A Shot At Life

MEZ

A SHOT AT LIFE

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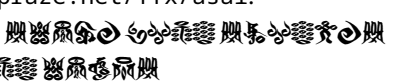

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Chapter 1

Three Travellers

Spring had arrived in Bevelle. The city was as busy as ever: priests and traders thronged the streets, gossiping and debating; young monks and nuns hurried to their lessons; warrior monks strode from one temple to another, preening under the respectful gaze of the citizenry. Apart from the sudden improvement in the weather, it was much the same as any other afternoon.

In a square near the city centre, two men met, just as they had planned. Each wore an elaborate, formal robe, although that would never have turned heads in Bevelle. Auron, the younger, was still getting used to his: he had obtained it just recently, finding himself able to choose his own attire for the first time after years spent wearing the various uniforms of the warrior monk corps.

Auron's hair was gathered in its usual ponytail, neatly scraped back to keep it from getting in his way. His robe

was a deep red, and he wore it over just one shoulder: that, he had heard, had been the custom of the warrior monks of ancient Zanarkand. It had seemed appropriate to adopt the same dress for his task. Secured at the waist with an elaborate belt, the robe went all the way to his ankles. The sleeve on the right side was tucked into a bulky gauntlet that covered his hand and forearm; his left arm was entirely bare. It had felt peculiar, to begin with, but he was beginning to get used to it.

Auron's companion, Braska, also wore a red robe; it completely covered his arms and legs, dragging on the ground and totally obscuring his feet. It was seen as right that a priest should cover himself up, and although Braska had not taken an active role in temple service for a number of years, he still felt more comfortable when he wore clothing that kept his form obscured. His hair, too, was entirely hidden under a large ceremonial headdress; some might have thought it too much, but Braska was used to having his head covered. Not only was it common in his profession, but it was also the usual practice among men of his ethnicity to wear at least a turban of some kind. In his hand, he held a long staff, at least a foot taller than he was: it was the tool he needed for his new duties.

Two months earlier, Braska had entered the temple of Bahamut in Bevelle's holy citadel and formally announced his intention to become a summoner. It was the culmination of a training schedule that had lasted the best part of a year; he had struggled, initially, to find someone willing to teach him,

but he had eventually learnt the summoner's arts, gaining new skills to complement the magical abilities he had already acquired years before. In the temple, he had prayed to the fayth, as all would-be summoners must; the fayth had seen fit to receive him, and so he had officially been admitted as a summoner, and deemed ready to begin his journey through the land of Spira, visiting additional temples and communing with more fayth until he was ready to travel to the holy city, Zanarkand.

Auron was to be Braska's guardian on the journey. Due to past events, Braska had never had many friends in Bevelle; Auron was one of the handful of people who had ever made time for him, and Braska had never doubted that Auron would make an excellent guardian. The journey to Zanarkand would be long and arduous; that was why summoners needed guardians to accompany them, and Auron was more skilled than most, having spent many years training as a warrior monk, where he had risen through the ranks of the corps at an exceptional pace.

Braska's original plan had been to finish his initiation as a summoner and then wait until later in the year, taking his few precious opportunities to spend time with his young daughter before beginning the journey. But events had taken a turn: Auron had recently run into some trouble of his own, and things would be much less unpleasant for him if they left Bevelle as soon as possible. What was more, Braska was unable to

deny that he himself was desperate to make a start on the summoner's pilgrimage. He had known for some time that this was his only path forward. The thought that he might complete the pilgrimage and do something good for the Spiran people was comforting to him; he was determined to set that process in motion as soon as possible. Every day that he delayed was a burden, and every step he took that brought him closer to his goal brought him some much-needed solace.

That was why the two of them had met on this spring afternoon: to make the final preparations before they departed. They were due to set off shortly before dawn the next morning, following the custom. Auron had thought everything was ready – he had busied himself in the last few days by triple-checking the plan, making sure the temples they were to visit were those that best suited Braska's lineage – but Braska had called him here for a final meeting before their departure.

The sun really was unusually bright. Auron shielded his eyes with his bare hand and squinted in Braska's direction. "You said you wanted to visit the jail, my lord?" he enquired.

The respectful form of address was something Braska was still getting used to; it was particularly strange coming from Auron, of all people, but he knew his friend valued tradition, and everyone was supposed to address summoners in that way. He nodded. "I've heard rumours. They say a man was taken in yesterday – he claims to be from Zanarkand. I thought it might be useful to visit, before we set off. We might even think about

taking him with us."

"You think he's telling the truth?" said Auron, frowning. Not much was known about the city of Zanarkand; only summoners ever visited, and very few of them were able to make it that far in their pilgrimage. Zanarkand had suffered badly in a war against Bevelle a thousand years ago; ever since, the city had been quiet.

"I don't know," Braska admitted. "I just wonder – the timing is remarkable, isn't it? Two days before we begin our journey, a man from Zanarkand appears in Bevelle."

"Supposedly from Zanarkand," Auron couldn't help saying.

Braska nodded slowly. "Supposedly. But worth investigating, I think. Shall we?"

Guardians were supposed to obey their summoners; Auron inclined his head in assent, and the two of them turned to make their way towards the jail, falling into step beside each other. Auron found himself having to slow his own walking to match Braska's pace. It wasn't the case that Braska was physically unfit: Auron had succeeded in persuading him to undergo some training in combat and endurance over the last few months, knowing their journey would be arduous. But Braska had come to tire easily in recent years, and his level of fitness was nothing compared to his guardian's: Auron had been involved in intense military exercises since he was very young.

They arrived at the jail, submitting themselves for in-

spection by the guard on duty, a warrior monk whom Auron vaguely recognised: probably one of the many members of the corps to whom he had recently been used to giving orders on the battlefield. The guard tensed at the sight of Braska – who had spent nearly eight years in Bevelle, and yet still elicited this reaction from devout Yevonites – and then he spoke. Braska was a summoner now, after all: it was important to show him some respect, even if that didn't come easily.

"Lord Braska," said the guard through gritted teeth. His gaze drifted towards Auron; their eyes met. Auron watched, trying to remain outwardly calm as a small but unmistakable grin formed on the guard's lips.

"We're here to visit one of the prisoners," said Braska, who hadn't noticed. "The man who claims to be from Zanarkand. In fact, as a summoner, I believe I have the privilege of being permitted to take him off your hands, don't I?"

"That's right," the guard confirmed. "Our men down in the cells can let him out, if you really think you want to take him. Have fun down there."

Auron responded to the remark with a scowl, and followed Braska down the stairs, whereupon another guard greeted them with a surprisingly polite bow of prayer, a gesture typical of the Yevonite faith. Neither of them returned it; Braska had given up on such traditions years ago, and Auron had recently seen fit to do the same.

He hung back as Braska approached the prisoner; he was

starting to feel uncomfortable. Being in the depths of the jail was bringing back unpleasant memories, and the sound of water flowing through the channels dug into the floor made him particularly tense. He stood at a careful distance, watching as Braska walked forward.

The man's name was Jecht, Braska had heard. That was all that had made it out of the jail and into the formidable Bevelle gossip machine. He had heard the name spoken by traders at the morning market, often accompanied by contemptuous laughter: nobody believed the man could really be from Zanarkand. But when he heard such reactions, Braska had wondered whether the man being discussed was a kindred spirit. He knew well what it was like to be cast aside and spoken about so derisively.

"Who're you?" Jecht groaned as Braska approached. He had been in the cell for a full day, and by this point was thoroughly fed up with the interactions he had had so far. The prison guards had taken issue with his repeated insistence that he knew nothing about this place, they had asked him about things that made no sense to him, and worst of all, they had declared they didn't have a clue who Jecht was. Everyone in Zanarkand knew his name; the idea that some people might not was one he found terribly insulting.

"You are the one they call Jecht," said Braska carefully, "the man from Zanarkand, are you not?"

"What of it?" Jecht replied.

Auron had continued to hang back, but he couldn't help hurrying towards the cell when he heard Jecht's words. He was used to people being disrespectful towards Braska, but now that Braska was a summoner, such open contempt was a step too far. "Watch your tongue, knave," he snapped, shooting Jecht his most disdainful look.

Braska gave Auron a warning glance; he was used to much worse, and it wouldn't do for Auron to lose his temper before they even got out of the jail – not in front of the other warrior monks. "My apologies," he said to Jecht. "I am Braska, a summoner. I've come to take you from this place."

Auron cringed internally at his words: Braska had already decided that Jecht would accompany them, it appeared. It was typical of him to make such decisions on the spot. It seemed Braska was determined to believe that Jecht really was from Zanarkand, the implausibility of that notion and the man's odious attitude notwithstanding. As Auron watched the stranger while he scrambled to his feet and continued talking to Braska, there was nothing he saw that failed to displease him. Jecht's unkempt hair and beard; his improper dress; the hideous scars that crisscrossed his skin, as if he had never heard of a white mage; the huge, gaudy tattoo covering his chest. Worst of all, the man stank of ale. He would be a detriment to their pilgrimage: Auron was certain of it. It was the last thing they needed, when they were already so low in everyone's estimation.

"But I must protest," he said, when it seemed that Jecht

was willing to accompany them. "This drunkard, a guardian?" He hoped Braska would see sense. Jecht couldn't possibly be from Zanarkand, and Auron was already sure of it: quite apart from the improbability of anyone coming from the city at all, it was the holiest place in Spira, and it certainly couldn't harbour anyone as unruly as this man.

Jecht's angry reply fell on deaf ears; Braska had turned to face Auron again. "What does it matter?" he said. "No-one truly believes that I, a fallen summoner wed to an Al Bhed, could possibly defeat Sin. This is what they say. No-one expects us to succeed."

"Braska, sir –" Auron began. That was exactly his point, he thought.

"Let's show them they're wrong," Braska insisted. "A fallen summoner, a man from Zanarkand, and a warrior monk doomed to obscurity for refusing the hand of the priest's daughter" – Auron grimaced in discomfort – "what delightful irony it would be if we defeated Sin."

Thrown off by the reference to his own troubles, as euphemistic as it had been, Auron found himself unable to formulate a response. Instead, Jecht spoke again: now that his liberation seemed imminent, he was keener than ever to leave the cell. "Stop gabbin' and get me out of here!" he demanded.

"Certainly," said Braska; he turned towards the closer of the two guards standing nearby. "I think the sphere has a clear record of his consent. Might you be able to release him?"

The man moved forward to unlock Jecht's cell, with a smirk in Auron's direction; Jecht emerged without a second glance at those who had come to free him. "Ah, free at last," he said contentedly, massaging his shoulders. Auron felt even more uncomfortable: up close, Jecht looked and smelt even worse.

"Now, Jecht," said Braska. "I am in your hands until we reach Zanarkand."

"Right, right," said Jecht dismissively; he wasn't bothered about the long journey he had apparently been recruited for. All that interested him was getting home as soon as possible. "So," he added, "what's a summer-ner, anyway?"

"A summoner," said Auron sharply, and regretted it as soon as he'd said it. Jecht was clearly playing stupid to wind them both up; another joke at Auron's expense, of the kind he'd seen a good few times recently. There was no way any grown man in Spira could be unaware of the role of a summoner.

"I send the deceased, and I seek to defeat Sin," Braska explained, as they headed up the stairs.

"Sin, huh?" said Jecht.

Braska inclined his head. "It's the manifestation of all our wrongdoings. A huge monster that terrorises Spira, causing death and destruction – if I can make it to Zanarkand, I may be able to defeat it."

His voice wobbled a little as he spoke the last few words; Jecht chose to ignore it. "Sounds like a tough gig," he said lightly. Nothing in what Braska had said made sense to him,

but there was one thing he was sure of: he would not be getting emotionally involved. That wasn't his style.

"You could say that," Braska murmured. "But it is the path I have chosen."

They had reached the vestibule at the top of the stairs; the guard who had bowed to them earlier had followed them up, and now held out half a small sphere. This was the record of their conversation below – the other half of the sphere now held an identical recording, which would be filed in the jail's archive. "Your copy of the sphere, sir," she said to Braska.

Auron took it; Braska watched as she walked off. Like nearly every woman of a certain age, she reminded him of his late wife. "I should go," he said suddenly. "They've let me have Yuna tonight." As a concession to his beginning the pilgrimage, the convent where his daughter now resided had let her out to visit him; it was to be their last night together before the pilgrimage began, and he owed her his company.

"Go ahead, sir," said Auron. "I'll take care of the paperwork."

Braska nodded, relieved. "Would you explain to Jecht, as well, what all this is about?" he asked. "I don't think he quite understood just now. And stop by the armoury tonight – I told them to expect you."

"Of course," said Auron. "We'll need to get him a sword anyway. I'll see you in the morning – you spend the time with your daughter."

Braska hurried away; Auron turned his attention to the guard on duty, the same one who had greeted them when they entered the jail earlier. He returned Auron's gaze smugly, no longer concerned about being polite now that the summoner had departed.

"You're taking him, then," he said, looking between Auron and Jecht with amusement.

"Looks like it," said Auron.

"Some pilgrimage that'll be," the guard said. He had already located the form that Auron and Jecht were required to sign, and laid it on the table between them. "Now, if you could sign here, Auron – oh, excuse me, *Sir* Auron –"

Suddenly, Auron found that he had had enough of his insolence. "There's no need for that," he snarled, trying to ignore Jecht's expression of mild curiosity. "Will you just stop all this fooling around –"

"Not trying to give me orders, are you?" said the guard. "What, did you forget you don't have the authority anymore?"

Auron just about managed not to punch him right in the face. "Just get on with it," he muttered instead.

It took some time to sort everything out: there was a bail to pay, and Auron was sure Jecht would have nothing resembling money, so he found his own reserve of gil substantially depleted as a result. He signed his name to the paper, so irritated that he nearly scored through it with the pen. Jecht signed too, with the quick scribble he was used to providing

as an autograph. "Look after that," he told the guard after he handed it over. "Gonna be worth tons."

Once they were finally outside, he stretched out contentedly, enjoying his freedom. "Man, I'm hungry," he remarked. "Is there somewhere we can get dinner around here?"

Auron had become well acquainted with a number of street food traders recently; in the past, he'd taken his meals in the barracks with the other warrior monks, but he'd been avoiding them of late, and tended to eat alone in his quarters these days. He led the way to a stall he imagined would suit Jecht: it sold big, heavy, meaty snacks. Jecht placed his order, slipping in a request for a few bottles of beer when Auron seemed not to be paying attention, and sat down on a nearby bench, contentedly listening to the early evening birdsong while Auron paid for their meals and then struggled over with the food and drink.

They both ate in silence for a while; Auron spared a few sidelong glances at Jecht, watching him gulp everything down at a speed he had previously thought impossible. He didn't know whether to be impressed or horrified.

Jecht wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and then said, "So, why are you guys going to Zanarkand anyway?"

"Lord Braska told you earlier," said Auron, with what he considered unwarranted patience. "He's a summoner."

"Uh huh," Jecht replied. After a few seconds, he realised no further explanation was forthcoming. "And," he said, "that means …"

"Don't be stupid," said Auron bluntly. "I refuse to believe that anyone could be unaware of the duties of a summoner. Unless you're *that* drunk –"

Jecht scoffed. "Hardly. Look, I don't know how I'm supposed to convince you that none of this stuff means anything to me, but if you keep refusin' to explain it, we ain't gonna get nowhere. That fancy guy said he was in my hands, right? So I guess I'm supposed to be some kinda tour guide for you guys?"

"His name is Lord Braska," Auron reminded him through gritted teeth. "And you're his guardian – we both are." He would have found the absurdity of the situation almost comical if it wasn't so disheartening to think that the two of them now shared the same duty.

"Right, and what does that mean?" said Jecht.

"Everyone knows what the pilgrimage involves," Auron protested. "Even the Al Bhed –"

"The what now?"

Auron sighed. "Fine. I'll humour you. What am I supposed to be pretending you don't know?"

"Everything," said Jecht, beaming. "Go right back to the start. Where are we?"

"Bevelle," said Auron. "Supposedly, the holiest populated city in Spira – and definitely the largest. Most summoners start out here, then –" He broke off. "No, this is ridiculous. There's no way you don't know any of this. Unless Sin's toxin – but

Braska said you spent last night in the cells, it would have worn off by now. You're trying to humiliate me," he concluded.

"No, no, I'm not!" said Jecht. "I just wanna find out what I signed myself up for, you know? Tell me about it – I won't forget this time, I promise. So Braska's a summoner, right, and he wants to go to Zanarkand. Awesome – nowhere better. And we're his guardians. Wait, what's your name?"

"Auron," Auron muttered.

"Auron," Jecht repeated, drawing the first syllable out at great length. "Cool. And you know who I am."

"Yes," said Auron, "unfortunately." He stood up. "Come on. We have to get you a weapon before we set off tomorrow."

"A weapon, huh?" said Jecht as they began to make their way to the armoury. "So what, we gotta fight people?"

Auron gave him such a withering look that he fell silent; they continued without exchanging much more conversation. There were a few places where one could obtain weapons in Bevelle – including, of course, the warrior monks' own private stores – but Auron had been laughed at enough times over the course of the day that he didn't fancy experiencing it on yet another occasion. Braska had mentioned an armoury earlier, and it was obvious which of them he had meant, now that there was only one where Auron knew the proprietor would still be civil to him.

Coultan, the armourer, gave a polite bow when the two men walked in; it went unacknowledged by both. Unfazed, he

addressed Auron with a smile. "I was expecting you, Auron," he said. *"Sir* Auron, I should say. You're setting off tomorrow, aren't you?"

"That's right," said Auron.

"And who is this," said Coultan, looking at Jecht; "this, er, rather striking fellow?" He passed his eyes over Jecht's tattooed chest with great interest.

"Lord Braska has seen fit to take a second guardian," said Auron, resisting the urge to add that Braska had evidently been suffering from a severe lapse in judgement at the time. "This is Sir Jecht."

"Sir, huh?" said Jecht, grinning. "Nice."

"It's only because you're Lord Braska's guardian now," Auron told him. "That's the convention." He couldn't deny it had felt wrong to say, though; he felt fairly certain that he would never find himself using the phrase *Sir Jecht* again.

"Cool," said Jecht. "I mean, it's about time someone recognised how great I am. They threw me in jail when I got here," he added for Coultan's benefit. "Unbelievable, right? The great Jecht in jail? If they found out about this back home in Zan—"

"Jecht isn't from around here," Auron interrupted. He was determined not to get Coultan caught up in what he perceived as Jecht's lies: the armourer was one of his increasingly few allies. If Jecht really wanted to keep insisting he was from Zanarkand, Auron hoped that as few people as possible would find out about it. "We won't keep you," he added, eager to

change the topic. "Just need to get Jecht a sword. We could do with your expertise in finding him the right sort of weapon."

"Oh, *you're* the expert, Sir Auron," said Coultan, while Auron inclined his head graciously. "But I'll do my best to help, of course." He stepped out from behind the counter, approached Jecht, and said, "May I?"

Jecht shrugged, having no idea what he was requesting, and said, "Sure."

Coultan reached out towards Jecht's mostly bare right arm, took hold, and gave his muscles a careful squeeze. "Oh, yes," he said enthusiastically. "Very good indeed. And this, of course –" He gestured towards Jecht's left arm, which was clothed entirely in plate armour. "You're experienced in combat, I take it, Sir Jecht? Forgive the assumption, but you have the body of a fighting man; not to mention your attire. You're in wonderful shape, I must say."

"Nah, it's all from blitz," said Jecht. "Gets kinda serious when you play pro, you know." He wondered briefly whether the others would claim not to know what he was talking about: nobody in Bevelle seemed to have recognised him, after all. But both seemed to understand the reference to blitzball. It wasn't that surprising, Jecht reflected: even someone like Auron ought to be familiar with the best sport ever invented.

"And the scars?" said Auron. He'd been disgusted by the state of Jecht's flesh ever since he first set eyes on it – now that Jecht's appearance was coming under scrutiny, he could

no longer keep himself from passing comment.

Jecht snorted. "Same thing. Been with the Abes fifteen years now – some of those guys play dirty."

Blitzball injuries were nothing that a white mage wouldn't be able to heal, Auron thought. There was certainly no need to leave them to scar. Unless Jecht had refused intervention deliberately – although that would seem extreme, even by the standards of a man who appeared to be a pathological liar.

"Jealous?" said Jecht with a smirk.

"Of your scars?" said Auron, confused. "Why should I be?"

"Well, kinda sexy, ain't they?"

"Absolutely not," said Auron. "They're disgraceful." No Yevonite would be so careless as to let themselves get injured as much as that without making sure there was a healer on hand, or at least a potion supply. According to the religious teachings that Auron had been accustomed to following all his life, such disfigurement was something to be ashamed of. Of course, there were certain parts of the teachings that he had always disobeyed – but that was unavoidable. Scars, on the other hand, were signs of recklessness and hubris, two qualities that he could already tell Jecht was likely to have in abundance.

Wielding a tape measure, Coultan approached Jecht again. "What position do you play?" he asked.

"Ain't it obvious?" said Jecht. "I'm a forward. Star of the show."

"Oh, yes, of course," said Coultan, while Auron frowned. "You must be fast, then. That works perfectly: Sir Auron's more about power and precision, so you can supply the speed." He stepped away briefly to retrieve one of the swords from a nearby rack, and handed it to Jecht. "Have a go."

"At what?" Jecht asked.

"Try it for size."

Jecht held the hilt of the sword with both hands, then with just one, and swung it about experimentally. Auron braced himself for disaster, but Jecht managed not to knock anything off the shelves. Coultan had been right, he thought: Jecht was nimble, if unpractised.

"Nice," said Jecht. "Feels good." He turned to Auron with a grin; Auron nodded back, unsmiling, as he appraised the weapon from a distance. It wasn't much to speak of: a fairly standard sword, the blade tinted red and cast in an unusual shape that left empty space in the middle, no doubt to follow the latest fashion trends in weaponry, which he had never thought worth keeping up with. It would make it lighter to carry, Auron supposed, which would be suited to Jecht as an unskilled swordsman. Auron's own weapon, sheathed on his back, was at least twice the length, and probably several times as heavy. It had been given to him a few years back, the result of some promotion or another; he had a vague suspicion that he would be required to return it to the corps when he left Bevelle, and had already planned to conveniently forget to do

so.

He negotiated a price for Jecht's sword, unashamedly taking advantage of Coultan's respect for him to score a substantial discount. Coultan was about to take the money, but then paused. "I almost forgot," he said. "Lord Braska stopped in here earlier; he said he wanted to reserve an armguard for you." His gaze drifted towards Auron's exposed left forearm.

Auron grimaced. "I don't have the gil to spare at the moment. It's been a rather expensive day." It would be good to have some kind of protection, without a doubt – it would help him defend Braska better – but that would have to wait until he had recuperated some of his savings dispatching fiends on the road.

"Ah, no," said Coultan. "You misunderstand me. He paid for it himself – a gift, he said." Before Auron could protest, he lifted the armguard from under the counter, and fastened it straight onto Auron's arm.

He looked down at it. It fitted perfectly, and he could tell that there was some kind of magical protection in there: he could feel it tingling pleasantly against his skin. It was an unexpectedly thoughtful gift from Braska, who cared deeply for others but tended to prioritise the spiritual over the material in expressing that care, and who was often too wrapped up in his own worries to express it at all.

Still holding onto Auron's arm, Coultan tugged it upwards so they could both admire the armguard more closely. "No

expense spared," he said proudly.

Auron somehow managed to subtly remove his arm from Coultan's grip, and nodded. "Yes. Lord Braska's very kind. This was … unexpected."

"Well," Coultan remarked, "this is the most important journey you'll ever make, isn't it?" He took Auron's money and handed over his change in return, suddenly sombre. "You don't need me to tell you to be careful out there – but I hope it goes well for you all."

"Thank you," said Auron.

"Don't forget about me when you get back," said Coultan. "I'll be here; drop in any time. And Sir Jecht's welcome too – I'd love to get to know him better –"

"We should be going," Auron said quickly. "Thank you for your assistance." He headed off to locate Jecht, who had taken to inspecting a shelf that held restorative items, and let him know it was time to leave.

"Should we get some of these?" Jecht asked. He tapped a finger against a bottle of ether; it made a satisfyingly reverberant sound. "Dunno what this does, but it looks useful, you know?"

"We have enough of those for now," said Auron. "Come on." He was keen to get back to his quarters, and to get a chance to think through the plans for the pilgrimage one more time: there was some recalculation to be done now that Jecht had joined them. He would have to ensure they had enough ra-

tions for three, and determine how much the extra cost for bed and board was likely to be when such facilities were available. There was a lot to consider.

Jecht followed Auron out of the shop, nodding goodbye to Coultan, whom he had found surprisingly effeminate for a weapons dealer. The sun had begun to set while they were in the armoury; it was the same insipid sort of sunset Bevelle usually experienced, where the clouds just took on a slight tinge of pink for a few minutes before the sky darkened without ceremony.

"So, where to next?" Jecht enquired.

"I'm going back to the barracks," said Auron. "There are more preparations I need to make before we set off tomorrow, and we'll be leaving before dawn – we all need to get an early night –" He stopped, suddenly making a horrified realisation. "You – you don't have anywhere to spend the night, do you?"

"Nope," said Jecht, with a grin.

Auron briefly wondered whether he could convince the prison guards to take Jecht back until the morning, and then sighed. "Right, well, follow me," he said, defeated.

They made the short walk to the barracks and headed towards Auron's quarters. Fortunately for him, the corps was engaged in evening prayer, so there were no unpleasant encounters on the way. Auron still prayed in private – his recent ordeal had made his relationship with faith more complex, but he did still follow the teachings, in essence. Braska's case was

similar, if more extreme: he had ceased to be outwardly religious some seven or eight years ago, after the way he had been treated by the priests, but he still strongly believed in the power of the summoner's pilgrimage, the most integral part of the Yevonite doctrine.

When Auron arrived at his door, he discovered a couple of items in the small cavity that held his post: an official-looking letter, and a video sphere wrapped in paper. He examined the sphere first, as it looked more appealing. The paper bore a message in his friend Wen Kinoc's complex, looped handwriting. *A sphere of our meeting earlier*, it read. *For you to remember me by on the road.*

Auron shoved the sphere into his robe with a mixture of exasperation and fondness: it was just like Kinoc to show undue sentiment.

"Remember me by on the road?" said Jecht with a smirk. "Who's that from, some girl you stood up?"

"What?" said Auron sharply; Jecht had hardly expected him to react positively to the jab, but his angry expression seemed a disproportionate response. He stood there frowning for a while, and then said tensely, "No, of course not. It's from Wen Kinoc. A friend."

"OK, dude, calm down," Jecht replied.

Auron shook his head, searching for an excuse for his discomfort, and then said truthfully, "I'm surprised you can read."

Jecht let out an incredulous laugh. "Seriously? What, you think I'm some kind of bum or somethin'?"

"Some kind of –" Auron shook his head again, thinking it best not to ask. He didn't know why Jecht seemed so offended: illiteracy was fairly common among Yevonites. Those of more noble birth, such as Kinoc and Braska, were normally proficient readers; Auron, who lacked any especially privileged background, had received basic instruction as a boy, but he had never had many chances to hone his still fairly undeveloped skills. Jecht's own interpretation of the note had seemed unusually effortless for someone that Auron assumed to be of a background no higher in class than his own. He resolved not to waste any more time asking him about it, and turned his attention to the other letter, trying unsuccessfully to angle it so Jecht couldn't get a look.

"Eviction notice?" Jecht said, raising an eyebrow.

Auron shook his head. "Doesn't matter. I'm leaving anyway."

"You in trouble with someone?"

"It's just because I resigned from the corps," said Auron evasively, and he tore the paper into little pieces in a very poor attempt to appear nonchalant.

Jecht watched his handiwork sceptically, noting how his brow furrowed in determination, but didn't press him further. When they entered the room, though, he couldn't suppress a chuckle at the austerity of the surroundings. He'd only known

Auron a few hours, and yet his living quarters were almost exactly as Jecht would have imagined them.

"What?" Auron snapped.

"You really ain't got much stuff," said Jecht.

"I sold what I had," said Auron. "Won't be needing it on the pilgrimage."

"So you ain't plannin' to come back?"

"Of course I am," said Auron. "But things will be different then. Until then, I need to give up everything I have. A guardian must dedicate their entire life to protecting the summoner – that goes for you too. We have to be prepared to die for him, if necessary. It's what they call the Code of the Guardian." He couldn't deny that he was saying such things in an attempt to shock Jecht, and to convince him of the strength of his own loyalty – anything to make the other man realise how serious this all was. He didn't expect to have to give his own life, of course, but if Jecht was struck down by fiends, it was a price they would have to pay.

"Yeah, well, rather you than me," said Jecht dismissively.

It was as Auron had suspected – Jecht could hardly be an effective guardian if he took that kind of attitude. When it came to it, Auron knew that Jecht would betray and abandon them over protecting the summoner. Braska had been naïve to think bringing a second guardian would be of any use.

He changed the subject. "You take the futon. I can sleep on the mat."

He'd expected Jecht to complain about that, too, correctly assuming that he was used to sleeping in a proper bed. There wasn't much point arguing from Jecht's perspective, though; he could tell that the futon was the best he was going to get under the circumstances.

Auron began to get ready for bed. He would go through the plans for the journey in his mind once he was already lying down, he had decided: there would surely be less chance of interruption from Jecht if he thought Auron was sleeping. He took off his robe, unbuckled his cuirass, and shook his long, dark hair out of its ponytail, putting it into a loose bun to avoid its getting too tangled overnight. Then, as he turned his attention to his trousers, he noticed that Jecht had made no start on his own preparations, but appeared to be paying great attention to Auron's bare chest.

"What?" he hissed.

Reluctantly, Jecht tore his eyes away from Auron's chest and looked at his face instead. "You're *ripped*," he said.

Auron frowned. "Well … so are you," he countered lamely.

"Yeah, but everyone knows that," said Jecht, without a hint of modesty. "Didn't expect it from you."

"I'm a warrior monk," said Auron. "Was, I mean. There's a strict training regime."

"Gotcha," said Jecht. "But why d'you keep all those muscles hidden away, huh? You'd have all the ladies after you if they knew –"

"Goodnight, Jecht," Auron interrupted. Abandoning the thought of undressing any further, he lay down on the mat and turned to face the wall.

Braska had gone to fetch his daughter from the convent, and spent the evening with her as intended. As ever when he was granted time to spend with Yuna, he was determined that she should enjoy the occasion, and so, at her request, he had cooked them both a nice, nutritious meal, full of the spices that were traditional in his family's cuisine, and tried his hardest to finish his own portion. After that, Yuna had wanted to see some of the old spheres of her parents, so Braska gathered a few and they watched them together. Watching the images of his own wedding, of his wife's belly growing round as Yuna took shape inside her, of carefree moments spent at home – seeing all that, and knowing that his pilgrimage was about to start the very next day, was almost enough to bring him to tears. He managed to stave them off, for Yuna's sake, and sat there stroking her hair, hoping that she wouldn't turn around and notice his sorrowful expression. It was the sort of thing he had become used to hiding during her visits.

When they had seen all the spheres, he hoarsely bade her goodnight and headed to bed. Unusually, he found it difficult

to get to sleep. It felt like the night before a big festival, as he remembered from his childhood: everyone was supposed to go to bed and pretend that things were the same as usual, but they all knew the next day would be different. In this case, he thought, it would be more than one day; if the fayth willed it, it would be the rest of his life.

There was a letter by his bed from his parents: it was one of the few attempts at contacting him they had made in the last eight years. He had been careful not to let Yuna see it; this situation was already distressing enough for her, even though she was putting on a remarkably brave face. *Please reconsider*, it said, his mother's usually neat handwriting cascading haphazardly across the page. People normally spoke about the summoner's journey being the noblest task one could possibly take on, and yet as soon as they personally knew someone who intended to do it, they all changed their minds at once.

You cannot truly believe Yevon has driven you to this, his father had written. *There are better ways for you to serve. You may have been expelled from the clergy, but taking the pilgrimage is hardly an appropriate substitute. It will achieve nothing.*

Talk to us, please, the postscript read. He had not done so.

Chapter **2**

The Journey Begins

Auron awoke with an aching back – it had been a while since he had slept on the mat. But despite having had the comparative luxury of the futon, Jecht was the one who felt worse: lacking the opportunity for a quick morning drink, he had a foul headache, and his memories of the previous evening's events didn't seem especially coherent.

"Aw, man," he said, rubbing his forehead. "Where am I?"

Auron reached for his cuirass before turning to him and answering – he didn't want Jecht making remarks about his chest again. "Bevelle," he said, while strapping on the armour. "In my room, which I'm about to be evicted from. Ring any bells?"

"What?" said Jecht blearily.

"I explained this all to you last night," said Auron. "You said you wouldn't forget. You promised."

"Did I?"

"Great," Auron muttered. "So you've not only forgotten, but you've even forgotten you said you wouldn't. Fantastic."

Jecht groaned. "Run it by me again. What's going on? And where can I get a drink in this place?"

Ignoring the second question, Auron gave him a curt summary of the situation, reiterating that they intended to travel across Spira so that Braska could defeat Sin. It was clear that Jecht had no recollection of much of what had happened the previous day, but Auron's terse explanation seemed nonetheless to be jogging his memory. By the time Auron got to the end of the story, Jecht was even starting to grin a little despite his compromised physical state. He'd begun to figure Auron out: his fellow guardian was stubborn, naïve, and entirely too serious for his own good. Jecht was going to have plenty of fun winding him up over the course of the journey, he decided.

They headed out for breakfast; it was still dark. Auron gave a final glance towards the door to his quarters as he walked away. In the past, he might have felt some sentimental attachment to the barracks; he'd lived there since he was a child, after all, starting off in the boys' dormitories and transitioning to gradually lower-occupancy rooms as he ascended through the ranks. With the way things had gone, though, he was glad to see the back of the place.

They stopped off for a quick breakfast, paid for with the dregs of Auron's gil, and then Auron led the way to where he had agreed to meet Braska, at the junction of two of the

city's bridges. The more major of the two led to a bigger one still, the Highbridge, which formed the southward route out of Bevelle: they would need to head that way in order to make for Macalania, where Braska would be required to commune with the fayth once again. After that, the remaining temples would be still further away. It was to be a long trip; Auron told Jecht as much, while Jecht was munching on the sweet pastry he had selected for breakfast. He seemed underwhelmed by the information.

"We wait here," Auron announced, once they reached the appointed place. Jecht immediately sat down on the ground, turning away so Auron wouldn't see his grimace; his headache was worsening. It had been a very long time since he had gone without a drink in the morning. Even in the jail the day before, he had slipped the guards a small bribe in exchange for some bottles of beer, finding them surprisingly corruptible.

Auron tried to put Jecht out of his mind, but he was fidgeting too much to ignore. Barely a minute after he had sat down, he sprang up again, scowling.

"How long is this gonna take?" he complained.

Auron returned the scowl in kind. "It's Lord Braska's last morning with his daughter. I'd expect him to be taking some time."

"Man," said Jecht, "I can't take this. I need a drink – I'm gettin' the shakes, look." He thrust a trembling hand towards Auron's face; Auron shoved it away, repulsed.

"I'm not buying you alcohol," he said.

Jecht shrugged. "I got cash somewhere – wait –" He fiddled around in his clothing for a while, and eventually fished out a not insubstantial amount of gil, dropping a number of coins on the ground as he did so, and bending haphazardly to pick them up. Auron watched with mounting suspicion.

"Hold on," he said slowly. "I bought you that sword last night – you mean you had money all along? You could have paid for that yourself?"

Despite his condition, Jecht smirked. "Should've asked at the time, shouldn't you?"

Auron let out a long sigh of frustration. Less than a day in Jecht's company, and he was already certain that nobody else had ever infuriated him quite as much. What he really needed, he decided, was a moment's peace: a final chance to breathe freely before he had to spend several weeks with the man.

"There won't be many shops that sell it at this hour," he said through gritted teeth, "but you might have some luck with the Al Bhed places. They're mostly on the north side of the city. Be back here as soon as you can."

"Yeah, sure thing," said Jecht, and he hurried off, leaving Auron to kick at the ground moodily.

Auron was right: Jecht soon found a shop that bore a poster in the window proudly proclaiming that it sold alcohol twenty-four hours a day, and was in fact run by an Al Bhed family, not that he knew yet how to tell them apart from Yevonites.

Soon enough, he was a few gil down and felt much better, having knocked back some of the local ale and prudently grabbed some more for the road.

He strolled through the city, doing a bit of sightseeing: it was strange when the sun hadn't properly risen yet, but there were enough lights on for him to get a good view of the unfamiliar buildings. After a while, he realised it was probably a good idea to make his way back to Auron; by this point, though, he had wandered far enough from his original route to be fairly unsure about how he might do so. He walked in a direction that seemed reasonable, but in the end it was Braska, not Auron, that he came across.

Braska's protracted goodbye to his daughter was taking place outside the convent where Yuna was now living. It had been agreed that in a few years she would enter Yevon's service, not as a nun – her mixed heritage had barred her from that pathway – but she was to train as a healer. She would be respected, at least, as the daughter of a summoner – still more so if the pilgrimage went as Braska intended.

"Hey, Braska!" Jecht crowed, striding forward. "Fancy seeing ya – oh, hi there!"

He looked down at Yuna. On this occasion, she was more timid than usual: she was normally quite a friendly child, and had shown remarkable strength in the build-up to her father's departure, although when it came to the point of saying goodbye she had become a bit more upset. She looked up at Jecht,

slightly tearful, and said nothing.

"Oh, Jecht," said Braska, frowning; he too looked sombre. "I thought you'd be waiting with Auron."

"Had to go grab a drink," Jecht explained. "Always need a drop in the morning, you know. Is this your kid? She's cute! What's your name, sweetie?"

Yuna looked at Braska, and he attempted to give her an encouraging smile. "Yuna," she mumbled.

"Nice to meet you, Yuna!" said Jecht. "Don't need to introduce myself, I'm sure you know who I am."

"This is Sir Jecht," Braska supplied, caressing Yuna's hair to comfort her. "He's my new guardian."

"That's right," said Jecht. "Gonna keep your daddy nice and safe."

Yuna bowed neatly. "May Yevon be with you, Sir Jecht." Then she frowned. "What's that?"

She was pointing at Jecht's tattoo. "That's my team's logo," he explained. "I'm a blitzer. You guys have blitzball here, right?"

"We do," said Yuna, less shyly. "Not many people play it in Bevelle; Dad says they're too –" She screwed up her face in concentration, trying to recall the word she had heard her father use. "Pious –"

"Now, Yuna," Braska admonished her gently. "Blitzball never really caught on here," he explained. "But it's very popular in the other regions of Spira."

"Wow, am I glad to hear that," said Jecht. "I was beginnin' to think you guys didn't know what fun was." He looked back at Yuna. "You wanna see some of my special moves?"

Yuna looked at Braska, unsure again. The distraction would be good for her, he decided. "Do you want to go and fetch a ball for Sir Jecht, sweetheart?" he murmured.

She hesitated, then nodded, and trotted inside. Braska wondered whether he might be able to encourage Jecht to allow them a moment to themselves once he had demonstrated his moves, although Jecht had already launched into an enthusiastic spiel about his profession.

"Man, I bet you're excited to be seeing the Jecht Shot up close," he said. "It's only the best blitz tech ever. Got me my place in the Abes, back when I was still a kid."

Too preoccupied to pay much attention, Braska merely hummed in response. "I don't really keep up with it myself," he admitted eventually.

Jecht made a noise of disdain, but then smiled as Yuna emerged from the convent, clutching a ball in both hands as if it were a sacred object. "Awesome," he said, grabbing it from her. "OK, you guys ready? Be prepared to have your minds blown."

He tossed the ball from one hand to the other; it was hardly championship standard, probably not even approved for local tournament use, but there wasn't a ball Jecht couldn't turn his hand to. He looped it into the air and launched himself after

it, connecting first with his head, then with a fist, and then performing a full somersault with such ease that Braska, distracted though he was, found himself gasping with amazement. As strange as Jecht might be, Braska reflected, he was clearly an expert blitzball player. Jecht launched a final kick towards the ball, sending it spinning into the air at high speed, and then landed on both feet with a smirk.

"That was remarkable," said Braska sincerely.

"The sublimely magnificent Jecht Shot, Mark Three," Jecht declaimed.

"Can you do it again?" Yuna pleaded.

"Sure," said Jecht. "Just for you, kiddo. But after this time, I'll start chargin'."

He scooped the ball up from where it had landed, and performed the move a second time – it was no less spectacular. Braska looked down at Yuna. She seemed mesmerised by the ball: her earlier sadness appeared to be somewhat alleviated. This might be the time to say his final goodbye, he decided, if he could get rid of Jecht for a moment.

"We'll be setting off soon, Jecht," he said. "Why don't you go and let Auron know?"

Jecht scratched the back of his head. "Uh, I was meant to be goin' back to Auron in the first place, but I kinda got lost. That's why I ended up here."

"He shouldn't be far away," said Braska, gesturing. "We said we'd meet at the other end of this bridge."

"Oh, cool," said Jecht. "Sure, see you when you're done. See ya around, Yuna!" He gave her a little wave, and she returned the gesture, wide-eyed.

"He'll be a good guardian," she said decisively, once Jecht was almost out of sight.

"Yes, I hope so," said Braska. "Now, Yuna – I really do need to go."

She buried her face in his robe, suddenly upset again, and he patted her head and murmured, "I know, darling."

Jecht sauntered along the bridge until he came upon Auron; Auron's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You're late," he said peevishly, "and why did you come from that direction? You weren't disturbing Lord Braska, were you?"

"Relax, he was happy to see me," Jecht replied.

Auron opened his mouth to argue, caught a whiff of the strong scent of beer on Jecht's breath, and stepped back. "How much did you have? You're drunk, aren't you?"

"So what if I am?"

"There's no point reasoning with you," Auron muttered. "Absolutely none." He turned away so he wouldn't have to look at Jecht: the sight of him was too enraging.

Braska appeared not long afterwards, gave Auron an unconvincing smile, and said, a little hoarsely, "Well. That's all our business in Bevelle taken care of, I suppose. Shall we go?"

"You're all right?" said Auron.

Braska's mouth tightened; he closed his eyes, took a sharp breath, and then opened them again. "We should get started," he said, not acknowledging it. "Not long until daybreak – we said we'd be out of the city before the sun finished rising."

"If you're sure you're ready, sir," said Auron.

"Hey, quit the love-in," Jecht rasped. "Are we gonna get goin' or what? I'm fed up with standin' around. This place is boring. I wanna see some action! Get a chance to use this!" He waved his sword around a little; Auron stepped back, grimacing.

"Indeed, indeed," said Braska, mustering another weak smile. "We'll make for the Highbridge. Lead the way, Jecht: it's the main road out of the city, you can't miss it."

As Jecht strode forward, Auron fell into step beside Braska. "I should thank you, sir," he said, raising his left arm to indicate the new armguard. "You're very kind."

"Hm?" said Braska. "Oh – not at all. Better for all our protection." He proffered a small device he had been carrying. "Would you put this with the rest of our belongings?"

"What's that?" said Jecht, who had turned around to observe them. "Didn't think you guys had, like, digital stuff here."

"Digital?" said Braska blankly. "You mean machines? Machina?" The first term was the official one, and preferred among the Al Bhed, but the second, somewhat derogatory, was more widely used and understood by Yevonites. "Yevon outlaws a lot of them," he explained. "Except those that can be

used in service of the teachings – I suppose they consider this an example. It records moving images onto spheres, to keep records."

"Oh, like a camera?" said Jecht, who hadn't understood anything to do with *Yevon* or *the teachings*, but thought this part at least was obvious.

There was a silence, and then Auron said, "There's no need to talk nonsense, Jecht. You're not going to convince me you're from Zanarkand."

"I'll be recording spheres to send to Yuna on the journey," said Braska, deciding it best to ignore Auron's remark. "You can take some too, if you like." He handed the device to Jecht, and then walked on, hoping not to have to preside over an argument between his guardians.

Jecht looked down at the sphere recorder, turning it over in his hands; it resembled nothing he had ever seen before, but after a few experimental button presses, he was confident that he had got the hang of it. He dashed in front of Braska, flicked the switch, and pointed the device towards the impressive building behind them.

"What are you taking?" Auron asked suspiciously, walking towards Jecht as Braska headed out of frame.

"Well, you said it was gonna be a long trip," said Jecht. "We'll be seein' a lot of neat things, right? So I thought I'd record it all in this – to show to my wife and kid, you know."

Auron frowned. He could picture it: a fiend ambushing

the three of them, Jecht whipping out the sphere recorder as if it was just a bit of fun. "This is no pleasure cruise," he said crossly.

Jecht rolled his eyes – the more time he spent with Auron, the more convinced he was that he had no concept of having a good time. He turned instead towards Braska, who had come to a stop and was staring into the distance. "Hey, Braska," he said. "Ain't this supposed to be a grand occasion? Where are the cheering fans? The crying women?" Braska wasn't bad-looking, after all, he thought; Auron had the edge over him, and neither was a patch on Jecht himself, in his opinion, but all three of them were surely capable of turning more than a few heads.

"This is it," said Braska. It was better this way, given Auron's dishonour; but he decided it was best not to mention that to Jecht, certainly not yet, while the two of them still seemed at loggerheads. "Too many goodbyes," he said instead: it was true in many summoners' cases. "People think twice about leaving."

"If you say so," said Jecht doubtfully; it seemed a poor excuse for making such an inauspicious start to a journey that Auron had repeatedly assured him was of the utmost importance for Spira's safety. "Well, it'd better be a lot more colourful when we come back," he suggested. "A parade for Braska, vanquisher of Sin!"

Braska managed to disguise his unease with a halfhearted

chuckle. "We should go," he said, wondering if Jecht really knew as little about the pilgrimage as it seemed. "Day will break soon."

Jecht nodded, and lowered the sphere recorder, pressing the button to eject the sphere; it emerged in the customary two halves. He looked down at them, puzzled, and said, "Uh, did it break?"

Having attempted to turn away and catch up with Auron, who had overtaken them both in his haste to get away from Jecht's experimentation, Braska found himself staying with his new guardian so he could explain. "They produce two copies," he said. "If you keep both, it'll let you add some more footage later." He paused, looking Jecht over. "You really are from somewhere quite different, aren't you?"

"At least one of you believes me," Jecht grumbled.

"Give him time," said Braska, looking at where Auron walked ahead of them. "Auron is the most open-minded warrior monk I have ever met."

"So I'm guessin' you ain't met many warrior monks," Jecht hazarded.

Braska frowned. "No – quite the opposite, alas. You should give Auron more credit."

"Right," said Jecht, confused by the fact that Braska seemed to have taken offence at his words. He felt as if he was being scolded; it wasn't a pleasant sensation. He strode forward to

catch up with Auron, brandishing the sphere recorder as he did so.

"Hey, Braska said he wanted you to carry this, right?" he asked.

"You can carry it," said Auron, "if you're going to be the one using it. Seeing as you haven't volunteered to take any of the other equipment –"

"Yeah, why buck the trend, huh?" said Jecht hastily, thrusting the device into Auron's hands and retreating to a safe distance; Auron suppressed a groan.

They reached the gatehouse that marked the southern limit of the city, and presented themselves for inspection; Auron pointedly looked away as the warrior monk on duty opened the gate for them. Summoners' parties were normally sent off much more obsequiously, he knew; it wasn't uncommon to receive some gifts on behalf of the city, a few healing items to get them to Macalania, where the fayth would turn a good number of them back anyway. In his younger years, he had been the one making a few of those presentations himself. Now, they just had to be content with not being openly mocked as they passed through. He wondered what the three of them must have looked like: Jecht, drunk and blasphemous in his very appearance; Braska, who had been despised by most of the citizens of Bevelle for almost a decade; and Auron himself, somebody most of the warrior monks now couldn't look at without laughing. It wasn't an especially promising start to their jour-

ney.

They walked down the long, quiet Highbridge, and eventually found themselves in Macalania Woods.

Auron had travelled there fairly recently, on some kind of military exercise; Braska hadn't visited for some time. Jecht, of course, had never seen the place before. He stared around in amazement: it was almost unbelievable to think that such a place existed so close to the urban precincts of Bevelle, and it was unlike anywhere he had ever seen. Having spent all his life in Zanarkand, he'd come across a few public parks, dotted with some mediocre flowers; but this put that kind of thing to shame several times over. Here, there were enormous trees, so tall that Jecht couldn't see the tops of them; they twisted up to block out the sky, casting an eerie, green-tinged darkness over everything that he could tell would remain in place even after the sun had finished rising. Despite the shade, though, it remained easy enough to see due to strange sparkles and glows that suffused the whole forest. Some of them came from the plants themselves, bathing parts of the foliage in a strangely soothing warm red light; others simply shone in the air, twinkling for a moment and then disappearing as soon as Jecht thought he might get a chance to look at them more closely. It was so strange, he thought, that he ought to have been disturbed by it, but that was impossible: the sight was somehow innately calming. He found himself experiencing a deep desire to lie on his back among the leaves and merely enjoy the feel-

ing of being in nature; but instead, he maintained a carefully neutral expression. He didn't want the others to see that he was so taken by their surroundings.

Auron too felt an odd sense of peace as the three of them entered the forest. Now that they were out of Bevelle, he would have no reason to return to the city until the pilgrimage ended. They would meet warrior monks on the journey, inevitably, but many of those would be people who had been stationed in the provinces for months or years and who, with any luck, would have no idea about the infamy Auron had acquired. For the first time in weeks, he would perhaps be able to go about his business without constantly anticipating that he might meet someone who was going to laugh at him. Maybe they would even be polite. Until recently, he had commanded respect; the thought of that being the case again was too tempting not to dwell on. Above all, without constantly having to try avoiding others, he would be able to turn his attention to what mattered: guarding Braska, and fulfilling the vow he had made to himself when he had first learnt that Braska was going to take the pilgrimage.

They were just a few feet into the forest when they encountered the first fiend of the journey: a skinny, lizard-like creature that rose up out of nowhere and made for the three of them. Braska and Auron exchanged a resigned glance: it would be the first of many. Outside the towns and cities, Spira was plagued by the creatures, as if the threat of Sin wasn't

enough. At least the fiends in most regions could generally be vanquished by a group of moderately skilled fighters, and Auron in particular was a proficient swordsman. He grasped his weapon with both hands, anticipating the attack; beside him, Braska focused too, ready to call on the elements. Only Jecht was anything but fully prepared; he managed to draw his own sword, but only got as far as slashing wildly at the air while the others entered combat.

"Concentrate," Auron barked, in between mostly ineffective blows – unfortunately for him, the fiend was fast, and managed to evade the majority of them. "You're not helping."

The fiend took advantage of Auron's distraction to lash out at him with a claw, and Auron was knocked off-balance; he stumbled into a crouched position, and tried to scramble up again, but found himself too weakened by the injury to stand. All he could do was watch while Jecht made absolutely no effort to deal with the fiend, even as it turned its attention towards Braska –

"Defend him," he gasped, and Jecht looked down at him in panic, before shrinking back, making no effort to intervene between the fiend and Braska at all.

Braska called a blast of ice over the fiend, and it was enough to take it down; it dissipated into a cloud of pyreflies, sparkling multicoloured motes that swirled around for a few seconds before fading into the air. Jecht stood immobilised, eyes still round with fright, as Braska knelt by Auron and

carefully pressed a hand to his forehead; Auron felt the warm, familiar sensation of healing magic pouring into his body.

As soon as his restoration was complete, he clambered to his feet and rounded on Jecht. "What in the names of all the fayth was that?" he spat. "Didn't I tell you to defend him? Why do you think I bought you that sword – to use as some kind of ornament?"

"Just didn't expect it, is all," Jecht mumbled. "Not used to this fightin' stuff –"

"Well you'd better *get* used to it," said Auron. "And don't just stand there like an idiot when you should be protecting Lord Braska –"

"Auron," said Braska, finding himself slightly agitated by his guardian's outburst. "I can fight too; you know that. This is new to Jecht – I'm sure he'll be better at it in a few days."

"We can't afford that," Auron protested. "The fiends around here are dangerous. We all need to be prepared to fight." The fiend was long gone, but his heart was still racing; his anger at Jecht had replaced the adrenaline from battle. He had a good mind to launch himself at the other guardian, to show him how serious this was by settling this physically; only the knowledge that it was likely to upset Braska was enough to hold him back.

"Yeah," said Jecht. "I'm sorry, right? I just need some practice."

He was genuinely chastened, and he looked it; less than a day in his company and Auron already knew it was a rare sight.

It did little for Auron's rage, though, and he tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword as Braska nodded and said solemnly, "We understand."

There was nothing to understand, Auron thought angrily, other than that Jecht was neglecting his duty.

They headed on, meeting more fiends in the process; Jecht's attempts at fighting remained clumsy and off-target for a while, but he quickly gained confidence and soon started to make a more useful contribution. For someone who had never encountered a fiend until that very morning, and who was yet to realise exactly what they were, he was performing beyond all expectations. Auron noticed this, but chose not to comment on it; he didn't want to give Jecht an excuse to start talking about how great he was again.

A few battles in, Jecht noticed that Braska's style of combat was decidedly unusual. Auron liked to hack away at the fiends with his large sword and pretend there was something refined about it, but Braska's offence seemed to consist of moving his staff until odd explosions of energy appeared in their foes' vicinity. Jecht wondered if the staff was another piece of strange Spiran technology, but it didn't look as if it was equipped with any buttons or even a source of power.

"So, what's with the way you fight, Braska?" he said.

"What do you mean?" Braska asked him.

"Well, you ain't got a sword," Jecht pointed out. "You just wave that thing around and stuff comes out, I guess. But it

just looks like a piece of wood, don't seem to be electric or anythin'."

"Well, no," said Braska. "The staff is just for channelling the energy, really. The spells come from my mind, you see."

Jecht frowned.

Auron joined them with a snort of contemptuous laughter. "Jecht claims to be having trouble understanding the concept of magic," he said.

"Magic?!" Jecht exclaimed. He looked at each of the others in turn, taking in Auron's unimpressed expression and Braska's rather weary one. "But that's – no human could – you gotta be kidding. You're kidding, right?"

"It's not that uncommon," said Braska after a moment, when it had become clear that Auron wasn't going to deign to respond. "Many people can perform a few basic spells, and summoners are usually fairly proficient. It's the best way to protect ourselves from fiends, especially among those of us who don't have Auron's gift for swordwork."

Jecht was still reeling at the revelation – that magic actually existed, and was apparently so common in Spira that people discussed it in such casual terms – but with Auron seeming to find his ignorance so amusing, he tried to play it cool. "Well, that's – that's good to know," he concluded. "Magic. No problem."

He fell into step beside Braska as they walked on, and said, "Hey, your little girl's real sweet."

"Yuna?" said Braska. He sighed; leaving her had been painful. "Yes, she's wonderful. Such a special child."

"How old is she?" Jecht asked him.

"Seven," said Braska.

"Oh, really!" Jecht remarked. "Same as my kid, then. He's a real wimp, though, not like Yuna. She could teach him a thing or two."

"You have a son?" said Braska, taking the opportunity to change the subject. "Back in Zanarkand?"

Jecht nodded. "Yeah, just me, him, and the missus. Dunno how they're copin' without me, hah. Bet they'll be surprised to hear about all this" – he gestured at the trees around them – "when I get back."

Braska hummed in agreement.

"So is it just you and Yuna at home, or is there a lady?" Jecht remarked casually.

Braska immediately felt a lump form in his throat. It had been three years since his wife had been taken by Sin, and he was still deeply affected by it; in fact, losing her had been his main motivation for becoming a summoner. "No," he said quietly. "It's just the two of us."

"Ah, well," said Jecht. "You're a good-looking guy, maybe you'll meet someone on the pilgrimage. All the women of Spira to choose from, huh? I guess after you beat Sin, you'll be hot property."

Braska had ceased to register what he was saying; the unexpected mention of his wife had been too destabilising. It wasn't Jecht's fault, he knew, but he found himself not wanting to talk much anymore. After that, he mostly gave distracted, monosyllabic answers to Jecht's attempts at starting conversation. Jecht eventually gave up on engaging him and took to walking ahead on his own, which seemed preferable to trying to speak to Auron; he didn't fancy being accused of lying again.

The rest of the day's journey took place mostly in silence, other than during encounters with fiends, where the three travellers found themselves having to collaborate. Between battles, Auron went over the preparations for the journey in his mind; as much as he'd intended to do so the previous night, he'd fallen asleep surprisingly quickly. Being someone who had always found it easier to store knowledge in his head than bother with writing it down, he felt fairly confident that he knew how the pilgrimage would work. He had a mental repertoire of directions, how long it would take to get from one place to the next, where they would need to camp and when they would need to set off so as to make it to the next such spot by nightfall; how many days' worth of rations he would need to prepare at each inn and travel agency they stopped in. Slotting Jecht into the plan wasn't too difficult when he gave it some thought. As a second guardian, he would theoretically be able to share some of the planning responsibilities too, although Auron already knew it wasn't even worth raising the subject.

He knew the questions he would be asking as well; where he would be posing them, and to whom. That was a part of his preparations that he had kept hidden from Braska. With the right enquiries and the workings of the sharp mind and strong sword arm that had once made Auron the most highly commended young warrior monk in Bevelle, he knew he would succeed in his self-imposed task.

The battles with fiends continued; not long after what had seemed to be a fairly run-of-the-mill fight, both Braska and Auron were startled by a loud groan behind them. They looked around, surprised to see Jecht doubled over, clutching at his chest and grimacing in pain.

"Jecht!" Braska exclaimed, putting his morose mood aside at the sight of Jecht's discomfort. He rushed towards his guardian with his staff aloft, casting a strong white magic spell as he did so. Jecht felt an odd but nonetheless pleasant sensation around him; when it had receded, he gradually became aware that nothing hurt anymore. He straightened up cautiously. "What was that?" he said.

"That?" Braska echoed. "Oh – sorry – magic again, I'm afraid. For healing. What was wrong?"

Jecht shrugged. "Well, we've fought a lot of things, it adds up, right? Think that last one broke a rib, though." He prodded at the body part in question experimentally; it felt perfectly fine.

"What?" said Braska. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Jecht shrugged. "Didn't think you could do anythin' about it."

"But you should have said," Braska insisted, "and we could have at least given you a potion – haven't you noticed how I've been healing Auron?" Over the course of the day, Auron had been slowed, stunned, and doused with water; he had received nasty blows to his head, arms, and torso; he had taken more damage than he had really needed to, because he was determined to intercept attacks directed at Braska, and normally managed it. For the more minor injuries, he had taken potions; for the worse ones, Braska had been on hand to heal everything immediately.

"You should tell me as soon as you get hurt," Braska went on. "My magic is powerful, but white spells lose their effectiveness if they're used too late."

"Sure," Jecht mumbled. In truth, he'd noticed Auron informing Braska about his own injuries, and had vaguely surmised that Braska was doing something to help, but he hadn't wanted to get involved. He himself had been in more and more pain over the course of the day, but had managed to keep it hidden, with some help from his bottles of beer, until that last fiend. He didn't want to appear weak by revealing his discomfort: all the times he'd received injuries in the blitz sphere back in Zanarkand, he'd just got on with things and done his best to discreetly patch himself up later. That was how things were done. The very last thing he wanted was to show vulnerability.

With so many fiends around, though, he could see it was unsustainable to take that kind of approach. Keeping quiet would mean he would probably collapse at some point, and that would be far more embarrassing than having to let Braska know about a few minor scrapes. From that point on, he began to awkwardly tell Braska each time he was hurt, and the summoner was always quick to assist.

Eventually, evening came and they reached the place where Auron had determined they would camp for the night. They consumed the rations – Jecht made a few complaints about the quality of the food, which Auron ignored – and then Auron began the work of pitching the tent. Jecht remained seated on the ground, working through some more of his beer supply, while Braska searched through their belongings for the sphere recorder. He had promised Yuna that he would record a short message for her each night, and send each one back to her at the next opportunity, until they got past the Calm Lands and away from civilisation. It would help her understand what he had resolved to do, and make their goodbye less sudden.

He sat on the ground, switched the device on, and gave it a small wave. "Hello, Yuna," he said. "Well, we've been travelling a day now, and it's all gone smoothly so far." That wasn't entirely true – he had spent a good deal of time holding back tears after Jecht had asked him about her mother – but there was no need to worry her. "The fiends have been no trouble at

all – Sir Auron's made sure of that. And Sir Jecht, of course – we've been enjoying getting to know him."

Jecht hauled himself to his feet and lurched towards where Braska sat, attracted by the sound of his own name. No doubt, he thought, Braska was rhapsodising about how great his new guardian was. "Hey," he drawled, looking at the sphere recorder. "What's this? Keepin' your fans updated?"

"I'm taking a sphere for Yuna," Braska explained. "I told her I'd –"

"Oh, Yuna!" Jecht interrupted, sitting down eagerly next to him. Braska couldn't help recoiling slightly; the smell of beer on his guardian's breath was difficult to ignore. "Hey, Yuna, hi!" Jecht went on, and waved at the device. "We're doin' good so far, right, Braska?"

Braska managed a polite nod.

"You know what, though," said Jecht, "this place sure is different than Zanarkand. I can't get over how dark it is at night, you know? Like, in Zanarkand, there's always so much goin' on – most of the big blitz games are in the evening, the whole stadium gets lit up … it just looks so awesome. I'll have to show you guys sometime! Guess everyone just goes to bed here soon as it gets dark, huh?"

"Mostly," Braska mumbled, once he realised Jecht expected an answer.

Jecht threw his head back in frustration. "Man, you guys are so lame. No, listen – in Zanarkand, on match night, the

whole city's like a big party. Everyone stays up to watch the game, the stadium's always full – and all the losers who can't get tickets watch it on TV. And then after the game we stay out celebratin' till the sun rises. It's crazy. Not like this place!" He looked at Braska, frowning, as if he thought it was Braska's fault the woods were so quiet.

"Well," said Braska, taking advantage of the fact that Jecht's monologue seemed to have ended. "I think we'll leave it there for tonight." He attempted to give the sphere recorder his full attention. "I'll send this when we get to the travel agency in Macalania. I love you – goodnight." He gave another small wave, and reached towards the device to switch it off before Jecht could prolong the conversation.

"Aw man, Yuna's so cute," said Jecht fulsomely. "She's missin' ya, I bet."

Braska sighed. "Yes. I'm going to turn in, Jecht – I'm tired." He headed towards the tent without waiting for Jecht to respond. White magic tended to tire its wielder, and Braska had used plenty of it during the day keeping them all healed; on top of that, he had found the day somewhat emotionally exhausting as well. It was a familiar experience.

"Is it ready?" he said to Auron, who had just secured the final peg.

Auron nodded. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Braska responded with an awkward shrug; he suspected that if he said another word, it would all become too much.

He ducked quickly into the tent; Auron paused for a moment, wondering whether to follow him inside, and then decided to sort out the night's arrangements with Jecht first. "Are you listening?" he said to him sharply, trying to put the thought of Braska out of his mind. "This is important."

"What?" Jecht slurred, much less disposed to be civil now that he was interacting with Auron and not Braska.

"We need to keep watch in case of fiends," Auron said, trying to ignore Jecht's drunken state. "You can take the first shift – it'll be easier that way when you're not used to it. The night fiends are weaker, so if you're on your guard, there shouldn't be any problems. If you see something you think you can't handle, come into the tent and wake me – *not* Lord Braska, just me. Got it?"

"Yeah, sure thing," said Jecht.

"I'm serious, Jecht," said Auron. "If you fall asleep on the job, we could get badly hurt."

"I get it," said Jecht. "I'll stay awake, I promise." He belched loudly.

"In Yevon's holy name," Auron muttered, before addressing Jecht again. "You should take potions if you get hurt," he said. "They might sober you up too, if we're lucky."

"Ah, fuck off," said Jecht.

Auron ignored the remark, and looked into the sky, eventually raising a pointing finger. "You can come and wake me

up when the moons are there and … there," he said carefully. "That'll be midnight." He turned and headed into the tent.

What he saw when he made his way inside was enough to make him stop in his tracks. Braska had changed into his long nightshirt and was lying red-eyed in his bedroll; his glum expression was nothing new. But as part of his preparations for sleeping, he had removed his headdress – and, Auron realised, this was the first time he had really seen Braska's hair. In the five years they had known each other, Braska had always worn something to cover his head; even when he had been in the worst stages of mourning his wife, and had spent long hours in bed, he had always sported a simple headwrap during Auron's visits. Now that they were travelling together, he had clearly decided that keeping his hair covered constantly was unnecessary.

There was nothing at all remarkable about Braska's hair. It was a medium brown, and just long enough for a slight wave to be detectable: the same sort of hair, in the same sort of style, that was found among many of the men of central Spira. But as far as Auron was concerned, seeing it for the first time was like slotting the final piece into a puzzle. At last, he could appreciate Braska's true appearance, and understand how that hair and that face came together to form the man he saw in front of him.

"How are you feeling, sir?" he asked, trying not to let it distract him too much.

Braska sighed. "It's been difficult. Just – you know, leaving Yuna behind, and getting used to all this –"

"I know," said Auron.

"It's really happening," said Braska. "And I'm glad of that – I truly am." He passed a hand briefly over his eyes. "At least we're away from Bevelle."

"Yes," said Auron. "Fayth be praised. I …" He exhaled slowly. "I didn't realise how much I needed to get out of there. But now that we're away from it – it feels as if I can breathe properly. Like a weight's coming off my shoulders. You know?"

"I'm so glad to hear that," Braska murmured.

Auron turned away to change, putting on the vest and undershorts that he normally wore at night before settling into his bedroll. Braska, unlike Jecht, had the decency not to make any remarks about his musculature.

"Would you do something for me, Auron?" Braska asked quietly, after extinguishing the small flame he had conjured by his own bedroll to give them some light.

"Of course, my lord," said Auron. "Anything."

Braska nodded in gratitude, although Auron failed to see it in the darkness. "Earlier today," he said, "Jecht asked about my living situation."

Auron frowned, not following. "Sir?"

"I mean –" Braska sighed. "He wanted to know about her, I think, and I – I couldn't tell him." His voice had faltered; he

cleared his throat. "You wouldn't mind, would you? I can't bring myself to explain –"

"Ah," said Auron, understanding; Braska's references to *her* only ever concerned his late wife. "Yes. I'll tell him tomorrow." He couldn't prevent a note of resignation creeping into his voice at the thought of it: he already knew that trying to have any kind of serious conversation with Jecht was difficult.

"I'm sorry," said Braska. "Perhaps I shouldn't have been so quick to bring him with us. I didn't mean to make things more difficult."

"No, it's fine," said Auron, not entirely honestly. "I suppose I should learn to get on with him. I just sometimes think Yevon must have sent him here to test my patience."

"Yevon has tested you enough," said Braska quietly.

"I should try to be more cordial to him, anyway," said Auron.

"I would appreciate that," Braska admitted. He yawned. "Oh, Auron, I'm exhausted – I shall have to say goodnight. Thank you for … for all this."

"You're very welcome, sir," said Auron. "Sleep well."

Chapter 3

You Wouldn't Understand

The night fiends were weaker, as Auron had said; they were still something of a challenge to Jecht, who had never even seen a fiend before that morning. Regardless, he managed to take them all down singlehandedly; he wasn't about to go into the tent and admit to Auron that he was having trouble. Keeping himself healed with potions, he made it through his shift and headed into the tent; there, having determined which of the two motionless forms was Auron, he awkwardly seized the other guardian by the shoulder and shook him until he woke up. While Auron stood and dressed, Jecht stripped to his underclothes and eagerly clambered into the bedroll that Auron had vacated, where he soon fell asleep.

Morning came; Braska and Jecht rose, and all three consumed their rations, the summoner at a rather slower rate than his guardians. Auron dismantled the tent, and Jecht drank a couple more of his beers, pleased that he had had the foresight

to stock up before leaving Bevelle. He engaged in a few morning stretches, and then looked back towards Braska and Auron, who were sitting on the ground, silently and studiously shaving their faces.

The sight made Jecht want to laugh: Auron had told him several times that he shouldn't expect any luxuries on the pilgrimage, and the attention his companions were paying to their personal grooming seemed incongruous with their rudimentary sleeping quarters. "Didn't realise you both cared so much about what you look like," he remarked.

Auron squinted up at him. "It's a sign of propriety to be clean-shaven," he explained. "We do hope to maintain *some* decorum on this journey." He glanced pointedly at Jecht's own beard.

"That's the tradition in Bevelle, at least," Braska added quietly.

"Yes," said Auron. "Anyone under sixty or so is supposed to shave. That's what the teachings tell us."

As Jecht scoffed and walked away, Auron couldn't help thinking of his friend Wen Kinoc, one of the few men he knew in Bevelle who defied the teachings on that particular matter. His beard was always neatly trimmed, but its very existence had been known to shock the senior clergy from time to time. Kinoc was like that: a moderniser. His noble birth and his skills in persuasion meant he mostly got away with it. He and Auron had spent hours in the barracks debating the merits of dif-

ferent types of weaponry. Kinoc always extolled guns; Auron ribbed him about sounding like a Crusader – part of Spira's lay military force, who tended to be more relaxed about Yevon's teachings – and defended the virtue of his sword. It was a running joke between them that whichever ended up commander of a company first would force all the men to pick one or the other.

Kinoc had won that one, Auron reflected. He was second in command at the barracks now; that was the position Auron would have held, if things hadn't gone awry for him. Had he accepted the marriage he had been offered, he would have avoided all the trouble that had happened since – but it had been unthinkable from the outset.

The three of them continued on their journey; Auron braced himself for the conversation he would have to have with Jecht. The thought of discussing something so serious with him wasn't appealing; but Braska had asked, and he knew Jecht would need to learn what had happened to Braska's wife sometime. His thoughts turned to her; they had met a few times before her untimely and tragic death. She and Braska had been so devoted to each other; they had had to be, when they had so few allies in Bevelle.

Girl – that was her name. Braska had always been a little embarrassed by it; the Al Bhed sometimes employed unusual naming practices. Because they spoke their own language, words that were quite mundane in common Spiran

often seemed exotic to them, and they occasionally adopted them as names thinking it sophisticated. Many of the Al Bhed escaped this misfortune, receiving names that followed the longer-established traditions of their race; those unlucky enough to have fashion-conscious parents were potential targets of ridicule from Yevonites, although Yevonites rarely respected the Al Bhed enough to ask their names anyway.

Braska had been so distraught after Girl's death that he had been judged unfit to care for his daughter. Auron had taken to visiting Braska daily at that time, fearing the worst if he left him to wallow in his misery too long, although Braska's energy levels had been so low that it was unlikely he would be able to harm himself even if he wanted to. Gradually, he had regained his strength to a point where he was mostly capable of going about his business unaided; but even now, three years later, he still had dark days, and there was a constant melancholy around him. Auron had spent a long time searching for ideas about how to shake it.

Jecht was walking ahead, confident that he could be the advance guard against any fiends now that he had a little experience; Auron strode forward to catch up with him. "I need to talk to you," he said.

Jecht rolled his eyes. "What about? Let me guess, you're gonna tell me I'm deluded about Zanarkand again? Don't waste your breath." Over breakfast, he had attempted to tell a couple of stories about the city, and each time he had

mentioned its name Auron had insisted on muttering some pointed remark.

"No, it's not that," said Auron. "Look, Jecht, this is important. Can't we have a civil conversation, just this once?"

Jecht scoffed. "You, tellin' *me* to be civil? Auron, that's all on you, and you know it." He spared him an unimpressed glance. "Go on, make it quick."

"It's –" Auron began. "Lord Braska asked me to speak to you. About Yuna's mother." He had lowered his voice to ensure Braska, a few paces behind them, didn't hear their conversation. "She died, three years ago – killed by Sin."

"Sin!" Jecht squawked. "As in the thing Braska's tryin' to kill? So what, is this some revenge thing?"

"Keep your voice down," said Auron. "No, it's more complicated than that. Anyway, the point is, Braska would appreciate it if you could be sensitive. He finds it difficult to talk about – it's best if you just don't bring his wife up at all. And certainly don't start suggesting he find some other woman to go off with – that would just upset him."

Jecht scratched the back of his neck; the thought of Braska being upset made him feel uncomfortable. It was disturbing on some kind of primal level: men were meant to be strong. They weren't supposed to be at the mercy of emotion; that just made them feeble and pathetic, in his opinion. "Three years, though?" he mumbled. "Ain't he over it by now?"

"Over it?" Auron echoed, incredulous. "Jecht, she was the

love of his life. I don't imagine that's something you can relate to, but –"

"The hell does that mean?" Jecht interrupted. "I'm married too, remember? You're the one that's probably never gotten laid before – stuck-up prick."

Auron frowned, about to argue, but then remembered his promise to Braska; he needed to try to get on better with Jecht, even if Jecht did make it incredibly difficult. "That's not true," he said calmly, "but I can see why you might be confused. There are two orders of monks in Bevelle: those who join the civilian order do take a vow of chastity, actually, but the warrior monks don't have the –"

Jecht groaned. "Did I ask? I don't care about dumb monks."

"Right," Auron muttered, and ceased the conversation immediately. So much for that, he thought.

They continued through the forest, dispatching more fiends; Jecht had got the hang of them now, realising that as Coultan had predicted, he was best equipped to take down the faster ones, while Auron could deal with the large, heavy ones and Braska used his magic on those that were less corporeal. There were certainly a few mishaps, and the assistance brought by potions and white magic was crucial, but Jecht was getting used to that too. In fact, he had started to wish they had access to such things back in Zanarkand, instead of having to rely on slow-acting pharmaceuticals and waiting for wounds to heal naturally. He'd injured himself

badly during a recent training session, colliding with some kind of rusty undersea detritus that had left a deep cut in his right forearm. It had forced him to put an abrupt end to his practice and head home, staunching the bleeding with a towel until he'd been able to get a bandage applied to the wound with some assistance from his long-suffering wife. Several days afterwards, the bandage was still on his arm; the injury would leave a scar, almost certainly, but it was just another to add to the collection. As far as Jecht was concerned, the scars just added to his rugged good looks.

It did still hurt though, sometimes; Jecht's wife, who had completed some medical training, had informed him that the cut was deep enough to cause some minor damage to the nerve. He'd resolutely ignored her advice to take painkillers, and certainly hadn't drawn attention to his discomfort, but now that he was aware of the superior treatments available in Spira, he wondered whether there might be a way of expediting the healing process. None of the potions he'd taken had had any effect on this particular injury, but maybe a spell applied directly to the area would help, he thought.

He approached Braska, and said, "Hey, would you do me a favour?"

"Hm?" said Braska. It was a question he wasn't used to being asked; Auron would certainly never dream of it, especially now that Braska was a summoner.

"Uh, I got this scratch, see, on my arm," said Jecht, raising

his bandaged wrist into view. "Doesn't hurt or nothin', it's just, this bandage gets in the way, you know? Just thought maybe you could do some kinda spell on it."

"It depends," said Braska. "What sort of injury is it?"

"I was out swimming," Jecht explained, "and I stabbed myself on some kind of shipwreck. Went in pretty deep."

Braska frowned. "When was this?"

"A couple days ago," said Jecht. "Actually, it would've been the day before I wound up in Bevelle, so ..." He performed a quick calculation. "Four days, I guess."

"Ah," said Braska ruefully. "I'm afraid too much time has passed, in that case. There's very little we can do about flesh wounds, unless it's within a few hours of the injury; a few minutes, ideally. Unless it's causing you pain – I may be able to do something for that."

"Uh –" Jecht hesitated. He didn't want to admit that his forearm actually hurt – that was just a sign of weakness, in his opinion. He certainly wasn't going to say anything about it in front of Auron. But, he considered, Braska was almost like some kind of personal medic. It made sense that Zanarkand's top blitzball player should have someone available to attend to his many injuries. Maybe, he thought, Braska would consider coming home with him and offering his services there. It would certainly make the rest of the team jealous.

"Yeah, it hurts a bit," he said nonchalantly.

Braska nodded, reaching towards the affected area and taking hold of it with his thumb and forefinger; Jecht stifled a gasp. "If I were to ask you where the pain is coming from," said Braska, "would you say it was the surface of the wound, or is it more general?"

"Been through this with the old lady," Jecht grunted. "She says it's nerve damage."

"I see," said Braska, letting go of him. "In that case, I have just the thing." He raised a hand to Jecht's forehead, concentrated, and then let out a burst of white magic energy; Jecht didn't notice an immediate difference, but upon tentatively flexing his wrist, he found that the movement didn't hurt as much as before. "Huh, I guess that does make a difference," he remarked. "What did you do?"

"We call it Shell," Braska explained. "Nerve damage is akin to magic damage, in a way. All I've done is dull the signals from your nerves to your mind, so you won't feel the pain as strongly. It'll wear off in a few hours, but perhaps you'll be feeling better by then anyway. I hear these things flare up from time to time." He gave a small smile. "Anything else I can help you with?"

"Nope," said Jecht, suddenly ill at ease with the fact that Braska was treating him like an invalid. "Why didn't you use that?" he asked, nodding towards Braska's staff in a hasty attempt to change the subject.

"The staff? I'm not used to it yet," Braska admitted. "They

say it's more effective than using one's bare hands, and I suppose it does seem that way for the offensive spells, but with white magic, it still feels a little strange. I haven't had this staff long, you see, only since I started my summoner's training." He paused. "I've been trying to use it for casting the minor healing spells on you – I didn't know whether you'd be comfortable with the hands, when we've only known each other a few days. But that Shell spell seemed a bit more important, so I just instinctively –" He let out a brief sigh. "Of course, what I *should* be doing for more important spells is using the staff. I just hope the fayth can look past my inadequacies."

"You don't use it on Auron," Jecht pointed out.

Braska nodded. "Exactly. I ought to, but … I know he doesn't mind if I just use my hands directly. We've been friends a long time, after all."

"Dunno why you'd be friends with that guy," said Jecht. "He's so up his own ass." Braska seemed pleasant enough, he had decided: he didn't think the two of them had much in common, and Braska often seemed distracted, but at least the summoner was polite. As for Auron – Jecht had tried, to begin with, but he was just too disagreeable.

"No, Jecht," said Braska somewhat sternly, "he's not. I had a talk with Auron last night, and I did tell him he needs to be more patient with you, but you should do the same. He's been having a difficult time recently – I don't doubt that it'll take him a while to trust you. I know you may find his behaviour

frustrating, but all I ask is a little patience."

"Right, I get it," Jecht mumbled. "No need for a lecture."

"I know you're new to all this, Jecht," Braska went on, "and there are things you may not understand, but I will not tolerate it if you insult Auron like that."

Jecht grunted in response; his goodwill towards Braska had taken a hit. If he wanted to dislike Auron, he thought, he certainly had the right to do so. He wasn't going to take orders from Braska just because Braska was a summoner: he was Zanarkand's biggest blitzball star, after all. Everyone there fell at his feet; soon enough, the people of Spira would be doing the same.

They walked on, taking this path and that according to Auron's instructions, seeing off additional fiends without too much trouble. The forest was extensive; neither Jecht nor Braska had any idea which direction they had ended up heading in, nor which way they would have needed to turn to find themselves back in Bevelle.

Jecht hummed a tune as they went along; it was the same one that always got stuck in his head. After a few iterations, Auron turned to him and said, "Stop that."

"What is it now?" Jecht groaned.

Auron glared at him. "Don't pretend you don't know. The Hymn. You're profaning it."

"What hymn?" said Jecht.

Auron ignored him. It was more proof of Jecht's duplicity, he considered: there was no way Jecht wasn't familiar with Spira and its customs if he knew the Hymn of the Fayth. It was an ancient song in praise of the core principles of Yevon, and summoners' duty of keeping Sin at bay; at least, that was what believers were always told. The words of the Hymn were in a classical dialect that very few people understood. Despite its arcanity, it had become the principal element of the Yevonite liturgy, sung so widely that even the Al Bhed knew it.

Eventually, they made it out of the forest, entering the region of Macalania Lake. In the short stretch where the trees ebbed away and the ground beneath their feet shifted from crunchy leaves to grass, the climate changed abruptly too, becoming windy and cold – so cold that a thick layer of snow coated everything. The lake itself was perpetually iced over. It was one of the mysteries of Spira: Yevonites tended to accept such things as proof of the limitations of the explanatory power of science, insisting instead that the workings of their homeland defied rational description. The Al Bhed, on the other hand, had made some preliminary enquiries into this kind of natural phenomenon, but as with much of their research, they had never managed to get very far as a result of the dual threat of Sin and Yevonite oppression.

A building stood near the start of the path that led out of the woods; the first sign of civilisation that the three travellers had seen in a while, it was one of the various hostels that could

be found in the more rural parts of Spira, popularly known as travel agencies. Braska gazed at it in relief; his feet were aching after the long walk.

"This is our accommodation, I suppose?" he said.

"That's right," Auron replied. "It's the last travel agency before the temple. It'll take us an hour or two to get there tomorrow, so we can make sure you've rested enough before we set off, and then we'll stay here tomorrow night as well before we head back into the woods."

Braska nodded. The trip to the temple would take a lot out of him; he had learnt that much from his first visit to the fayth two months earlier, in Bevelle's holy citadel. The occasion had been so physically and emotionally draining that after he had spoken to the spirit-child who took the role of the fayth of Bahamut, he had stumbled into a sitting position and been unable to stand again for several minutes, forcing himself to stay anchored to reality with the help of Auron's hand rubbing careful circles into his upper back.

"Then what?" Jecht demanded. "We gettin' close to Zanarkand yet?"

"When Lord Braska's ready, we head back through the forest," said Auron, not looking at him. "Our next stop is Djose, and it's some distance away, as I'm sure you know."

Jecht made a noise of frustration, ignoring the last remark. "This blows. I just wanna get home, not go to all these lame religious places."

Auron was about to make a retort, but the sight of Braska's weary expression was enough to remind him not to rise to the bait. It was for Braska's sake, he reminded himself. He disliked Jecht possibly more than anyone else he had ever met, but Braska's needs came first.

He led the others inside. Auron had stayed at a few travel agencies before with the corps, and this one was just like any other: there was the same small food market in one corner, a similarly furnished seating area, and the same poorly equipped bookshelf that would no doubt contain the usual collections of prayers and hymns. He made a mental note to check the shelf later: perhaps it might point the way to some information that could be of use.

