."

"You can't blame yourselves," Reeve interrupted. "No one knew about this. If anyone, it's the fault of all of us in Avalanche. We all went along, we all wanted to bring back Aeris."

He looked at Aeris. He could tell she was deeply disturbed by what Ellengio had told them, but she just turned away.

Cloud stood there, shaking his head slowly. He didn't doubt Ellengio, but he could hardly believe what he was hearing. They had undertaken the quest to resurrect Aeris with the noblest of intentions. To save her from death, to right the grievous wrong Sephiroth had done to her, had done to them all. When they had succeeded, he had counted it among their greatest triumphs.

Could it be that one of their greatest triumphs would turn out to be one of their greatest mistakes?

But they hadn't known! He couldn't blame himself, he couldn't blame any of them. There was no way they could have been aware of this, aware of the danger they were unleashing.

Could they?

He remembered something Tifa had told him Tarkin had said, when he had stopped the Turks from taking the crystal materia from her.

You are like children playing with a deadly weapon.

Even if they had known, would it have made any difference? Would they have put aside the quest, knowing that Aeris would be gone forever if they had? He knew in his heart the answer to that. He knew that he would never have turned aside, even if it meant putting the entire planet in jeopardy.

He looked at Aeris. She was facing away from them, her head bowed.

The cruel irony was that she would never have wanted it. She would never have wanted to put others in peril for her own sake, yet that was exactly what had happened.

Suddenly they heard shouts from near the doorway. They all turned as Red, Nipala and Barret came in, followed by more of the canyon guards. The room was getting quite crowded now. Barret was carrying Illyanova in his arms.

He eased her down onto the ground as Reeve went over, pulling out a restore materia. Red and Nipala came up beside Cloud. Both were covered with cuts and scrapes, and Nipala was limping.

"The canyon is taken," Red said slowly, barely seeming to be able to get the words out. He did not look at Cloud when he spoke.

Aeris suddenly turned toward him. There were tears in her eyes. She came over and wrapped her arms around the red beast.

"I'm so sorry," she said softly.

Red did not reply. Barret looked at Aeris curiously, then turned to Cloud, a questioning look in his eyes.

Cloud quickly gave them a rundown on what Ellengio had told them.

"So you all blamin' yourselves for what another one of those headless freak things is doin'?" he exclaimed when Cloud had finished. "We can straighten this out real easy, let's just go out and kick this Jenova freaks ass clear back to the planet it came from.

"But it's our fault it here in the first place," Cloud stated. "We called it when we used the crystal materia."

"What's done is done," Barret replied. "No use cryin' over it. You gonna sit in here whining about blaming yourselves or are you gonna do something about it?"

Cloud started to reply, but then shut his mouth, realizing that Barret was right. It didn't matter who, if anyone was to blame for their current situation. What mattered was what they were going to do about it.

"It's all well and good to talk about destroying Jenova," Zack observed. "But right now we have more pressing problems, such as an army of monsters knocking at our door. What are we going to do?"

There was silence. They all looked around the room at each other, but eventually all heads slowly turned until they were looking at Red.

Red returned their gaze with a haunted look in his eye. He slowly padded over to the doorway and looked out at the canyon below. He stood there for a long time. Then he walked slowly back inside.

"It is over," he said softly. "The canyon is lost. The creatures have overrun it, and we are too few to resist. Go. All of you. Flee while you still can, while the Gi cave is still undiscovered."

"They would have a difficult time assaulting the caves," Zack protested. "We could hold out here for a long time."

Red shook his head.

"No, it is over," he repeated. "We are too few. Staying to fight will only result in more needless death. The canyon...the canyon is destroyed. There is nothing left to fight for. The eternal flame has been extinguished."

"No!"

They all turned toward the door once more at the sound of the voice. Cid stood in the entrance way, Vincent, Elena and Rude behind him. In his hand was a brightly burning torch.

He walked into the room.

"No, the eternal flame still burns," he said. "It's just become a little more mobile."

He looked at Illyanova and grinned.

"I told you I'd take care of it."

Illyanova managed a wan smile.

"It heartens me to see this," Red said. "But it does not change the fact that you must flee. I am just happy to know that after all this is done some small part of the canyon may yet survive."

"We're not going to leave you here, Red," Cloud said.

"You must," Red replied. "I am the protector, defending the canyon is what I was born to do, what all my line have done for thousands of years. I cannot leave."

"Very brave," Ellengio said. "But you would just be throwing your life away."

"I am the protector," Red repeated. "It is what I must do."

"But you'll die," Aeris said in a choked voice.

"We all die," he replied. "What would you have me do? Run away to die somewhere many years from now, in disgrace? Would you have me turn away from my obligation, just to save myself? My father died defending this canyon against nearly insurmountable odds. Could I ever look myself in the face again if I was not willing to do the same?"