The focal point of the reception area was a large, curved desk; a smartly dressed woman stood behind it, giving a deep Yevonite bow at the sight of the three guests. Trying not to show his relief that she hadn't recognised him, Auron acknowledged the bow with a nod, and said politely, "Good afternoon. We're looking for a room – for two nights, if possible. Lord Braska here will require a bed, but there's no need for any luxury beyond that – basic quarters will be fine."

The clerk turned to face Braska, understanding the nature of the group of travellers from his appearance as well as Auron's request. "Lord summoner," she said reverently, bowing again. "It is an honour." She turned away to flick through her records, and then addressed Auron. "You can take room eight.

One bed, as requested, and there are mats that the two of you can use."

They thanked her, and were about to head on, when she added, "Just a word of caution: there's an Al Bhed group in the next room. I'm afraid we get a lot of them staying here. We did instruct them not to do anything sacrilegious, but you never know, do you?" She shrugged apologetically. "I just hope they show you some respect, lord summoner. If they cause any trouble, we can ask them to leave, of course."

Braska smiled uneasily. "I hardly think the Al Bhed are going to give us trouble," he remarked to Auron once they had begun making their way along the corridor. "Not as much as we'd get in Bevelle, at any rate."

"They might not be pleased to see a summoner, though," Auron pointed out.

"I suppose not," said Braska. "The Al Bhed don't follow Yevon," he added for Jecht's benefit. "They're not always well disposed to the idea of the summoner's pilgrimage."

"Oh yeah?" said Jecht. "Why's that? If you wanna be a summoner –" He broke off as they entered the room. "Hey, a proper bed!" he exclaimed, immediately throwing himself onto it. "Been days since I slept in one of these!"

"The bed is for Lord Braska," said Auron.

Jecht looked up at him from where he lay spreadeagle on the blanket. "What?" he moaned. "Are you kidding? You know who I am, right? They'd never let the great Jecht –"

"It's for Lord Braska," Auron repeated, more loudly.

"Auron," said Braska, and then he approached Jecht. "My apologies, Jecht – but it is the proper procedure for the summoner to be permitted greater comfort where available. You are accompanying me for my protection, after all." He sat on the bed as Jecht reluctantly vacated it, leaning back against the headboard, and closed his eyes: he really did need a rest. He hadn't had to rely on his magic quite as much as the previous day – now that the three of them had become used to the types of fiends found in the forest, they had been able to dispatch them much more efficiently. But he could nonetheless feel the slight headache that sustained use of black magic tended to bring on, coupled with the weariness of white. Moreover, his legs and feet were still aching from all the walking; Auron had been sure not to set a pace that would overexert him, but it was still a lot more exercise than he was used to, especially in recent years.

"I think I'll take a nap," he murmured.

"Of course, my lord," said Auron. "Can I get you anything?"

Braska shook his head. "Thank you, Auron. I just need to rest."

"Are you sure?" said Auron. "I can ask the clerk for some tea –"

"I'm *quite* sure," said Braska sharply.

Auron stepped back immediately. "Right, yes," he mumbled. "Of course, sir." He retreated into the corridor, closely

followed by Jecht, who remarked, "Huh, tetchy, ain't he?"

Auron sighed. "He's just – you wouldn't understand."

"Oh yeah?" said Jecht.

"Yeah," Auron echoed, folding his arms. "I hope you're not expecting me to spend the evening entertaining you."

Jecht snorted. "As if. Pretty lousy entertainment that'd be."

"Good," Auron retorted, stomping off towards the reception area, where he planned to have a close look at the bookshelf he'd noticed earlier.

Jecht headed in the same direction, making for the reception desk. "Hey," he drawled once he got there. "You guys sell beer?"

They didn't have a lot available – they were waiting for a shipment, the clerk explained – but Jecht bought what he could to top up his supply, and then settled in to interrogate her some more. He still had a lot of questions about Spira, and the more he learnt about the place, the less any of it made sense.

Auron, meanwhile, was trying to work methodically through the books. Many of them could be discounted immediately: some were the standard Yevonite tracts that he practically knew by heart, while a surprisingly large number of the others were in the language spoken by the Al Bhed, which he had no knowledge of. He had made some lacklustre attempts at learning during his preparations for the pilgrimage, thinking that access to Al Bhed science might be

useful for his task, but had quickly discovered that his talent for languages was minimal.

The remaining books were hardly much easier, given that Auron was a slow reader. One of them was a handbook to the Macalania Lake region, written by and for devout Yevonites; about eighty percent of it was devoted to an in-depth description of the temple, going into unnecessary detail about the materials used in its construction. The rest gave a perfunctory summary of the layout of the area and the wildlife and fiends that could be found there, as well as some speculation about why the climate of the region was so particular, which led as always to the disappointing conclusion that the divine mysteries of Yevon were simply inexplicable.

There were a couple of tedious-looking novels, and then, wrapped in brown paper, the well-known *Treatise on Al Bhed culture and history* that had long been banned in Bevelle. Auron had previously had a few opportunities to see it, but had always passed them up; now, more concerned with ensuring a successful end to the pilgrimage than adhering to Yevon's teachings, he wondered if it might be of use to him. He opened the book and slowly began reading, but found himself distracted by practical matters. He would wash the party's clothes the following evening, he thought, and he would have to make sure they had rations that would last them to the next travel agency, the one on the Thunder Plains. He would need to do a thorough check of the healing

supplies, probably before going to bed; they had used a lot of potions in the last two days, and the remaining stock perhaps wouldn't be enough for the journey to the temple, he considered, especially if the visit was hard on Braska – it wasn't a good idea to have to rely on only white magic for healing at the best of times. Taking down fiends had meant they'd collected enough gil in bounties over the two days to be able to replenish the supplies, although they would have to be careful not to spend too much of it; it was always wise to have some in reserve.

With some reluctance, Auron forced himself back to his reading, struggling through the book's introduction, which seemed mildly interesting but was of little practical value. After a while, Braska emerged from the corridor and lowered himself into the chair across the table from where Auron sat; Auron was glad to have an excuse to put the book down for a while.

"Feeling better, my lord?" he asked.

"A little," said Braska. He had had a good sleep, woken up feeling more energetic, then taken his nightly sphere for Yuna; after that, he had started to think about the next day's trip to the temple, and the thought of it had made him so apprehensive that he had started to feel worn out again. At that point, he had decided that the best thing would be some distraction, so he had hauled himself out of bed and made his way towards the agency reception, hoping to find Auron there.

He reached out towards one of the piles of books Auron had made, and looked at the one on top; it was a slim Al Bhed volume. "Oh, I haven't seen one of these in years," he remarked. "They were all the rage back when I lived with the Al Bhed. Thrillers about Yevonites and their torrid affairs – all highly improbable, of course."

"I'm sure," said Auron.

Braska turned the book over to read the blurb; although his command of Al Bhed had declined over the last few years, his reading comprehension remained passable. "This one's about a priest and a nun who live in neighbouring temples," he told Auron. "Of course, they start to realise they're madly in love with one another, but they have no opportunities to meet and confess their love, so the nun devises a system using –" He frowned at the unfamiliar word. *"Pyhhan* – oh, it must mean a flag, I think. She uses the flag to send him messages, and then they arrange to meet illicitly at night, and then – oh, goodness me – they consummate their love in the temple, at the foot of the statue of Lord Gandof."

Auron's face had turned red; he had heard much worse before, growing up in the barracks, but hearing it from Braska was a lot more embarrassing. "Scandalous," he managed to say.

Braska gave him a little smile. "They're all like that, I'm afraid. Very popular among young Al Bhed ten years ago, although I suppose they'd be a bit dated now." He picked up a few more books from the pile: a number of them were ad-

ditional entries in the same long-running series. There were some larger volumes below them that looked familiar as well; he lifted one for a closer look, deciphered the title, and then said, "Ah, yes. *Gahato's shorter Al Bhed primer*, volume sixteen. I had to use these in my studies – they're very dull."

"Doesn't sound very short if there are sixteen volumes of it, sir," Auron remarked.

"Twenty-six," Braska corrected him. "Yes, frightful, isn't it? I dread to think what the full version must be like. Someone once told me there's only one copy and it's buried underground somewhere for safekeeping." He frowned. "Although perhaps he was trying to pull my leg a little."

"What are the other Al Bhed books about?" said Auron casually. It had occurred to him that if any seemed as if they might be particularly useful, he could perhaps lift them and try to find someone who could translate later in the journey. He had never been tempted by petty theft before, but in his opinion, the importance of his task outweighed such minor moral concerns.

"Let's see," said Braska, working through the rest of the pile. "Gardening … this one's the ship schedules for the southern islands routes … and this one is about fishing on Macalania Lake."

"That seems optimistic," said Auron, thinking of the perpetually frozen body of water they would be passing by the next day.

"It does, doesn't it?" Braska mused. He looked at the book more closely, carefully reading the full title. *"Cbalimydewa* – ah – *speculative* fishing. I see; how peculiar."

Auron laughed briefly, and then stood up, seeing that there were no books left to go through. "I need to check our supplies," he explained. "I think we'll need to stock up on potions before tomorrow."

"Yes, thank you," said Braska. "We may need a few – I don't know if I'll have the strength to cast, after the temple –"

"I'll make sure we have plenty, my lord," Auron confirmed.

Braska rose too, and headed to the reception desk. He planned to ask if the travel agency kept anything that might help his sore feet – the standard potions dealt well with battle wounds, but other aches and pains often responded better to alternative treatment. Braska had imagined it would be a simple question, but somehow found himself drawn into a long conversation about the practicalities of the summoner's pilgrimage. Admitting that he had entrusted most of the planning to Auron didn't seem to dissuade the clerk, who continued to ask him a whole string of questions with great enthusiasm.

After some time had passed, Braska gradually became aware that Auron was standing behind him. He had in fact been there for a good while, clearing his throat and shuffling his feet in an attempt to get Braska to notice him without interrupting the conversation.

"Is something the matter?" said Braska, turning around at

last.

"Jecht's gone," said Auron promptly. "I've looked everywhere for him."

Braska frowned. "Well, it's not for us to dictate how he spends his evenings – we're hardly his keepers."

"He might have run off," said Auron. "You know, decided he doesn't want to accompany us anymore, and just bolted –"

"That would be regrettable," said Braska, "but I thought you might be happier about it, Auron."

Auron suppressed a grunt of frustration. Braska was right – he really would prefer it if Jecht was as far away from him as possible. But the thought that the other guardian might have disobeyed orders and abandoned them, Braska especially, was one he found highly insulting.

"Perhaps he's gone into the village for a drink," Braska suggested.

"Yeah," said Auron, *"a* drink." He snorted, ignoring Braska's admonitory expression. "And he'll be totally useless to us tomorrow, then. That's just great." He marched off.

"I hope I haven't done anything wrong," said the clerk. "Your guardian asked if there was anywhere he could go drinking nearby, so I did tell him there was a bar over in the village."

"No, it's all right," Braska assured her.

"I didn't think that sort of thing would be a problem for a summoner's guardian," she added.

"It's fine," he said again, trying his best to appear as if it really was. "Jecht and Auron just aren't on the best of terms, that's all."

Jecht had indeed headed into Macalania village in search of somewhere to go drinking, on the clerk's advice. The bar he found there was surprisingly lively: it was where many of the villagers spent their evenings, finding it a welcome refuge from the cold. Jecht sauntered towards the counter, cast a critical eye over the beers on tap, and ordered the one he deemed to have the highest chance of resembling a Zanarkand ale.

"Two gil," said the barman listlessly.

He examined his pockets, but it was no good; he didn't have a single coin on him. He knew he'd had some cash before – he must have left it behind at the travel agency, he reasoned, or been convinced, in a moment of surprising gullibility, by Auron's entreaties that he add it to the communal stock. Not to be deterred, he clamped a hand onto the shoulder of the man sitting at the bar next to him, and said cheerfully, "Hey, wanna see something impressive?"

The man looked up at him slowly. He was already noticeably drunk, Jecht could tell, which would probably help his scheme. "Get lost," he mumbled, and turned back to his beer.

"Aw, man," said Jecht. "I bet you like blitzball, though, right? You realise you're talkin' to a pro blitzer here?"

The man turned around marginally more quickly at that; his interest had been piqued. "Prove it," he said, after a slurp

of beer.

After that, it was only a matter of locating a spare blitzball to get the pieces of Jecht's plan to fall into place. It turned out there was a ball kept behind the bar, intended for outdoor tournaments on the rare warm days of summer, and the disinterested barman didn't seem to object too much to the idea that Jecht might borrow it. When Jecht landed a particularly impressive trick shot that involved bouncing the ball off each of the four walls of the bar in turn, the punters seemed to take a bit of notice.

"So," said Jecht conspiratorially, the second phase of his plan to score a few free drinks incoming, "bet you I can do that again even with some pints in me."

"No way," said his neighbour, who had become more invested since seeing the trick. "Not possible."

"Go on, I bet you," said Jecht.

"What's your wager?" another patron asked him.

Jecht grinned. "You guys buy the drinks, I'll give it a go. Then if I don't make it, I'll pay everyone back. If I do, you all had to buy my drinks for me. Deal?"

There was a general murmur of assent, and soon Jecht found a pleasantly high number of full glasses set down in front of him. He settled in to drink them: this was going to be a serious challenge – never mind the shot, just getting all of it down by morning.

After a couple of pints, he found himself getting chatty with the other patrons, who were all much further gone than he was.

"So who are you, anyway?" said one, with mostly unintended belligerence. "Ain't seen you here before."

"I ain't from around here," Jecht told him. "Just passin' through, you know?"

"Not much blitz up this way," his companion pointed out.

"Well, that ain't all I do," Jecht explained. "Actually, I'm here with a summoner. He's goin' to the temple tomorrow."

The man gazed at him in surprise. "Wait … a summoner? You mean you're a guardian?"

"Yeah, I am," said Jecht proudly.

The man let out a laugh, took a swig from his glass, and said, "So, tell me. Summoners are either stupid kids with some kind of hero complex going on, or they're arrogant enough to think they can break the cycle, or they're suicidal. So which is yours?"

"Huh?" said Jecht.

"Gotta be one of 'em."

The question was ludicrous, but Jecht was drunk enough to give it some thought. Braska was hardly a child, he thought, and neither did he seem especially arrogant: he clearly wasn't shy of using his summoner's privileges, but both Auron and Jecht himself were just as self-absorbed. The reference to *breaking the cycle* passed Jecht by completely, and the idea that sum-

moners might be suicidal seemed equally baffling. It hadn't escaped his notice that Braska often seemed miserable and withdrawn, but he certainly wasn't going to waste time trying to evaluate the state of the summoner's mental wellbeing: that wasn't any of his business, and he hoped it never would be. "You don't know what you're talkin' about," he concluded.

The man laughed again, the same short, bitter bark. "Dream on. Sane people don't decide to go off and become summoners. Well, I'm sure you'll find out during the journey – just out of Bevelle, are you? You've got some nasty surprises coming."

"Whatever," Jecht muttered, turning back to his pint.

When his various glasses were empty, he struggled to his feet and somehow managed to locate the blitzball beside him. "All right!" he roared, holding it aloft. "I'm doin' it! Everyone watch!"

They did, as he lobbed the ball into the air at entirely the wrong angle, aimed an inexpert kick at it, and sent it in a very vague approximation of the intended direction. It made it to the first wall, somehow, then bounced off and dropped straight to the ground.

"Shit," he said, into the silence.

"Right, pay up!" someone called.

Jecht bolted, somehow finding his way to the exit despite the fact that everything was spinning slightly. It was a move that nobody had expected him to make, and given the resulting

confusion and the fact that most people in the bar were even drunker than he was, nobody was able to pursue him soon enough to have any hope of catching up. At full pelt, Jecht ran up the slope that led out of the village and towards the vicinity of the travel agency, not daring to look back until he was safely inside, whereupon he took a moment to catch his breath before making his way towards the room that he was sharing with his companions.

The lights were out; they had both been asleep for several hours. The noise of Jecht's clumsy entrance was enough to wake Auron, though, and he sat up, folding his arms in disapproval as he glared up at Jecht from one of the mats, which, Jecht was disheartened to see, looked much less appealing than the soft bed where he could just about make out Braska's form gently rising and falling under the blanket.

"Where do you think you've been?" Auron hissed, as Jecht unsteadily made his way across to the other mat.

"Fuck you," Jecht slurred. He dropped onto the mat in an ungainly manner and slowly embarked upon removing his armour, without a great deal of success.

"Can you – could you –" Auron paused, having so many things to reprimand Jecht for that he was unable to choose just one. "At least be quiet. Lord Braska's asleep."

Jecht grunted in response, and Auron lay back down in irritation, prevented from going back to sleep himself, first by the sound of Jecht laboriously taking his armour and clothes

off, and then by the noise of him tossing and turning, trying to get comfortable on the mat, for what seemed like hours.

Chapter 4

Hope

Morning came; Auron and Jecht rose and made their preparations for the day ahead, each of them taking great care to avoid the other until Jecht said, "So, we get breakfast in this shithole?"

"There's a room next to the main reception," Auron informed him with displeasure.

Jecht wasted no time in heading there; Auron instead approached Braska, who was still motionless under his blanket, and said gently, "Sir, are you awake?"

Braska was; he just hadn't been able to bring himself to get up. There were days when the mere thought of going out and facing the world seemed like an impossible task, a heavy weight pinning him down and making him feel slow and sore, and this seemed to be one of them. He was due to commune with the fayth of Macalania Temple; as harrowing as the experience was likely to be, it would bring him closer to his goal,

and he knew he ought to be glad of that. But the knowledge seemed to be doing nothing to lift his mood, and that in turn just made him feel even more forlorn and ashamed.

He had to overcome it, he knew; he had often doubted that he had the strength to undertake the pilgrimage, but it really was his only option. "I'll be up soon," he mumbled. "Just give me a moment."

"Of course," said Auron, gazing at Braska's huddled form for a few seconds.

He headed to the breakfast room. Jecht had already taken great advantage of the food that had been laid out, sampling various items and then casting them aside when he had had enough of them. Auron made sure to ignore him as he entered, taking the seat opposite and reaching for some cold meats and the newspaper, then busying himself while he ate with reading the front-page article, which turned out to be about new regulations for conduct at temporary military encampments, something he already knew about and didn't wish to be reminded of.

"Hey, Auron," said Jecht suddenly. "Do me a favour and grab me one of those apples, yeah?"

Auron glanced over at the bowl of apples; he was barely any closer to it than Jecht was. "Get it yourself," he said.

"Aw, come on," said Jecht.

Auron wasn't going to give in that easily. "Why should I have to fetch it for you? You can walk, can't you?"

"Bet you would if it was Braska askin'," Jecht pointed out.

"Of course," said Auron, without a trace of embarrassment, "but I'm his guardian. It's my duty to do what he asks – and yours too, or at least it should be."

"You know," said Jecht, "there's people in Zanarkand that'd pay thousands of gil for the privilege of servin' the great Jecht."

"I'm not one of your imaginary fans," Auron muttered, attempting to turn back to the newspaper.

"Man, you are so jealous," said Jecht. "You really wish you were me. It's tragic."

Without looking up, Auron quietly replied, "I absolutely do not."

Jecht let out a disdainful laugh, and then leant across the table. "Where's my apple?" he said.

"I'm not getting you an apple," said Auron, slowly and loudly. Despite his effort to keep looking down at the paper, he had ended up making eye contact with Jecht again; Jecht knew exactly how to annoy him.

"Yeah, you are," Jecht countered, "because I'm gonna keep on askin' till you give in and get one. Go on, Auron, grab me an apple – please … be nice to your old pal Jecht, come on, you know you wanna …"

Furious, Auron stood, marched over to the bowl, and seized one of the apples, nearly upending the bowl and spilling the rest of them onto the floor in the process; then he returned to the table, slamming the fruit down in front of Jecht so hard that

the whole thing shook. He sat back down, folded his arms, and fixed his gaze on a speck on the ceiling.

"Hey, thanks, man!" said Jecht, his voice a ludicrous parody of innocent delight. "Oh Auron, you're just great." He took a bite of the apple, grimaced, and carefully inspected it. "Huh," he said, setting it down on the table. "Well, that ain't so hot."

Trying not to shake visibly with rage, Auron closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. Jecht, meanwhile, turned his attention to the loaf of bread that had been set out. He sawed off a slice, took it over to the toasting machina, and then, once it was browned to his satisfaction, brought it back to his place at the table and began to coat it in butter, assiduously making sure every part of the bread was covered.

Auron opened his eyes and instantly regretted it. Jecht had used nearly the whole pot of butter on his bread, creating a layer almost half an inch thick: the sight of it was obscene, not helped by the fact that substantial quantities of the melted butter had dripped onto Jecht's fingers. To Auron, the thought of consuming so much grease at once was appalling. He had never seen anyone eat with such a lack of restraint: in Bevelle, people were at least somewhat refined at mealtimes. The warrior monks ate hearty meals to maintain their strength, but they did so on the understanding that plentiful food was a privilege and a gift of the fayth's divine providence. It was tacitly acknowledged that one should consume no more than they really needed, lest Sin should unexpectedly destroy any part of

the supply chain – it happened often enough, and was sometimes catastrophic.

Satisfied with his handiwork, Jecht bit into the toast. Melted butter trickled onto his lips and clung to his scraggly beard in little beads, catching the light. Auron couldn't help but stare at the revolting spectacle. The sight of Jecht smearing grease over himself like this was enough to make him feel nauseated.

"Got a problem?" said Jecht, mouth full of toast. More butter oozed out from between his parted lips and into his beard.

Half suspecting that opening his mouth would have unfortunate consequences, Auron declined to respond, fervently hoping instead that Braska would join the two of them and give him a distraction as soon as possible. It didn't take too long before his prayers were answered: Braska shuffled in, fully dressed, and took the remaining seat at the table, murmuring a greeting without making eye contact with either of his guardians.

Auron was on his feet immediately, fetching Braska some fruit and a cup of tea, and making quiet enquiries as to whether he needed anything else; Braska declined in a whisper and made an unenthusiastic start on the breakfast that Auron had assembled for him. Jecht, meanwhile, had started to feel uncomfortable, once again, faced with Braska's obvious emotional struggles. He muttered something about going to brush his teeth and then hastily left the room.

"Sir," said Auron when Jecht was out of earshot, "you don't look well. Maybe we should put things on hold for today – you can spend the time resting, and then we'll go to the temple when you're feeling better."

Braska shook his head. "I appreciate your concern," he said quietly, "but I don't think that's a good idea." He could feel tears beginning to prick at the back of his eyes. "I just – I know I'm not – but if I don't go today, it'll be even worse tomorrow, and then –"

"Are you worried about speaking to the fayth?" Auron asked him.

"Not worried, so much as –" Braska broke off and sniffed loudly. "It's just … a lot. It's a lot."

"I still think you should consider leaving it until tomorrow," said Auron, "but either way, you know I'll be with you – I'll do anything you need. If it doesn't go as planned, we can talk about that later. Until then, you save your strength; Jecht and I can deal with the fiends on the way there." He bit back a remark about the location of the travel agency: out of all the provincial temples they were to visit, Macalania's was the least well served in terms of hospitality, and the cold climate hardly helped. In Auron's opinion, the agency would have served summoners much better if it had been built on the other side of the lake; then there would be no fiends intercepting the journey to the fayth's chamber.

Braska took a deep breath, was still for a second, and then

nodded. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you, Auron." He wiped his eyes and forced himself to sit up a little straighter. "Then let's go. I need to do this, and I can. I *can* – for her sake."

It was clear enough that he was referring to Girl. Auron found himself wishing, not for the first time, that Braska might one day become less fixated on his late wife – that was really the root of the problem. He gave a nod of encouragement, though; if Braska was determined to go on, that would be enough to see them to the temple, and whatever happened once they were there would be at the fayth's prerogative.

They headed out to the reception area, ready to begin the journey. Jecht was sitting by the books, swigging from a bottle; he caught Auron's eye and raised it in a mocking salute. Auron ignored him.

Not far from Jecht, there was a small group of people sitting around one of the few tables, whose distinctive jumpsuits and large goggles marked them out as the Al Bhed party the clerk had mentioned the previous evening. As Auron and Braska entered, one of the Al Bhed immediately stood up and approached them. "You are the summoner, yes?" he said to Braska, his command of the common language evidently good but heavily accented. "Your name is Braska?"

"That's right," said Braska, trying not to sound tearful.

"And you are going to the temple today – is that correct?"

"We are," said Auron. "What's your point? We need to get going."

"Hold on," said the Al Bhed, and headed back to the table where his friends sat; moments later, he was back with a few garments draped over one arm, holding them out towards Braska. "It's cold," he said. "You can borrow these vests. Al Bhed *dransymc* – thermal linings."

Braska reached for the vests hesitantly. "That's very kind," he said, his voice still a little quieter than usual. "But why are you helping us?"

"We just passed through Bevelle," the man explained. "We heard a fallen summoner had started the pilgrimage – an Al Bhed lover, they said. None of those Yevonites supported you, but we know you are doing this for everyone. Not just for Yevon."

Braska nodded, taking hold of one of the vests between his thumb and forefinger, and rubbing the material carefully until he could bring himself to speak. "Thank you," he murmured at last. "I'll certainly take one – Auron? Jecht?"

Both of them declined; neither had ever been particularly bothered by cold weather. Jecht habitually dressed in little but shorts, and often spent several hours of the day underwater: he had trained himself to withstand even the most extreme temperatures. As for Auron, he simply preferred colder climates; even the city heat of Bevelle was sometimes too much for him in the summer.

"Al Bhed clothing won't hurt you," said the man, turning to Auron.

"I realise that," said Auron irritably. "I've got nothing against the Al Bhed." It was true; he found the Yevonite attitude towards the Al Bhed and their machina frustratingly hypocritical. In his view, both societies could evidently benefit from the skills and knowledge of the other: indeed, in Bevelle they often did, but it was always done behind closed doors and on the understanding that the general public of Spira were not to know about it. On a personal level, Auron appreciated the utility of certain machina for making life easier. There were certainly a few devices that he found somewhat disturbing, and others that he simply had no interest in: the guns that some modernisers had insisted on adopting in the corps were an example of the latter. Auron much preferred his sword, but he had no issue with people who chose to use the new weaponry, as long as they didn't attempt to force it on anyone else.

Braska headed back to their room to put on his vest; Auron, whose irritation at Jecht had quickly been displaced by concern for Braska earlier, felt the former emotion return just as rapidly while they waited. At this point, the mere sight of his fellow guardian annoyed him intensely. His ridiculous insistence on going around half-naked, with that odious tattoo plastered across his chest like an advertisement; the hideous scars that he clearly had no qualms about displaying to all and sundry; his hoarse voice tinged with the rasp of alcoholism – all of it made Auron fervently wish he had never met the man.

It seemed Braska had permitted him to come on the pilgrimage with them out of the goodness of his heart, but Auron had never been especially swayed by charitable feelings.

"What're you lookin' at?" Jecht drawled. He, likewise, wasn't feeling particularly well disposed towards Auron himself. He'd given him the benefit of the doubt to begin with, but by this point, Auron had proved himself to be too disagreeable to be worth the effort.

Auron refused to answer; Jecht was drunk again, he noticed with displeasure. He concentrated on going over his mental checklist for the day, confirming to himself that they had enough supplies. At least, he thought, he had been able to leave the tent behind on this occasion; that gave him more capacity for potions, which would mean Braska could be spared from having to waste his energy on healing them all.

Braska emerged, noticeably red-eyed: a few minutes on his own had been enough for him to lose his composure again, particularly after such unexpected kindness from the Al Bhed. "Well, let's go," he said hoarsely.

"Sir, are you –" Auron began.

Braska raised a hand to cut him off, cleared his throat at some length, and spoke again, sounding much more confident. "Yes, Auron. I'm determined to do this today. Let's be off."

He ushered his guardians through the door, and then stepped out behind them, feeling a chill even with the assistance of the borrowed vest. It was not only cold but

significantly windy: Auron's ponytail flapped around in every direction, becoming horribly tangled within seconds. The sight of his bare left arm, and of Jecht's bare chest and feet, was enough to make Braska shiver just thinking about how unpleasant it would be if he had to be out in that state himself.

Jecht looked up at the sign by the travel agency that welcomed visitors to the region, and suddenly remembered the sphere recorder. "Hey!" he said. "This is the first temple we're goin' to, right? I wanna get this on video – a souvenir for my kid, you know." He located the device, along with the two halves of the sphere he had used to make his previous recording, and slotted them back into place. "Let's just take a quick one of me and Braska under the sign," he said, holding the recorder out for Auron to take. "Do me a favour and take the stick outta your ass for two seconds, would ya?"

Auron stared down at the sphere recorder, then back up at Jecht, and decided the only response he deserved was a frown. Jecht's tomfoolery was an utter waste of time, he thought, as well as this being a highly improper use of machina.

"Asshole," Jecht hissed.

Braska winced; for the first time, he feared that his guardians might actually come to blows. Clearly, he thought, neither had paid attention to his entreaties that they make an effort to be polite to each other, even now that he was deeply in need of their support. "I'll do it," he said hastily, stepping forward to take the sphere recorder from Jecht. He

wouldn't normally have offered, but he was keen for relations between Auron and Jecht not to get even worse. Besides, he didn't fancy being captured on the sphere himself when it would probably be obvious that he had been crying just a few minutes earlier. "Auron," he said, "you can be in this with Jecht, please."

Auron stood rooted to the spot as Braska set up the recording; he was still appalled that Jecht insisted on wasting their time with such a vacuous pursuit, but he could hardly disobey Braska. Hoping they would be able to get it over with quickly, he tried unsuccessfully to ignore Jecht while the latter posed and preened under the welcome sign.

Braska switched on the device and attempted to capture both his guardians and the sign in the same shot. "Auron," he called again. "Could you stand closer to him?"

It was the very last thing Auron wanted to do, and it took several seconds before he was able to bring himself to comply with Braska's request and approach Jecht. When he had done so, he found it equally difficult to turn around and face the device again. In his belief, this whole exercise was not only pointless and a waste of time, but utterly demeaning. It made a mockery of the pilgrimage, which was, after all, a deeply sacred endeavour.

Braska suppressed a sigh; that was probably as good as he was going to get, and he didn't want Auron to become even more angry. "Good," he said, making a surprisingly successful

attempt at sounding as if nothing was wrong. "That should do it."

Auron was still glowering in totally the wrong direction, refusing to be captured properly on the sphere; Jecht turned towards him with a sneer. "What's the matter?" he said. "Afraid I might bite?"

"Jecht," Auron said through gritted teeth. He had managed not to react to the last few of Jecht's taunts, but by now he was so frustrated that he couldn't help showing it with more than a mere frown. Indeed, it was clear to Jecht that Auron was moments away from losing his temper completely. What would really send him into a rage now that he was finally responding, Jecht thought, would be if Jecht were to start ignoring him in turn. Feigning innocence, he turned away from Auron, stepped forward, and said, "Braska, you should take one too – it'd make a great gift for little Yuna."

"I suppose," said Braska doubtfully, as Jecht took up his pose once again. He wasn't particularly inclined to take a sphere himself, but he wondered if acquiescing might keep at least one of his guardians happy; Auron certainly seemed too far gone.

"Lord Braska," said Auron, striding forward at last, "we shouldn't be wasting our time like this."

"What's the hurry, man?" Jecht jeered.

It was the last straw for Auron: he had had enough of Jecht's constant goading. "Let me tell you what the hurry

is," he growled, surging forward with the sole aim of turning off the sphere recorder. He wrenched it from Braska's grasp; Braska murmured his name in ineffectual protest, while Auron fumbled with the device until he had stopped the recording. He pulled the two half spheres out of the slot and held them aloft in one hand, the recorder in the other.

"People are dying, Jecht," he spat. "Sin is killing people, every day, and this is the only way we can stop it. This journey is hard enough on Braska without you treating the whole thing like tourism; he didn't decide to become a summoner so he could go on a nice jaunt around Spira, you know, he made this decision because he really thought he –"

"Auron," Braska cut in, more sternly. "That's enough."

Much too late, Auron realised he had overstepped the mark. He looked at what he held in his hands with mounting horror, suddenly recalling that he had snatched the device straight out of Braska's grip. "I'm sorry, sir," he said desperately. "I'm truly sorry."

Braska acknowledged the apology with a brief nod. "If the two of you can't be polite to each other," he said in the same cold tone, "then you'll have to refrain from speaking to each other at all. You're both here for my protection, and I need that protection today, more than ever – Auron, you know that. Engaging in petty squabbling is not part of your task."

"I'm sorry," Auron mumbled again, lowering his head in contrition. He felt terrible: Braska was right. The summoner's

safety was of far more importance than arguing with Jecht, however frustrating Jecht was.

Braska began to walk on, leaving his guardians to follow; he still felt shaken, and it was easier to cling to his anger than to let it turn back into the kind of wretchedness that would hinder his progress. He was disappointed in them both, Auron and Jecht, but he was just as disappointed in himself for having lacked the foresight to realise taking on a second guardian would cause so much trouble.

Auron, just as annoyed for different reasons, strode forward to take the lead. After his lapse in judgement, he was even more determined for Braska not to have to get involved in fending off any of the fiends they were to encounter. He poured his frustration into the first few battles, driving his sword into each foe as hard as he could without sparing a thought for the need to pace himself. Jecht made sure to give him a wide berth; Auron looked absolutely murderous.

Most of the fiends were the sort that went down easily with a few swordstrokes; soon enough, though, they encountered a different type, one of the amorphous blobs known colloquially as flans. Auron knew full well that a couple of fire spells would allow Braska to take the fiend down with much less effort than either he or Jecht would require, but he continued to insist that the summoner stay away from battle, barking orders at Jecht with increasing desperation as the two of them took it in turns to deliver blows that had very little effect. After the flan was

dealt with, both Auron and Jecht were in a bad way; it had sent icy shots towards them several times, and they were both feeling lightheaded, leaning on their swords to stay upright.

"Braska," Jecht whined; for once, he was feeling bad enough not to downplay his injuries. "I need some magic – gimme a spell –"

Braska frowned, making no move to approach him. Both Jecht and Auron looked like they were about to pass out, in his estimation; Auron was unusually pale, and Jecht was clutching his forehead with his unarmoured hand, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. He found it difficult even to look at them when they were both in such difficulty, but Braska knew casting magic could weaken him, and Auron had sworn he wouldn't need to get involved. And after Auron's display at the travel agency, Braska thought, he owed Braska the decency of keeping his promises.

"No, Jecht," Auron grunted, once he had gathered his wits enough to speak. "We have potions. Use them." He began to search around in his belongings for a few; it was difficult when he felt as if he was on the verge of losing consciousness. Eventually, he extracted several, tossed half of them in Jecht's direction and swallowed the rest himself, soon feeling normal again. He straightened up as Jecht did the same.

"OK, guys, we're gonna have to talk about resource management," Jecht complained, "because yours is shit. We just used up, like, half our potion supply, but if Braska just did some

lightning on that thing –"

"Fire," Auron corrected him; Jecht's knowledge of elemental weaknesses was still minimal. "No, Jecht, this is non-negotiable. We're handling this ourselves today – I made sure we have plenty of potions. Lord Braska is saving his strength for the fayth."

"That's dumb," said Jecht. "Braska, you could've just done one little fire and then you wouldn't even have to white magic us anyway. One spell ain't much, right?"

"No," said Auron again. "I told you, no. What makes this so hard to understand? Why are you so determined to call every single one of my decisions into question?"

"Auron," said Braska, before Jecht could respond. "Please – both of you." Having gone from seeing both his guardians almost knocked out by the fiend to witnessing another of their increasingly vicious arguments, he was starting to feel distressed again. The thought that he could indeed have stepped in to prevent their discomfort was making him progressively more convinced that he was handling everything terribly. "Please," he said again, unsure what he could do but beg. "Just stop fighting, will you?"

Auron's heart sank; Braska looked as if he was about to cry again, and Auron knew it was at least partly his fault. He sheathed his sword and walked on, trying to put aside his anger. He had always been short-tempered, but the warrior monks had practised stoicism, and he had usually succeeded,

when he had to, in ignoring worldly cares and letting his faith be a guide. But after his recent experiences, that seemed more difficult. He was irritable and on edge more often than not these days, concerned about the progress of the pilgrimage for multiple reasons. The days when he had been able to persuade himself to rise above such minor annoyances seemed long gone.

They rounded a corner in the path, and came to the shore of the lake. It had been frozen over for hundreds of years; the sheet of ice on its surface was rumoured to be several feet thick. Travellers normally walked straight across the middle; the chance of anything but an extremely strong force breaking the ice was minimal.

Auron, who had been taking the lead in an attempt to forget Jecht was with him, came to the edge of the lake first. He looked across to the opposite shore, taking in the expanse they would have to cross; then, suddenly and unexpectedly, he found himself thinking about the body of water that lay beneath the ice; and then, just as suddenly, he felt sharp, irregular pains across his chest, his heart beating a frantic counterrhythm against each constriction. His vision blurred; he staggered back, almost losing his balance, and stumbled into Jecht, who had approached from behind.

"Hey, watch it," Jecht said angrily, shoving Auron away. Auron might have ordinarily retaliated in kind, but he was too disorientated; all the energy he could muster was focused on

trying to stay standing. He turned away from the lake as his vision sharpened and his heartbeat slowed; the sense of panic, of something being terribly and indescribably wrong, gradually ebbed away.

"We'll go around," he said breathlessly. "Instead of crossing the lake directly – we'll stay on the shore." He searched his mind for an excuse. "Fewer fiends, I think."

"Yeah, but the path's longer," Jecht pointed out, not unreasonably.

Braska tried to brace himself: he could see yet another argument brewing, and he didn't know whether he would be able to bear it. Auron knew that more squabbling would upset him, he thought, and Jecht had been told enough times by now too. He really didn't want things to turn sour yet again; it would be one altercation too many.

"You go that way if you want," said Auron, "but I won't be joining you."

He turned to walk along the lakeshore; the others fell into step behind him after a moment's pause. Normally, Auron would have been stubborn enough to try talking Jecht around, as unkindly as necessary; he was accustomed to his decisions being the correct ones, and was usually prepared to defend them at great length. On this occasion, he was just determined to move away from the edge of the lake as soon as possible. He walked on, trying to avoid looking to the side and seeing the sheet of ice again; his reaction to it had been deeply unsettling.

They fought more fiends on the rest of the journey; the flans they encountered caused just as much trouble as the first had. Braska continued to hang back, looking on gravely as his guardians slowly took them down, almost went down themselves, and carefully healed their injuries using potions. Jecht had ceased to complain about it, although he still thought the whole process incredibly inefficient. He had been working through his beers on the journey, and by now was mellow enough not to be particularly bothered about challenging Auron's decisions.

Eventually, they arrived at the temple. It was an impressive structure, built to look as if it was floating in midair in the middle of a huge, icy grotto, but in reality anchored to the ground far below by large and ancient ice crystals, more of which surrounded the temple roof and blocked out much of the natural light. A narrow path snaked towards the building; unlike the temple itself, the path truly was suspended in the air, as improbable as it seemed. Magic was clearly at play in the temple's construction, and it was difficult to discern the exact boundary between the man-made and the natural. Each of the temples of Spira had its eccentricities, although this one was far more striking than the temple of Bahamut in Bevelle that had been the first stop on Braska's journey. That temple was in the middle of the city, and hardly stood out against the surrounding buildings; this one was the only such structure for miles around, and that fact alone made it remarkable.

They climbed the front steps and entered, passing through the elaborate double doors that opened into the temple atrium. Inside, the statues and decorations resembled those of any other temple of Yevon; pendants inscribed with the holy alphabet adorned the walls, spelling out invocations to the fayth. Groups of monks and nuns stood around, talking quietly or making their oblations. In the centre, a staircase led to a second pair of doors; a priest stood guard at the top of the steps. It was this man who would require Braska to present himself, and who would allow the summoner and his guardians to pass through the doors to reach the fayth's chamber.

A blue sphere stood by the temple entrance, coming to about waist height. It was one of the waymarkers that summoners and other pilgrims used to record their progress. They were a largely unexplained blend of magic and machina, bathed in an ethereal glow: the kind of thing that would have been banned several times over by Yevon, had they not been deemed essential in carrying out the teachings. With the signals sent from such devices, the high priests could track the progress of summoners as they journeyed around Spira – whether those journeys ever came to anything was another matter.

Braska bent to touch the sphere, watching as the blue glow briefly enveloped his hand. No doubt the authorities in Bevelle would be displeased at the news that he had made it even this

far; it gave him a perverse thrill of satisfaction to think it. He was still feeling fretful, especially now that his trial was near; but being in the temple made him determined to see the task through, and just as it had been earlier in the morning, that was enough to ensure he carried on.

Jecht, meanwhile, had realised something: somebody in the depths of the temple was singing a song, and it was the same tune that he habitually got stuck in his head – the same one Auron had scolded him for humming to himself the previous day. "The Hymn," he murmured, remembering what Auron had called it. It was the first time he'd heard it being sung by another person; he'd always assumed he must have made it up of his own accord.

"Coming back to you, is it?" Auron hissed.

Jecht shrugged; he didn't want to admit that he was confused. "So what if it is?" he said.

Rolling his eyes contemptuously, Auron slipped off to pray, kneeling at the foot of the nearest statue. He closed his eyes and reflected reluctantly on the morning's events. His mind was unsettled; his continued disagreements with Jecht had made him act rashly and unkindly, and Braska had suffered because of it. That was the last thing Auron wanted. Moreover, his experience at the shore of the frozen lake had been disconcerting to say the least. All he needed was a sign of some kind, some guidance from the fayth on how he might assuage his troubled thoughts.

Jecht glanced at Auron's crouched form, trying to forget about the odd experience with the Hymn. It was unusual, he thought, to see his fellow guardian so still and reverent. He tore his gaze away with a little reluctance and took in the rest of the scene, swigging contemplatively from his beer bottle.

"You should put that away while we're in here," said Braska, frowning. "This is a holy place."

"Yeah?" said Jecht without much interest.

"Yes," Braska said. "I don't normally insist on following those parts of the teachings – goodness knows they're full of nonsense. But there are some things where it's just a matter of decorum. You shouldn't be drinking in a temple: it's bad manners."

Jecht was about to argue, but Braska's voice was a little hoarse and his eyes glistened slightly, so he decided it was preferable to stop the conversation as soon as possible, even if that did mean having to follow orders. "Fine," he said. "I'll behave, I promise."

"Thank you," Braska murmured.

Jecht put his beer bottle away and looked for a way to distract himself, ending up peering at the three large statues that flanked the central staircase. Casting an eye over their appearance, he tried to work out who the people depicted could be, but had little luck when none of them resembled anyone he had met in Spira so far.

He tried to think about something else, but the only

thought that seemed to occur to him was how much he wished he could go back to his drinking. He tried looking down at Auron briefly, but found the sight of his motionless, prostrate form too irritating, so he pretended to concentrate on the statues for a little longer before sneaking another look towards Braska, whose condition fortunately seemed not to have deteriorated.

"Who're these guys?" he asked.

"The High Summoners," Braska explained quietly. "The people who have defeated Sin before – Yevonites revere them, and rightly so." He gestured at the leftmost statue; it depicted a man clad in a strangely boxy robe, his head mostly hidden by an odd triangular hat. "This is Lord Gandof. He became the first High Summoner, four hundred years ago. He's a bit of a mystery, in fact – there are some legends about his Final Summoning, and he's supposed to have done all sorts of good things for Spira, but we don't know much about who he was as a person."

Braska wasn't accustomed to giving long explanations like this – that was normally Auron's department – but it helped him focus on what lay ahead. He went on, pointing out the second statue, a bearded man wearing a large cloak. "Lord Ohalland. He was a blitzball player, in fact. He defeated Sin around two hundred years after Lord Gandof did. And that one –" He indicated the third statue, a slighter figure whose eyes were hidden by a veil; it was at the foot of this statue that Auron

was pressing himself to the ground. "Lady Yocun. The most recent High Summoner – nearly a hundred years ago now. Her triumph is well documented."

"Huh," said Jecht, finding the new information difficult to make sense of. "You mean – these are the only people that've managed to beat Sin? In – how long did you say? Four hundred years?"

Braska shook his head. "A thousand, nearly."

"And –" Jecht blinked, trying to understand. "Wait, you mean Sin comes back? We gotta go all this way, go in all the temples and everythin', and it just comes *back*?" His voice had risen to an indignant squawk; a few of the priests and nuns had turned around, casting looks of displeasure in his direction.

"Er," said Braska, "yes, but –" He was at a loss for words. It was true: Sin always had returned, eventually, after each High Summoner defeated it. But he was convinced it was worth it, to give Spira a few years of respite; even if Sin did come back, there was that precious time in between when the people could go about their lives without fear. It was worth the exchange.

He was still hesitating, searching his muddled thoughts for something that might convince Jecht of how important the pilgrimage was, when Auron suddenly stood, turning to face his companions.

"There's always a chance of defeating Sin for good," he said, quietly and solemnly. "The teachings say that if a High Summoner defeats Sin at a time when the people of Spira are

deemed to have atoned for their transgressions, then Sin will leave us in peace – forever. So we have to keep trying. It's the one thing that sustains us." He looked at Braska, and Braska found himself nodding with relief.

"Hope," said Auron, his gaze still fixed on Braska. "That's what makes this worth it. Hope that we can rid Spira of this torment for good. Isn't that right, my lord?"

"Yes," Braska breathed. "That's it. Hope." It was a word the two of them had exchanged countless times in their preparation for the pilgrimage: when Braska had been feeling especially low, or struggling with his training, and later, when Auron had been the one to suffer. Through those trying times, they had kept that hope as a talisman, reminding each other of the importance of their journey. Hope that the pilgrimage would end in success – and, in Auron's case, hope that he would find a way to alter that ending.

Jecht grimaced; it was disturbing to think about the fact that Sin had been around for so long. Spira had already seemed a much more sombre place than Zanarkand even when he first arrived, and gradually learning more about the perilous existence of its people was merely making him wish even more fervently that he would be able to leave soon. "You guys are messed up," he muttered.

Braska forced out a rueful chuckle. "Indeed we are," he said. "But we can't mope around here all day." He looked at the staircase and tried to ignore his mounting feeling of dread.

"We should go inside," he murmured.

"Sir, are you sure?" Auron asked. "You don't want to rest?"

"I'm as prepared as I can be," Braska assured him. "No use putting this off." He made a valiant attempt at a smile, and ascended the steps to face the priest who stood at the top.

"Good morning," he said, returning the man's deep Yevonite bow with a small nod. "I am a summoner, by the name of Braska. I have already gained the æon from Bahamut's temple in Bevelle. And these are my guardians." He indicated Auron and Jecht behind him.

The priest nodded, looking carefully at each of them in turn. His gaze settled on Auron; he frowned, and then said slowly, "Aren't you that monk –"

"No," said Braska immediately; at the same time, Auron said, "Someone else."

"Oh," said the priest, a little confused; he nonetheless waved them on. "May Yevon be with you."

Braska knew, on the contrary, that Yevon was against him, but he passed through the door without further complaint. His guardians followed, finding themselves at one end of an ice-covered corridor. Another door marked the way onward, but between the two, the floor dropped out entirely. The only way they could go was down a slope that ran off to one side.

They made their way down, into a cavernous underground chamber. Pillars and pedestals stood around; small glowing spheres were set into some of them. This was the Cloister

of Trials, the puzzle that blocked the way to the fayth at each temple with the aim of making sure summoners and their guardians had sufficiently sharp minds before they were permitted to continue. The reason for this requirement had never been elucidated during Braska's training as a priest, nor, much later, as a summoner; neither was there anything about it in the teachings. It was one of the many unexplained mysteries of Yevon.

The Trials of Bevelle had been complex, with a series of moving platforms that had left Auron and Braska back at the start of the path more than once after they had made a wrong decision. Auron had tried to handle as much of the puzzle as he could by himself, so that Braska could concentrate on preparing his mind to commune with the fayth, but it had been a slow and complex process. Braska had made a few contributions where something leapt out at him, but he had been increasingly distracted as time had gone on, and Auron had had to struggle through most of the exercise alone. It had taken a long time, and both had been tense and irritable by the end.

This time, Braska thought, at least Jecht might be able to contribute and give Auron some help. He watched as his guardians headed towards the first sphere, and Auron reached out and extracted it from the cavity it rested in.

"OK," said Jecht, "what the hell is this?"

"The Cloister of Trials," Auron told him. "It's a sort of puzzle that we have to complete before we can move ahead. We'll

need to use these spheres to activate the switches." He looked around, and noticed a small nearby pedestal with a round slot on its side. "This looks promising," he announced, striding forward to the pedestal and placing the sphere into it. Above the pedestal, a glyph appeared, rotating slowly in midair.

"Freaky," Jecht remarked. "Now what?"

"It might move," said Auron dubiously, and he gave the pedestal an experimental push. It slid along the ground, coming to a stop when it collided with a large icicle growing from the floor.

Auron frowned; nothing seemed to have happened beyond the rather dramatic shattering of the icicle. While he was contemplating what to do next, Jecht moved forward and gave the pedestal another push in a different direction, sending it into a second one. This time, when the ice broke, it revealed a ramp that led to a lower level, and the pedestal continued to slide along, travelling smoothly down until it was out of sight.

"I get it!" Jecht crowed, charging down the ramp after the pedestal.

The others followed more slowly. Auron and Jecht experimented with the spheres, inserting them into the various slots that presented themselves; Auron had had some practice at this in Bevelle, but he was well matched by Jecht, who turned out to have a natural aptitude for the task. Nearly every time it was necessary to take one of the spheres and move it into another slot, the two of them seemed to have different opinions

on what move to make; with a fair amount of trial and error, though, and a lot more bickering, they eventually succeeded in figuring out most of the puzzle, and after some time, all that remained was the illumination of a single pillar, which would lock the final section of the path into place and allow them to move on.

"Right," said Auron wearily. "I suppose we take one of the green spheres from down here, then, and put it into the last pillar upstairs."

Jecht scowled at him. "The green spheres? What, are you dumb? The green ones ain't gonna light up the pillars. There's another white one in the wall up there, right? We need to use that one."

"No, I don't think so," said Auron. "I don't think we left one up there."

"We definitely did," said Jecht, "a hundred percent." He led the way up the ramp; sure enough, there was a sphere in the back wall, glowing invitingly.

"I don't think we're supposed to take this one out, though," said Auron. "It'll stop us going back down, won't it?"

"And why do we gotta do that?" said Jecht, exasperated. "This is the last bit of the path, right – no point going downstairs now anyway."

"It just seems like a bit of a risk," said Auron through gritted teeth. "We might need access to the rest of the spheres."

"Bullshit," said Jecht. He headed towards the wall, ready to extract the sphere from its slot.

"Wait," said Auron, raising a hand to his head as he tried to concentrate. Jecht's contrariness had hardly helped him keep track of which spheres were where. The Cloister of Trials here was simpler than the one in Bevelle, but in Auron's estimation, the experience in Macalania had been notably less pleasant. He attempted to focus on their progress so far: if the sphere up here was white and the ones downstairs were green, he thought, that meant …

Braska, who had previously declined to contribute, cleared his throat cautiously. "Sorry, Auron," he said, "but I think Jecht's right. It looks as if only the white spheres will operate the pillars, if I've understood this correctly."

Auron was still trying to understand the state of play; Jecht grinned, plucked the sphere from its cavity in the wall, and darted over to the pillar, where he inserted it. The pillar lit up; he pumped his fist in triumph. "Oh yeah!" he exclaimed. "The great Jecht does it again! Suck on that, Auron!"

"Jecht," said Braska warningly, giving Auron's bare arm a brief touch that he hoped would convey some sympathy. Auron shook his head, trying not to be too annoyed by his fellow guardian's behaviour; Braska had to be his priority, he reminded himself. His quiet moment of prayer in the temple atrium had helped him remember that.

He stayed by Braska's side as they ascended the ramp and

proceeded along the newly made path, observing him closely. Braska seemed subdued, he thought, but certainly better than he had been first thing in the morning. Despite everything that had happened on the journey, the situation could have been worse.

They entered the small antechamber that led to the chamber of the fayth. "Well, I think this is it," said Braska, his voice faltering a little. "I hope I'm not too long."

"You can take as long as you need," Auron assured him. "I'm with you, sir – I'll be right here."

"Thank you," Braska whispered, and he reluctantly turned away and headed on through the heavy door at the other side of the room.

Chapter **5**

Thanks For Your Concern

After Braska disappeared through the door that led to the fayth's chamber, there was a long silence. "What do we do now?" said Jecht eventually.

"We wait," Auron replied.

Jecht snorted. "Didn't take you for the waitin' type."

Auron acknowledged the remark with a brief raise of the eyebrows. Jecht was right – he had never been patient – but he would wait all day for Braska if he had to.

Jecht heaved out a long, theatrical sigh, and sat cross-legged on the floor, revealing the dirty, rough soles of his bare feet to Auron, who altered the angle of his stance minutely so as not to have to look at them. "So what's he doin' in there?" Jecht asked.

"Praying to the fayth," Auron replied. "That's the point of the summoner's pilgrimage: summoners pray to the fayth of each temple, and if they're deemed worthy, they can receive

the æon."

"Wait, wait, slow down," said Jecht. "What's an æon? No, actually, go back to the fayth – what's that?"

Auron sat down on the steps; they would probably be there a while after all, he thought. "The fayth are the guardian spirits of Spira," he explained. "The deities of Yevon, in essence. Temples are built over places where the fayth made their sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?" said Jecht.

"Yes. Each fayth was once a person who chose to die," said Auron. "In times of war, or torment from Sin – there were those who decided the best thing to do would be to give their own lives to protect the people. With their strength, they can sustain the æon, and then the æon is used by the summoner."

Jecht's blank expression was encouragement enough to go on. "Æons are – they're a bit like fiends, I suppose, but bigger and more powerful. Once a summoner gains the trust of one of the fayth, that fayth allows the summoner to call on their æon. That's what Lord Braska is doing in there right now – attempting to convince the fayth of this temple that he's worthy. If he succeeds, he'll be able to summon the æon in the future."

"And if not?" Jecht prompted him.

It was a very real possibility; a lot of summoners' pilgrimages ended because of the premature death or serious injury of a traveller, but it was just as common for the fayth of a given temple to refuse to surrender their æon to those who came asking for it. Nonetheless, Auron hesitated before responding. He

and Braska had never properly discussed what would happen if they were forced to abort the journey for such a reason. It would destroy Braska, he knew, if one of the fayth were to turn him back.

"Then he'll have to abandon his pilgrimage," he murmured.

Jecht grimaced. "Well, that'd be a bummer. Dunno how I'd get back to Zanarkand in that case – maybe I'd find another summoner to take me. Are there lots of 'em?"

"Usually five to ten on the go," Auron informed him. "Probably more like ten now, since the weather's getting better."

"And …" Jecht frowned. "Only three of 'em *ever* beat Sin?"

"What's your point?" Auron asked, knowing full well what it was.

"We ain't gonna get to Zanarkand, are we?" said Jecht.

Auron folded his arms. "Jecht, if you're so desperate to make it to Zanarkand, you know what you have to do – be an attentive guardian. If Lord Braska doesn't manage to win the fayth's trust, that's out of our hands. But the rest is our responsibility. We need to support him."

Jecht grunted in response.

"Our lives should be dedicated to his protection," Auron added, just for the pleasure of seeing Jecht squirm. It wasn't that he didn't believe what he was saying: he would willingly risk his life for the sake of Braska's wellbeing, but he could tell Jecht wasn't used to putting others' needs before his own.

"I get it," Jecht said peevishly; Auron responded with a small snort of amusement.

They were silent for a while, and then Jecht said, "Why'd you change your mind, anyway?"

"What do you mean?" said Auron.

"If I asked questions before," said Jecht, "you never gave me a real answer. This mean you finally believe I'm from Zanarkand?"

Auron contemplated the question: Jecht was close to the mark, but not quite there. It had been Auron's prayer at the foot of Lady Yocun's statue that had shown him the way forward: tense and troubled, he had found that a few minutes' quiet reflection had been enough to allow him to think about the situation more calmly. All he had managed to do with his constant suspicion of Jecht was make things more difficult for Braska, and that was the last thing he wanted.

"I still think the idea of someone actually coming from Zanarkand is ludicrous," he explained carefully, "but I am starting to think you really are unfamiliar with Yevon. I thought you were doing it to annoy me, but – you really don't know *anything*. There's no way anyone would pretend to be that ignorant – it would just make them look stupid."

"Gee, thanks," said Jecht. "And I thought you were finally showin' me some respect, but turns out you're still a dick."

"Takes one to know one," Auron muttered.

"Whatever."

They sat in silence for some time longer, and then Jecht groaned loudly. "Oh man, I'm fed up of waitin'," he complained.

"Get used to it," said Auron unsympathetically.

"How many more times do we gotta do this?" said Jecht.

"Four," Auron replied. "The temples of Djose, Kilika and Besaid, and then the Final Æon in Zanarkand."

"Final Æon, huh?" Jecht echoed. "Sounds fancy."

Auron didn't respond. Jecht's typically vapid response had led him to a sudden realisation: if Jecht really didn't know about any of this, he thought, then he would have no idea of the significance of the Final Summoning. He was totally ignorant of the consequences of a successful pilgrimage.

"Why's he doin' it, anyway?" Jecht went on. "How do the æons help him beat Sin?"

"They don't," said Auron. "It's only the Final Æon that he'll have to use against Sin. But he needs to master the rest of them first. They're extremely powerful – he can't just go straight to the fayth of the Final Æon and expect to win their trust immediately. Each fayth lends him a little more strength, and then once he gets to Zanarkand he should be ready for the last one."

"But it could turn him away, like any of the others, right," Jecht surmised.

"That's true," said Auron. "Although I suppose it won't matter to you," he added contemptuously. "You'll be home by

then."

"You got it," said Jecht coolly, trying to mask the sting he felt from Auron's words. Auron was right, to some extent: getting to Zanarkand was the most important aim in Jecht's mind. But that didn't mean he didn't care about Braska's goal, at least a little. It was clear that Braska was committed to his task; and Sin, Jecht could tell, was obviously a serious concern for the Spiran people. He wasn't planning to get too hung up on it, but he had nothing against Braska and therefore had no reason not to hope he would succeed. If Auron was the summoner, things might have been different.

They exchanged few words after that.

Braska, meanwhile, had left the antechamber and found himself rather disconcerted that it led not directly to the chamber of the fayth, as he had expected, but back outside. There, another long and icy path lay before him. Thankful for the Al Bhed's generosity, he carefully made his way down the slope – the journey seemed longer without his guardians' company, fractious as their relationship was. At last, he arrived at the other end, finding a door that took him inside once again; after that, he was met with a small chamber whose main feature was a colourful and otherworldly carving set into the floor in front of him. This was the stone in which the fayth had been preserved, and from which their spirit would rise.

He carefully assumed a kneeling position, laying his staff on the floor in front of him. When he had done the same in

Bevelle in order to gain his first æon, it had been the first time he had prayed in at least seven years; but this was one of the few occasions where, in his opinion, praying was merited. He rested his elbows on his knees and his chin on his clasped hands, trying to remain calm.

Time passed, and then he heard a voice.

"Stand, summoner. Let me see you."

He got to his feet; his knees ached. He suspected he had been on the ground for a good while, although after the first few minutes, the exact nature of the passage of time had begun to elude him. As he lifted his head and beheld the ghostly figure in front of him, taking in her voluminous, colourful garments, he realised: she had been a member of the clergy, just like he once had.

"My lady," he said reverently.

He could see her eyes roving over him, taking in his appearance; but she said nothing. "I am Braska," he began.

"Yes," she replied. "Braska. I know you; I can see you. No need to speak your thoughts – they are no secret to me."

He realised, then, that she was not merely looking him over, but somehow reading inside him, seeking to understand him without the need for him to speak himself. Bahamut's fayth had done the same, he recalled, back in Bevelle. This time, because the fayth was a grown woman and not a child, the experience of it seemed very different. He was grateful that her body was so thoroughly covered up; it made it easier

to ignore the strange intimacy of the act. If she had dressed in a way that made her features more obvious, he found himself thinking, he would no doubt have been reminded of Girl.

The thought of it, of course, was enough to make him think of her anyway, and he felt his jaw clench as the fayth studied him.

"Such sorrow," she said. "So few years. Sin has wronged you, summoner – but Yevon has been still more unkind."

Braska was glad he didn't need to speak out loud – her words were enough to bring him close to tears again. He closed his eyes and tried to redirect his thoughts, breathing deeply in and out as he focused on his simple determination to obtain the æon and complete the pilgrimage.

"Your will is strong," the fayth said in response. "But I must see, summoner. Show me what is in your heart, and then I shall show you mine."

He understood – again, Bahamut's fayth had used the same technique. The child had reached out to him with a ghostly hand, stretching upwards to take his own, and as soon as they had made contact, his mind had begun to flood with memories: his own memories, unsettling in their vividness. He had come to understand that the fayth was searching inside him, seeking those moments that would reveal the true reasons for his decision to follow the summoner's path. That had been what had exhausted him the most during the encounter: having to relive his own life, watching all the trials he had faced, in so

much detail that it felt as if he was suffering anew.

Braska stepped forward; the fayth had already extended both her hands towards his own. He let her take them; she drew them together in a gesture of prayer, and then it began.

He was a young boy again, standing obediently by as the great rituals of Yevon were conducted. He was a teenager, aiding the senior priests at one of Bevelle's minor temples; then, he was a young man, lodging with the Al Bhed in the city they called Home, sharing warm pastries with Girl and her brother. He was teaching those who did not reject him outright about the doctrines of Yevon, and his friend Rin was the only one listening; he was walking on the shore with the Al Bhed elders, learning about machina that even Bevelle men would never have dreamt of; he was an outcast, worried but reasonably content, at home with Girl and an unfathomably tiny Yuna. He was practising black magic; he was distraught, utterly bereft, and struggling through paperwork that was so arcane it seemed to be in a foreign language, and they had taken Yuna away from him; he was rediscovering his purpose in Bevelle. He was distressed, but determined, working through each day with ever-increasing certainty about what he would do. He was standing in the city sun with Auron, doing his best to listen to his friend animatedly complain about the maesters' most recent decree. He was staggering out of the chamber of the fayth, a summoner at last, and Auron's strong hands were steadying him.

The memories ended; Braska came back to himself with a start, and found that he had sunk to his knees, his hands still holding onto the fayth, now above his head, as if his wrists had been tied to a post. His head was pounding; the experience of reliving his whole life in such a short time had been just as unpleasant as it was in Bevelle. He stayed there, kneeling, anchored by the fayth's grip as he fought the urge to collapse.

"You have great passion, summoner," the fayth murmured.

The sound of her voice, gentle though it was, made Braska's head hurt even more; he couldn't prevent himself from releasing a brief moan, swaying on the spot as the fayth continued to grip his hands. He was dimly aware of her bending forward, leaning close, and then, suddenly, the images returned.

It was her life he was witnessing now; a life lived hundreds of years ago, but the struggles the people had faced back then were fundamentally the same. He could understand what it was like to have been the priestess that this fayth once was: he saw through her eyes.

He knew of nothing but love: love for Spira, and for the people of the ice fields especially. They had been visited by Sin, again and again, and they deserved better; they deserved something that lasted longer, something that would allow them to rest, just for a while.

He watched as her family were taken, one by one, their blood soaking into the snow as bells tolled incessantly for the

dead. He watched as she performed the rituals, protecting the people even when her own grief was new and raw. He saw what nobody at the time had seen: how, when the ceremonies ended for the evening and the villagers returned to their homes, she let her strength crumble and broke down, weeping for her lost husband and children. He watched as she finally stepped up to offer her soul, and he understood: they were not so different.

The images ended abruptly; Braska was back in the fayth's chamber, shaking with distress, confused by the two lifetimes he had witnessed. It was difficult, by this point, to distinguish what had happened in his own life from what had happened in hers. He looked up towards her, trying to maintain eye contact despite the pain clouding his vision.

She let go of his hands; that was all it took for him to slump to the floor, his forearms smarting as they made contact with the ground through the sleeves of his robe. It was a struggle not to lose consciousness; but he held on, scrabbling against the floor with his fingertips in an attempt to hold onto something that was real and solid, and not an awful memory long repressed. He felt the fayth's careful touch against his headdress; she had bent over his prone form and was leaning close.

"Summoner," she said, "you have much to learn. There is still weakness within you – you must be ready to cast that weakness out, and face the trials ahead."

Braska could only whimper in response, pressing his face

into the hard, cold ground.

"But you are passionate," she murmured. "You have love, and that is all I ask. I grant you my æon – Shiva is her name. Only a little of her strength – you are not yet ready for more. But she will help you in all that she can."

She stood, moving away from Braska; he felt her touch at the back of his neck recede.

"Choose wisely, summoner," the fayth said as she faded away; but Braska heard nothing. He had passed out at last, and lay still and silent on the ground, alone.

A few minutes passed; Braska drifted back into consciousness, and hauled himself into a kneeling position, gasping from the effort. His head was still throbbing; his arms ached, having borne the impact from his fall to the ground after the fayth had let go of him. He massaged them slowly in an attempt to ease the pain; a simple Cure spell would have done the job, but he was in no state to be casting magic.

The images of the fayth's life and her sacrifice were still in his mind, although he was finding it easier to separate them from his own memories with each passing second: they were starting to seem more like scenes he might have seen in a sphere, or read about in a novel. Remembering his own struggles was nonetheless deeply unpleasant, and it was hard for him to decide which set of visions to dwell on.

He located his staff and used it as an aid in clambering to his feet. Standing, he felt lightheaded again, and pressed a

hand to his forehead to soothe himself; then, once he felt able to walk, he made his slow way towards the exit. The journey back up the icy slope did nothing to make him feel better; he shuffled forward at a snail's pace, reminding himself that every step would bring him closer to a soothing potion and the chance to rest. Everything ached, but he gritted his teeth and forced himself to continue, feeling more and more sure that he was about to faint again.

Auron and Jecht were both seated; they hadn't spoken for a long time, beyond a few muttered complaints from Jecht about how bored he was. Auron had almost fallen asleep, but as soon as he heard the door to the fayth's chamber opening, he leapt to his feet.

Braska stood at the top of the short set of stairs, his eyes half-lidded; Auron hurried to his side, vaulting the steps two at a time. As he approached Braska, he threw an arm around his back to support him; Braska leant into the contact, relief evident on his sweat-drenched face.

"Thank you, Auron," he mumbled. "It was difficult, but – the fayth has accepted me."

"Well done, my lord," Auron murmured, and then turned to Jecht, who had stood and was staring at Braska in disbelief. "Jecht," he said. "Come up here and help me."

Jecht found himself rooted to the spot; the sight of Braska looking this awful was too horrifying. Braska had already shown weakness that, in Jecht's opinion, was unbecoming of

a man; seeing him as vulnerable as this was something he found absolutely repulsive. The thought that he might have to care for Braska in the way Auron was doing, hold him gently and ease his pain – the idea of it was disgusting. He cast a glance at the exit, looked briefly back at Auron, and then made up his mind: it was time to get out of there. He bolted.

"What in the names of all the fayth," Auron muttered. "Damn you, Jecht!" he yelled, losing his grip on Braska a little. Braska stumbled slightly.

"Auron," he said, "now is not the time –"

"Is it *ever* the time?" Auron snapped.

"Please, Auron," said Braska, and the weakness in his voice reminded Auron of the task at hand.

"Of course, my lord," he said, suddenly chastised, and he guided Braska down the steps, helping him sit when they reached the bottom. Braska leant against Auron's shoulder, pressing one hand to his forehead, and tried his very hardest not to faint again as Auron searched his possessions for a potion, eventually producing one and handing it over.

Braska drank it down as quickly as he could; it did little for the headache, but his arms stung less at least. He took out his handkerchief to clumsily wipe the sweat from his face; Auron, meanwhile, continued looking through his own belongings in search of some ether. It was a liquid that alleviated magic-related pains and tiredness; bottles were in short supply, and it was common practice to keep them for emergencies, but this

situation was deserving enough, in Auron's opinion.

He located one at last and passed it to Braska; Braska took it with an exhausted nod of thanks, gulped it down, and sat there forcing out deep breaths, his hands on his knees. The ether had helped; a few more moments, he thought, and he would have the strength to begin the journey back to the travel agency.

Auron lifted his bare hand to place it on top of Braska's, hoping the contact might be some solace during his recovery; Braska made no reaction, and after a few seconds, Auron discreetly withdrew again, trying not to make anything of it. He waited, watching Braska silently until the latter finally raised his head and met Auron's gaze with a weak smile.

"Thank you, Auron," he said softly. "I'll be all right – let's go."

"Are you sure, sir?" said Auron. "You don't want to rest a bit longer?"

Braska shook his head. "No, I'm ready – and Jecht will be waiting."

The mention of Jecht made Auron suddenly irritated again. "If he hasn't run off," he muttered.

"Auron," Braska warned him.

"No, my lord," Auron insisted, looking at the ground. "I'm sorry, but I must protest – he's not fit to be your guardian! If he can't even do this –" He gestured around the room, and then looked back at Braska, attempting to ignore his reproving

expression. "Even if he really is from Zanarkand – that doesn't mean he can't help when you need it –"

"Auron!" said Braska again. "If you must discuss this, take it up with him later. I need you to support me now – and if Jecht won't give me any help, it's even more crucial that I get it from you."

Auron nodded, suddenly mortified that he had let Braska down yet again. A little prayer and reflection had allowed him to be more patient with Jecht for a while, but now the effects of that seemed to have worn off. He was tense and irritable again – it had become his default state over the past few weeks.

"Help me stand, please," Braska commanded him.

Auron supported him glumly, letting Braska take hold of his arm as they both slowly stood. Once they were up, Braska broke away from Auron, and walked forward without looking at him; Auron felt his heart sink even further. They made their way across the chamber, and then along the long, icy path that their completion of the Trials had set in place. Auron followed Braska closely, ready to support him if he needed it; Braska was determined not to rely on his guardian, but when they reached the top of the long staircase that led down into the temple's main hall, he found himself reaching for Auron's arm instinctively. There were a good twenty or thirty steps; the way these temples were constructed hardly made things easier for summoners whom an encounter with the fayth had weakened.

They advanced clumsily down the stairs; Braska almost tripped over his own feet several times, but Auron's strong grip righted him on each occasion. Braska felt a twinge of guilt at the realisation that Auron was still supporting him so steadfastly after their last interaction – but he dismissed the thought. This was Auron's duty, he reminded himself, and in his own state of exhaustion and lingering pain, he could hardly be expected to be polite.

Auron had expected to find Jecht at the bottom of the steps, but the familiar figure he was faced with was an only slightly less unpleasant sight. It was Perula, an older lady from Bevelle who had undertaken training to become a summoner contemporaneously with Braska. Wedded to Yevon's precepts, she therefore despised Braska, and now Auron, quite openly. There had been rumours in Bevelle that she had been training as a summoner for at least a decade, and had been rebuffed several times by the fayth of Bahamut; whether or not that was true, she had finally received the æon about a month before Braska had, and had at long last been able to begin her pilgrimage, enlisting her two young nephews to act as guardians.

"Oh, the fallen summoner," said Perula as Braska reached ground level. "I hear that's what they're calling you – how appropriate. So you've finished your training."

"He's more than finished his training," said Auron, "he has two æons now –"

Perula turned her gaze slowly on him, and then back towards Braska. "And you've brought your pet."

Braska tightened his grip on Auron's arm, both to support himself and to warn his guardian not to rise to the bait, and said, "It is good to see you too, Lady Perula. Forgive me for not speaking to you at greater length – the fayth of this temple has weakened me. I am sure you will cope admirably."

"I would hope to do better than you, at any rate," she said, casting a significant glance at the way he clung to Auron before sweeping past them both with her guardians in her wake.

"How can you stand it?" Auron couldn't help asking. Being treated so dismissively was something he found hard to bear; Braska, on the other hand, had been the target of such mockery for almost a decade.

"I got used to it," said Braska. "You won't have to." After Auron's disgrace, Braska had realised that his rehabilitation within Yevon would be yet another positive outcome of his pilgrimage. If Auron returned to Bevelle following a successful defeat of Sin, they would have no choice but to admit they had been wrong to cast him out. He had said as much to Auron several days before the pilgrimage began, and had been surprised by Auron's somewhat muted response.

"Please don't worry about it, Auron," he added. "I've had worse. Let's fetch Jecht and be on our way."

Auron nodded tightly; he had just spotted Jecht sitting on the floor at the other side of the atrium, and was disappointed

to see that he was once again swigging assiduously at one of his ever-present beer bottles.

"I'll leave you to it," Braska murmured, extricating himself from Auron's grip and leaning against the wall with a grimace; Auron made his way over to Jecht. "You know you're not supposed to drink in here," he growled. "I heard Lord Braska telling you not to; you said you wouldn't. You promised."

"Did I?" said Jecht. "Ah, so what. You gonna yell at me again?"

Auron suppressed a sigh; Jecht's slow speech and ungainly movements were a sure sign that he had consumed a large amount of beer indeed while Braska had been mustering the strength to leave the temple. "No," he said through gritted teeth. "That doesn't matter, anyway, it's the fact that you just ran out of there – Jecht, why? Why are you determined to neglect your duties when it matters most?"

Even as addled as he was, Jecht knew perfectly well why he had fled – it was for the simple reason that the sight of Braska in that state had made him extremely uncomfortable – but he wasn't about to admit that to Auron. "Dunno," he slurred. "Just had enough, yeah? Wanted some fresh air, you know?"

Auron shook his head in exasperation; there was no point trying to get any sense out of Jecht when he was this far gone, he decided. "We're going back to the travel agency now," he said, slowly and clearly as if he was speaking to a child. "Can you stand?"

"Gimme a minute," Jecht grunted; he struggled to his feet. Auron looked back at Braska, who was wincing as he levered himself away from the wall; it was going to be an arduous journey back, he realised. At least, he reflected, he knew which of them he would be helping if they were both to stumble.

Braska led the way as they walked back, setting a pace that suited him and was much too slow for his guardians, but Auron insisted that the summoner not overexert himself. Jecht complained a few times about the slow pace of their progress, and on each occasion he was rebuffed with a hissed "shut up" from Auron. Braska was barely aware of their muttered arguments; he found that he had so little energy that the mere act of trudging through the snow demanded most of his concentration. At the temple, he had felt better after taking the medicines Auron had retrieved for him, but now, having to return to the journey was rapidly exhausting him again, not helped by the cold and bitter climate. He needed to stop and rest frequently, pressing a hand to his brow in largely futile attempts at assuaging his persistent headache. Auron stayed back on these occasions, making sure Jecht didn't approach Braska and disturb him. He would have preferred to draw close to Braska himself, ready to lend a hand if he needed support, but after their brief disagreement in the temple, he was unsure of whether Braska really wanted him nearby at the moment.

Auron had expected Jecht's combat skills to be significantly worse than usual in his drunken state, and had resigned

himself to the thought that he would have to deal with the fiends himself; but it turned out that Jecht was still of some use, and the intermittent battles actually sobered him up fairly quickly. The flans still caused trouble for both of them, though, and they made heavy use of potions during those fights, gulping them down between blasts of ice from the fiends.

They circled the lake, as they had done in the morning; Auron purposely avoided looking at it this time, and, regardless, still felt a slight tightness in his chest. He wondered, once again, what the cause of this sudden discomfort was; it was something he had never experienced before. Dwelling on it would make him feel worse, though, he could tell; so he looked away into the snowy hills and tried his best to think about other things.

When they were halfway around the lake, they were set upon by two flans; it was a formation they had faced before, and while it had been hard on Auron and Jecht, they had always managed to see to both of them. This time, however, things went differently; instead of distributing their attacks between the two guardians, the flans happened both to target Auron. Almost on his knees, he succeeded in taking one of them out, and was confident that he would be able to dispatch the other one with Jecht's help, but he had miscalculated; close as it was to going down, the second fiend nonetheless struck Auron with a strong torrent of ice, and it was too much for him

to bear. His sword fell from his hand, hitting the frozen path with a loud clatter, and at the same time, Auron sank to the ground himself.

Jecht had landed the final blow on the fiend at the same time, and it disintegrated into spiralling pyreflies; he paid little attention, staring down at Auron's motionless form instead in horror.

"Phoenix down," said Braska, moving forward with surprising alacrity. "With the potions – a gold feather, you'll know it when you see it." With some effort, he knelt beside Auron and took his hand; normally he would have used a spell to raise him to consciousness, but that would be impossible in his current state. He caressed the lifeless hand instead, looking down at Auron sorrowfully; it was horrible to see his guardian incapacitated like this. Braska knew how strong Auron was and how much force he had trained himself to withstand: the flans must have been very powerful.

Jecht located the phoenix down, holding it aloft bemusedly as he tried to guess how it might help; Braska all but snatched it from him, tearing the feather into tiny pieces and scattering them over Auron's chest. Soon enough, Auron's eyes opened, and he hauled himself into a sitting position with a grimace.

"A potion, please, Jecht," said Braska sharply, and Jecht passed him one; Braska unstopped the bottle and handed it to Auron, and Auron drank it down. As soon as he had swallowed it, the agonised expression left his face; on coming to, he had

felt almost as bad as when the fiend had been about to strike him down, but now he was feeling much more invigorated.

Braska reached for Auron's hand again. "Are you all right?" he asked. "I'd have cast Life if I could, but –"

"I'm fine," Auron assured him. "Nothing to worry about."

"Life?" Jecht stammered, and the other two looked up at him. "You don't mean – uh – Auron, you weren't *dead*, were you?"

Auron smirked. "Just knocked out. But thanks for your concern."

"Magic can do all sorts of things," Braska added, "but it can't bring back the deceased, alas."

"Sure," Jecht mumbled, trying to disguise his discomfort. He turned away as Braska helped Auron to his feet; he couldn't deny that briefly believing the fiend might have actually killed Auron had disturbed him. As much as Auron got on his nerves, he considered, having him die didn't seem like it would be very pleasant – and Braska would certainly be upset by it.

Braska idly brushed some snow off the sleeve of Auron's robe, and then said, "If there are more flans, I'll help. Jecht was right earlier – this is more trouble than it's worth. I'm not up to white magic at the moment, I'm afraid, but I think I'm well enough to use fire."

Auron shook his head. "Don't exert yourself, my lord. We have plenty of phoenix down – it'll be no trouble."

"No, Auron, I insist," said Braska, with gentle intensity. "I don't like seeing you hurt like that, especially when it's so easy to prevent. Just one fire spell when one of those flans comes up – that'll be enough to take them down without you and Jecht having to make a fuss. I'm only sorry I didn't do it earlier."

"Thank you, Lord Braska," said Auron quietly.

Braska was right: at the next attack, they found that each flan went down with just one hit from a fire spell. Jecht had just about enough tact not to crow about the fact that his suggestion that morning had turned out to be the more efficient one. In Braska's weakened state, he found it required more exertion than usual to cast the spells, but he tried not to make too much of his discomfort. His headache was worsening again, but he supposed that was a fair price to pay for his guardians' health.

Finally, they reached the travel agency; all three were aching and tired, but none more so than Braska, who asked the clerk for some more medicine and then went straight to his bed. Auron grabbed Jecht before he was able to enter their room as well. "Don't disturb Lord Braska while he's sleeping," he said. "If you want to rest, find somewhere else to do it."

Jecht shook him off with a scowl. "I ain't gonna *rest*," he said dismissively – he wasn't about to admit to Auron that the idea sounded highly appealing. "Whatever, see you later."

He stomped off; Auron returned to the reception area and sank into one of the chairs there. It had been a gruelling day, he reflected; the long walk, the fiend attacks, having to put

up with Jecht, seeing Braska so discomforted by the fayth – and of course, his own adverse reaction to the lake. By this point, he was thoroughly exhausted. He arranged himself into as comfortable a position as he could, and was asleep not long afterwards.

Time passed; it was noticeably darker when Auron found himself being shaken awake by Jecht. "What?" he mumbled, half-conscious.

"I'm hungry," said Jecht. "This place do dinner?"

Auron rubbed his eyes. "They'll make you something if you ask. Or you can go into the village again, if you want a proper meal."

That avenue was closed off to Jecht, who was aware that he was now persona non grata in Macalania village. He headed over to the reception desk instead to make enquiries, and returned a few minutes later with two steaming bowls. Auron, who had been close to falling asleep again, eyed the one Jecht set in front of him with suspicion.

"You can say thanks, you know," said Jecht through a mouthful of food, sitting down opposite Auron.

Auron grunted in response, and began to consume the dinner Jecht had brought him. It was a pleasant surprise, he had to admit, that Jecht had thought to get a portion for him as well; not that he was going to say so out loud.

"Guess we should get some for Braska too," Jecht pointed out after a while.

"He's not always that hungry when he's –" Auron began, and then he reconsidered. "Yes, I suppose so. I'll take him some." He stood up stiffly – sleeping in the chair hadn't been entirely comfortable – and went over to the reception desk to get the bowl refilled before heading to their room.

"Sorry to disturb you, my lord," he said as he walked in; "we just wondered if you'd like some dinner."

Braska looked up slowly; he wasn't at all hungry, but he knew Auron would make a fuss if he didn't eat. "Thank you," he said, sitting up and taking the bowl from him.

"How are you feeling?" Auron said.

Sighing, Braska gave no answer at first. "It's not a pleasant experience," he said eventually. "But it was no worse than Bevelle, at least. I knew what to expect this time – that helped a little."

"That's good," said Auron, watching as Braska slowly consumed his food. He ate about half of it before carefully setting the spoon down in the bowl and placing it on the table beside the bed.

"I should take tonight's sphere for Yuna before I fall asleep again," he said, without much enthusiasm. "Where's the recorder?"

"Jecht has it, I think," said Auron. "He's at reception; I can go and –"

"No, I'll go out and do it," Braska interrupted. "Better than lying here like an invalid – I wouldn't want to worry her." He

swept the blanket out of his way and stood up, still a little unsteady on his feet; then he located his robe, which he had removed along with the Al Bhed vest before getting into bed, and slipped it back over the light shirt and trousers he wore underneath. Forgoing the breastplate and the single earring he normally wore, he nonetheless put his headdress on, and left the room without a backward glance, taking the vest with him so he could drop it off with the Al Bhed next door.

Auron stood there, looking down at the bed; the imprint of Braska's body was still dimly visible in the mattress. Privately, he couldn't help feeling a little envious: the bed was no doubt significantly more comfortable than both the chair he had had to sleep in and the mat where he would again be spending the night. He reached out to touch the blanket; it was just as soft as it looked, he discovered.

He considered. Braska surely wouldn't mind, he thought, if he took advantage of the bed while it was unoccupied. Just five minutes' quick rest might make him a little less sore. He removed his robe and boots, arranging them in a neat pile on the floor, and climbed into the bed, sighing contentedly at how cosy it was. Barely a few seconds later, he was asleep.

Braska had left the vest back with the Al Bhed, all of whom seemed thrilled to hear he had been successful at the temple; after making his excuses, he walked out to the reception and found Jecht there, also sleeping in the same place Auron had left him. The sound of Braska approaching was enough to

wake Jecht, and he straightened up quickly, hoping Braska wouldn't notice he'd been asleep.

"Good evening, Jecht," said Braska, taking the seat opposite. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," Jecht said defensively.

"Not too tired, I hope," said Braska. "It was a strenuous day for all of us, I'm sure." Jecht made no response, so he added, "You wouldn't have the sphere recorder, would you?"

"Sure," said Jecht, fishing around in his belongings and handing it over. "Oh – takin' a sphere for Yuna?"

"That's right," said Braska.

"Great!" Jecht exclaimed. "Let me get in frame." He dragged his chair across the floor until it was next to Braska's; Braska winced at the unpleasant noise it made.

"Oh," he said, "you're … I see." He had hoped Jecht might give him some privacy, but he was beginning to suspect that his guardian would become a constant fixture in the evening spheres he recorded. Jecht had been absent from last night's, but that was because he had been out in the village; now that he was around for the recording, he seemed to assume that Yuna would want to see him.

"Hello again, Yuna," Braska said as he switched on the device.

"Hey, Yuna!" Jecht echoed.

"We travelled to Macalania Temple today," Braska went on, trying to ignore him, "and I spoke to the fayth there – it was

challenging, but she took pity on me. So I've gained a second æon, I'm pleased to say."

"What is an æon, anyway?" Jecht asked. "Auron said something about big fiends and the strength of the fayth, or somethin', but that sounds like a load of crap to me."

"Language, Jecht," said Braska quietly, nodding towards the sphere recorder. "I think you may have misunderstood him. The æons aren't fiends, they're the manifestation of the fayth's will. It's a little difficult to explain – I'll show you at some point." He turned back towards the sphere. "We'll be heading back through the woods tomorrow – it's a long journey to the next temple. Sir Auron said he expects it'll take us at least a week to get there. First we have to cross the Thunder Plains, so I'll need to make sure my water magic is strong; then we'll stop off in Guadosalam, and then cross the Moonflow, of course –"

"Aw, man," Jecht moaned. "We gonna walk all that way? You know, in Zanarkand, we have a metro, just gets you from one side of the city to the other in a couple hours. I guess there's nothing like that here, huh."

"I suspect that would be considered a forbidden machina," said Braska gravely. "No, we'll be making the journey on foot, I'm afraid."

Jecht groaned. "This place sucks. I wanna go home."

Turning back to the sphere recorder, Braska gave it an apologetic smile. "Well, I suppose we should turn in," he said.

"I love you, Yuna – goodnight." He switched off the device and carefully took out the two halves of the sphere, stowing them away in his robes; then he looked back towards Jecht. It was a little irritating, Braska found, to have his spheres constantly hijacked by his guardian; but on the other hand, he knew Jecht was confused and lonely away from his hometown. He wondered whether he should ask about it – try to make Jecht feel comfortable – but he didn't have the energy.

"Time for bed, I think," he said. "More walking tomorrow."

"What a surprise," Jecht muttered, folding his arms; but bed certainly sounded like an attractive proposition, and he followed Braska back to their room. When they entered, they were both surprised to see Auron asleep in the bed, only the top of his head poking out of the blanket. He was sleeping soundly enough, but the noise of his companions walking in sufficed to wake him up, and he lifted his head, beginning to pull the blanket off himself before catching sight of Braska's somewhat bemused expression and wishing he had remained covered up so as to spare himself the embarrassment.

"I didn't expect to find you there, Auron," Braska remarked.

"Yeah, too right!" said Jecht angrily. "What about all that *the bed is for Lord Braska* stuff? Just wanted to get me out the way so you could have a turn, huh? You lying piece of shit –"

"Sorry," said Auron, totally ignoring Jecht and looking up at Braska guiltily. "I just meant to take a quick nap."

"It's all right," Braska replied. Auron looked unusually

young, he suddenly thought: with his cheeks reddened and his eyelids drooping with fatigue, his long hair uncharacteristically untidy, he seemed almost childlike. Or maybe, Braska reflected, it was just that he himself felt very old. After experiencing two full lifetimes in a day, ten years' age difference had never seemed so large.

"I'd like to go back to sleep now," he said, "so if you'd ..."

"Of course," Auron mumbled, and he clumsily made his way out of the bed and across the room to the mat where he had slept the previous night, lying down and hauling the blanket over himself without another word.

Braska raised his eyebrows at Jecht. "Well, that's that, I suppose," he said. "Goodnight."

"Night," Jecht echoed. He eyed his own mat with displeasure, still resentful that everyone had got to sleep in a real bed but him. Nobody in Spira realised what a celebrity he was, he thought as he lay down. They didn't understand that he deserved more respect than this.

Chapter 6

Best Intentions

Auron, unusually, was the last to rise for breakfast the next day; he felt well rested, at least.

"Feeling better?" Braska murmured as Auron joined his companions at the breakfast table.

"I'm sorry," said Auron, remembering the shame of being found in Braska's bed the previous night. At the time, he had barely been awake enough to care; now, he looked back on the event with deep embarrassment.

"It's quite all right," said Braska. "You didn't do any harm." He gave Auron a brief touch to the wrist to emphasise his sincerity. "Did you rest well?"

"I did, sir," said Auron. "Did you?"

Braska nodded.

He hadn't eaten much of his breakfast, but Auron declined to comment on that and got started on his own portion, trying to avoid glancing at Jecht, whose approach to the food was

just as chaotic as the previous morning. On the few occasions where Auron did accidentally meet Jecht's eyes, Jecht smirked at him and raised his eyebrows; Auron didn't want to begin guessing what that was supposed to mean.

"I suppose we should think about leaving, should we, Auron?" said Braska, once they had all finished eating.

"We should, if we're to make good time," Auron agreed. "The woods will take us a couple of days, but we ought to aim to camp as close as possible to the Thunder Plains tomorrow."

"You'd better go and settle up, then," said Braska.

Auron took the communal gil purse and headed to the reception desk. The same clerk was there – he wondered briefly whether she was ever off duty – and he began the negotiation of the price with her. It was a skill that his time as a warrior monk had taught him: the art of winning an argument. It hadn't come naturally to begin with, but he had dedicated himself to learning the rules in the same way that he had approached his swordwork, and eventually it had paid off. Both had been essential requirements for rising through the ranks in the corps.

Braska and Jecht listened to the distant sound of the conversation as each respectively finished his tea and coffee. Braska had heard Auron negotiating like this a few times, but the process still seemed entirely alien to him: he had never understood the art of successfully manipulating a debate. It had made him a poor envoy to the Al Bhed in some respects,

back when that had been his mission, but he had been sent to them more as a way of getting the senior priests shot of him than because of any skills in diplomacy.

Once the exchange seemed to be concluded, he set down his empty teacup and began to rise, leaving Jecht to follow. "Next time, we'll agree a price beforehand," the clerk was saying as they approached the desk. "Mark my words."

"Thank you for your assistance," Braska said while Auron joined them, grinning, his face a little flushed. The clerk nodded, as politely as she was able under the circumstances; and then Braska and his guardians headed back out towards the woods.

Braska found the cold weather less bearable without the vest the Al Bhed had leant him, but fortunately it was only a short journey to the forest entrance, where the sudden shift to a warmer climate was welcome despite remaining inexplicable. Equally welcome, and equally odd, was the fact that a glowing path, so thin and transparent as to be almost invisible, had somehow appeared in the thirty-six hours or so since they had left the woods after their previous journey. Rising up from the forest floor in the distance, it snaked away into the treetops, its sparkles even more intense than those that shone from the vegetation.

"Oh, that's handy," Auron remarked.

"What is it?" said Jecht.

"We call it the sky trail," Auron explained. "It appears here

from time to time – nobody really knows why – but it'll let us get to the south side much more quickly. Before nightfall, probably."

"The fayth's blessing, perhaps," Braska mused, looking up at the shining walkway. "One of Spira's great mysteries, at least. Have you used it before, Auron?"

"Once or twice, sir," said Auron, who had come through Macalania a few times on military business. "No fiends up there, either – that'll speed things up."

Braska nodded. "So I've heard." He wondered if it really was the goodwill of Macalania's fayth that had set the sky trail in place. She was, in essence, the guardian spirit of the whole region, not only the temple, and she would have known that he was intending to head south for the next æon. The thought of it gave him a little spark of hope: it was that occasional feeling, the same hope he and Auron had spoken of the previous day, that ensured he was just about strong enough for the journey. He took the few steps towards the path, and then walked onto it, beginning to follow it as it rose into the sky.

Auron was close behind; the path was mostly too narrow for two to walk abreast, but he stayed near Braska, ensuring that he would be able to provide assistance if his master needed it. Jecht brought up the rear, mildly impressed by the way that this new path had sprung up out of nowhere. In Zanarkand, there would have been health and safety concerns about walking on something so narrow, so far above the ground, with no

handrail or other such protective measures in sight. The likelihood of being set upon by fiends as soon as one left a populated area, however, had already convinced him that people in Spira weren't particularly bothered by that kind of thing.

He still had so many questions to ask about Spira, and now that they were going to be spending most of the day walking with no fiends to worry about, it was an ideal time to ask them. Indeed, if he had been able to speak directly to Braska, he would have done so without restraint. But the fact that Auron walked between them held him back: the other guardian had seemed more receptive to his queries while they were at the temple, and Jecht had, in turn, tried his best to be civil with him in the evening, but it was still frustrating to try getting information out of someone who was so suspicious of most things he did. If Auron had known just how famous he was in Zanarkand, Jecht thought, he would have been deeply embarrassed by his own conduct.

He kept the questions to himself instead, swigging contemplatively from one of the bottles he had hoarded. He would just have to work it all out on his own, he decided: he was no stranger to that. The drunker he got, the harder it would be, but the less he would care, so it would all balance out in the end.

At the front of the group, Braska was thinking about his new æon. He knew her name, but nothing else about her: the form she took and the type of magic she used would remain

unknown to him until he summoned. Æons were normally reserved for the more difficult battles – it was thought disrespectful to call one to deal with just a couple of low-level fiends – but by that time, he would need to know how she operated in order to use her effectively. He had summoned Bahamut just once, having travelled out to the fields outside Bevelle with Yuna in tow; it had seemed right to call the æon for her and show her exactly how the fayth would be protecting him on his journey. The act of summoning had been strange: he hadn't known what to expect, but somehow it had felt even odder than he had anticipated. While he knew he had a bond with Bahamut, and he could feel the æon within his soul, it seemed almost embarrassingly intimate to actually call the creature and see it manifest itself in front of him.

He had been told that winning the trust of the remaining fayth would be more difficult; indeed, bonding with each æon was to be a greater challenge, preparing him for the difficulties of receiving and using the Final Æon. He was supposed to practise summoning them so he could strengthen those bonds; but he was worried that they might resist him. Then again, he thought, he would have to start somewhere. It would be unwise to put off calling Shiva until it was too late.

He raised the subject with Auron, half-hoping that Auron would tell him summoning unnecessarily was a waste of his energy; but Auron agreed with the idea. "That sounds sensible," he said. "I didn't realise you knew so little about the æons to

start with."

"Yes, all I know is her name," Braska said. "And I'm sure I could have found that out by talking to the temple elders."

Auron hummed in agreement, trying not to appear disconcerted by Braska's use of the female pronoun. At some point towards the end of his training, he had taken to referring to æons as if they were people – other inhabitants of Spira, Auron included, were accustomed to calling them *it*. From what Braska had told him about Bahamut, it sounded like the æon wasn't very much like a person at all – and that tallied with the handful of occasions when he'd seen æons summoned in the past. Braska had seen a humanity in them that continued to elude Auron.

"Do you think it'll be very different from Bahamut, sir?" he asked.

"The fayth certainly was," Braska mused. "Yes, I think they're quite unlike each other. The connection feels different – in here." He tapped his breastplate, giving Auron a small, slightly sheepish smile.

Auron did his best to grin back – the knowledge that Braska could somehow feel the æons inside him was even more unsettling than the way he referred to them. He was thoroughly familiar with the way summoners bonded with their æons, having found out as much about it as he could before they had embarked on the pilgrimage, but knowing about it and experiencing its effects were two quite different

things. The thought of harbouring what was almost a second soul in one's body – a second and third soul now, in Braska's case – was one he found fairly disturbing.

"This one might be elemental, I suppose," he said.

"Yes," said Braska, "that's just what I was thinking. That's why I'll have to summon her – it would be good to know which element she favours, if any. If it had anything to do with the climate around the temple, I'm sure it would be ice, but I don't suppose we can rely on that as a factor."

Auron considered. "Ice would make sense," he said, "given the name."

"How's that?" said Braska, frowning.

"Well," said Auron, "you said the æon's name is Shiva, didn't you?"

"Yes?" Braska replied, still confused.

"So, you know – Shiva – like *shiver* –"

"Oh," said Braska; "yes, I see." His mouth twitched almost imperceptibly, and then he turned his attention back to the path ahead.

Auron suppressed a sigh; it had been a poor attempt at a joke, he knew, but he had hoped for slightly more of a reaction. He had never been much of a comedian, but over the past three years he had found himself taking any opportunity he could to try making Braska laugh: to get him to produce the kind of wholehearted, uninhibited laughter that had been the norm before Girl died. These days, the closest Braska came to true

amusement was the occasional weak chuckle or rueful grin; but Auron had resolved not to stop trying to coax more out of him.

They walked on, exchanging a few more brief conversations. At around midday, they came to a curious area where the path forked, the short sideways branch leading to a large glowing orb, rather like an enormous sphere.

"That's strange," said Auron. "Never seen anything like it before."

He stopped to take a closer look, curious about what the orb could signify; Jecht, approaching from behind, shoved Auron out of the way so that he could get a look at it himself. "Whoa, that's cool," he said, having drunk enough beers over the course of the morning to fail to come up with anything more insightful. "What is it?"

Nobody answered, so he strode forward towards the orb, determined to see it up close. It was made of such an odd substance that he couldn't even tell whether it would be hard or soft to the touch; he extended a hand and found that it was neither. It was like touching light, if light had somehow been made solid. A pleasant warmth, not unlike white magic, enveloped his hand. Then, after a moment, a voice of unknown gender began to speak in his head, with the same soft warmth as the orb itself: "Have you the –"

Jecht yelped and recoiled; he had never experienced anything like it before. Withdrawing his hand from the orb's sur-

face, he backed away, towards Braska and Auron, who, despite their eccentricities, were at least fellow human beings.

Braska blinked at him a few times, and then murmured, "Is something wrong, Jecht?"

"Nah, I'm fine," Jecht lied.

"Ignore him, my lord," said Auron dismissively. "He's drunk."

"So what?" Jecht snarled.

"So," Auron went on, his voice taking on a severe tone, "you're neglecting your duties. Again. You're supposed to be guarding Lord Braska."

Jecht let out an incredulous laugh. "Guardin' him against what? There ain't even any fiends here!"

"That's not the point!" Auron snapped. "You should be alert at all times – who knows what's going to –"

"Auron," Braska interrupted. "Stop arguing with Jecht, please."

Jecht smirked; Auron clenched his fists. He already knew his confrontations with Jecht could have negative consequences, and he really had been trying to be polite to him, especially since the temple, but that didn't mean he could stop himself losing his temper at times like this. Braska's command took priority, though, so he forced himself to obey with a muttered "Sir".

Braska nodded in response, and led the way forward again. He pondered as he went; his own troubles had largely pre-

vented him from giving much thought to Jecht's situation, but it was becoming obvious that they would need to address a few things.

"I know you don't approve of Jecht's drinking," he murmured to Auron when they were sufficiently ahead of their companion, "but I'm starting to think he really has a problem. I'm not sure he'd be able to stop even if he wanted to."

"Yeah," said Auron irritably. "His relationship with alcohol is unhealthy – that's obvious. But he should know your protection comes first."

Braska shook his head. "No, Auron, I don't think you understand. I think he really depends on it, the poor man. I think he's addicted." His voice had lowered to a whisper as he regarded Auron intensely.

Auron did his best not to roll his eyes: it had been obvious to him that Jecht had a real problem with alcohol since they had first set eyes on each other. He had seen that sort of thing in the past, before his dismissal from the warrior monks: both among civilians they had supported, and in the corps itself, young men and women who had regretted their enlistment and turned to drink to blot out the fact that they weren't coping with military life. Braska, in comparison, was naïve: he had never spent much time among Spira's more disenfranchised populations. The Al Bhed were discriminated against, of course, but they got on quite well within their own societal units; apart from them, Braska had only really known Bevelle's upper classes.

Auron knew full well that Jecht was in the throes of a serious alcohol addiction, but he remained of the opinion that there were no excuses for not paying full attention to the duties of the pilgrimage.

Braska, interpreting Auron's frown as disbelief, turned back towards Jecht and called out to him. "Jecht, if I were to ask you to stop drinking while we're on the pilgrimage – just to make sure you can dedicate yourself to your duties, as Auron says – do you think you'd, er, be able to do that?"

Jecht snorted. "Sure I could. I can stop whenever I want."

"Then stop," said Auron flatly.

Slowly, Jecht raised the beer bottle he held in one hand to his mouth and took a swig, extending the middle finger of the other hand in Auron's direction. Auron's jaw tightened: it was a gesture he hadn't come across before, not being part of the Spiran repertoire of body language, but the broad sentiment behind it was unmistakable.

"Never mind," said Braska hastily, turning away to resume the journey.

They continued along the sky trail for a few more hours; it was noticeably darker by the time they reached the end, alighting on the soft forest floor. The path had brought them almost to the limit of the southern part of the woods, and it would be unwise to travel any further south than that; camping on the Thunder Plains would result in a sleepless night for everyone, even Braska. Auron had already determined that they would

spend the night in the woods, giving them a whole day to make it across the northern half of the plains to the travel agency located at the region's halfway point: it would be a long journey, but a manageable one.

Auron handed out the evening's rations, and they ate in silence. Jecht, who had realised he needed to slow the pace of his drinking in order to allow for another day's travel, was beginning to get a sore head that he certainly wasn't going to mention out loud. Braska's thoughts, meanwhile, had turned back to the need to summon his new æon; he picked distractedly at his food for a while, and then stood up, deciding something needed to be done.

"I should see what this æon's about, I suppose," he announced, taking hold of his staff.

Auron nodded. "Try not to overreact," he said to Jecht.

"Overreact?" Jecht echoed. "What are you talkin' about?"

"Well," said Auron casually, "I'm just saying that this might surprise you, if you've never seen an æon being summoned before." He couldn't help grinning.

"Sure, whatever," said Jecht, not enjoying being the butt of Auron's joke; he much preferred it when things were the other way around.

Braska revolved slowly on the spot, dragging his staff through the air; he was trying to get a feel for the best method of summoning Shiva. Each æon reacted best to a different motion, he knew; Bahamut, he had discovered,

seemed to favour a sort of twirl that he himself thought rather ostentatious. Concentrating on the æon, he did his best to let her spirit guide him, eventually raising his staff as high as he could before dropping into a crouch, lowering the staff quickly to the ground.

It was a success: huge ice crystals formed behind him, and the æon descended, gradually taking a distinctly human shape. She was a woman, he realised, a stunningly beautiful woman with impossibly long, flowing hair that hung from her head in heavy plaits, framing her almost nude body. She cast one arm sharply behind her; the ice shattered, and Shiva's mantle flew into the air. Instinctively, Braska rushed forward to catch it in his arms, almost tripping over the hem of his own robe.

"Holy shit," said Jecht as he watched Shiva appear. "This is an æon? Auron, you didn't tell me æons were … smokin' hot ladies! Could've mentioned it, huh?"

Auron took a moment to respond: he found himself captivated by the look on Braska's face, an expression of sheer fervour. He could tell that Braska was putting as much effort into the summoning as he could, baring his soul to the æon in a way that was almost physically painful to witness. "They're not usually humanoid," Auron murmured, tearing his gaze away reluctantly. "The ones I've seen before are more like beasts – this is unusual."

Braska faced Shiva, trying to remain confident. Her mantle was uncomfortably cold in his arms, but he knew he couldn't

put it aside now: he had to show her his persistence. As he looked into her eyes, he found himself feeling increasingly unsettled: his suspicion had been right. This already felt much more difficult than bonding with Bahamut had. He could tell he would need to put in a good deal more work to encourage Shiva to trust him. And yet, at the same time, his body was reacting in a different way altogether: he was a man, after all, and this type of intimacy with such a stunning woman – one, moreover, who was so scantily dressed – was enough to make his cheeks redden slightly and his heart beat somewhat faster. He was glad that the shape of his robe made what was underneath difficult to discern: he was sure there would be further consequences if he had to maintain this contact much longer.

Jecht wasn't experiencing the same emotional connection with the æon, of course, but even from a distance he too found himself unable to look away. "What a view, huh?" he murmured.

"Show some respect," said Auron.

Jecht turned towards him, shaking his head in disbelief. "Man, I don't get you, Auron," he said. "I mean, I know you're a jerk, but how are you not gettin' turned on by that?!" He gestured towards the æon with enthusiasm. "Never seen a woman that perfect before."

"Aren't you married?" said Auron suspiciously.

"I can look at other girls," Jecht declared. "Seriously, is there somethin' wrong with you? Apart from the whole stick-

up-the-ass thing? Cos any guy I know would be goin' crazy for her. Hell knows I am." He let out a long, low whistle.

Auron shrugged; the direction the conversation had taken was starting to make him feel uneasy. "Not my type," he muttered.

"You're kiddin'," said Jecht, not noticing Auron's discomfort. "That's everyone's type, right there."

Braska was flagging; he was becoming increasingly worried by the current of unfriendliness he could detect from the æon, and decided at last to dismiss her. He waved his staff to communicate the instruction; slowly, Shiva's form lost its substance, fading away until it was like glass before vanishing altogether. He looked down at the ground for a moment, steadying his thoughts; the intensity and uncertainty of the whole experience made him feel like crying. But he remembered Shiva's fayth telling him he needed to be stronger: that was what mattered most. If he couldn't be as the fayth wanted, there was really no hope at all.

"Well," he said hesitantly, "that was something."

"Something?" Jecht echoed. "You're damn right! That was just about the sexiest woman I ever seen – and you just magicked her out of thin air!"

"Not quite," Braska attempted to explain as a way of distracting himself. "I summoned her – it's not exactly the same thing –"

"Sure, yeah," said Jecht. "Well, I'm sure gonna store that one away for later."

Auron scowled. "Don't be crude," he said.

"I can be as crude as I damn well want, you prick," said Jecht. "Hey, Braska, this guy said she wasn't his type! Can you believe that? I think there's somethin' seriously wrong with him."

Auron grimaced, but Braska had barely registered the remark; he still felt close to tears. The few people who had consented to share their experiences of summoning with him during his training had been right, he now knew: not all æons were as trusting as one's first. He had grown up in Bevelle and spent much of his adult life there as well, and perhaps that also helped explain why Bahamut, as the æon of the citadel, had seemed so familiar from the start. Things would be different with Shiva. The chill in the air that had accompanied her arrival seemed not to have lifted.

Exhaling slowly, he reminded himself what he needed to concentrate on. He had to be strong – *strong*, he thought, briefly clenching his fists. Even if it meant forcing his sorrow aside, he would have to try his very hardest. A moment to catch his breath would help: just a few minutes on his own, away from Auron's concern and Jecht's posturing.

"Excuse me," he mumbled. "Nature calls."

"Nature calls, yeah right," said Jecht with a snort as Braska trudged away. "More like …" He curled his right hand into a

loose fist and moved it back and forth in front of his crotch – the meaning of the gesture was unambiguous.

"Don't," Auron protested weakly.

"Wouldn't blame him," Jecht went on. "Not after that – man, I can't believe you said she wasn't your type! So what kinda women *are* you into, then?"

Auron sighed. "That's none of your business."

"Oh, so you're gonna make me guess?" said Jecht. "Let's see – you're a preachy asshole, so – oh. Oh, Auron." He shook his head in feigned disappointment.

"What?" Auron snapped.

Jecht grinned. "You're into those nuns, ain't ya? The old ladies at the temple – the ones that look like they're about to drop dead. Man, Auron, that's messed up."

"I am *not*," Auron hissed. "Don't be ridiculous."

Jecht laughed. "Oh boy, your face. You know, you should learn to lighten up a little. Quit bein' so serious all the time."

Auron ignored him. The pilgrimage *was* serious, he thought, and Jecht knew that. Besides, after what he had been through recently, he couldn't help being tense, especially given the subject matter.

"Braska's takin' a while," Jecht remarked after a few moments of silence. "I think he really is jerkin' off."

Auron tried not to react, but it was too late: Jecht's words had already planted images in his head unbidden. He could imagine Braska, his robe held up by one hand, the other work-

ing at his crotch, his eyes gradually falling closed as he got into a rhythm –

He forced the thought away with some reluctance. It really wasn't a good idea to be thinking about that sort of thing while Jecht was around, he reflected. "I'm going to get the tent ready," he muttered, and sprang up to attend to it.

Jecht smirked. He relished making Auron feel uncomfortable – although he wasn't quite sober enough to work out the exact reason for that discomfort.

Not long afterwards, Braska returned. His urge to give in to tears had eventually passed, and he remained more determined than ever to work on his strength: as he had already concluded, it needed to be his foremost priority. Carefully, he sat on the ground where Auron had been, facing Jecht across the small campfire he had lit earlier. "I'd like you to help me with something, Jecht," he said as he did so.

"Uh huh," said Jecht warily.

Lowering his eyes towards the fire, Braska went on. "When I spoke to the fayth yesterday, she told me I wasn't strong enough. I'm worried that this failing could hold me back at the next temple. We have a while before we get there, but I need to do all I can to overcome it. It's terribly important."

"Right," said Jecht.

"Well," said Braska, "perhaps this is something you could help me with. Take me through some exercises, maybe – I know you're a fit and active man yourself." Asking Auron

would be a possibility, but Auron had already put him through some training before the pilgrimage had started, and despite promising it would be manageable for a civilian, the pace had been almost too fast for Braska to cope with. Moreover, Braska had wondered whether doing something with Jecht might allow the two of them to bond a little. Jecht was struggling with a serious alcohol addiction, and he was far from his home, surrounded by things that were new and strange: he surely needed companionship, Braska thought.

"Uh," said Jecht, "you sure she meant strong, like, physically? Was she maybe talkin' about –" He was well aware by this point that Braska tended to let his emotions show, but he didn't want to acknowledge it. "Other stuff?"

"Oh, undoubtedly," said Braska, attempting a smile. "But I should think this is part of it, and it seems as if it might be easier to work on. So, what do you say – do you think you could put me through my paces?"

"Sure thing," said Jecht. "You know you're talkin' to Zanarkand's top blitzer, right? Ain't nothin' I don't know about keepin' fit. Course, it all comes natural to me, but I happen to be a pretty great teacher too, so you're in luck."

He coached Braska through a few basic strength training exercises; there weren't exactly any weights they could lift, but it was easy enough to have a go at some squats and push-ups, even if Braska did insist on doing the whole routine fully clothed in his robe and headdress. He was slightly out of breath

by the end of it, but had coped better than Jecht had anticipated.

"Not bad," said Jecht. "I dunno what you're worryin' about – you're stronger than I figured."

Braska smiled and shook his head; he had found the experience more enjoyable than he had expected, and it had allowed him to mostly forget about Shiva, leaving him in a notably better mood than before. "Looks can be deceiving," he remarked. "I might not have done so well if I'd been casting magic all day, but I'm glad I was able to give it a good go. That was just the sort of thing I needed – I have to thank you, Jecht."

"Well, I am the expert," Jecht declared. "One last thing – wanna race me to that tree?"

Braska looked at the tree Jecht was pointing out: it was about fifty yards away, he estimated. "With all this on?" he said, gesturing down at his robe.

Jecht shrugged. "I mean, you can take it off."

"Not in public," said Braska, although the chance of any strangers coming by was minimal. "All right, I'll make do." He hitched the robe above his ankles with both hands, revealing the light trousers and walking sandals he wore underneath. "Just to the tree, then?"

"There and back," said Jecht. "Let's say we gotta get close enough to the tree to touch it, then turn around and –" He looked for a marker on the ground, and saw both their

weapons that they had set down earlier. "Whoever picks up your staff first is the winner."

Braska nodded. "That suits me," he said.

"Ready, then?" said Jecht, settling into a sprinting stance. "Three, two, one – go!"

They hurtled towards the tree, neck and neck; as it was such a short race, Braska's complete lack of technique was made up for by his determination, but that didn't give him the edge over Jecht, who managed to overtake as they got close to the halfway point. He stretched out an arm as he approached the tree, ready to tap it and make a quick turn – but he suddenly found himself hindered by Braska, who had reached out from behind and was trying to tug his arm away.

"Hey," Jecht exclaimed breathlessly, "you cheatin' bastard!" He wrenched the arm from Braska's grasp and managed to touch the tree before turning around, hearing Braska close behind him; his interference had narrowed the gap between them. Nonetheless, Jecht was clearly in the lead again by the time they reached their goal, and he bent down to lift Braska's staff from the ground; but once again, Braska was doing his best to get in Jecht's way, grabbing at any part of Jecht he could reach until he got close enough to the staff to lay his hands on it, even though Jecht was already holding it himself.

Jecht wrenched the staff away from Braska as hard as he could; the friction made Braska's hands burn, and he gave a little yelp of pain, but it soon turned into a quiet chuckle as he

cast a quick Cure spell on himself.

"What the hell, man?" Jecht complained. "I didn't think you were gonna cheat!"

Braska shrugged. "I don't think it counts as cheating when there aren't any rules to break. If you were concerned about my behaviour, you should have established what was allowed beforehand."

Jecht couldn't help grinning at the absurdity of it, mirroring Braska's own wry smile. "I just never knew you had it in you," he said. "Thought you were too … *moral* for that kinda thing."

"I think you're confusing me with Auron," said Braska.

Jecht laughed. "Yeah, maybe. I guess I should apologise, then – you're way cooler than that asshole."

The asshole in question appeared before Braska had the chance to reprimand Jecht, frowning suspiciously at the sight of Jecht still clutching Braska's staff. "What's going on?" he said, looking from one to the other.

"We were just exercising," said Braska. "You should be pleased, Auron – you've told me often enough how important it is for me to stay fit."

Jecht failed to stifle a whoop of laughter at that; Auron barely registered it. Braska was smiling, he had realised, noticeably more broadly than his usual efforts. In fact, Auron didn't think he'd seen this kind of smile on Braska's face in a very long time.

"Are you all right?" said Braska, more gently. "You look a bit bewildered."

"I just don't see what sort of exercise could have resulted in Jecht holding your staff, sir," said Auron gruffly, while Jecht doubled over, laughing even harder.

Braska gave a little snort of amusement, and then said, "It's nothing to worry about, Auron. I suppose we should turn in, anyway – it's your turn to take first watch, isn't it?"

Auron had been going to suggest that Jecht take first watch again, given that he still wouldn't be used to dealing with the reduction in his sleep; but the fact that Braska was even aware of whose turn it was supposed to be was surprising enough for him to go along with it. "Yeah," he said, before turning to Jecht. "I'll be in to wake you in a few hours, Jecht – don't get complacent."

Jecht laughed again. "Sure thing," he said, before following Braska into the tent, ready to guest star in the evening's sphere for Yuna once again.

Auron stationed himself by the campfire and gazed into the flames, watching the orange-tinted image of the trees behind as it slowly morphed from one distorted elongation to the next. The memory of Braska's earnest smile was still vivid in his mind; he had expected to be relieved to see it, but it was surprisingly disconcerting. He wished he knew exactly what Braska had been smiling at – what Jecht had done that had achieved something Auron himself had never had much suc-

cess with. If Braska was to smile like that again, he thought – perhaps eventually even laugh – there was a chance that things might work out differently.

He wrapped his robe around himself more tightly as the sky grew darker. It was an absurd hope, he thought – a hope he had to keep secret from Braska at all costs. An improvement in Braska's mood might go some way towards changing the course of the pilgrimage, but he would also need to keep working on it himself. There had been no clues as to how he might do so in Macalania, but the region had always been a long shot. Visiting temples further from Bevelle would be more useful – he was sure of it.

There was a crunching in the leaves nearby. Auron raised a hand over his shoulder to take hold of the hilt of his sword, expecting to see a fiend; but it was a woman, carrying a gun and dressed in the characteristic baggy trousers of the Crusaders. The lay militia of Spira had always had a rivalry with the warrior monks, and even though Auron had severed his ties with the latter, he still felt an instinctive suspicion as he watched the woman draw closer.

"Evening," the Crusader said.

"Good evening," Auron replied quietly.

"What's this, then?" said the Crusader, nodding towards the tent.

Auron stifled a sigh. "I'm a summoner's guardian," he explained reluctantly. "He's asleep in there."

"Oh, right," said the Crusader, unimpressed. She peered at Auron more closely. "Here – do I know you?"

"I don't know *you*," Auron replied, "so presumably not."

The woman frowned. "Just – you look familiar. You haven't been on the sphere lately, have you?"

"No," Auron lied; his likeness had indeed been shown during a public sphere broadcast recently, but he would rather not jog the Crusader's memory further. "What are you doing, anyway?" he said. "Since when was it your job to walk around the woods questioning people?"

"New orders," said the Crusader. "Got a problem with that?"

"I just think people should be entitled to travel from one place to another without being interrogated about it," said Auron.

"They are," the Crusader replied, "unless they cause trouble."

"And am I *causing trouble*?" Auron hissed back.

The Crusader blinked back at him for a moment, and then said, "Not at present."

They stared at each other for a few seconds more, neither saying anything; then the Crusader turned around and walked off in as dignified a manner as possible. Auron let out a snort of contempt once she was out of earshot. The pilgrimage was going to be hard enough, he thought, without Crusaders meddling in it.

Inside the tent, Jecht and Braska slept, unaware of the exchange outside. Braska's unusually good mood had persisted, and he was quite ready not to have to spend any more time worrying about Shiva. His relationship with Jecht seemed to be improving too; perhaps, he had thought as he drifted off to sleep, Jecht might soon realise he didn't need to cloak himself in bravado. Maybe that would mean he and Auron might soon be able to get on better, too – and if that happened, Braska would go to the Final Summoning with one thing less to worry about.

Chapter 7

Laughter and Tears

They rose early, woken at dawn by Jecht on Auron's instruction: they would need to get across the northern part of the Thunder Plains before nightfall, and Auron was determined to build in extra time for the journey in case of unexpected mishaps.

Once again, there was a sudden shift in the climate as they emerged from the forest; Braska and Auron were long used to it, but Jecht peered around in confusion at the abrupt change. The Thunder Plains, as the name suggested, consisted of a large, flat, open area without much vegetation, dotted here and there with tall, forbidding-looking towers that were clearly man-made, despite the apparent absence of civilisation. While the weather in Macalania had remained dry over the past few days, there was a persistent rain here: not so heavy as to drench travellers in minutes, but the kind of fine drizzle that would gradually accumulate until passersby were soaked

through without even noticing when or how it had happened.

On top of that, there was the eponymous thunder, which rumbled menacingly every few minutes; unsurprisingly, this was accompanied by lightning, not in the form of faraway flashes but as actual bolts that periodically shot down to strike the ground, leaving little scorched patches that took a moment to blend in with the surrounding terrain.

Jecht surveyed the scene doubtfully: it looked extremely unsafe. He didn't want to seem like a coward by pointing it out, but on the other hand, he thought, Zanarkand's star blitzball player deserved better treatment than to have to walk through such an obvious deathtrap. He hesitated, unsure of how to draw attention to the situation, and then abruptly stepped back as a bolt of lightning struck the ground less than an arm's length away from him.

"Don't look so offended, Jecht," said Braska, who was still unusually cheerful. "It won't hurt you."

Jecht's frown deepened. "Huh? What do you mean, it won't hurt me?"

"This is no ordinary storm," Braska explained. "The lightning's almost totally harmless; it might knock you off your feet, but the worst thing you'll have to worry about is the fall. The only downside is that the storm's perpetual."

"No way," said Jecht. "You mean this place is *always* like this?"

Braska nodded. "It's been this way for hundreds of years,

they say. The towers were built to disperse the lightning's power. They do a good job of it – and they absorb a few of the strikes in the areas where –"

He was cut off by a lightning bolt that suddenly struck him, as if on cue, and he toppled over, landing on the ground with a quiet gasp of pain. Auron stepped forward, a potion in hand, but Braska was almost immediately back on his feet, rubbing the arm that had taken the impact of the fall and refusing the potion with a shake of his head. "I'm all right," he said. "I'm sure we'll be in greater need of those later."

He was right; they were all sore and fed up after the first hour of crossing the plains, having been knocked off their feet several times each. The fiends did more damage, but at least they were easier to fend off; the lightning was constant enough to be quite an annoyance.

"We'll rest here for a moment," said Auron when they came within reach of one of the lightning towers. Braska nodded, wiping the rain off his face with his sleeve; due to the fiends' elemental weaknesses, he had mostly been using water spells in combat, which hadn't helped.

"Hey, this place is great!" Jecht enthused, joining them; since discovering the lightning was mostly harmless, he had found that his attitude towards it had rapidly changed, from suspicion, to acceptance, to delight. "I want a picture. Somethin' to show the guys back home – hey, Auron, take one of me with the tower in the background, right? Braska, you can

be in it too."

Braska paused – he could see Auron was about to argue, but it didn't seem as if there would be any harm in indulging Jecht on this occasion. "Just a quick one," he said, averting his eyes from Auron's suddenly irritated expression.

Auron maintained his scowl, but he took out the sphere recorder and attempted to set up the shot while Braska and Jecht stood in front of the tower. Braska looked on, making the mistake of glancing towards Auron again and finding him looking even more annoyed than last time. But it was important to make Jecht feel comfortable, Braska thought resolutely; Auron needed to learn that too. That was the only way Jecht would come to trust the two of them.

He decided he ought to discuss it with Auron before the latter got too angry, and left his position beside Jecht, making for his other guardian. Concentrating more on Braska than on readying the sphere recorder, Auron studied his expression as he approached, hoping Braska might be about to tell him that there was no need to give into Jecht's foolish whims after all.

"Hey, hold it steady!" Jecht complained as he watched Auron's meagre efforts at positioning the sphere recorder.

His exhortation had little effect: it merely served to remind Auron of how ridiculous it was to be taking these recordings, as if the pilgrimage was some kind of holiday. "Why am I doing this?" he hissed into the recorder, turning away from Jecht and switching it off at last.

"What the hell?!" Jecht said.

"Auron," said Braska. "You know Jecht's a long way from home. I really think –"

"This isn't the place," Auron insisted, gesturing irritably towards the sky.

"I know," said Braska, "but ..." He hesitated, wondering if placating Auron might for the moment be more important than keeping Jecht happy. "Jecht," he said, turning to face him again. "Maybe we should leave it until later. I think Auron's just worried about whether we'll make it to the travel agency in good time."

"Ugh, lame," said Jecht.

Despite his protest, they walked on, seeing off a few more fiends. Braska and Auron paused again at the next tower, waiting for Jecht to join them: he had been bringing up the rear. Auron wrung out his ponytail, grimacing as the rainwater trickled over his bare left hand. Over the few days they had been on the road, he had started to realise that the way he had decided to dress on the pilgrimage was somewhat impractical; but, he reflected, Braska and Jecht were hardly more conveniently dressed themselves, and the clothes he wore were a nod to a centuries-old tradition. He had made a commitment, and he would stick to it: that was how he operated.

The sky flashed around Jecht, and he instinctively leapt back; moments later, a bolt of lightning hit the ground in front

of him, just where he had been standing before. "Whoa!" he exclaimed. "Did you guys see that? I can't believe I just dodged –" He considered. "I mean, obviously I can dodge the lightning, I'm the great Jecht! Fastest reflexes in Zanarkand! There was this one time in the sphere, the guy from the Cadgers was tryin' to trick me by sendin' the ball the other way, but I –"

"A fluke," said Auron, raising his voice a little so Jecht could hear across the distance. "Could have happened to any of us."

"Are you serious?" said Jecht. "Didn't you see that, Auron? You wanna try doin' that yourself? I didn't think so!"

"Come and shelter with us, Jecht," Braska suggested, cutting in before Auron could make a retort.

Jecht snorted. "Hell no. I'm gonna stay out here, and I'm gonna dodge it again, just so I can show that asshole."

Auron rolled his eyes; Braska glanced at him and sighed minutely. There seemed to be no way of resolving his guardians' disagreements; on one of his worse days, the situation might have driven him to tears. At least that might have encouraged Auron to be reasonable, he reflected.

Jecht stood, his arms folded, until another telltale flash lit the sky around him; this time, he jumped ostentatiously to the side, and the lightning hit the ground a short distance away. "Ha!" he crowed, extending an arm to jab a pointing finger in Auron's general direction. "See that, Auron? Not a fluke now, is it? Pretty clear that I'm the best. Looks like you should be apologisin'."

"Don't hold your breath," Auron called back, before Braska could stop him.

"Ugh, you're so jealous," said Jecht dismissively. "Hey, you know what'd be good? We should get this on video, for … for posterity, you know! All my fans are gonna want to see it. Auron, get the camera out, and I mean it this time."

"He means the sphere recorder," Auron muttered for Braska's benefit; he had become more accustomed to Jecht's strange vocabulary than he would have liked.

"I see," said Braska. "Perhaps you should on this occasion, then."

"Are you serious?" Auron protested.

"It clearly means a lot to him," Braska pointed out, "or he wouldn't keep asking, would he? If we indulge him this time, that might be the end of it. Come on, Auron."

Auron quickly took out the sphere recorder again; he had detected the note of exasperation beginning to creep into Braska's voice. Braska, meanwhile, looked into the distance, wondering what else he could possibly try as a way of encouraging his guardians to be more tolerant towards each other.

Glancing at Jecht as he swaggered and pranced around, and dearly wishing it was something he didn't have to see, Auron turned back towards Braska as he switched on the recorder, and found him staring at something on the horizon.

"What do you see there, my lord?" he said, eager to forget about Jecht's antics.

"Oh, I was just thinking," said Braska truthfully.

"This is important!" Jecht yelled. "No foolin' around, you're gonna spoil it!"

Auron ignored him, keeping the recorder pointed at Braska. Now that he was looking away from Jecht, he felt supremely unmotivated to turn back towards him; the sight of Braska, even facing in the other direction, was much more appealing.

Jecht scowled, waving his arms in an attempt to get Auron to turn his attention back to him. In his frustration, he failed to notice the sky flashing until it was too late – seconds later, a lightning bolt struck him. "Whoa!" he yelled as he went down, falling flat on his face with uncharacteristic inelegance.

At that, both Braska and Auron finally turned to look towards Jecht, who hauled himself into a slightly more respectable position with a grimace.

"Are you all right?" said Braska. He assumed Jecht was fine – they had all been so far – but the fact that Jecht hadn't yet stood up again was something that he wondered whether he needed to be concerned about. As he drew closer, though, he was relieved to find that Jecht appeared unharmed.

"Now there's a scene for *posterity*," Auron remarked, grinning as he carefully zoomed in with the sphere recorder.

"Yeah, yeah," Jecht said crossly.

Braska's smile widened: he was starting to find some humour in the situation, and now knowing that Jecht was unhurt, there seemed to be no harm in showing it. Such ironies were just the kind of thing that tickled him – the fact that Jecht had dodged the lightning twice in a row, and then, once a recording was actually being made, he had failed so spectacularly –

He began to laugh out loud.

At the sound, Auron felt a sudden, sharp ache in his chest. He had gone three years without hearing Braska laugh properly; it was something he had begun to think he would never hear again. And here he was on the Thunder Plains, standing in the rain and listening to it once more; it was a bittersweet echo of happier times.

He stood immobilised for a moment, and then fumbled to switch off the sphere recorder, watching numbly as Braska helped Jecht to his feet and then led him towards the closest of the towers to take cover, an arm slung lightly around his guardian's shoulders. Jecht was somewhat awkward in his reactions – men didn't tend to make physical contact with each other in that way in Zanarkand, even if they were very close friends – but Auron completely failed to notice his discomfort. He was still reeling at what he had heard, and what it might mean for the pilgrimage. If Braska were to laugh like that again, he thought, perhaps he would begin to seek a path other than the one he had chosen.

Surreptitiously, he took a few deep breaths, reminding him-

self to be rational. This didn't mean anything, not on its own, he told himself. He was normally an extremely logical and clear-headed person; jumping to conclusions like this wasn't his style. It was just that there was something about Braska that sometimes caused his thoughts to be less well organised than usual, and something about that laugh that had reminded him of the very hope that he and Braska had spoken about before. He couldn't let go of it; the sound echoed in his mind as they set off into the storm again.

Braska had taken the lead, striding forward with unusual vigour. Jecht initially followed right behind, but Auron grabbed him by the arm and pulled him close. "I need to talk to you," he said, lowering his voice so Braska wouldn't hear.

Jecht scowled. "Get off of me, you weirdo. What is it?"

"It's –" Auron frowned as he tried to put his thoughts into words. "You made him laugh."

"Yeah, and?" said Jecht.

"That's the first time I've heard him laugh," said Auron, "in three years. I've been trying, all that time – and you just –"

Jecht shrugged. "Guess you just ain't a funny guy."

"But –" said Auron. He broke off. There was no point trying to explain the significance of this to Jecht, he realised – and even if he did, Jecht would no doubt make light of it. He couldn't possibly realise what this meant, even if Auron laid it out for him.

"Never mind," he said gruffly, striding forward so he wouldn't have to look at Jecht's derisive expression.

Despite the fact that Jecht continued to be obtuse, though, Auron couldn't help seeing him in a new light as they continued. If Jecht was capable of making Braska laugh like that, he thought, he had a utility that Auron had never expected. It was difficult to stop his imagination running wild, conjuring up some kind of scenario in which Braska might become truly happy again, and go back on his decision; forcing himself not to picture it, Auron nonetheless found himself wondering how Jecht's newfound talent might ease the sadness of the pilgrimage.

He paid unusual attention to Jecht while they advanced, seeing off more fiends. Jecht's fighting had come on enormously since they first set off a few days earlier, but he was still reckless and impulsive, and displayed nothing resembling proper sword technique; Auron almost cringed visibly as he watched him leaping about, landing blows that damaged the fiends in defiance of all logic. His own swordstrokes were slow and precise, and many times more powerful – and yet Jecht was cutting down just as many fiends as he was.

They arrived at the travel agency in good time, despite or perhaps because of Auron's earlier insistence that they needed to set off as early as possible; it wasn't yet evening when the three of them staggered into the building, soaking wet and aching again after having been knocked to the ground by the

lightning so many times. The man at the reception desk, to whom this was a familiar sight, cheerfully made each of them a cup of steaming tea and handed them a blanket that would have been large enough to drape over all three travellers if they had sat close together; Auron and Jecht both refused their respective corners and left the whole thing to Braska, who enthusiastically wrapped it around himself as he sat to drink his tea.

Jecht didn't touch his own; he was a coffee man. Auron had the same preference, but he drank his tea out of politeness, sneaking the occasional glance at Braska, who seemed thoroughly contented to have finished the day's journey despite how soaked he was.

"Well, I think I might have a bath," he announced eventually, standing slowly and making his way towards the washing facilities. Auron watched, vaguely half-remembering an occasion some time ago when Braska had made the same declaration and Auron had spent the next half-hour worrying that he might be about to try to drown himself; there was no chance of that today, at least.

He turned to Jecht, having resolved earlier to speak to him about his swordfighting prowess. "Your fighting's improving," he began, after a brief and unimpressed look at the beer bottle Jecht had produced seemingly from nowhere.

Jecht looked at Auron, frowned momentarily, and then barked out a laugh. "Wait – are you kidding me?" he said. "Is

that a compliment? Don't tell me you finally realised I got talent?"

"Shut up," Auron snapped back. "I was going to say, it's improving, *but* it still needs work. You can't afford to get complacent – there are some dangerous fiends out there."

"Dangerous like those flans that took you out a couple days ago, huh?" said Jecht, grinning.

"Yes," said Auron, ignoring the jibe. "And if we find ourselves in a position like that again, with Lord Braska unable to help us, you'll need to be as precise with your sword as possible. We can't afford to make mistakes."

"Braska wasn't *unable* to help us, you were just being overprotective, as usual," said Jecht dismissively. "Anyway, what am I supposed to do about it, practise? You gonna give me lessons, if you're such an expert?"

Auron shrugged. "I can go through some of the basics of proper technique with you, yeah."

"Oh yeah?" said Jecht, raising an eyebrow. He considered: he didn't fancy having Auron order him around, but maybe he would be able to show his fellow guardian just how sophisticated his combat skills had become. "OK, then," he said, setting his beer on the table. "You wanna do it now?"

It was still raining, of course, but they were soaked anyway, Auron reasoned. "Sure," he said.

They headed outside, staying close to the travel agency to minimise the chance of fiends intervening, and began to circle

each other, Auron with his sword over his shoulder in his customary two-handed grip, Jecht waving his around apparently at random.

"You're fast, so use it," said Auron. "When I attack, you should be able to parry easily. Rely on your agility, not your strength; land a blow when you see an opportunity."

He raised his sword to strike, and Jecht deflected the blow easily with his own blade. Auron nodded. "That's it," he said. He lunged a few more times, and each time Jecht managed to block his approach.

"Try an attack," Auron urged, wiping the rainwater off his face, and Jecht complied, lashing out clumsily towards him with his sword. Auron deflected the blow easily with his own, and bore down on Jecht with his greater strength, forcing him onto his knees. "You need to focus," he said. "That wasn't targeted properly – you lost time. Pick a spot and aim straight for it."

Auron was still pushing his sword against Jecht's, and Jecht was bending back towards the ground, struggling to hold himself in a crouched position. "Fine, fine," he said, his voice strained from the effort of not falling backwards. "I give in, I – I yield. You got me trapped here."

Auron laughed, and let Jecht go, pushing against his chest roughly as they both stood up. "Try again," he urged him.

Jecht hit out with his sword once more, and Auron blocked it, not bothering to force him onto the ground this time. "Bet-

ter," he grunted. "Now –"

Jecht decided to rely on his speed, and try for a second blow while Auron was distracted. He drew back and struck once again, not really picking a particular spot to aim for, but just trying to show Auron that surprise was one of the prime features of his arsenal. Auron twisted at the same time, assuming a different stance, and Jecht's blade drove straight into his bare left arm, just below the shoulder.

Auron cried out, dropping his own sword and tearing off his gauntlet with his teeth, before he raised his right hand to the wound instinctively. Jecht's eyes widened as he looked at it; he'd cut deep. Blood was flowing from the incision and seeping out between Auron's fingers, trickling down towards his elbow.

"Don't just stand there," Auron hissed.

"Well, what am I meant to do?" said Jecht desperately.

Auron gaped at him. "Don't you – haven't you been here long enough to learn how healing works? I need white magic, and quickly –"

"Right," Jecht stammered, and began to hurry towards the travel agency, fervently hoping that Braska was out of his bath.

He was in luck, finding Braska sitting on the bed in the room they had taken for the night; he had put his robe back on and was towelling his hair dry. "Auron's hurt," said Jecht, bursting in without ceremony. "You gotta help – he's outside."

Braska looked up at him, suddenly wide-eyed. "What?" he said sharply. He stood, and then remembered his headdress, and hesitated: it wasn't proper to go out with his hair uncovered. But it would take time to put the headdress on, he knew: it would surely delay his getting to Auron. Eventually, after a few seconds of fierce mental debate, he decided Auron was worth the trouble, and followed Jecht outside with his staff in hand.

Auron had fallen to his knees, the pain from his wound making it difficult to remain standing; his right hand was still clamped firmly over it in an effort to staunch the blood. He gritted his teeth – it hurt more than a single blow from an ordinary fiend ever would. He hadn't known Jecht was capable of striking with as much force as that; if he had been slightly more charitably disposed towards him, and less afflicted by his injury, he might even have been impressed.

Braska approached, hitching up his robe with his free hand to permit him to run; Jecht followed behind. Once they arrived at the scene and Braska could see what needed to be done, he cast his staff aside and knelt by Auron's side, gently removing Auron's bloodied, trembling hand from the wound and placing both his there instead before he concentrated on sending out a strong pulse of white magic.

Immediately, Auron's pain subsided; the gash in his arm closed. He let out a sigh of relief, raising his eyes to meet Braska's concerned gaze.

"Are you all right?" said Braska softly.

Auron chuckled briefly. "I am now. Thank you, sir."

"Don't mention it," Braska murmured back, caressing Auron's bare shoulder with a lingering finger. "Any time."

Auron found himself looking into Braska's eyes a moment longer before he abruptly turned away, standing and collecting his discarded sword and gauntlet from the ground and then approaching Jecht. Jecht blinked at him in trepidation: Auron had seemed relaxed enough after Braska healed him, but now he looked serious again. It was possible, Jecht thought, that Auron would retaliate. He wondered whether that was how things worked in Spira: if you wounded a person, even accidentally, maybe they had the right to respond. Jecht was under no illusion about Auron's abilities: if he was to attack, he knew he would be in trouble.

"That was very effective," said Auron gruffly. "You can rely on surprise." He hoisted his sword into its sheath on his back, and stomped off towards the travel agency.

While Jecht was staring dumbly after him, Braska frowned. "Effective?" he echoed. "What's he talking about?"

"It was me," Jecht explained. "We were fightin' – for practice. I didn't mean to do that to him; we just both moved at the same time, and, you know."

"I see," said Braska, suddenly lost in thought. If Auron and Jecht had been practising their swordwork together, he realised, it must mean that they were beginning to get on af-

ter all. If Auron cared enough about Jecht to help him with his fighting technique, and if Jecht cared enough about the pilgrimage to consent to working on it – it seemed as if the truce between them that he had been hoping for might be within reach after all. He couldn't help beaming.

"What?" said Jecht suspiciously, at the sight of Braska's smile.

"Oh, nothing," said Braska cheerfully. "Just thinking, that's all."

Braska sat in the travel agency reception area, idly watching the sphere broadcast. They were showing a documentary he had seen many times before – there was never much new content transmitted beyond the news and live coverage of some of the blitzball matches. With the constant threat of Sin, Spira's public broadcasting service had never amassed the funds or the equipment to provide more comprehensive programming.

The documentary was about the Hypello, a species of strange aquatic humanoid that mostly lived in the shallows of the seas around Spira. A few had gained an imperfect mastery of the common language, and had set up as traders or, more usually, as transport operators, which was a career many

humans believed beneath them. Braska himself was under no such illusion, but doubted his sense of direction would be up to it; after all, on the pilgrimage, he was leaving all the planning of that sort to Auron.

He watched as the Hypello swam about in the water, much more elegant than they were on land; people might be kinder to them, he thought, if they realised how much better suited to their undersea habitat the Hypello were. They were known as laughable creatures for the ungainly way they walked around and their distinctive speech impediment: in their own home, they were clearly much more at ease.

Suddenly, the images on the sphere changed to grainy, shaky footage of a large structure being destroyed. Braska sat up in alarm, suddenly attentive: this wasn't part of the Hypello documentary. The programme had been interrupted, he realised, for a breaking news report.

A few more seconds sufficed for him to work out what was being shown: the crumbling buildings were ones he knew intimately. It was the Al Bhed city, known as Home: the place that had seen him make long visits as a younger man, first as a Yevonite missionary, and then as a friend. It was where he had realised that he could no longer preach the teachings of Yevon in good faith, and made the decision to change his life's course. It was where he had met Girl – where he had fallen in love, and where the two of them had confessed their feelings to each other, and stolen their first tender kisses by the light

of the machina lamps.

He rose to his feet in panic. The sight of it was unbearable: his rare good mood had suddenly dissipated. Now, he suddenly felt an emotion that he was much more familiar with: utter despair.

Dizzy with anguish, Braska somehow made his way towards the corridor where the bedrooms were located, calling for Auron. He was too distressed to work out which room was theirs; fortunately, though, Auron soon emerged, his brow furrowed in concern.

"Auron," Braska gasped, "you have to see this. It's awful." He gripped Auron by the arm and tugged him back along the corridor to the reception, coming to a stop below the sphere screen.

Auron looked up at the images; it didn't take him long to work out what was being shown. It was clear that the settlement being destroyed was a machina city, and there was only one of those in Spira – Bevelle, which was careful to be selective in its use of such devices, hardly counted. Even without Braska's reaction, he would have been able to tell this was the home of the Al Bhed, and as he watched the blurred but no less recognisable images of the monstrous creature that was attacking it, he couldn't help murmuring its name: "Sin."

Braska let out a whimper, burying his face in Auron's shoulder, and Auron found himself stroking Braska's back as he began to sob, his own attention still drawn to the events

shown on the sphere. He watched transfixed: there was a terrible beauty in what Sin was capable of. So many years of work to build that city, and so many stories of the people who had lived there: all of it was gone in mere minutes.

He tore his eyes away and looked at Braska, who was shaking with grief, his tears soaking into Auron's robe. Auron felt his heart sink as he took in the scene: this, unfortunately, was more typical of the Braska of recent years than the unusual happiness he had seen in him over the past day of travelling.

"Let's sit down, sir," he said, forcing the thought away. "I'll get you some tea."

He steered Braska onto a bench in the seating area and then returned to the reception desk, ringing the bell for service. The previous travel agency had offered some self-service drinks facilities, but this one was presumably operated by more devout Yevonites, as they seemed to have decided the provision of such equipment was inappropriate. After a short time, one of the staff emerged, and set about brewing some herbal tea at Auron's request, turning up the sound on the sphere so they could both hear the live commentary.

"We understand," the announcer was saying, "that there were no casualties. Most of the Al Bhed were able to evacuate the city before its destruction began, while the rest took shelter in underground bunkers. We have received the following statement from the Al Bhed ruling council –"

"Only a matter of time," the clerk remarked, handing over

the tea. "All that machina – they had it coming."

Auron took the tea, declining to comment; he was about to turn around and return to Braska's side, when the clerk added, "Is that your summoner over there? Something wrong with him?"

His use of the possessive gave Auron a familiar, sharp feeling in his chest, which he did his best to ignore; he followed the man's gaze towards Braska instead, seeing him sitting with his head in his hands.

"Just a minor setback," he said. "Bad news from home." It was true, technically – the clerk just wouldn't realise it was the Al Bhed Home he was referring to.

"Not Sin, I hope?" the man said, and the sight of Auron's answering grimace was enough to send him into a deep bow, cupping his hands in front of himself reverently.

Auron quickly made his way back to Braska, sitting beside him on the bench. "I got your tea, my lord," he said; Braska made no response for a second, and then wearily reached for the cup, not meeting Auron's eyes.

"I don't know if you could hear the reporter," said Auron, "but they said there were no casualties. Most of the Al Bhed managed to escape, and the rest used shelters, apparently." He paused, waiting for a response; none came, so he added, "That's good news, isn't it?"

Braska looked at him then, raising the teacup shakily to his lips before he spoke. "But where will they go, Auron?" he

murmured. "Losing their home like that – it's dreadful. Where will they all live?"

"They'll find places to go," said Auron. "There are Al Bhed communities all over Spira – and you know how resourceful they are. They'll probably have a new Home ready to move into before the year's out."

Braska nodded, unconvinced; he heaved a ragged sigh, took another sip of his tea, and then said, almost inaudibly, "It was where we met."

"Ah," said Auron, realising he meant Girl. "Yes. Of course."

"I feel," said Braska between sniffs, "as if Sin is erasing all those memories. Wasn't it enough to take her? Why does it have to destroy everything I associate with her, too? Can't I be left in peace?"

He looked at the ceiling, blinking back new tears; Auron laid a hand on his shoulder, and said, "Is there anything else I can get you, sir?"

"No," said Braska, raising his own hand to place it on top of Auron's; he ran his fingers over Auron's battle-worn skin in an attempt to ground himself. "Just – just stay here, please. Stay with me."

"I'm not going anywhere," Auron murmured.

They sat in silence for a long time; eventually, Braska wiped his face with his free hand, and used the other to take hold of Auron's more tightly, lowering it from his shoulder to the table, and then gripping it with surprising strength.

"This has reinforced my resolve," he declared, staring into the distance. "I must defeat Sin – I have to. There is no other solution."

He squeezed Auron's hand even more firmly for a few seconds, and then suddenly stood, somewhat unsteadily, and made his way back to their room.

Auron sat there massaging his hand: Braska's grip on it had grown so tight that it had actually started to cause him pain. As he did so, he reflected miserably on what had just happened. That same day, Braska had seemed happy; so happy that Auron had begun to ask himself whether things might change enough to put the end of the pilgrimage into question. But seeing him like this, utterly despondent, made Auron realise that happiness had been fleeting. It was this despair that Braska always returned to. There was no chance that he would be able to leave it behind over the course of the pilgrimage – no chance that he would be the one to decide that things should end differently. That, Auron realised, was his own responsibility. If he wanted the pilgrimage to end in a way that defied its natural progression, he would have to make sure it happened himself, and find a solution that satisfied both of them.

Braska changed into his nightshirt as soon as he entered the bedroom: it was still early for turning in, but after everything that had happened, he simply had no energy left. He lay down, fell asleep almost immediately, and woke up some time later with an unpleasant headache that he knew potions would

be useless against.

Gradually, he realised he still needed to take that night's sphere for Yuna, disregarding the fact that his red eyes and state of undress might cause her to worry about his wellbeing. He stumbled out of bed, slowly located the sphere recorder, and then lay down again, switching it on and then positioning it at arm's length.

"Hello, Yuna," he began quietly.

He was interrupted by the sound of the door opening and a sudden, strong smell of ale; Jecht, who had been passing, had heard the distinctive sound of the device starting up, and had come ready to make his usual contributions to the sphere.

"Not now, Jecht," said Braska.

"But –" Jecht began.

Braska raised a trembling hand, and said again, "Not now. Please."

His voice quivered as he said it: drunk as Jecht was, that was enough to get him to relent and leave, realising that Braska was upset and that, as a result, he didn't want to be anywhere near him. Braska waited until the sounds of his clumsy departure had died away, sighed deeply, and turned his attention to the sphere again.

"I suppose you've heard about Home," he said. "Such awful news. I had hoped you might go there one day and meet your mother's family, but now … it cannot be. All those poor people, scattered through Spira with their city in ruins – I hope you

pray for them, Yuna." He was, after all, incapable of doing so himself.

He took a deep breath and tried to recall something more positive to tell her. His memories of the day's events prior to the news from Home seemed dim and irrelevant, but he eventually remembered Auron and Jecht's practice fight, and related the story of it to Yuna, noting how glad he had been to see them appearing to warm to each other. Exhausted and miserable as he was, he knew he was failing to convey that gladness in his account of the incident, but it was better than nothing, he thought.

"Well, that's all," he concluded. "Do keep the Al Bhed in your thoughts, Yuna – they need our support. Goodnight, darling; I love you very much."

He switched off the device, placed it on the table by his bed, and retreated back under the blanket as his eyes filled with tears again.

An hour or so later, Auron entered with a tray of hot food. "I brought you some dinner, sir," he said.

Braska slowly opened his eyes and glanced at the tray. Objectively, it was an excellent meal – varied and interesting, made with fresh produce from the nearby Moonflow region. Auron had already eaten his own portion, and very much enjoyed it. But in Braska's state, the sight and smell of it made him feel sick. He shook his head and pulled the blanket over his face.

"Lord Braska," said Auron, "you have to eat something."

Braska shook his head, which was barely discernible under the blanket. "I'll have something tomorrow," he mumbled. "Breakfast. Just need to sleep for now."

Auron looked down at him for a while, wondering how to respond, and then gave up. "Rest well, sir," he said, resigned, and took the food away again, knowing Jecht would be more than happy to eat a second portion.

Chapter **8**

Man Up

Braska was fast asleep by the time Auron and Jecht came to bed, and remained silent and unmoving under his blanket when they rose again in the morning; Auron wondered whether he should attempt to wake him, but then decided it would be better to let him rest. He headed to breakfast with Jecht instead, trying to distract himself from his companion's anarchic eating habits by looking at the recently delivered newspaper.

The front-page article, unsurprisingly, was about Sin's attack on the Al Bhed: the picture that accompanied it, a blurred still from the sphere footage, was enough to inform him of that before he even tried to read it. He turned to the second page, and slowly deciphered the headline there: *New laws debated: machina, transport funding, summoners.*

He frowned, deciding this looked like something he needed to be aware of. Gradually, he began working his way down the

article, placing a finger by the line he was reading to keep his place, and feeling increasingly disconcerted as he got through more of it. "Oh no," he muttered.

"Somethin' bad happen?" said Jecht between mouthfuls of yoghurt.

Auron glanced up at him. "Yeah, maybe."

"So, what is it?"

"I'm still reading," said Auron. "You can look in a moment." He turned back to the paper, letting his lips carefully form the shape of each word as he mentally sounded them out.

"Oh, give it here," said Jecht impatiently. "I'll read it out, it'll be quicker." He grabbed the paper, turned it to face him, and began reading. *"The court of Yevon today debated new legislation that is planned, if passed, to be implemented with immediate effect. The deliberations started early in the morning with a discussion of the funding model for Moonflow crossings –"*

"That's not the important bit," Auron interrupted him. "Go to the second column."

Jecht acknowledged the instruction with a scowl, and then started reading again. *"After prayers, the subject turned to a controversial bill that aims to impose restrictions on who may become a summoner or a summoner's guardian. Under the proposed law, only those who submit themselves to an inspection at the citadel of Bevelle and are deemed to be sufficiently pious followers of Yevon will be authorised to undertake the pilgrimage. Temples will be instructed to turn away those who are not sanc-*

tioned to visit their fayth." He lowered the paper. "Looks like we started just in time, huh? You think they'd have tried to stop us comin'?"

"I think they might have," Auron admitted. "Never mind – keep going."

Jecht turned back to the paper. *"Several amendments to this divisive bill are due to be debated over the coming days, including a clause that would require the registration of all those who are undertaking the summoner's pilgrimage at present. Should the law be passed with this amendment, any summoners and guardians currently on pilgrimage will be asked to return to Bevelle at their earliest convenience. Newly appointed deputy commander of the warrior monk corps and chief envoy to the Crusaders, Wen Kinoc, said* – hey, that name sounds familiar. Did I meet him somewhere?"

"He's a good friend of mine," said Auron. "He left me that sphere the night we –" He cut himself off, remembering Jecht had forgotten all about it as soon as the next morning. "What did he say?"

"Wen Kinoc said," Jecht repeated, *"I am pleased to support this motion, and trust the court of Yevon will agree that it is particularly timely. Spira's good people are accustomed to showing kindness to summoners and their guardians, as the teachings advise, but with the recent increase in the number of pilgrimages embarked on, it is important that this hospitality and assistance not be abused. This law will ensure that those without a hope*

of succeeding in their pilgrimage will waste nobody's time." He laid the paper down carefully. "You sure he's your friend?"

Auron ignored the question; he was too busy trying to work out what might have motivated Kinoc to say such things. Like many people in Bevelle, Kinoc had never been very comfortable around Braska; but most of them had turned on Auron as well after his troubles, and Kinoc had been one of the few to remain a friend. He was probably doing this for political reasons, Auron reflected: Kinoc had always been one to take whatever unscrupulous opportunity he could for the benefit of his own advancement. Auron had done similar things once or twice. It was unlikely, he thought, that Kinoc really thought the pilgrimage should be the preserve of the most pious Yevonites; he was surely just pretending to agree in order to win respect in his new position. Braska and his guardians' situation probably hadn't crossed his mind at all, Auron concluded.

"What does it say next?" he asked quietly.

"Speaking in opposition to the motion," Jecht went on, *"Lady Torroll of Kilika gave a passionate speech in which she cited discrimination against those summoners who begin their journeys in the outer parts of Spira. While these summoners –"*

"Stop," Auron suddenly hissed – he could hear the sound of shuffling footsteps in the corridor. "Lord Braska's coming – put that away."

Jecht looked up at him, not understanding the sudden ur-

gency; Auron snatched up the newspaper, hastily folded it, and tossed it under the table. It would upset Braska to see this news, he knew, and after the previous day's events, he would hardly be starting this one in the best of moods. "Tea, my lord?" he said as Braska slowly walked in. "Toast? We'll start with toast, shall we, and then you can have some tea. Did you sleep well?"

Jecht averted his eyes; Auron's terrible attempt at acting as if nothing was wrong was almost worse than the sight of Braska himself, who was cowed and pale. If a grown man were to act like this in Zanarkand, Jecht thought, nobody would take him seriously. Men weren't supposed to be weak.

Auron placed the toast in front of Braska, hastily arranging an assortment of jams behind it; Braska stared at the spread dully for a moment, and then mumbled, "I'm sorry – I – I can't face it." He felt as if he had used all his energy in getting himself dressed and undertaking the brief walk from bed to breakfast; actually consuming the food demanded a strength that was beyond him, to say nothing of the onward journey.

"Right," said Auron, immediately putting his pretended cheerfulness aside. "We'll stay here a second night. You're in no state to travel, sir, and it's still a long way to Guadosalam. We're ahead of schedule – we'll write today off, and see how you're feeling tomorrow."

"Oh," Braska mumbled, blinking as new tears began to form in the corners of his eyes. "I don't mean to cause inconvenience – it's just that I can't –"

"It's not an inconvenience," said Auron, more loudly than he intended. He lowered his voice again. "It's fine, sir. We didn't expect to get here until this evening. Let's get you back to bed, and then I'll tell them we need to stay another night."

Braska let himself be coaxed out of his chair and led back to their room, Auron's strong arm around his shoulders; Jecht stared up at the ceiling while they walked awkwardly away, and then turned back to his breakfast in an attempt to forget he had seen any of it. The worst part of all, he thought, was the special soft voice Auron adopted when Braska got like this; the way he suddenly took on a sort of nurselike persona. It made Jecht almost physically recoil.

After seeing that Braska was back in bed and had everything he might need, Auron made his way to the reception desk to inform the staff of their change of plans. Passing Jecht, and ignoring him, he reached the desk and let the clerk on duty know they needed to make a change to the reservation.

"You're staying another night, right?" said the clerk. "Your friend just spoke to me – it's all taken care of."

Incredulously, Auron turned to face Jecht, who reluctantly met his gaze. "You've already told them?" said Auron.

Jecht shrugged, taking a sip from the bottle of beer he had acquired from the clerk. "Yeah, thought I might as well."

"That's odd," said Auron, "because I seem to remember you repeatedly saying that you don't want to take any part in organising this pilgrimage, and that the only thing you care

about is getting back to Zanarkand."

"Look," said Jecht defensively. "It just seemed like the right thing to do, OK? Wasn't like there was anything else I was meant to be doin'. But if I'd known you were gonna make a big deal of it, I wouldn't have bothered."

Auron raised his eyebrows. "Oh no, don't let me stop you, if you want to help me prepare for the journey. Maybe later, we can get the rations ready together."

"Fuck you," said Jecht with a scowl. "I was just bored, all right? What else am I meant to do all day?"

"Do what you like," said Auron, "as long as you don't try to get me involved."

"Sure," Jecht shot back. "I guess you'll be busy anyway, lookin' after Braska while he lies in bed cryin' like a little girl."

Auron's hands curled reflexively into fists; his loyal defence of Braska had at times turned physical in the past, and he had a brief desire to strike Jecht's smug face as he had done on that handful of occasions to whichever of his subordinates in the corps had dared speak ill of him. Instead, he took a deep breath and flattened his palms against his thighs, remembering just in time how disappointed Braska would be if he were to lash out. "He's not well," he said through gritted teeth. "I'm sure you've realised that by now."

"It's pathetic," said Jecht. "He needs to man up, you know?"

"Man up?" Auron echoed. "What's that supposed to mean – you think this makes him less of a man?"

"Guys are meant to be tough," said Jecht, shrugging. "We ain't supposed to act like that. Leave it to the ladies, yeah?"

"In case you'd forgotten," Auron hissed, "his wife was brutally killed –"

"Yeah, three years ago!" Jecht interrupted.

"Brutally killed," said Auron again, cutting over him in turn, "when they were barely in their thirties, and after he'd given up everything for her! No career, hardly any friends, a little girl to look after – and he was a Yevonite missionary! He was supposed to be the one convincing the Al Bhed to give up their machina so we'd have a shot at getting rid of Sin for good – and then when he didn't manage it, Sin *killed his wife*. Can you imagine how lonely, and guilty, and angry that made him feel? How unbearable it must be to walk around every day with a burden like that? Or are you completely heartless?"

Jecht was silent for a moment: put that way, it made some sense, he thought, but he still found Braska's behaviour deeply unsettling. "If all that stuff happened to a guy in Zanarkand," he pointed out, "he'd be sad for a while, I guess, but he'd suck it up eventually, you know?"

"Well, this isn't Zanarkand, this is the real world," said Auron.

Jecht groaned. "This is a shithole. That's what it is. All this Sin stuff, no entertainment –" He glanced up at the sphere screen above the reception desk, which showed a group of young men in rubbery yellow trousers, passing a ball to each

other with woeful imprecision. "Even your blitzball players are crap," he remarked, before sighing heavily and sitting down at the nearest table. "Auron, do me a favour and get me another beer, yeah?"

Auron took the seat opposite, leant over the table, and said, "I'm not your slave, Jecht."

"Just Braska's slave, huh?" Jecht taunted him.

"We've been through this," said Auron. "You're a guardian too – it's about time you started acting like one."

"Hey, I do act like one," Jecht protested. "Got a hold on the sword stuff now, ain't I? And I did that strength trainin' with him a couple days ago. Back home I'd normally charge for that kinda thing." It struck him as he said it: he hadn't even considered asking for a fee.

"And what about Macalania Temple?" said Auron, interrupting Jecht's thought. "Your behaviour there was disgraceful – just running off like that. Those are the moments when Lord Braska needs us most, and you just –" He waved a hand dismissively, too appalled by the memory of Jecht's actions to finish the sentence. "I certainly hope you won't try that again in Djose."

Jecht narrowed his eyes, ready to retort, but he was interrupted by the appearance of a wizened old man who suddenly approached the table. Clad mostly in green, with a cape, baggy trousers, and an unusual mitre that added at least a foot to his diminutive height, he stared at the two of them from behind a

pair of small round spectacles.

"Can we help you, sir?" said Auron, suddenly polite.

"Perhaps, perhaps," the man said; he had a tremulous voice that made it mostly sound as if he was on his last legs, although as Auron and Jecht were shortly to discover, he was given to the occasional moment of surprising force in his lengthy pronouncements. "You see," he went on, "I am a historian of this place, by the name of Maechen – for many years I have been conducting research on the ins and outs of Spira: on everything that makes it tick. Indeed, were you to ask me a question about the history of our land, I should be delighted to provide an answer – for, you see, what I truly crave is a captive audience." He looked between them hopefully, his gaze not quite meeting either of theirs; he was too distracted by some matter of great academic importance to give them his full attention.

"Well, thanks, dude, but all I wanna know about this place is how to get out of here," Jecht informed him.

"He said history, not geography, you idiot," Auron muttered.

"A fascinating question," said Maechen, having mercifully failed to notice Auron's remark. "Should you travel north from this location, you will find the remarkable region of Macalania, with its woods that sustain a marvellous diversity of plant and animal life. To the south, you will come to Guadosalam, the home of that most ancient and respectable race, the Guado; and to the west, there is the great Thunder Lake. Ah, but who

knows what terrible beasties dwell beneath its surface! I shudder to think. Legend has it that High Summoner Ohalland once played blitzball in those very waters."

"I don't think you get what I was askin'," said Jecht, who had very little interest in most of the information he had just been given. "I meant a way of gettin' out of Spira. I'm fed up of it."

"Getting out of Spira?" Maechen echoed, his bemusement evident in the deepening of his many wrinkles. "My word, what an unusual idea. In all my long years, seldom have I heard such a proposition. It seems that there may yet be research to be done."

"It's a ridiculous idea," said Auron contemptuously.

"It is certainly a startling one," Maechen replied. "But a puzzle worth considering, I daresay. One that surely flies over the heads of the common folk of Spira. Alas, their minds are simply too tiny to allow them to think outside the box, as it were."

Auron frowned, suspecting that he had just been insulted; Jecht yelped with laughter, hastily disguising it with a cough as Maechen turned a curious glance towards him.

"Is there anything else you might wish to know about?" said Maechen, now staring at Jecht quite incisively.

"Actually, there is something," said Auron, who not only wanted to avoid the subject of Jecht's origins in the presence of a third party, but was also beginning to wonder whether

Maechen might be able to help him in his own endeavours. "I'd like to know if you've come across any alternative methods of bringing the Calm. Or hints, even – anything at all, really."

"Another most peculiar question," said Maechen approvingly, turning his penetrating gaze in Auron's direction.

"What's the Calm?" Jecht said.

"Now *that*," said Maechen, "I can answer most authoritatively. When each High Summoner performs his greatest service, the Final Summoning – when he calls forth the Final Æon and makes the very ground quake in terror – when he defeats that most wretched of pests, Sin! Surely you know of Sin, my young friends."

Auron, who thought *friends* was somewhat forward at this point, nonetheless nodded brusquely, while Jecht said, "Heard of it, yeah."

"Well," Maechen went on, "that is the moment at which the Calm is, as we say, brought. The beginning of a splendid time for the Spiran people – blessed respite from our constant troubles. The time before Sin is born anew, when we have a few short years to live in peace and rebuild our resources."

"So, how long does this Calm last?" said Jecht, thinking back to the statues of the few High Summoners he had seen at Macalania Temple.

"It depends," said Maechen. "Lord Gandof's Calm was a fine twelve years – but Lady Yocun's, alas, only three. Some

say that time will continue to decrease – but they are a rather pessimistic lot."

"Not that long either way," Jecht pointed out.

"But better than nothing," said Auron. "Jecht, the threat of Sin is constant in Spira. There are people who barely sleep because of how terrified they are of waking up to find their families dead. Even three years – even one year – it's something."

"Uh huh," said Jecht, unconvinced. "And you said there's a chance it might last forever, right?"

"Exactly," said Auron. "An eternal Calm – that's what the teachings say. If we can truly atone, then Sin will be gone for good."

Maechen nodded solemnly. "Quite, quite. We must all have hope in those bold enough to take the summoner's pilgrimage. The Final Summoning is a drastic act, but one that is capable of quite unexpected consequences."

"Yes," said Auron, seizing the opportunity to steer the conversation back towards his question. "But you haven't heard about any other ways of bringing the Calm? Even rumours?"

"Nothing I can recall at present, alas," said Maechen. "But I must say, the two of you have given me some meaty puzzles to chew over. I shall have to continue my research posthaste – and when we meet again, perhaps I shall be able to give you answers to your most fascinating questions."

He stood up, gave a clumsy little bow, and announced, "I bid you good day," before turning and ambling towards the exit.

Jecht was beginning to wonder why Auron had been so insistent on discussing the Final Summoning; he almost asked him about it, before realising Maechen had mentioned something much more interesting. "Hey," he said. "He said there's a lake nearby, right?"

Auron nodded. "Yeah, not far to the west."

"And Lord what's his name used to play blitz out there?"

"Ohalland," said Auron. "That's right, there are a few stories about this place. There was also the man who worked out how to stop the lightning causing harm. He was an Al Bhed – I forget his name –"

"Do you think I care about that?" Jecht interrupted. "Just thought I could go for a swim out there – it's been like a whole week since I was in the water. It's weird, you know? Feels like I'm missin' something."

"Oh, right," said Auron. "Sure. You should ask at the desk if they can lend you something that repels fiends – it'll be too dangerous to go out on your own otherwise."

Jecht headed to the reception desk to do so, expecting to be offered some kind of aerosol spray, and found himself heading back in Auron's direction with an embarrassingly sparkly bracelet snug against his bandaged forearm. *"This* is meant to keep fiends away?" he said. "Why's it gotta be so girly?"

Auron shrugged. "There aren't many types of armour with that property. I suppose that's the only one they had."

"Couldn't we just wear stuff like this all the time, though?" Jecht asked him. "The pilgrimage would be way quicker if we didn't have to bother with the fiends, right?"

"It's extremely expensive," Auron explained. "Anyway, summoners and their guardians are supposed to fight fiends – it's one of the traditions of the pilgrimage. It's not meant to be an easy journey. They're good practice, too: building up strength for when we climb Mount Gagazet. Apparently it's tough."

"Right," said Jecht, bored as usual by another of Auron's overly earnest and detailed explanations. "Well, see ya later."

"Take your sword," said Auron, "just in case."

Jecht stopped off at their room to pick it up, trying to ignore Braska, who was lying motionless in his bed, staring at the ceiling; he had almost made his way back across the room to the doorway when he heard Braska mumble, "Jecht?"

"Just goin' out for a swim," he said, not turning to look at him.

"I'm sorry," said Braska. "Will you tell Auron?"

"Tell him what?" said Jecht reluctantly.

"That I'm sorry," Braska said again.

"Oh," said Jecht. "Right. Sure." He made a swift exit, and headed out towards the common area, where Auron was still sitting; neither did so much as glance at the other. Jecht felt

no remorse for not passing on Braska's message: he firmly believed that he was too important to be doing such duties. If Braska was that keen to apologise to Auron, Jecht thought as he walked towards the lake, he could get up and do it himself. He was still of the opinion that if Braska only tried a bit harder, he would be able to put his sorrow aside and get on with the pilgrimage.

He was all too happy to forget about Braska and Auron as he reached the edge of the lake. As he had told Auron, he hadn't had a single chance to go for a swim since arriving in Spira, and that had been over a week ago. It was about the longest he'd gone without getting in the water in his whole life: back at home, he would have gone at least once a day, unless his son had some kind of school commitment that Jecht was required to go to. When he was first training to get into the Abes, back when he was still a skinny teenager, he'd pushed himself to his limits every day; then, once he'd got onto the team, he'd initially dialled back the intensity of his sessions, just circling around the sphere a few times and then calling it a day after that. That was where the rumours about him had originated: the claims that he'd made it to his position through talent alone.

He'd let them believe it: it only increased the myth of the great Jecht, the player gifted like no other. In reality, his rapid rise to stardom had been the result of a lot of luck and a lot of talking to the right people in the right ways – sometimes,

indeed, not just *talking* to them. Fame was a dirty business. He hadn't been able to go down the bribery route in the early days, so he'd pursued other options, and once he'd managed to scope out the right people, everything had gone well from there. His celebrity had grown exponentially.