"The circumstances are different," Ellengio pointed out. "When the Gi attacked Cosmo Canyon stood alone. They had no allies to come to their aid, they had no where else to go. But you do. You can lead your people to another city, you can call for aid. You can come back with an army and retake the canyon. Standing and fighting now would just be throwing away your life for no reason."

"No, not for no reason," Red countered. "You are a Cetra, but you do not know the relationship my species has had with the people of this canyon. It has been my species obligation and right to protect this place for as long as we have existed. No one has ever failed that obligation. I would rather perish than be the first. I will stay!"

Ellengio looked at Red doubtfully, but he did not reply.

Nipala lifted her head, a fire seeming to burn in her eyes.

"I will not leave you," she stated.

"Nor will I," Cloud said.

"Nor I," said one of the canyon guards. And it was repeated around the room. They all seemed willing to stand by Red, even if it was the last stand they would make.

Red bowed his head.

"I do not wish for you all to die with me," he said.

"It is not your decision to make," Nipala replied. "Although I have never lived in Cosmo Canyon, I am a protector too, so the burden is as much mine as it is yours."

"As for everyone else," she said, looking around slowly. "They are under no obligation to stay. Any who wish to leave may do so, with no shame. But if they wish to stay and die bravely, as you choose to do," and she once again looked at Red. "Can you deny them?"

Red paused for a moment, then shook his head.

"It is a dark day," he said slowly, looking around himself. "But you have made me proud. Perhaps we can make our last stand something that people will remember long after we are gone."

"Nanaki."

Red turned to face Illyanova. She was still lying where Barret had placed her. Reeve had cast cure, but her wounds were

serious, though not fatal. It would take her many days to recover.

Red slowly walked over to her.

She smiled at him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You are very brave, but still young. There is much you have to learn yet, and I fear that the decision you are making now may be in error."

"Why do you say that, Elder?" he replied, somewhat surprised. "I am the protector. Is this not what I must do?"

"You are the protector," she agreed. "But you seem to have lost view of what you are protecting. It is not the canyon walls around you, it is not the red clay of the mountainside, it is not the Great Hall, or the Hall of Records, or any building. It is not even the eternal flame of which I speak now. It is the people of Cosmo Canyon. That is what you are here to protect. That is what is important. Not the place, but the people dwelling within it. What will happen to those people, Nanaki? What will happen to all the citizens of Cosmo Canyon that survive this when their protector and their finest warriors are gone?"

Red did not reply.

"We will perish," she continued. "We will die, or fade away into other cities. And then Cosmo Canyon will be gone forever."

Red bowed his head.

"I did not think of this, Elder," he said slowly.

Illyanova nodded.

"You are still young," she repeated. "No one has ever become protector at such a young age. There is so much more I wish you would have learned, but do not be ashamed. You have handled yourself well, and I think you would make your ancestors proud. But in this case I think the Cetra might be right. You will not be helping your people by dying here. Sometimes even the brave will turn away from a battle, for a single battle may become meaningless in the long run. I think your greatest obligation now is to lead your people to safety, and preserve what little we have left until we can return to reclaim our beloved canyon."

Red stood there in thought, his tail twitching furiously. Of course he respected Illyanova's opinion, and had leaned heavily on the advice of the Elders in all things since he had become protector of the canyon, precisely because he was so young. But this advice went against all he believed in. To abandon the canyon! Every lesson he had learned growing up, every skill he had obtained, all the training he had received, it had all been to one purpose, to make him the defender of Cosmo Canyon. To leave now, to walk away from that. It was just inconceivable.

But what Illyanova had said made sense. No matter how he felt about leaving the canyon, it was true, he was the protector of the people, not the canyon itself. The canyon had been here long before any of them, and would undoubtedly be there when they were all long gone. It was the spirit that was important, the spirit of the people who lived there. He did not wish to see that perish.

Red looked up once more at the others around him, his eyes falling last on Illyanova.

"Very well," he said. "I will lead the people out, though it will break my heart."

"As it will mine," she replied. "But it is the right thing."

Cloud could not help but give an inward sigh of relief.

"Very wise," Ellengio said, standing up slowly. "But before we leave, you must tell me what has become of the crystal materia."

"It is hidden in the Gi cave," Red replied. "That seemed to be the safest place for it. We can get it as we leave."

Ellengio nodded. They stood there for a moment in silence.

"Shall we go?" Ellengio suggested.

Red nodded, then reluctantly led them out of the room and up the stairs. The others slowly followed, Nipala and Ellengio right behind him. Reeve and Barret helped Illyanova up and joined the exodus. When they reached the entrance to the Gi cave Red turned and looked back for a moment, but he did not say anything. Then, with each step seemingly more reluctant than the one before, he led them into the cave.

Cloud and Zack both drew their swords as they descended down into the cavern, but nothing disturbed the darkness around them. There was no feeling of a presence like they had felt the last time they had been in here. Perhaps the dead had finally found a resting place, or perhaps they knew they could not oppose such a large procession. For whatever reason, the party was not challenged.