More recently, he'd found himself needing to train harder again: a whole new generation of stars was starting to pop up, kids who were barely in their twenties, and Jecht had found his own playstyle slow and outdated in comparison. After long years, he had started needing to make a real effort in training once more, just as he had as a youth. But the persona he had cultivated, the star player who had no need to practise, had to remain for the sake of his image. Instead of using his team's facilities, he began to train at sea, early in the morning and late at night so nobody would spot him making his way there and back.

To start with, he managed to fool the media: the image of Jecht as the prodigy who relied on pure talent persisted. But some reporters started to notice that he was struggling in the sphere, occasionally caught off guard by the new techniques brought in by the younger players. Stories about his alcohol dependence began to emerge at the same time; and as a result, the rumours started to spread. For the past few months, the celebrity gossip columns in the papers and the afternoon talk shows had been churning out the same stories: speculation that Jecht's lack of practice had finally caught up with him; that

the drinking was slowing his reactions in the sphere, and that despite his enduring popularity with the punters, his manager at the Abes was planning to force him into retirement.

All the while, Jecht continued his clandestine training regime. The extra time he spent at sea meant he was able to keep up with what was going on in the sphere, and to continue to come out on top more often than not. But he had to make sacrifices in other areas, most notably spending time with his family. He had already taken a wrong turn somewhere in his relationship with his son, who was more often than not resentful and emotional in the face of Jecht's attempts to prepare him for the harshness of life; as for his wife, she was prone to depressive periods, not as a result of some specific trauma like in Braska's case, but merely as a consequence of a long family history of mental struggles. She clung to Jecht as if he was the only thing that could make her happy.

He tried to take care of them both, but it wasn't where his talents lay. Tidus, the boy, was just as stubborn as Jecht had ever been; but being a young child, he was understandably volatile, bursting into tears with alarming rapidity. Jecht nonetheless found it irritating: his son had to be a man, and men didn't cry. He tried to encourage Tidus to toughen up, but that seemed to make him cry even more. Sometimes it seemed as if the mere sight of Jecht was enough to set him off.

So he stayed away, putting in long hours of training in the sea where nobody would find him, and, when he was with

his family on the houseboat where they had made a home for themselves, relying on the drink to dull his worries about having messed up his relationship with his son at home and created an unrealistic image of himself in the sphere.

He would have it all back in an instant, though, he knew: that life over Spira any day. He missed his wife and son terribly, although he would never admit it. The adulation he received from the blitzball-watching public was nice, and had cemented his belief that he really was someone special, but it was his family that truly mattered – not that anybody could ever know.

He plunged into the lake without hesitation, immersing himself in the cold water. It was wonderfully fresh: not full of purifying chemicals like the sphere where the Abes played their matches, and not tainted by pollution like the sea outside Zanarkand. There was good visibility, much better than he was used to in natural settings: he could see a few fiends in the distance, large and skinny green fishlike creatures floating around in groups of two or three. They made no attempt at approaching him: the armour he had borrowed was doing its job.

Jecht made a few circuits of the lake, relishing the feeling of being in the water after so long. His hair trailed behind him as he went, sleek and smooth and free; his feet were finally relieved of the dirt that multiple travel agency showers had failed to remove. He was weightless and unencumbered, back where he belonged – or at least, as close to where he belonged

as he could get in Spira.

After a long time, he emerged, standing on the lakeshore and shaking the water out of his hair and clothes like a dog. He felt thoroughly invigorated, and bounded back to the travel agency; even the sight of Auron, who was still sitting in the common area but had taken to carefully running his sword across a small, flat stone, wasn't enough to ruin his good mood.

"Hey!" said Jecht.

Auron looked up, frowned at the enthusiasm of the greeting, and gave a small nod back once he had decided Jecht didn't seem to be up to anything dubious. "You should use this too," he said, gesturing at his whetstone. "Your sword's probably getting blunt by now."

"Oh, right," said Jecht, taking a seat opposite him. He looked down at the movements of Auron's hands, trying to figure out exactly what he was doing, and almost immediately lost interest: his mind was still somewhere in the lake. "You know," he said, "I'm gonna admit it, I wouldn't have the patience for that kind of thing. I bet you could do it a hundred times better than I could."

"Probably," Auron muttered suspiciously, wondering why Jecht seemed to be complimenting him for what was probably the first time ever.

"So," said Jecht, drawing his own sword, "it'd be better for you to do it, right? I mean, if I try, I'm just gonna get the technique wrong or somethin', and then you'll get all annoyed

with me."

Auron snorted, seeing where this was going. "Right. Let me guess – a *favour*?"

"If you like," said Jecht nonchalantly.

"Fine," said Auron; he took hold of Jecht's sword. "Only because mine's done," he added.

Jecht grinned and settled in to watch, taking in the scene as Auron carefully drew the red sword across the stone. There was something oddly calming about it, Jecht thought. Auron was usually so tense and short-tempered that seeing him doing something like this cast him in quite a different light. The way concentration drew his eyebrows into a frown over his dark eyes; the way he pursed his lips minutely as those same dark eyes moved ever so slightly, their gaze flitting from one target to the next; the way he occasionally reached to his face to take hold of a few stray strands of hair that had escaped his otherwise neat ponytail, and tucked them behind his ear in an automatic gesture – it was inexplicably mesmerising, just as the sight of him bent in prayer at Macalania Temple had been.

Auron was easy on the eye, Jecht reluctantly concluded; and judging by the sort of looks his fellow guardian had been getting from many of the travellers they had passed over the last couple of days, a number of Spira's women were of the same opinion. It wasn't the case that Braska wasn't good-looking, but Jecht was sure it was hard to be drawn in by someone who went around with so much of his body

covered up; as for himself, Jecht had initially been certain that his rugged good looks would attract a lot of interest, based on his experiences at home, but maybe Spiran women were into a different type of man. It was indisputable that Auron was the one who received the most attention – although, oddly, he never seemed to notice. There were certain areas where Auron was highly skilled and very much knew it, and yet, in this one, he seemed totally oblivious.

If all those women happened to see Auron's chest, Jecht thought, he would have no choice but to notice their interest; they would surely make an even more obvious reaction. He himself was still having enough trouble taking his eyes off it on occasions when Auron removed his cuirass, despite having seen what was underneath a few times now; each time, he experienced the repeated realisation that someone could be simultaneously so infuriating and so handsome.

The sword was almost sharpened to Auron's satisfaction by the time Braska emerged from the bedroom, fully clothed. "Auron," he said, "a word, please."

Auron stood and left his station straight away, following Braska back to the room; he stood by stiffly while Braska closed the door and sat slowly on the bed, only sitting down himself once Braska gestured for him to do so.

"How are you feeling?" Auron said.

"Somewhat better," said Braska, although his expression was grim. "That's what I wanted to discuss, in fact. Auron, the

fayth at Macalania told me I was too weak. She said I needed to be stronger."

Auron nodded uncertainly.

"And with that in mind –" Braska hesitated. "Auron, I appreciate that you're trying to look after me, but we shouldn't be taking days off like this. We should have gone on to Guadosalam today."

"Sir, you could barely walk this morning," said Auron. "We wouldn't have made it."

"We would have had to," Braska insisted. "That's what this is about: pushing through the difficulties. That's how I can show the fayth I'm strong enough."

"Sir," said Auron again, "you're ill." Ignoring Braska's shake of the head, he went on. "This is nothing to do with being strong – of course you're strong. But when there are setbacks like last night – you know what things like that do to you. Do you really think you'd have been able to spend the whole day casting magic after the state you were in this morning? The plains are dangerous enough as it is – the fiends could have caused real damage."

"We'd be fine," said Braska, his voice taking on a stern edge in the face of Auron's continued defiance. "I'd have had no choice but to cope with it."

"No," Auron protested. "You wouldn't – I'm sorry, but you wouldn't have lasted ten minutes. And then what would I have been supposed to do, carry you all the way to Guadosalam?

With all due respect, sir, that seems like a pretty poor way of showing the fayth how strong you are."

"Auron!" said Braska sharply. "You're my guardian – and this is an order. We are to go on – no matter how ill you think I may be. Do you understand?"

"And what if I disobey?" Auron retorted. "Because I still think this is ridiculous –"

"Then Jecht and I shall have to continue without you," said Braska.

"Unbelievable," Auron snarled, springing up from the bed. "You know as well as I do that relying on Jecht would be disastrous. I don't care what you imagine the fayth are trying to tell you – this is completely stupid. If you're that determined to get yourself killed before we even reach Djose, never mind Zanarkand – I don't know what you think you're trying to achieve."

"You know why I'm doing this, Auron," Braska hissed. "You know what this pilgrimage means to me. And the fayth want me to push on, I can tell – I can feel it –"

"The fayth," said Auron, "weren't the ones taking care of you while you shut yourself in your house for months. The fayth weren't there when they took your daughter away because you weren't well enough to look after her. The fayth don't know you can still barely eat a proper meal. If you want to be strong, Braska, maybe you should start with that, instead of some ludicrous plan to overexert yourself and destroy any

chance of ever making it as far as the Final Æon."

"Auron!" Braska exclaimed. "That's enough – I can't listen to any more of this!"

"Well," said Auron, "I'm glad we agree on something." He turned and stormed out of the room, strapping his gauntlet on as he did so. He was livid, absolutely seething with rage, and he knew from experience that there was only one way of calming himself down when he got into this kind of temper: taking his sword and throwing himself into a fight until he was exhausted.

In the barracks, there had been training rooms where he had been able to work off these moods in a safe environment; here, there were only fiends. Auron strode into the reception area, shaking with anger, and came face to face with Jecht.

"Where're you goin'?" the latter remarked, setting his bottle of beer aside.

"Outside," said Auron. "Training."

Jecht raised an eyebrow. "On your own? Is that safe?"

"Do you care?" Auron snapped.

"Not really," said Jecht, "but I bet Braska wouldn't like it if you got in trouble out there."

Hearing Braska's name was enough to enrage Auron still further; he let out a groan of frustration. "Just get out of my way," he muttered, ignoring Jecht's expression of mild puzzlement.

Jecht hesitated for a few seconds, and then said, "You know what, I'm comin' with you. Those fiends are a lot to deal with if you're on your own, you know? Could be useful to have a bit of backup."

Auron would much rather have been alone, but he was too angry to waste time protesting. "Fine," he said. "Just don't try talking to me, I'm not in the mood."

Jecht followed Auron outside and watched as he began hacking away at the fiends, occasionally making his own contribution but mostly leaving Auron to it. Auron was attacking with a speed and ferocity that were very unlike his usual style: normally, Jecht reflected, he was much more measured and precise in his swordstrokes. On this occasion, he was landing many more hits than he did normally, but more often than not they were so poorly targeted that they did only a fraction of the usual damage.

The fiends were striking back, of course; not just at Auron but at Jecht as well. Jecht kept himself healed with potions, but every time he raised one in Auron's direction, Auron waved it off with a scowl. He had sustained several minor injuries, including a few blows to the head that had succeeded in giving him an increasingly painful headache, but still he persevered, swinging his sword wildly at the fiends and occasionally felling them through sheer desperation. Jecht looked on sceptically as Auron visibly became more and more afflicted, practically on his knees and yet still refusing the potions that Jecht thrust

towards him.

After that, it only took a few more attacks from the fiends for Auron to lose consciousness, slumping face-first onto the wet ground. Jecht, totally unsurprised, saw off the large reptilian creature that had landed the final hit, and then located some phoenix down, tossing it over Auron's back.

Auron came to, groaning as he hauled himself back into a kneeling position; Jecht once again shoved a potion in his direction. "If you don't take this one," he said, "I'm gonna fuckin' force it down your throat."

Auron snatched the potion from him and drank it, then took a few deep breaths and finally scrambled to his feet, dirty and dishevelled but cured of his injuries. He glanced at Jecht, gave him a small nod, and then hoisted his sword over his shoulder, ready to head back inside.

"Hey, wait a second!" Jecht protested, shoving against Auron to prevent him from going any further. "What was all that about?"

"Just … letting off steam," said Auron reluctantly.

"Steam?!" Jecht squawked. "What, your idea of lettin' off *steam* is comin' out here and trying to get yourself killed?"

"I'm not the one who wants to –" Auron began, and then stopped abruptly. "It doesn't matter. I don't want to talk about it." He walked on, ignoring Jecht's further complaints, and led the way into the travel agency.

Braska was sitting at the same table that his guardians had occupied earlier, doing his best to eat a light dinner; he looked up as they walked in, and his gaze fell instantly on Auron. Muddy and drenched by the constant rain, his hair and robe in disarray, Auron looked so miserable that Braska simply couldn't ignore it. "Auron," he murmured, at a loss for what he might say next in order to put things right between them.

Auron had been looking away, but at the sound of Braska's voice, quiet and gentle, he couldn't help meeting his eyes. He stood there, not bothering to hide how upset he was, feeling Jecht's curious gaze on him as he stared sorrowfully at Braska's face.

After a few seconds, Braska broke eye contact; Auron's look of utter despair was too intense to bear. "Would you get me some more tea?" he asked instead, moving his empty teacup in Auron's direction as he looked down at the table.

Auron obeyed, taking the cup with only a little less poise than usual, and heading over to the desk to ask morosely for a refill; once it had been supplied, he took it back to Braska without looking at him, and then walked off, not waiting to be thanked.

"OK," said Jecht, watching him leave, "do *you* know what that was about? Cos he's been actin' real weird tonight."

Braska knew perfectly well what was going on, having borne witness to Auron's temper enough times over the past

few years. "He'll be all right," he said, and then sought to change the subject. "Would you like to be in tonight's sphere for Yuna, Jecht?" he asked. "I was just about to take it."

"Course!" said Jecht.

Braska set up the sphere, and had barely greeted Yuna before Jecht launched into an enthusiastic recollection of some blitzball game he had played a few months ago. Listening, Braska found himself glad Jecht had taken the lead; having spent most of the day in bed, feeling awful, and then emerging only to have that terrible argument with Auron, he didn't have much he could tell her himself. After a while, he even found himself smiling slightly at Jecht's anecdote, which had turned out to be the story of an occasion when the device that kept the sphere water purified had malfunctioned, and Jecht's entire team had had to play the whole match covered in foul-smelling green goo.

With the sphere finished, they headed back to their room; Braska was steeling himself to try talking to Auron again, hoping their disagreement wouldn't be left to fester overnight. When they arrived, though, the room was dark and quiet, and Auron was already under his blanket, turned towards the wall and apparently asleep.

Braska murmured his name again – he even stooped down and laid a hand briefly on Auron's shoulder – but Auron made no response. Sighing, Braska conceded that he would have to try raising the matter in the morning; he whispered goodnight

to Jecht, and then retired to his own bed.

Chapter 9

Auron's Plan

It didn't surprise Jecht at all to learn that Auron was the type of person to hold a grudge. His own disagreements with his fellow guardian were frequent, but fleeting and petty; after about a week of travelling together, they had become tolerant enough of each other to mostly manage to coexist in peace. Whatever had happened between Auron and Braska, Jecht had realised, was altogether different. Breakfast was excruciatingly awkward with the two of them: Jecht attempted to start a conversation a few times, but Auron made no reaction, and Braska's contributions were terse and distracted. Braska was trying to find some way of reconciling with Auron, Jecht could tell; he kept looking over at him and frowning, or almost saying something before apparently thinking better of it. As for Auron, he had barely said a single word since the previous evening, and now seemed to be refusing to make eye contact with the summoner at all.

When Braska was looking away, though, Auron did something quite different: he slowly raised his eyes, and then began to stare openly at Braska, his expression changing from mere displeasure to absolute dejection. Jecht had rarely seen anyone look so completely miserable before; Auron had borne a similar expression the previous evening after he and Jecht returned from their session fighting the fiends, but Jecht had thought it was a consequence of that ill-fated adventure. At this point, he was starting to suspect that something else might be going on, although he couldn't put his finger on what. Every time Braska looked up and cast his eyes towards Auron, Auron quickly dropped his own gaze, the abject sorrow on his face giving way to mere irritation.

There was more to this situation, Jecht decided, than a simple disagreement where one party happened to lack the emotional maturity to get over himself – but he still couldn't work out exactly *what* the issue was. Not that he cared particularly about whatever was going on with Auron, he reminded himself; it just wasn't nice to think that both his companions potentially knew yet another thing he didn't.

"It looks as if we've all finished," said Braska tentatively; before he could ask Auron to go and settle up, Auron abruptly stood and left the room. Braska frowned, staring after him; then, hearing Auron's low voice as he began to negotiate with the clerk, he looked down and sighed. "I'm sorry about this, Jecht," he said, speaking in a half-whisper to ensure Auron

wouldn't hear. "We had a bit of a disagreement yesterday. Auron's – well, he tends to get like this when things don't go his way."

"Kinda childish," Jecht remarked, deciding not to mention the incredibly sad expression that Auron had assumed when Braska wasn't looking at him.

Braska shook his head. "Well, it's …" He grimaced. "It's a difficult subject, my decision, and I sometimes wonder if he's really …" Trailing off, he let out a quiet sigh. "No, he told me he understood. Sorry, Jecht – I'll speak to him later and sort this out. It can't be pleasant for you, having to watch the two of us squabble like this."

Jecht shrugged. "You're good, Braska. Ain't like I care *that* much about Auron."

They awkwardly stood, not really knowing what to say to each other, and headed into the common area, where Auron had recently finished paying. Once he had joined them, still without looking either in the eye, they headed out into the rain once more.

Braska had hoped that fighting together might make Auron more inclined to speak to him, but he had no such luck: Auron settled into a position on Jecht's other side, and continued to look pointedly in a different direction. Casting one of the protective spells on Auron would be a little too on the nose, Braska decided, so he concentrated on black magic. When one of the fiends delivered a rather nasty blow to Auron's shoul-

der, Braska prepared himself to deliver a Cure spell, thinking that finally there would be no choice but for the two of them to interact, but Auron reached for a potion and gulped it down before Braska could make his move.

By the time the battle had finished, Braska had made up his mind: he was going to speak to Auron, and he wasn't going to put it off any longer. He still didn't know exactly how he would address the matter, but he couldn't leave things to fester, especially if it meant Auron might endanger his health unnecessarily by refusing white magic. As Auron was lifting his sword onto his back, preparing to move on, Braska sneaked towards him and then took hold of his bare left wrist, forcing Auron at last to turn around and acknowledge him.

"Auron," he said calmly, once Auron's gaze had reluctantly turned in his direction. "Let's not do this – I hate it when we fight."

Auron blinked a few times as he looked down at Braska's fingers tight against his wrist, and then up at his patient, concerned face; not for the first time, the sight of those blue eyes made him feel as if someone had struck him. He closed his own eyes, and sighed, and opened them again; Braska was still there, still firmly holding him, still in possession of that indescribable mixture of gentleness and determination that had drawn Auron to him when they had first met at the docks in Bevelle more than five years ago. Braska and his decisions made Auron's heart ache; he wondered if he would ever know.

"I'm worried about your health," he muttered.

Braska smiled sadly and shook his head, running his thumb over Auron's wrist. "I'll be sensible," he assured him. "And I couldn't ask for a better person to be looking after me."

Auron very much doubted that; for three years now, he had been in this position of having to care for Braska, and he still had no idea whether he was doing the right thing when Braska was in one of his low moods. Auron had never received any instruction on how to look after him – he had merely followed his instinct, trying to make Braska feel better in any way he could, and often failing. It was one of the few areas of his work where he had sometimes felt inadequate. Much of what he had done in the corps came naturally, and the rest had been mastered after thorough training; this, on the other hand, had always seemed unfathomably complex.

"I'm sorry I raised my voice," Braska went on. "Let's put it behind us. All right?"

Auron hesitated; he was still reluctant to drop the matter, still sure that Braska would overexert himself and wear himself out. But perhaps that was inevitable on the pilgrimage, he thought, and Braska was right: Auron would be there for him, until their journey ended. He would give almost anything to protect him.

He nodded. "Yes."

Braska paused, and then drew Auron into a tight embrace, arranging his arms carefully across Auron's back to avoid the

blade of his sword. Auron reacted with a small gasp, which was almost entirely muffled by the lower part of Braska's headdress. Braska had embraced him before, but only on a handful of occasions, at times when he had been in particular need of support. He had certainly never done it when they made up after an argument; they had had enough of them for Auron to know they usually ended with a gradual, hesitant reconciliation.

Jecht, a few paces ahead of them, happened to look back at that moment and catch sight of the two of them pressed together; he quickly looked away again, his face burning. The sight of two men sharing such a tender moment was completely foreign to him: nobody would ever do such a thing in Zanarkand, at least not in public. As Jecht had repeatedly told Auron, the men where he came from were supposed to be tough; neither gentle and melancholy like Braska, nor volatile and passionate like Auron. If the guys he knew from home had seen him travelling with these two – then again, he realised, there was something undeniably genuine about his two companions. For all Auron's insistence that there was nothing more important than battle technique, he was at least committed to his principles; and in Braska's case, despite everything, it was undeniable that at his better moments he normally tried to make sure Jecht felt included in a way the guys from home had certainly never bothered with.

It didn't matter, he reminded himself with not quite com-

plete conviction. Getting back to Zanarkand was more important than anything that happened in Spira, even if there were times he forgot that.

He waited for Braska and Auron to catch up with him, and then slapped the latter on the back with a smirk. "Stopped actin' like a grouchy kid, have ya?" he said.

Auron scowled and shook off Jecht's hand; Braska drew his eyebrows together in concern, wondering if Jecht's antagonistic behaviour might call Auron's recently regained good temper into question. "Jecht," he said, "don't. Auron's entitled to express his opinion."

"*Not* express his opinion, more like," said Jecht. "Walkin' around all morning with a big frown on his face cos he didn't get his way –"

"Jecht!" said Braska again, while Auron grunted with frustration and lunged towards Jecht, lashing out with his gloved hand. Jecht evaded the blow easily, yelping in amusement. Thinking that would be the end of it, he turned away, but was caught off guard by the feeling of Auron's hands on both his shoulders, holding him in a firm grip from behind.

"Auron," said Braska, having changed the target of his ineffectual protest; Auron paid him no heed, and twisted Jecht around to face him. "You are the most infuriating person," he hissed, "I have *ever* had the misfortune of meeting, and I –"

The sky flashed white around them in a familiar warning; Jecht, the only one quick enough to react, tried to step back,

but with Auron still grabbing him by the shoulders, he was unable to move before the lightning came down right between them, forcing them apart. Both toppled onto the ground in opposite directions, while Braska stood by, wincing as he wondered whether it would be a good idea to cast some conciliatory white magic on either or both of them. Auron got to his feet, still looking murderous, but Jecht merely drew himself into a sitting position and pointed at something in the distance.

"What're those?" he asked.

Braska and Auron turned around; Auron strongly suspected that Jecht was still up to no good, but when he saw the dark shapes on the horizon, his heart sank.

"Sinspawn," he said breathlessly. "Fiends that fall from Sin's body, and –" He glanced at Braska. "We have to fight them."

Braska nodded, tightening his grip on his staff; Jecht got to his feet, his brow furrowed, and said, "So, does that mean Sin's here somewhere?"

"Probably not," said Auron. "But that's the thing about sinspawn – if nobody gets rid of it quickly enough, it draws Sin. So we need to deal with these as soon as we can." He looked at Braska again. "Ready, sir?"

The thought that Sin might be nearby was making Braska extremely worried, but he knew Auron was right: if they didn't focus on taking out the spawn, the situation could get much worse. "I'm ready," he confirmed, trying to seem confident for

the fayth's sake.

The two of them set off, sprinting towards the place where the sinspawn had gathered – Jecht followed close behind. Arriving at the scene, they all took a moment to catch their breath and evaluate the situation; a group of smaller fiends at about knee height surrounded a larger specimen, which quivered ominously, a putrid black liquid oozing from the seams in its shell.

"Cut through the smaller ones," Auron ordered his companions. "We need to get to the big one: focus on taking it down."

"Right!" said Jecht, launching himself towards one of the smaller sinspawn – it didn't take long to see it off. Auron did the same, approaching the group from the other side, while Braska stood at a distance, casting a string of thunder spells at the principal foe. It didn't seem particularly receptive to magic damage, but Auron and Jecht were occupied with trying to carve a path through the small ones, slicing in every direction while trying to evade their counterattacks.

They had almost made it to the larger fiend when there was a rumble in the sky and a volley of several more small ones plummeted down, embedding themselves in the ground in place of the creatures Jecht and Auron had already taken out. Jecht bit back a curse and stepped back; one of the fiends had grazed his shoulder as it made its rapid descent. While Braska leapt forward to heal the injury, Auron got to work on the new batch of sinspawn with renewed vigour.

"Cut the ones that matter," he advised Jecht as he did so, "or they'll regenerate. Got it?"

"Yep," Jecht said, joining the fray once more. This time, the two of them managed to forge a way through to the large fiend, and started to hack away at it. Auron's attacks were having some effect, but Jecht's were doing little damage; his sword just bounced back from its oily carapace with a dissatisfying clang. "What the hell?" he muttered.

"It's armoured," Auron explained, between grunts of effort as he struck the fiend repeatedly with his own sword. "Your sword can't cut through it – give me a moment, I might be able to break its defences." He took a few steps back, preparing to charge; then, holding his sword aloft, he made for the sinspawn at full pelt.

"Yeah!" Jecht yelled, taking a break from his own largely useless attacks to pump his fist in Auron's direction. "Go on, Auron!"

Invigorated by the encouragement, Auron landed his sword on a weak point in the fiend's shell; it let out a hideous noise, and began to convulse even more wildly. The smaller sinspawn were clustering around Auron and Jecht, battering themselves against the two guardians' legs, but they ignored the attack and continued their onslaught against the large one. Jecht's sword was finally doing some damage as it struck right into the fiend's core, gouging out more of the horrible oily liquid that had coated its shell.

"Nearly there," Auron panted, before delivering what turned out to be the final blow; both the large fiend and the remaining small ones immediately exploded into an impressive cloud of pyreflies, spiralling up into the gloomy sky. In good weather, it might have been even more spectacular; as it was, it was over in seconds, leaving behind only Braska, his guardians, and the ever-present rain.

Braska surged forward again to see to Jecht and Auron's injuries; he had mostly escaped unharmed, having been able to cast his spells from a safer distance, although his head was beginning to hurt from the effort.

He was more concerned about how close they had come to encountering Sin, however. Now that the danger from the sinspawn was over, thinking about it was unavoidable; as they walked on, Braska found himself dwelling on the thought of how he might have reacted. It was hard to imagine himself having the fortitude to do anything remotely effective: not only was his roster of æons still far from complete, but the idea of facing the creature that had taken Girl from him was unbearable. Sin was the enemy of everyone in Spira, but for Braska, it was a personal grudge. He stared down at the muddy ground below his feet, trying to think about something less dispiriting, but it was always difficult to cast such thoughts aside.

"What were you sayin' about my sword earlier?" said Jecht to Auron as they trekked across the plains.

"Hm?" Auron replied.

"While we were fightin' the sinspawn," Jecht clarified. "Your sword cut right into it, but mine just kinda bounced off – felt like I wasn't doin' any damage at all until you did that thing where you broke its shell."

"Oh, yeah," said Auron, remembering. "It's just a cheap sword. It's not good against fiends with armour, like that one."

"Right," said Jecht. "Hey, what do you mean, cheap? Didn't you even bother buyin' me a decent weapon?"

Auron scowled. "They're practically the only sort you can get in ordinary shops. If you remember, I didn't have much choice – the armourer picked it out for you. He just doesn't have a particularly good selection."

"And there wasn't anywhere better we could've gone?" said Jecht.

"No," said Auron, glaring at him. Jecht wasn't to know that Coultan was the only armourer Auron had been certain of being able to visit without getting laughed at, and Auron didn't fancy a reminder of the way he had come to be regarded by most people in Bevelle. Now that they had been away from the city a few days, he had quickly become used to being treated with respect again, just as he had been in Bevelle itself until things had gone awry. It was refreshing to be able to look a stranger in the eye and, barring a few near misses, to know that the person in question would look back at him without smirking, and that they would behave in a civil manner and have a polite conversation with him.

"How come your sword's so good, then?" Jecht said, disturbing Auron from his thoughts.

"Because," said Auron, "I was an officer in Spira's most elite combat force. It's not difficult to understand, Jecht."

Jecht made a face; Braska, despite his somewhat gloomy thoughts, couldn't help smiling a little. Auron and Jecht's return to form was a sign that the morning's tense atmosphere had vanished, and he knew he should be grateful for that. Most of their arguments were inconsequential at this stage.

They walked on, seeing off other, much less dangerous, fiends; Braska's head was showing no signs of becoming any less sore, but he pushed on, determined to prove his strength to the fayth. As they approached the southern limit of the Thunder Plains, the conversation turned to Guadosalam, the next town on their journey.

"You'll have to try and be discreet, Jecht," said Auron. "The Guado are quite conservative."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Jecht protested.

"Well," said Auron, "I doubt they'll be used to –" He gestured towards Jecht's chest, and then his unkempt hair, and his bare feet, and then gave up on pointing out specific areas and just waved a hand in his general direction. "It just might be a shock for them."

"It?!" Jecht squawked. "What are you tryin' to say –"

"The Guado are an ancient race," Braska supplied hastily. "They mostly keep to themselves – I think that's what Auron

was getting at. But they're certainly accustomed to summoners' parties passing through."

"We're not exactly an ordinary summoner's party," Auron pointed out.

"I suppose not," said Braska.

"So, what's this place got in the way of attractions?" Jecht asked. "You gonna be doin' all that holy stuff?"

"There's no temple, if that's what you mean," Auron told him. "The main feature of the town is – well, we call it the Farplane. I wouldn't say I know how it works – nobody really does – but it attracts pyreflies, for some reason. People go there to speak with their loved ones who've passed on."

"Hey, hold on," said Jecht, thoroughly confused by Auron's last sentence. "You … talk to dead people there?"

"Yes," said Auron impatiently. "Is it that hard to understand?"

Jecht merely gaped at him; Auron rolled his eyes and turned away, leaving Braska to take up the duty of explaining. "There are different theories about the Farplane," he said softly. "Some devout Yevonites really do believe that they're speaking to the spirits of the deceased, but people in Bevelle tend to agree that the Farplane in Guadosalam is unconnected to the one where those spirits actually end up. And the Al Bhed, of course, believe none of it is real at all."

"So, what," said Jecht, still just as confused, "there's two different ones?"

"If you agree with the priests of Bevelle, yes," said Braska. "The Yevonite belief is that when a person dies, his spirit turns to pyreflies and is sent to the Farplane. But the visions we see in Guadosalam don't move or speak, so it's been hypothesised that those are just reflections – the true spirits, and the true Farplane, are elsewhere."

"Right," said Jecht, ignoring the hoarseness that was beginning to creep into Braska's voice. "But fiends are made of pyreflies too, ain't they?"

"Yes," said Braska. "Fiends are –" He took a deep breath, cleared his throat, and then said, "Auron, can you explain this to Jecht, please?"

Auron frowned, but obeyed. "They're human spirits," he said, deciding that providing a calm and factual explanation might be the best way to stop Braska becoming too upset. "When someone dies, they need to be sent by a summoner in order to pass on to the Farplane. If that doesn't happen, their spirit has nowhere to go. So, in most cases, it stays on Spira and turns into a fiend, and – well, you've seen what those do. All they can think about is taking vengeance on the living. It's a horrible way to go out."

"So," said Jecht, "when we kill fiends, we're actually – you mean, they were already dead, and we're just, like, getting rid of 'em –"

"We're putting their souls to rest," said Braska, not looking at him. "Ending their torment."

Jecht nodded. "Right, yeah."

He considered as they walked on, finding it all a bit hard to believe. Fiends turned up in Zanarkand occasionally, once every two years or so; the city police were normally sent out to see them off. It was always big news; Jecht remembered a time when his spectacular achievement of five goals in a championship final had failed to take the top spot among the headlines one evening, demoted by a report on a sighting of some "dangerous unidentified creatures" on the city shore. He had been furious, and had refused to speak to the press for an entire week after that; what he hadn't taken notice of at the time was that when the creatures had been caught and, supposedly humanely, put to death, they had turned out to be made not of flesh and blood but of something that was reported as a strange multicoloured gas.

That gas had been pyreflies, he now understood – and those pyreflies, in turn, were somehow human spirits. In Zanarkand, the idea of even possessing a soul had been ridiculed; science was seen to have refuted that long ago. Life seemed somehow more profound here in Spira, Jecht thought: with Sin and Yevon and these strange ways of being reborn after death, there was a sense of meaning that Zanarkand and its constant entertainments lacked. But, he reminded himself, the bright lights of his home were infinitely preferable to the gloom and drudgery of the place where he had ended up.

"Will you be visiting the Farplane, sir?" Auron asked

Braska, when it seemed that the summoner was more composed.

Braska sighed and shook his head. "She wouldn't have wanted me to," he said quietly. "The Al Bhed don't believe in it at all – neither the Farplane in Guadosalam, nor any other. It would be disrespectful, I think, if I were to go up there and conjure her up to stare at."

"Do you think they're right?" Auron couldn't help asking.

"Perhaps," said Braska. "Forgive me, Auron, this must sound incredibly blasphemous to you. I spent a long time among them, as you know, and, well, one does tend to find one's opinions change in that sort of situation." He attempted a smile. "I know some people find it a comfort to go up there and see the faces of their loved ones, but – I must confess it seems rather futile."

Auron nodded.

"But what about you?" said Braska. "I'm sure there are people you'd like to see."

There certainly were: Auron knew death as well as anyone in Spira. He had been expecting to see lost comrades and relatives on the Farplane; the thought that Braska might not be going there himself hadn't occurred to Auron until now. He had imagined that they would go up together, and that Braska would slip off to pay quiet homage to Girl, leaving Auron to summon the visions of his own friends and loved ones. But, he realised, seeing them silent and unmoving would be a poor sub-

stitute for any real interaction – and above all, Braska clearly thought little of it.

"No, you're right," he said. "It wouldn't really be them, would it? I can't see much point in going."

Braska smiled again, with a little more success. Auron really was remarkable, he thought; he had never met another Yevonite who had the sense to think for himself. "Don't let the priests hear you say that," he said; "they'll think I've corrupted you."

"I think that would be the least of their complaints about me, sir," said Auron, and Braska even managed a chuckle.

They crossed the last stretch of the Thunder Plains as the afternoon drew on; elsewhere in Spira, the shadows would have been beginning to lengthen, although it was impossible to surmise as much under perpetual cloud cover. The storm, of course, had continued throughout their journey, and by the time they reached the southern limit of the plains, the constant rain and intermittent lightning strikes had taken their toll: all three of the travellers were sore and irritable. Braska's headache had worsened as the day went on; he had kept using black magic against the fiends, determined to prove his strength, despite Auron's tentative suggestions that he might let his guardians handle the battles on their own.

Once they emerged from the brief tunnel that led into the town of Guadosalam, Jecht looked around with interest: once again, it looked totally different from anything he had seen

so far in Spira. He was beginning to realise that these sudden changes of climate were commonplace here. Now, they seemed to be inside an enormous, twisted tree: its branches formed walls and aerial walkways, with the brightly coloured doors of homes and shops set into the hard wood. Gaps in the branches revealed not the sky but a kind of stained-glass substance that cast tinted light onto the ground; it was impossible to catch a glimpse of what lay beyond, but Jecht suspected that after the dark grey skies of the Thunder Plains, everything would would be bright and clear again. The whole place was vibrant and alive – just as busy as Bevelle, but with a very different spirit.

The oddest thing of all, Jecht realised, was the appearance of the people; they looked so strange that he briefly wondered whether he really had gone too far with his drinking. The fingers that protruded from the sleeves of the tall, gangly locals' robes were impossibly long; their hair seemed hard and twisted, just like the treelike structure of their home; and their faces were marked with prominent veins in colours that seemed to vary from one person to the next.

"Uh, who are these guys?" he said.

Auron frowned. "The Guado. Be polite."

"OK," said Jecht, "but why do they look like that? You know, with the vein stuff, and the massive hands." He wiggled his own fingers to demonstrate.

"Don't," Auron hissed. "I don't know, they're just different.

Stop staring."

He led the others to the inn in the centre of the town and arranged a room for the three of them while Braska staggered into a seat and began to massage his temples, and Jecht reached for one of his beer bottles, glancing around the reception area.

"I'm gonna go take a look around this place," he told Auron.

"Fine," said Auron, who cared very little about how Jecht was going to spend the evening. "Just try not to make a fool of yourself."

Jecht snorted and headed out, while Auron took the room keys he had been given and passed them on to Braska. "You should go and lie down," he said, before hastily adding, "sir."

"Aren't you coming?" Braska mumbled.

"No, there's someone I need to see," Auron explained, and made a swift exit before Braska could question him further.

He was making an enquiry that he didn't want Braska to know about. During his investigations before the pilgrimage had begun, Auron had found that the Guado might be of particular use to him in his quest to find some alternative to the Final Summoning, for one important reason: they had an extensive collection of archives that contained material not held in Bevelle. The Guado's conversion to Yevon was recent, the result of the efforts of their relatively forward-thinking leader, Lord Jyscal; in their collections, they still held spheres that bore records of the kind that Yevonite priests would have seen fit to destroy. There had been a long public dispute about it, in fact,

which Auron just about remembered. Bevelle had mandated that the Guado get rid of certain elements of their collection once they converted, but they had refused, maintaining that their new loyalty to Yevon's teachings was on their own terms. Jyscal had personally stepped in, and with his intervention and the need to maintain a cordial relationship with the Guado due to their being the custodians of the Farplane, the priests had withdrawn their complaint.

Auron had been given the address of the Guado archivist, Byelas. He headed to the house, knocked on the door, and, as soon as it opened, sank into a respectful bow of Yevonite greeting, for possibly the first time in several weeks.

"Good evening, sir," he said. "I am here as a summoner's guardian, and I –"

"No access to the records," Byelas interrupted him.

Auron straightened up, frowning. "I assure you, sir," he said, "I will behave with the utmost discretion. Until recently, I was a high-ranking officer in the warrior monk corps – Bevelle can vouch for me." The last part was certainly a lie, but Auron was prepared to lie as much as he needed for the sake of gaining access.

"No exceptions," said Byelas, shaking his head gravely. "Don't you think I get summoners' guardians coming here all the time, wanting to know about Zanarkand? I'm not running a sphere theatre here, boy – this is the most extensive collection in Spira, and it's not open to humans."

"I'll swear any oath you want," said Auron. "I'll pay, if you'll take gil. I'll – I'll let you take me in blindfolded, and I'll only watch *one* sphere, and then I'll never bother you again – please, sir, whatever conditions you require –"

"I said no," said Byelas, "and I meant it." He closed the door.

Auron swore under his breath, looked down at the ground for a moment, and then knocked again. Unsurprisingly, there was no response, so he kept knocking. After several minutes, Byelas appeared once more, opening the door only a few inches; Auron nonetheless managed to get his foot into the bottom of the gap, and used it to wedge the door open.

"Go away," said Byelas.

"You wouldn't want me to make a scene," Auron hissed, raising a hand to the hilt of his sword; politeness having failed to get him anywhere, he had decided to try a different approach.

Byelas laughed. "As if you'd dare attack one of Lord Jyscal's trusted advisors. Leave me alone, boy."

"I will not," said Auron. "You think I'm worried about your people retaliating? I've got Bevelle on my side – if this turns into a diplomatic incident, it's the Guado who'll come off worse."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Byelas, but the threat had made him a little less sure. If this was some kind of test of the Guado's loyalty to Yevon, he thought, there would indeed

be repercussions. On the other hand, it was impossible for humans to enter the archives, and that was non-negotiable.

He looked over the young man in front of him: Auron looked tense and tired, but he lacked the sheer exhaustion that affected most guardians who had accompanied their summoner all the way to the southern regions of Spira and back again. The residual dampness in his clothes and hair, he estimated, were also a sign that he had come south from the Thunder Plains rather than in the other direction.

"You're not long out of Bevelle, are you?" he said.

"A week," Auron replied. "Why?'

Byelas nodded, ignoring the question. "As I thought. Do you know how many summoners come through from Bevelle, thinking they're going to make it all the way south and then back here, before they fail or give up or get killed somewhere? Where's the furthest south you're going – Kilika?"

"Besaid," said Auron stiffly.

"Right," said Byelas, "then come back once your summoner has the æon from Besaid Temple. We can discuss this then – I'll know you might be in with a chance of making it."

"If you don't keep your word," said Auron, "I will raise this in Bevelle, and there will be consequences." It was a total lie – Auron knew full well that anything he might raise in Bevelle before completing the pilgrimage would be ignored – but he was confident that the news of his disgrace wouldn't have spread to the insular Guado community.

"Noted," said Byelas. "Good luck on your pilgrimage." He attempted to close the door, pulling it tight against Auron's boot and quite deliberately trapping his foot in the process; Auron stifled a gasp of pain, withdrew his foot from the gap with some difficulty, and limped back to the inn.

Braska had had a short nap and returned to the inn's common area to request a warm compress for his head and a cup of tea; he was finishing off the latter as Auron hobbled in, looking thoroughly bad-tempered.

"Are you hurt?" said Braska.

Auron shook his head. "It's nothing. I just … tripped on something." He sat down with a grimace; having to walk back from the archivist's house had made the injury increasingly painful.

"That's not like you," said Braska, who was the clumsier of the two of them by far. He set the compress on the table; it had mostly cooled anyway. "Show me?"

Reluctantly, Auron removed his boot to let Braska cast a quick healing spell, mumbling his thanks and putting the boot back on as soon as the pain had receded.

"How's your friend?" said Braska.

Auron frowned. "Sorry?"

"You said you were meeting someone," Braska explained. "I assumed it was – although I can't say I've ever known a human to have a Guado friend –"

"Oh. No, she is a human," Auron invented. "She's just working here, at Lord Jyscal's mansion."

"Goodness," said Braska, genuinely surprised. "I didn't think they'd employ humans, either."

"Well, they do say Jyscal wants to improve human-Guado relations," Auron pointed out.

"Oh yes, I had heard that," said Braska. "Quite admirable."

"What about you, sir?" said Auron quickly, keen to change the subject – he was close to losing track of how many lies he had told in the last hour. "How's the headache?"

"Tolerable, I suppose," said Braska. "Auron, there's something I've been thinking about. We need to tell Jecht about how the pilgrimage ends. We've been keeping him in the dark too long – it's not fair."

"Do you think?" said Auron.

"Yes," said Braska insistently. "The longer we leave it, the worse it's going to get; he needs to know the truth. He was talking to me about how everyone's going to celebrate, once it's over, and how Yuna will be so glad to have me back, and –" He sighed. "I could hardly bear to listen to it."

"It's just difficult to imagine that a grown adult could know so little about all of this," Auron mused.

Braska nodded. "But you do believe him now, don't you? I know you were convinced he was making it all up, but I really do think he's telling the truth."

"Yeah, I believe him," Auron admitted. "There's no other explanation – nobody would pretend to be as stupid as that."

"Auron," said Braska with gentle admonishment. He paused, and then added, "Would you tell him about the Final Summoning, then? Tonight?"

"Yes, my lord," said Auron. "I'll tell him."

"Thank you," said Braska, reaching out to give Auron's clothed arm a brief squeeze. "Now – I'm in desperate need of distraction. I expect you want some dinner – shall we go and see what's available?"

The fact that Braska was willingly raising the idea of going out to eat was a sign that his mood was relatively stable. Auron tried his best to allow that knowledge to lift his own spirits as they went in search of a café. His attempt to get into the Guado archives had been fruitless, and his forthcoming conversation with Jecht would be difficult; but, he reminded himself, at least Jecht had got himself out of their way for now, and he would be able to have a pleasant dinner out with Braska, like in the old days.

Indeed, had it not been for the fact that everyone around them was a Guado, and that Braska discreetly asked for a smaller portion as he ordered his food, the evening would have been just like those that the two of them had spent together in Bevelle years ago, when they had first got to know each other. At the time, Auron had been enjoying a meteoric rise through the ranks of the warrior monks; Braska, on the

other hand, was already vilified in Bevelle, but he was living a mostly happy life in the company of his wife and daughter. The friendship he and Auron had developed had turned a few heads, but at the time, Auron's adherence to the teachings had seemed otherwise exemplary, and even those who resented him for his swift promotions could find nothing to complain about.

Having eaten, they headed back to the inn. Jecht had returned some time earlier from his own exploration of the town, and had settled into the seat Braska had occupied previously with a few beers that he had ordered from the reception desk.

"Hey guys," he said as the others walked in. "Been havin' fun?"

"Yes, it's been quite a pleasant evening," said Braska.

"Cool," said Jecht, not especially caring about what his companions had been up to. "Hey, you didn't tell me the Guado ain't actually human, Auron! That explains why they're so freaky-lookin'!"

"Keep your voice down," Auron muttered, offended on the Guado's behalf.

"Like, I thought you meant it was some kind of genetic thing," said Jecht, using vocabulary that meant nothing to Auron and Braska, "but it turns out, even though they can walk and talk and stuff, they're literally not humans. Do you guys not think that's kinda crazy?"

"Wait until he sees the Ronso," Braska murmured, and Au-

ron suppressed a snort; the seven-foot-tall, blue-furred, somewhat catlike creatures would be sure to give Jecht a shock.

Braska gave Auron a little pat on the shoulder, and then said, "Well, I'm exhausted – I shall have to turn in. I'll leave you to it."

Auron nodded, suddenly sombre – he knew Braska was referring to what they had spoken about earlier, the need to inform Jecht about what happened at the end of the pilgrimage. Jecht was clearly drunk, he thought as he cast an eye over him, although he supposed it would have been a rarity to find him sober. Carefully, he took the seat opposite, forcing himself not to avert his eyes from Jecht's scruffy, infuriating face.

"Put that down," he said, nodding towards Jecht's mostly empty beer bottle, "and listen to me. This is important."

Reluctantly, Jecht set the bottle on the table in front of him. "What?" he said.

"I have to tell you something," said Auron. "It's about the pilgrimage. At the end of the journey, if Lord Braska gets all the æons and makes it to Zanarkand – he'll have to receive the Final Æon there, and –" He changed tack. "When a High Summoner defeats Sin, and calls the Final Æon –"

Even speaking about it in this impersonal manner, he found it so difficult to say. He always had, ever since Braska had first confessed he intended to follow the summoner's path.

"The High Summoner dies," he managed at last, looking

down at the table; Jecht, who had lifted his beer bottle again and begun to take a swig, fed up with Auron's dithering, immediately inhaled sharply, and beer flooded into his windpipe.

He bent over the table, coughing furiously, while Auron sat there and looked on with increasing rage. It was just like Jecht, he thought, to play the fool at a crucial moment – it was almost as if he deliberately set out to humiliate Auron at the worst possible time.

Jecht's throat was burning. "Fuck, Auron," he spluttered as soon as he found himself able to talk, "get me some water, will you? I can't breathe here –"

Auron stayed still for a moment; he was even more disinclined to help Jecht than he might usually have been. Finally, although not after slamming a fist onto the table in fury, he got up and retrieved a glass of water from the reception desk, setting it in front of Jecht with an amount of force that he hoped adequately conveyed his displeasure.

Jecht snatched up the glass, drinking the water down between coughs; when it was drained, he gave in to a final bout of coughing and then said, hoarsely, "So, if Braska gets to Zanarkand – he's gonna die?"

"That's what normally happens," said Auron impassively.

"And," said Jecht, "you ain't upset about that? I thought you'd be tryin' to stop him."

"I –" said Auron. He sighed, and sat down again. "I did try to stop him. He wouldn't hear of it. Anyway, it's fine. It won't

happen."

"Uh huh?" said Jecht.

Auron considered: he certainly didn't trust Jecht enough to feel wholly comfortable admitting his plan to him, but on the other hand, having to keep it secret so far had just been yet another thing to worry about. "I'm going to find a way to save him," he said, giving in to the urge. "There has to be something. I did some research before we started the pilgrimage, and there are more things I can consult on the journey. I'll find a solution."

"For the first time in, what was it," said Jecht, "a thousand years?"

"I've never failed in anything before," said Auron. "I won't fail in this. It's the most important thing I'll ever do."

Jecht nodded, unconvinced. "Right. Gotten anywhere so far?"

"There's still time," said Auron. "Anyway, try to be sensitive around Lord Braska, will you? He thinks he's not going to survive this. He doesn't need you talking about how happy everyone's going to be when Sin's defeated."

"Yeah, I didn't know!" said Jecht, exasperated. "You didn't tell me! Fuck, Auron, it wasn't like I did it on purpose."

"Well, you know now," Auron snapped; Jecht was beginning to irritate him again. He stood up, and said, "I've had enough of this. The stench of your beer is making me feel sick."

He marched off, down the corridor and into the room they had taken, trying not to make his displeasure too evident as he came face to face with Braska, who had just finished recording the evening's sphere for Yuna and changed into his nightshirt.

"How did he take it?" Braska asked.

Auron shook his head impatiently. "You know what he's like. I don't think he's that bothered."

"That's good," said Braska, clambering into bed and pulling the blanket over himself. "It's the best outcome for all of us. I hope he sees that."

Jecht, in fact, was more affected by the news than he really wanted to be. As much as he had kept telling himself he didn't care about Spira, this latest revelation about the pilgrimage had got to him. Braska meant well, he decided while making a start on his next beer: the news that the pilgrimage was expected to end in his death was undeniably unwelcome. And as for Auron, and his surely fruitless efforts to prevent the inevitable – maybe that, Jecht considered, went some way towards explaining why his fellow guardian was always so irritable and quick to anger. Not to mention the look of utter distress and misery he had seen on Auron's face that very morning: he was beginning to understand the reason for that, too.

He wasn't going to feel sad about things that happened in Spira, he told himself; the only thing he cared about was getting home. And yet the thought of how tragic the pilgrimage had to be, and the image of Auron's grief-stricken face, were

sticking with him, preventing him from enjoying his beer as he contemplated how miserable the whole situation was. There was only one thing to do, he decided: get really drunk, more drunk than he had been for a long time, and blot the whole thing out. Standing, he stumbled over to the reception desk and ordered as many beers as he could carry.

Chapter 10

A Promise

Jecht eventually made his way to the room they had booked several hours later, still clutching several unopened bottles of beer and making an extremely poor attempt to settle on his mat to sleep. After a few minutes of his noisy tossing and turning, Auron had had enough; he grabbed Jecht by the shoulder, hauled him out of the room, and, after a moment's thought, continued to drag Jecht along with him until the two of them had left the inn altogether. Leaving Jecht to disgrace himself in the common area of the inn was just as bad as having him do it in the bedroom, he had decided: it would bring even more shame upon him and Braska. Once they were outside, he finally let go of Jecht, who fell awkwardly to the ground, somehow managing to arrange himself into a sitting position.

"What's going on, Auron?" he mumbled, looking up at his fellow guardian with red, wet eyes. "What's the matter?"

"Lord Braska's trying to sleep," Auron hissed back, "and

you're making an absolute disgrace of yourself –"

"Ah, what's new," said Jecht, before letting out a long, loud belch.

Unable to look at him any longer, Auron turned and marched back inside, taking care to move quietly once he got back to the bedroom. Braska appeared to be asleep, even after the disturbance caused by Jecht's entrance, but Auron was certain that he had done the right thing in removing him from the room. He pulled his blanket over himself and lay there, staring at the ceiling, until his anger had dissipated enough to let him drift off.

Morning came; when Braska and Auron awoke, Jecht was nowhere to be seen. Auron tried not to make his relief too obvious.

"Where's Jecht?" Braska remarked, some time after the two of them had sat down to breakfast.

"Outside, probably," said Auron, and then he explained what had happened.

"Oh," said Braska gravely, putting the rest of his food aside. "I do hope he's all right."

"His behaviour was appalling," said Auron unrepentantly. "You need your sleep, sir – you wouldn't have got much last night if I hadn't taken him out."

"I suppose so," said Braska. It was true – his energy was a precious resource, and it was always important that he got

a good night's sleep, especially on the pilgrimage. Auron had been looking out for him, he told himself.

On finishing breakfast, Auron headed to the reception desk to pay, finding to his extreme displeasure that Jecht had added all his drink to the party's bill. Some expert negotiation sufficed to lower the price significantly, but even after doing that, the total was still eyewatering. He stomped back towards Braska without bothering to conceal the fact that he was already in a foul mood before the day had even really begun. Braska almost asked, but thought better of it.

"Time to move on, then?" he said instead.

Auron grunted his assent, leading the way outside. There, as expected, they came upon Jecht, who was slumped against the wall of the inn, surrounded by empty bottles; flecks of vomit clung to his beard, although he had mercifully succeeded in not getting any on his clothing. He was sleeping noisily, snoring and muttering incomprehensibly to himself.

Holding his breath in an attempt to avoid taking in the smell, Auron stepped forward, took hold of Jecht's bare shoulder, and shook him until he was awake.

Jecht opened his eyes; they gradually focused on Auron. "Oh, it's *you*," he said.

Auron had hoped Jecht might be merely hungover by this point, but he was clearly still deep in the throes of drunkenness. "We have to go now, Jecht," he said, deciding it wouldn't be worth mentioning the extortionate bill he had had to pay.

"Come on."

Jecht made a feeble attempt at getting to his feet before deciding it wasn't worth the effort; it seemed unusually difficult. He waved a hand towards Auron instead, wondering whether that might get him to go away.

"I'm sorry, my lord," said Auron, turning towards Braska. "I should have taken the drink away from him last night – I just thought, surely he'd stop –"

Braska shook his head. "You're not his keeper, Auron. This is …" He sighed. "Disappointing. But he has the right to do as he pleases."

"Not when it's our money he's wasting," Auron said, and in answer to Braska's puzzled look, he explained: "He had it all put on our bill. It made quite a dent – we'll have to be careful about what we spend for a while."

Auron and Braska had pooled their money to use on the pilgrimage; Braska had had much more of it to start with, even after signing away most of his savings to pay for Yuna's keep. There was an additional small sum he had set aside for personal use on the journey, not telling Auron at the time, but he now saw it might be required for more mundane purposes than he had intended.

"I brought along a few extra gil," he admitted. "A little travel money, I suppose. I thought maybe I'd see something Yuna might like, and I could have it posted home – well, it doesn't matter. If we have to use it, then …" He looked at the

ground and shrugged.

"Sir," said Auron.

"No, it's all right," said Braska. "It was a silly idea. If we need it for our board and lodging, then that's that – it's not as if there's any alternative."

"I suppose not," said Auron doubtfully. "Let's hope it won't come to that, anyway. If we really get into dire straits, the travel agencies ought to let us stay for free – summoner's privilege."

"Ah, of course," Braska mused, before turning his attention back to Jecht. "We should be moving on, shouldn't we?" he said. "Despite everything?"

Auron nodded, his brow furrowing as he followed Braska's gaze towards their companion; Braska, meanwhile, approached Jecht and addressed him in the sort of tone he might have used to speak to Yuna five years earlier. "Good morning, Jecht," he said. "It's time to go. Can you stand?" He turned back to Auron. "Perhaps you could help him up?"

The thought of touching Jecht for any longer than a second when he was in this state made Auron's skin crawl, but he steeled himself and then stepped forward, taking hold of one sticky hand and grabbing Jecht around the waist with his other arm. After tugging him upright, he tentatively let go, and found that now Jecht was on his feet, he was quite capable of standing unaided, even if he did sway quite dramatically from one side to the other while doing so.

The walk out of Guadosalam and into the woods that bordered it on the south side sobered Jecht up enough for him to gain some idea of what he was supposed to be doing; by the time they encountered the morning's first fiends, he was eager to fight. But he was still far too addled to have a hope of targeting his attacks correctly, instead slashing his sword about with such imprecision that he ended up doing more harm than good. Auron found himself forced to spend more time defending himself and Braska from Jecht's blows than actually attacking the fiends, managing to sneak in the odd swordstroke here and there at times when Jecht was too confused to target anything at all. He was furious, of course – utterly disgusted by Jecht's behaviour, and ashamed and embarrassed by how it reflected on the group as a whole – but he didn't want to upset Braska by starting yet another argument. Besides, he thought, Jecht was still too drunk to engage usefully with anything that Auron might say to him; so he kept quiet, stewing in his anger.

"He's not usually this bad, is he?" Braska murmured, briefly pressing a finger against Auron's arm to heal a graze that Jecht himself had unintentionally delivered. "Do you think something's upset him?"

"He's a disgrace," said Auron. "Totally irresponsible – I'm so sorry you have to be involved in this, sir."

They were drawing near to the Moonflow now: the wide river that divided the northern and southern halves of mainland Spira, famous for its calm waters and for the high concen-

tration of pyreflies that settled there by night, creating striking rainbow patterns that the river reflected and amplified. Auron had witnessed it once or twice before, travelling with the corps; it really was a striking sight, and was known justifiably as one of the most beautiful of Spira's natural wonders. Even during the day, the lilies that floated on the surface of the water were enough to stop passersby in their tracks.

On his previous visits, Auron had stood and marvelled at the Moonflow along with his comrades; but now, he unexpectedly found himself experiencing a very different reaction. It was just like the way he had felt as he prepared to cross Macalania Lake: the sight of the water was enough to make him suddenly feel ill. He could feel his heart thumping against his chest; his knees were weak; he found himself struggling to breathe, and began to gulp down lungfuls of air as discreetly as he could, hoping his sudden and inexplicable distress wouldn't cause any disruption to the journey.

Before he could think much more about it, a group of fiends rose to attack them, and with the distraction, Auron miraculously found himself able to act somewhat normally, even if he felt numb and disorientated as he did so. Jecht was still worse than useless in the fight, doing more damage to Auron and Braska than to the fiends; once they had been seen off, Auron found himself no longer able to keep quiet about it, faced with the choice between confronting Jecht and confronting his own fears.

"There's no point in even trying to fight when you're in that state," he growled. "Put your sword away before you start doing serious damage."

"I ain't gonna do that," Jecht mumbled. "I can still fight! Played some of my best matches after a few beers –"

"You've had more than *a few beers*," Auron hissed. "You can barely stay standing. You're an embarrassment."

"Don't you fuckin' –" said Jecht, before abruptly changing tack. "You just wait, next fiend we see, I'm gonna take it down, yeah? Then you'll see, you'll fuckin' see, won't you."

Auron turned away from him, disgusted by his drunken rambling – but then, looking in the other direction, he caught sight of the Moonflow again, and his chest felt as if it was about to burst from pure terror. He turned abruptly again and fixed his gaze on the trees, concentrating on the patterns their branches formed in an attempt to stave off his mounting nausea. Meanwhile, Jecht, determined to make good on his promise, dashed on, following the path as it turned a corner and heading out of sight.

Braska had looked away while they had their argument, trying not to let it agitate him; he let his gaze settle on the Moonflow. He too had been here before, with Girl; the memory was a little unclear, but he concluded that it must have been while they were travelling to Bevelle to set up their home. They had stood on this bank, he remembered, or perhaps it was the bank on the south side, and they had looked out over the river

and embraced, overcome by its natural beauty and the fact that they could freely be together at last. He had gently taken hold of the strap of her vest that lay across her left collarbone, and moved it away, and kissed her in that very spot; and they had looked at each other with such fierce love, such unwavering devotion.

He could feel his eyes beginning to sting; the memory was so frustratingly patchy. He wasn't even sure that he could properly remember what she had looked like, these days: there was an image of some kind in his mind, but as soon as he tried to concentrate on its features, it shifted and became unknown. Even the sight of the Moonflow, which had delighted him so much on that occasion, now had no effect. He looked out over its surface, and imagined himself stepping forward, sinking into the water below. It probably wouldn't take long to drown, he thought, and then he could have what he wanted.

It wasn't the time, he reminded himself with some reluctance; the pilgrimage needed to come first. He wiped the back of his hand across his face; it wouldn't be right to worry Auron, still so soon after the two of them had had that horrible argument about whether he was up to the journey. "Beautiful, isn't it?" he remarked, having decided that was the sort of thing that someone might ordinarily say in his position; he hoped the tone of his voice didn't give away the fact that he was quite sure he would never be moved to find anything beautiful again.

There was no reply; Braska turned around to see where Auron had got to, and found him leaning against a tree, pressing into it with not only both his hands but his forehead as well. His eyes were screwed tightly shut, and as Braska approached, he realised that Auron was shaking.

"Auron?" said Braska, puzzled. "Are you –"

He was interrupted by the sound of a commotion in the southeasterly direction: it suddenly sounded as if a lot of people were screaming and shouting. The noise was coming from the dock that was used to cross the Moonflow: the place that Jecht would have reached once he followed the path around the corner and headed on a little further.

Auron raised his head. "Jecht," he croaked, before immediately drawing his sword and bolting in the direction of the continued hubbub. Braska followed as fast as he could, hoisting up his robe to allow himself to run; he failed to match Auron's pace, but arrived on the scene soon enough to see what was going on.

The dock was swarming with people in a state of agitation. The two Hypello that operated the crossing were attempting to keep order, but to little effect; their race had never been particularly good at taking charge. The shoopuf, the enormous elephantine animal that carried travellers across the Moonflow, was stamping its huge feet and bellowing in distress, curling and uncurling its long trunk; strange black blood trickled out from a wound in one of its hind legs. And in front of the crea-

ture stood Jecht, brandishing his sword, the blade of which bore a telltale smear of the same dark, sticky blood.

The need to avert any further catastrophe was so urgent that Auron was able to put his troubles aside, and let his practised response to such emergencies take over: he surged forward, grabbed Jecht by the hair, and twisted him away from the shoopuf before he could do any further damage. Jecht yelped and dropped his sword in alarm, and then crossed his arms in front of his face to shield himself from Auron's ire.

Auron pulled Jecht's arms down, dragged him a few feet until he was no longer at the centre of the crowd, and pushed him to the ground, straddling him in one of the standard protective positions. "What –" he heaved, "what in the holy name of Yevon do you think you're doing?"

"Said I'd take care of the next fiend, didn't I?" Jecht protested. "Tryin' to show you I can fight – where's my sword –" He made to stand up, and Auron pressed a hand into his chest, keeping him pinned against the ground.

"You fool," he said, "you absolute, complete idiot. That's no fiend, Jecht, that's our transport across the Moonflow, which you have just incapacitated. If you weren't blind drunk, you might have seen that."

"Oh, man," said Jecht. "Shit. Look, I'm sorry, OK?"

The insincerity of the apology angered Auron still further. He had a strong desire, not for the first time, to sock Jecht right between the eyes, but he could imagine the expression

on Braska's face if he were to do so. Instead, he stood up and moved away from Jecht to stop himself doing something he might regret, stomping off to stand at a safe distance from the water. Jecht scrambled to his feet, retrieved his sword from the ground, and followed.

"Don't say a word to me," Auron hissed, turning his back on him.

"Auron –" said Jecht.

Auron whirled around to face him. "I have lost my patience with you, Jecht. I don't know what it will take for you to understand the importance of this pilgrimage. Your behaviour has brought us into disrepute at every step of the way – as if we weren't already the laughing stock of Bevelle. I've had enough of this – I can't bear to even look at you." He turned away again.

Braska, at least, had found a way of making himself useful by offering some calming white magic to the panicked onlookers; helping others always made him feel as if his own life was a little more worth living. He worked his way through the crowd, casting spells as necessary until he reached the shoopuf itself. The Hypello attendants had converged on it as soon as Auron dragged Jecht away, and had by now succeeded in calming it down significantly, although its bloody hind leg remained as a conspicuous mark of Jecht's misdeed.

"May I assist?" said Braska, raising his staff hopefully.

"No," said one of the Hypello. "Hooman magic ish no good

on shoopuf, no good at all."

"Oh," said Braska, watching as the two Hypello produced what appeared to be some kind of bedsheet and began wrapping it around the shoopuf's leg like a bandage. Their awkward gait and peculiar speech impediment were notably at odds with the gravity of the situation: they pranced around the injured leg, weaving in and out in a strange pattern that resembled a ritual dance.

"I'm terribly sorry," Braska added, once they had tied the bandage in an elaborate knot.

The second Hypello fixed Braska with its best effort at a piercing gaze. "Ish thish your doing?" it said.

"In a manner of speaking," said Braska, immediately wondering if he ought not to have admitted it. "The man who, er, struck the shoopuf – he's my guardian, you see –"

"Then yoo acshept reshponshibibility?" the Hypello continued.

Braska nodded politely. "Of course. If there's anything I can do to help, do let me know. I hope we haven't caused any inconvenience – I know there must be a lot of people hoping to cross the Moonflow. Ourselves among them, naturally."

"Yoo wish to crosh?" said the first Hypello.

"Very much so," Braska replied.

"We musht dishcush thish," the Hypello said, before turning to its colleague and commencing a conversation in their native language, which consisted mostly of clicks and whis-

tles. Braska tried to keep a straight face as they did so; it was difficult to maintain one's dignity when conversing with the Hypello in common Spiran.

Eventually, they turned back towards him, and the Hypello who had spoken last did so again. "Thish ish very serioush indeed," it said. "Shoopuf ish badly injured, yesh. Will require much treatmentsh. Very ecshpenshive."

"Oh dear," said Braska. "Perhaps I might be able to contribute. Would that help a little?"

"Poshibibly," said the Hypello impassively.

Braska excused himself and went to fetch the gil purse from Auron. "They're going to let us cross, I think," he explained. "But I do need to give them something to help them pay for the shoopuf's treatment." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "It sounds quite bad."

Auron grunted in response.

Heading back to the Hypello, Braska opened the purse and showed them its contents. "You're welcome to some of this," he said. "And I do apologise, most sincerely."

The two Hypello seized the purse, looked inside, made a few clicking sounds at each other, and then the second one spoke. "Thank yoo, yesh. We will take thish."

Braska watched, a little startled, as the Hypello emptied the entire amount of gil into the pouch it wore at its belt, and then handed the empty purse back to him, more limp and insubstantial than Braska had ever seen it.

"But I doo not think thish will be shuffishent," said the Hypello. "Shoopuf treatmentsh will require a shpeshalisht. Thish gil will not go very far, yesh."

Both Hypello were still looking at Braska expectantly. "Um," he said, "that's all we have."

"A pity," the other Hypello said. "Will be very difficult to crosh with shuch shmall shum. Perhapsh we shut croshing for tooday."

Sighing, Braska searched his robes for the extra cash he had mentioned to Auron earlier. Retrieving it, he showed the little bag he had been keeping it in to the Hypello, and watched with resignation as they inspected the money and then once again took the entire amount from him.

"Thish will doo, yesh," said the first Hypello. "Croshing will prosheed."

Before Braska was fully able to understand what had happened, he found himself corralled into a queue that led towards the lift transporting passengers onto the shoopuf's back, with Auron and Jecht joining behind. Auron was still livid, and Jecht was starting to regret how much beer he had drunk; having been shocked into sobriety by Auron's manhandling and then the realisation that he really had done something quite intolerable, he was beginning to feel ill.

They were approaching the water again, but Auron was angry enough not to be affected by it; once the lift had delivered him onto the shoopuf's back, he took a seat under the canopy

and found, in addition, that he was so high above the surface of the river it was almost possible to pretend he was somewhere else entirely. He sat resting his chin on both hands, at times glancing across at Braska, who was sitting opposite him, as a way of encouraging himself to remain calm.

Braska looked back at Auron as the shoopuf made its slow progress across the wide river; he wondered what would happen once they disembarked. He knew Auron was angry with Jecht, perhaps angrier with him than he had ever been; it was an anger that Braska agreed was somewhat justified on this occasion, but he really didn't want it to contribute to the continued deterioration of his guardians' fractious relationship. On impulse, he stood, made his way carefully across to where Auron was sitting, and squeezed into the small space on the bench next to him.

"Don't worry," he murmured, deciding not to tell Auron about the money yet.

"He's –" Auron began, and finding no word adequate to describe how poorly Jecht had behaved, he merely shook his head.

Braska extended an arm and placed it around Auron's shoulders, pulling him in close. "I know," he said. "But it's happened now. Don't let this hang over us for the rest of the pilgrimage, please, Auron. I know you're angry with him now – and so am I, to be quite frank – but that's not what's important."

Auron sighed, and then nodded slowly. "Yes. Thank you, sir."

"We'll manage, Auron," said Braska softly.

They sat in silence after that. The gentle motion of the shoopuf swimming through the river was enough to send Braska to sleep, and he drifted off with his arm still tight around Auron's shoulders; Auron was far from relaxed enough to fall asleep himself, so he sat watching Braska as his chest rose and fell peacefully, and managed in doing so to quite forget that Jecht or indeed anyone else existed.

Some time later, the shoopuf came to a stop on the southern bank of the Moonflow. Braska awoke, acknowledging Auron with an embarrassed little raise of the eyebrows, and straightened up, stretching a little as he waited for the other passengers to disembark. Auron, meanwhile, found that he had experienced so many opposing emotions over the course of the day so far that he now felt rather detached from reality. He watched numbly as the other travellers headed down onto the dock, catching sight of Jecht through the crowd; he too was hanging back, looking distinctly green.

When the lift had emptied, the three of them made their way towards it for its final descent. Nobody spoke, not only while the lift was transporting them to the ground, but after that as well, while they walked across the rapidly emptying dock towards the path that led to the southeast. Auron cast his eyes experimentally over the water, and felt a harsh twinge in

his chest, but no ill effects otherwise. Increasing his exposure to it was perhaps the key to ridding himself of this strange affliction, he decided.

They walked along the bank of the Moonflow for a while, and then suddenly, Jecht could bear it no longer; he stumbled forwards, retched, and then vomited right into the river.

"Oh, poor you," said Braska, feeling sympathetic despite himself; he made to approach Jecht, but Jecht waved him off before turning towards the Moonflow and vomiting again. Braska stepped back, grimacing, and waited while Jecht continued the thorough emptying of his stomach; when he had finished, he threw himself onto the ground with a groan.

"Yes, let's rest here," said Braska, hoping that his encouragement might quell any disagreement from Auron. He turned away, looking out across the Moonflow again, and finding himself thinking once more about how he had once believed it so remarkably beautiful. The sentiment felt completely alien to him now.

Auron, staying a few yards away from the shore, carefully sat on the ground. He too was glad of the rest, although he was beginning to feel on edge again given his continued proximity to the water. Rooting through the group's possessions, he came upon the sphere recorder, and began fiddling with it to distract himself. He inserted a sphere, switched on the device, and trained it on the river: viewing it through the lens of the sphere recorder somehow made it more bearable than

looking at it directly.

He panned across the Moonflow; it was, after all, objectively one of Spira's greatest beauties. Jecht would probably be glad of a recording to show his son, Auron thought, before remembering that he wasn't particularly inclined to do anything nice for Jecht at the moment. He found himself focusing on Braska instead, pointing the recorder in his direction in an attempt at capturing the calm dignity he exuded. Braska stood out so strikingly against the lilies, he thought, and –

It wasn't proper, he told himself. He continued to move the device slowly rightwards, coming to the figure of Jecht lying on the ground, and then switched it off, finding himself too annoyed to continue.

Braska had begun to think about what had transpired with the Hypello; he was starting to become aware that the creatures hadn't entirely been acting in good faith. They had insisted on taking all his money, every last gil, and had repeatedly told him how much it would cost to heal the shoopuf; and yet after he had paid, the shoopuf had crossed the Moonflow as normal, with a full load of passengers and no apparent difficulties. The leg that Jecht had injured must have been operating well enough to allow the shoopuf to swim through the water, he concluded. His mouth fell slightly open as he realised what the Hypello had done – it was difficult to believe the ungainly, slightly ridiculous creatures would act so unscrupulously.

Auron would never have been so gullible, Braska thought;

that was one of the several reasons why he was always in charge of that sort of negotiation, although he had been far too enraged on this occasion to have a chance of speaking to the Hypello in a civil manner. Jecht, Braska reflected glumly, would no doubt have worked out what was going on as well, had he been a little more sober. It was only Braska who was so trusting, and so inclined to see the good in everyone – often to his cost.

He would have to confess to Auron, he decided, and Auron would be able to sort it out as always. He turned around, looked down at Auron where he sat, and attempted a smile.

"My lord?" said Auron. He stood and approached Braska, looking straight at him to avoid having to focus on the river.

"I'm sorry, Auron," said Braska quietly. "I've been rather foolish. I gave all our money to the Hypello – they said they needed it to pay for the shoopuf's treatment. But I think perhaps that wasn't quite true."

Auron felt a strange mix of exasperation and affection; only Braska could be conned into parting with his money by a pair of Hypello, that was for sure.

"I even handed over my personal supply," Braska added sheepishly. "The travel money I told you about. We don't have anything left – not a single gil."

"It's all right, sir," said Auron. "We'll earn it back from fiend bounties eventually – and in the meantime, the Djose inn will let us stay even if we can't afford it. Summoner's privilege."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Braska. "I am sorry."

"It's not your fault," said Auron. He looked towards where Jecht was lying, and muttered, "It's his – the scoundrel."

Braska hummed absently in agreement, before turning back to look at the Moonflow again; Auron, not wanting to follow his gaze, stared down at the sphere recorder that he still held in his hands, and then an idea came to his mind. Jecht was so obsessed with his renown, he thought, and with capturing images of himself to take back to his son; perhaps if Auron were to insist on taking a sphere in which he drew attention to the incident, Jecht would feel bad enough about it to apologise properly, and maybe even to realise how badly he had behaved.

He flicked the device back on and began walking in Jecht's direction.

"What are you shooting me for?" Jecht moaned.

"So you don't do anything stupid again," said Auron self-righteously. "I can't believe you attacked that shoopuf," he added, being sure to specify the nature of the incident for the recording. "Lord Braska had to pay the handler for damages from his own travel money."

"I said I was sorry," said Jecht, who really did feel bad about it. "It's never gonna happen again – I promise."

"Ah, a promise!" said Auron triumphantly, pleasantly surprised that it had taken so little time for Jecht to show remorse. "Which you'll forget come tomorrow."

Braska, overhearing the conversation, doubted whether this type of strange performative punishment was really the best way forward. "Auron, please," he said. "He did apologise. He knows he was wrong."

Jecht did indeed know; in fact, while Auron and Braska had been talking, he had spent the time feeling not only very ill but also very guilty. He had angered Auron; that was nothing new, although his fellow guardian's rage certainly seemed to have reached hitherto unseen heights. But he had clearly disappointed Braska as well, and doing so mere hours after learning about the fate in store for him at the end of the pilgrimage had undeniably been in poor taste. Jecht had just wanted to prove to his companions that he was of some use to them, but all he had done was disrupt the pilgrimage and give them even less reason to have confidence in him.

As much as he had kept telling himself he didn't care about the pilgrimage, it was clear enough that what they were doing meant a lot to the people of Spira. He had noticed in his more sober moments that many of the people they passed on their journey seemed to treat them with not only solemn reverence, but a sort of quiet, tentative hope: the hope Braska had told him about on more than one occasion. People really believed that Braska might be able to defeat Sin and bring the Calm to Spira, and they believed Jecht might be part of that. It was nothing like the hard-won fame he had acquired in Zanarkand, where everything depended on keeping the media happy and

making sure to strike a balance between skill in the blitz sphere and shocking behaviour elsewhere. It was simply a chance to do something good, and if he succeeded in doing that in Spira, he might go home with a renewed sense of what mattered there as well.

Because he had been losing his way recently, and he knew it. It was the drink; he denied it as soon as anyone asked, but it was clear enough that it had become a way of avoiding everything he had to face. Drinking had allowed him to forget the demands of his home life as well as the constant need to remain Zanarkand's most skilled blitzball player. And here in Spira, too, it had been the reason for his shameful behaviour on the other side of the Moonflow. In Zanarkand, ending his reliance on alcohol would have been unthinkable; it had already come to be part of the legend he had built up. But here in Spira, nobody knew the great Jecht. Without the burden of expectation, it would perhaps be easier to make things right.

"That's it," he said, scrambling awkwardly to his feet and turning to face the riverbank in an attempt to get away from Auron's rather intense scrutiny. "Only thing I drink from now on is shoopuf milk."

Neither Auron nor Braska had expected that at all; they exchanged a brief, surprised glance. "You're sure?" Braska said.

Jecht sighed. "We're on a journey to fight Sin and save Spira, right? If I keep screwin' up and makin' a fool of

myself –" He paused, and reminded himself: a fresh start, and another chance. That was what his time in Spira would give him. "My wife and kid are never gonna forgive me," he concluded.

Auron, still sceptical that Jecht would keep his promise, kept the sphere recorder focused on him. "That's on the record," he said smugly, before switching it off and carefully pressing one of the two hemispheres it ejected into the ground with the heel of his boot.

"What," said Jecht, sounding a little more like his usual self, "think I ain't gonna stick to it?"

"I don't have much faith in you at the moment, to be honest," Auron shot back.

"Please, Auron," said Braska again, approaching the two of them. "That's very good of you, Jecht," he said. "I know you may not quite understand the significance of the pilgrimage, but it is very important to us in Spira."

"Yeah, I … I noticed," said Jecht.

"Great," said Auron flatly. "But now that you've changed your ways, we should get going."

Jecht groaned; he still felt largely incapable of getting to his feet. "Can't we stay here a bit longer?" he said. "Look at all the nice water?" He flung a hand in the vague direction of the Moonflow, and then, suddenly finding himself struck by nausea again, quickly brought it back towards his face to cover his mouth.

"I thought you said you'd realised the pilgrimage was important," Auron said stiffly, while Jecht let out the most discreet belch he could manage.

"I think," said Braska, drawing closer to Jecht, "a little white magic may be what we need here." He waved his staff carefully; Jecht doubted it would have much effect, but almost immediately found himself feeling better. "Thanks," he mumbled.

Auron turned away, eager to get on with the journey and distance himself from the river; he felt slightly annoyed that Braska had used magic on Jecht as a result of a problem that was entirely of Jecht's own making. There was still plenty of ground to cover over the course of the day, and Braska would tire himself out if he insisted on casting spells unnecessarily, he thought.

Braska, who knew this as well as Auron did, was nonetheless perfectly willing to expend his energy on making sure Jecht felt well. Jecht had just declared his intention to make what was for him a considerable sacrifice, Braska reasoned, and so it was only fair to show some kindness to him in return. He fell into step with Jecht as they walked on, half-listening to his customary long, rambling tales about Zanarkand and the son he had left behind there.

After they had travelled some distance and taken out a fair few fiends, they took a short break at Braska's request; fortunately for Auron, the Moonflow was now far enough away to be totally out of sight. Auron had been mostly ignoring Jecht

as they walked, although he had gradually found that the need to work together in battle made it slightly easier to tolerate him. When Jecht sat on the ground beside him, therefore, he greeted him with a small nod.

"What's in there, anyway?" said Jecht, looking down at the spherical two-pint jug Auron wore at his hip.

Auron placed a hand over it protectively. "Couldn't even last a few hours?" he sneered.

"So it *is* somethin'," said Jecht triumphantly. "I knew it. You put on this whole *I'm so pure, I don't drink* act, and all the time you're carryin' the stuff –"

"I never said I don't drink," Auron protested. "I just know how to do it in moderation." He frowned in the direction of the dusty ground. "Never said anything about being *pure* either – I certainly wouldn't want to make that claim."

"Quit changin' the subject," said Jecht. He pointed at the jug again, which Auron was now holding firmly with both hands. "What is it?"

"None of your business," said Auron resolutely.

Jecht groaned. "You're so boring."

"I'm not here to entertain you," Auron pointed out.

"Guess I'll have to *entertain* myself, then," said Jecht. "If I guess what's in there, will you tell me when I get it right?" Receiving only a glare in reply, he decided it was worth trying. "Whiskey?" he said. "Uh … gin? Brandy? Is it bourbon? That's basically whiskey anyway. Um …"

Auron tried his best to tune out as Jecht named nearly every type of alcohol he had ever heard of and several he suspected were made up. Taking advantage of a brief pause while Jecht tried to dredge up the memory of some obscure spirit, he muttered, "You're not doing a great job of convincing me you're giving up alcohol, when it seems to be the only thing you can talk about."

"Just gettin' it all out my system," said Jecht nonchalantly.

"Making room for the shoopuf milk?" Auron taunted him.

"You got it," Jecht replied.

Auron rolled his eyes. "You didn't even know what a shoopuf was until this morning."

"Yeah, and?"

"And you were talking about shoopuf milk, as if you had any idea it even existed," said Auron; "it just proves that you never take a second to think before you do or say anything! How can you –" He lowered his voice so Braska wouldn't hear. "I just don't understand how you make it from one day to the next without getting, I don't know, arrested, or *killed*, because you've done something totally thoughtless –"

Jecht laughed. "I did get arrested," he said. "When you met me, remember? I was in jail. Only got let out because of Braska's summoner's privilege or whatever."

"Oh," said Auron. "Yeah. So was there anything specific that got you put away, or just your general ..." He trailed off

and waved a hand towards Jecht, casting his eyes over him sceptically.

"Guess Bevelle just ain't the place to be drunk and disorderly, you know?" said Jecht. "Don't remember much, to be honest. I was probably profanin' Yevon or somethin', I guess."

"Yeah, they wouldn't take kindly to that," Auron remarked.

"Didn't even tell me how long they were gonna keep me in there for," Jecht added.

"The judicial processes of Yevon aren't exactly known for their transparency," Auron muttered.

Jecht laughed. "Figures."

At that point, Braska stood; his guardians watched as he made his way towards them. "We need to move on," he said.

"You look tired, sir," said Auron. Indeed, Braska was; the additional white magic he had used on Jecht, as well as on the people who had been queueing to board the shoopuf and had required his assistance after the fright of Jecht's attack, had drained much of his energy.

"I am," he said. "But you know we have to keep going, Auron. I have to prove my strength."

"Right," Auron muttered, declining to meet the summoner's gaze as he got to his feet.

Jecht found himself walking beside Auron on the next stretch of the path. "Hey," he said cheerfully. "You know earlier, when you, uh, found me on the dock, and you just kinda dragged me along and threw me on the ground, yeah?"

Auron glanced at him suspiciously.

"Just ..." said Jecht. "You're real strong, you know? Like, I'm a big guy! I ain't exactly light. But you just grabbed me like it was nothing."

"What's your point?" said Auron.

Jecht shrugged. "Ain't you gonna take a compliment?"

Deciding not to respond, Auron looked away. He was well aware that Jecht's compliments were normally reserved for none but himself; saying such things to Auron, in Auron's view, must have meant that he wanted something, or worse, was trying to play some kind of trick. As a result, he was very certain that the best course of action was to ignore him.

They made their way along the road that led towards Djose, seeing off the various fiends that got in their way. The worst of them was the ochu, a large, plantlike creature that routinely cast a thick green gas over the travellers, causing a terrible smell that caused all of them to become overwhelmed by nausea. Braska was forced to spend most of his time ridding himself and his guardians of this and other afflictions; the fiends would have been dispatched more quickly if he had had the opportunity to use fire on them, but that was rarely an option. After a few hours of intermittent battle, he felt almost ready to sleep even though he was still standing.

It was when he tried to heal their wounds after one of the fights that it became obvious that his magic power was completely spent: his own injuries and Jecht's were healed soon

enough, but by the time he came to Auron, he was unable to muster up enough energy even to seal up his guardian's few small cuts and grazes. Auron took a potion instead, waved off Braska's mumbled apology, and gently suggested that they retire for the evening.

"It's starting to get dark – we wouldn't have got much further anyway," he pointed out. "And we've made good progress; we'll still make it to Djose tomorrow, at this rate."

"I suppose," said Braska. He stifled a yawn behind his hand, watching with drooping eyelids while Auron assembled the tent as quickly as he could. As soon as it was up, he crawled inside and made for his bedroll, which Auron had been thoughtful enough to lay out in preparation.

Auron kept watch outside the tent, while Jecht wandered off to explore the nearby fields; not long afterwards, he limped back, bleeding and bruised in several places.

"Didn't you take potions with you?" said Auron unsympathetically.

"Forgot," Jecht grunted, reaching for the bottle Auron held out to him. After drinking its contents down hastily, he found that his injuries had vanished, and he sat down heavily on the ground next to Auron with satisfaction.

"You're lucky you didn't come off worse," said Auron. "If there's any delay before you take the potion, it increases the risk of a wound not fully healing, especially if it's serious."

"Yeah, Braska said somethin' about that," Jecht told him.

"It's fine, I'm used to it." He gestured towards his bandaged forearm, which continued to give him some trouble at times – not that he had bothered telling Braska about it recently.

"It'll be inconvenient, though, if we have to delay the journey because of preventable injury," said Auron. "You should take responsibility for looking after yourself."

Jecht snorted. "Sure. Bet you wouldn't say that if it was Braska who got hurt."

"He's the summoner," said Auron firmly, "so it's different."

"Yeah, yeah," said Jecht. He looked out towards the fields for a moment, thinking about his recent encounter, and then said, "How do people travel around here, then?"

"In what sense?" said Auron.

"I mean," Jecht explained, "me and you, we're like, expert swordsmen, so for us it's no problem, but what about the ordinary folks? How do they get from one place to the next if there's fiends everywhere?"

"Oh, I see," said Auron. "Well, if they can afford fiend-repelling armour, they wear that, of course. Otherwise … you can hire a chocobo, or –"

"Come again?" said Jecht.

"A chocobo," Auron repeated. "Big birds you can ride – they go too fast for fiends to attack."

"Big," Jecht echoed, "hold on, did you say big *birds*?"

"Is that so hard to believe?" Auron snapped. "I think we've already established that Spiran wildlife isn't the same as what

you're used to, given what happened with the shoopuf this morning."

Jecht shrugged. "OK," he said, "calm down."

Shaking his head to dispel his irritation, Auron continued. "Anyway, if people can't afford chocobo hire, it's harder to travel, obviously. You can just stock up on potions – the basic ones are pretty cheap – and try risking it. Some people would know a couple of low-level magic spells, so those can keep the weaker fiends at bay. People often just run away, too, if they find themselves in trouble; fiends don't usually bother chasing. Or as a last resort, you can travel at night, when they're not as dangerous." He shrugged. "Although quite a few people just stay in their villages, especially if they don't have a lot of money. There's not usually much need for travel if you're just a normal civilian."

"What, so they just stay in the same place all their lives?" said Jecht. "That'd drive you crazy."

"They don't exactly have a choice," Auron replied. "Tourism is a luxury. And most people don't want to go far, anyway: more chance of encountering Sin."

"Oh yeah," said Jecht. "Sin, right."

Auron couldn't help snorting with laughter at that; "What?" Jecht said.

"Just …" said Auron. He tipped his head back, looking up at the reddening sky. "The thought that someone could forget about Sin. It's just such a huge part of – of everything in Spira.

People live their whole lives in fear – they're completely traumatised by it – and you just didn't even think … life must be so different in Zanarkand. So easy." He sounded bitter, he knew, but decided it was warranted.

"It ain't like there's nothin' else to worry about," Jecht said.

"What," Auron sneered, "like who's going to win the blitzball league?"

"Fuck you," Jecht muttered. He was thinking of the decision he had made earlier. It wasn't exactly easy to navigate fame in Zanarkand, even if he didn't know how he would have survived without everyone's constant attention either. There was the question of whether his son would ever toughen up. And there was his wife and her depressive episodes – the times he had returned from training late to find her lying in bed, barely responding to his careful touches and murmurs of encouragement. Often, his presence had eventually sufficed to rouse her; but sometimes, he had just had to wait until the next morning and hope that she would be capable of keeping Tidus fed and looked after while he went out to his matches.

He wasn't going to mention any of those things to Auron: they were private. The last thing he wanted was for Auron to take pity on him.

Braska emerged from the tent soon afterwards, less exhausted after his nap, and the three of them shared out the evening's rations and ate them while Auron briefed the others on the fiends they were likely to encounter on the southern

half of the road towards Djose.

"Your turn for first watch tonight, Jecht," said Auron after Braska had made his excuses and gone off to relieve himself. "I went first last time we camped, back in the woods."

Jecht scowled; he'd been looking forward to getting to lie down and sleep for a while, to say nothing of the fact that if he had to sit in the dark on his own for hours, he suspected he would be spending a lot of that time wishing he was drinking something. Of course, he'd have to keep watch for half the night either way, but he preferred to put it off for as long as possible.

"But," he said speculatively, "we were in that travel agency for two nights, right, so that'd have been my turn and then yours, and then last night would've been me again, so you go first tonight, yeah?"

"What?" said Auron. "That doesn't make any sense. Why would we count the nights we weren't camping?"

Jecht sighed. "OK … fine. Just do me a favour, right, and take this one for me? I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"What, are you tired?" said Auron smugly, knowing Jecht wouldn't admit to it.

"Hell no," Jecht replied. "Just – come on, Auron, please?"

For once, Auron couldn't be bothered to argue. "Fine," he said, sitting down by the campfire.

Behind Auron's back, Jecht pumped his fist in triumph, before bending down and getting into the tent, where Braska had

already begun to make himself comfortable in his own bedroll. "Ah, Jecht," he said. "I was just about to take tonight's sphere for Yuna. Will you join me?"

"You sure?" said Jecht. On previous evenings, he had always been certain that Yuna would want to hear from him, but at those times he had always had a few drinks by that point in the evening and had a particularly inflated sense of his own importance. Now, for the first time, he was unconvinced that Braska really wanted him there.

"Of course," said Braska. "I'm sure she likes hearing your stories. They're much more interesting than what I usually have to say – come on, sit beside me."

Jecht crawled awkwardly across to perch next to Braska, who switched on the sphere recorder. "Well, Yuna," he began, "here we are on the south side of the Moonflow."

As he went on, Jecht chipped in here and there, but he couldn't stop himself thinking about Braska's fate: seeing him taking these spheres for his daughter was a quite different experience now that Jecht knew how the pilgrimage was expected to end. Once Braska had waved goodbye, finished the recording, and put the two halves of the sphere aside, he couldn't help bringing it up.

"So these spheres are gonna be the last record Yuna has of her daddy," he said.

"That's right," said Braska solemnly. "Of course – I'd forgotten Auron had explained how the pilgrimage ends to you

last night. I hope it wasn't too much of a shock."

"I did find it kinda hard to understand," Jecht admitted. "Might've been why I, you know."

"Hm?" said Braska.

"Well," said Jecht, "this morning – I know was drinkin' a lot before, but not usually that much, right? I think I went a little overboard last night. Tryin' to make sense of it all in my head, see."

"Oh," said Braska, finally understanding the effect learning the truth had had on Jecht. His attack on the shoopuf, he now saw, had to have been a direct consequence. "Oh, goodness, Jecht," he said, "I didn't realise. I am sorry – I'm sure it all seems very strange to you."

Jecht nodded. "I just don't get why someone would do that," he said. "And sittin' there takin' these spheres every night, like everything's gonna be fine –"

"Yuna knows what's going to happen," said Braska.

"And that's meant to make it better?"

"Yes," said Braska firmly. "Because she knows I may bring the Calm. If I can ensure her safety, that's worth more than anything." He looked down at the groundsheet. "That's one of the reasons why I'm doing this – and it's a very good one."

"Just for what, a couple years without Sin?" said Jecht.

"Or longer," said Braska. "Perhaps I can be the High Summoner who brings an eternal Calm at last."

"Never happened before," Jecht pointed out.

"It only needs to happen once," said Braska. "If I can give Yuna that gift – well, it's the only thing I can do for her now. If I hadn't been so weak, they might not have taken her from me. But I lost my chance to be her father, so this is really all that's left, isn't it?"

He raised his head; Jecht could see he was blinking back tears, and instinctively recoiled. "Uh, maybe, yeah," he muttered, retreating towards his own bedroll. "Night."

"Goodnight," Braska murmured back, glad of the sudden end to a difficult conversation. He knew Jecht would find it hard to understand his decision, but the way forward was still as clear to him as it had been for more than a year now: it was the only way he could make things up to Yuna and put an end to his own misery. He had to die.

Chapter 11

The Highest Authorities

Auron sat by the campfire, mildly annoyed with himself for having given into Jecht's illogical request with only the slightest resistance. He was normally firm in his opinions, and proud to be so; he wasn't quite as stubborn as Braska, but there was hardly anything in it. Braska didn't like seeing Auron and Jecht argue, that was clear, but as far as Auron was concerned, that was no reason to capitulate to the other guardian's whims.

He dug a little dent into the soily ground with his foot. It was particularly disappointing, he thought, that he had succumbed to Jecht's will on this day of all the days they had spent together so far. That very morning, after all, Jecht had committed his most egregious misdeed yet.

When it was time to go in and fetch Jecht to take over the watch for the second half of the night, Auron kicked some of the soil over the campfire, and then a little more, until the flame died. That would teach him, he thought, with vindictive plea-

sure. He headed into the tent, woke Jecht, and settled into the vacated bedroll, glad that the darkness obscured his smirk.

Jecht, in turn, went outside, saw that the fire had been extinguished, and headed straight back into the tent again. "Fire's out," he hissed.

Auron shrugged, affecting innocence. "You'll just have to deal with it," he whispered back as he tied his hair into its night-time bun. "We're not waking Lord Braska."

Grimacing, Jecht went back outside and made himself as comfortable as he was able beside the small pile of charred wood. Now that he was alone, he was finding it difficult not to think about how nice it would be to have a beer in his hand. Each time he had kept watch so far, he had drunk a few – never so many that he lost sight of what he was supposed to be doing, but just enough to keep himself cheerful and insulated against the cold night. Moreover, he was suddenly aware that he had nothing to do with his hands. He laid them in his lap – that felt odd – so he hung them by his sides; but that was no better.

He tried a few more positions, his hands beginning to quiver as he attempted to find a suitable place for them. He began to wonder why it was so difficult. Lying on his back, his front, his side; standing, and then sitting again; taking advantage of the flexibility he cultivated in the blitzball sphere to fold his legs up into his lap; none of it seemed any more successful than the rest.

It irritated Jecht more than it should have: the more he

struggled to find a way of arranging himself, the more critically important it seemed for him to do so. After a while, he took note of the fact that his heartbeat, which normally followed an athlete's slow pace, was unusually elevated. It only made him more restless.

He tried to imagine the feeling of a cool bottle of beer in his hand, the delicious bitter taste flowing onto his tongue. All it did was make him more desperate for the real thing. He was sitting there in the dark, he thought, and Auron and Braska clearly didn't care about the fact that he was having a singularly unpleasant time. All he needed, he decided, was one drink. Just one little beer, and then things would be all right.

He knew there were none to be had, and so he did nothing about it for some time – but just as it was becoming too much to bear, Jecht remembered Auron's mysterious jug. Whatever was in that jug, he decided, would be his salvation. He hurried into the tent, made his clumsy way towards where Auron lay sleeping, and began to shake him roughly by both shoulders.

Auron awoke slowly, confused and unsure why it felt as if he was strapped to some malfunctioning machina; eventually, Jecht's sweaty, agitated face came into focus. "What are you doing?" Auron mumbled, still not totally awake.

"I need a drink," Jecht gasped out. "Auron, you gotta give me whatever's in that jug – just a tiny sip – I'm goin' crazy here –"

"Certainly not," Auron hissed back, now fully awake and

wishing he wasn't. "You're being ridiculous. Get back out there."

"You don't understand," said Jecht urgently. "I just need one drop – Auron, please –"

"I knew," Auron whispered, "I *knew* you wouldn't keep your promise, you ruffian –"

Feeling increasingly as if he was actually about to die if he didn't get a drink of something within the next minute, Jecht decided to take matters into his own hands; squinting around in the darkness, he caught sight of a pile that had a reasonably good chance of being Auron's clothes. The jug, he was sure, would be nearby. Doing his best to clamber over Auron's bedroll, he made straight for it.

Auron realised what was going on; he sat up and reached for Jecht with the intent to impede his progress. As he began tugging Jecht down towards the ground, Jecht attempted to fend him off; undeterred, Auron clutched Jecht's arm tightly. Jecht tried to twist himself free, but succeeded only in catching and twisting his skin in Auron's strong grip; already beside himself, he let out a yowl.

That, at last, was enough to wake Braska, who sat up at once and fixed both his guardians with a glare so furious it was perceptible in the near total darkness. "What's this?" he said.

"Braska," Jecht whined at once, "I really need a drink, and Auron's not lettin' me have any of his –"

Braska paused, and then said sternly, "Jecht, come here."

Auron tentatively let go of Jecht's arm; Jecht made no move to approach Braska, having failed to see what it could do to put an end to his predicament.

"Do as he says!" Auron yelled, cuffing Jecht around the back of the head. Now that Braska was awake, and clearly not happy about having had his sleep disturbed, Auron was even more angry with Jecht than before, and he wanted to make it very clear to Braska that none of this disruption was his own fault.

With a whimper, Jecht shuffled forward towards the summoner.

"I'm going to cast some spells on you, Jecht," said Braska, "and I need you to tell me whether they make you feel better. Will you be honest with me?"

"Yeah," Jecht mumbled, and Braska laid a hand on his clammy forehead and began. It was an odd experience for Jecht, who had so far almost exclusively been the target of magic channelled through Braska's staff: having it applied directly felt very different. It seemed less immediate, but more potent somehow, and certainly more intimate – the warm touch of Braska's skin against his own lent a kind of comfort that magic alone failed to transmit.

After casting a few spells, Braska drew his hand back. "Well?" he demanded.

"Yeah," Jecht mumbled, realising that he felt a lot more nor-

mal, and most importantly, that he was no longer possessed of the strong craving for alcohol that had consumed him moments earlier. "That's – that's good. I'm good."

"Are you sure?" said Braska, in the same severe tone.

"Yeah, I swear," Jecht said, and immediately, Braska turned away and lay back down with a quiet snort of displeasure.

Jecht cast a somewhat apologetic glance at Auron; Auron shrugged back at him. "Why are you still here?" he muttered. "Aren't you supposed to be keeping watch?"

"Sure," said Jecht, and he scrambled out of the tent.

Several hours later, as the morning light began to illuminate the grass, Auron and Braska emerged from the tent and joined Jecht outside. Jecht hung his head, anticipating that Braska would still be in the same angry mood as when he had been woken up during the night; but while Auron dismantled the tent, Braska carefully sat down on the other side of the miserable remains of the campfire, and offered him a small smile.

"Are you feeling all right this morning, Jecht?" he enquired.

"Uh, yeah," said Jecht awkwardly.

"Good," said Braska. "I'm, er, sorry about my demeanour last night. It's just that I'm rather particular about my sleep, you see."

"Oh, uh, no problem," said Jecht.

"I'll cast a little more magic on you now, just to make sure that you don't experience those symptoms while we're travel-

ling today," said Braska, before raising his staff and beginning to wave it in Jecht's direction.

Auron, emerging with the tent packed away, furrowed his brow as he came upon the scene. "Should you be wasting magic like that, sir?" he couldn't help saying.

Braska looked up at him, mirroring his frown. "It's not a *waste*, Auron," he said. "We'll hardly make much progress if Jecht's in trouble. He promised he would take this pilgrimage seriously, and I owe him my thanks."

Auron turned away; he wasn't convinced that Braska owed Jecht anything, certainly not so soon after the latter had made his promise, which he was still sure wouldn't last. He knew Braska was right about the importance of ensuring Jecht was well, but watching him dole out magic before they'd even started walking made him wonder whether they would succeed in making it to Djose.

As the day went on, though, it turned out there had been no need to worry: Braska was flagging by the afternoon, as he often did, but he was still able to cast magic and in relatively good spirits. The fiends posed no particular difficulties, and Jecht had kept Braska entertained as they walked with his seemingly endless supply of stories about Zanarkand.

As for Auron, he was finding mild enjoyment in hearing Jecht's stories as well, although he tried not to show it. The city that Jecht described sounded completely reliant on machina, even more than Bevelle was: it made Auron feel a little un-

easy, but that was mitigated by the grim satisfaction he got from thinking about how most priests of Yevon would react to such tales. They would be so disgusted, he thought, that they might actually require medical intervention. It was a cruel thing to imagine, but after the way the Yevonite clergy had treated him recently, wishing ill health on them seemed an appropriate way of taking revenge.

Braska, having left the priesthood on terrible terms several years earlier, instead found plenty of amusement in Jecht's anecdotes – so much so at times that he couldn't help letting out an incredulous laugh at the absurdity of it all. Each time, it was an almost guilty sound, quickly cut short by Braska's steadfast determination to maintain his dignity, but it never failed to escape Auron's notice. Braska was laughing, Auron thought, enough for it to be something he did on a regular basis – for the first time in three years. Each time he did it, it surprised Auron a little less, but that fact was equally surprising in itself. Gradually, since that moment on the Thunder Plains, the sound of Braska's laughter had begun to become familiar again: Auron began to wonder if there would come a time when he would be able to hear it without experiencing the feeling of his heart stopping momentarily.

"It's a good thing you waited until we reached this side of the Moonflow to tell all these stories, Jecht," Braska remarked as they approached the long bridge leading to Djose. "You might have found yourself in a lot of trouble if you were to

talk about that sort of thing in Bevelle."

Jecht snorted. "Well, yeah – ended up in jail, didn't I? I'm kinda hazy on the details, but I guess that could've been why."

Braska hummed in agreement. "It was probably quite the shock," he suggested.

A shock for the priests, he meant, to come across someone saying such strange things about a holy site, but Jecht nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, it was!" he exclaimed. "Good thing you guys came along to bust me out – you know talent when you see it. Dunno how long they'd have kept me in there otherwise."

"I should think keeping you in there would have been preferable to the alternative," Braska couldn't help saying.

"Oh yeah?" said Jecht. "What alternative?"

"It's called the Via Purifico," Braska explained, sotto voce. "A sort of underwater labyrinth: people deemed to have blasphemed against Yevon are sent there to fight their way out."

"Underwater," Jecht scoffed. "Sounds easy enough to me."

"Underwater, and teeming with fiends," Braska said gravely. "The idea is that Yevon will spare the innocent, and the guilty will go to their deaths. In practice –" He sighed. "It depends whether you believe the temples or not."

"How so?" said Jecht.

"Officially, nobody has ever survived the Via Purifico," said Braska. "It's supposedly a sign that the courts of Yevon are infallible. But in reality, a few people do make it out – thank

all the fayth. The priests just alter the records to make it seem as if they were never sent there in the first place. And the victim goes free, but he's as good as dead as far as Yevonite society is concerned."

"As if that matters," said Jecht. "I don't give a shit about Yevonite society anyway. Guess they didn't reckon on the great Jecht comin' their way."

"I'm sure you're a good swimmer, Jecht," Braska argued gently, "but we still can't presume you would have made it; only the exceptionally strong ever come close. The pilgrimage is dangerous too, of course, but I daresay your chances of survival are a little higher by my side than they would have been in Bevelle."

Auron, who was walking in front, had overheard more of the conversation than he wanted; he turned around and said, "We're almost at Djose, my lord. Do you want to visit the temple this evening, or shall we go straight to the inn?"

"Oh, the inn, of course," said Braska, who had no interest in visiting the temple before it was strictly necessary, and had thought Auron would be aware of that.

"Right, sir," said Auron, and he led the way into the town.

Djose was a small settlement, built into the gorge between two large outcrops of rock; the town had come into being some time later than the temple, which was the oldest structure in the area. It had been built into another huge boulder, known as the Lightning Mushroom Rock; when the fayth of Djose had

sacrificed himself hundreds of years ago, the same rock had absorbed the powerful thunder spells that he had cast in his final attempt to protect the area from Sin, with the result that when the fayth was awakened, the rock would still throb with electricity. When Braska and his guardians arrived, though, it was still and dark, enveloping most of the man-made structure below it.

They continued to the inn, where Braska took a seat. While they had been walking, he hadn't realised quite how tired he was getting; now that the opportunity to rest presented itself, he suddenly discovered that it was just what he needed. Fortunately, he hadn't cast enough offensive spells over the course of the day to cause a headache, and so it was just the exhaustion of white magic that he had to contend with, but as he sank into the cushions, he found it difficult not to close his eyes and drift off.

Meanwhile, Auron approached the reception desk and politely explained the financial situation; they had made a little money from fiend bounties since crossing the Moonflow, but it was nowhere near enough to pay for two nights' stay. The inn was willing to help summoners in such difficulties, as he had expected, and the clerk opened up his ledger to determine a room that might be suitable, before he caught sight of another piece of paper underneath it, hesitated, and looked up at Auron again.

"I don't think I caught your lord summoner's name, sir," he

said.

"It's Lord Braska," Auron informed him.

The clerk looked down at the paper once more, and then back up at Auron, and said, somewhat nervously, "Ah. Then I'm afraid – I'd forgotten about this regulation. You're not, um, on our list."

Auron frowned. "Your list?" He remembered the newspaper article that he had discussed with Jecht, back at the agency on the Thunder Plains: the proposed legislation to require summoners to hold some kind of formal authorisation before they could journey. "But that law hasn't been passed yet," he said, "has it?"

"Oh no, it's not that," said the clerk. "This notice arrived from Bevelle this morning – it's nothing to do with which summoners are allowed to take the pilgrimage, but there are, er, instructions regarding our offer of financial support." He placed his fingertips on the edge of the paper and attempted to push it further under the ledger.

"Let me see that," said Auron, and before the clerk could stop him, he pulled out the sheet of paper from the other side.

His eyes widened as he looked it over. There were a lot of words that would take him a while to decipher, but the subject of the notice was clear even without them from the two detailed portraits that had been drawn in the centre of the page: one, a melancholy-looking young man with high cheekbones and his hair hidden under an ornate turban; the other, a still

younger man with long, dark hair, his eyebrows drawn low over his eyes and the beginnings of a military uniform visible at the bottom of the image.

They were drawings of himself and Braska, no doubt based on archival sphere footage that was months or even years old. The presence of the drawings confirmed his developing suspicion: this wasn't a list of summoners' parties who were deemed worthy of receiving financial support, but the opposite. It was a list of travellers who should be excluded from such assistance – and it looked very much as if Braska and his guardians were the only people in that category.

Auron tried to concentrate on the text enough to read it, but found himself too restless to take in more than a few letters at a time; he looked over his shoulder and found Jecht standing a few feet away, idly peering at the inn's walls as he considered the rather bold design choices that had been made during its construction. "Jecht," he said. "Come here."

Jecht raised his eyebrows to show his displeasure at Auron's attempt to give him orders, but he made his way towards him nonetheless. "What's up?" he said.

"Can you read this, please," said Auron, handing the notice to him.

"Oh," Jecht said, letting out a little chuckle as he scanned the page, but then he scowled and looked up at Auron again. "Hey!" he said angrily. "Who wrote this?"

"What does it say?" Auron demanded.

Jecht looked back up at the top of the paper. *"A memorandum from the highest authorities of Yevon,"* he read. *"Establishments providing guest accommodation are hereby given notice that the summoner and guardians named in this decree are not to be afforded any of the special protections or financial aid normally granted to journeying pilgrims. Following extensive discussions in the courts of Yevon, it has been determined that the three men listed here lack the propriety and good intentions necessary to complete a successful pilgrimage. All three have repeatedly blasphemed and rejected our teachings, and good Yevonites would do well not to waste their time and resources on coming to their aid."* He lowered the paper, looking at Auron eagerly. "OK," he said, "I knew Braska'd done stuff those guys don't like, but what about you, mister perfect? What did *you* do to make 'em so pissed?"

"Keep going," said Auron through gritted teeth.

With a snort, Jecht turned back to the page. *"The summoner Braska,"* he continued, *"depicted below left, is a treacherous individual who betrayed the trust of Yevon some ten years ago. Sent as an envoy to the Al Bhed as part of our effort to counteract their development of dangerous offensive machina, he instead shared Yevonite secrets with our enemies and fathered the half-breed child of an Al Bhed –"* He faltered. "Shit. *An Al Bhed whore. Such a man is clearly incapable of winning the confidence of the fayth and bringing the Calm."*

"That's not true," Auron muttered. "He never betrayed any

Yevonite secrets – this is preposterous. And – talking about her like that –" He looked over towards Braska, hoping he had heard none of it, and was relieved to see that the summoner was asleep, his head thrown back against the chair where he sat, his hands clasped together serenely in his lap.

"Want me to read the rest?" said Jecht.

"No," said Auron, and then he sighed. "But you'll have to. We should know what they're saying about us, even if it is all lies."

"Summoner Braska is travelling with two guardians," Jecht went on, *"both of whom openly defy the teachings of Yevon. The portrait below right shows Auron, a disgraced warrior monk who has recently been found guilty of defiling our faith with vile and obscene acts. Banished from the warrior monk corps, he has since turned his swordwork skills to the blasphemous service of his master. Inn and travel agency operators are to be warned that Auron is quick to anger and in possession of a deadly weapon.* Well, they got that bit right, anyway." He cast his eyes over the drawings of his companions, and then began to read out the next paragraph. *"Braska's second guardian, a man who calls himself Jecht, is a raving, drunken lunatic who claims to be the captain of a nonexistent blitzball team. On arriving in Bevelle, he spoke ill of Yevon and attacked several priests. No images of Jecht were found in our archives, but he will be recognised by his long, unkempt hair and his constant state of undress, along with the foul smell of beer on his breath."* He rolled his eyes. "Yeah,

yeah. That's out of date now."

"Did you attack several priests?" said Auron curiously.

"Dunno," said Jecht, "I, uh, don't remember much. But what about you – what's this about *vile and obscene acts*? Is that true?"

"You've seen how they exaggerate," said Auron.

"Huh," said Jecht, realising Auron wasn't going to get any less evasive. He turned back to the paper to read the final paragraph. *"Accommodation providers are reminded that these men are highly unsuitable for the summoner's pilgrimage, for the manifold reasons cited. While we currently have no legal grounds for refusing them service if they have the means to pay, we should like to take this opportunity to assure loyal followers of Yevon that we are actively working to prevent them from making further progress, and in the meantime strongly encourage all those who meet them to deny them the additional aid with which pilgrims are traditionally provided. By order of* – huh ..." He frowned, trying to remember where he had heard the name before. "Oh right, that guy! Ha, you're gonna love this, Auron. You guessed who wrote it yet?"

Auron grimaced. As far as he knew, there was only one person from Bevelle besides himself and Braska whose name Jecht might have known. But, he thought, it was hardly likely that something so scathing had been written by someone he had always considered a good friend –

"High priest of Yevon," Jecht read out triumphantly, *"newly*

appointed vice-chief of Crusader liaison and deputy commander of the warrior monk corps – you got it, right? *Wen Kinoc.*" He brandished the paper triumphantly; Auron looked down at it, despite himself, and recognised the letters spelling out Kinoc's name in the bottom right.

He turned away, wondering what Kinoc thought he was doing sending out this kind of notice. When he had discovered that Kinoc had spoken in favour of the motion to vet summoners before they began their pilgrimages, Auron had assumed that Kinoc just hadn't been thinking about his and Braska's journey at all, but this was clearly a targeted attack. And for Kinoc to have signed off on such offensive language being used to describe Girl – he had always disliked the Al Bhed just as much as anyone else from Bevelle, but he would know just how much this would upset and anger Braska – and Auron by extension – if they were to come across it.

None of it made any sense, he thought; pursuing Braska and trying to interfere with his pilgrimage would result in little political gain for Kinoc when he had already attained one of the highest positions in the Yevonite hierarchy.

"We'll have to camp tonight," he said glumly, trying to put aside his speculation about his friend's motives. "It's not ideal the night before Lord Braska petitions for his next æon, but they're clearly not going to help us here. At least nobody will need to keep watch – the fiends usually stay away from built-up areas."

"Not gonna try talkin' 'em around?" said Jecht.

"No, there's no point," said Auron. He wasn't opposed to begging when the situation required it, but no Yevonite would defy an order from Bevelle. "We'll leave them alone."

He cast a sharp look at the man behind the reception desk as he said it, but found him studiously avoiding his gaze, and decided there was nothing left to do beyond collecting Braska and leaving the building.

Braska was still asleep, and failed to respond to Auron's quiet coughs and even to Jecht's somewhat louder barks of his name; eventually, Auron was obliged to sit beside him, place a hand on his shoulder, and lean right in towards his face as he murmured, "Lord Braska. Sir."

The firmness of his touch and the insistent invitations to wake up were at last enough for Braska, who slowly opened his eyes and cast Auron a look of disdain, instinctively annoyed to have had his sleep interrupted; after a moment, he realised who was waking him, and rearranged his features into an apologetic smile. "Is the room ready?" he asked.

Auron shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, his hand still resting on Braska's shoulder. "It looks like we won't be able to stay here after all."

"Oh," said Braska. "But the summoner's privilege – didn't you say yesterday –"

"There's some kind of directive from Bevelle," said Auron, taking care not to be too specific about the contents of the no-

tice. "They've told people not to spare us their charity, effectively. Without the gil, they won't have us."

"Us in particular?" said Braska.

Auron nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"Very well," said Braska, sighing and straightening himself up. "We'll be camping tonight then, I suppose?"

"We'll have to," Auron confirmed. "I'm sorry about this, sir. I know it's not the best news to receive just before you're due to go to the temple – I hope this isn't too upsetting."

"Upsetting?" said Braska. "Oh no, Auron, we both already knew the Yevonites had it in for us. And I'm sure Jecht's realised that by now as well. This is hardly a surprise."

He moved to stand; Auron let his hand fall from Braska's shoulder hastily. "If anything," Braska announced, "this makes me still more determined to prove them wrong. I'll make them understand, Auron – their teachings have nothing to do with the fayth's trust. When I leave the temple tomorrow, the æon of Djose will be with me, mark my words." He turned in the direction of the clerk, and added, "Did you hear that?"

"Sir," Auron hissed.

"I'm just following orders," the clerk said warily.

"Clearly," Braska shot back. "And perhaps instead, you should learn to think for yourself, as my guardians and I have." With that, he swept out of the inn, leaving his guardians to catch up.

Jecht raised his eyebrows at Auron as the two of them followed Braska out; once they were outside, they found him standing not far away, looking up at the temple with a steely gaze.

"I'm sure you'd like to rest, Lord Braska," said Auron. "I'll get the tent ready."

He began putting it up; eventually, Braska turned to Jecht with his best attempt at a smile. "I should take Yuna's sphere before I end up falling asleep again," he said. "Shall we?"

They sat on the ground to record the sphere together, telling her everything they had observed about Djose while carefully avoiding any mention of the inn. Jecht finished off with a heavily expurgated version of one of the Zanarkand stories he had told Braska earlier, and then Braska signed off with his usual wave and reminder to Yuna that he loved her, before switching off the sphere recorder and pocketing the two halves of the sphere carefully.

"Have you taken any of these for your son recently?" he asked Jecht.

"Nah," Jecht admitted, "not really. We're gonna be comin' back this way later, though, right? Keep thinkin' I can just put it off until then."

"We may not be passing through Djose again," said Braska. "This is something of a dead end. It depends how Auron has planned the route, but I wouldn't take it for granted." He located a blank sphere, and handed it to Jecht along with the

device. "Here, you should take one. I'm going to go and lie down, I think."

As Braska walked off towards the tent, Jecht slotted the sphere into the recorder and switched it on. "Hey, Tidus," he said a little awkwardly, pointing the device up towards the temple. "Uh, I guess when you see this I'll be back home with you, and I'll be able to tell you about it anyway, but … well, here we are in Djose. That big building is the temple – Braska's gonna go in there tomorrow and pray to the fayth. I don't know exactly how it works – seems like it's kinda tough, though. But me and Auron'll be there to help him."

He paused, taking in the scenery. "Braska's the summoner we're travellin' with," he explained. "He's a good guy. And Auron, uh, he's kind of a dick. But once you get to know him, he's …" He trailed off, unsure how to explain what he currently thought of his fellow guardian. "Ah, forget it."

He had run out of things to say; it was difficult to connect with Tidus even at the best of times. "Well, catch ya later," he mumbled, and stopped the recording.

Burying one of the hemispheres and keeping the other in accordance with the custom, Jecht couldn't help thinking about Tidus. It was odd to think he had gone more than a week now without hearing the kid crying, he thought. That certainly hadn't been something he'd expected to miss.

In his peripheral vision, he noticed Auron heading towards him, and he turned to face in his direction, eager to put the

thought out of his mind. "What's up?" he said.

"I was just thinking about dinner," said Auron sombrely. "I didn't think we'd need rations for tonight – I only prepared one evening's worth in Guadosalam. We still don't have enough money to buy anything. One of us will need to go out and see if we can forage for something – not both, I wouldn't like to leave Lord Braska on his own. Especially while he's sleeping."

Jecht thought for a moment, and then said, "I'll go – gives me somethin' to do, you know. You can stay here with Braska. That OK?"

"Do you know what you'd be looking for?" said Auron, who rightly suspected that Jecht had no experience in foraging.

"I'll figure it out," said Jecht cheerfully. "Can't be that hard, right?"

Auron raised his eyebrows, once again amazed by the fact that Jecht seemed to enjoy making as few preparations as possible for anything he became involved in. "Right," he said, "fine. Braska probably won't want much food, but, well … I'm quite hungry."

"You and me both," said Jecht with a grin. "Sure, I'll see what I can find. See ya!"

Auron watched as Jecht jogged off, and then, with little else to do, returned to the tent. Both he and Jecht were tall enough to find it slightly cramped at the best of times; on this occasion, with the three of them all trying to sleep in there together, it looked as if it would be an uncomfortable night. Braska had

already taken up his usual position at the far side, and Auron went to sit on the neighbouring bedroll, drawing his knees up to his chest as he predictably found himself thinking back to the matter of Wen Kinoc's somewhat concerning actions.

He hadn't got very far with puzzling out his friend's motives even by the time Jecht returned and peered into the tent. "Hey," he hissed. "I found some stuff, wanna come have dinner?"

"Great," said Auron. "Give us a minute."

Jecht nodded and withdrew, while Auron turned towards Braska. "Sir?" he said.

Braska, who had been facing the other way, slowly looked up at Auron. The light filtering into the tent from outside was still sufficient for Auron to notice that Braska's eyes were red and a little moist, and that was enough to make him immediately forget that they were supposed to be going out to have their food.

"You said you weren't upset," he said; it came out sounding a lot more accusatory than he had intended.

"I'm not," said Braska, but tears began to coat his cheeks even as he spoke. "I'm just – I don't know – you know this just happens sometimes –"

"I thought you were going to tell me if you needed support," Auron murmured, reaching to take Braska's hand.

"I'm sorry," Braska sobbed. "Awful of me – I –"

Auron shook his head, squeezing Braska's hand more firmly. "That's not what I meant. You don't need to apologise, sir; I just want to help you."

Braska sniffed a few times before replying. "They must all hate us so much," he said quietly. "I'm used to it, of course – and it's not as if I don't deserve it – but you must be finding it so hard."

"You don't deserve it," Auron insisted, not for the first time. "And I'm … I'm all right. It's like I said before: being away from Bevelle helps. I haven't been thinking about it much; there are other things that are more important."

"Like looking after your poor friend while he lies in his bed feeling sorry for himself," said Braska, wiping his eyes. "I'm sorry, Auron – I'm sure you never thought being a summoner's guardian would be like this."

"I knew it would mean doing whatever you need, sir," said Auron; and then, in an attempt to dispel the familiar sensation of tightness that had arisen in his chest, he at last turned his attention back to Jecht's summons. "Jecht's found us some dinner," he said. "We should go and eat."

"Oh," said Braska, releasing his guardian's hand. "You go – I don't think I'm –"

"You need to have something, sir," said Auron. "Especially when you're going to the temple tomorrow. Just a little," he added, seeing that Braska still seemed reluctant.

"I suppose," said Braska, and he sat up and let Auron hand

him his headdress and robes, putting them on over his nightshirt and wiping his face one last time before he followed Auron out of the tent.

Jecht had done a good job of the foraging; he handed some of the grains and leaves he had found to the others, trying not to look too closely at Braska when it was obvious he had been crying again. Braska's mood seemed to improve over dinner, though, and he was beginning to look less miserable by the time the three of them returned to the tent to sleep. As Auron had suspected, it was a tight fit with all three sharing the same quarters. Sandwiched between Braska and Jecht, he unquestionably had the worst deal, and found that Jecht was particularly restless, prodding and kicking him in the side sporadically as the night drew in. Eventually, he became tired enough to be less bothered by the disruption, and fell into a sleep that, given the day's events, was relatively untroubled.

Chapter 12

Different

The three of them woke the next morning stiff and sore after a night spent squeezed into the tent together. Jecht quickly made his excuses and headed off for a morning jog; Auron wouldn't have minded doing something similar himself, but he was aware that Braska probably needed support when he was due to speak to the fayth that same day, especially after how things had gone the previous evening. He stayed in the tent, massaging his neck and waiting for Braska to stir next to him.

Slowly, Braska forced himself to face the day ahead. The thought of going to the temple and petitioning the fayth was no more appealing than it had been in Macalania, but he knew it would be a mistake to put it off. The fayth there had told him to be strong; he had to show that he was prepared to face the ordeal of receiving the next æon, or it would be even harder.

He turned over, looked up into Auron's dark eyes, and

mumbled, "Morning."

"How are you feeling?" Auron asked.

Braska considered for a long time, and then said, "Adequate."

"Are you sure you're ready?" said Auron.

"I haven't much choice, Auron," said Braska. "I'll manage."

They dressed and headed outside for breakfast; Jecht had kept back some fruit that he had found the previous evening. Braska wasn't at all hungry, but he forced himself to eat, knowing he needed the sustenance. After that, Auron packed away the tent, and Braska remained seated on the ground, concentrating on staying composed.

"I wish we could have spent the night at the inn," Auron said as he collected the tent poles. "You can't have slept well."

Braska shook his head. "There's nothing we can do about it," he murmured.

Auron grunted in response; he was still annoyed by the notice from Bevelle, and by the man in the inn's insistence on complying with it. Summoners deserved respect, he thought, especially when they were about to commune with the fayth. Given that Braska had made it to Djose, it would have been obvious that he had already received an æon in Bevelle and probable that he had gained a second in Macalania, and that ought to have made it clear that the fayth had granted him their favour. Anything put about by mere humans was supposed to

hold less sway than that, although he knew the people of Spira would always be eager to follow orders from Yevon.

Jecht returned, in a good mood after his jog; Auron frowned, and said, "You're late."

"Oh yeah?" said Jecht. "We gonna head already?"

Auron turned to Braska. "Sir?"

Braska nodded. "Yes," he said, almost to himself. "I shouldn't put it off. I need to be strong."

"I'll pray for you once we're inside, my lord," said Auron.

Jecht immediately assumed a rather unimpressed expression; Auron felt his jaw clench, but he restrained himself from reacting visibly and led the way into the temple, pausing so Braska could use the nearby sphere to transmit a record of his progress to the authorities. True to his word, Auron made straight for the statue of Lord Gandof and sank low to the ground, taking up the most pious posture of prayer he could. It had granted him a little more patience in the face of Jecht's behaviour last time; he could only hope to benefit from the same effect again before having to spend hours with him waiting for Braska to emerge from the fayth's chamber.

Behind him, Jecht was getting impatient. He had sneaked a few glances at Braska and each time had been disconcerted to see that the summoner looked dangerously close to crying. Braska could cry all he wanted once he was alone with the fayth, Jecht thought, but he didn't want to be anywhere near it himself. Auron had implied his prayer would benefit

Braska somehow, but all it seemed to be doing was delaying their progress and making it more likely that he would have to witness Braska's inevitable breakdown.

"Hey!" he said, at last deciding enough was enough. "Are we gonna make a move or what?"

Auron drew himself up incredulously, and snarled, "Excuse me?"

Jecht shrugged. "Thought we were in a hurry. You said I was late – you're always tellin' me there's no time to hang about –"

"But this is –" said Auron, gesturing towards Lord Gandof's statue in angry disbelief. "That's not – I was praying, Jecht! *Someone* has to, and I don't see you making any attempt –"

"Well, it don't seem like Braska cares about it either," Jecht pointed out. "So why bother?"

"It's important to him," said Braska, almost inaudibly.

"Not to you, though, is it," said Jecht confidently. "Never saw you doin' any of this stuff."

"Do you mind?" said Auron, still outraged enough to fail to notice Braska wincing a little at the sound of his raised voice. "This is a temple, Jecht – if Lord Braska doesn't want to pray himself, that's not my business, but –"

"Yeah," Jecht argued, "and you keep sayin' he's the only one that matters! Braska gets the bed, Braska gets to decide

how long we rest, Braska can sleep instead of keepin' watch – if he don't wanna pray, no point doin' it at all, right?"

"This is a temple," said Auron again. "It's my faith."

"And not his," said Jecht.

"But that doesn't mean –" Auron broke off and ran a hand over his hair. "I'm his guardian, and – you can't expect me to accompany a summoner into a temple without taking a moment to pray! That's absurd!"

He turned to look at Braska, and added, much more calmly, "I'm sorry about this, sir. I had thought Jecht was starting to learn some manners, but I must have been unduly optimistic."

"Please don't, Auron," said Braska, not meeting his guardian's gaze.

Auron sighed. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I really am – I didn't mean to upset you. You should apologise too," he muttered to Jecht, elbowing him in the side; Jecht stepped away with a small noise of indignation, but after that, he looked at the ground and said, "Yeah, sorry, I guess."

Braska mumbled something incomprehensible in reply before turning his back on his guardians and heading towards the elderly priest who stood at the foot of the staircase leading to the fayth's chamber. He took a deep breath, and then spoke more loudly, trying to sound as confident as he could. "Good morning. I am a summoner, from Bevelle – I seek an audience with your fayth."

"Oh – really?" said the priest, which was an unusual reaction: most people recognised Braska's role from his staff and robes. "And these are your guardians, are they?" he added, as Auron and Jecht approached.

Braska nodded.

"You have guardians who insist on making a spectacle of themselves, do you?" the priest went on. "All that shouting – I've never heard the like of it in a temple. You should be ashamed of yourselves – especially you, young man," he said, turning towards Auron, who had been louder at the height of the disagreement. "Have you no respect for Yevon?"

"I'm truly sorry," said Auron quickly, ducking his head in contrition. "It was a personal dispute – we both let our emotions get the better of us. All I can do is reiterate how ashamed I am; our behaviour was unseemly, and" – he hesitated so minutely that only Jecht noticed – "may Yevon punish us for our misdeeds."

The priest folded his arms with a little grunt of disdain. "You'll understand," he said, "that I'm hardly inclined to allow you to pass, after that display."

Braska was so shocked that he couldn't help letting out a brief gasp; Auron glanced at him momentarily, and then forced himself to turn back to the priest. "Please don't take this as a reflection on our lord summoner," he said. "We were both wrong to argue like that, and he tried to stop us – his concern was for the sanctity of this place. He is a good man, whose

only mistake was to take pity on two flawed, imperfect people and choose them for his guardians; but under his guidance, we are learning to improve ourselves."

Jecht just about kept himself from rolling his eyes at that – in his opinion, Auron was laying it on a little thick. The priest seemed taken in though, he noticed; he slowly nodded while Auron kept talking.

"If you must ban the two of us from the Trials," said Auron, "at least allow our lord summoner to pass. We are the only ones at fault here, and we humbly repent, but we would understand if you were to deny us passage – just please don't punish him as well."

It was Braska's turn to glance at Auron: if he was required to navigate the Trials, speak to the fayth, and find his way out alone, the task would be significantly harder, and he already wasn't feeling his best. But Auron was doing what he could to ensure Braska could pass through, and Braska supposed he should be grateful for that – until he remembered that it was Auron's behaviour that had got them into this situation in the first place, and he was suddenly much less inclined to feel any warmth towards him.

"Is this true?" the priest said, looking back at Braska. "You took these men into guardianship because you pitied them?"

Braska swallowed. "Yes," he whispered, and then he spoke again, forcing his voice to come. "Yes. They were both poor unfortunate souls, lost and directionless without true knowledge

of Yevon – that education had sadly been denied to them. I brought them with me so they could learn the true importance of the teachings." It was, in a way, half-true.

Nodding slowly with an expression that was now beginning to show sincere sympathy for Jecht and Auron's plight, the priest now looked towards Jecht, taking in his all but heretical appearance, and then said, "And what have you learnt about the teachings so far, sir guardian? Do you understand why your lord summoner is undertaking this most noble quest?"

"Uh," said Jecht. Auron turned around to look at him as he tried to come up with a suitable answer, glaring with such intensity that Jecht was surprised not to find a pair of holes burning themselves into his face.

"Well, as far as I know," he said eventually, "Sin goes around destroyin' stuff, and summoners are the only ones that can stop it, so they have to, uh, get the æons, and then have some kinda battle. And then Sin goes away, but it comes back again later, right? And the summoners always die when they fight Sin, so we need to make sure there's enough of 'em, cos otherwise Sin would just be around forever, and maybe it'd get stronger or somethin' if there was nobody around to stop it. So … guardians need to protect summoners, and everybody else needs to support 'em too, cos they're important. Hope," he concluded triumphantly. "They give Spira hope. And they're the only people that can do that, so the rest of us all

just need to help out as much as we can."

"Oh, you poor man," said the priest. "I'm sure you lived in terrible conditions before your lord summoner found you."

"Oh yeah, real bad," said Jecht cheerfully, correctly surmising that this was what the priest wanted to hear. "I used to just lie around drinkin' all the time, didn't know anythin' about Yevon or any of that. If it wasn't for this pilgrimage … I dunno, I might even be dead or somethin'. Used to get mixed up with a lot of bad guys, you see."

"Or maybe you'd be in prison," Auron couldn't help muttering.

Jecht nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, probably."

"How awful," said the priest. "May the blessing of Yevon be on you – both of you. Your lord summoner has done you both a great service. It is no easy task to sculpt simple, ignorant folk into good, pious men, and I see he still has much work ahead of him." He gestured towards the steps behind him, and turned to address Braska once more. "You may proceed. I shall pray for your success. It cannot be easy with guardians such as these."

"It's not," Braska muttered, before he gathered his robes in front of him and began to head up the stairs, his guardians following behind.

As soon as they were through the door, Jecht let out a quiet laugh. "Oh man," he said. "Fooled him good."

Auron ignored him and looked towards Braska instead; the summoner was still and quiet, his gaze turned towards the

ground. "Sir?" he enquired.

"I cannot believe," said Braska softly, "that the two of you almost put an end to this entire pilgrimage." His voice wavered as he spoke; his eyes were beginning to sting.

"Sir," said Auron again.

"No, Auron," said Braska, more loudly but just as unsteadily. "I'm not interested in more of your apologies. You know what this pilgrimage means to me." He paused. "And to everyone in Spira, of course. I'm very disappointed in you both."

Auron looked down, unsure of how to respond. He knew Braska had already been struggling when they entered the temple, and the fact that the priest had considered denying them passage had clearly been a significant setback. Braska was on the verge of tears again; it didn't bode well for his chances with the fayth.

"We gonna do this, then?" said Jecht awkwardly, gesturing at the wall in front of him, where two glowing spheres flanked a circular door.

"Maybe we should wait here for a while," said Auron, still looking at Braska, but the summoner shook his head vehemently.

"We'll go on," he said, even as the last syllable he uttered turned into a harsh sob.

"Are you –" Auron began.

"Yes, I'm *sure*, Auron," Braska snapped, raising a shaking hand to wipe his face.

Tearing his gaze away from Braska, Auron looked ahead instead, trying to focus on the puzzle that had presented itself to them without much success. He couldn't see anything to indicate which of the two spheres in the wall should be moved, nor where it ought to go; he stared blankly at them some more, and found himself distracted by the irregular sniffs and hiccoughs coming from Braska's direction.

"No problem," said Jecht knowledgeably, moving to Auron's side. "The great Jecht'll sort this one out, just you watch."

Auron looked at him and sighed. "Fine," he said. "Go ahead."

In little time, Jecht had opened the door; there, he immediately realised that the rest of the puzzle was somewhat more complex. A corridor led the way to more spheres and more indentations, and there was a symbol of the holy alphabet in the middle of the floor upon which sat a pedestal of the same type that had had to be pushed around interminably at Macalania. Jecht frowned as he surveyed the scene in front of him: it was too complicated for him to solve by intuition alone.

Now that they had moved forward and left Braska further behind, Auron found himself more able to concentrate, and he examined the spheres as well, looking at the lit and unlit tracks that ran along the floor and walls, before eventually murmuring, "This one."

Between the two of them, they slowly managed to manipulate the puzzle until it was solved, with only a brief and relatively peaceful debate about who would need to cross the lightning pit that had revealed itself in order to push a second pedestal that lay on the other side. Jecht maintained that Auron would be the lighter of the two of them, as he was slightly shorter, and that would make it safer for him to use the rather unstable-looking platform; Auron pointed out that Jecht was wearing fewer clothes than he was, and was therefore likely to be less weighed down overall. Eventually, Auron conceded just to break the stalemate, although he insisted on removing his robe first, and left Jecht holding it and his sword while he carefully leapt across the gap.

Eventually, they jointly succeeded in correctly placing the remaining spheres, so that the symbol on the ground was fully lit; a platform formed on its surface, clearly their means of ascending to the upper level and reaching the chamber of the fayth. "That's it, then," said Auron. He turned to look back in Braska's direction, and added, "I'll go and get him."

Drawing near, he found that Braska had retreated into a sitting position on the ground, leaning against the wall with his eyes closed, but had mercifully stopped crying. "We've finished the puzzle, my lord," he said. "Perhaps you should –"

Braska opened his eyes; he scrambled ungracefully to his feet, taking hold of his staff, and began to make his way towards the platform without a word.

"I was about to say," Auron added, following behind him, "maybe you should take some more time to rest, before you go in? Sir?"

Braska continued to ignore him; he strode towards the platform and hastened onto it without a glance at his guardians. They hurriedly joined him before it began to ascend; as it brought them to the upper level, Braska headed on just as quickly, continued up the stairs to the left, and made his way without hesitation towards the door set into the opposite wall of the antechamber. He laid a hand on it and it rose to let him through; he walked on resolutely.

Groaning in frustration as he reached the top of the stairs himself, Auron kicked at the wall, flung his sword aside, and sat down heavily on the ground with a glare in Jecht's direction.

"Oh, what," said Jecht, appearing behind him, "is it my fault now? You mad at me again?"

Auron looked down at his feet for a long time before answering. "I'm angry with myself," he said. "I'm disappointed in *myself*. I shouldn't lose my temper like that – Braska's right, I nearly cost him the pilgrimage –"

Jecht chuckled. "He's just as bad as you are," he pointed out. "Goin' from zero to fuckin' breakdown in sixty seconds."

"He's not well," said Auron. "He has an excuse – I don't."

"Not an excuse to be a dick," said Jecht.

"He wasn't being a –"

Jecht cut Auron off. "Look, he knows you didn't mean to get us in trouble with that guy. And you're the one that got us out of it, too, comin' up with that stuff about Braska liftin' us out of our miserable existence or whatever. And after that, he still goes and gives you the silent treatment? He's bein' a dick, Auron. Just like you were, after you guys had that other argument before."

Auron looked down again, and said, very quietly, "He's not."

He carefully retrieved his sword from the ground, laid it across his lap, and ran the fingers of his gloved hand across the flat of the blade. Then, he tucked a few stray strands of hair behind his ear, and added, "It's my fault. I deserve it."

"Oh, man," said Jecht, rolling his eyes. "You know what, Auron? Self-pity really ain't your thing. What happened to *I'm the greatest warrior monk in Spira with my big sword that can cut through anything, I'm gonna find a way to stop Sin without anyone havin' to die*? Huh?"

Auron said nothing; Jecht shoved against his arm, causing him to flinch away violently, and said again, with much more insistence, *"Huh?"*

"Do you mind?" Auron hissed, rubbing his arm where Jecht had dug into it.

"Well, when are you gonna stop actin' so fuckin' sorry for yourself?" Jecht demanded.

"I didn't realise I was offending you so much," said Auron.

"Damn right you are," said Jecht.

"Forgive me," said Auron, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

Jecht smirked; passive-aggressive Auron was a significant improvement on the pathetically remorseful version he had just experienced. "That's the spirit," he said cheerfully. "You gotten anywhere with that, anyway? The changin' the Final Summoning thing?"

"Maybe," said Auron. "I might have a lead with the Guado – I'm planning to ask again when we head back. Other than that, I –" He frowned and cut himself off. "Why am I telling you this?" he muttered. "It's not as if you care!"

"Yeah?" said Jecht. As much as his primary aim was still getting back to Zanarkand, he thought it was pretty clear by now that he did have some investment in the pilgrimage – the decision he had made on the bank of the Moonflow was evidence enough of that, he thought. But Auron was evidently too concerned with other matters to have noticed, and, Jecht decided, maybe it would be better to keep things that way.

"Just makin' conversation, Auron," he said, stretching his arms out casually. "You don't gotta talk to me if you don't wanna."

Auron grunted in response, and that was the last either of them said for a long time.

It took a sudden loud noise outside for the two of them to break their silence. The sound was like a spark of electricity,

followed by a great rumbling all around them; it quickly died down to a low hum.

"That a storm startin'?" Jecht guessed. "Better be over by the time we get outta here. Wouldn't wanna camp out in that."

Auron shook his head. "No," he said, "it's the rock. The one that surrounds the temple – you remember? That's why they call it the Lightning Mushroom Rock."

"What?" said Jecht.

"Well," Auron explained, "you know the shape of a mushroom –" He gestured with both hands. "When a summoner addresses the fayth, the temple releases energy in the form of lightning, and the lightning parts the rock and suspends the pieces in the air around the building."

"So, like, there are just big bits of stone floating there? Man, this place is crazy," said Jecht. "I gotta go see this."

He made for the exit, and was barely surprised to hear Auron calling him back immediately. "No, Jecht," said Auron, "we have to stand guard. He might need us."

Jecht made a face. "You think he'll be out already? The last one took hours and hours."

"You never know," said Auron. "He was successful with the fayth there – but here, if it rejects him –"

"You think that'll happen?" said Jecht.

"Well, I hope not, obviously," Auron replied, "but if it does, he could be out at any time."

"Huh," said Jecht. He thought for a moment, and then came to a sudden realisation, moving closer to Auron to point an accusatory finger in his direction. "Ha!" he exclaimed. "That's what you want, ain't it? You want the fayth to turn him away, so he don't gotta do the Final Summoning!"

"No," said Auron, "I –"

"You want him to survive, right?" said Jecht. "So you're just waitin' for one of 'em to say no – admit it."

Auron shook his head; this was something he had spent a long time thinking about. "You saw what he was like today. If the fayth denied him, he'd be – it would destroy him. I need to find some way of seeing the pilgrimage through and keeping him alive at the same time – it's the only solution." He turned to look at the door that led to the fayth's chamber, not wanting to acknowledge the sceptical expression on Jecht's face, and added, "But I think we might be in trouble. I wasn't expecting the fayth to take so long to appear."

"How so?" said Jecht.

"As far as I'm aware," Auron said, "the fayth normally manifests itself pretty much as soon as the summoner begins to pray. That's when the lightning is released and the rock opens. I assumed we just hadn't heard it from in here, but if that was it just now –" He glanced back towards the door again. "That means he was in there that long before the fayth showed itself."

"So what does that mean?" Jecht prompted him.

"I don't know," Auron admitted. "But it's probably not good."

Auron was right; it had indeed been a long time before the fayth deigned to appear. Braska had entered the chamber, which was mercifully connected directly to the previous room on this occasion, unlike in Macalania. He had knelt in prayer immediately, doing his best to forget the unpleasantness that had come before, but nothing had happened; and so he had stayed in the same position, fervently willing the fayth to speak to him even as his knees became increasingly painful against the stone beneath them. After some time had passed, his legs were numb and had begun to tremble, but he ignored the discomfort and persisted, trying to focus totally on his mental entreaty to the fayth.

Eventually, it paid off; he heard a low, calm voice above him. "Summoner."

Braska scrambled to his feet, gasping in pain, and looked at the spectre in front of him. It was a middle-aged man, much older than the fayth of Macalania, dressed in archaic clothes that Braska nonetheless recognised as belonging to someone who was a sailor by trade; the top of his head was hidden under a large tricorn hat.

"Others would have given up by now," the fayth said. "With no answer to their call – they would have accepted that they lack what is needed to gain my æon. But you, summoner – you did not turn back."

I waited, Braska thought, and I would have waited hours more. Days.

"Do you desire this so much?" the fayth asked him.

More than anything, Braska thought.

"You have impressed me, summoner," the fayth went on. "Determination is a great quality. Many summoners lack it – they think the pilgrimage will be some merry jaunt up and down Spira, with the occasional excursion to call upon one of my fellows; the moment something impedes them, they back away at once, professing never to have wanted our aid at all. We grow tired, summoner, of such inconstancy. But I sense it in your mind – you are dedicated. Your sole aim is the Final Summoning."

Yes, thought Braska. Absolutely. It is my only goal.

The fayth continued to observe him wordlessly.

But, Braska couldn't help thinking, you doubt me, do you not? Your delay in approaching me – it must be because you find some fault in me. Tell me what I lack, and I will do all I can to overcome it – I will show you that I am worthy of your æon.

"You are right, summoner," said the fayth. "I did not appear to you, because within your mind I sensed thoughts that troubled me. Such thoughts would hinder summoners on their journey; and in you they are dark and strong. If you continue fomenting such thoughts, you will not meet success."

Tell me, please, Braska thought again.

"In life," said the fayth, "hundreds of years ago, I was a merchant sailor. I travelled up and down the Moonflow, buying and selling goods at the villages on its banks. And those times were hard: there were storms, famine, raids – and Sin, of course."

Braska nodded. He knew a fair amount of Spiran history: Sin had been a near-constant threat for the past thousand years, but it had rarely been the only hardship that the people had had to contend with. In many ways, things were better for his generation than they had been in the past, even outside the relative safety of Bevelle.

"It was a difficult time," the fayth said again, "and no man would have managed such a task on his own, of that I am certain. You see, summoner: I was not alone in my duties. I was part of a whole crew of men, some strong, some quick-witted, some diligent. None of us was a perfect man, but no man can be perfect when he works alone. Together, we fulfilled our duties. It was teamwork that allowed us to achieve our goals; without it, we would have failed."

He offered Braska a stare that was no less piercing for its incorporeality. "And summoners are the same," he continued. "Without his guardians, a summoner is nothing. *Nothing*. Your guardians protect you, summoner; they guard you from fiends by night, and they advise you, and they take your hand when you are unwell and uncertain; and above all, they are crucial in your journey to the Final Æon. A summoner who approached

Zanarkand with no guardian would be unable to proceed. It is impossible to succeed in your quest without guardians. And yet, summoner, when I look into your mind, I find doubt and resentment towards the men who accompany you."

Had Braska been speaking out loud, he would have covered up his true feelings with an apology; but his instinctive reaction was too forceful to hide when the fayth had access to his thoughts. They wronged me, he found himself thinking. They embarrassed me. They almost threw away the pilgrimage.

"It was not your guardians who jeopardised the pilgrimage, summoner," said the fayth gravely. "Nobody has the right to decide who may gain the æon of Djose but me. And when you approached, I was disinclined to hear your supplication. I sensed that displeasure that you harbour towards your guardians, and I was certain that such a man would never be worthy of my æon."

"No," said Braska, sheer desperation driving him to speak out loud.

"When I was a sailor," said the fayth, "and one of my crew made an error of judgement – when a man misspoke, or acted wrongly, or neglected his duties – we showed him mercy. He repented, and we forgave him. For we needed his strength. It did us no favours to cultivate rancour among us. You must show that same spirit towards your guardians – for while they protect you, you are their guide. You are leading them towards the promise of a safe, peaceful Spira, and if they make mistakes

on that journey, it is because they are human."

Braska nodded slowly, too sorrowful to attempt to shape his thoughts into words. The fayth was right; he couldn't deny it. Anything the priests and the temples might say about who was allowed to pass through to the Cloister of Trials was so insignificant, in comparison with the decisions of the fayth themselves, and Braska had lost sight of that. He had been so volatile, so quick to turn against his guardians, that he had turned away from what really mattered. He had been cruel to Auron, mere days after their last awful argument; on that occasion, he had embraced Auron and sworn to put such disagreements aside. It had been Auron who was stubborn then, and Braska who had sought to repair their friendship; and now, he realised, he was the one who had gone too far.

I was wrong, he thought at last. I see that now. I too am human, and flawed, and petty, and – I should have forgiven him. It did no good to act in that way.

"Summoner," said the fayth, "it cheers me to hear that you repent. I can tell that you are sincere, and that you understand the importance of this matter. But how am I to know you will not err again? How can I willingly grant you my æon, when that bond with your guardians is so delicate?"

Let me show you, Braska begged him. Look into my memories – you will see that I treasure him. Please.

"Very well," said the fayth, and he stepped forward and clamped both ghostly hands onto Braska's shoulders.

Immediately, Braska's mind was transported to the day he had first met Auron – that cold, windy day at the docks. He felt his own mouth smile, and the sensation of it was like being punched in the stomach – he had been that happy once. Cast out from Yevon, friendless, anxious about his family's future, and yet, in essence, happy; the emotion felt as if it belonged to another man.

He watched glumly as the images of the past moved on, showing his developing friendship with Auron. A disgraced ex-priest becoming friends with one of Bevelle's most promising young warrior monks had certainly turned heads, and Auron had had pressure put on him to abandon their alliance; but he had been true to his own beliefs, as he always was. Braska watched those memories unfold, and saw how loyal Auron had been throughout; he had never wavered.

And then: the worst period of Braska's life. Girl was gone, and everything was dark and slow, and Braska felt it again, that awful feeling of complete despair. He had lain in his bed for days, weeks; the house had been so quiet with Yuna sequestered away in some convent that Braska had sometimes thought, in his grief, that he had died himself. But it was Auron who had insisted on visiting him, coming to sit at his bedside even when Braska tearfully requested that he turn back and leave him to fade away. It was Auron who had brought him food and coaxed him to eat when he felt sick and weak, and who had helped him gain the strength and the courage to

leave the house and walk among the people of Bevelle as if he was anything like them.

The images changed; Braska undertook his summoner's training, and still Auron was by his side, making preparations for the practical elements of the pilgrimage while Braska did his best to ensure he was spiritually ready. They had several terrible arguments at that time about Braska's fitness to undertake the journey and Auron's motives for accompanying him, and as Braska relived the memories of those moments, he found himself struck by the passion they had both had, and the way each of them insisted his own way of doing things was what was right for the other, as if each of them knew the other better than the other knew himself. Perhaps it was true, Braska thought sorrowfully.

They came to memories that were more recent again, just a few weeks before the pilgrimage: Auron's ordeal. Now it was time for Braska to look after him in turn. He had welcomed Auron into his home when almost everyone else in Bevelle had turned against him; he had healed his injuries, and done his best to minimise the emotional damage in tandem, and the need to take care of Auron had made him feel a little less worthless for a short while. At the same time, he had begun to wonder whether to recruit a second guardian, worrying that Auron's duties might be too much for him so soon after his troubles.

Neither of them had expected a man like Jecht; there

were no men like Jecht to be found anywhere in Spira. As he watched the scenes of their first meeting, and those tense first few days on the road, he wondered what the fayth made of him. Jecht was ignorant of Spiran ways, and he made mistakes, but Braska appreciated his presence; as dear as Auron was to Braska, he had never been good at relaxing and enjoying himself. It was a relief to have a guardian to whom these things came more naturally, just to alleviate a little of Braska's misery.

They were both such a help to him, he reflected; especially Auron. The thought that his own stubbornness had almost cost him the pilgrimage hurt even more when he considered it: if he could just focus a little less on his own difficulties sometimes and consider his guardians, he would remember how much he ought to be cherishing them. As the memories stopped and he returned to the present, he looked up at the fayth and whimpered, "I'm sorry."

The fayth nodded solemnly, keeping his grip on Braska's shoulders, as Braska felt himself dissolve into tears once again. I'm sorry, he thought, thankful that there was no need to force words out between his sobs. You were right – without them, the pilgrimage would be nothing. Without him, I would already be gone, without even the merest hint of a Calm in exchange.

"Summoner," the fayth intoned, "I see now that you do treasure your guardians. You must not lose sight of that."

Never, Braska thought, never. I promise.

"You know there is one more thing we must do to complete the ritual," said the fayth. "Do you wish to go on?"

After the strain of witnessing his own memories, Braska felt ready to pass out, but he knew this was a test: if he asked for some time to pause and gather his emotions, it would be proof that he lacked the strength and dedication to gain the æon.

Yes, he thought.

"This will be difficult for you," the fayth said. "You are already troubled – this will cause you pain."

Show me, Braska implored him.

Suddenly, his mind was filled with images again, and he understood the life that the fayth had described to him. He watched as countless journeys across the Moonflow ended in calamity, as men and valuable cargo were lost to storms and Sin; he saw the desperation of the villagers when their homes were destroyed time after time. And on each occasion, experiencing the memory so vividly, he felt their sorrow and pain within himself, and each new tragedy he witnessed was like a new wound.

Just one thing provided a degree of respite: the camaraderie among the sailors. Braska watched, and understood their closeness; he saw that their unwavering loyalty to the crew was the one thing that gave them the courage to persist in their service. And he knew that his own pilgrimage would

be the same: when they drew near Zanarkand, and came close to the end, his own guardians would be his only source of strength. The hope that he and Auron always spoke of was completely dependent on their bond.

The images faded, and the fayth leant in close. "Your guardian," he said urgently. "He is not like us – he is different. He may be the one to end our torment. Do not forget."

He let go of Braska's shoulders; immediately, Braska's knees buckled, and he lost consciousness.

Chapter **13**

With Compliments

In the antechamber, the noise of Braska's fall to the ground was loud enough to be heard by Auron and Jecht, whose conversation had dried up some time earlier. Auron turned his head towards the sound, wincing a little; he could guess that it signified the end of the fayth's ritual, although not whether it had been successful.

"He'll probably be out in a moment," he said.

"Sounds like he fell over," said Jecht.

Auron hummed in agreement.

"Ain't you gonna go check on him?" Jecht suggested.

"It's against the teachings," said Auron. "Only summoners can enter the chamber of the fayth. I'm sure he'll be all right." The last sentence wasn't entirely true: he was still worried that something had gone wrong, especially when it had taken such a long time for the fayth to appear. But Braska was already angry with him, and would be incensed if he were to disrupt

the sanctity of the fayth's chamber, he knew.

"The teachings?" said Jecht; the phrase took him back to the notice he had read at the inn. "Didn't they say you defiled those, or whatever?"

Auron sighed. "Supposedly."

"Aw, you can't leave me hangin'," said Jecht, grinning. "What did you do?"

"It's not –" Auron began, and then he looked towards the door again. "I don't want to discuss it," he said.

"Sounds like it was real bad," said Jecht gleefully. "But, hey, if you already did something Yevon don't approve of, what's the harm in doin' it some more?"

"That doesn't follow," said Auron. "Regardless of what the priests think of me, I still try to follow the teachings when I can. It's only when –" He paused. "Sometimes the way the teachings tell you to live just conflicts with who you are. And that can't be helped."

He looked down, and resolved to say no more; he had already revealed too much to Jecht, certainly a lot more than he had ever planned to.

Jecht was about to try provoking him into elaborating, but fortunately for Auron, the door to the chamber of the fayth creaked open at that moment, and they both turned to see Braska staggering out, leaning heavily on his staff as he slowly advanced towards them.

Auron stood immediately and made his way to Braska's side, supporting him as he took a few more steps before gently guiding him to sit on the ground, studying his demeanour for some clue as to whether he had been successful. Braska's face was pale and drenched in sweat; his eyes were downcast and it seemed that he barely registered Auron's presence. It looked bad, Auron thought, but it was impossible to tell.

He sat beside Braska, placing a hand against his arm, and looked up at Jecht, who seemed revulsed by what he was witnessing. "You're not going to bail this time, I hope," he said pointedly.

Jecht sighed, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Looks like you got it covered," he mumbled.

"You could assist," Auron pointed out. "If you've got any potions on you, for example; and ether, if we have any –"

Nodding in resignation, Jecht searched his belongings and succeeded in finding both a potion and a bottle of ether, which he hastily passed to Auron while doing his very best not to linger on Braska's distressed expression. Auron unstopped the bottles and handed them one by one to Braska, using his other hand to guide Braska's towards each bottle and then to his mouth.

After drinking both, Braska was more lucid, and he clutched Auron's hand tightly while he regained his senses, forcing out slow breaths in an attempt to ground himself.

"My lord," said Auron quietly, "may I ask – did you succeed?"

Braska nodded slowly, and then spoke, his voice halting and distant. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I have the æon. Ixion." He didn't recall the fayth telling him the æon's name out loud, but now that its spirit was within him, he knew it instinctively.

"Well done," said Auron, squeezing Braska's hand in return as an attempt to distract himself from the familiar mixed emotions he was experiencing.

Braska was becoming more aware of his surroundings by the moment. Soon, he remembered the fayth's warning, and the fact that he had left his guardians on bad terms; he recalled the intensity of his anger, and the shame of it made him almost breathless.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, clutching at Auron as his eyes began to fill with tears again; he bent forward to hide his face in Auron's robe. "Sorry," he moaned again; "I'm sorry, Auron, forgive me –"

"It's all right," said Auron, holding onto Braska tightly with both hands. "It's fine."

"And you too, Jecht," Braska sobbed, looking up so he could determine where Jecht was standing before reaching towards him with a shaking hand. At the sight of Auron's stern look, Jecht reluctantly stepped forward and met the hand with his own, finding it grabbed with surprising strength.

"Uh, it's OK," he said, before quickly letting go and retreating again, ignoring Auron's unimpressed expression.

Once Braska's distress seemed to have subsided a little, Auron decided it was time to raise the suggestion that they might leave the temple. The prospect of returning to the tent with Braska in this condition was grim – it would have been far preferable to have a proper bed to take him back to, along with the other comforts that the inn would have provided – but at least Braska would be able to lie down, which was better than continuing to sit on the cold, hard temple floor.

"Can you stand, sir?" he asked.

Braska wiped his eyes and nodded, and Auron took that as his cue to hoist him to his feet, keeping his own arm securely fixed against Braska's back as Braska whimpered and gripped Auron tightly in return, swaying from side to side a little as he tried to balance himself.

"Jecht," Auron hissed. "I could do with some help here."

Looking extremely put out, Jecht nonetheless moved to Braska's other side to add the support of his own arm, and the three of them advanced slowly and clumsily towards the stairs that led back down towards the exit. Once they reached the steps, it was impossible to keep going with all three abreast, so Jecht detached himself and walked in front, turning to face Braska so he could catch him if he stumbled forwards.

They reached the lower floor after a few near misses, huddled together on the lift that took them back to the

Trials, and made their way through the corridor towards the temple atrium; Jecht positioned himself in front again as they advanced down the second set of stairs leading to the main hall of the temple, and then he returned to Braska's side for the walk back outside.

Having retreated to a quiet spot away from the main path through the town, Braska sat on the ground while Auron and Jecht erected the tent together, and then Auron guided Braska to his bedroll and assisted him in removing his headdress, taking out his own handkerchief to dab at Braska's clammy forehead; afterwards, he looked down at him with concern while Braska lay there, twitching and grimacing in discomfort.

"Does it hurt a lot, my lord?" he asked softly.

Even the sound of his gentle voice made Braska's head throb; he squeezed his eyes tightly shut in response. Auron watched him with increasing despondency; potions were never sufficient to assist in situations like this, and it seemed as if Djose's fayth had taken the greatest toll on Braska yet. There were a few rarer medicines that would be useful, but they were difficult to obtain on the road. If they had been permitted to use the services of the inn, it was likely that he would have found something there to help, particularly as the establishment was fairly close to the temple. Auron looked at Braska's creased brow, ran a hand over his shoulder, and then decided that the situation was untenable; the inn was bound to have medicine, and he was going to need to convince them to give him some.

"I'll be right back," he promised, slipping out of the tent before he had a chance to gauge Braska's reaction to his departure. Jecht was sitting on the ground outside, having decided to keep his distance; he looked up hesitantly when Auron emerged.

"Do you have the money?" Auron asked him.

Jecht did; he handed over the purse, still mostly empty apart from the few fiend bounties they had collected since crossing the Moonflow. "Ain't much in there," he noted.

"Yeah," said Auron, looking inside. "I know this won't get us far, but as a gesture –" He closed the purse firmly. "Lord Braska needs medicine. I'm going to go back to the inn and see if they'll spare us anything."

"Want backup?" Jecht said.

Auron shook his head. "We shouldn't leave him on his own. You should stay here in case he needs one of us."

"Oh," said Jecht, "uh, maybe you should do that, and I'll go ask for the stuff? You're better at –" He waved a hand towards the tent. "You know."

"I'm better at this too," said Auron brusquely, before turning and heading towards the inn.

He went inside, and was disappointed to find the same clerk as the previous day on duty. "What do you want?" the man asked.

"My lord summoner's in a bad way," said Auron, emptying the contents of the purse onto the desk. "I know this isn't

much, but if there's any medicine you can spare us, we'll be grateful."

The clerk looked down with disdain. "That'd barely get you a potion," he said. "You know the rules: we can't help you."

Auron ran a hand through his hair. "Please," he said. "This is all the money we have at the moment – you can take it all, and I'll repay you in kind, too, if there's anything you need help with. Lord Braska's really not well – I'm worried about him." He watched with increasing desperation as the clerk made a careful show of inspecting his own fingernails. As much as Auron wanted to slam a fist onto the desk to force him to pay attention, he knew getting angry would only make things worse.

"Your fayth clearly sets a formidable challenge," he said instead, wondering if flattery would be a productive route. "Lord Braska's emotions were already compromised when he went in to make his petition, and as I understand it, he was nearly unsuccessful in winning the æon."

At that, the clerk looked up sharply. "Hold on," he said. "Your summoner has the æon?"

"That's right," said Auron, "as of about an hour ago. We're just back from the temple."

"Oh," said the clerk, frowning.

"Perhaps I wasn't clear," Auron went on. "It's the fayth that put him in this state – I think he reacted badly to the ritual. He managed to complete it, but it seems like it was very painful for him."

"Right," said the clerk; he tapped the notice that Auron and Jecht had read the previous evening, still on the desk in front of him. "That's … interesting. The man who brought this from Bevelle seemed certain that he would have no chance of gaining our æon. He said nobody who had committed such heresy against Yevon would manage it."

"But he already has the æons of Bevelle and Macalania," Auron pointed out.

The clerk nodded. "Yes. He told me Bevelle's fayth is undiscerning, and he suggested Macalania was a fluke, but if your summoner has ours now, as well –" He blinked down at the desk distractedly. "We do have a little pack that we usually give to summoners. If yours really has won the trust of the fayth, perhaps Yevon should be on his side after all. I wouldn't want to get in his way, if he's …"

He sighed, and then reached underneath the desk and retrieved a small box. "Here. Don't mention this to anyone, but there are some things in here that might help."

Auron gestured towards the money on the desk. "Do you want –"

"No, keep it," said the clerk. "You're going to need it. Yevon preserve you."

"I appreciate it," said Auron, sweeping the coins back into the purse. "You'll be in my prayers – thank you."

He walked over to the seating area and carefully opened the box, rolling his eyes at the overly fancy way it had been

packaged. At Macalania, he thought as he undid the ribbon, they had at least had the good taste not to do this. But the further one was from Bevelle, the less frequently summoners would come to petition the fayth; it made sense that the provincial establishments would put more effort in.

There was a card nestled among the contents of the box that declared it was offered to summoners with the compliments of the inn; Auron didn't bother to read it, although he found himself letting out an incredulous laugh when he saw what else was inside. A few potions, of course, and even a small bottle of ether; a couple of tablets that Auron knew were particularly effective when taken in conjunction with the former; bandages; a few sachets of powder whose function he would be able to guess from their smell; and a set of elemental gems, fire, water, lightning and ice, each about the right size for Auron to hold in his palm. What made him laugh was the fact that nearly all these items, barring the bandages and potions, were typically used exclusively by the Al Bhed. The inn hadn't quite gone so far as to hand him a box full of machina, but it was the next best thing – the Al Bhed, who tended to lack skills in magic and often didn't have the build for physical combat, were known for using these sorts of items against fiends.

It was utterly hypocritical, Auron thought, for Yevonites to denounce Braska for relations with the Al Bhed while at the same time handing over these items to summoners. He had

thought this sort of two-faced behaviour was most rampant in Bevelle, but was beginning to suspect it happened a lot elsewhere as well.

He put the items back into the box, thinking about how to use them. The fire gem would permit them a small campfire without requiring Braska to expend magical power, while applying the ice gem to his brow would help soothe his headache. The water gem could provide fresh water to drink, and some of that could have one of the powders added to it to create a solution that would send Braska to sleep for a while and allow him some painless rest. The bandages could be used to compress his knees after hours of kneeling before the fayth. Overall, there were certainly a few things that would help, even if they remained unable to use the inn's facilities otherwise.

Stopping briefly outside the tent to leave the fire gem in Jecht's possession along with a short explanation, he went in and began seeing to Braska, making use of the various items as he saw fit. Having firmly bandaged Braska's knees and refrained from making any remarks about how thin his legs were, he located a cup in which he could mix the sleeping solution, and knocked the water gem against it until a sufficient amount of water had been released.

"Auron," Braska murmured as he did so, "you're so good to me. What would I do without you?"

"Just doing my duty, sir," said Auron, lifting each of the sachets of powder to his nose in turn to determine which was

the right one to use.

"The fayth said something about you," Braska said quietly, holding the ice gem steady against his forehead as he drew himself into a sitting position in preparation for drinking the solution. "I can't quite remember – but he said you were special. You may have what it takes, he said, to end their torment – or something like that. I didn't quite understand, I'm afraid, but that's the essence of it."

"Don't worry about it," said Auron, handing over the cup. "Drink this."

Braska took it obediently, drank it down, and then lay back once again; within moments, he was asleep. Auron sat watching him for a moment, and then turned away, allowing himself to think about what the summoner had said now that his immediate needs had been taken care of. If the fayth really thought there was something special about him, he thought, it was clearly something to do with his resolution to change the Final Summoning. As he had suspected, he had what it took to find some way of altering the pilgrimage's usual course – he just needed to keep looking for it.

He went outside, and found Jecht sitting by the newly lit campfire.

"Hey, that gem thing worked," said Jecht happily. "Just chucked it on the ground and it went straight up."

"Yeah, they do that," said Auron. "I'm going to consult the temple archives. If Lord Braska wakes up and asks, I've gone

to meditate."

Jecht whooped with laughter. "Meditate? Ain't never seen you do that. You should try, though, it might stop you bein' so cranky all the time."

Auron merely grimaced in response; Jecht didn't know it, but he had made a valid point. Meditation was an important element of Yevonite spiritual practice, especially among warrior monks, and Auron had once been in the habit of doing it at least once a day. Since everything that had happened in Bevelle, though, he had rarely been able to bring himself to try.

He headed off towards the temple; Jecht grinned to himself before returning his attention to the fire. It was a good, strong flame, he thought, despite having come from something that he had assumed was merely a stone until Auron had explained its use.

A long time passed; Jecht was beginning to suspect he ought to be going into the tent to check on Braska, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Eventually, his moral dilemma was solved when Braska himself emerged from the tent and slowly made his way to sit on the opposite side of the fire, holding the ice gem against his head again.

"Uh," said Jecht, feeling very uncomfortable, "you … doin' OK?"

"I'm a bit better, thank you," said Braska. "I thought some fresh air might do me good." He looked around, and then added, a little more sharply, "Where's Auron?"

"He, uh, went to meditate," said Jecht.

Braska nodded; he seemed convinced by what Jecht considered a very obvious lie, although maybe, Jecht thought, his critical faculties were impaired for the time being.

"He's so valuable to me," said Braska. "Such a wonderful guardian – I'd get nowhere at all without his help." His eyes were beginning to moisten again; he took a deep breath, and said, "I'm sorry. I know this sort of thing makes you feel uncomfortable."

"Can't be helped," said Jecht, looking away.

"Indeed it can't," Braska replied. "There's something about the ritual to gain the æons that mixes the physical and the spiritual, somehow – I don't quite understand how it works, but those emotions turn into real wounds, almost. I was already out of sorts when I approached the fayth, so it caused me more pain than it might have otherwise. Auron was – excuse me –" He located his handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes. "Auron was right; I should have taken a moment to rest. I'm hardly making things easy for him, especially after –" He cut himself off, shaking his head.

"He did something that got him in trouble, right?" said Jecht.

"Yes," said Braska morosely. "I'm sorry, Jecht, I don't mean to keep secrets from you, but it's not my place to tell you what happened – that's Auron's decision. But you're right, there was some nasty business at the temple. They were so cruel to

him. Fortunately, we had the excuse of this pilgrimage to get him away from Bevelle." He sighed. "And then he has to spend the journey looking after me. Goodness knows I don't deserve his friendship."

Jecht couldn't help snorting in response; Braska met his gaze, and said, "What?"