They reached the fork that led to the library chamber where they had found the book when looking for a way to resurrect Aeris, which now seemed so long ago. Red monitored for them to wait, then he and Nipala walked down the dark corridor. They came back a few minutes later with the crystal materia. Red gave it to Ellengio.

"When they find out the crystal materia has escaped them, will the monsters abandon the canyon?" Red asked.

Ellengio looked thoughtful.

"I do not know," he replied.

Red turned away and started off again. Ellengio stood there for a few moments looking down at the stone in his hand, then he too followed as the procession wound its way through the lower caves. Eventually they came to the exit and looked up to see the stone figure of Seto silhouetted above them against the stars.

Here Red stopped and let the others file slowly past. He waited, with Nipala by his side, until the last of his people had passed out of the caves. Cloud stopped just past them and turned back toward his two friends.

"Go on," Red called. "Go down to the valley. Leave us here for a few minutes to say our last goodbye."

Cloud hesitated for a moment, then nodded slowly. He turned and followed the others down the steep path toward the trees below. He looked back once and saw Red and Nipala standing side by side silently in the darkness. Reluctantly he continued down the trail, but hadn't gone very far when a mournful wail broke the silence behind him. Cloud could not help but stop and pause for a second, for it was a cry of utter despair. A moment later the voice was joined by another, slightly higher one. Both crying out into the darkness. The sounds of lost souls without hope. For a moment Cloud felt tears welling up in his eyes, but he clenched his teeth and held them back. He started down the trail again, his knees trembling, as the wrenching cries of his friends filled the night air around him.

He reached the others, who had stopped at the bottom of the slope. Most were looking back up the hill in silence, their faces pale. Aeris was crying softly and not looking up at all. Cloud walked up to Ellengio and then turned to face the mountains as the others were, taking one last look at Cosmo Canyon, for they could not tell when, if ever, they would return here.

They stood in silence in the darkness for a long time, listening to the mournful howling above them. But eventually the sound faded into silence, and a short time later Red and Nipala appeared out of the darkness coming down the slope. Red walked up to Ellengio and looked at him.

"The canyon is lost, but what of Jenova, and what of the crystal materia?" he asked, his voice strong and filled with resolve. "What can we do defeat Jenova and set things right?"

"Yeah," Barret agreed. "What are we going to do about stopping that freak?"

Ellengio looked around him in the dark.

"It's late and we are weary. We need to rest and regain our strength. We must find a place of refuge. I think it would be best to discuss strategy after we have all gotten a good night's sleep."

"It will be long before I get a good night's sleep again," Red stated.

Ellengio nodded.

"As best we can then," he corrected. "Where is the nearest town?"

"Nibelheim," Cloud answered. "Just past the river to the north. About an hour's march."

"Then let us go there," Ellengio said.

"No," Red said.

Ellengio looked at him.

"The ancestral boundary of Cosmo Canyon ends at the river," Red continued. "I will not cross it. I, and any of my people who wish to continue the fight, will find refuge in the hills to the east. Some of my people dwell there, in the mountains,

although the land is wild and inhospitable. We will stay here and harass the enemy that has dared to defile our beloved canyon, until help arrives and we can once more free it. This at least I will do in the name of my ancestors."

Ellengio stood silently in thought, looking at Red. Finally he nodded.

"Very well," he said. "We will go to Nibelheim. It is much too risky for the crystal materia to remain here. Above all else it must be kept safe. We will try to bring you aid and supplies, and come up with a plan to deal with Jenova."

Red nodded.

"Take the Chocobos," he said, motioned toward the remaining birds that some of the guards had rescued. "There are only seven of them left, and I don't think we'll need them up in the mountains."

The beasts were brought forward. Ellengio mounted one. Barret suddenly stepped forward and looked at Red.

"I'll stay with you," he said.

Red looked at him in surprise.

"Until we get help you're going to have to fight a guerrilla war, using terrorist tactics. I've had some experience with that sort of thing."

Red smiled ruefully and nodded.

The others mounted up, Elena behind Vincent. Reeve rode slowly up behind Aeris, who had not mounted.

"Would you..." he began, but just then Zack came up on a Chocobo in front of her and extended his hand. She looked up and him and then took it, and he pulled her up behind him.

Cloud turned to Red when they had all mounted.

"Good luck," he said. "Stay safe. And don't worry. We'll find a way to destroy Jenova."

"Farewell, my friends," Red replied. "May we be standing once more on the streets of Cosmo Canyon when we meet again!"

With that Ellengio spurred his Chocobo forward, and the others followed. Cloud looked back once as they rode off into the night. He caught a glimpse of his three friends and waved, but he didn't know whether they saw him or not, for they did not respond. He looked forward again, the wind whipping around him, but his heart heavy. He couldn't help but wonder if he would ever see any of them again.