"Uh, nothing," said Jecht hastily, fearing that Braska might be about to start crying again. "Just – I thought *friendship* would mean something a bit more … equal, you know? Weird kind of friendship if one person's always callin' the other *my lord* and all that, right?"

"That's how summoners are traditionally addressed," Braska explained. "I initially thought we might make an exception, but Auron does care about the teachings. It did take a little getting used to, but if it makes him more comfortable –" He looked at the ground. "I do worry about him sometimes. He has such a strong sense of what's right and what's wrong. Too strong, I sometimes think. He gets these ideas, you see."

"Yeah?" said Jecht.

Braska hesitated for a second. He wasn't sure whether it was right to confide in Jecht, but this was one of the rare subjects he was unable to discuss with Auron. If he had been feeling better, he might have been able to give it more thought before deciding, but it always helped to talk about his worries.

"A few months ago, while we were preparing for the pilgrimage," he said, "Auron suddenly started talking about some

plan he had to – I'm not sure exactly. To change or avert the Final Summoning somehow, I think. He was convinced that he would find a way of stopping the pilgrimage taking its usual course – of allowing us to bring the Calm without requiring my death. I was –" He paused. "I was flattered, of course. But the summoner must give his life during the Final Summoning: it's inevitable. I had made peace with it, and Auron knew that."

"Sounds like he just didn't want you to die," Jecht murmured.

Braska shook his head. "Auron's a remarkable man," he went on, "the finest warrior monk of his generation – but it's no good trying to stop what must happen. When I chose to become a summoner, I had already resolved that my life would need to end. It's the only way – you see?"

"Uh," said Jecht, "I mean, I guess."

"I kept telling him to forget about it, but he insisted on bringing it up," Braska reminisced. "It was getting – I mean no disrespect to him, of course, but it was getting quite tiring, at times. Eventually, I'm sorry to say, I rather lost my temper with him. I told him that if he didn't stop continually talking about these fruitless plans, I would have to dismiss him as my guardian."

"Bet he wasn't happy about that," said Jecht.

Braska nodded slowly. "Indeed. The argument we had about it was simply monstrous – we didn't speak to each other for several days afterwards. But we made our peace, in the end,

and he promised he wouldn't mention the idea to me again."

He stared into the flame of the campfire for a while. "I hope he's put it aside," he mused. "He knows why I'm doing this." He was silent for a moment, and then suddenly looked back at Jecht. "I don't suppose he's ever spoken to you about it? Some misguided plan to deliver me back to Bevelle in one piece?"

Jecht stilled; he remembered the determination with which Auron had told him about his plan, and the frequent references he had made to it in the few days since. He remembered, too, the looks of raw emotion he had noticed on Auron's face when he thought Jecht wasn't watching: the way he turned towards the summoner and seemed to lose awareness of everything else around him, as if he was concentrating very intensely on the promise he had sworn to himself. It was almost impossible to watch.

"Nah," he said.

Relieved, Braska nodded slowly. "That's good," he said. "He was wasting his time. I'm glad he understands that I need to do this – it'll make things easier. They're hard enough as it is."

They both lapsed into silence after that, watching the flame as it continued to flicker. Braska felt somewhat calmer; the talk with Jecht had done him good, as he had known it would. Sharing his burden always brought him a little relief.

Not long afterwards, Auron returned from the temple, ruminating over his discoveries: there had been little of sub-

stance in the archives, but the priests and nuns had done their best to point him to the most relevant items in their collection, eager to assist the guardian of a summoner who had gained their æon. The most interesting thing he had discovered was the elemental affinities of the æons. Macalania's, as he already knew, was ice; Djose's was lightning, which was unsurprising; the next æon they were due to encounter, the one at Kilika Temple, would be fire. The temple at Baaj, an island off the west coast of Spira, had once housed an æon of water, but this had apparently been lost when the settlement fell into ruin a few hundred years ago. It was all interesting enough, and it seemed a good sign that Braska would be recruiting æons that covered most of the elemental spectrum. Auron wondered if combining the powers of all the elements might somehow result in some kind of substitute for the Final Æon in the Final Summoning, but with the loss of the only recorded water æon, this seemed like a fruitless line of enquiry anyway.

Seeing Auron heading towards him, Braska set the ice gem on the ground, rose to his feet with some difficulty, and went over to greet his guardian as he walked the last few paces towards the campfire.

"What's happening?" said Auron, bewildered by Braska's sudden approach. "Are you all right?"

Still slightly unsteady on his feet, Braska grasped Auron firmly by the elbow. "I'm feeling better," he said. "I had a good talk with Jecht; I was telling him how wonderful you are."

With the fast progress he had made through the ranks of the corps, Auron was used to praise; coming from Braska, though, it felt different.

"That's very kind," he managed to say.

Braska tried to smile, but found his face twisting into an expression of regret. "Auron," he said, "I *am* sorry. You were right, when you said I should rest – I wouldn't have had nearly as bad a time in there if I'd listened to you –"

"There's no need, sir," said Auron firmly. "It's in the past now."

"You must think I'm terribly reckless," said Braska.

Auron almost smiled at that. "I knew that anyway," he said. "It's all right, my lord, really. Let's go and sit down."

Braska let Auron lead him back to the campfire, still clutching his elbow and grateful for the warm solidity that Auron provided. They sat on the ground together, and Braska leant into Auron's side a little while Jecht gathered together the remaining food from the previous night and served it out. Braska managed about half his food and gave the rest to Auron, who was hungry enough not to protest; while he finished it, Braska made his excuses and trudged back to the tent, where he had just about enough energy left to take a quick sphere for Yuna and change back into his nightshirt before going to sleep once more.

Outside, Jecht made a halfhearted attempt at cleaning the bowls from which the three of them had eaten, and then care-

fully kicked soil over the campfire until it was snuffed out. "What's the plan for tomorrow, then?" he said into the dim evening light.

"We head further south, if Lord Braska's feeling up to it," Auron replied. "It'll take three or four days to get to the next temple. Are you going to bed already?"

Jecht shrugged. "Well, Braska did, and I figured you would too. Not much else to do, is there?"

"Not a lot happens after dark," Auron agreed. "I see you're getting used to Spiran customs."

"Guess so," said Jecht, and then he added, "Hey. That mean you really believe I'm from Zanarkand now?"

"I admit," said Auron carefully, "that you can't possibly be from Spira. It seems pretty clear now that you're not joking about it, even if I did think that to begin with."

"But you still don't think I'm from *Zanarkand*," Jecht prompted him.

Auron sighed. "It's just … you hear a lot of things about Zanarkand, and none of it ever makes it sound like people actually live there. Anyway, Zanarkand *is* in Spira – just on the other side of Mount Gagazet. So if you're from Zanarkand, you *are* from Spira."

"Maybe I am, then," said Jecht with a shrug. "Ain't got any of this stuff there, though, that's for sure. Summoners and æons and Yevon and all that."

"I suppose it could just be cut off by the mountain," said Auron dubiously.

"I guess it must be," said Jecht.

Neither of them spoke for a moment, and then Auron said, "I'd appreciate it if you could try not to move around so much this time. You kept kicking me in your sleep last night – my back hurts."

"Can't help what I do when I'm sleepin', Auron," said Jecht smugly, and they headed into the tent together.

Chapter 14

Who We Have To Be

Auron woke first; sharing the tent with both his companions had been no less uncomfortable than the night before. Taking advantage of the fact that Jecht was still asleep, he put on his day clothes, then clambered past him and headed outside. He was still envious of Jecht for having had the opportunity to go for a run the previous morning, and was determined to put things right by seizing this chance to do the same himself.

Leaving his robe in the tent, he jogged the short distance to the temple, increased his speed to a sprint as he circled the building, and then, slowing to a jog again, made his way back into the southern part of the town, heading towards the inn. The clerk he had dealt with was standing outside, taking care of an early morning shipment; as the chocobo-drawn cart began to trundle off, he turned and waved hesitantly to Auron. Auron waved back briefly, surprised to see the man acknowledg-

ing him; his puzzlement was prolonged as he watched the gesture mutate into something that was undoubtedly an attempt to beckon him closer.

He jogged forward, and said, "Yes?"

"You're still here, then," the clerk said.

Auron nodded. "We wouldn't have made it far if we'd left last night. Besides, Lord Braska wasn't well enough to travel."

"Of course," he replied. "Did the things help?"

"They did," said Auron.

"Good," said the clerk, before turning towards the pallet that lay on the ground next to him, piled high with deliveries; he picked up the topmost of the smaller boxes, and thrust it in Auron's direction. "Here," he said. "I don't suppose you have much for breakfast."

Auron reached out automatically to take the box, but frowned as he did so: the man's attitude towards him seemed to have changed significantly over the past day or so. "You're very kind," he said, opening the box to find a substantial number of fresh pastries inside. "Surprisingly kind. Aren't you worried about the orders from Bevelle? If someone finds out you stole food from the inn to give to us, they won't exactly be forgiving."

"Well, our fayth clearly favours your summoner," the clerk said. "I wanted to apologise for not realising that."

"And the medicines you gave us weren't enough of an apology?" said Auron.

The clerk grimaced, and moved a little closer to him. "Look," he muttered, "I was talking to my colleague last night. She was saying she'd been in Bevelle recently – she recognised your picture on the notice. She told me why they were after you."

Auron suddenly felt his jaw clench. "So what?" he said.

"Well, you see," said the clerk, "I understand – because I'm also –"

"If you are," Auron interrupted, "then you'll know it's best not to talk about it."

"I've tried," he hissed, "but – you know, it just gets more and more – every time a man comes to stay at the inn, if he's on his own, I find myself thinking: maybe I should just ask? I know it's ludicrous, but I've gone all my life without a single chance –"

"It's not worth being indiscreet," said Auron. "Believe me; I know. You don't want them to do the same thing to you."

"But they won't," the clerk insisted, "if we … I mean, I don't need to be indiscreet, now that you're here. You're the first one I've ever met. We could –"

"No," said Auron firmly, louder than he intended; the other man flinched, and Auron took a deep breath. "After what happened – not with someone I don't know. I can't risk it. I'm here as Lord Braska's guardian, and I'm not going to compromise that." He looked down at the box in his hands. "You'd better have this back, if it was an attempt to, um, buy my favour …"

"No," said the clerk, briefly looking horrified before his face settled into an expression of glum disappointment. "Keep it." He turned towards the pallet, picked up an armful of boxes from the pile, and trudged into the inn.

The run had done Auron good, but its benefits seemed to have been short-lived; he was tense and uncomfortable again after the unpleasant reminder of his disgrace. Deciding that another lap of the temple might help him calm down, he walked over to the tent and placed the box on the ground outside, and then jogged onward.

Meanwhile, Jecht awoke, pulled on his shorts, and made his way out of the tent, squinting in the morning sunlight. After a few stretches, he opened the box that Auron had left by the tent, briefly considered the potential dangers of eating food that seemed to be of unknown provenance, and then, deciding it was worth the risk, sat down cross-legged on the ground and began to tuck in.

He watched as Auron ran back from the temple, finding it hard not to watch the musculature of his arms while it gradually changed shape in tandem with his movements, and the sweat beginning to bead on his forehead, and his ponytail swinging rhythmically from one side to the other: it really was an appealing sight. Urging himself not to stare seemed to have little effect as he began to imagine what it would be like to place his own hands on those muscled arms and pin Auron against some wall somewhere – press his

mouth roughly against Auron's neck and feel him squirming. He wondered how Auron would react; perhaps, he thought eagerly, he would be vocal, moaning loudly in pleasure as Jecht ministered to him.

Auron came to a stop in front of him. "What are you staring at?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nothin'," said Jecht. He brandished his pastry. "Where'd these come from?"

"They're from the man in the inn," said Auron.

"What," said Jecht, "the guy that told us to get outta there?"

"He's had a change of heart," said Auron gruffly. Seeking to change the subject, he added, "Is Lord Braska awake?"

Jecht shrugged. "Dunno."

"Right, I'll check," said Auron. He looked down at the now significantly depleted box of pastries, and added, "Leave some of those for us."

He made his way into the tent; once his vision adjusted to the darkness, he could see that Braska's eyes were open, but he had made no reaction to his guardian's entrance. "My lord," he murmured, crouching beside Braska and placing a hand on his shoulder. "How are you feeling this morning?"

It took a long time before Braska found himself able to answer. Physically, he felt a lot better than he had after the encounter with Djose's fayth: Auron's assistance and the time he had spent resting had made sure of that. But he had been unable to shake off the guilt he felt about how he had behaved.

He should have been kinder to his guardians; he should have made sure to cherish Auron, his dear friend who had helped him through the darkest times of his life; but that same lingering darkness made it hard, at times, to find the energy that would allow him to treat others as they deserved. And that made him feel even more guilty, and dragged him into a horrible, familiar spiral, until the shame and regret about this and about everything were so overwhelming that he felt he could hardly move.

"I'll be up in a moment," he mumbled eventually, the words feeling heavy and difficult as they made their slow way out of his mouth.

"You don't look well," said Auron. "If we need to stay another night –"

"No," Braska said. "I have to go on."

"Jecht and I can go out and hunt fiends," Auron suggested. "If we spend the day doing that, we might be able to make enough in bounties to afford a night at the inn. Then you'll be able to get some proper rest – I'm sure that'll help –"

"No," said Braska again. "Please – I haven't the strength to argue with you, but – we have to continue. I need to be strong. *Please.*"

Auron suppressed a sigh. "All right," he said. "Take your time; we'll see you outside."

He went to sit down outside the tent, reached into the box of pastries to take some food for himself, and began eating

as Jecht did a few stretches. "We're leaving as soon as Lord Braska's ready," he informed him, trying not to dwell on the fact that it would undoubtedly be a difficult day.

"Where to next?" said Jecht.

"The Mushroom Rock Road," said Auron. "We'll be heading towards a city called Luca, but we won't get there for a few days."

"Another temple there?" Jecht guessed.

"Several," said Auron, "but none with æons we're interested in. We'll be taking ferries from there, and heading out to two of the offshore islands. Luca is the southernmost city on the mainland."

"Oh yeah," said Jecht, without much enthusiasm.

"I don't know why you asked if you weren't interested," Auron said irritably.

Jecht rolled his eyes and went back to his stretches, taking care as he slowly flexed his right wrist. His blitzball injury was still causing some trouble, although he'd stopped bothering Braska about it days ago: it always felt awkward to have to ask, and he didn't like seeming vulnerable.

Braska emerged at that point, fully dressed but still looking miserable; he sat down listlessly in response to Auron's gestured invitation to do so, keeping his arms protectively folded around himself. Jecht looked away: he could tell that it was one of Braska's worse days, and had no desire to become involved.

"Have some breakfast, sir," said Auron, handing the final pastry to Braska; Braska took it, but then looked down and eventually muttered, "I'm not hungry."

"You need to eat," said Auron resolutely.

Shaking his head, Braska nonetheless began to take a few bites with obvious reluctance. Auron watched until he was satisfied that Braska seemed to be eating, and then said, "I'll put the tent away."

Jecht looked up sharply at that; it was apparent to him that if Auron was busy with the tent, he would be left sitting with Braska, and he really didn't want to be in that position if Braska began to talk about his emotions, or worse, started crying again. "I'll do it," he suggested, leaping up before Auron had the chance to say anything sceptical.

He dismantled the tent quickly enough, but encountered a stumbling block when he tried to pack it into its bag: getting it inside was a struggle. After a couple of attempts, he threw it on the ground in frustration, and called out to Auron, "Hey. This thing won't go in."

"It's tight," Auron explained. "Just keep trying. Be patient."

"Yeah, right," Jecht muttered. "As if *you* ever are." He tried again, and failed quite spectacularly; "Fuck this," he muttered.

Sighing, Auron stood and joined him. "It should be easy enough with some help," he said. "You hold the bag open."

Jecht scowled, but did as requested and was surprised to find that together, they were successful. "Guess it's one of

those things that need two people," he remarked.

Auron levelled an unimpressed gaze at him. "Well, I've always managed it on my own," he said. "All it takes is perseverance. Don't just give up the moment things don't go your way."

"Yeah, yeah," said Jecht in annoyance.

Auron ignored him, and sat down again to shave, while Braska did the same next to him; once they had both finished, he smiled politely at the summoner, tried not to be discouraged by the fact that Braska looked much closer to crying than to smiling back, and then said, "Well, sir – let's go. You can lead the way: set a pace that suits you. We'll be right behind."

Braska nodded mournfully and hauled himself to his feet, and they began the journey out of the town.

The need to fight fiends at least gave Braska something to concentrate on now and then: each time they ended up in battle, he found that he needed to dedicate himself to the assault and to healing his guardians' wounds. Going through the motions mechanically was somewhat better than merely dragging himself onwards, even if the end of each fight marked a sudden return to the depths of his most despairing thoughts. Outside battle, he did his best to forge on, trying not to be hindered by his stinging eyes and the constant, inescapable suspicion that he wasn't even good enough to sacrifice himself.

Auron watched, and wondered if he should say something, but he knew suggesting they stop and rest would be of no use,

even though Braska was sorely in need of it. He had known since before the pilgrimage began that there would be days like this, where Braska would slip into this withdrawn, unresponsive state and all Auron would be able to do was wait it out and hope things improved as the day went on. Normally, Jecht's improbable tales of Zanarkand succeeded in making Braska smile and sometimes even laugh, but this time, he was unresponsive beyond the occasional minute raise of the eyebrows, and Jecht soon gave up on trying to entertain when he was reaping such poor rewards.

They came to a fork in the road: the right hand path would take them via the more direct but less interesting route, a continuation of the dirt track they had been following since they left Djose. The left led towards a beach that was notorious for being a frequent site of Sin's attacks. So common were they that the Crusaders had established a semi-permanent camp not far away, with almost as many of their number stationed there as at their principal base in Luca. It would make for a less monotonous journey if Braska and his guardians were to head in that direction, but Auron was by now determined to avoid getting close to any large bodies of water if he could possibly help it, so when Braska turned around and dully asked which way to go, Auron indicated the path on the right hand side.

"Man, he's so slow," Jecht muttered as Braska shuffled in the indicated direction.

"Jecht," Auron hissed.

Jecht raised an eyebrow at him. "Relax, he ain't gonna hear us over there," he said, and he was right: the two of them were far enough behind Braska for him not to have a chance of hearing their conversation unless he turned to face them.

"He's slower than usual, right?" he added. "You gotta admit it."

"It's a bad day," said Auron. "Be grateful he can walk at all."

Jecht groaned. "Wish he'd just get over it."

Auron shook his head, but made no reply; as irritating as Jecht's persistent belief that Braska could somehow shake off his low moods was, he couldn't help privately agreeing. The wish that Jecht had expressed was, after all, the same one that Auron had himself held for three years, on a larger scale.

As they got closer to the Crusader base, the path grew busier: people dressed in the various types of Crusader uniform were starting to become a regular feature of the route, always seeming to be in much more of a hurry than Braska and his guardians. Auron suspected that their haste was exaggerated: in his experience of Crusaders, they often took great pains to make themselves seem more important than they really were. Many of these passersby were on foot, although some rode chocobos; it was Jecht's first proper experience with the birds, and he stared at them in disbelief, finding the sight even more bizarre than he had expected.

Further along the path, they were intercepted by a helmeted Crusader who appeared to be standing guard. "On your

way somewhere?" she said to Braska, who was the first to reach her.

He raised his eyes to meet hers, blinked, and then slowly replied, "We're on pilgrimage. I'm a summoner."

"Prove it," she said.

"How's he supposed to do that?" said Auron, hurrying forward to catch up. "And more importantly, why? This is a public right of way – we don't need to ask permission to use this road."

"We do want to be sure everyone travelling this way is safe," the Crusader replied.

"And you think we're a threat?" Auron snarled.

"Well," she said, in a tone that was almost as insistent as his, "you and your associate do seem to be carrying weapons."

Auron resisted the urge to groan in disbelief. "Because we're guardians," he said. "We're on pilgrimage; can't you tell my lord summoner is – isn't it obvious, when he's dressed like this? Why else would he be carrying a staff?"

"You can never be too careful," said the Crusader. "They say people dress as summoners and pretend to take the pilgrimage, just so they can trick others into showing them charity."

"Nonsense," said Auron. "I've never heard anything like it."

She folded her arms, and said, "If your supposed lord summoner isn't able to demonstrate to me that he really is one, then I'm afraid I can't let you pass."

At that, Braska nodded wearily. "Right," he muttered.

"Sir," Auron hissed, "this is ridiculous. They can't force you – especially not when you're in a bad way."

"It'll only take a moment," Braska murmured back.

"But it's the principle," Auron protested.

"Please don't argue with me, Auron," said Braska, very softly, and Auron immediately nodded and stood aside, grabbing Jecht by the arm and pulling him along with him.

"Ow, get off of me," Jecht complained. "What's goin' on?"

"This Crusader," said Auron through gritted teeth, "wants Lord Braska to call one of his æons so he can *prove* to her that he's a summoner. It's absolutely shameful."

"But why?" said Jecht.

"I've no idea," Auron replied. "Typical Crusaders trying to make things difficult for everyone, that's what it is."

They watched as Braska carefully waved his staff, his face displaying nothing but grim resignation; moments later, a large winged creature took shape in the sky, first spiralling upwards and then plummeting sharply to earth, landing so heavily on its large clawed feet that the ground shook and Braska almost lost his footing.

"Is that an æon?" Jecht said. "What happened to the ice lady? Wouldn't mind seein' her again."

"That's Bahamut," Auron confirmed, ignoring the last remark. "The first æon Braska took, back in Bevelle." As he cast his eyes over it, he couldn't help taking note of the fact that Bevelle was the last place he had seen this æon summoned,

too. In fact, he realised, Braska hadn't used the æons in battle once over the course of the pilgrimage so far.

"Will that do?" Braska demanded, still holding his staff aloft as Bahamut stood beside him.

The Crusader frowned, but nodded. "I suppose so. You're a summoner; can't argue with that."

Braska dismissed the æon with a further wave of his staff, and resumed his slow progress without another word; Auron followed behind, but when he reached the Crusader, he said, "Aren't you going to apologise?"

"For doing my job?" she countered.

"For accusing my lord summoner of being some kind of fraud," he said.

"I can't go against orders," she insisted. "I was asked to keep a record of the summoners who pass this way. And we have to be careful about who we allow near the base – one of our men was involved in a scandal recently. We don't want a repeat of that."

Auron glowered at her, but said no more, and he and Jecht followed Braska onwards.

As soon as they had left the Crusader out of sight, Braska turned around, waited until his guardians had come close enough to be within earshot, and said, "I need to rest."

"Of course, sir," said Auron immediately. "Can I get you anything?"

Braska shook his head.

Auron insisted on spreading his robe on the ground for Braska to sit on nonetheless, and once the mechanics of it were negotiated, he retreated to the other side of the path and sat down himself, next to Jecht, who had already positioned himself against the rock wall that ran by the side of the track.

"You guys can have women in the army, then?" Jecht remarked.

"The Crusaders aren't an army," said Auron dismissively. "But yes, they do have women in their ranks. So do the warrior monks, although the temples are a bit more reluctant to let them take powerful positions."

"Right," said Jecht.

"I know you just see women as sex objects," Auron added, "but it may surprise you to learn that they're capable of more than that."

Jecht was so surprised by the remark that he laughed uproariously for several seconds. "Hey, what?" he said when he had finished. "I never said that. Just know how to appreciate a nice girl when I see one." He clasped both hands to the back of his head and stretched. "Ain't no harm in looking. Anyway, I'd say the same about a guy if he was hot."

Auron turned towards him, suddenly alert. "What?" he said.

"Yeah, I'm into guys," said Jecht with a shrug. "Life's too short to discriminate, right? Might've even slept with more guys than girls, if I count 'em."

"Slept with …" Auron echoed.

"Aw man, Auron," said Jecht, "you're so pure. I know you were a monk and all, but – you really don't know what that means?"

"I know what it means," Auron muttered, now looking quite deliberately in the other direction.

"Then why're you actin' so weird, huh?" said Jecht, lightly punching him on the shoulder and unusually receiving no reaction, not even a shove in return. "Wait a minute," he added, suddenly becoming suspicious, "you ain't one of those people that have a problem with it, are ya? It's totally natural, you know." Braska, he thought, was always talking about how tolerant Auron was; he would be disappointed if he really was a homophobe. In Zanarkand, indeed, such people were thin on the ground; most of the population were perfectly happy for others to make their own decisions about who they involved themselves with.

"No," said Auron quietly. "I don't have a problem with it."

His mind was racing. Jecht was the first person he had ever heard speak about attraction to the same gender in such a casual way – as if it was completely normal. As if, he thought, nearly everyone partook in such activities. But things weren't like that in Spira. It was something that had to be discussed quietly and euphemistically, always taking care to make sure nobody overheard.

He looked back at Jecht with some reluctance. Jecht

wasn't a person he had ever considered confiding in: he still didn't trust his fellow guardian enough to believe he would be capable of keeping secrets. But the need to keep such things hidden sometimes felt like such a burden; and the knowledge that he might be able to talk to someone about it was so gloriously tempting. It was something he had discussed with Braska not long before the pilgrimage had started, but Braska clearly hadn't really understood; if Jecht actually experienced the same desires, though, things would be different. He would know what it was like.

"Actually, I'm," he said, "I'm inclined that way myself."

Jecht frowned. "You're into guys?" he said, wondering if he had misunderstood.

"Yes," said Auron, running a finger across the dusty ground. "Just … guys." He looked up at Jecht. "I'm, er, not interested in women at all."

"No way!" Jecht exclaimed. "You're gay?"

Auron looked blankly back at him.

"As in," Jecht clarified, "you're *just* into guys? I mean, I guess you are, you already said that! Whoa." He looked into the distance, and his gaze came to rest on Braska, who was facing the other way, looking out over the steep incline that led down towards the shore. "Whoa," he said again, less animatedly.

Auron frowned. "I thought you said you didn't mind," he said.

"I don't," Jecht replied with enthusiasm, "I just didn't expect – well, maybe I should've – I dunno! It's just takin' me a moment to process, all right?" He shook his head in amazement. "Why didn't you say before? I was ribbin' you about girls, back in the woods; could've mentioned it then."

"It's not the kind of thing people talk about openly," Auron explained. "And at that point I didn't realise you were the same – well, not the same, but – now that I know you're fine with it, it's different." His mouth felt strangely dry. "You are – aren't you? Fine with it?"

"Well, yeah," said Jecht. "People keep it to themselves here, huh? Yeah, in Zanarkand, everyone's pretty open."

"That must be nice," Auron murmured.

"So does Braska know?" said Jecht eagerly.

"Yeah," said Auron. "I told him – not that long ago, actually. A few weeks."

"Yeah?" Jecht echoed. "Why?"

"It came up," said Auron evasively. "Look, I realise you're used to things being different, but – it's quite a private thing in Spira. Now that I've told you, I hope you'll do me the courtesy of being discreet."

"Sure," said Jecht; he could tell how serious Auron was about this, even if he personally considered it something of an overreaction. "Can't make any promises about what I'll say when it's just us guys, but yeah, I get it. When we're in public –" He mimed a zipping gesture over his lips.

"Thanks," said Auron. He looked in Braska's direction, and decided it was time to go and check on him, so he slowly stood and made his way to the other side of the path.

"How are you doing, sir?" he asked, sitting down on Braska's right side.

"Not well," said Braska. He closed his eyes, sighed, opened them again, and then added, "I'm sorry, Auron. You must think I'm pathetic."

"You know I don't," said Auron.

Braska said nothing in response; speaking still felt very difficult. But the presence of his guardian by his side was a comfort, at least, and he reached out to clasp Auron's hand, threading his fingers through Auron's until their warm palms were pressed together. Auron let Braska move his hand into the space between them, and sat still as the summoner closed his eyes again and ran his thumb rhythmically across Auron's skin, breathing in and out deeply in time with its motion.

After a few repetitions, Braska opened his eyes, let go of Auron's hand, and murmured, "Well, we struggle on, I suppose." He turned towards Auron, and smiled; it was a small, sad smile, but unmistakably a smile nonetheless, and Auron couldn't help returning a larger one of his own – the sight of Braska looking just a little bit happier was enough to make him privately euphoric.

"Hope, sir," he said softly.

Braska gave a slow nod. "Hope," he echoed. "Thank you, Auron; there's no greater help than having you by my side."

"Whenever you need me," said Auron, "I'm here."

Braska insisted that he was ready to move on after that, and so the two of them stood and retrieved Jecht, and continued southward. Braska went in front again – still slowly, but less so than before – and his guardians fell into step a few yards behind him.

"You know," Jecht remarked to Auron, "I kinda thought that out of you guys, he'd be the gay one."

"He was married," Auron reminded him.

"Yeah, I guess," said Jecht. "It's just – the way he gets, you know, all emotional, and all that touchy stuff –" He laid a hand briefly on Auron's arm with exaggerated precision to demonstrate.

"Well, he's not doing it to get off," said Auron.

Jecht snorted at the uncharacteristically crude expression – Auron had said it with an entirely straight face, which, on the other hand, was typical – and then said, "I didn't say he was. It's just, gay guys are usually more like that, right? Or maybe that's not a thing here?"

"I don't think there are any expectations about how we should act," said Auron, shrugging. "But like I said, people keep it private."

"Yeah, I guess that makes a difference," said Jecht. "Less of a … culture around it, huh? Gay guys in Zanarkand are kinda

feminine – well, not all of 'em. Would've thought there was some connection, though."

"I don't see why there should be," said Auron. "It's two completely different things."

Jecht still wasn't convinced, but he let the matter slide – it was clear that his and Auron's cultures framed this kind of thing differently, and that neither of them was about to understand the other's point of view. Instead, he spent the rest of the afternoon grappling with Auron's revelation: in some ways, he was still amazed by the news, while in others, he was merely disappointed in himself for not having worked it out previously. He was a perceptive person, after all, especially now that he had given up the drink. Maybe, he thought as he observed Auron in battle, the fact that he wore his hair long should have been a clue; but he knew that if he were to mention it out loud, Auron would deny that there was any correlation.

The path remained busy as they continued southward, heading past the numerous tracks and gaps in the rock wall that led to the Crusader base. By this point, it had begun to get busy again; while the greater density of passersby resulted in far fewer fiends, it also meant that the three travellers found themselves increasingly inconvenienced by Crusaders jostling against them as they walked – sometimes, it seemed, deliberately.

"What's up with these guys?" Jecht grumbled, rubbing his shoulder where a passing infantryman had prodded the barrel

of his gun against it.

"They're territorial," said Auron. "Be glad you're not wearing a warrior monk's uniform."

"Oh yeah, you guys are like, rivals, right?" said Jecht. "They not religious enough for you or somethin'?"

"They do have a looser interpretation of the teachings," Auron confirmed. "Although the monks are going that way as well now – most of my comrades carried guns by the time I left."

"You don't like that?" Jecht surmised.

Auron shrugged. "If they want to, I won't stop them. But it's not for me."

Shortly after that, one of the passing Crusaders walked straight into Jecht, and that was the final straw: he shoved his hand against the man's chest to retaliate, and exclaimed, "Hey! What the hell are you doing? How about lookin' where you're goin' for a second, huh?"

The Crusader pushed back against Jecht, equally angry. "This is Crusader land," he snarled in reply. "If you insist on using our service road to go for a stroll, you should know when to get out of our way."

A small crowd was beginning to form; Auron had planned to stay out of the dispute, but couldn't help getting involved after hearing what the man had said. "Don't be ridiculous," he interrupted. "This is the main road from Djose to Luca. It's part of the standard pilgrimage route."

"Yeah!" said Jecht enthusiastically. "We ain't *going for a stroll*, we're trying to save Spira here! Got it?"

"Where's your summoner, then?" the Crusader asked.

Reluctantly, Auron pointed out Braska, who had come to a stop on the other side of the crowd and was looking back at his guardians as he waited for them to extract themselves from the obstruction. Several pairs of eyes turned towards Braska, and he lowered his own in response; Auron hoped the sudden attention wasn't making him too uncomfortable.

"Whatever," said the Crusader, who seemed more willing to believe Braska was a summoner based on his appearance than his comrade had earlier. "But *you*" – he jabbed a finger against Jecht's bare chest – "still need to show us some respect."

Jecht swatted his hand away. "Yeah?" he growled. "I need to show *you* respect, is that right? Do you know who you're talkin' to?"

"Jecht," Auron began, realising where things were about to lead, but Jecht paid him no attention. Leaning in close to the Crusader's face, he said, "I'm the biggest celebrity in Zanarkand, you know! Star player of the Zanarkand Abes!"

There were a few titters from the gathered Crusaders at that, and the man speaking to Jecht stepped back theatrically. "The Zanarkand Abes?" he repeated. "Zanarkand? You mean the city that's been in ruins for a thousand years?"

It was the first time Jecht had heard any such claim; he frowned momentarily, and then became aware of the need not

to lose face. "That's where you're wrong, buddy," he spat, and gave the Crusader a final shove before he hurried off to join Braska, ignoring the laughter from the crowd.

Auron followed, suddenly tense: he could tell Jecht was shocked by what he had heard about Zanarkand. He had done his best to stand his ground against the Crusaders, but ending the argument by walking off as abruptly as that was tantamount to a humiliating defeat in Jecht's book, and Auron was well aware of it. He cast his mind back over their travels as he walked, trying to remember whether he or Braska had ever told Jecht that Zanarkand was commonly believed to be ruined and deserted; he was sure they must have spoken of it at some point, but the more he considered, the clearer it seemed that there had never been a specific moment where they had mentioned it to him.

"Get a load of that guy," said Jecht, once Auron caught up with him and Braska. "What's up with him?"

Auron looked at him critically: he could tell Jecht's bravado was at least half feigned. "We'll talk about it in a moment," he said. "Let's find somewhere quieter. Away from all these people," he added, nodding towards the Crusaders.

Jecht almost argued, but then he returned what was meant to be a dismissive shake of the head and began to walk on; Auron and Braska followed behind in silence.

They turned a corner, and reached a part of the road that was much calmer: only one small figure stood in the distance,

looking down towards the shore, too far away for the three of them to discern any details. "This'll do," said Auron.

"Right," said Jecht keenly. "So, anyway, that crap the guy was talkin' about Zanarkand – where'd that come from, huh? In ruins for a thousand years? Yeah, right!" He frowned, and then said, "You don't actually believe it, do you?"

"Well," said Auron apologetically, "that is what people say. I mean, it's just a rumour. Nobody goes to Zanarkand except summoners who make it to the end of their pilgrimage – but the general belief is that it's been deserted all that time, yes. I suppose it's probably not the whole truth."

"Probably?" Jecht echoed. "I mean, yeah, I come from there! Wasn't fuckin' ruined last time I looked, I can tell ya." He turned towards Braska, and said, sounding a little more accusatory than he intended, "What about you, huh? You can't believe that guy?"

Braska shrugged slowly. "You're the first person I've met from Zanarkand, Jecht," he said, not meeting Jecht's eyes.

Jecht stared at him in disbelief for a moment, and then said, "What? Seriously? So you think I'm lyin' now? I thought you were the one that believed me!"

Braska looked at the ground, wincing at the sound of Jecht's raised voice; Auron stepped in front of him, and said to Jecht in a warning tone, "Don't bother him about it."

"This is my home we're talkin' about, Auron," Jecht hissed back, folding his arms.

Auron nodded. "I know. But you've got to admit there's something odd about this. We've always been told Zanarkand fell a thousand years ago – I'd never met anyone who claimed to have even seen it, until we heard about you. It is ... a bit strange."

"I don't fuckin' believe this," Jecht muttered, turning away from Auron in frustration; at that point, he noticed that the person who had been standing at the other side of the path and was now ambling in their vague direction was Maechen, the elderly man that he and Auron had encountered at the travel agency on the Thunder Plains. "Hey!" he called. "Hey, old guy!"

Maechen raised a hand in a little wave, and continued his slow walk over to where they stood. "A pleasure, indeed, to see you again," he said when he arrived, nodding at Jecht and Auron in turn, and casting his eyes over Braska in evident confusion.

"Yeah, yeah," said Jecht. "Listen, you know about history and stuff, right? You gotta tell me about Zanarkand. These guys are sayin' it's been ruined for a thousand years, but – there's no way. That's just impossible."

"Ah, yes, the holy city," said Maechen. "The seat of the Final Æon. Indeed, only summoners nearing the end of their journey have the honour of visiting a place so sacred."

"But people gotta live there, right," Jecht prompted him.

Maechen blinked up at him. "Certainly not to my knowl-

edge," he admitted. "The city was destroyed, you see, in the machina war. After years of cruel, vicious combat, Bevelle was victorious, and the people of Zanarkand gave their lives in vain, falling one by one against the superior might of Bevelle's forces. A terrible, brutal occasion – so they say."

"What?" said Jecht, confused. "There was a war? Between Zanarkand and Bevelle?"

Auron nodded. "A thousand years ago," he said sombrely.

Jecht looked at him sharply, and then turned his gaze back to Maechen. "But it can't be deserted," he said, his voice taking on a steely edge. "There must be people that come from Zanarkand turnin' up in other places sometimes."

"Never in all my long years have I heard of it," Maechen declared.

"But –" Jecht looked out over the cliff edge, lost for words. "It can't just be me!" he declared. "I can't be the only one!"

He looked back at his companions, his eyes blazing with fury, and Auron turned to Maechen and said, "I think you should leave us, sir."

"Perhaps you would like to hear a little more about the terrible machina war?" Maechen suggested, not moving.

"I know about the machina war," said Auron brusquely. "I really think it would be best if you leave."

"Pity," said Maechen, but instead of walking away, he approached Braska, who was staring morosely at the ground, and said, "Is something the matter?"

Slowly, Braska raised his head, and muttered, "What?"

"I assume you are accompanying these two fine young men," Maechen elaborated, "but you seem reluctant to involve yourself in their highly interesting conversation. If you were to pay attention to their talk of the history of Spira, you would find it most edifying –"

"That's enough," said Auron loudly. "Leave him alone."

Maechen looked at him, puzzled; then, with a muttered "Very well," he turned and slowly walked off.

Auron glanced back at Braska, who had returned his gaze to the ground; then he turned his attention once again towards Jecht, who met Auron's eyes, frowned, and then said, "So it's true."

"It's a rumour," Auron clarified. "A widespread rumour."

Jecht shook his head. "A thousand years?" he said despondently. "A *thousand*? I just –" He gestured vaguely in amazement. "Why didn't you guys say something, huh? We been travellin' together nearly two weeks, and you didn't think it was a good idea to tell me –"

"I thought we had told you," Auron admitted, "but maybe not."

Jecht let out a barking laugh. "Yeah," he said, "I'm pretty fuckin' sure you didn't tell me! Cos I think, if you did, you might've remembered my reaction!" He shook his head in disbelief. "Auron – this is the city I grew up in – I spent my whole

life there – and now I find out it's, I dunno, not real or somethin'? What – how am I supposed to –"

He looked away again, and then back at Auron. "But I bet you're glad," he went on, "cos it means you were right all along, don't it? Guess I was crazy after all, huh? And you get to say I told you so – bet you love that, don't ya?"

"No," said Auron, mildly offended. "I don't care about that – of course not, Jecht! You obviously come from – from *somewhere*, so –"

"Yeah, thanks a lot," Jecht cut in. "Real helpful, that is. Gee, Auron, I – you know what, I can't take this. Forget it." He stomped off towards one of the narrow paths that cut into the cliff face, forming one of a series of parallel tracks that led down to the beach.

"Jecht," Auron protested, but he was already gone.

"Oh dear," Braska murmured, moving beside Auron and joining him in staring in the direction in which Jecht had departed. "Poor thing. I should have said something; I just couldn't –" He gestured towards himself and then folded his arms tightly over the lower part of his breastplate.

"I'll go after him," said Auron; he wasn't happy about having to leave Braska on his own, but, he realised, worrying about Jecht wandering off would hardly be good for Braska's mental state either. "Stay here," he added. "We'll be back soon."

He followed the path that Jecht had taken, manœuvring himself through the cliffside vegetation with some difficulty:

in some places, the path was too narrow for him to tread properly in his boots, and he began to wonder whether taking them off and going barefoot like Jecht would be more productive, before deciding that method would be unnecessarily painful. After a few minutes of walking, there was still no sign of Jecht, and Auron was beginning to hope he wouldn't have to go all the way down to the beach to speak to him.

Soon afterwards, though, he caught sight of Jecht's head above the bushes, and more of him gradually revealed itself as he got closer; but then, when Jecht noticed Auron was approaching him, he quickly turned around and continued down the path.

"Jecht!" Auron called. "Come on – you're being childish."

At that, Jecht stopped and turned around, looking incredulous. "Childish?" he echoed. "Seriously, Auron? I find out my city was – everyone *thinks* my city was destroyed a thousand years ago, and you expect me to just brush it off and say everything's fine?"

"Let's just talk about it," Auron suggested. Jecht glowered, but, Auron realised with satisfaction, he didn't make any attempt to head further down the path, so Auron carefully drew closer to him, feeling as if he was attempting to trap a wild animal.

"I was thinkin'," said Jecht, not looking at Auron, "you know how you guys have magic here, right – well, what if it really is true, and maybe I – I dunno, travelled in time, I

guess? Do people do that?"

Auron shook his head. "There's no such thing as time travel," he said firmly. "Teleportation in space, sometimes – with very specialist equipment – but not in time. That's impossible."

"You promise?" said Jecht fiercely.

"Yes," Auron replied. "I'm certain of it."

"But then," said Jecht, "how does any of this make sense?"

"These things usually have a simple explanation," said Auron. "The Zanarkand you've been telling us about is so different from the one we've heard of; maybe they're ..." He considered. "Perhaps they're just not the same place. We might be talking about two completely different cities, and it's just a coincidence that they're called the same thing."

"Some coincidence," Jecht muttered.

"Well, maybe there's a connection between them," Auron suggested. "People from our Zanarkand went away and founded yours, or something like that. Maybe when we get there – to ours, I mean – it'll be obvious. Or maybe we're all wrong, and it really is your Zanarkand. The priests could be lying; it's happened before." They hadn't lied about anything as big as this, to his knowledge, but it wasn't impossible.

"You think so, huh?" said Jecht.

"Who knows," said Auron. "Nobody ever goes there, like I said: we don't know what it's really like. But either way, your Zanarkand is out there somewhere."

Jecht frowned again. "Yeah, I guess," he mumbled.

"Jecht," said Auron, and he traversed the last few feet of the path that kept him apart from Jecht, until he was standing right in front of him. He looked carefully at Jecht, and then slowly reached out and laid both his hands on his fellow guardian's shoulders.

"We should have mentioned this to you before," he said. "You know I didn't believe you at first, and Braska was … preoccupied. But we should have told you what we knew – *thought* we knew – about Zanarkand. That was an oversight. I'm sorry."

Jecht blinked back at him dumbly: the sight of Auron apologising to him this sincerely was one he found utterly bizarre. The look in his eyes, dark and serious, was more like the sort of looks he tended to reserve for Braska; it had an intensity that made Jecht uncomfortable. He stepped back, shaking Auron's hands off himself, and said, "Yeah. Thanks."

"Will you be all right?" said Auron.

Jecht scoffed. "I'm fine," he said automatically, but then added, "I just wanna be on my own for a bit, OK? I wanna think this over."

Auron nodded. "Take your time. We'll see you back up there."

He made his way back up to the path, struggling just as much against the vegetation as he had on the descent, and

came face to face with Braska, who was dabbing at his face with his handkerchief. "How is he?" he demanded.

"He's OK," said Auron. "We had a bit of a talk; he wanted some time to process it. I apologised for not telling him about it before – I thought that was important."

"Yes," Braska agreed. "Oh, poor Jecht. I feel terrible – we really should have said something. What if he thinks we dragged him along with us on this pilgrimage under false pretences? Perhaps we should have explained right at the start –"

"He'd have been too drunk at that point to understand anyway," Auron pointed out, refraining from noting out loud that Braska had been entirely alone in making the decision to bring Jecht with them. "It was better than the alternative; he was probably glad to get out of that jail. If we hadn't taken him with us, they'd probably have sent him to the – well, you know."

Braska nodded. "I should speak to him," he said miserably. "If I wasn't feeling so awful –"

"It can't be helped," said Auron. "You need to look after yourself, sir."

Braska nodded morosely, and took hold of Auron's arm to comfort himself while they waited for Jecht to reappear.

He emerged some time later, dripping wet; Auron recoiled, and said, "Did you go for a swim?"

"You got it, genius," said Jecht, with only a little less conviction than usual. "Nothin' better for clearing your head."

"Are you all right, Jecht?" said Braska. "Do you want to talk?"

"Nah, I'm good," said Jecht.

"But you shouldn't keep it hidden away," Braska protested. "It really does help to talk when you're feeling low – I have a lot of experience, unfortunately, and –"

"Yeah," said Jecht, cutting Braska off before he could start talking at length about his own problems. "I get it. I just – not right now, OK? Maybe tomorrow, or something. I just wanna think about it on my own for a bit."

Braska frowned, but at last said, "All right."

They continued along the path, now all walking together, although there was little conversation among the three of them beyond what was necessitated by the occasional battles with fiends they found themselves drawn into. Nobody's heart was really in the fighting, and Braska was starting to get tired again, even though the immediacy of Jecht's troubles had been a fairly effective distraction from his own; after a few rounds of battle, he said, "I'm sorry – I hope you don't mind if we stop. I'm exhausted."

"That's no problem at all, sir," Auron reassured him. "We're nearly at the Mi'ihen Highroad, so this is a good place to rest. I'll see if I can find something for dinner."

He headed off, leaving Jecht and Braska to sit together in silence, and was back soon enough with the bodies of a few small animals that he had managed to surprise; they were swiftly

cooked over the campfire that Braska had lit with the last of his magical strength while Auron assembled the tent. The three of them ate in silence – Braska managed to get through most of his portion without protesting – and then, while Braska took as brief a sphere as he could to send to Yuna, Auron made his way over to where Jecht sat.

"I took first watch last time," he said, somewhat apologetically, "but if you don't feel up to it –"

"I feel fine, Auron," said Jecht gruffly. "It's no problem. I'll come wake you up in a few hours."

"I just thought you might want some sleep first," Auron suggested. "You're probably tired."

Jecht shrugged. "I'm fine," he reiterated.

At that, Auron gave up; he followed Braska into the tent, where the summoner had already begun to get ready for bed. "What an awful day," Braska remarked as he crawled into his bedroll.

"You're feeling a bit better, though, aren't you?" said Auron. "Than earlier, I mean."

"I suppose so," said Braska. He sighed. "Yes, you're right. I'm just worried about Jecht."

"He's resilient," Auron pointed out.

Braska hummed in agreement. "He's certainly coping better than I would be, the poor thing. Maybe he'll want to talk about it tomorrow."

"Maybe," said Auron doubtfully. "You should get some sleep, my lord."

"I should," Braska agreed. "Goodnight, Auron – thank you for taking care of me."

"It's a pleasure, sir," said Auron, watching as Braska gradually drifted into sleep.

Chapter 15

Family Ties

Braska woke up as the light filtered in through the canvas; he turned slowly to the side and recognised Jecht lying next to him, awake but immobile, his face turned upwards.

"Jecht?" he said.

Jecht turned towards him. "Oh, hey. Mornin'."

"Are you all right?" said Braska.

"Huh?" said Jecht, and then he remembered Braska's sudden interest in his emotional state the previous afternoon. "Oh yeah," he said, "I'm fine."

"You said you might be willing to talk later," Braska prompted him. "Perhaps now, if you like, while it's just the two of us? Now that you've had some time to think about it?" He reached out to lay an encouraging hand on Jecht's arm.

Jecht just about succeeded in not physically recoiling. "I'm good, I promise," he said. "No need for some kind of big discussion. It ain't that important."

"Oh, it is," said Braska fervently. "I don't want you to feel as if I'm not paying attention to your wellbeing, Jecht. Did you at least think it over while you were keeping watch?"

Jecht contorted himself minutely so as to let Braska's hand fall away from his arm before answering. "Yeah," he admitted. "Actually, I was thinkin' about something Auron said. He thinks there might be two cities called Zanarkand – like, maybe the one you guys know and the one I'm from are totally different places, but there could still be a link between 'em."

"Is that so," Braska murmured.

"I think," said Jecht slowly, "I can kinda believe it. I mean, it don't sound like your Zanarkand is anythin' like mine. But then it'd be weird to have two cities with the same name if there was nothin' connecting them at all. So maybe he's right. Not that I don't still want it to be my city, like, obviously that'd be the –"

He cut himself off abruptly; this was getting dangerously close to being a conversation about his emotions after all, and that certainly wasn't the way he had wanted to start his morning.

"That's a very interesting theory," said Braska. "I'm glad to hear Auron helped you. You must have felt ever so shaken. And if you'd like to discuss it any more – I know Auron isn't always the most sympathetic person, but I'd be very happy to lend an ear."

Trying to disguise a snort in reaction to the idea that Braska had ever been *very happy* to do anything at all, Jecht fidgeted in his bedroll. "Honestly," he insisted, "it's no problem. I'm fine."

"All right, then," said Braska, failing to hide his disappointment. Like many mages, he felt a natural inclination towards helping others, even if recent events had made that harder; on occasions where he could muster the fortitude to aid someone in more acute distress than himself, doing so was a sure way to make him feel less troubled for a while. Auron's recent ordeal had, somewhat perversely, provided Braska with a much-needed confidence boost in the weeks before the pilgrimage: the knowledge that he was the one ensuring Auron was of sound body and mind had been enough to convince Braska that his own life had some kind of purpose, if only for a short time. The hope that he might do the Spiran people an invaluable service by bringing the Calm had been equally encouraging as he prepared for the journey: it certainly hadn't been his only reason for becoming a summoner, but it was one of many things that assured him he was on the right path.

He put on his day clothes, removing the bandages that Auron had wound around his knees in Djose; the pain from his encounter with the fayth was completely gone now. After donning his headdress, he made his way around where Jecht still lay and went outside, approaching Auron where he sat.

Surprised to see Braska out of bed before Jecht, Auron

blinked up at him. "Are you OK, sir?" he asked. "It's still early – I hope you weren't having trouble sleeping."

"No, no, not at all," Braska reassured him, gripping Auron's shoulder to anchor himself as he sat on the ground next to him. "I feel quite awake. I was trying to ask Jecht if he wanted to talk about Zanarkand, but he didn't seem very keen. I do wish he'd let me help him."

"Well, you know he likes to keep that sort of thing to himself," said Auron. "I wouldn't worry about it. I'm sure he'll be telling all his ridiculous stories about it again soon enough."

Braska responded with a brief hum of disapproval, but then he recalled what Jecht had said to him about Auron's suggestion, and added, "You have a theory about it, he said."

"Hm?" said Auron. "Oh – not really. It was just the most logical thing I could think of on the spot." He shrugged. "They *could* still be the same city, but it seems more likely that it's just two places with some kind of connection between them. That would explain why they have the same name but sound so different from each other."

"It would," Braska murmured. "That seems to have comforted Jecht, anyway. Thank you for being kind to him."

Auron turned away so Braska wouldn't see him frowning; the idea that he had been *kind* to Jecht was somehow disconcerting. It wasn't the sort of adjective that sprung to mind when he attempted to describe himself: he was capable of being civil and polite when necessary, but that was simply be-

cause he had manners.

And for some reason, he realised, the idea that he had been kind to Jecht specifically was especially uncomfortable. It wasn't the case that he really disliked him, he thought, not anymore; but still, the suggestion that he might sympathise with Jecht and put effort into helping him made him want to squirm.

"I'll get us some breakfast," he grunted, to change the subject.

After all three had eaten and prepared themselves for the day ahead, they began the next portion of the journey: it was a more pleasant section of the route, improved by the relative absence of Crusaders in comparison with the day before, but also by the general surroundings and climate. Instead of a barren, rocky path, bordered on at least one side at all times by a high rock face that blocked out a lot of the natural light, they were making their way along a wide grassy track bordered by pretty wildflowers while the sun shone down brilliantly from a mostly blue sky. It was the result of another of those sudden climatic changes that were unremarkable in Spira, and Braska and Auron, at least, were unmoved by it. Most importantly, Braska's mood had improved significantly overnight, motivated by the potential need to assuage Jecht's more acute and unusual distress. He walked at a more normal pace, took part in his guardians' brief conversations, and even smiled and chuckled from time to time, and that had a more positive effect

on the group than any amount of sunshine.

After a while, Jecht noticed that even their battles with fiends were going better now that they were on the Mi'ihen Highroad. Most of the creatures went down with just a couple of hits and minimal injury to the three travellers. After the third battle in quick succession where they had barely suffered a scratch, his curiosity got the better of him.

"Am I imagining things," he said, "or are the fiends kinda weak here?"

Braska smiled at him indulgently. "I daresay you've just been getting better at fighting," he suggested. "You're quite the expert with that sword now."

"No, that's not why," said Auron, interrupting before Jecht had the chance to start feeling too good about himself. "The further south we go, the less powerful the fiends get. It's because the concentration of pyreflies is lower. I'm surprised you didn't know that, sir."

"Well, Auron, you're the combat specialist," Braska reminded him. Having benefited from Bevelle's finest education, his general knowledge was superior to Auron's, but Auron was indisputably the authority on two subjects, fiends and geography – his experience as a warrior monk, travelling around Spira to assist in various emergencies, had ensured that.

Auron had thought the decreasing strength of the fiends was common knowledge, but then, he supposed, most people

weren't that accustomed to fighting them. "They'll keep getting weaker as we approach Besaid," he said, "but when we head back northward, we'll need to keep our wits about us. They say getting up Mount Gagazet is really tough – the climate doesn't help either." Indeed, Braska was shivering just thinking about it.

"So there are more pyreflies up there?" Jecht asked. "Why?"

"It's close to Zanarkand," said Auron.

Jecht's face fell for a moment, but then he assumed a neutral expression, tightening his jaw, and said, "Oh, right, yeah. Course."

He avoided looking Braska or Auron in the eyes for a while after that, stomping ahead to take the lead; after a minute or so, Braska laid a hand on Auron's sleeve, and leant in to whisper, "He's still not happy."

"There's nothing you can do if he doesn't want to talk about it," said Auron.

"I suppose not," Braska admitted.

Some time passed, and Jecht gradually returned to his usual self; his stories about the bright lights of Zanarkand were conspicuously absent from the afternoon's conversation, but he couldn't help talking about his son instead to fill the void. Once he started telling the others about Tidus, he found it hard to stop; he hadn't quite realised how much he missed him.

"Man," he concluded, "he's such a little runt. Honestly, I'm ashamed to be his dad. The great Jecht, you know, and then this little guy turns up, all snotty cos he's been cryin' again, and everyone's like, wait, this is *your* kid? He's so embarrassing."

He looked at his companions' frowning faces, and clarified: "He just cries all the time, see? Mom goes out – cries. Hurts himself – cries. Some blitzball result he doesn't like – cries. And when I tell him to stop, he just cries even harder." He shrugged. "Little weakling."

"But," said Auron slowly, "how old did you say he was? He's still a child, isn't he?"

"Seven," Jecht confirmed. "But he's gotta be a man, you know! Needs to toughen up."

"Your little girl's seven, isn't she?" said Auron to Braska.

"That's right," Braska replied.

"And I'm sure she gets upset sometimes," Auron pressed him.

"Well, yes, now and then," said Braska. "She's still quite small, I suppose."

Auron turned back to Jecht triumphantly, but Jecht was shaking his head. "But she's a girl," he insisted. "It's OK if the kid's a girl – it's different with guys."

"But he's still really young!" said Auron. "He's probably, what," – he made a gesture at waist height – "about this tall! Surely you don't expect him to act like an adult already."

"Hey," said Jecht angrily, "what do you know? How many kids you got? Huh?"

Auron rolled his eyes. "None, obviously," he said, "but –"

"Then don't tell me how to bring up mine, OK?" said Jecht.

"Fine," said Auron. "I didn't realise you'd get so sensitive about it."

Jecht made a noise of contempt and turned away. *Sensitive* was right: he'd never have admitted it, but being a father was something he found hard. For someone to whom most things came naturally, it was difficult to concede that parenting wasn't like that. Earnestly believing that what Tidus needed was just to toughen up, Jecht really did try his best with him, but it never seemed to work; and when Tidus clearly preferred his mother, it was hard not to become dispirited and give up on smoothing over the widening cracks in their relationship.

Unsolicited advice from Auron, though, was the last thing he wanted.

The day went on; Jecht's irritation faded, and he began to chat with the others again, still telling them about Tidus on the understanding that Auron knew not to try interfering this time. Braska, for his part, was still concerned about Jecht. Even if Jecht didn't want to discuss what he had learnt about Zanarkand, he thought, there remained the matter of his involvement in the pilgrimage. Auron had rightly pointed out that bringing Jecht along had surely been better for his well-

being than leaving him in jail, but perhaps, now, it would be kinder to allow him to make his own way. Now that he knew their destination was unlikely to be his Zanarkand, it would be understandable if he didn't want to accompany them any further.

Having resolved that it was only fair to present Jecht with the option, he approached Auron, who said, "Not far to the travel agency now, my lord."

"That's good," said Braska. "Auron, I'm going to ask Jecht to take a walk with me once we get there. I'd like to speak to him in private."

"You're not going to have much success if you want him to talk about his feelings," said Auron bluntly. "He's made it pretty clear that he's not prepared to do that."

Braska shook his head. "No, it's not about that. I want to ask him if he's still happy to accompany us. Now that he knows what we believe about Zanarkand, he may not consider it worth his while going there."

"Oh," said Auron, considering the possibility that Jecht might really leave them. The pilgrimage would be immeasurably improved, he decided: no more of Jecht's embarrassingly amateurish fighting style, no more inane chatter, no more of the shame of having him wander into Spira's holiest sites half-naked. Without Jecht, Auron would be able to devote himself entirely to protecting Braska. There would be practical considerations, such as how he might keep watch at night

with nobody to share the duty, but he dismissed that as a minor detail.

"I just thought I'd tell you in advance," Braska added, "so you know I'll be spending some time with him later. I wouldn't want you to be jealous."

Auron turned to look at him. "What?" he said sharply. "Why would I be jealous?"

"Perhaps that's not the right word," said Braska hastily. "I just don't want you feeling left out."

"You can talk to Jecht as much as you want," Auron said. "Just don't expect him to say anything sensible." He paused. "Spend the evening with him if you like – I don't mind."

"Thank you, Auron," Braska murmured.

Soon, they drew near the travel agency. Decorated in more vibrant colours than usual, it stood out distinctively against the grassy landscape; Braska looked up at the strange buttresses, registered the distinctive script in which the sign above his head was written, and realised why the building looked so unusual.

"You know this is an Al Bhed establishment, don't you?" he said to Auron.

"Yes," Auron confirmed. "It's the only travel agency on this road – who knows what Yevonites must think when they pass through here. I assumed you wouldn't have a problem with it, sir."

Braska chuckled softly. "Indeed I don't. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, this place belongs to an old friend of mine. We've kept in touch over the years – he was always interested in hearing the news from Bevelle. Rin really was a remarkable young man." He smiled as the memories returned to him. "He always dreamt of running a business away from Home. Last time he wrote, he was telling me he'd taken over this travel agency, and another outside Bevelle. He must be doing well, running this one right on the main trade route."

"Outside Bevelle seems like an odd place," Auron pointed out. "People would hardly want to be seen doing business with the Al Bhed publicly."

"I'm sure he knows what he's doing," said Braska. "Rin's terribly shrewd. Perhaps he's inside – it would be wonderful if the two of you could meet. You'd get on, I think – you're both eminently sensible."

"So what are all the Yevon people meant to do if they don't wanna stay here?" asked Jecht.

Braska shrugged, grinning a little. "That's their problem," he said. "I suppose Rin has made it rather inconvenient for them – a shame, isn't it, Auron?"

Auron couldn't help smirking back. "I'm sure it is, sir."

Braska led the way inside with uncharacteristic enthusiasm, faltering only slightly when he caught sight of the clerk, an Al Bhed woman wearing the large goggles favoured by many of her race. With the exact shape of her face obscured,

she looked so like Girl – if Braska had thought about the similarity for more than a moment, he would have found it difficult to maintain eye contact, but he pushed the thought away and walked towards her.

"Kuut yvdanhuuh,"[1] he said politely. It was only right, he believed, to address the Al Bhed in their own language when possible, just to show that he and his companions meant no ill will towards them.

"Kuut yvdanhuuh, cen," she replied. "Yna oui muugehk vun y nuus?"[2]

"Er –" said Braska. "I'm sorry, my Al Bhed's a little rusty –"

"No problem, sir," she replied in the common tongue; only a slightly stilted intonation betrayed the fact that it wasn't her native language. "Is it a room you're after?"

"Yes," said Braska with relief. "My guardian will make the arrangements, thank you. This is one of Rin's agencies, isn't it? Is he around?"

"I'm afraid he's at the other branch today, sir," she said. "Do you know him well?"

"I do," said Braska. "Never mind – perhaps we'll catch him on the way back. I'll leave you to arrange the room, Auron." He ambled over to the seating area and let himself sink into a chair, glad to have the chance to rest.

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[1] Good afternoon.

[2] Good afternoon, sir. Are you looking for a room?

Auron emptied the gil purse onto the reception desk; they still didn't have much money. "I hope this is enough for a room," he said. "We just need one bed for Lord Braska, and we'll forgo breakfast if necessary."

"Lord Braska!" the woman repeated. "Of course – I thought I recognised you both from the notice we were sent from Bevelle."

Auron's face fell – he hadn't expected this agency to have received the injunction against them when it had so clearly been addressed to Yevonites. Maybe, he thought, the Al Bhed who ran the place were determined to comply with official rulings in an effort to get on with their clientele. "We're not asking for any additional support," he said. "Just whatever basic room this money might get us. I really hope it's enough to afford something – it's been days since Lord Braska last slept in a bed. He does need his rest."

The clerk chuckled. "My apologies, sir," she said.

"Please," Auron insisted. "He's been finding things hard –"

"No, you misunderstand me," she said, and reached down to take hold of the waste paper basket on the floor at her side of the desk. Holding it towards Auron, she said, "I think this will clarify Mr Rin's attitude towards Yevonite directives."

Puzzled, Auron looked into the bin, and at last understood: staring back up at him from within was the drawing of his own face from the notice, ripped sharply across one side. The rest of the notice lay scattered around it in similar small pieces.

"Ah," he said, laughing. "I see. Did Rin do this himself?"

"He did," she replied. "Very enthusiastically, if I may say so, sir."

They quickly made arrangements for a room – the clerk making it very clear that both breakfast and dinner would be provided at no extra cost – and Braska went inside for a short nap while Auron and Jecht busied themselves with a game of chess in the reception area. They were well matched, although Jecht was beginning to get frustrated with the time Auron took to make his moves, and when Braska reappeared, he was glad to have the chance to turn away from the game without making it seem like he was forfeiting.

"Would you like to take a walk with me, Jecht?" said Braska. "There's something I need to discuss with you."

Jecht sighed, suddenly finding his mood souring. "Braska," he said, "I still don't wanna talk about the Zanarkand thing. Can we just drop it already?"

"Oh, it's not that," said Braska quickly. "Well, it's related, but – I promise I won't ask you how you're feeling about it. This is something different – a more practical matter."

"Yeah?" said Jecht, mildly intrigued.

Braska nodded. "It's really just a simple question. All you need to say is yes or no, and I'll respect your decision."

"And you can't just ask it here?" said Jecht.

"I could," Braska admitted, "but I thought you might be glad of a walk, and the chance to think it over without distraction."

Rightly guessing that *distraction* meant the high probability of some sarcastic or angry remark from Auron, Jecht nodded. "Yeah, OK," he said. "Sure, let's go."

They headed outside; Braska smiled at Jecht, making the effort to give him his full attention. "Now, Jecht," he said, "first of all, I have to apologise. The fayth of Djose Temple told me I need to be kinder to you and Auron; and he was right. It's just that I don't always manage to – well, you know about all that. But I am sorry, Jecht, really."

"Uh, no bother," said Jecht.

"I've enjoyed hearing all the stories you've been telling us," he went on. "They really do help me take my mind off things. And that training we did in the woods – that was fun, wasn't it? I know we only met a fortnight or so ago, but I really do feel as if … well, what I mean to say is, I hope you don't think me presumptuous if I call you a friend." He paused. "I know I'm not always a terribly attentive one. But I do see the two of us as friends now, and I can't help but wonder – do you feel the same way?"

Jecht tried to disguise his bewilderment at the question; it was odd to be part of such a candid discussion about the matter. Friendship was never negotiated in such straightforward terms in Zanarkand, and he suspected it was unusual to speak about it in this way in Spira as well. Besides, Jecht had never really had friends before. Teammates, rivals, lovers – people to whom he owed favours, and who owed favours to him – but

all his relationships in Zanarkand were transactional, all built on his efforts to ensure he remained the best of the best, trading off his place in someone's estimation for a strategic word in the ear of somebody else.

But, admittedly, Braska wasn't much like those people. Jecht had no ill will towards him; indeed, he wanted Braska to succeed in his pilgrimage, even if getting home was a more important concern. He enjoyed telling Braska his stories and making him laugh; it was certainly more pleasant than spending time with Auron. There was nothing Braska demanded of him in exchange other than his services as a guardian, and that had been made very clear right from the start. He had even been reasonably happy to give up his reliance on alcohol in Braska's company – and the summoner had helped him with that, too. In a sense, he was more able to let his guard down and be himself around Braska than he was with anyone he knew in Zanarkand, and, he supposed, if that didn't count as friendship, then surely nothing could.

"Uh," he said, "was that the question you wanted to ask me?"

Braska chuckled. "No," he said, "sorry. Just an idle thought, I suppose."

"Right," said Jecht. "Well, I guess … you're a good guy, Braska. You're doin' a good thing, and I … aw, man." He scratched the back of his neck. "Yeah," he said, "you're my friend, I guess."

"Thank you, Jecht," said Braska, almost moving over to embrace him before he realised Jecht definitely wouldn't enjoy it. "That means a lot," he said instead. "Friendship is a precious thing, and I'm sure you don't offer yours lightly."

Normally, Jecht would have made some remark about being one of Zanarkand's top celebrities, but on this occasion, for multiple reasons, the words fell flat before they even took shape in his mouth, so he just grunted in response.

"Anyway," said Braska, "there's something else I need to apologise for. When we first met, and you started telling us about Zanarkand – your Zanarkand – I should have said something at the time. It was obvious from the beginning that your city isn't the Zanarkand of legend, at least not according to what people in Spira believe about it. I should have made that clear before I asked you to come with us. I had other things on my mind – leaving Yuna behind, and starting the pilgrimage, and making sure Auron didn't have to face the burden of being a guardian alone – quite apart from everything else. But that was remiss of me. I'm sorry."

It was the same sort of apology that Auron had offered Jecht the day before, and he found it similarly unnerving, although somewhat less unexpected, on this occasion. "Uh, it's OK," he said. "I mean, yeah, it was pretty clear that there was something goin' on. I guess I was just drinkin' too much to put the pieces together back then."

Braska nodded sadly. "It occurred to me," he said, "that

now you know the full truth about Zanarkand, you may be reconsidering your role as my guardian. And I shan't stop you – if you think it's best to leave us, I understand."

"You mean," said Jecht, "you'd let me walk away? Give up on the guardian stuff?"

"Of course," said Braska. "I'm not holding you captive. You were released from Bevelle under the condition that you would be accompanying me on the pilgrimage, but you already know I don't pay much heed to their rules. If you want to make your own way from here, you have every right to do so."

"Yeah?" said Jecht. He'd never thought about the possibility of leaving Braska and Auron to it – being part of the pilgrimage was a duty he had seen as necessary even before he came to have any opinion on the journey's importance. To have the option suddenly presented now was nothing short of overwhelming. He would be able to go anywhere in Spira he wanted – he wouldn't know where to start.

"Auron would have to guard you on his own," he mused.

"Yes," said Braska. "But he's doing all right – I think he'd manage. Don't feel that you have any obligation to us, Jecht. The pilgrimage isn't your responsibility if you choose to leave it. All I ask is that you be honest with me about what you want to do, and whatever you decide, I'll support you. Don't be afraid to speak your mind, my friend."

Jecht's thoughts returned to the decision he had made on the bank of the Moonflow. If he continued to assist Braska

on the pilgrimage – if they could bring the Calm to Spira – it would prove that he was a good person. He would be able to go home and hold his head high, and nothing the media said about him would matter anymore. He could concentrate on taking care of his family at last, knowing he had been able to demonstrate his worth outside the blitzball sphere. And, given Auron's theory about Zanarkand, there would perhaps be some clue as to how he might get home once they reached their destination. If he turned down the chance to go all the way, he would have no leads at all.

"I'm stayin'," he said.

"Staying with us?" Braska asked.

Jecht nodded. "Yeah."

"You're sure?"

He nodded again, hoping Braska wouldn't press him any more about it.

Braska looked at the ground, making a halfhearted attempt to hide his smile. "Well," he said, "thank you, then. I'm honoured to have you as my guardian, Jecht. Who knows where we'd be without you?"

"Yeah," said Jecht. "No offence, but you and Auron would lose to those reptile fiends every time."

"Oh yes," said Braska, remembering the kind he was talking about. "They are rather fast, aren't they?"

Back at the travel agency, Auron was drinking a nice glass of whiskey that the clerk had supplied to him free of charge –

another perk of being an enemy of Yevon – and enjoying a little quiet time to himself, idly watching the other guests as they made their way to the reception desk to check in or ask for information. The agency was busy; the fact that it was run by Al Bhed didn't seem to have deterred Yevonites from using it, although they didn't have much choice. Some of them were clearly displeased to be staying in such an establishment, but they managed to remain civil with the staff, and in some cases, they even appeared to warm to them after finding that their needs were met.

Auron was the only person in the seating area until he was joined by a woman who looked to be in her early sixties; he could tell from her clothes and the complicated way she wore her long, greying hair that she was well off. She perched on the seat next to him carefully, seeming troubled by her surroundings.

"Good evening," he said, wondering if the chance to talk might put her at ease.

She blinked, startled to hear him speak, and looked him over carefully before saying, "You're not one of them."

"Not an Al Bhed, no," said Auron.

"Thank all the fayth for that," she replied. "We were very disappointed to find they had taken over this travel agency. It used to be such a lovely little place. We simply can't stay here tonight – my husband's arranging transport to Luca straight away."

She gestured towards the reception desk, and Auron looked; sure enough, a finely dressed man of around the same age was standing there, speaking tersely to the clerk, who, Auron noted, was doing an excellent job of remaining calm and professional.

"They're not all bad," he couldn't help saying.

"Perhaps not," she replied. "That lady seems respectful enough, and she's learnt our language well. But there's no question of our staying here overnight. I feel ill just thinking about it."

Finding no appropriate response to what he could only assume was extreme bigotry, Auron grimaced in a way he hoped looked sympathetic.

"They took our son, you see," the woman added.

"Took?" Auron repeated with surprise – he had never heard of the Al Bhed doing such a thing. "You mean – they kidnapped him?"

"As good as kidnapped, yes," she said. "It was a frightful affair. A few years ago now, but you must understand that I can't forgive them something like that."

"I'm sure," Auron murmured, wondering how true the accusation was, as the woman's husband made his way over to join them.

"Well?" she asked, watching him sit down.

He took her hand. "It's all sorted. There's a man on his way now – he'll take us to Luca. We won't arrive until midnight,

but some of the hotels will still be open, she said."

"Praise be to Yevon," said his wife fervently.

He caressed her hand for a few seconds, and then looked past her, turning his attention to Auron. "I hope you're not staying here long, young man," he said.

"Only tonight," said Auron, affecting a polite smile.

"Well," the man replied, "may the fayth preserve you."

"You're very kind," said Auron. "I'm sorry to hear you and your wife have had bad experiences with the Al Bhed. I've always found them to be very civil."

The man frowned a little, still clinging onto his wife's hand. "I suppose it's different for you young people," he said. "Have you come far?"

"From Bevelle," said Auron.

"Oh really?" the woman said. "So have we. We're taking a short holiday in Luca – things have been difficult at home recently, so we thought a change of scene would do us good. We're heading down to watch a few blitzball matches."

"Yes," her husband added, "always clears the mind. We had some bad news a few weeks ago, and we've hardly been able to keep up with events in Bevelle since then – we're in dire need of a few days away from it."

Auron nodded, meeting the steely gaze of the man's blue eyes. That made sense, he thought: most people from Bevelle would know of his infamy, but this couple clearly had no idea

who he was. If they hadn't been following the news recently, that would explain it.

"A shame the Bells were disbanded," the man went on, returning with more levity to the subject of blitzball, "but I've supported the Goers since then – it's always rewarding to watch the home team. Are you a fan?"

"Not really," Auron admitted.

"Then what brings you to Luca?" the man asked. "I assume that's where you're going."

"Well, yes," said Auron, "but on to Kilika and Besaid after that. I'm a summoner's guardian, you see – we're on pilgrimage."

"Really!" the two of them exclaimed in tandem. "How wonderful!" the woman added.

"Then you *certainly* shouldn't be staying in a place like this," said the man.

"It's quite all right," said Auron. "My lord summoner doesn't mind at all."

"I suppose he's a fine young man like you, is he?" the woman asked.

"Don't embarrass him, dear," said her husband.

She looked back at him, and said, "Well, I wouldn't expect you to see it, but he is a rather handsome young fellow."

"My lord summoner is making excellent progress," said Auron, a little awkwardly, before the man could accuse him of

stealing his wife's affections. "I'm very fortunate to be his guardian."

"And he must be doing well, if he's on the way to Kilika," said the woman. "He must have a fair few æons by now."

Auron nodded. "Three, yes." He was about to say more – it was never a chore to praise Braska – but at that moment, a man entered the agency, approached the three of them, and said, "Did someone call for transport to Luca?"

"Oh yes, that's us," said the woman. "Thank goodness for that – at last we can escape this awful place."

She and her husband both stood; Auron rose too to shake their hands, and bade them a good journey.

"May Yevon's blessings be with you," said the man. "We'll pray for you and your lord summoner."

"Thank you very much," said Auron. "Enjoy the blitzball."

He watched them leave, returning to his whiskey; they were a nice enough couple, he thought, but of an age and class that meant they were disposed to be intolerant towards those unlike them. He'd learnt to get on with that sort of person during his time in the corps: rising through the ranks had meant there were a lot of them to be pleased.

Outside, Braska and Jecht were coming to the end of their walk; once it had been established that Jecht was happy to continue as Braska's guardian, their conversation had turned to more trivial matters, and they had amused each other by relating a few mishaps from their respective early days of fa-

therhood on the journey back to the travel agency. As they approached the building, Braska glanced ahead towards the entrance, gradually realised what – or rather *who* – he was looking at, and grasped Jecht's arm tightly, freezing in place.

"Ow!" Jecht exclaimed. "Hey, what's the big idea?"

"Don't move," said Braska quietly. "Stay where you are."

"Huh?" said Jecht. "What is it, a fiend?"

Braska shook his head. "Just stay still, please. It'll only be a minute or so."

Confused, Jecht waited with him, following his gaze to the travel agency entrance; the same couple Auron had been speaking to were loading their luggage into the cart that belonged to the driver they had hired. Jecht, of course, didn't recognise them at all. He watched as they climbed into the cart themselves, the husband ushering his wife in before him, and closed the doors; shortly afterwards, the chocobo that drew the vehicle began trotting along the road. As the cart passed close to Jecht and Braska, Braska turned away from it, shielding his face in the crook of his elbow as he waited for it to pass by; only once it had made its way out of sight did he lift his head again, letting go of Jecht's arm at the same time.

"What the hell was that about?" said Jecht.

Braska took a deep breath before responding. "Those people were my parents," he said.

Jecht knew they were long gone, but he couldn't help turning his head in the relevant direction anyway, staring at the

road as if the pattern of dust the cart had left behind could give some indication of its purpose. "No way!" he said. "So you, uh, don't get on?"

"They haven't spoken to me for eight years," said Braska, his eyes still wide with surprise. "After I married – they didn't want anything to do with me." He looked at the ground and blinked several times. "Let's get back inside," he said. "I need to sit down."

They made their way back into the travel agency and joined Auron, who had just finished his whiskey. "Good walk, sir?" he asked.

"What?" said Braska. "Oh – yes." He sank into the chair opposite. "Jecht," he added, "would you get me a cup of tea, please?"

Jecht headed over to the reception desk; Auron leant towards Braska, and said, "Is something wrong? Did Jecht decide he does want to leave us?"

"Just give me a moment, please, Auron," said Braska, resting his chin in his hands as he looked down at the table. It was getting dark outside, but the sight of his parents had seemed so vivid; the thing that had struck him most was the fact that since he had last seen them, they seemed to have grown old. His mother's hair had never been that grey; his father had walked more confidently than that, more fluidly. And yet, he thought, their son was the one who would die first.

Jecht returned with the tea, set it on the table in front of

Braska, and sat down next to him.

"All right," said Auron crossly, "will you tell me what's going on? Jecht, are you leaving us or aren't you?"

"Huh?" said Jecht. "What are you talkin' about? I'm staying, obviously – although if it was *your* pilgrimage, you bet I'd be out the door like a shot."

Auron folded his arms in displeasure. "What's this about, then?"

"Braska saw his parents out there," said Jecht, watching with satisfaction as Auron suddenly became speechless.

"Oh. Right," said Auron, after several seconds. "Did you … did they speak to you, my lord?"

"They didn't see him," said Jecht. "We stopped before we could get near enough."

Auron nodded, and then a sudden suspicion came over him. "They weren't coming out of here, were they?" he ventured. "Getting into a chocobo-drawn cart?"

Braska looked him in the eyes at that, but continued to make no response; Jecht nodded, and said, "Yeah. You know who we're talkin' about?"

"Yeah," Auron echoed. "A woman with long hair, and a man wearing a turban, right? Sixty-ish? I was just talking to them. They came and sat here and spoke to me." He thought back to the man's piercing blue eyes, and realised there was no doubt about it.

"What did they say?" said Braska hoarsely.

"Nothing about you," said Auron. "I'd never have realised – well, they did say their son was *taken* by the Al Bhed, but I thought they meant the Al Bhed had captured him when he was a child or something, not –" He shook his head. "I wish I'd worked it out. They were mostly just talking about how afraid of the Al Bhed they were. They'd only just arrived – they were supposed to stay here tonight, but they ordered that cart so they could go straight to Luca."

Braska frowned. "Luca? What are they doing there?"

"Watching the blitzball, by the sound of it," said Auron, ignoring the interested expression that Jecht suddenly assumed. "They said something about taking their minds off some bad news."

"Oh, I know what that'll be," said Braska. "The news that I was taking the pilgrimage. They wrote to me, you know – the first time in years. I ignored it. I just hope they don't get their hands on Yuna when I'm gone." He sipped at his tea and sighed. "They were good parents. Always taught me to be kind and inquisitive – they even questioned some of the Yevonite doctrines. But when I married, that all changed – going off with an Al Bhed was inexcusable, in their book. I had thought they might see sense when it was their own son, but my mother forced me to go with her to the temple in the citadel, and when I refused to kneel in front of Lady Yunalesca's statue and repent, she disowned me then and there, in front of all the priests who used to be my colleagues."

"Whoa," said Jecht. "And I thought *my* folks were assholes."

Braska took another sip of his tea and gave Jecht a sympathetic smile. "Do they give you trouble?" he asked.

"Eh, it was more when I was a kid," said Jecht. "They just didn't want me to be a blitzball star – thought I wasn't serious about it. They wanted me to get a *real job*, work with computers or be some boring professor or somethin'. But I showed 'em." He turned towards Auron, to whom the latter part of what he had said had been impenetrable. "So what about you, huh? Let me guess, mister perfect has perfect parents too?"

"I wouldn't know how *perfect* they were," said Auron impassively. "In fact, I barely remember them at all. They died over twenty years ago."

Jecht gaped at him. "Seriously?"

Auron merely glared back; Braska took up the thread. "Auron's family were killed by Sin," he said softly. "It was one of the worst tragedies in living memory – the whole village was wiped out. Only a handful of the youngest children were spared."

"Oh man," said Jecht. "Auron, I –" He looked at Auron, who had taken to staring glumly into the distance, and the words caught in his throat. "Well," he said instead, forcing lightness into his voice, "I guess all of us are fucked up, then. Cheers to that, huh?" Balling his right hand into a fist, he thumped it lightly against Braska's teacup, and then Auron's empty whiskey glass.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a short while, and then Auron let out a quiet snort of amusement. "I suppose so," he said. "Look, we should have some dinner before it gets too late. I'll ask them to put something on for us." He got up and strode over to the reception desk.

The dinner was ready before too long: a nutritious salad of fresh produce that even Braska enjoyed. The three of them ate without making much conversation; Auron, unusually, found himself thinking about his family. He was normally less affected when they were mentioned, given that their deaths had been so long ago; it was the stress of recent events, he supposed, that had made this occasion harder to bear. That, and the fact that they had needed to explain the situation to Jecht in detail: most people he knew were aware of what had happened in that village. The scale of the incident had ensured it was still well known in Spira, even though Sin killed people every week.

It was true that he couldn't remember them – he certainly couldn't picture them, anyway. But there were a few things, fleeting sensations, that he recalled: his mother's soft hands bathing him, his father hoisting him over his shoulder when he returned from his work in the fields. His sisters' giggles when they involved him in their games, joining their small, sticky hands with his even smaller ones; his brother, older by a full fifteen years, smiling down at him during his brief visits home while off duty. He had been a Crusader, Auron had learnt much

later by laboriously reading through the obituaries; there was a certain irony there.

"I'm tired," he announced. "I'm going to bed." Without waiting for a reaction, he made his way to the room they had reserved.

"Oh, poor Auron," Braska sighed. "I think it was a shock for him, having that brought up. He doesn't usually talk about it."

"I wouldn't've said if I knew," Jecht muttered.

"Of course not," said Braska. "There's a habit of not asking about family in Spira – it's painful for a lot of people. Sin has killed too many. As far as parents go, I'm quite fortunate, really, even if our relationship ended badly." He thought back to the sight of his mother's grey hair, and said, "I think I'll go to bed too – oh, but we should take Yuna's sphere first. I'll go and get the recorder."

He crept into their room, hoping not to disturb Auron, but found him lying on his mat with his eyes wide open. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Auron. "I just didn't feel like talking anymore. What about you, sir? It can't have been pleasant running into your parents like that."

"It was an unwelcome surprise, yes," Braska admitted. "But at least they didn't see me." He located the sphere recorder and a fresh sphere, and added, "Well, goodnight. I hope you sleep well."

"Thank you, sir," said Auron. "You too."

Chapter **16**

Shoopuf Milk

Halfway through breakfast the next morning, Braska excused himself and headed to the travel agency reception; he was keen to hear how the Al Bhed were faring after the destruction of Home. It had still been only a week since the incident, and the clerk hadn't heard a lot, but she informed him that Rin was hoping to contribute financially to the rebuilding effort.

"But what about all the poor people who lived there?" Braska asked. "Do they have places to go?"

She shrugged. "I'm sure a lot of them have relatives they can stay with. It's rare to find an Al Bhed family without at least one member who moved away. Pnyeh tnyeh,[3] we call it – a lot of people find more opportunities on the mainland."

It was true, Braska knew: there had been a distinct lack of young adults at Home when he had spent time there. That was

[3]Brain drain

one of the reasons why he had initially caught Girl's attention: there had been few others of around her own age. When they started getting to know each other, he had thought that she might be curious enough about Yevon to allow him to make some progress in his allotted task, but things had turned out differently when he eventually realised her interest lay elsewhere.

"Have you been away long yourself?" he said.

"Seven years," she replied. "I left as soon as I could – I'd heard so much about what it was like in the Yevonite towns. I couldn't wait to see it all in person."

"It must have been awfully hard, making your way on your own," said Braska.

"Not really," she said. "There are always jobs for Al Bhed, even if the Yevonites don't want to admit it. I was in the machine trade in Luca until Mr Rin hired me."

"That sounds like quite the career change," he remarked.

She chuckled. "It was. I didn't want the job at first, but Mr Rin was insistent. He needed someone who'd spent enough time among Yevonites to understand their customs well. He's always very insistent that we need to make them feel at ease."

"I'm sure that helps, yes," said Braska. "And you speak our language extremely well. I always found Al Bhed terribly hard – I can read it well enough, but getting my tongue around those sounds was always difficult. Velar fricatives, isn't that right? A nightmare."

Back at the breakfast table, Auron was getting increasingly impatient. He was hoping to be back on the road in plenty of time for the three of them to make it to Luca before nightfall; on the other hand, Braska had left half his breakfast behind when he took his leave, and Auron didn't want to deprive him of the option to return and finish it, as unlikely as that seemed. He glanced between the clock, Braska's abandoned plate, his own boots, and Jecht, who was still stuffing himself with toast, compensating as always for Braska's lack of appetite.

"He ain't gonna come back," said Jecht, his mouth full of toast. "Dunno what you're waitin' for."

Auron frowned: since giving up the alcohol, he thought, Jecht had become altogether too perceptive. He'd preferred it when Jecht hadn't seemed to be able to tell what he was thinking half the time. Moreover, it annoyed him that Jecht was almost certainly right about Braska not returning as well; not to mention his terrible table manners.

He got up and walked over to the reception desk, standing behind Braska while he waited for a lull in the conversation; eventually, the clerk nodded at him, and said to Braska, "I think your guardian wants to speak to you, sir."

Braska, who had been in the middle of a fond anecdote about how the Al Bhed stored perishable goods, turned around, and was faced with an apologetic half-smile from Auron. "I don't want to rush you, my lord," said the latter, "but we should make a move soon. Are you going to finish your breakfast?"

"Oh, I've finished," said Braska blithely.

Auron suppressed a sigh. "Fine," he said. "I'll settle up, then, and then we can get going."

Braska began to move aside, but then something struck him; he placed a hand on Auron's arm to stop him getting closer to the desk, and said, "Could we have a word first?"

"Sure," said Auron, and he let Braska usher him to one of the tables, where they both sat down.

"Auron," said Braska, leaning close to his guardian and speaking in a low voice, "I don't think you should … negotiate. You spoke about the price yesterday, didn't you? Best just to pay the standard rate, I should think."

"We did discuss it," Auron murmured back, "but it's not as if we made a formal agreement. We're still low on funds, sir – we need to make economies where we can. If I can just get the price down by a few gil, that might make all the difference."

Braska shook his head. "But they've been so good to us," he insisted, "keeping us fed and watered when they know we can't pay extra. I really think it would be improper to try arguing them down any further. Besides, I'm very keen to support Rin's business; you know the poor Al Bhed need help after what happened to Home."

"If you say so, sir," said Auron, and he stood up stiffly and returned to the desk to hand over the exact sum that the clerk requested.

"I expected you to haggle," she said cheerfully. "Most Yevonites at least try."

"And you Al Bhed always pay the advertised price, do you?" Auron couldn't help asking.

"Usually, yes," she replied. "Certainly when we're among our own people. It does help to know exactly how much is changing hands before doing business."

Auron let the subject drop: it was a cultural difference that would just annoy him more if he continued thinking about it. "My lord summoner is very grateful for your assistance," he said instead, more calmly. "Talking to the Al Bhed does him good. I don't know how much he told you about his background, but –"

"I remember him," she interrupted. "He spent a lot of time at Home, not long before I left. I'm sure he's forgotten me – there was only one person he was really interested in. They were very sweet together."

"I thought they kept their relationship secret until they married," said Auron.

"They thought they were keeping it secret," she said with a smile, which dropped immediately as she added, "I'm sorry he's become a summoner."

Auron was sorry about it too, of course; he stood up a little straighter, and said, "Don't be. It's a great honour to be called to serve Yevon in that way."

"Then I wish you good luck, sir," she said impassively.

After gathering the belongings and dragging Jecht away from the breakfast table, they were on their way to Luca, once again enjoying the pleasant climate and blue sky, as well as the fact that the fiends were relatively easy to deal with.

"I think you'll find Luca a bit more interesting, Jecht," Braska remarked. "It's almost as big as Bevelle – and a little more tolerant. There's always something going on there."

"Luca," Jecht repeated thoughtfully: the name had put him in mind of something he had heard the previous night. He had sworn to himself that he wouldn't forget it; now, to his dismay, that promise was the only thing he remembered. After racking his brains for several minutes, he eventually realised what the significance of it was.

"Blitzball!" he exclaimed, wheeling around to look the others in the eyes. "Luca! Blitzball!"

"What?" said Auron wearily.

"You said," said Jecht, pointing at him with enthusiasm, "Braska's folks were goin' to Luca to see some blitzball games, right? So there's a stadium there, yeah? I gotta see it!"

"We don't have time," Auron told him. "We'll only be there a few hours tonight – just enough to stock up on supplies and find some dinner. We're getting straight on the boat to Kilika."

"Auron," Jecht whined, "this is real important to me, you know? I ain't played a match for weeks – I'm going crazy here! Just need to keep my hand in – I promise it'll be quick. Please, Auron – do me a favour, won't ya?"

Auron frowned, saying nothing; Jecht turned his entreaties onto Braska. "You get it, huh, Braska?" he asked. "You ain't gonna stop me doin' what I love, right?"

Braska hesitated for a moment, and then said, "We can't, Jecht."

"So we just stay in Luca a couple nights and get on some other boat," said Jecht impatiently; "what's the problem?"

"It's not that," said Braska. "It's – we're not going near that stadium while my parents are there. I'd really rather move on as soon as possible."

"Aw, come on," said Jecht. "There'll be a crowd, we ain't gonna see 'em. And if we do, me and Auron'll just tell 'em to scram, right?"

"I'm sorry, Jecht," said Braska firmly, "but we're not going to risk it."

"But," said Jecht, "blitz is – you know, it's my *thing*! It's – you know how much I hate this place. Nothin' to do anywhere except fightin' fiends and worryin' about Sin coming to kill us all, and now with all this shit about Zanarkand too – I just need somethin' to take my mind off of it, yeah?"

It was a greater admission of vulnerability than he felt comfortable making, and he hoped it would at least show Braska how serious he was about the benefits of a few matches for his wellbeing, but Braska shook his head.

"It's out of the question," he said. "I'm very sorry, Jecht, I know this is a disappointment; but you're my guardian, and

my needs come first. That's how the pilgrimage works."

"Bullshit," Jecht snarled. "What happened to us bein' friends, huh? I know you guys have some weird messed-up idea of friendship where it's more like one of you is the other one's slave, but seriously, that ain't normal. It's meant to be about mutual respect, you know? Whatever. Fuck you." He turned away and began stomping onwards down the road.

"Don't worry about it, sir," said Auron, as soon as Jecht was out of earshot. "He's a ..." He searched for a word that would convey his disapproval. "An absolute ruffian."

"He has a point, though," said Braska miserably. "But I can't face going anywhere near the place while they're around. Oh Auron, I don't know what to do."

"You were right," Auron insisted. "You're the summoner – we defer to your word. It's not your fault Jecht refuses to understand how this works. He's been here long enough now."

"Long enough to miss his Zanarkand terribly, I'm sure," said Braska. "If only we could find some sort of compromise."

Auron considered. There would be a second opportunity to call in at the blitzball stadium on the northward journey; Braska, he surmised, seemed to have forgotten that. Auron wasn't particularly inclined to bring it up either, until he glanced at Braska and saw how regretful he looked. Maybe, Auron thought, keeping Jecht happy really was that important to the summoner, as hard as it was to empathise.

"We'll be coming back this way as well," he said reluctantly.

"I'm sure your parents will have left by then – maybe we can catch one of the games on the way through."

"Oh, of course," Braska murmured. He glanced towards Jecht, rubbed a hand over his face, and then said, "Yes. I hope he'll accept that. Would you –" He reconsidered. "No, I'll raise it with him."

Auron watched as Braska hurried forward to catch up with Jecht and then began to make his peace offering; Jecht remained stiff and withdrawn at first, but gradually, he loosened up. Having no desire to get involved, Auron stayed a few paces behind, ready to be the first line of defence against any fiends that attacked them from the rear; but none did so, and he found himself continuing to watch his companions while their conversation went on, keeping himself entertained by trying to guess the sort of things they were saying from their now decidedly cordial body language.

Eventually, Braska gave Jecht a friendly pat on the shoulder and turned around to face Auron, standing still on the path while he waited for him to catch up. "It's settled," he announced cheerfully, once Auron was in earshot. "We'll spend a few days in Luca on the way back."

"A few *days*?!" Auron echoed.

"He's awfully persuasive," said Braska.

Auron let out a long sigh.

"You're not angry with me, are you?" Braska asked him.

"No," said Auron, "of course not. I just don't know how we'll pay for it, with our financial problems. The fiend bounties aren't exactly generous around here, and they'll be worse on the islands."

"It'll be all right," said Braska, who had never had to be careful with money in his life.

Auron grunted in response as he thought about it. If things became truly unmanageable, he decided, he would probably be able to make a few gil later on by hiring himself out as some kind of mercenary swordsman. It wasn't pleasant to think about – a far cry from his warrior monk days – but it would stop them becoming destitute. Jecht's characteristic insistence on derailing the pilgrimage was irritating, but on the other hand, he realised, perhaps some extra time would be useful. There was a public library in Luca, he knew; there was bound to be material there relating to the Final Summoning. A few days for some research might give him the key to preventing Braska's death.

"I suppose a break will do us all good," he conceded at last.

They walked on to Luca, in an uneasy truce that eventually gave way to genuine companionship: if the disagreement had been between Auron and Braska, things would have been different, but Jecht rarely stayed angry for long. By the time they arrived at the top of the stone steps that marked the southern end of the Mi'ihen Highroad and the northern entrance to the city, he was informing the others enthusiastically about the

moves he would be showing off once he eventually got into the blitz sphere, and even though neither Braska nor Auron had any particular interest in the sport, Jecht's language was colourful enough to get them both to pay attention.

"Right," said Auron as soon as there was a gap in Jecht's enthusiastic monologue, "we've got a while to stock up. Then we can find somewhere to eat, and make our way to the docks after that."

"You keep saying we ain't got any money," Jecht pointed out. "What are we meant to be stockin' up on?"

Auron glared at him. "A few potions cost a lot less than a room at a travel agency," he said. "Besides, some of the shops around here sell things at a discount. There's more competition – they have to attract customers."

He began leading the way to a shop where he knew the prices would be reasonable; with the intent, of course, of arguing them down still further. Jecht looked around as they walked, taking an interest in the surroundings. Luca was only the second town of a reasonable size he had visited in Spira – indeed, although he didn't know it, it was the only settlement other than Bevelle to consist of much more than a main square and a few houses. He was intrigued by the sight of the buildings, their dull grey and yellow stone decorated in places with bright patterns and covered incongruously with colourful banners and pennants: the atmosphere seemed a lot less sombre than elsewhere in Spira.

There were a significant number of Al Bhed walking around the place too, he realised; he now knew how to recognise them from the goggles and strange jumpsuits many of them wore. He pointed out the observation to Braska, and Braska nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes, there are a lot of Al Bhed here," he confirmed. "A lot in Bevelle, too, but they tend to make themselves less conspicuous there. I've heard the teachings hold less sway –"

The sudden blare of a siren interrupted him before he could complete the sentence; he winced and pressed both hands to his ears, dropping his staff in the process.

"Some building get broken into?" Jecht yelled, as Auron bent to pick it up.

Auron shook his head. "Sin," he said.

"What?" said Jecht.

"Sin!" Auron repeated loudly. "It's the warning alarm for the city – lockdown. We're meant to take shelter indoors."

They found their way to the nearest bar; after the door swung shut behind them, it became significantly easier to hear each other, and Braska finally lowered his hands from his ears and took his staff back from Auron, exhaling slowly.

"So Sin's attacking the city?" said Jecht.

"Unlikely," Auron explained. "It's probably been sighted at the port. There are plenty of Crusaders there – they'll do their best to drive it off. Luca's quite well defended." He turned and looked back through the glass pane in the door, watching the

people outside as they hurried through the street towards their homes. "Perhaps I should go and offer my services," he mused. "They could probably do with some extra manpower."

"I don't think that's necessary," Braska murmured.

"Their swordwork's atrocious, though," said Auron thoughtfully, still looking out at the street. "Worse than his." He nodded towards Jecht, making no response to the aggrieved little yelp he had provoked.

"Auron," said Braska, more firmly. "You're not a warrior monk anymore. You're here as my guardian, and I need you to stay with me."

Auron turned to look at him at last, met his eyes, and said, "Forgive me, sir. I'll stay here, of course. Are you all right?"

Braska merely sighed in response. The sudden arrival of Sin had distressed him, even though he knew that being in the centre of Luca meant they were well protected. Part of him wanted to go out there too, and confront the creature even with the insufficient power he had gained on the pilgrimage so far; at the same time, he wanted to put as much distance between himself and Sin as possible. Three years ago, it had destroyed any chance he might have at living out his life in happiness; the thought of having to face it now was sickening, and the thought of doing so without Auron's support absolutely unbearable.

"Let's get some drinks," said Auron, wondering if Braska might benefit from a change of subject. "We might be here a

while."

They approached the bar, and were immediately attended to by the bartender, who seemed surprisingly relaxed given the circumstances. "What can I get for you gentlemen?" he asked them.

Auron cast a critical eye over the shelves behind the bar, and was pleased to see that there was a range of spirits available. Spiran production was modest but varied, with different regions making do with their own local produce as best they could; Luca was one of the only places where all their various beverages could be obtained with ease.

"What's the strongest spirit you have for under ten gil?" he asked.

The bartender examined the shelves, and suggested, "Macalanian vodka?"

"One measure of that, then, please," said Auron.

"And what about you, sir?" the man said to Jecht.

"Uh," said Jecht, slightly surprised by Auron's order, "I'm kinda off the drink, see –"

"Oh, that's no problem," said the barman; he gestured to another shelf. "We have coffee and a variety of teas – or there's our range of fruit juices, if you'd prefer."

"Ah!" Auron exclaimed suddenly, his voice taking on an oddly Braska-like tone as he scanned the same shelf himself. "Shoopuf milk – didn't you say you wanted to try some, Jecht? Looks like they have a few bottles."

Jecht met Auron's eyes, his own narrowing as he tried to discern what Auron was up to. It had been after the incident at the Moonflow that he had said something about shoopuf milk, while hungover and probably still half-drunk; and later, he remembered, Auron had confronted him about it, apparently taking offence at his having mentioned the stuff without knowing anything about it. He supposed therefore that the present scheme was some kind of lesson in not saying things without having meticulously researched every statement he planned to make beforehand, which, in his opinion, was ridiculous: Auron was both a pedant and a hypocrite. With that settled, it was clear enough that the only option was to play his game, and win it.

"Yeah, sounds good," he said, folding his arms as Auron made a poor attempt at disguising a smirk.

The bartender looked doubtful. "That one's not very popular," he said. "We keep it in for any Guado who pass through – it doesn't really suit human tastes."

Jecht shrugged. "So what," he said, "let me try."

Braska, who had calmed down enough to place his order, requested a chrysanthemum tea, and Auron handed over the thankfully small fee. "Have a seat," said the barman, "and one of the girls will bring your drinks over."

They did so, squeezing into a corner where there was a small round table, Braska flanked on either side by his guardians. The *girls*, it turned out, were all Al Bhed, although

they wore clothes that conformed more with the Yevonite style. Despite that, Jecht still managed to recognise their race from their blonde hair and green eyes, a combination that he had learnt was uncommon among Yevonites. Pleased once again with his observational prowess, he mentioned it to Braska.

"Yes, indeed," said Braska, grateful for the distraction. "I imagine they're wearing those clothes to make sure people are at ease. This is a Yevonite bar, after all – they'll hire Al Bhed, but ask them to be discreet. Quite unlike Rin's establishments, of course."

One of the Al Bhed waitresses in question brought their drinks to the table, and Auron leant towards Jecht, eager to prove his point about the shoopuf milk. "Well?" he demanded, nodding at the small bottle. "What's it like?"

Jecht raised his eyebrows and gave the drink a slow sniff, delaying his response as long as he could so as to cause Auron maximum frustration. He couldn't avoid grimacing a little at the smell: it wasn't bad, exactly, but it was certainly unusual. There was a hint of lemon in there, he decided, but also something coppery, and to top it off, an unmistakable odour of root vegetable.

Noticing Jecht's expression falter, Auron couldn't help grinning again, curling his hands into fists in anticipation as he watched Jecht place the bottle against his lips with obvious reluctance. Jecht did his best to ignore Auron, and

took a modest sip, bracing himself for something disgusting; but when the drink met his tongue, he found that the root vegetable aroma was much less pungent in the taste, and that generally, the milk was actually quite pleasant. It helped that he usually enjoyed slightly sour flavours.

"It's good," he said smugly.

"You're lying," said Auron. "I saw your face –"

"That was before I tasted it," Jecht explained. "Wanna try some?" He pushed the bottle in Auron's direction.

Auron frowned at him, picked up the drink with a great deal of suspicion, and raised it to his mouth; catching the scent of it, he almost put it straight back on the table again, but managed to steel himself enough to take a sip, wincing as it went down.

"You're *lying*," he said again, thrusting the bottle back in Jecht's direction and quickly reaching for his own vodka to get rid of the taste. "That's vile."

Jecht chuckled. "I ain't lyin', Auron," he said, and he picked the bottle up again and drank the rest of the milk in a few swift chugs before placing the empty receptacle back on the table in front of him. "See? I like it. Maybe it's cos I ain't from around here."

Auron shook his head in irritation, about to make another retort, but he was cut off by a sound from Braska's direction: one of those increasingly common laughs, he realised. Smiling,

Braska placed his tea carefully on the table, shook his head, and said, "Really. You two."

"Is something the matter, sir?" said Auron.

Braska laughed again. "Bless you, Auron," he said, taking hold of his tea once again and returning his attention to it.

Auron watched him in disbelief; they had certainly come a long way, he thought, since the days when his disagreements with Jecht had been more likely to drive Braska to tears. Of course, their arguments tended to be lower stakes now, and to be defused more quickly, and that surely helped. To hear Braska laughing, though, was still something that didn't quite seem real, especially when he had seemed much closer to despair only a few minutes earlier. Braska was quiet again now, but Auron couldn't help watching him as he sipped his tea, staring into those blue eyes in search of whatever had brought him joy for the most fleeting of moments.

His chest felt as if it was burning; it was the vodka, he told himself. He tore his gaze away from Braska, and glanced across at Jecht instead; Jecht, who had been looking at Auron, quickly broke eye contact.

"How's the tea, sir?" said Auron, trying to dispel the strange awkwardness that had arisen.

"Sweet," Braska murmured.

They sat in silence for a while, with Braska trying not to fall asleep – the walking and magic casting he had done that day had tired him, as usual, and even though they hadn't yet been

on the road for as long as they normally were, sitting on the comfortable bench with his guardians' warmth on either side was enough to make him quite drowsy. Knowing the journey wasn't quite over, he did his best to stay awake, but suspected he was fighting a losing battle.

"We ought to have dinner here," said Auron eventually. "Save us trying to find somewhere else – we might be in a hurry if the lockdown goes on much longer."

"This place does food?" said Jecht. "Thought it was a bar, not some kinda café." The vast array of non-alcoholic drinks on offer had indeed suggested something more like the latter, but he couldn't help but be influenced by the fact that the atmosphere just felt more bar-like, with the low lighting and cushioned seats that, in Zanarkand at least, were more connotative of the sort of place one went to for the purpose of drinking.

"Bar, café, what's the difference?" said Auron impatiently, before flagging down one of the Al Bhed waitresses. "Could we order some food, please? Whatever's cheap. Yes, broth is fine – three of those, then."

Not long later, she brought the food to the table: three steaming bowls of some sort of meat broth that Jecht looked at with substantial scepticism, having resolved many years ago that food was something one should never skimp on.

"Thank you, baby," said Braska as he received his bowl.

Immediately, they all froze; Auron and Jecht met each other's eyes, and then looked at Braska, whose own were

beginning to widen as he realised what he had said.

The waitress looked apologetic. "If you're interested in, um, other services," she said, "I'm afraid we don't offer those here, but there's an establishment a few streets away with a lot of Al Bhed girls –"

Braska was too stunned to speak; Auron cut in instead. "No, that's fine, thank you," he said firmly, still keeping his eyes on Braska as if he thought the intensity of his gaze might be an antidote to embarrassment. "My lord summoner misspoke. You can leave us."

"Would you like me to bring any seasoning?" she asked.

"What?" said Auron. "No. Thank you."

Once the waitress had walked away, Braska buried his face in his hands. "I can't believe I said that," he moaned faintly. "Stupid …"

"It was a slip of the tongue, sir," Auron reassured him. "You're tired."

"Pathetic," Braska muttered. "As if I forgot she was gone –"

Auron opened his mouth to protest, but he was interrupted by the feeling of Braska slumping against him, leaning his head into his guardian's shoulder while keeping both hands pressed to his own face. He reached behind Braska instead, steadying him from the other side and taking hold of him by the elbow; such physical contact might be more comforting than words, he reasoned.

"Uh," said Jecht, who was feeling supremely uncomfortable, "I'm gonna go take a leak." He stood up slowly, and then all but ran to the bathroom.

When he got back, he was dismayed to find that Braska was still leaning against Auron. Auron had started to eat his dinner, with some difficulty given that half his upper body was immobilised as a result of Braska's position; Jecht sat down, unable to think of an excuse to leave for a second time, and began work on his own broth.

"What do you think, Jecht?" Auron asked after a minute or so.

"Huh?" said Jecht.

"The food," said Auron. "It's a Bevelle dish, actually. Local meat from animals reared in the nearby fields. They say the priests didn't want to interrupt their prayers to make dinner, so they just threw everything into a pot and left it on the boil for a couple of hours."

He was rambling, and Jecht could tell: he knew Auron got that way sometimes, especially when he was unsure of how else to get out of a difficult situation. He was tempted to ignore it, but decided talking might distract him from the state Braska was in.

"Not much of a *dish*," he said, fishing one of the chunks of meat out of his bowl to make his point.

"Well," said Auron, "Bevelle isn't known for its cuisine."

Jecht scowled and lifted the meat to his mouth reluctantly; he'd already decided that this meal was one of the worst things he'd ever tasted, and Auron's explanation of its origins had hardly helped with that. After chewing the piece of meat for what felt like several minutes and eventually breaking it down into chunks that were small enough to swallow, he sighed heavily and said, "Oh man."

"Something wrong?" said Auron.

"I dunno how you're meant to eat this stuff," Jecht complained. "You gotta chew it for hours – and then even after that, it still tastes like a dog's ass."

Auron let out a little snort of amusement; and then, after a few seconds, Braska reacted too, with a brief laugh that soon turned into something more like a sob. But nonetheless, that had somehow been enough to rescue him from his misery; gradually, he lowered his hands from his face, straightened up, and picked up his spoon from the table.

Watching closely, Auron almost couldn't believe it. His plan had succeeded. He had decided, while Jecht was in the bathroom, to try talking to his fellow guardian until he inevitably said something ridiculous, without much hope that it would achieve anything – but somehow, it had been enough to pull Braska out of the depths. It was just one tiny incident, he told himself, but nevertheless that spark of hope was beginning to flicker within him again. Maybe there would be more, he thought. Maybe he would be able to find a way of harness-

ing Jecht's irritating irreverence and shaping it into something that could convince Braska life was worth living.

He let himself watch Braska as the latter ate, observing the movements of his jaw as he chewed – and now, for the first time, Auron wished he had ordered something more appetising. He watched as Braska slowly manœuvred the spoon around his bowl; as he blinked, pale eyelids drawing themselves briefly over weary blue eyes.

"Excuse me," said Braska after a while, still not meeting Auron's eyes as he stood and shuffled past him, heading to the bathroom.

Once he was out of sight, Jecht turned to Auron and said loudly, "Hey! I'm here too, you know!"

Auron scowled at him. "What's that supposed to mean?" he hissed.

"Your food's gettin' cold," said Jecht, pointing at it.

Frowning at the non-sequitur, Auron looked down at his bowl, and realised with some surprise that he hadn't eaten anything since Braska had started on his own meal; he'd been doing nothing but staring at him for several minutes, letting that burning feeling grow inside his chest again, providing himself with a very different kind of nourishment. Without another word, he turned back to the broth, lowering his face as he felt it heat up, and hoping Jecht wouldn't notice.

In the bathroom, Braska was washing his hands; he rubbed the little bar of soap against them carefully, massaging it into

his fingers. It was so unfair, he reflected, that Auron and Jecht had been able to distract him from his grief with such ease. He didn't deserve to be laughing at trivial things; of that he was certain. He had embarrassed himself and insulted Girl's memory, and it was a reminder of how he was fit for nothing but his own death now, having taken Girl from her family and lost the support of his own; having waved her off at the docks, not knowing he was sending her to her grave, and then being so destroyed, so weak after what had happened that he had lost Yuna too. He had called himself pathetic a few moments earlier, and it was true, he thought, barely daring to look at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. His whole adult life had been a series of mistakes and misfortunes; at least the pilgrimage would give him the chance to repay some of his immeasurable debt. And so there was nothing to do but go on, and hope he could be strong, as the fayth required, and continue the journey taking comfort from the fact that each step brought him closer to the end.

Belatedly noticing the tears trickling across his face, he gave it a brief wash and stood there for a moment, trying to compose himself a little before he went back outside. While he was still sure that laughing along with his guardians was inappropriate for one who was so undeserving of happiness, at least those moments helped him maintain the strength he so desperately needed. They would need to make it to the ship soon, and he would have to petition the fayth of Kilika the

next day; it was important not to lose momentum, or the results could be catastrophic. So he placed the soap quietly back in its dish, and dried his hands and face, and walked out of the bathroom and back over to the table, placing his hand on Auron's back to anchor himself as he slipped back into his seat.

"Are you –" Auron began, but his voice was strangely hoarse; he cleared his throat and tried again. "Are you OK, my lord?"

"No," said Braska, "not really. I feel –" He sniffed. "Pretty awful, actually. I'm sorry."

"Can I get you anything?" Auron suggested.

"I'll be all right," Braska murmured.

"Guys!" said Jecht suddenly.

Auron reluctantly turned his attention towards him, and snapped, "What? What is it now?"

"Alarm's stopped," said Jecht, gesturing towards the nearest window. Indeed, the other two had both been too preoccupied to notice, but now that Jecht had pointed it out, the silence made it obvious that the lockdown was over.

"Oh," said Auron. "We should –" He looked back at Braska. "Maybe it's not a good idea to travel tonight after all. There are probably plenty of hostels around here –"

"No, we need to keep going," said Braska. "Go and settle up, Auron; I'm sure it's not long until the ferry leaves."

Auron grimaced, but he did as he was told and halfheartedly negotiated a modest discount on the three bowls of broth

with the barman. Jecht and Braska joined him at the door, the latter trying to ignore the fact that he felt achy and exhausted. It wouldn't take long to get to the docks, at least; while the thought didn't exactly raise his spirits, it somehow helped him stay on his feet.

The ferry was already boarding when they arrived; Auron was relieved that they had made it in good time and would have no trouble securing a cabin. As they joined the queue, he fiddled nervously with the end of his ponytail; he was still on edge. At first, he thought his discomfort was related to Braska's setback at the bar – but then, he caught a whiff of the salty sea air, and realised there was something else involved.

He looked up into the sky, blocking out the sight of the boats as they slowly rose and fell with the waves. That was the problem: water. It had been going on long enough now for it to be something he could no longer deny. Since the incident in Bevelle, any encounter he had had with bodies of water like this had distressed him. At Macalania, the sight of the frozen lake had almost made him keel over; then, arriving at the Moonflow, he had found himself barely able to breathe. Only the emergency of Jecht's attack on the shoopuf had distracted him enough to let him snap out of it on that occasion.

He squeezed his eyes shut. They would be spending the night on the sea, he reminded himself; deep in the hull of the boat in some windowless cabin, with the only reminder of their location being the movements the ship would make. He had

travelled by sea enough times to know how it would work, although this would be the first such journey since the ordeal. It would be all right, he told himself; he would be shielded from it while he was in the cabin. The only parts of the journey that he had any need to worry about at all were the moments of embarkation and disembarkation. And if much of the town of Kilika was built on wooden boards that formed only the flimsiest pathway over the water, and the ferry they would take on to Besaid would take a full day to cross the strait, meaning he would be expected to walk about on the deck of the ship during daylight hours – he would worry about those things later.

With his eyes still closed, he focused on his breathing, trying to block out his surroundings. It was a while since he had engaged properly in meditation, and he knew it would be more difficult than it had once been to calm his mind. But, fighting off myriad distractions, he kept his eyes shut and concentrated on the sensation of breathing in, and then out, and on the way his body reshaped itself with each breath, moulding itself around the new air that flowed through him every few seconds.

After a while, he became aware of a gentle tugging at his arm, and the sound of his name murmured against his ear; he opened his eyes to find Braska beside him.

"It's our turn," said Braska softly, gesturing towards the ramp that led onto the ship. "Lost in thought?"

"Yeah," Auron muttered, before leading the way onto the

boat, bounding across the ramp as quickly as he could to ensure he wasn't directly above the water for any longer than strictly necessary. "Good evening," he said to the sailor who stood there, trying to fight back against the sensation of his breathing becoming rapid and shallow. "We'd like passage, please – three of us. One cabin is fine."

"One with a porthole?" said the sailor. "It'll cost extra."

Auron shook his head. "No, no. Whatever's cheap, please."

"Ah," said the sailor knowingly. "On a budget? I can put you in a two-berth cabin if one of you doesn't mind sleeping in a hammock. That'll save you some gil."

"Yes, thank you, fine," said Auron breathlessly.

They arranged a price – much like when he had paid for their dinner, Auron didn't really have it in him to argue for a substantial discount – and he took out the increasingly light gil purse to retrieve the money. Having fished out the cash, he attempted to hand it over, but his hands were beginning to tremble, and several of the coins slipped out of his grasp and dropped onto the deck, rolling noisily around on the wooden boards.

"No sea legs, huh?" Jecht remarked derisively as Auron and the sailor bent down to pick up the coins. Auron ignored him; he retrieved those that the sailor hadn't, and handed them over to him hastily before straightening up. "Which cabin?" he demanded.

"Down the stairs, first on the right," the sailor informed him. "Number four."

Auron murmured his thanks, and headed inside as quickly as he could without checking that the other two were following. Once he had located and entered the cabin, he sat down on the lower of the two bunks, trying to catch his breath. As he had anticipated, the ship was rolling in the water slightly, but that was manageable. He was grateful for the lack of porthole: that almost made it possible to forget where he was.

Braska and Jecht joined him shortly afterwards, the latter carrying a large canvas hammock that the sailor had retrieved for them after Auron made the payment. "What the hell," he said, looking down at Auron where he sat on the bed. "Ran down here so you could grab a bed first, huh? After you told the guy this thing would be OK? Why didn't you just pay for a cabin that'd actually fit three of us?"

"No," said Auron, who was starting to feel enough like his usual self to argue, "this bed's for Braska. I'll take the hammock, that's no problem." He straightened up, intending to stand, but the top of his head made contact with the upper bunk with a loud crack, and he immediately recoiled, pressing his hand against the affected area with a cry of pain.

Braska found the energy to hurry forward, sitting down next to Auron to heal him; after a few seconds had passed, Auron felt as if the injury had never happened. "Thanks," he muttered.

"You're not usually uncoordinated," said Braska. "Dropping all that money, and now –"

"Sea legs!" said Jecht again, triumphantly. "Not used to it, are ya, Auron? Always takes a while if you ain't been on boats much."

Braska knew Auron was well accustomed to sea travel from his years in the warrior monk corps; had he been feeling better, he might have realised the explanation didn't add up, but no such thought crossed his mind.

"Yeah," said Auron, "probably." He attempted to stand up again, more carefully, and was relieved to find he succeeded without incident. "Let's get that hung up, then," he added, gesturing at the hammock.

Braska took a brief and rather low-spirited sphere for Yuna while his guardians wrestled with the hammock, eventually managing to get it strung up next to the beds. There wasn't much room available in the cabin even without it; once it was in place, there was no space to stand in front of the bunks at all. With few opportunities left to do anything else, there was nothing for it except to follow Braska's lead and fall asleep, aided by the motion of the waves rocking the ship and its passengers from side to side in a gentle, eternal rhythm.

Chapter 17

Devotion and Desire

With no natural light, it would have been impossible to tell morning had arrived without the rudimentary wake-up call that consisted of one of the younger crew members visiting each cabin and banging loudly on the door until somebody came to answer. The noise woke Jecht first; he reached down from his bunk and prodded Auron with his toes until the latter got up and went to acknowledge the disturbance.

"Docking in half an hour," said the boy officiously, while Auron peered down at him, trying to dispel the remnants of sleep-induced confusion. "I'll be back in ten minutes with your breakfast."

The breakfast was little to speak of, it turned out: merely one piece of slightly stale bread per traveller, along with a small dish of butter to be shared among the three of them. "Dunno why you're looking so pissed, Auron," Jecht remarked as he finished his off. "You were the one that wanted to save money.

If you'd paid a bit more, bet they would've given us somethin' more exciting."

Auron ignored him; his bad mood wasn't because of the breakfast, but because he would soon be confronted with the sea again. He had slept well in the hammock, no worse than Braska and Jecht had in their bunks: putting the water out of his mind fortunately hadn't been too difficult when he couldn't see it. But now that they were drawing close to the shore and to the particular way in which Kilika Port was constructed, he was finding it harder to remain calm.

Feeling his jaw clench, he led the way to the deck and somehow succeeded in disembarking the ship without stumbling. Once he was onshore – if it could be called that – he barely knew where to look. The sea was all around: behind, on both sides, even visible between the slats of the rickety boardwalk beneath his feet that led to the villagers' huts. He could feel his pulse quickening; it sounded very loud in his ears.

"You two go first," he managed to say, ushering Braska and Jecht ahead; there wasn't room to walk three abreast on the slats, and that way he would have a little more privacy. With the need to appear outwardly composed less pressing, he thought, the walk through the village would be slightly more bearable.

But it hardly seemed to make a difference. Jecht and Braska went ahead, discussing the unusual way in which the port had been constructed; its insubstantial nature, Braska was explain-

ing solemnly, was due to the frequency of Sin's attacks. Behind them, Auron clutched his chest as it tightened, forcing himself to keep his eyes open so he had some idea of which direction to head in, even as his vision was beginning to blur and make it difficult to tell. Trying not to draw attention to himself, he nonetheless found himself gasping for breath, staggering forward more heavily with each step. The hazy figures of Braska and Jecht in front were the only signal of which way he should be walking; they were so small in his mind in comparison to the water, and the thought of sinking down forever, moving his limbs to no effect as he plummeted into darkness, the fiends surging around him, tearing into him with increasing ferocity until there was nothing left of him at all.

It hadn't been like that, he told himself. He had fought; he had survived. Even after that awful audience with what had seemed like the entire population of Bevelle, where he had been so thoroughly humiliated. He had got through it.

But the thought had little effect. The sea was so close, lapping at his feet like the bites of the fiends, the sting of metal digging into his hands as he fumbled with each grate, the shameful echoes of their laughter –

It was too much to take. Stumbling across the last few feet of boardwalk that led to the inn, he pushed past Braska and Jecht, grabbing the latter by the arm as he did so and hauling him into the building in his wake. "Stock up on potions," he mumbled, retrieving the gil purse and shoving it clumsily into

Jecht's hands. "I've got to – bathroom."

Jecht looked down at the gil purse as Auron dashed off; there was enough in there to buy a few potions, certainly, but after that they would be out. Auron had probably intended Jecht to haggle, although Jecht had no particular interest in doing so; that was why Auron normally insisted on getting all the supplies himself. But it was Auron's problem if he wanted to issue such vague instructions, Jecht thought, choosing not to think about the fact that something had clearly distressed him.

Braska entered a few seconds later, looked around, blinked a few times, and said, "Where's Auron? He did run in here terribly quickly – is he all right?"

"Think he's fine," Jecht lied, and he wandered over to the counter to replenish their potion stock while Braska took a seat, content that his guardians were able to look out for each other.

Jecht returned with a few potions and only the smallest handful of gil, and sat beside Braska as they waited for Auron to return. "Auron was right about the money," he admitted. "We ain't got much at all now – I guess we'll have to camp again tonight instead of stayin' here."

"We have to pass through a jungle before we reach the next temple," Braska informed him. "There'll be fiends to slay there, so we'll make some more in bounties. We're supposed to be taking the ferry to Besaid tomorrow, and we'll need to pay for

our fare; I'm sure Auron has it all in hand."

"Right," said Jecht doubtfully, looking down at the few coins he was holding. It was unlikely they'd make enough from fiend bounties in just one day to have enough to pay for another ferry crossing, he thought. Braska seemed confident that Auron would manage it, but Jecht wondered if Auron's inexplicable affliction had harmed his ability to plan ahead. He decided not to voice his doubts, and instead lapsed into silence.

They sat there for a few more minutes, and then Braska murmured, "Are you sure Auron's all right? He's taking an awfully long time. Perhaps we should check."

"Uh, yeah, maybe," said Jecht.

"Would you, Jecht?" Braska prompted him.

Jecht had thought Braska would volunteer, given that he was the one who cared about Auron's wellbeing, but then he remembered that Braska was rarely one for doing things himself when he could ask one of his guardians to do them for him. "Sure," he muttered, before reluctantly standing and heading the way Auron had gone earlier.

He soon found the bathroom, and knocked on the door. "Hey, Auron," he said unsympathetically. "Braska wants to know if you're OK."

There was a pause, and then Auron spoke, his voice low and hoarse. "I'm fine," he said. "I'll just be a moment."

"Right," said Jecht, and he was about to turn around and return to the seating area, but then Auron added, "Did you get those potions?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Do you have them now?" said Auron.

"You want one?"

The door opened, and Auron stood there; faced with the sight of him, it was impossible for Jecht not to acknowledge that he didn't look well. Auron had undone his ponytail, letting his hair cascade messily over his shoulders; his face was pale and bore a telltale sheen of sweat, and as he reached out to take the potion that Jecht handed over, his hand trembled.

"Thanks," he mumbled, withdrawing into the bathroom again.

"If you're sick," said Jecht to the closed door, "why don't you just get Braska to do a spell on you?"

"Magic doesn't cure everything," said Auron. "Anyway, Braska needs to save his strength for the æon today. He shouldn't be worrying about me."

"He's gonna worry if you spend any more time in there," Jecht pointed out.

"I'll just be a minute," said Auron. "You can tell him that."

"Sure," said Jecht, and he made his way back to Braska to deliver the news.

Inside the bathroom, Auron gave his hair a quick comb and tied it back into its ponytail, studying his reflection in the mir-

ror. The potion hadn't helped much with how he felt, but at least it had restored some colour to his face and made it possible for him to stand still without shaking. To an observer, he might have appeared composed, even though his heart was still pounding and he still felt as if he was on the brink of collapse.

He forced himself to stand still, gazing at his outwardly untroubled reflection. Perhaps, he thought, it would be a good idea to let Braska know about this problem: it was endangering his ability to dedicate himself to his duties as guardian, after all. If he was reduced to a wreck every time he drew near water, Braska should surely know about it, and be aware that he wouldn't be able to rely on Auron's protection at those times. But then, he thought, if Braska knew, he would begin to worry about Auron himself, and he already had quite enough to deal with. The burden of being a summoner was heavy even for someone who didn't suffer in the way Braska did; adding his own troubles to that, Auron was sure, would be inexcusably selfish.

He would have to deal with it himself; that at least was very clear to him. He would need to follow Braska's example. The argument they had had in the Thunder Plains travel agency came back to him: Braska had been adamant that even at his worst moments, he needed to continue. As much as he had believed the contrary at the time, Auron now saw the advantage of setting such an inflexible goal: without it, a short rest break

might have become a week, and Braska might have found himself less and less able to continue. As things were, Auron could foresee something similar happening to him. If he made a fuss about the water now, and tried to wait until he felt better before continuing, he would be waiting for days. Braska didn't deserve to have his pilgrimage derailed by Auron's problems; that would just make things even worse for everyone.

He was doing this for Braska, Auron reminded himself; he had already sworn that he would do anything at all, overcome any challenge, for Braska's sake. Not only because of the promises he had made when he formally signed his name to the Code of the Guardian and became responsible for Braska's pilgrimage – Jecht, oddly, seemed to have escaped needing to go through the same process – but because of his own convictions. He would do anything Braska needed, whether or not it lined up with the official duties of his position: he had already decided that.

He would have to draw on that dedication now, he realised, and let it win out over his fears, focusing so wholly on supporting Braska that his own troubles could be forgotten. It would be possible. The terrible aching in his chest, the nausea that persisted despite his having spent a good few minutes retching over the sink when they had first arrived, the feeling of panic and despair – all of that could be overcome by focusing on Braska and the duty to serve. Bowing in private prayer, Auron swore it in the names of all the fayth; then, he straight-

ened up, splashed a little water onto his face, and headed out to rejoin his companions, walking as confidently as he could.

"Are you all right?" said Braska as Auron approached. "Jecht said you were fine, but you were a terribly long time in there –"

Auron scrambled into a kneeling position, bending his head so low that it almost touched the ground. "Forgive me, my lord," he said. "I was caught up in needless vanity and introspection. But I'm ready to serve you now, with all my strength. Anything you ask, I'll provide."

"Oh," said Braska, somewhat surprised by Auron's response. "Well, I appreciate it. Thank you."

Auron stayed on his knees, determined not to stand until Braska requested it; Braska peered down at him, still slightly perplexed. After a few seconds, another patron of the inn walked past, almost tripping over Auron's prostrate form; Braska shot her an apologetic glance, and hissed, "For goodness' sake, Auron, get up."

Auron did so hurriedly. "Ready to go, sir?" he suggested.

Braska nodded, and they made their way out of the inn, back onto the boardwalk that would now take them to the edge of the temple's expansive, jungled enclosure. Auron's breath hitched as he stepped onto the planks, but he focused with all his might on the sight of Braska walking in front of him. All this was for Braska, he reminded himself; Braska took priority over everything. Auron's breathing was becoming ragged;

his head pounded, and the sweat had begun to trickle across his face once again; but to the best of his ability, he kept his thoughts focused on that one matter, letting the thought of Braska be the guiding light that would dispel his terrifying darkness.

It worked, to some extent; he succeeded in maintaining control of his movements long enough to move off the boardwalk at last and onto the paved path that ran through the jungle. Focusing on Braska had mercifully preserved him from spiralling too far into panic. He stood by as his companions paused to take in the sight of their surroundings, closing his eyes and slowly exhaling as he felt his heartbeat return to a manageable pace.

"What's the plan, Auron?" said Braska, turning to face Auron for the first time since they had left the inn. "How are the fiends in this area?"

"Not bad," Auron replied breathlessly, finding the sight of Braska's face alarmingly intense after having spent so long looking at the back of his head. "They'll be weak. Jecht and I will take care of it, sir – you need to save your strength for the fayth."

"Very well," said Braska with relief. He was starting to worry about the temple, as he always did; the novelty of the ferry journey had meant he could put this one out of his mind a little longer, but now that they were drawing near, it was more difficult to ignore. He let Auron and Jecht walk ahead, turning

his thoughts inwards as he moved along the path behind them.

The distraction of a few battles with fiends, impotent as they were, was all Auron needed to feel mostly normal. With the water less present in his mind, his thoughts had nonetheless predictably turned to the last trip he had made to Kilika: it had been one of his last major duties as part of the corps. Both the warrior monks and the Crusaders had been dispatched there to assist with cleanup after one of Sin's attacks; it had turned out when they arrived that most of the damage had affected the islanders' huts. Each party had resented the presence of the other – normally, only one of the two forces was sent to this kind of thing, but apparently there had been some sort of mixup among the people calling for aid – and both had thought the task somewhat beneath them, for different reasons. The monks had been summoned on the understanding that they were to help at the temple, which was of course where their primary loyalty lay, but had discovered when they arrived that due to the temple's distance from the port it was mostly unharmed. The Crusaders had grumbled about the fact that Sin had already departed from the scene, especially when the monks were also present: they had been promised an opportunity for active combat, and had found when they arrived that this was nothing of the kind.

As a result of the misunderstandings, there had been a lot of sitting around doing nothing, playing cards in the encampment that had been hastily set up in the southern part

of the jungle. After a few days, a casual landball league was established, which, unusually, attracted teams from across the divide. Auron hadn't been involved, but had watched the matches and cheered on his comrades along with the other monks. That had been the beginning of some tentative – and temporary – camaraderie between them and the Crusaders.

Not long before the expedition was due to finish, Auron succeeded in finding a man of a similar persuasion to himself. A few glances across one of the landball nets had sufficed for the two of them to communicate that fact to each other; the man was, of course, a Crusader. It was rare to find another who one could suspect was interested in members of his own sex, and to be able to confirm that suspicion so expediently. The two of them had spent the last few evenings behind the barracks, engaging in furtive and frantic mutual masturbation while still wearing full military gear; it was difficult to take things any further, and ill-advised to make any attempt at undressing, when it was always possible that one of their comrades would come by. Neither of them had ever even told the other his name; that had hardly mattered with so little time and space.

It had ended badly, to put it mildly, but Auron couldn't help feeling a stab of longing mixed in with the familiar sensation of regret and shame. When a pair of very young-looking Crusaders emerged from a thicket and began to hurry towards him, he was glad to be distracted from his mixed feelings by

something that looked as if it would require more attention than the routine battles with fiends.

It turned out that the Crusaders of Kilika were more pleasant to deal with than those who patrolled the Mushroom Rock Road; being stationed on the islands on a permanent basis seemed to mean they were less convinced of their own superiority. There was a fiend lurking in the jungle, they explained, one that returned periodically and preyed on the priests and pilgrims who passed through. The islanders had come to believe it was possessed of a kind of immortality. Auron in particular was sceptical about that, but he couldn't help acknowledging that the fiend sounded more dangerous than the usual sort.

"It's a constant menace," the more senior of the two Crusaders explained. "But stronger fighters can usually beat it back for a while – we'll get a few weeks' peace if you take it down, at least. You look experienced enough with those swords – are you interested?"

"Can't you do it?" said Auron suspiciously. "Isn't that what you're here for?"

"Ordinary fiends, yeah," said the Crusader, not at all put out by his tone. "Not ones like this, though – we're still pretty new recruits. We sent a message to command asking for backup; they keep telling us they'll send someone, but it's been months already. Rumour is, the Crusaders on the mainland don't care that much about the rest of us."

Auron nodded; there was a general belief among mainlanders that the islands were rarely worthy of attention, although he hadn't realised it went so far among the Crusaders that they wouldn't even look out for their own. "Well," he said, "I'm sorry about that, but it's not a good idea for us to get involved: my lord summoner's on his way to petition your fayth for the æon, and I'm sure you'll understand that he needs to save his strength until then."

"Aw, you pussy!" Jecht exclaimed. "Me and you can do it, can't we? You keep braggin' about how the fiends around here are so easy to deal with – it can't be that much harder than the rest of 'em."

"If anyone's bragging, Jecht –" Auron started, before shaking his head; he wasn't going to let himself get into some petty argument with Jecht in front of the two Crusaders. "We don't even know how strong this fiend is," he said instead. "If Lord Braska can't heal us, we might be in trouble."

"I can use potions, Auron," said Braska. "I'll stay out of the fiend's way, and help you both with items if you need them."

"Yeah, come on!" said Jecht. "We gotta help these guys – they're basically kids, I mean, seriously. It's the right thing to do."

"Sir," said Auron, ignoring the last contribution, "we don't want to slow you down. I'm sure you want to get to the temple."

Braska shook his head, and said, "It's all right, Auron. We

should help them – Kilika's fayth may appreciate it."

"So," said Jecht to the Crusaders, satisfied that Auron wouldn't dare contradict that line of reasoning, "where is this thing, then?"

They led the way to the fiend; it wasn't lurking in the undergrowth like most tended to do, but had stationed itself in the middle of a path, raising its long tentacles into the air as if to goad its would-be assailants. That sort of behaviour usually meant the fiend in question was stronger or more sentient than the normal sort; beliefs about fiends often differed according to one's interpretation of the teachings, but the common view was that while most of them lacked awareness of anything beyond an urge to do harm, there were a few that possessed a more complex consciousness. These fiends could be significantly more dangerous; while the usual kind attacked blindly without regard for the situation or what was being used against them, these more developed ones often had more grasp of the concept of strategy.

"We fought these before, right?" said Jecht. "Near Djose? Piece of cake."

"Yeah, but this one's bigger," said Auron, drawing his sword warily. "And probably more dangerous – don't get complacent." He turned to Braska, and added, "You stay back, sir."

Braska inclined his head in response; staying back was certainly what he intended.

As soon as his guardians approached the fiend, it began to bounce up and down unnervingly as if eager to fight; it soon snaked a tentacle towards Jecht. He managed to dodge the full force of its impact, but the light slap was nonetheless enough for the tentacle to secrete a thick green gas. Moments later, Jecht found that the same gas was emanating from his nose and mouth each time he exhaled; the stench of it was almost enough to make him vomit. "What the hell's this?" he groaned.

"Poison," Auron explained. "It's happened to you before – remember those insect fiends near Djose? Braska normally gets in with some magic before it takes hold, though. Do we have any antidotes, sir?" he called.

Braska was searching through the items frantically; eventually he looked up, wide-eyed, and shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "None – no remedies, either."

"It's fine," said Auron. "We'll deal with it later. Try not to think about it, Jecht." As he turned his attention back towards the fiend, he felt a prickle of unease; it was undoubtedly his fault that they weren't carrying any of the right kind of restorative items. If he had been in a position to stop and think calmly about what they needed that morning, he might have realised that Braska wouldn't be in a position to cast magic, and might have thought ahead and realised they needed more than just potions; in the event, he hadn't even been well enough to ask for those.

He tried his best to put it out of his mind as he struck the

fiend repeatedly with his sword. It retaliated with blows from more of its tentacles, as well as the occasional blast of water, which left Auron and Jecht gasping for breath each time it hit them, but at least provided brief respite from the nauseating smell of the poison gas. By this point, Auron was poisoned as well; he was more used to it than Jecht was, but could still feel it sapping his strength, making him feel sick and uncomfortable.

The fiend seemed to be getting weaker in response to Auron and Jecht's assault, but then it suddenly slumped to one side and became relatively still. It looked as if they had somehow defeated it, but Auron knew better. "Sleeping," he said in response to Jecht's quizzical expression. "It'll get stronger again if we don't hit it quickly."

Jecht nodded, and launched forward to attack; he struck the fiend with a good clean blow, and it sprang back to life, raising its tentacles into the air once more. Then, suddenly, it leapt upwards, springing off the mossy paving stones to an absurd height before slamming back down with such force that the ground trembled violently. Both Auron and Jecht stumbled; for Jecht, it was the last straw, and he found himself spewing out the remains of his breakfast, narrowly missing his bare feet.

Auron's stomach churned, and he pressed a hand briefly to his mouth; but he forced himself through it, and began hacking away at the fiend with renewed vigour, distracting himself from his nausea by throwing everything into the attack. Not too long later, Jecht mustered the force to join in, and together,

they fought their way through another series of slaps from the fiend's tentacles and torrents of water from its enormous mouth, until at last, it shuddered to a stop, and then quietly disintegrated, pyreflies rising from its body with incongruous tranquillity.

At that moment, the two Crusaders emerged from their hiding place. "That was brilliant," said the older one enthusiastically. "It'll be back soon enough – it always is – but that'll be such a help to us in the meantime."

"Do you have any antidotes?" Auron asked.

The two Crusaders exchanged a glance, and shook their heads. "Sorry," the young man went on. "They're bound to have some at the temple, though, or at least someone who can cast Esuna – you'll be in no trouble once you get up there."

"We should go, then," Auron muttered.

"Not without your reward," said the younger Crusader; sweeping her long red hair out of the way, she produced a large bag of coins and handed it to Auron. "Quite the bounty on this one," she explained. "Everyone's always keen to see the back of it, see."

Auron almost dropped the bag in surprise; he hadn't been expecting their financial problems to come to such an abrupt end, but the weight of what he now held made it clear that they now had enough gil to get them through at least the next fortnight comfortably. He readied himself for a long, formal expression of gratitude, but the Crusaders assured him that no

such thing was necessary, and urged him to head on towards the temple so that he and Jecht could be cured of the poison as soon as possible.

"Are you sure you can both make it up there?" Braska asked, as they proceeded towards the steps that marked the north end of the jungle.

"I'm fine," Auron lied. "So are you, right, Jecht?"

Jecht frowned at him; he was still feeling distinctly unwell, and knew Auron was too, but, he decided, if Auron was going to act as if nothing was wrong, he certainly couldn't show himself up by admitting his own discomfort. "Yeah," he said. "All good here."

"You don't look especially well," said Braska.

"Well, our money problems are over, at least," said Auron, unconvincingly changing the subject. "You know, Jecht, when you said it was the right thing to do, I thought you meant *morally* right, but maybe that was naïve of me."

Jecht smiled weakly. "Huh, yeah," he muttered. "What would you do without the great Jecht."

They were drawn into battle with a few more of the weaker fiends as they approached the steps; fortunately the monsters were dispatched easily enough, even if the effort of fighting them made Auron and Jecht feel increasingly ill. Each time, Braska handed each of them a potion, and suggested with gradually increasing firmness that they might allow him to cast just a quick spell to settle their stomachs; but they both in-

sisted there was no problem every time before shouldering their swords and making their way on, slower and slower after each fight.

At last, they made it to the bottom of the steps. Jecht looked up, and saw how many there were; so many that the temple itself remained very much out of sight. He groaned; he'd expected to be there by this point.

"You're all right, aren't you," said Auron sternly, discreetly clutching his own stomach.

Jecht opened his mouth to reply in the affirmative, but found himself vomiting again instead, collapsing onto his hands and knees as the remaining contents of his stomach made their way onto the ground in front of him. Auron turned away with a grimace, knowing he was close to breaking point himself; Braska, meanwhile, marched towards Jecht with determination.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered, and, stooping to place a hand on Jecht's back, he gave his staff a little wave, until Jecht straightened up, looking much better.

With Jecht seen to, Braska approached Auron; Auron backed away. "Don't worry about it, sir," he mumbled. "It's not far to the temple now – I'll make it."

"Auron, I insist," said Braska.

"You need to save your strength," Auron protested.

Braska shook his head. *"Please*, Auron," he said, "I don't want to argue with you – not when I'm about to go up there

and – I don't want a repeat of what happened in Djose."

"Oh," said Auron, suddenly remembering; if Braska were to approach the fayth with anything resembling the resentment towards his guardians he had been feeling on the previous occasion, gaining the æon was bound to be a difficult and perhaps impossible task. "Yes – of course. Sorry."

Braska seized him by the wrist, channelling magic into Auron until it was clear that the poison was expelled; then, keeping hold of him, he looked up to meet Auron's eyes.

"I really am sorry," said Auron again, quietly. "I forgot about that – I never meant to make it harder for you."

Rubbing his thumb slowly over Auron's wrist, Braska sighed. "I know," he said. "Just, Auron – think next time. Please."

Auron nodded; he was cured of the poisoning, but still felt miserable knowing that he had done the wrong thing. First the antidotes, he thought, and now this: two mistakes in a single day. It was unusual for him, and it was impeding his ability to serve Braska; he couldn't let it continue.

Braska let go of Auron's wrist, drew him into the lightest, most fleeting embrace, and then began to make his way up the steps. Jecht followed quickly, keen not to have to talk to Auron, who he could tell was upset; Auron walked behind, his fists clenched.

On the plateau at the top of the steps, they came face to face with a familiar but unwelcome sight: it was Perula, the older

summoner who had been accepted by Bevelle's fayth shortly before Braska had, and whom they had last encountered at Macalania. "Ah," she said. "Lord Braska; it seems we're on each other's tail again."

"Indeed," said Braska politely. "You're looking well, Lady Perula – I take it you've been successful with the fayth?"

Perula nodded. "That's right. They say Kilika is a difficult one, but as you can see, I didn't find it too taxing." She paused. "Although the fayth may not be so quick to help an enemy of Yevon."

"So you've seen the notices they've put out about us," said Braska.

"How could I have missed them?" Perula asked. "Quite the enlightening read. Don't be too disappointed when the fayth turns you down, Braska – it's a miracle you've come this far. At least it will make it easier for your daughter when her time comes."

At that, Braska's polite expression momentarily faltered. "I sincerely hope that won't be necessary," he said.

"Touching," she said with a smirk. "But naïve."

"What's your problem, lady?" said Jecht.

She looked him up and down. "Ah, yes – the raving lunatic, isn't that right? A fitting guardian to your lord summoner, I'm sure."

Jecht merely scowled in response; satisfied that she had insulted Braska and his entourage sufficiently, Perula began to

make her way towards the steps, followed at a distance by her two young guardians. One of them caught Auron's eye, stifled a laugh, and whispered something to his companion as they walked past.

"Is something the matter?" Auron hissed.

"Ooh, watch out," said the younger of Perula's guardians to his brother. "He wants to –"

"Enough," Braska thundered; even Jecht was taken aback by the sudden intensity of his voice. "You may be here with a summoner, but I will not tolerate malicious gossip and slander about one of my guardians." As for Auron, he thought, he would have words with him later about controlling his temper, for all the good it would do. "You will apologise," he said, no less forcefully. "To him and to your lady summoner, for bringing her pilgrimage into disrepute."

"Sir –" Auron mumbled, but Braska fixed him with the same look of ire, and he said no more.

The boy grimaced, and then looked back at Auron and muttered, "Sorry," dropping into a quick bow of prayer as he did so. Then he turned to Perula, and said, with obvious reluctance, "My apologies, my lady."

She returned a slow nod, before shooting Braska a hostile glare, incensed that he had dared issue an order to one of her guardians; he returned her gaze defiantly, and before too long she was away, hurrying down the steps with the two boys in her wake.

"What the hell was that about?" said Jecht.

"Bevelle politics," said Braska, regarding Auron with concern. "Let's not worry about it – it's not important."

Auron took a deep breath, and then met Braska's gaze. "You're right, sir," he said; the incident had made him feel uncomfortably destabilised again, but he was determined for Braska not to have to worry about it when he would shortly have the fayth to contend with.

Braska gave him a small smile. "Let's go inside," he suggested, and his guardians followed him down the steps into the temple.

Auron immediately made his way towards the statue of Lord Gandof; he was desperate for the mental clarity that a moment of prayer would provide. "I hope you're not going to interrupt this time, Jecht," he said over his shoulder, "after what happened before."

"Knock yourself out," said Jecht unenthusiastically.

He and Braska stood back as Auron prostrated himself in front of the statue; Braska turned away from the sight of it. Yevon owed nothing to Auron, he thought, and the fact that Auron was still so pious after everything he had gone through in Bevelle was an honour that in his opinion, Yevon did not deserve. "I do hope he's all right," he murmured.

Jecht rolled his eyes; it was clear to him that Auron wasn't quite as put together as usual, and seemed to have been struggling with something throughout the day, but he

certainly wasn't going to acknowledge it. "What was that thing she said back there about Yuna?" he asked instead.

"Oh," said Braska. "Yes. You see, summoning tends to run in families – there's an expectation in Bevelle that if somebody attempts the pilgrimage, his children will eventually follow suit when they reach adulthood. But there's no reason why that should be the case; I never meant to –" He sighed. "It was never my intention that Yuna should follow this path. I wouldn't wish that on her."

"So why do they normally do it?" said Jecht.

"They say," Braska replied, "that if the fayth are already familiar with a certain family, subsequent generations will find it easier to petition them for the æons. Just a superstition, perhaps – there's nothing about it in Yevon's teachings, but then, on the other hand, it can't have come out of nowhere. People see it as a duty: if they come from one of those families, they think it's more likely that they'll get somewhere with the pilgrimage."

"Right," said Jecht, unconvinced.

"All of Spira is built on these traditions," Braska remarked as he turned to look back at Auron, "but often they do more harm than good."

"Yeah, I can believe it," Jecht admitted.

On the floor, focusing all his concentration on his prayer, Auron was starting to feel better. His dedication to Yevon was a comfort, as it often was; reflecting on his faith was enough to

take him back to the familiar doctrines of his boyhood, when every problem had had a clear solution and prowess with the sword had been enough to ensure everyone's respect. And then, suddenly, something struck him: he had neglected his true priorities, he realised. He had put something worldly, something transient, above his beliefs: he had needed something to focus on that would get him through the journey from the inn to the jungle, and he had chosen Braska. Not Yevon, but Braska.

Now that his mind was clearer, he realised the inappropriateness of it. Not so long ago, prioritising anything over his faith would have been thinkable. Even Braska, undoubtedly the most important man in Auron's life; even he should never have taken precedence over Yevon. He squirmed in place, pressing his forehead harder against the floor as if the increased force of the contact would help him regain the piety he had realised he was lacking. That sort of thing was unforgivable, he thought; his faith was a precious gift, and he needed to hold onto it. In the days after the incident in Bevelle, it had been the firmness of his trust in Yevon that had got him through and aided his recovery; no matter what the priests said about him, he had remained certain that he was a model follower of the teachings in every way he could be.

But, he couldn't help thinking, it hadn't just been Yevon. Braska's care and concern, too – Braska's insistence on being there for him, when everyone else had turned their backs.

Would Yevon have healed him, he wondered, and let him rest until he felt able to walk the streets of Bevelle again? Would Yevon have made him feel so safe?

He dismissed the thought. Braska had been a great help, undoubtedly, but he was a mortal man. It was wrong to try drawing some comparison between him and the very bedrock of Spiran society. He would need to hold Yevon in his heart from now on, he thought, and ensure he was appropriately respectful towards his beliefs. On the walk back to the inn, he decided, it would be Yevon that he would focus on to ensure he got through it, not Braska.

He stood, took a deep breath, and returned to his companions.

Braska glanced at Auron, taking note of the red mark on his forehead where he had pressed it so forcefully against the ground, and said mildly, "That looked like enough reverence for all three of us."

"Well," said Auron, "someone had to. Are you feeling ready for the fayth, sir? I hope those spells didn't tire you. I'm sure they'll let us rest here for a while if you need it."

Braska shook his head. "Two spells is nothing, Auron. I'll be all right – we'll go on."

Auron nodded and stood aside, letting Braska present himself to the priest who stood at the entrance to the Trials. This time, unlike in Djose, everything went smoothly; the three of them advanced up the stairs, through the heavy door, and

waited on the lift that took them down.

"I'll let the two of you handle it," said Braska, once they arrived at the bottom. "I need to –" He waved a hand distractedly in front of his face. "I should prepare myself."

Auron and Jecht worked their way through the puzzle without much difficulty; it was easier again than the one in Djose had been. It came as no surprise to Auron; the further one got from Bevelle, he knew, the more primitive the way the temples were constructed was likely to be. Outlying areas tended to take the teachings' injunctions against machina more seriously; in Bevelle, on the other hand, it was known that they were indispensable to civilised society.

"Got it!" Jecht exclaimed when the last sphere was in place. "OK, Braska, it's all yours."

Braska nodded, forcing himself out of his reverie. "Very well," he murmured.

"You're ready?" Auron asked him, once they had advanced through the corridor that had revealed itself and into the peaceful antechamber beyond.

"As ready as I can be," said Braska, and he walked past Auron towards the door into the fayth's chamber, letting his hand rest briefly on Auron's back as he did so.

Auron watched as he receded from view, wondering. Braska had been a lot more tactile with him recently: there had been that quick, surprising embrace after he cured Auron of his poisoning, and the day before, Braska had spent quite

some time slumped against Auron's shoulder while they were at the bar in Luca – on that occasion, it had clearly been his grief and embarrassment that had driven him to seek physical comfort, but the incidents since then hadn't seemed to be motivated by that. Braska had always seemed to need physical contact when he was feeling low – Auron remembered those long evenings for months after Girl's death, sitting with Braska and holding his hand while he wept or simply stared morosely into the distance – but he seemed to be going beyond that now.

It meant nothing, Auron reminded himself. The pilgrimage was hard on them all, even Jecht; Auron and Braska had already been close friends, and everything that had happened over the past fortnight was bound to have strengthened their bond. Braska was the sort of person who expressed affection physically. Auron concentrated very hard on that thought, reiterating to himself that this behaviour was nothing more than a result of the natural progression of their friendship; but he could still practically feel the imprint of Braska's hand through the back of his cuirass, as brief as the contact had been. He closed his eyes, leant back against the wall, and let out a quiet sigh of frustration, hoping Jecht wouldn't notice.

Jecht did notice; within moments, he was standing in front of Auron, scowling at his pained expression. "OK," he said, "what's up with you? You been actin' weird all day. You ain't still sick, are ya?"

Reluctantly, Auron opened his eyes and muttered, "Are you concerned for my wellbeing?"

"No," Jecht hissed back, "I just don't like not knowing what's goin' on. Feels like you're keepin' me in the dark about somethin'."

"I'm not," said Auron. He closed his eyes again. "Go away."

"I mean," Jecht went on, "you screwed up with those antidotes, right? You're usually so obsessed with making sure we got enough of everythin'. You asked me to buy potions, but when I added 'em to the rest of the stuff, there were tons there already. You're usually on top of that."

Auron opened his eyes again, tugged distractedly on the end of his ponytail for a moment, and then said quietly, "You're right. I wasn't thinking – I made a mistake. I – I'm not used to making mistakes."

"Fucking hell, Auron," said Jecht, incredulous that someone could say such a thing in total sincerity, before deciding that of all the people he had met, Auron was the most likely candidate. "We could've gotten real sick from that thing," he added resentfully.

"We'd have just passed out if it got that bad," Auron explained; the opportunity to provide Jecht with some factual information made it easier for him to remain composed. "I know we have plenty of phoenix down – it would have been fine."

"Still felt like shit, though," Jecht remarked. He paused, and then added, "You know, if you let me do some of the plannin',

maybe it wouldn't have happened."

"Hold on," said Auron, wondering briefly whether he was so worn out that he had fallen asleep and dreamt the last sentence. "You're saying you want to help?"

Jecht scoffed. "Not *help*," he said, "more like … get involved in all the stuff, like …" He waved a hand to the side. "I ain't used to makin' mistakes either, you know. If we both know what's goin' on, it has to go to plan, right? Ain't like we're both gonna mess up at the same time."

"I suppose so," said Auron doubtfully.

"No point makin' this harder for Braska either, is it?" said Jecht.

"No," said Auron. "Of course not." He looked at the ground. "I'm not trying to do that."

Jecht snorted. "Yeah, don't worry, I didn't think you were. You're tryin' to … show off for him, right? Prove you can do it all by yourself?"

Auron opened his mouth to reply, and then sighed.

"You make it pretty obvious you'd do anything he asks you," Jecht went on. "I don't think there's any need to worry that he thinks you're not dedicated enough, or whatever. Even someone as tied up in his own stuff as him is gonna see that."

Auron stared at him a moment longer, and then said, "I was going to be his only guardian. But after things went the way they did in Bevelle … I think he was worried about relying on me."

Jecht nodded, trying not to make his curiosity about what had happened to Auron too obvious.

"I managed to convince him it would be fine," Auron said, more to himself than to Jecht. "In the end, he seemed content enough to let me do it on my own. But then when he heard someone from Zanarkand had turned up, only the day before we were due to leave – he was sure it couldn't be a coincidence."

"Huh," said Jecht. "And then it turned out it was."

"Maybe," said Auron. "You know –"

Jecht interrupted. "Forget about it."

"But –"

"I said forget it," Jecht insisted. "You want me to be a better guardian, right? So tell me about all the stuff I gotta know. I'm guessin' we got plenty of time."

Inside the chamber of the fayth, Braska was on his knees, concentrating as hard as he could on ridding his mind of distractions. The fayth was yet to manifest, although it hadn't yet been as long as it had taken in Djose. There was still hope, he thought, and he mouthed the word to himself a few times, letting himself focus on the way his lips rounded and then briefly came together before falling apart again, taking comfort in the predictability of each movement.

And eventually, the fayth appeared. Braska looked up, and recognised his uniform: it was a little old-fashioned, but the man had clearly been a Crusader. It was surprising, when the

Crusaders' focus tended to be on trying to take down Sin by more immediate methods, that one of them might have chosen this path; but, he reminded himself, they were still followers of Yevon, and in the past their opposition to the warrior monks and to the more traditional elements of Spiran spirituality had been less acute.

"Summoner," said the fayth, "you are most unusual."

Braska stayed still, waiting for the fayth to elaborate.

"Most summoners make a fundamental error when they take the pilgrimage," the man went on; "they fail to realise how it will truly end. They think too much of gaining the Final Æon, and then, of the glory they and their guardians will be awarded after the Final Summoning – but never of what must happen in between."

Death, thought Braska confidently.

"Yes," said the fayth. "Indeed. Those men and women forget their own sacrifice – or rather, they never understand the cost. They talk superficially of their own passing; they make arrangements for the care of their families; but they cannot comprehend the fact that they must truly no longer live. But you, summoner: you are ready for it. You are one of the few."

I've had enough of life, Braska thought. There's nothing to keep me here anymore. I've felt this way for three years now.

It was refreshing to be able to be so honest about it. He had said such things to Auron a few times, usually in moments of great distress, and Auron had clearly been disturbed. Braska

had begun to allude to other reasons for taking the pilgrimage instead – bringing some peace to Spira while Yuna was growing up, helping the people in their suffering, ensuring Auron's reputation would be restored – all of them were important, of course. But none so much as the simple truth that had led him to train as a summoner in the first place: he wanted to die.

The fayth nodded in approval; he stepped closer, and placed his incorporeal hands on Braska's shoulders, and then the memories began.

In the antechamber, Jecht and Auron were sitting close to the door that led towards the fayth's chamber, discussing the various types of threats to be found in Spira. Auron had decided that the best way of educating Jecht would be to present him with a taxonomy of the different kinds of fiends they might encounter, and methodically work his way through it from the weakest to the strongest of each species; Jecht, on the other hand, was adamant that the only fiends worth knowing about were the largest and most dangerous ones, and had insisted on this several times during the discussion.

They were about to come to blows, not for the first time, when the door opened behind them and Braska stumbled out. Immediately, both his guardians sprang up, each taking him by one side and lowering him gradually into a sitting position. Once he was safely on the ground, Jecht stood up again quickly and stepped back; Auron stayed close, ready to lend further assistance.

Braska swallowed the potion Auron thrust towards him and pressed a hand to his head to soothe the throbbing headache that had come on at some point during the exchange of memories; physically, he felt almost as terrible as he ever had after communing with the fayth, but his mind was unusually calm. It was all because he had passed the fayth's trial without any issues; there had been no question of his being turned away, when the only test was to show that he wanted to die.

"How are you doing, sir?" Auron asked, studying Braska with wide, alert eyes.

"It really wasn't bad," Braska murmured, giving him a little wincing smile in return. "Better than the others, in fact." He knew better than to admit why.

"Gettin' the hang of it, huh?" said Jecht. "Nice one! Besaid'll be nothing, then, yeah?"

Braska shook his head. "I don't think we can guarantee that. It depends on what the fayth requires – I was lucky with this one, that's all." He reached out towards Auron, letting his fingers skim against Auron's robe, and added, "I'm ready to move on, I think."

"You're sure?" said Auron. "You don't want to rest more?"

"At the inn," said Braska, "not here. Let's get moving before I become completely exhausted."

"As you wish," said Auron, and he stood, and then let Braska take his arm to help himself up in turn.

Braska continued to cling to Auron's arm as they made their way slowly back through the Cloister of Trials; he could have walked just as well on his own without the support, but it was comforting to feel Auron's presence beside him, solid and warm and confident. He didn't let go until they had left the temple, descended the long flight of stone stairs, begun to travel through the jungle, and encountered the first fiend; it was only the need to allow Auron to draw his sword that prompted Braska to release him and stand back so his guardians could take care of the battle.

As the three of them progressed through the jungle, Auron's thoughts turned with dread to how the journey would progress once they were back on the boardwalk. He would need to remember his vows to Yevon, he reminded himself. He would need to forget, on the other hand, the feeling of Braska's arm looped through his own. He tried not to look at Braska as they advanced, walking ahead of him until they reached the end of the jungle and then ushering him in front, mindful that he himself might need a moment to catch his breath during the walk back to the inn, and hoping that he might be able to do so without being noticed by the others.

He felt his chest tighten almost as soon as the sea came in sight, and tried his very best to think about Yevon, the teachings, the hours and hours of religious instruction he had had as a warrior monk; even the brief and barely remembered period of his life when he had been a ward of one of the temples in

Bevelle, immediately after the destruction of the village where he had been born. None of it helped. The sea was too powerful; the sound and smell of it were beginning to overwhelm him; it felt as if every muscle in his body was clenching, no matter how much he tried to focus on any of the standard Yevonite meditations. He was finding it difficult to breathe, his field of vision was darkening, and he was certain that he would collapse, sprawl forward onto the wooden boards –

And then Braska turned around, just briefly, and smiled, and said, "Still with us, Auron?"

He faced forward again without waiting for a response; he hadn't meant the question as anything more than idle small talk. And yet, to Auron, the momentary sight of his face was like the sun rising above clouds. Braska looked pale and tired, but as Auron saw it, he was convinced: he had an extraordinary radiance, beyond anything else Auron had witnessed in his entire life. Where Yevon could not go, there Braska was. He was sure of it now – he had had some idea of this feeling earlier, but had buried the thought, hoping to find proof that his faith might still be the most important thing in his life – but now, it was undeniable. Braska was more valuable to him than the teachings were: at last, he could no longer pretend otherwise.

The memory of that fleeting glimpse of Braska was what kept Auron composed enough to walk the rest of the way back to the inn without becoming overwhelmed by his fear. Had

he been in less danger of succumbing to it, he might have felt worried and guilty about what this realisation meant for his faith; as it was, he let himself concentrate on Braska wholeheartedly, staring at the back of his head, watching as the end of his staff tapped rhythmically against the boards with each step, and as the tail of his headdress bobbed from one side to the other in the sea breeze. Focusing on Braska, excluding all else, was incredibly easy. The threat of the sea seemed so distant, so negligible in comparison with the power that Braska held.

By the time they arrived at the inn, Auron was in a daze, but that was far preferable to the state he had been in during their earlier visit. While Braska found somewhere to sit down, he stood and looked at the floor, doing his best to compose himself.

"One night, right?" said Jecht.

"Hm?" said Auron, before realising Jecht was offering to arrange their accommodation. "Oh – I'll do it. Just give me a moment." Discombobulated as he was, he was aware that Jecht would probably make no attempt to ask for the kind of room that came at a reasonable price. It wasn't as if they were lacking in gil now – which was an odd thing to think after having had to spend almost a whole week being extremely careful with budgeting – but all the same, there was no need to be profligate.

Jecht grunted and sat down himself, carefully avoiding

Braska, who had started to flag on the journey back and was now massaging his forehead with the tips of his fingers. After taking a few more moments to calm down, Auron approached the reception desk.

"Could you tell me when the next ferry to Besaid is scheduled?" he asked. "By my calculations, it's tomorrow morning; is that right?"

"It is, sir," said the clerk. "It'll leave mid-morning. Do you need a room until then?"

He made the arrangements, not failing to notice the clerk's polite but somewhat aloof demeanour; she had clearly seen the injunction from Bevelle and had some idea of who he was. Now that they had plenty of money, though, he was able to secure a room with no difficulty, and put in a request for some dinner as well before heading towards the others to update them.

"Well, I'll be going to bed, then," Braska suggested, once he heard Auron's news.

"Dinner first," said Auron firmly. "I've ordered some food – they'll bring it over in a minute."

Braska frowned, but he was too tired to argue. Once the food arrived, he slowly ate what he hoped Auron would consider a sufficient portion, and then touched his guardian lightly on the arm and said, "I really do need to go and lie down. Which room is ours?"

Auron glanced down at Braska's dish, suppressed a sigh,

and handed over the key; while Braska went to ask the clerk for some medicine and then trudged away up the stairs, and Jecht eagerly moved in to finish off Braska's food, Auron continued eating his own with almost as little enthusiasm as Braska had shown. Now that his duties were over for the day, the strain of everything that had happened was catching up with him again. At least, he thought, Braska hadn't needed a huge amount of support after speaking to the fayth on this occasion; a good thing too, when everything else that had happened had been so disastrous.

He had managed to conceal his troubles from the others for the most part, he thought; that was some kind of silver lining. Jecht had clearly had some idea that something was going on – the enhanced perception he seemed to have gained since sobering up made sure of that – but his disinclination to get involved in anything that seemed like it might relate to emotions had meant he hadn't pried into Auron's predicament too much.

"I'm going to go to bed too," said Auron, once he had finished his dinner.

Jecht raised an eyebrow, and grunted, "Early."

"Well, I'm really tired," said Auron truthfully, and as he had expected, Jecht merely shrugged and replied, "Whatever."

Auron headed to the bedroom without bothering to say goodnight to Jecht, and found Braska sitting on the side of his bed, having perked up a little since taking the medicine the

clerk had reluctantly provided to him.

"Coming to bed already, Auron?" he murmured. "I didn't expect to see you so soon."

Auron nodded, but then he caught sight of the sphere recorder in Braska's hand. "Am I interrupting?" he said.

"I was about to take Yuna's sphere," said Braska. "Just a quick one – I haven't the energy for anything more. You can join me, if you'd like?" He patted the space on the bed next to him, gesturing for Auron to sit down.

"Oh, no, that's all right," said Auron. "I won't disturb you." Without waiting for Braska to respond, he closed the door and headed towards the communal bathroom, deliberately taking his time to get ready for bed. Once he had drawn out the process as long as he could, he returned to the bedroom, and paused outside the door, making very sure he couldn't hear Braska speaking before he went in.

Satisfied that there was no such sound, he eventually went inside. The room was dark; Braska had finished the recording and gone to sleep, he supposed. He crossed the room, changed into his nightclothes as quietly as he could, and lay down on the mat that had been laid out.

"Yuna would have liked to see you," Braska said.

Auron shook his head, even though the darkness made it imperceptible. "She doesn't know me," he pointed out. "We've barely met."

"But I've told her about you," said Braska. "I had to let her know I'd be in good hands, didn't I? I'm sure she'd be glad to hear from you."

"I'm not good with children," Auron admitted. "I just don't know how to talk to them." It was true – he had never found it easy to communicate with children. There were some at the barracks, of course, whom he had tended to avoid; when that had been impossible, he had mostly found himself ordering them to busy themselves with whichever of the necessary tasks made it most likely that they would stay away from him. Children were too undisciplined and unpredictable – indeed, he found himself thinking, much like Jecht had once been.

Braska chuckled. "They're not a different species, Auron. There's nothing to be afraid of." He paused. "Perhaps you don't see it, but you'd make a good father."

"I don't think that'll be happening, sir," said Auron.

"Of course not," said Braska awkwardly. "Sorry, I – it slipped my mind –"

Auron said nothing.

"I didn't mean anything by it," Braska continued. "I just meant – you take care of me so well. You're a kind person, Auron. Anyone who spent a little time with you would see it."

"Thank you," said Auron.

"I hope I haven't upset you," Braska said.

"No, my lord," Auron murmured, "I'm just tired. I'll sleep now, if you don't mind."

"Of course not," said Braska. "Goodnight, my friend."

Chapter **18**

Southward

Braska felt better the next morning, as did Auron, who was still worried about what the previous day's events meant for his faith, but had at least rested well enough to be able to push the matter to the back of his mind.

"I hardly know anything about Besaid," Braska admitted over breakfast. "Have you been there on your travels at all, Auron?"

"Never," said Auron. "Not much call for it – it's so remote. The ferry takes a whole day from here."

Braska nodded. "Yes. People don't talk about it much, do they? I suppose it must be very isolated."

"Hold on," said Jecht, "isolated? What're you comparin' it to, exactly? Cos it kinda feels like most of the places we've been are isolated, you know? Luca was different, but all these villages … you mean Besaid's gonna be worse than that?"

"What do you want us to do about it?" asked Auron acidly.

"Find some entertainment to bring with us?"

Jecht scowled. "Fuck off. Just … it's gonna be boring, ain't it?"

"Oh, *sorry*," Auron muttered.

They finished their breakfast, and Auron went to pay, getting to the reception desk in time to catch the tail end of a conversation between two of the inn's employees.

"She's already left," one of them was saying, paused at the foot of the stairs with a bundle of clean bedclothes in his arms. "I let her know they'd changed the ship schedule last night, so she decided to head on first thing."

"That's sensible," said the clerk, whose back was turned towards Auron. "They brought it forward by a few hours – bad for business, probably, but sounds like they really don't want that summoner to go any further."

"Excuse me," said Auron loudly, realising with sudden horror what was being discussed – and his suspicion was confirmed when the clerk turned to face him and her face immediately fell. "Why didn't you tell me he was there?" she hissed, looking back at her colleague.

The man shook his head, suddenly tense; Auron stepped closer to the desk, and said grimly, "I suppose he didn't recognise me from the notice. So the ship's left, has it?"

"Not yet," she admitted, not meeting his gaze. "They, er, altered the schedule for today; it's due to leave in the next hour or so –"

"So you made a point of telling everyone staying here, apart from us," said Auron. "Did we slip your mind? Or did someone tell you to leave us out?"

"I'm going to have to alert the Crusaders, sir, if you get violent," the man stammered.

"If I *got violent*," said Auron, "believe me, you would find it very difficult to alert anyone about anything." He turned his attention back to the woman, dug into the gil purse for some cash, and flung it onto the desk, adding, "That's for the room. It sounds like I don't have time to negotiate."

He hurried back to the breakfast area, and said, "We need to leave. Do you have everything? They brought the ferry crossing forward."

"Forward?" said Braska with surprise. "You mean –"

"We'll miss it, if we don't hurry," said Auron. "Come on."

"Can't we just wait until tomorrow?" Jecht suggested.

Auron shook his head. "It's not like the Luca route – not many people go to Besaid. If we miss this one, we could be stuck here for a week."

"Oh," said Jecht, realising just how bored he would be after an entire week on Kilika. "Right, I guess we better go, then; what are we waitin' for?"

They left the inn, Auron allowing himself a final glare in the clerk's direction as they passed the desk, and began to head towards the port at a slow jog. The sense of urgency meant Auron found it easier to deal with the water, much like at the

Moonflow, where Jecht's behaviour had been an unpleasant but somehow useful distraction. He did some calculations in his head as they went: time was short.

"We need to pick up the pace," he told the others. "Can you go faster, sir?"

"Yes," said Braska, "but not for more than a –"

"Save your breath," Auron ordered him, before increasing his own speed.

They hurried further along the boardwalk until the ship came in sight; it was clear that there were no passengers left to board. "Quick!" Auron barked, breaking into a sprint.

"Auron," Braska gasped, "I can't run this fast –"

"You *can*, sir!" Auron encouraged him.

But Braska was faltering – he was fit enough for a short dash at high speed, but he lacked the stamina that allowed his guardians to run at the required pace for any longer than a few minutes. He was beginning to fall behind, despite using all his strength to run as fast as he could.

"You'll have to go ahead," Auron panted, drawing close to Jecht. "Tell them we're on our way –"

"It's already leavin'!" Jecht pointed out, watching as the ropes that had secured the ship to the dock were wound in; but then, the very sight of it gave him an idea. "OK," he added. "I'm gonna swim out and throw one of those ropes down for you guys. Got it?"

"Go!" Auron hissed, and Jecht charged off. Auron looked behind him; Braska was still running as fast as he could, but it wasn't fast enough to keep up. Auron reached out to take Braska's hand – he knew it would be more likely to slow him down than to help Braska go faster, but at least they wouldn't lose each other – and continued running towards the edge of the dock, while Jecht jumped into the water with a huge splash and quickly covered the short distance that had opened up between the ship and the land.

He located a few rungs on the hull of the boat and hoisted himself up, scrambling over the side until he was on the deck. There, ignoring the aggrieved shouts from the sailors, he located a rope wrapped around a post equipped with a winding mechanism, a heavy weight attached to its end. Grabbing a few coils, he hurried to the edge of the deck to look down at the dock, and bellowed, "Get a move on, guys!"

Auron finally succeeded in dragging Braska to the edge of the boardwalk. "Hold onto me," he said urgently. "As tightly as you can – Jecht's going to pull us up using that rope."

"Are you sure this will work?" Braska wheezed.

"Hurry!" Auron exhorted him.

Auron had both his sword and the tent strapped to his back, so Braska took hold of him from the front, wrapping his arms around Auron's chest and passing them under his blade before clasping his hands together behind Auron's back. Glancing briefly at Braska's face, mere inches from his own, Auron

waved to Jecht to signal they were ready, and Jecht tossed the rope in his direction.

Fortunately, Auron succeeded in catching it; he tugged the rope down until it was as taut as he could manage. "Ready, sir?" he murmured.

Braska nodded; Auron looked back up at Jecht, and yelled, "Wind it in!"

Jecht gave him a brief thumbs-up before returning to the post and using the handle protruding from it to winch the rope back in. It was hard work with no assistance – he found himself walking all the way around the post in a circle just to complete each turn – but eventually, the combined mass of Auron and Braska came into view over the side of the deck, grunting and whimpering from the effort of holding on.

A few more turns sufficed for them to be brought onto the ship; Auron let go of the rope, and the two of them crumpled in different directions, gasping for breath. The experience hadn't been pleasant, particularly for Auron, whose bare left hand had been stung by the rough rope, and whose ribcage had almost been crushed by the force of Braska desperately clinging to him.

Now that the commotion was over, one of the sailors stomped towards them as they lay on the deck. "What's going on?" he demanded.

"Give us a moment," Auron muttered, sitting up gingerly and clutching his back with a grimace. "Jecht – potions?"

"Oh, right," said Jecht, locating a couple and handing one to each of them. Auron swallowed his, stood up carefully, and said with as much dignity as he could muster, "We need passage. How much is it?"

"Hold on," said the sailor, "we'd already left. You can't just climb up here and ask for passage."

"What're you gonna do, huh, make us walk the plank?" said Jecht sceptically. "Don't look like you got many passengers. Oughta be glad of our business."

"We usually have more than this," the sailor admitted, "but we were instructed to set sail early today." He didn't seem particularly happy about it.

"Yeah, and we'd have been some of them!" said Jecht. "So you should be glad we're here, huh? Seeing as we made the effort to get here an' all?"

"Thanks, Jecht," said Auron, before addressing the sailor himself. "We're not trying to stow away," he explained; "we'd be doing a pretty poor job of it if we were. We just didn't hear the schedule had changed, and it's really important for us to be on this boat. What's the fare?"

They arranged a price and the sailor assigned them a cabin while Braska slowly got to his feet; he had taken his potion as soon as Jecht had given it to him, but had been glad of the opportunity to stay seated for a while after the unpleasant experience of being hauled onboard. "Why did you set off early?" he asked, once the negotiations were concluded. "Did you say

it was an order?"

The sailor nodded. "We weren't told why," he said. "It was a message from Bevelle, last night – they just said the temples had decreed that we needed to bring forward our departure by a couple of hours. It is a nuisance," he admitted.

Braska nodded. "I see. Well, we'll take our things down to the cabin."

He led the way below deck and found the way in; Auron had consented to pay for a larger cabin this time, with two sets of bunk beds. Braska sat down on one of them, waited for his guardians to enter and close the door, and then said gravely, "So they're trying to interfere."

Auron sat on the bed opposite. "Yes," he admitted. "The staff at the inn had told everyone else about the change of schedule – but they didn't tell us. I only found out because they were talking about it when I went to settle up. It's quite deliberate – they didn't deny it."

"And if we'd had to stay there another week," Braska mused, "they'd have found some way to stop the crossings entirely, I'm sure."

"Or maybe they were counting on that law being passed," Auron suggested.

"What law?" Braska asked.

Auron grimaced; he'd forgotten Braska didn't know about it, and now wished he hadn't brought it up. "Jecht and I saw it in the paper last week," he admitted, deciding that there

was no point trying to conceal it now – and besides, Braska seemed well enough at the moment to be able to handle the news. "They're trying to pass a law to require summoners and guardians to go through some sort of registration process. We'd have to go back to Bevelle and prove our loyalty to Yevon before any more of the temples would let us in."

"Ah," said Braska. "I see." He fell silent for a moment and frowned, but then spoke again. "You'd be all right," he said, "but it would certainly cause problems for Jecht and me."

"And me," Auron argued, "after what happened."

Braska shook his head. "You've been judged. And you still follow the teachings." Before Auron could protest, he added, "At least we'll make it to Besaid unhindered now. But they could do any number of things to stop us getting to the Final Æon."

"Screw them," said Jecht. "We made it this far, we'll manage the rest, right? We don't need their help to get the æons and fight Sin – we can do it on our own."

Braska smiled a little. "I certainly hope so. I don't suppose their help would get us very far, anyway." He stood up and walked over to stand in front of Jecht, grasping his shoulder with affection. "Thank you, Jecht," he said, "and thank you for your assistance getting us all onto the ship. We'd certainly be in trouble now if it hadn't been for your quick thinking."

"Oh, uh, no problem," said Jecht, before suddenly wondering why he was so embarrassed. "I mean," he said quickly, "I'm

the great Jecht! Course I could do it. Child's play."

Braska nodded indulgently. "Indeed. Now, I think I could do with a little fresh air." He left the cabin and headed back out onto the deck.

Jecht did the same; Auron watched as they both left, being much more inclined to stay inside. Now that the urgency of needing to board the ship had passed, he knew he would start feeling uncomfortable if he returned to the deck. But, he decided, he would need to get used to it; the pilgrimage was in enough danger without this issue on top of everything else, and the ship provided an ideal environment for him to practise exposing himself to the water while staying a sufficient distance away.

He headed outside, and made his way towards the prow of the ship, positioning himself so he could see only a small strip of sea over the side. It was just about bearable that way; as soon as Auron began feeling too uncomfortable, he closed his eyes, took a step back, and did his best to block it out. Then, once he had gathered himself, he opened his eyes and stepped forward again.

He went on like this for a long time, training himself to move a little closer to the water with each step. He felt tense and slightly breathless, but it was manageable. Knowing there was no point trying to invoke his faith, he concentrated on his duties to Braska: the summoner needed him, and that was what mattered.

Meanwhile, Braska was slowly making his way around the deck, engaging in brief conversations with the few other travellers present. Most of them were tradesmen from the Luca region; none seemed to be aware of who he was, which was a relief, and they all sank into deep bows when Braska confirmed he was a summoner, whereupon he restrained himself from sighing and bade them thanks for their encouragement.

Moving forward, he observed Auron performing his strange ritual: staring out at the sea for a few seconds, before stepping back, closing his eyes, and breathing deeply; then opening his eyes and approaching the prow again. Braska would have assumed it to be some religious practice, but it was unlike any Yevonite profession of faith he had ever witnessed. Too curious to hold himself back, he moved to his guardian's side, and murmured, "What are you up to, Auron? Are you all right?"

Auron flinched; he had been concentrating so hard that he hadn't even noticed Braska drawing close to him. "Just thinking," he lied halfheartedly, and sought to change the subject. "What about you, my lord – how are you doing today?"

"Not terribly," Braska admitted. "Luca was … well, you know all that was challenging. But I couldn't let it disrupt the pilgrimage. And then the æon really wasn't much trouble at all. I don't expect Besaid's to be easy, but it feels within reach, at least. It helps – having something to focus on."

"Yes," said Auron. "It does." He fiddled with the end of

his ponytail. "You're not upset by what we spoke about downstairs, are you? Knowing the temples are trying to meddle with the pilgrimage?"

Braska shook his head. "My opinion of them was low enough already," he said. "After all the awful things they've done to me before – and to you, Auron. Jecht was right: we don't need their help. Still," he mused, "trying to stop a summoner really is a new low, isn't it? When the pilgrimage supposedly means so much to them? You'd think they'd be glad of anyone stepping up to it, even if it is someone like me. Especially now that we've made it as far as this."

"Yeah," said Auron absently, thinking back to the way Braska had reacted to similar news a few days earlier. In Djose, he recalled, the discovery that they were unable to benefit from the help the travel agencies normally gave summoners had been enough to make him noticeably upset: true, he had been tired anyway after the day's journey, and had maintained a brave face at first, but he had failed to remain composed after retiring to the tent. These days, he seemed less affected by this sort of thing. Maybe he really was doing better, Auron thought; maybe there was hope after all.

"It just goes to show," Braska added, "how hypocritical they are. The more I learn about them, the more amazed I am that I ever bought into their teachings; the whole system's totally rotten. It's sickening. I'm amazed anyone would willingly believe –" The memory of Auron kneeling to pray at Kilika

Temple suddenly occurred to him, and he quickly cut himself off, stealing a sideways glance at his guardian. Auron had resumed staring into the distance, his face twisted into a slight frown; Braska wondered if he felt offended. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to insult your faith – that was careless of me. Forgive me."

Auron looked towards him, maintained his silence for a few seconds, and then said, "It's all right," before turning to face forward again.

"Are you sure you're OK, Auron?" Braska asked, continuing to watch him closely. "You seem rather preoccupied. Is something the matter?"

Forcing himself to block out the sea, Auron turned back towards Braska; it was unfortunate, he thought, that this was the moment Braska seemed to have chosen to become somewhat less oblivious than usual to what was going on around him. "No, I'm fine," he said. "I was just thinking about preparations for the next part of the journey."

"Good," said Braska fervently. "I'm glad you're all right; I do wonder sometimes. I know you're much better at handling all this than poor old me, but I'm sure the pilgrimage is tough for you too. And for Jecht, although he'd never admit it."

"We're here to serve you, my lord," Auron reminded him.

"And I thank all the fayth that you are," said Braska. "I wouldn't have lasted a day without your help."

"You don't give yourself enough credit," said Auron.

Braska pursed his lips briefly. "Jecht's a great help as well," he said. "All those stories about his Zanarkand – they do make it easier to take my mind off everything. I'm glad you're getting on better with him now, Auron."

"He's more thoughtful these days," Auron admitted. "Not always entirely unpleasant to be around."

"I knew you'd warm to him," said Braska. "But I'm sorry we haven't had more time to ourselves recently. Perhaps when we get to Besaid – we'll be staying there a few days, won't we?"

"It's likely, yes," said Auron.

"So maybe we might have the chance to spend a little time together," Braska suggested. "Just like we did in Guadosalam. That was a nice evening."

"Yeah," said Auron, unsure what else to say in response; he turned to face the sea again, letting his proximity to Braska be a ward against the unease it made him feel. Beside him, Braska let his gaze turn in the same direction, finding himself similarly cheered by merely standing next to his friend. Jecht's stories were a welcome distraction, as he had said, but Auron's quiet, solid presence brought him comfort on a much more profound level.

A few paces behind, Jecht sat down on the deck and fiddled with the sphere recorder. He had taken it out with the intention of capturing a few shots of the sea for Tidus, but had found it much more interesting to converse with the sailors, who seemed to have forgiven him for the unorthodox way he

had boarded the ship and had been quite happy to discuss boat maintenance techniques, especially once they had established that he knew a fair amount about the subject himself. At the time, he had considered recording his conversations, but he knew Tidus wouldn't be interested in the finer details of how to varnish the outside of a ship's hull. Talking to other people remained much less embarrassing than just filming something and trying to provide some kind of narration for it, though, and eventually he had decided it might be more productive to record Braska and Auron telling him about the onward journey. That way, the content of the sphere would be at least somewhat interesting for Tidus, especially once Jecht was back in Zanarkand to contextualise it, and he wouldn't have to try getting the kid's attention by addressing him directly.

"Hey, Braska," he called, and flicked the device on. "After you get that æon from Besaid, where are we going?"

Auron turned around first, glad of an excuse to stop looking at the sea. "Back the way we came," he said. "Then we go north from Bevelle, and climb Mount Gagazet."

Braska turned too, adding, "Beyond it lies Zanarkand."

"Zanarkand, huh," said Jecht, scoffing. "It's been in ruins for a thousand years, right," he added for Tidus' benefit. They'd watch this together, he thought, and laugh.

Auron approached him. "So the legends say," he reminded Jecht quietly. "No-one knows for sure; it still could be your Zanarkand."

Looking up at Auron's serious expression, Jecht was suddenly keen to switch off the recorder. "Thanks for trying, Auron," he muttered as he did so, ignoring the way Auron inclined his head sympathetically. "I'm gonna go have a look inside." He sprang to his feet, leaving the sphere recorder on the deck, and hurried off without meeting his companions' concerned gazes. That wasn't how he'd intended the conversation to go; he hadn't wanted to confront the uncertainty about Zanarkand in a way that made it anything more than a joke. He knew by now that the city in Spira was unlikely to be his Zanarkand; Auron didn't need to rub it in by trying to make him feel better about it, he thought resentfully.

He went to the upper deck and found himself sitting cross-legged again, trying to find a way to put the issue out of his mind. That was the problem with Spira, he decided: far too few distractions. When you didn't want to think about something, it was hard to know what you could do instead.

Below, Braska looked down mournfully at the sphere recorder Jecht had left behind. "Oh dear," he said. "He still doesn't want to discuss it, does he? I had hoped he might be ready to confront it by now."

"I think he was taking a sphere for his son," Auron pointed out. "He probably didn't want to get into it while he was doing that." Nonetheless, he himself had still thought it important to remind Jecht that nobody really knew the truth about Zanarkand. Jecht seemed to have quite readily accepted his

suggestion that there were two different cities with the same name, he thought, and while he also considered it the most likely explanation, there was still a chance that everyone in Spira could be misinformed.

Braska walked forward and carefully picked up the sphere recorder. "I shouldn't have brought it up," he murmured. "I should apologise to him."

"You don't need to do that," said Auron indignantly; "he knows Zanarkand's where we're going. He can't avoid it forever."

"All the same, Auron," said Braska, and he headed up the stairs, following the route Jecht had taken. He switched the sphere recorder back on as he approached him; he felt a little guilty about disrupting Jecht's recording for Tidus, and wondered if Jecht might appreciate the opportunity to pick it up again.

Jecht had turned his attention to one of the few distractions Spira did have to offer: the pilgrimage. He had already sworn to himself, after all, that helping Braska reach his goal would be a way of demonstrating that he could be a good person, and would in all likelihood give him some clues about how to find his way home too. By this point, it was undeniable that doing his duties as a guardian gave him some satisfaction: it had become strangely gratifying even to be involved in such mundane tasks as paying for their board and lodging. The stunt he had pulled to make sure the three of them escaped Kilika had

moreover been both daring and genuinely useful. He wouldn't have minded a little more recognition of that from his companions, but they had been concerned about Bevelle's attempts to interfere with their progress, he supposed. Continuing to assist Braska, all the way to the Final Summoning, would ensure that he really could do something meaningful; and then, after that, it would be time to think properly about getting home. If he explained to the others that the pilgrimage was his priority for the moment, they might even stop looking so guilty every time they had to mention Zanarkand in his presence, and he would just be able to forget about the whole thing until later, which sounded like a very attractive idea.

Before too long, he heard careful footsteps behind him, and saw the shadow of someone drawing near on the sail in front. It was quite clearly Braska: the shadow made that evident from the distinctive shape of his headdress. Jecht was glad that the summoner was the one who had come to confront him. Explaining that he understood the importance of the pilgrimage seemed as if it would have been a lot more difficult with Auron around.

"I thought if I went with you guys I might find a way to go back," he said. "But it's not that easy."

"I'm sorry," said Braska.

"No need to apologise, Braska," said Jecht, standing and meeting Braska's gaze. "It's not your fault. I should be thinkin' about fightin' Sin now, anyway – Zanarkand can wait. But I

will find my way back," he couldn't help adding.

Braska was humbled by Jecht's words; had it been one of his worse days, he might have found himself moved to tears. The thought that Jecht was now committed enough to the pilgrimage to want to see it through first and get back to his Zanarkand later – and, what was more, that he was actually prepared to say as much to Braska – it would have been unimaginable just a few short days earlier. Jecht was as loyal as that, Braska thought, even with the knowledge that Yevon had it in for his pilgrimage. He would really take that risk.

"Be careful, Jecht," he said.

"Hey, I'll be all right," said Jecht. "You're the one that should be careful. Wouldn't want your little girl to cry."

"She'll be all right," Braska echoed thoughtfully. Yuna was more resilient than he was; he had known that for a long time. When Girl had been taken from them both; when Yuna had been removed from Braska's care, supposedly for her own safety; even when he had had to tell her there were no options left for him beyond taking the pilgrimage. He was the one who had let each of those events draw him further into despair; Yuna had briefly been upset, but had found the strength to carry on, her childish innocence letting her overcome each challenge.

"She's strong," he added. "Like her mother was." Suddenly remembering that the sphere recorder was still running, he hastened to switch it off. "I was just bringing this up for you,"

he said. "In case you're planning to take any more spheres for your son."

"Right, thanks," said Jecht, taking it from him. *"He'd* definitely be cryin'," he muttered.

"Your son?" said Braska. "Only because he cares about you, I'm sure."

"Yeah, maybe," Jecht replied, as Braska headed down the steps back to the outside deck.

Auron had returned to his position at the prow of the ship and to his attempt to suppress his reactions to the water. He was making progress: he found himself able to look directly at the sea now and really focus on it, instead of deliberately letting his vision go out of focus so he couldn't see the detail. His heart still pounded when he did so, but he was getting used to that as well; it was easy enough to conceal.

Braska approached Auron, noting how he was once again standing in the same place he had stood earlier, and once again apparently concentrating very hard on something, his face so tense he looked extremely uncomfortable. He slowly moved closer, coming to stand right beside him; and just like before, Auron didn't even notice.

"Auron," said Braska firmly. "Tell me what you're doing, please."

Auron gave a start as he turned to look at him; he stared at Braska for a moment, and then shook his head and muttered, "It's nothing."

"Something's wrong," said Braska, "isn't it?"

Auron ran a hand through his hair, willing himself to think straight; he hadn't planned to reveal this issue to Braska. It would be an unnecessary worry for him, he was sure; he was adamant that it was something he needed to deal with himself. But he had hardly succeeded in keeping it under control so far, and now Braska had all but commanded him to talk about it. He couldn't disobey orders; that never ended well.

"Not here," he said eventually. "Over there." He gestured towards the centre of the deck, and then walked in the same direction, immediately starting to feel less uneasy as he moved further from the water. Braska followed, his eyes narrowed with solemnity as he drew close to his guardian, gazing at him expectantly.

"It's –" said Auron; and then, as his composure returned, a sense of shame came with it. It was excruciatingly embarrassing to be affected by something so unavoidable. Just a natural feature of life in Spira, something that thousands of people acknowledged every day, without it ever doing them harm; there were certainly more dangerous things to worry about. And he had been one of the most proficient of all the warrior monks once, renowned for his prodigious skill, slated to become a maester one day …

"It's stupid," he said.

"Auron," said Braska. "I'm sure it isn't. Tell me what the matter is."

Auron sighed, fidgeted with the end of his ponytail for a few more seconds, and then, at last, muttered, "It's the water."

"The water?" Braska echoed, bemused.

"Since …" Auron reluctantly met his gaze. "Since what happened in Bevelle. I can't look at it without imagining that happening to me again. Being under –" He cut himself off, not wanting to voice his fears. "It takes me back there."

Braska's eyes widened. "Oh," he said. "I see."

"I told you it was stupid," Auron mumbled.

"Oh, Auron, it's not," said Braska, reaching out to take hold of Auron by his bare arm. "I understand – I know how terrible that was for you." The memory of the time Auron had spent convalescing in Braska's home hung between them, unspoken; he had lain there, in the bed that Braska had once shared with Girl, while Braska had patiently tended to him and encouraged him to face the world again, determined for Auron not to succumb to Yevon's cruel punishment. And it had worked: Auron had recovered, and regained his strength and confidence – but now, for the first time, Braska wondered whether the experience had left more lasting damage.

"I just don't want it to affect your pilgrimage, sir," Auron said, feeling somewhat comforted by the sensation of Braska's warm hand against his arm. "I've been trying to shake it off – that's what I was doing over there. I think it's getting more bearable. Yesterday I could barely walk across those boards on the island without collapsing."

"And you didn't tell me any of this," said Braska softly.

"You've got other things to worry about," said Auron.

Braska shook his head with a sad smile; even in the midst of this personal nightmare, he thought, Auron was still prioritising his summoner above everything. "I may not be able to do much about it," he said, "but you don't need to hide it from me. You're my friend, Auron; I want to help you."

Auron nodded; Braska let go of him, raising his hand to Auron's forehead and pressing his palm against it instead, before he channelled a soft pulse of white magic through his hand and into Auron's body. "Does that make you feel any better?" he asked.

"Slightly," said Auron truthfully. "I don't think this is the sort of thing magic can really help with, but I appreciate it." He glanced towards the sea again. "Anyway, like I said, I'm working on it. It's not as bad as it was."

"That's good," said Braska. "Maybe it'll all be over soon." He looked into Auron's eyes, so dark and serious, and suddenly felt overwhelmed by affection for his guardian; stepping forward, he embraced him tightly.

Auron flinched a little with surprise, but then let himself relax into Braska's grip, extending his own arms to hug him back. He had revealed something to him that he had hoped to keep secret, he thought, but at least he had managed to conceal the fact that it was the thought of Braska himself that was allowing him to get through these episodes. That was something

that definitely needed to remain undiscovered.

"Would you mind not mentioning this to Jecht?" he asked as Braska let go.

"I'm sure he'd understand how serious it is," said Braska, frowning. "I don't think he'd make fun of you, if we were to explain."

"I just don't want him to know about any of it," said Auron. "He's not used to our culture – it would be hard to make him see why it happened in the first place. And especially when he's a blitzball player – he must think the idea of worrying about water is ridiculous."

Braska nodded slowly. "Very well," he said. "But you know you can tell me if there's anything troubling you."

Auron hummed in agreement.

"Please take care, Auron," Braska murmured, reaching towards his guardian for a final caress of his arm.

He walked away, seeking out a fellow traveller to make conversation with so he could put Auron's struggle out of his mind; thinking about it too much would be upsetting. Auron, meanwhile, decided to head inside; so much physical contact with Braska had given him a feeling that was quite different from those he had been grappling with before, but no less important to control. He went down to the cabin, took off his robe, and sat on one of the lower bunks, arranging the robe over his crotch before doing his best to think about combat techniques.

The afternoon wore on. By early evening, the sea breeze was beginning to make it feel cold on deck; following everyone else's lead, Braska and Jecht retreated to their cabin. Like on the previous ferry, one meal would be included as part of the journey, although on this occasion it was dinner, not breakfast; for that, they would need to wait until they got to Besaid village.

The promise of dinner wasn't enough to convince Jecht to wait in the cabin for long; after a few minutes, he became fed up of sitting still and decided to take a look around. Not long afterwards, he returned, brandishing a pack of cards. "Anyone want a game?" he suggested.

"Where did you get those?" said Auron suspiciously.

Jecht jerked his thumb towards the doorway. "Bought 'em," he said. "Just out there, there's a guy sellin' stuff."

Auron frowned; Jecht shouldn't have been wasting money on frivolities, he thought.

"Come on, Auron," said Jecht, correctly interpreting his expression. "We got money again now, right? Anyway, these were about two gil – that ain't gonna break the bank." He sat down at the other end of the bunk. "So, you wanna play or not? Or you, Braska? Don't think I know any games for three."

"No, I'm fine," said Braska absently, barely looking up from where he was taking advantage of a day with no walking or combat to concentrate on a little black magic practice. Inches from his hands, a small flame glowed; a moment ago it had

been an ice crystal, and, he intended, it would shortly reshape itself into a droplet of water. "You can play a game with Auron."

"Sure!" said Jecht. "Auron, what games do you know? Shame we ain't got the stuff for Triple Triad, I used to play that one all the time with the guys. Do you know three-man slip chase?"

Auron's own card playing experience was fairly extensive: it had been a popular hobby in the barracks. However, it turned out that he knew none of the games Jecht suggested, and Jecht was equally unfamiliar with those Auron mentioned. It seemed that Spiran customs diverged from those Jecht was used to in this matter.

"Aw, forget it," said Jecht, when he had just about exhausted all the games he knew. "We'll play jigger; it's my favourite. So, we start with seventeen cards each –"

As he somewhat opaquely explained the rules, Auron realised that Jecht was describing a game he knew quite well. "Aces are worth twenty, yeah," he supplied when Jecht hesitated. "We have this one here – we call it old wife's tierce."

"Old what?" said Jecht, looking up from the cards. "What, you knew it all along? Then what was I doin' tellin' you all this?"

"Good question," said Auron. "Here, give me the deck, I'll deal."

They played a few rounds of rather fierce competition, laying the cards out in the space between them on the bunk. It

turned out, in fact, that there were slight variations in the rules between Spira and Zanarkand, most of them cosmetic.

"That's not enough points to go down," said Auron, a while into their fourth or fifth round.

"Yeah, it is," said Jecht, fanning out the pile of cards he had just set in front of him. "Pure jig of fours, that's five hundred thirty-five points –"

"Oh, it's pure?" said Auron. "Should have put a red one on top, then. Black is for impure."

"No, when it's impure, you lay one over it, like this," said Jecht, turning the top card so it was perpendicular to the others.

Auron raised his eyebrows: that was a new one. It explained why Jecht had been placing his cards at an odd angle, though – Auron had previously thought it was just part of Jecht's general messiness. His own cards were laid in front of him in neat stacks, while Jecht's sprawled over most of the bed, overlapping with the discard pile and spilling into Auron's own territory. Not that he would have mistaken them for counting towards his total, because the fact that they belonged to Jecht was clear from their haphazard arrangement.

A few turns later, Jecht declared, "I'm out," and added the remaining cards in his hand to one of those piles.

"Aren't you discarding?" Auron pointed out.

Jecht frowned. "Well, I went out. So I don't need to."

"Yes, you do," said Auron.

"Not if you're goin' out," Jecht insisted.

"No, that's ridiculous," said Auron. "You always have to discard. I could have gone out three turns ago otherwise. If you wanted to play house rules, you should have said so to begin with."

"They ain't *house* rules," Jecht protested. "That's Z- that's the rules where I come from."

"Well, seeing as we're in Spira, perhaps we should defer to Spiran rules," Auron pointed out, tactfully deciding not to dwell on the slip-up.

"How was I supposed to do that when I didn't know what Spiran rules were?" said Jecht. "As if you were gonna explain them to me –"

"Let's just keep going," Auron suggested. "Just pick those two back up and discard one of them. You'll probably go out again in a couple of turns anyway."

"No way!" said Jecht. "That'll ruin my whole strategy!"

Auron rolled his eyes, and turned towards Braska, wondering whether he might be persuaded to arbitrate. He quite forgot the matter, though, when he noticed what Braska was doing. "Sir!" he said sharply.

Braska hastily lowered his hands. He had taken off one of the bracelets he wore on his wrists and laid it on the bunk in front of him; now, though, the bracelet was suspended in midair, drifting back onto the bed in tandem with his movement.

"What's the problem?" Jecht asked, too intrigued by the fact that Auron appeared to be scolding Braska for something to care about the game anymore.

"It's all right, Auron," said Braska, and addressed Jecht. "This magic – it's not typically taught these days. It comes from an old Bevelle tradition, from before Yevon."

"How do you know it, then?" said Jecht.

"It was passed down in my family," Braska explained. "Of course, we all had to pretend we didn't know it in public – especially when I was training as a priest."

"Yevon outlaws it," said Auron brusquely. "It invokes a fifth element: the earth. It's contrary to the teachings." Something felt false as he uttered the last sentence; he ignored the thought.

"What, is it Al Bhed magic, or something?" Jecht hazarded, trying to understand.

Braska chuckled. "No, the Al Bhed hardly use magic at all. The teachings say there are four elements, so most Yevonites deny that the magic of the ground exists."

"We're already in trouble with Yevon," Auron pointed out. "I don't think it's a good idea to do that in here."

"Lighten up, Auron, no-one's gonna see!" said Jecht impatiently. "So why don't you use it on the road, huh, Braska? Not like there's people around when we're fightin'."

"Well, I'm not very good at it," said Braska. "I've never had formal lessons, or much chance to practise. I doubt I can float

anything heavier than this bracelet – although maybe if I work on it a bit more –"

Auron's frown deepened.

"The fiends use earth magic, you see," Braska went on, ostensibly for Jecht's benefit. "So it would seem a shame if we were to limit ourselves. It's perfectly natural."

"It's extremely powerful," Auron said quietly, looking him in the eye. "It hasn't been studied nearly as much as the four elements – it could be dangerous."

"I'm being careful," Braska replied, with what he hoped was a reassuring smile. Auron looked back at him for a second, then dropped the eye contact, turning away and adjusting his ponytail.

Jecht smirked at Auron's discomfort. "Another game?" he suggested.

"Maybe you'd like to come outside with me, Jecht?" Braska said. "I think I'll take my sphere for Yuna now – it looks as if dinner might be late. There may still be enough light out there to show her what it's like at sea."

"Sounds good," said Jecht, and he followed Braska out of the cabin.

"Hello, Yuna," Braska murmured into the sphere recorder, training it on Jecht as the latter took advantage of the mostly deserted deck to perform a few athletic moves. "Well, we're on the ferry to Besaid now – the furthest south we'll be going on our journey. Just one more æon to retrieve there, and then

it's all the way to Zanarkand for the Final Æon. There goes Sir Jecht," he added, moving in a little closer as Jecht did a rather spectacular backflip.

He continued recording in silence for a while, letting the device capture Jecht's actions without feeling the need to pass comment, and then went on. "None of us knows anything about Besaid – not even Sir Auron. I'm sure it'll be charming; I expect it'll be nice and warm, at least. I can only hope Sir Jecht finds enough to keep himself occupied; perhaps he can play blitzball. There's bound to be plenty of water around." He found himself thinking about Auron's earlier confession, and paused again, frowning.

"Anyway," he said at last, trying to put it out of his mind, "we're doing all right. And I hope you are too." At least, he thought, Yuna wouldn't be affected by Yevon's apparent attempts to interfere in her father's pilgrimage: entrusting her to the temples' care had ensured that, as shameful as it had felt to do so.

Jecht approached the sphere recorder with a large grin, his hair even messier than usual after his acrobatic exploits. "Hey, Yuna!" he said loudly. "Get some of that, did ya, Braska? I been wantin' to show little Yuna some more of my moves."

"It's all on the sphere," Braska confirmed. "Well, Yuna, Sir Jecht and I shall say goodnight now – we'd better go in for our dinner. I'll update you tomorrow about what Besaid's like – speak to you then. I love you very much, darling; say goodbye,

Jecht –"

"Speak to you next time, sweetie!" said Jecht, waving enthusiastically.

"Goodbye, Yuna," Braska concluded, and he switched off the recorder.

"So do you think dinner's ready yet?" Jecht complained. "I'm starvin'!"

Braska chuckled. "Especially after all that exercise, I'm sure."

They headed back inside, after which it didn't take long for the food to be brought to their cabin. Like on the previous journey, it was a fairly paltry portion: about the right amount for Braska, which meant nowhere near enough for his guardians. After eating – and a good deal of complaining on Jecht's part – they got ready for bed, and settled into the bunks, Braska and Auron taking the bottom level and Jecht scrambling into the top bunk above the latter.

"You're all right?" Braska murmured to Auron, once they were all under their blankets.

Auron sent what he hoped was a meaningful glance in Jecht's direction, and said, "Fine. You?"

"Yes, thank you," said Braska, idly considering that their bunks were almost close enough together for him to reach out and grasp Auron's hand in the space between them. It would have been a stretch, though, so he turned to face the wall instead, and said no more.

Chapter **19**

A Fine Place To Live

Morning came, and with it, a wakeup call that was somewhat less welcome than the previous one due to the lack of accompanying breakfast. Nonetheless, Auron managed to drag himself out of his bunk and inform the sailor that the three of them would be ready to disembark by the time the ship was moored, before waking his companions and ensuring they and their belongings were out of the cabin in good time.

They waited on deck while the boat was secured; not to a proper dock, like at Kilika, but to nothing more than a short jetty that led straight onto a beach of fine, golden sand. Braska watched the sailors tie the ropes, taking in little of what he saw; waking up, he had found himself newly preoccupied by the fact that the authorities were trying to meddle with the pilgrimage. He wouldn't have minded, he thought – he should have expected it, in all likelihood. Jecht had been right when he had suggested they didn't need Yevon's help, and Braska

had never intended to ask for it. But there was one thing that made him feel unsettled, and that was Yuna's fate.

He had left almost all his savings with the convent in exchange for the promise that they would look after her fairly, and he was reasonably sure that they would – until the pilgrimage ended. It was less certain that they would continue to treat her well once he was gone. If he succeeded in becoming High Summoner, they would surely try forcing her to follow the summoner's path herself, as Perula had suggested at Kilika Temple. Regardless of how he met his end, they would seize the opportunity to educate her as a good Yevonite. There was a part of him that knew he should be grateful: it would stop her becoming a pariah in the way her parents had been. It would be simpler if she were raised to follow the teachings. But the thought of Yuna growing up to parrot their lies was sickening. And now, knowing that the temples were doing their best to interfere in his progress, he had no doubt that they were already making plans for her future, and ensuring his legacy would be defaced as well.

On the other side of the deck, Auron was forcing himself to look out at the sea once more. It was becoming more bearable, he decided; it helped that the water on the shores of Besaid was bright and still, so clear that one could see almost all the way to the bottom. There was no wind beyond a slight sea breeze, causing the many plants on the other side of the beach to sway only the tiniest amount. The careful practice that Auron had

engaged in seemed to have made him less unsettled by the water; he merely hoped it would last for the entirety of their stay on the island.

Apart from a couple of traders, Braska and his guardians were the only people to disembark the ship at Besaid; the few other passengers had business on some of the other small islands that it would visit on the onward journey north-west before circling around to Kilika again. While the traders paused to retrieve their wares from the hull, Braska, Auron and Jecht headed onto the jetty and then the beach, making for a gap in the cliffs that seemed to indicate it might lead them to the village.

As Braska made his way across the soft, warm sand, he was surprised to find his spirits lifting a little. Besaid somehow felt different from the rest of Spira: instead of the miserable, oppressive atmosphere that seemed to reign everywhere else that was touched by Yevon, it seemed almost carefree. He couldn't put his finger on why it was: perhaps the vegetation that had been allowed to grow wild, or the feeling of the sun shining pleasantly on his face. Or, indeed, maybe it was the groups of children playing together on the beach, not even caring who Braska and his guardians might be. Whatever it was, it was enough to make him feel strangely at ease.

Braska had always been partial to hot weather; Auron had always been the opposite. The sun on Besaid was making him feel sweaty and itchy. By the time they reached the edge of the

beach and set foot on the track that would lead into the village, he had decided to take his robe off.

"Hold on," he said, lifting the tent over his shoulder and handing it to Jecht, who took it with a scowl.

Jecht was quite ready to forget the annoyance, though, when Auron carefully thrust the point of his sword into the ground and then removed his robe, slinging it over one shoulder before taking hold of his sword again. "Stripping, huh?" he said, grinning eagerly.

Auron frowned. "Very funny. It's hot."

He walked on, glad that he hadn't removed his cuirass; he'd considered doing that and leaving the robe on instead, but that would have put his chest on display, and the remark Jecht would have made at that would no doubt have been even more inappropriate. It helped with the heat, at least a little; taking his shoes and socks off as well would have been still more welcome, Auron reflected, but that would seem too much like he was taking a leaf out of Jecht's book, and he didn't want the soles of his feet getting all dirty and calloused like Jecht's were.

As expected, the fiends they encountered en route were even weaker than those in the jungle at Kilika had been. Urged on by Jecht, Braska had a go at simply hitting one of them over the head with his staff instead of attacking it with magic, and the two of them were mildly amused to find that was enough for it to disintegrate into pyreflies. After that, Jecht insisted that Braska be allowed to have the first shot at every fiend

they came across, and they enjoyed dispatching each one in the same way, with Jecht on hand to deliver a finishing blow on the few occasions where Braska's attack didn't quite manage to finish off the fiend completely. Auron found it funny enough to smile at, at least, but the feeling of sweat slickening his skin under his cuirass made it too unpleasant for him to let his guard down and join in properly with the others' laughter, and he hung back slightly, glad not to have to get involved in such short and uninspiring battles.

As they headed down the last part of the track and towards the village, Jecht remembered that Besaid would be the southernmost stop on their journey. "Hey," he said, "we oughta be filmin' this! It's an occasion, right, makin' it all the way out here?"

"I suppose it is," Braska agreed. "Especially after we almost didn't manage it."

"Right!" said Jecht. "Auron, do me a favour and put the camera on, yeah?"

"You do it," Auron protested.

"Not when I'm the one carryin' the tent," said Jecht. It was a poor excuse – his hands were largely free – but Auron was too distracted by the heat to argue, so he dug out the sphere recorder and turned it on as they entered the village. Maybe the climate would cause the device to malfunction, he thought. That would serve Jecht right.

"Smallest heap of huts I ever seen!" Jecht exclaimed, striding past the others to inspect the scene more closely.

Braska followed, smiling – the sight of the village made him feel still more content. He could see on the faces of the villagers passing by that there was no suspicion here, no subterfuge: just a community thankful for every day they spent unaffected by Sin. He had never felt so removed from the machinations of the clergy in Bevelle. "Now," he mused, "that looks like a fine place to live."

As he said it, his thoughts suddenly returned to Yuna. If she could be taken from Bevelle and brought somewhere far away like this – it wouldn't mean the temples couldn't get to her at all, but it would surely help. If she could grow up somewhere quiet and simple, somewhere that mainlanders hardly cared about, she might be able to spend her days relatively undisturbed, unaware that her safety had once been so crudely negotiated in her father's fight to end his life on his own terms.

"Auron?" he said.

Auron had found himself becoming lost in Braska's peaceful, determined gaze; he remembered with a start that he was supposed to be capturing the appearance of the village on the sphere. "My lord?" he asked, caught off guard.

"When this is over," said Braska, still looking out over the village, "could you bring Yuna here? I want her to lead a life far away from this conflict."

Auron nodded, but he was surprised to find how disturbed

he was by Braska's words. Braska had often talked about the Final Summoning, of course, and the fact that he believed he would die, often with a twisted sort of eagerness; but he had never discussed the practicalities of what would happen to Yuna before. Hearing it made Auron realise how little progress he had made so far in finding a way to save him. He had wasted far too much time over the past few days feeling sorry for himself, he thought, when he ought to have been mulling over the evidence he had gathered so far and planning how he would take things forward. The thought made him feel deeply guilty.

"You have my word," he said, trying to keep his voice steady as he swore internally that he would get back to the task of keeping Braska alive as soon as he could. "I will bring her here," he added, hoping fervently that such a thing would never need to happen.

"Thank you, Auron," said Braska, turning to face him. "You're a good friend."

Hearing such words only made Auron feel worse. He was in no doubt that Braska would not have said them if he knew Auron was still trying to find a way to save him from the fate he desired: the arguments they had had about it before the pilgrimage began were proof enough of that. And that was to say nothing of the feelings Auron harboured for Braska, which indisputably went beyond friendship. It was shameful even to think about it; he knew Braska would have been embarrassed

too.

They were both distracted by Jecht's voice. "What are you doing?" he called from in front of them. "Let's go! I'm so hungry I could eat a shoopuf whole!"

While Braska apologised goodnaturedly for the delay, Auron hurried forward, turning off the sphere recorder. He needed to save Braska, he reminded himself, not waste time longing for the impossible. Keeping him alive was the goal; the rest was mere fantasy, and he would do well to remember that.

After making enthusiastic enquiries to every villager whose eye he could catch, Jecht eventually succeeded in establishing that he and his companions would be able to get both breakfast and accommodation at a boarding house near the temple, operated by the Crusaders. He'd expected Auron to turn his nose up at the last fact, but he merely shrugged distractedly, so Jecht led the way to the lodge and immediately ordered a meal for the three of them. The two Crusaders on duty were all too happy to oblige, being very interested to see a summoner and his guardians on the island; despite the presence of a fayth, there weren't many who passed by.

"Guess you're the real deal, huh?" one of them said as he ladled food onto Braska's plate.

"I try to be," said Braska politely, gesturing to show he didn't want any more.

Getting to sit down and have some food in the lodge, away

from the blazing sun, made Auron feel a bit calmer, and before too long he was able to concentrate fully on the conversation. "Could you tell us how soon we can take the ferry back to Kilika?" he asked the Crusaders.

"Wanna leave already?" the younger one said, grinning.

"We're on pilgrimage," Auron pointed out irritably. "We're not supposed to be lounging around relaxing."

"Auron," Braska murmured, finding his guardian to be unusually impolite, but the Crusader laughed. "I know, I know," he said. "Just teasing. They go once a week – next one's in five days. That OK for you?"

"It'll have to be," said Auron, and he turned his attention to Braska. "It's up to you when you petition for the æon, then, sir. We can go to the temple today if you want to get it over with, or we can leave it a bit longer – whatever you like."

"I suppose I shouldn't put it off too long," said Braska thoughtfully. "Although today does seem very soon – I think I'd rather have a look around the island." He grinned guiltily. "We'd better say tomorrow. Will you hold me to that, both of you?"

"Sure thing," said Jecht, just about comprehensible with his mouth full of rice. "You got more of this? It's good!"

"A local speciality," the older Crusader confirmed, moving to Jecht's side to dish out some more food.

Trying not to be too put off by Jecht's characteristic lack of table manners, Auron finished his own breakfast and then ar-

ranged beds for the three of them. Unlike at the travel agencies, there was only one dormitory-style room, although nobody else was staying at the moment; according to the Crusaders, few people ever did. The advantage was that all three of them would be able to sleep in proper beds, which Auron couldn't pretend wasn't something of a relief.

"So what do we do now?" said Jecht, once Auron had returned.

Auron shrugged. "Whatever you want. I'm going to go to the temple."

"Are you?" said Braska, failing to hide the disappointment in his voice. "Well, if you must. I think I'll go back to the beach and relax."

"Do you need an escort?" said Auron.

"Hey, chill, Auron," said Jecht. "You saw the fiends here, they go down in one hit." He stood up, stretched, and added, "It's fine, anyway – if you don't need me for anything, I'm gonna go for a swim, so I can head out that way too."

"Excellent," said Braska. "We're all sorted, then. Are you going now, Jecht?"

Auron parted ways with the others outside the lodge, and walked the short distance to the temple. It was one of the least imposing ones he had seen in Spira, but it was still much grander than the islanders' homes, which took the form of small round huts constructed from wood and canvas; the temple, at least, was stone. He went inside, made for the statue

of Lord Gandof, and knelt down, grateful that he could spend as long as he wished in prayer without feeling as if it was an inconvenience to Braska.

Praying usually made Auron feel calm and clearheaded. Even two days earlier on Kilika, taking a moment to kneel and reflect had been enough to remind him of the importance of his commitment to Yevon, even if it had demonstrated that he had been neglecting that commitment recently. On this occasion, though, prostrating himself in front of the statue had no effect on his restlessness. He was still distracted by the heat, and by the unpleasant feeling of sweat under his cuirass and in his boots; and as much as he adjusted his position, he couldn't make himself comfortable enough to devote himself fully to his profession of faith.

He had felt worse before and still managed it, he reminded himself. As a boy, even occasional bouts of childhood flu and fever had never prevented him from performing his oblations; other novice monks had excused themselves when they were ill, but he had always used the strength of his faith to push through, and often, in fact, found that taking some time to pray even made him feel better.

He thought back to Djose: there, until Jecht had interrupted, he had found it easy enough to kneel and pray. That had only been a week or so ago – around the same time they had discovered the injunction from Yevon. Maybe that had been the final straw, he thought. The ordeal he had been made

to suffer in Bevelle had momentarily shaken his faith, but not truly damaged it; but now, perhaps, the fact that the temples were trying to interfere with Braska's pilgrimage – despite the pilgrimage being the most central and sacred component of the teachings – maybe that was a step too far.

Looking up at the statue, Auron sighed quietly to himself. The thought that he really might be losing his faith was deeply worrying. Yevon had always meant so much to him; his dedication to the teachings had always been the only thing he really cared about. There had been his career, too, before things went awry in that department – but that had all been part of the same overarching goal of showing his loyalty to Yevon. That loyalty inspired him to do well in his duties, and doing well in his duties showed in return how committed he was to his beliefs; everyone had known that, and recognised that his prowess in battle was a manifestation of the strength of his religious devotion.

And now – as he had realised in Kilika Temple, but hadn't been able to admit fully to himself – the only thing he was truly devoted to was Braska.

He would have to keep trying, he resolved; he would have to pray nonetheless, and hope he managed to connect with Yevon in some way that was currently eluding him. He fidgeted on the ground, trying to find a position that would make it at least somewhat possible to ignore how much he was sweating, and forced himself to run through the Yevonite liturgy in

his mind. For the first time ever, the words he had known so well since he was a boy felt trite and meaningless, irrelevant to his real concerns; but he carried on anyway, whispering hundreds of lines of scripture to himself, clinging onto the base of the statue and not daring to raise his head.

Much later, he stood up again, momentarily dizzy and disorientated after having spent so much time on his knees.

"You been praying all that time?" said a voice behind him.

He turned around; it was a young boy, probably around twelve years old, with dark reddish hair and blue eyes that shone with curiosity.

"I came in here earlier," the boy went on, "and you were already kneeling down there, but that was hours ago! Got a lot to pray about, ya?"

"Out of my way," Auron snapped, before marching out of the temple.

Once outside, he immediately regretted having been so abrupt, especially to a child. Prayer had once helped him relax; this time, it seemed to have had the opposite effect. He walked back to the lodge, and found the older of the two Crusaders from earlier on duty at the desk.

"Sir guardian!" said the man cheerfully.

Auron nodded back, and then realised something: both Crusaders had been not only polite, but in fact exceedingly friendly to him and his companions. It was certainly at odds with the way the staff at the Kilika inn had behaved.

"Have you been sent any dispatches from Bevelle recently?" he asked, forcing himself to remain civil despite his mood.

The Crusader chuckled. "Don't think we've *ever* been sent any dispatches from Bevelle. We barely even get the newspapers here; I'm not even sure they know we exist, to be honest."

"Right," said Auron thoughtfully; that confirmed his suspicion. The notice that had been sent out to the travel agencies hadn't made it this far; nobody on the island was aware that Braska and his guardians were supposed to be traitors and heretics. That explained why everyone was being pleasant to them. Braska had been right, Auron realised, when he had suggested that Besaid might be the place to raise Yuna – it really was somewhere the temples wouldn't be able to get to her.

Not that it would need to happen, he reminded himself. There would be no need for Yuna to be brought to the island; Braska would survive, and he would return to Bevelle and bring up his daughter himself.

"Do you have much experience fighting Sin?" he said.

It turned out the Crusader had been involved in a few campaigns; he shared the details with Auron, who was disappointed to hear that most of the Crusaders' techniques seemed to rely on developing new and ever more complex machina weapons that usually turned out not to have much effect. There were a few things he made a mental note to follow up on, though, resolving to revisit the temple over the next few

days and reminding himself that he would need to consult the public library in Luca. Finding the man's insistence on the supremacy of machina weapons somewhat distasteful, he politely excused himself, collected his sword, and headed to the beach to see how Braska and Jecht were doing, slicing down each fiend that had the misfortune of getting in his way.

Braska was sitting on the jetty the ship had docked at earlier, his robe hoisted up and his trousers rolled around his knees; he had removed his sandals, and was dangling his feet over the edge, letting the sea wash over them. Nowhere else in Spira would he have dared reveal so much of his body in a public place – but there was barely anyone around, and he had already concluded that Besaid was quite unlike anywhere else. The feeling of the cool water on his feet and the warm sun on his back, keeping him well insulated under his robe, was notably more agreeable than most sensations he'd experienced over the past few years, and he watched Jecht darting around in the water with a feeling of quiet satisfaction.

Walking onto the beach, Auron spotted Braska in the distance, but decided not to approach him; he was much closer to the water than Auron wanted to get, and he didn't fancy stationing himself somewhere so exposed to the sun either. Instead, he took shelter under the cliffs on the other side of the beach and waited for the others to approach him first, removing his boots and socks before sitting down on the sand with his legs crossed.

After a while, he found that the heat was making him drowsy, and briefly debated whether to fight it; there wasn't much else to do, he concluded, so he lay back and let himself sleep.

He woke some time later, blinking in confusion as he sat up; looking towards the shore, he gradually made out the shape of Jecht, who was advancing in Auron's direction with a large grin, water dripping from his chest.

"Like what you see?" he said when he approached, flexing an arm.

"What?" said Auron wearily. "No."

Jecht laughed. "Aw, come on," he said, "saw you lookin'. Though I guess I'm not your type. You're into pale, skinny guys, right?"

"He's only skinny because he refuses to eat," Auron retorted; and then, immediately, he buried his head in his hands and groaned.

Seizing Auron briefly by the shoulder and giving it a cheerful shake, Jecht cackled. "Hey, relax," he said. "Nothin' wrong with a little crush."

"Please don't," Auron muttered.

"It's cool!" Jecht insisted. "Don't worry, I won't say anythin' to him." If he had been going to, he would have done so much earlier; he had suspected Auron had some kind of interest in Braska ever since he revealed his attraction to men, and hearing it confirmed was largely a non-event by this point.

Auron slowly raised his face from his hands, and levelled a glare in Jecht's direction.

"Oh man," said Jecht, "your face. Spent too long in the sun, huh?" He snorted, and then added, "Just dunno why you'd go for him over me. He ain't bad lookin', but … you've seen these muscles, right?"

"Do you have no sense of loyalty to your wife?" Auron hissed.

"That don't really come into it when you're a celebrity," said Jecht. At Auron's puzzled expression, he sat down next to him on the sand, and said, "You don't think it was just talent that got me where I am, do ya?"

He folded his arms and considered how he might explain. "I mean," he said, "talent's one thing, and trainin's another, but if you wanna make it big in blitz, you gotta know people. Most of the top players got where they are cos of family connections, but my folks didn't know anyone in the sport scene, so I had to, uh, get people interested in me in a different way."

"You," said Auron slowly, "you mean, you traded sexual favours for …"

Jecht laughed again. "Yep, that about sums it up. Trust you to be direct, Auron." He shook his head in amused disbelief. "Pretty straightforward when you know who to go for. Team scouts, journalists, that kinda thing. Just had to make sure they wouldn't forget me. Luckily for them, I'm nearly as good at sex as I am at blitz."

He met Auron's gaze; Auron immediately broke eye contact, visibly embarrassed.

"Died down a bit after we got married," Jecht continued, "but I still gotta do it sometimes. Keeps 'em interested. And stories about my crazy affairs are better than ones about how I'm meant to be losin' my touch – which is not true, by the way."

"Doesn't your wife mind?" said Auron.

Jecht shrugged. "Part of the package. That was clear right from the start. I ain't stopping her goin' after other guys either, if she wants." She quite clearly didn't want to, even though Jecht had encouraged her to spread her wings a little.

He eyed Auron reproachfully. "I do love her, you know. She's the best thing that ever happened to me."

"You don't talk about her much," Auron pointed out.

"Nothin' to complain about," said Jecht, with a grin.

Auron looked down at the sand for a while, and then said, "Doesn't it feel wrong, though?"

"Price you gotta pay for fame," said Jecht. "Sure, it's some skeevy shit, but what can you do?" He paused. "I guess Spira ain't like that, then? More of a find one person and bond with 'em forever type place?"

"Mostly," said Auron. "I think the Al Bhed are a bit more flexible, based on what Braska says." He lowered his head and coughed a little; the mention of Braska's name had dredged up

some residual embarrassment from earlier in the conversation. "Yevonites consider marriage very important."

"Hey, so do I," said Jecht. "Like I said, I dunno where I'd be without her. Who else would put up with all my shit, you know? And besides, she gave me the best gift of 'em all."

Auron frowned.

"My kid, Auron."

"Oh," said Auron. "But … you're always complaining about him. I don't think I've ever heard you say anything about him that isn't negative."

Jecht scratched the back of his neck. "You'll get it when you're – well, anyway. Yeah, I know, I talk smack about him all the time, but that don't mean he ain't the greatest kid ever, know what I'm sayin'?"

It didn't make much sense to Auron, but he shrugged, and said, "I guess."

Jecht nodded decisively, and then said, "Anyway, now you know all that, I guess that's me sayin' I'm available, if you ever wanna, uh, fool around."

"What?" said Auron, turning red again, although considerably less so than the previous time.

"Well," said Jecht, "you're a good-lookin' guy, I'm an even better-lookin' guy, we're on this pilgrimage together … it'd be a shame if we didn't bang, you know?"

"If you can't go a few weeks without sex," said Auron, "that's not my problem."

"Just thought you might wanna have a bit of fun," Jecht said. "Well, sure, let me know if you change your mind. I'm gonna get back in the water! You coming?"

"I'm not much of a swimmer," Auron lied.

"Ah, too bad," said Jecht, and he stood up and jogged back towards the sea.

As evening approached, the temperature decreased and Auron began to feel less uncomfortable. Eventually, Braska put on his sandals and walked onto the beach to join him; Jecht came out of the sea again not long afterwards, and the three returned to the Crusaders' Lodge for dinner.

After they had eaten, having been served just as enthusiastically as they had in the morning by the same two Crusaders, Braska retrieved the sphere recorder and sat beside Jecht to take the evening's sphere.

Auron walked past, midway through taking care of some practical matter; as he did so, Braska remembered the brief conversation they had had about the spheres in the inn on Kilika, and called out to him. "Auron," he said, "Jecht and I were about to take tonight's sphere for Yuna. Will you join us?"

"Oh," said Auron, searching for an excuse, "that's all right ..."

"Yeah, come sit down, Auron!" said Jecht. "Quit makin' excuses – get your ass over here."

Suppressing a sigh, Auron joined the two of them, and stationed himself beside Braska, who eagerly moved towards

Jecht to give him more room.

"She'll be so pleased to see all three of us," he said, adjusting the sphere recorder's position to ensure they were all in frame. "Now ..." He flipped the switch, and gave a little wave. "Hello, darling! Here we are in Besaid – the southernmost point of our journey. It's wonderfully warm here. And, as you'll see, Sir Auron has joined us tonight."

"Hello," said Auron, trying to appear enthusiastic.

"You've met Auron once or twice before, Yuna," said Braska, "but you were very small at the time. Perhaps you don't remember him – but you know all about him, of course."

"Only good things, huh?" said Jecht, grinning.

"Certainly," said Braska earnestly. "Now, Yuna, I'm sure you're keen to hear about Besaid – people don't talk about it much in Bevelle, do they? What do you think of the island, Jecht?"

Jecht shrugged. "Ain't seen much of it yet," he said, "but it seems pretty cool. Kinda relaxed, I guess."

"Yes, absolutely," said Braska. "And what about you, Auron?"

"I wouldn't say it's my sort of place, sir," Auron admitted. Braska raised an eyebrow and gestured towards the sphere recorder, and Auron hastily added, "But it's definitely, er, very peaceful."

"Indeed," said Braska. "Yes, it feels quite different from the rest of Spira. A much more welcoming place, wouldn't you

say? In fact, I even asked Sir Auron to –" He faltered, and reapplied his smile, not entirely convincingly. "Never mind that. But it really is a lovely island, Yuna. We've a few days here, so I'm looking forward to getting to know it better." He adjusted his position. "But tomorrow, I'll be going to see the fayth, so I suppose I should get an early night. Goodnight, darling! I'll speak to you soon."

"Night, Yuna!" said Jecht eagerly, and Auron offered a slightly awkward wave before Braska stopped the recording and stood up, using Auron's shoulder to steady himself as he did so.

Once he was gone, Jecht said, "So, what'd he ask you to do?"

"Hm?" said Auron. "Oh." He sighed. "He wants Yuna to grow up here, after … after the Final Summoning."

Jecht frowned, and then realised what Auron was alluding to. "Oh, right," he said. "He wants you to take care of that, huh?"

Auron nodded. "But it won't need to happen – as you know."

"Yep," said Jecht. "That all goin' good? Operation Save Braska?"

"I'm working on it," said Auron. "Look, we should get to bed as well – Lord Braska will need support tomorrow. I know he did all right last time, but we should be prepared in case things go worse."

"You worry too much," said Jecht dismissively. "Sure, whatever – at least we get real beds here."

The two of them followed Braska into the dormitory; soon enough, all three were asleep.

Chapter **20**

Unworthy

Braska was less relaxed the next morning; the prospect of facing the fayth was as unappealing as ever. He ate as much of his breakfast as he was able, and then went to sit on his bed while his guardians got ready for the day ahead, trying to focus on preparing his spirit for the encounter.

"Are you ready to go, my lord?" Auron asked a little later, and Braska blinked a few times and eventually responded in the affirmative, forcing himself to come back to reality.

They walked over to the temple, finding a small group of islanders outside. "You're a summoner, right?" said one excitably. "Going for the æon, ya?"

Braska nodded. "May I help you?" he enquired.

"Nah," said the young man, "just wanted to say good luck, you know? We're all rooting for you."

"Well, thank you," said Braska, slightly perplexed, before he led the way inside.

Jecht chuckled as they entered the temple. "Got a little fan club, huh? That's cute. You could do autographs."

"They're probably not used to seeing summoners," Auron pointed out. "Not many seem to make it out here."

Approaching the statue of Lady Yocun, he knelt to pray with some reluctance. Braska would certainly understand if he confessed that he was struggling with his faith, Auron reflected; indeed, Braska had had the same experience himself after getting to know the Al Bhed. In many ways, there would be nobody better to confide in. But raising it at this point would distract him, and harm his chance of successfully gaining the æon. So Auron prayed as usual, somewhat perfunctorily, and then stood up and turned back towards the others.

"Finished already?" said Braska.

"I spent a long time here yesterday," said Auron truthfully.

"Very well," said Braska. "We'll go ahead, then."

The Trials turned out to be even simpler than at Kilika Temple; this time, there were only two spheres that required slotting into place, and one pedestal needing to be pushed along a short, straight path, before they found themselves heading down to a lower level on the lift that had revealed itself. For Braska, it was still more proof of the unpretentious, straightforward spirit of Besaid, and the discovery made him feel slightly more at ease. In Bevelle, the Cloister of Trials had been vast and baffling, going so far as to make ostentatious use of machina; a summoner and guardian less cognisant of

Yevon's hypocrisy than he and Auron were would have been outraged by it.

"Well, that was easy," said Jecht dismissively. "Æon'll be a piece of cake after that, right?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that," said Braska, curling his hands around his staff nervously as they walked into the antechamber. "Each fayth tends to demand more from me than the last. Kilika wasn't too bad, but I can't expect the same treatment here; it's likely that this will be quite testing."

Noticing the way Braska's voice was beginning to shake slightly, Jecht grunted and turned away to kick softly at the wall.

"You have our support, sir," said Auron, ignoring Jecht and moving closer to the summoner.

"Yes," said Braska, "thank you. It's just that … this is the last fayth standing between me and Zanarkand. It's – it's going to be a long journey from here, isn't it?"

"Do you want to sit down?" Auron suggested.

Braska nodded, and he clumsily sat at the bottom of the steps that led to the chamber of the fayth and arranged his hands on his knees, forcing himself to breathe slowly and deeply. Beside him, Auron shifted uncomfortably; he was beginning to feel the effects of the heat again. Being deep within the temple, several yards underground, meant that the air was particularly stuffy; moreover, Auron had elected to wear his robe when he left the lodge, deciding the

occasion would require it. Now, though, he was regretting that decision.

At last, Braska hauled himself up and said, "All right then. I'd better go ahead."

"Good luck," said Auron solemnly, and Braska nodded and made his way up the stairs.

After the door slid shut behind him, he carefully knelt to pray, and eventually felt the presence of the fayth.

He looked up, and felt his breath catch in his throat; she was just a young girl. Older than his Yuna, perhaps twice her age; but there was a childish look about her that unavoidably reminded him of his daughter. The thought that someone so young had willingly given her life in the fight against Sin was horribly upsetting.

"Summoner," she said, "you have come a long way."

Yes, Braska thought, trying not to be too shaken by her appearance. From Bevelle.

"Then you must have mastered several æons," she said.

Four, thought Braska.

The fayth was silent for a moment, and then she moved closer to examine him. He watched as her ghostly expression changed: from childlike innocence, to concentration as she cast her eyes over his face, and finally to doubt.

"Summoner," she said, "you have not the aspect of a man who has mastered four æons. Have you been summoning them well?"

Braska stilled, trying to devise an answer that would convince her, but he couldn't stop his thoughts involuntarily turning to his prior experiences with the æons. Bahamut certainly felt like an ally: it was Braska's first æon, the one who took the most space in his soul. He had summoned the creature a few times, and had felt secure in its company, despite its imposing appearance. But Shiva: he remembered that hesitation when he had first summoned her. There had been a sense of unease there, a feeling that she wasn't ready to do his bidding. It had worried him, and there had been so much else making him feel low that he had decided this was something to put aside. In all the days since, he hadn't dared call her again.

Then there had been Ixion, and on that occasion, the experience of meeting the fayth had caused Braska such anguish that he had neglected to summon the æon afterwards at all. The following day, he had still been feeling utterly miserable – and when the Crusaders had challenged him, demanding that he produce an æon to verify his position, it was familiar Bahamut that he had instinctively selected. And after that, having put off summoning so long, he had begun to feel more and more apprehensive about it. He remembered Shiva's obvious mistrust of him, and his training in Bevelle, where he had been told not to call the æons for trivial reasons; and on top of that, there was the fact that each of them was stronger and harder to tame than the last. And so he had resolved, without ever really admitting it to himself, that he would put off the issue

of the æons until later.

"And you hope to win my trust," said the fayth quietly, "when you have not even sought to gain the trust of my brethren. I should be granting you the full strength of my æon, when only the Final Æon remains for you to conquer – how else would you be capable of commanding such force? But when you come before me in this state, I am disinclined to think you worthy."

As she spoke, Braska realised he had misjudged her. She was a child in appearance, it was true; but she spoke with a gravity that came from hundreds of years of experience. No doubt, he thought, she had seen more summoners pass through this temple than he could fathom. The extent of her æon's power was frightening to imagine; he felt foolish for ever thinking he might be strong enough to wield it without having made the effort to acquaint himself with the other æons beforehand.

"You regret what you have done," she remarked.

Yes, he thought firmly. I see that I should have given the æons more attention. Forgive me, please; the pilgrimage has been difficult …

"Difficult," she echoed. "And you expected it to be easy?"

No, no, of course not, Braska replied. I expressed myself clumsily. I meant to say, there have been other concerns –

"The pilgrimage should be your only concern," she said. "You have sworn to die for the sake of Spira – all you can do is prepare for the end."

"I'm *doing* that!" Braska said, his frustration pushing him to speak out loud. He looked down at his knees, pictured the beach where he had spent most of the previous day, and took a deep breath. I was wrong to neglect the æons, he thought carefully. I shall prioritise them in the future.

"You address me as if you expect your pilgrimage to continue," said the fayth.

The words made Braska's heart sink; immediately, he felt lightheaded, overwhelmed by sudden despair. He lowered his head, curling his hands into fists against the floor; it was a gesture of panic that he hoped might be interpreted as reverence. Please, he thought, *please.* This is the only path forward for me. Let me show you I am worthy. I'll do anything you ask of me.

The fayth was silent; for the second time on his pilgrimage, Braska was increasingly convinced that he was about to be turned back. He felt as if he was going to be sick; he twisted inwards more tightly to steady himself, feeling his throat tighten with unreleased tears.

"Very well," said the fayth at last. "A test. You must show me your æons, summoner, and I shall challenge them. They must prove that they are willing to protect you."

In here? Braska thought despondently.

"Yes," she said. "Here – now. Stand and call your æons, summoner."

He stumbled to his feet, starting to cry in earnest, and rubbed a hand over his face in an attempt at wiping it, too dis-

consolate to search for his handkerchief. He would respond to her request, because he had no choice; but he already knew the bond between him and his æons would be insufficient. At least, he thought, in whatever combat this turned out to be, there was the chance that the æons might turn on him and strike him down. He would rather die now than have to crawl out of the chamber and tell Auron they would need to return to Bevelle.

"Call them!" the fayth commanded.

Braska's mind was just about clear enough to recall the pattern he needed to draw with his staff to summon Bahamut; he grasped it and twirled on the spot, somehow preventing himself from toppling over as he did so. Eventually, through his tears, he made out the shape of the fearsome black dragon forming in front of him, and then watched as the fayth in turn herself transformed into a magnificent avian creature. But there was no time to waste gazing at this unfamiliar æon; it lashed out towards Bahamut with a fast, stony wing, and Braska immediately willed his æon to defend.

Bahamut obeyed Braska's commands well; if he had known all his æons as intimately as this one, there would never have been any doubt about his passing the fayth's test. But, as always, his first æon was also his weakest. It attacked and defended well, shielding Braska from harm, but fell soon enough, disintegrating into a shimmer that faded to nothing. With dread, Braska summoned Shiva to take its place.

At least he had called her once before, and knew a little of what to expect. She too defended him, blocking the fayth's strikes successfully. But asking her to make offensive moves was more difficult; he could tell she was resisting. Communicating with her was an enormous strain; his head had already been hurting from the emotional cost of this encounter, but now the pain was becoming unbearable.

Shiva fell, at last, and Braska somehow managed to summon Ixion, sketching out an erratic shape in the air with his staff. This was an æon he hadn't yet seen: it took the shape of an enormous horned horse, electricity sparking forth from its hooves and horn. If Braska had felt less disconsolate, he would have been able to appreciate the sight; as it was, he willed the æon to defend, clutching his head with his free hand.

Ixion obeyed; but only partly. For each blast of energy the æon of Besaid sent forth, Ixion took the majority of the impact, but he seemed unwilling to absorb the blow in its entirety. Some of that energy made it past the æon, and struck Braska; it wasn't enough to hurt him, but it made him stagger backwards each time, as if he was mounted on a particularly disobedient chocobo. Disrupted by the assault, he nonetheless tried his very best to communicate to Ixion a command to attack. But once the thought finally made it through to the æon, Ixion merely reared on his hind legs, dashed around the chamber in a circle, and disappeared.

Braska understood; Ixion had not come to trust him

enough to attack such a powerful enemy on his behalf. He fell to his knees, gasping in pain as they hit the stone floor; he knew this was the end. If Ixion had refused, there was no chance that his newest æon would do his bidding. He knew the name of the æon he had acquired in Kilika Temple – Ifrit – but he hadn't made the effort to bond with the creature at all. It was a lost cause.

The voice of the fayth echoed around the chamber, coming not from the æon she had transformed into but from some unknowable place: *One æon remains. Call him.*

"I can't," Braska sobbed. "I've already lost. Please, just end this – please –" He found that he was crying too much to keep speaking. Remembering the fayth could read his thoughts, he concentrated on forming the words in his mind instead, as clearly and unambiguously as he could: Please kill me.

The æon first.

Shaking his head in despair, Braska nonetheless consented; if the fayth demanded to see his last æon before she would agree to strike him down, then he would have to comply. He rose slowly to his feet; it felt as if entire minutes passed before he was able to stand successfully. At last, he brought his staff downwards in a brief, sharp gesture, before driving it against the floor to steady himself; any more elaborate movement would have caused him to lose his balance.

Somehow, it was enough to call Ifrit. The æon was a huge horned creature wreathed in fire; the sight of him was abso-

lutely terrifying. Ifrit faced the æon of Besaid, and looked briefly as if he was ready to attack on Braska's behalf; but then, he turned to face the man who was supposed to be his master. Braska stared into Ifrit's face, trying to communicate that he meant no harm – he was the one who had summoned, he thought, the two of them were supposed to be allies; and then, suddenly, Ifrit lunged forward with an enormous fist, connecting with Braska's chest. Braska let out a cry; he fell backwards. His head made contact with the floor; new, sharp pain blossomed briefly at the back of his skull, and then he blacked out.

Out in the antechamber, Auron was still feeling uncomfortably hot. He had long since taken off his robe, tying it reluctantly around his waist on Jecht's suggestion. That had helped with the heat for a while, but soon enough it had started to get distracting again. He had begun to sweat so much that he could see the lines of moisture running down his arms, following the contours of his muscles.

"I can't take this," he said eventually, hoping for some reaction from Jecht, who merely turned towards him and raised an eyebrow. "It's hot," he specified.

Jecht looked him over, and said, "Yeah, uh, clearly."

"Doesn't it bother you?" Auron demanded.

"Not really," said Jecht. "Kinda like hot places." He turned away. While the sight of Auron's muscled arms gleaming with sweat was undeniably appealing, seeing him looking so under the weather was just unpleasant.

Perhaps, Auron thought, going back to the Cloister of Trials would help; being less deep under the ground might mean the air was slightly less stifling. He flapped his bare hand in front of his face for a few seconds, trying to create a breeze, and then said, "I'm going to step out for a moment."

Immediately, Jecht wheeled back around to face him. "You can't leave me on my own in here!" he protested. "What if he …" He jerked a thumb towards the door at the top of the stairs through which Braska had departed earlier.

Auron rolled his eyes. "You know what to do, don't you? Just help him down the steps, give him a potion and anything else he needs – sit with him until he –" He frowned. "Oh. This is your *men can't show emotions* thing, isn't it? Look, I don't know how many times I need to tell you, but when Lord Braska needs support, we have to give it to him. Both of us."

"So why can't you do it?" said Jecht.

"You *know* why, Jecht," Auron said, running a hand through his lank, moist hair. "I'm not getting into another stupid argument with you – I feel rotten enough as it is. I won't be long."

He marched out of the chamber angrily; the heat was making him feel even more short-tempered than usual, and

Jecht certainly wasn't helping. After ascending to the uppermost floor of the Trials, he took a deep breath; the ambiance did seem marginally more tolerable, as he had suspected. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the stone wall, letting out a low, quiet groan of relief, and resolving to stay away from Jecht for as long as possible.

Meanwhile in the chamber of the fayth, Braska was finally coming to. He raised his head slowly, pressing a hand instinctively to the spot where it had made contact with the ground; immediately, his headache worsened, and he drew his hand away, gasping.

Slowly, he sat up; and then he remembered what had happened. The fayth was gone; his pilgrimage had failed. And he was still alive.

He began to cry again at once. This was what he had dreaded, so much that he had forbidden himself to think about it. He had fixed his sights on the Final Summoning, forcing himself to be confident about that if nothing else; the alternative had been too awful to imagine. Even though he knew most summoners failed, he hadn't been able to bring himself to consider meeting that fate, especially in circumstances like these. Being killed by fiends on the road would at least have put an end to his sorrow.

He lay back down slowly, twitching and gulping as the tears soaked his face. The one thing that might bring some small consolation, he thought, would be if Auron were to come

into the chamber and hold him close. Auron was such a dear friend, he thought; at times when nothing else had reached him, Auron had been able to bring him a modicum of comfort. He craved the feeling of Auron near him, reaching out with both arms as he had briefly done when the fayth had exhausted Braska before, taking him in his strong grip and simply holding him. It would offer him some meagre respite.

It was against the teachings to enter the chamber of the fayth unless one was a summoner, and as far as Braska knew, Auron was still entirely committed to Yevon; but he wondered if making his distress as obvious as he could might induce Auron to come in and see to him anyway. He could leave the chamber himself, of course, on his hands and knees if necessary. But having Auron accompany him would be so much less of an emotional strain. So he resolved to sob and wail as loudly as he could, hoping the sound would make it to the antechamber and that Auron would be disturbed enough by it to come for him.

Even after crying noisily for as long as he could possibly manage, though, there was no sign of his guardian. He had to admit, at least, that the experience had been somewhat cathartic: he no longer felt quite as overwhelmingly distraught as he had when he first regained consciousness. He sat up again, letting his sobs give way to quiet sniffs and hiccoughs, and buried his head in his hands, trying to muster the courage to accept his failure and leave the chamber.

Just as he was about to do so, though, he heard a voice.

"Summoner. Listen."

He raised his head warily, squinting at the figure in front of him. It was a fayth: not the fayth of Besaid, but a younger child, its eyes hidden by a large hood. Braska had met this fayth before; eventually, he remembered where. This was the first fayth he had spoken to on his journey, back in that machina-riddled temple – the fayth of Bahamut.

What do you want from me? he thought.

"Your journey must not end," said the fayth. "For all our sakes – it must go on."

I don't understand, thought Braska, and his tears started to flow freely again. I can't take this anymore, he thought. Please, let it end.

The child shook its head. "Your pilgrimage is more important than you know, summoner," it murmured. "But not all of us understand that yet. She must be convinced – then she will realise, and grant you her power. Call Ixion."

The idea of having to summon again immediately filled Braska with dread. He began to shake his head, stopping abruptly when he discovered it was making his headache significantly worse. I can't, he thought instead. Please don't make me – I'm not strong enough.

"It is the only way to ensure your pilgrimage continues," said the fayth. "You are determined to defeat Sin, yes? Then call him."

Why does it have to be Ixion? Braska protested. Bahamut is the only æon I have bonded with fully – why can't it be –

"It must be Ixion!" the fayth said sharply. "Call him now – or your pilgrimage ends here!"

Braska looked down at his knees, trying to gather himself; when he looked up again, the child had vanished. Summoning an æon was the last thing he wanted to do; he fervently wished he could simply lean back and succumb to oblivion. If he let himself fall to the ground, he thought, perhaps he could ensure his head struck the stone sharply enough to knock himself out again, and return to glorious unconsciousness for a while; but it would be difficult to hit the ground with much force when he was sitting already.

He reached for his staff to help lever himself up; it took a few seconds, and he almost collapsed back onto his knees a handful of times, but eventually managed to stand, clinging onto the staff to steady himself and waiting for his sudden dizziness to subside. His dearest wish was still to throw himself to the floor again and hope to lose consciousness once more, but it still seemed unlikely that he would manage it when he was stationary; so he lifted his staff, carefully, and summoned Ixion.

The effort of it made him topple onto his knees again. He looked up with trepidation, seeing the æon take shape across the chamber, and kept his eyes fixed on what he presumed was Ixion's face. It was impossible to tell whether the æon was

looking back, but Braska had the feeling that he was. The two of them remained there, uneasy companions, neither daring to move.

Then, finally, the fayth of Besaid reappeared. Ignoring Braska, she made for Ixion, reaching out with a small hand to touch his mane. "Why did he call you?" she murmured.

Braska waited while the two of them conversed; at least, he assumed that was what they were doing. Only the fayth was speaking, so quietly that he was having trouble making out what she was saying, but it appeared that she was receiving some kind of response from the æon: she kept pausing as if waiting for him to reply. Braska did his best to listen and understand, even though trying to concentrate on it was making his headache worse; as far as he could tell, the fayth was insisting that he was weak. He couldn't dispute it, but hearing it said by another felt like confirmation of how pathetic his attempt at taking the summoner's pilgrimage had been. His vision blurred with tears; he let out a quiet groan, but the fayth was evidently too engrossed in her conversation to take notice.

He too found himself less and less able to pay attention to her words: the sound of his own whimpers was drowning out half of what she said, making it difficult to understand the brief snatches he caught. None of them seemed to make sense anyway; the subject of the conversation had seemed to change, and he picked out "a thousand years" and "still dreaming" and "his guardian". It wasn't worth trying to listen, he decided mis-

erably; he slumped forward, huddling into a fœtal position on the floor and wishing the end would come swiftly.

"Stand," said the fayth at last.

Slowly, Braska looked up; Ixion was gone.

"You are unworthy of my æon," she informed him, "but with regret, I must grant you her power nonetheless. Stand."

"For the ritual?" he croaked.

"Yes," she said impatiently.

He closed his eyes. I can't, he thought. You're right – I'm too weak. I don't deserve it.

"Indeed," said the fayth, "but you have no choice. *Stand*, summoner."

Braska clambered to his feet with dread; he knew what would happen now. It would be the same exchange of memories he had performed with each fayth so far, where their souls were absorbed into his. It was emotionally and physically draining at the best of times; he doubted that he would make it through the process now without passing out. But the fayth was clearly adamant, and so he shuffled towards her and let her move his arms into position so that they grasped hers.

As he had half expected, the memories of his that flowed forth were some of the worst of his life. They started innocuously enough, just reminders of disputes he had had with senior priests as a member of the novitiate; they had felt stressful and unpleasant at the time, and had no doubt been a major factor in the decision to send him away to attempt to evangelise

to the Al Bhed, but they seemed like halcyon days compared with what came next. First, the memories of his return to Bevelle with Girl, and of being ostracised by almost everyone he knew there: then of his mother, standing in the high temple of Bahamut denouncing him with utter conviction. And then, at last, the moment five years later when they had delivered the news that his Girl would never return. It felt so real, so new and raw, that it was almost as if someone else dear to him was gone: Yuna, perhaps, or Auron …

The memories were more prominent in his mind than reality was, but Braska eventually came to realise he had lost his balance and slumped forward into the fayth's arms. Despite her slight and indeed incorporeal figure, she was clearly having no difficulties supporting his weight. He groaned and fidgeted in her grip as the images changed to scenes that were unfamiliar to him, realising they were the fayth's own memories; she had begun to share them without giving him a moment to pause and catch his breath. He watched as Sin bore down on Besaid again and again, destroying the simple, innocent life that the girl who had become the fayth had once lived. For someone that young to choose to sacrifice herself – he could see that she had witnessed unspeakable horrors in her short life. He understood the burning, righteous anger that the fayth harboured; and he felt terrible that she was somehow being forced to grant him her æon when he knew he was undeserving.

But then, finally, as the memories ebbed away, he heard her whisper, "Sorry."

The fayth vanished; with nothing holding him upright, Braska fell forward. He lay on the ground, overcome by pain and exhaustion; after a few seconds, he slipped into unconsciousness again.

In the antechamber, Jecht had taken to attempting to amuse himself by counting the stones in the wall; he was under no illusion about how bored he was. Auron still hadn't returned, and Jecht suspected that he was trying to avoid his fellow guardian's company as much as the heat, based on the way Auron had snapped at him before taking his leave. It wasn't his fault, he reflected; Auron just got into these angry moods sometimes. At the beginning of the pilgrimage, Jecht had often been the one to provoke them, whether deliberately or not; these days, he didn't usually mean to get Auron worked up like that, but Auron seemed to be finding enough to get annoyed about anyway.

He pressed his hands to the back of his neck and stretched; he couldn't deny that it would be more pleasant to have company. Standing guard waiting for Braska was very dull, but marginally less so with someone to talk to, even if that person did have to be Auron. At least he was pleasant to look at, Jecht mused.

His thoughts were disturbed by the sound of the door to the fayth's chamber opening; Jecht raised his head abruptly

and was met with the sight of Braska. Leaning heavily on his staff, his robe and headdress askew, Braska was red-faced from crying, and looked like he was in immense pain; Jecht felt physically revolted by the sight, but he forced himself to go to his aid, bounding up the stairs two at a time to take hold of Braska and support him as he made his way clumsily down. "Come on," Jecht murmured, "that's it. Nice and slow, that's right."

They reached the bottom step, and Jecht guided Braska into a sitting position before retrieving a potion and some ether for him to take, passing them carefully into Braska's shaking hands and watching as he raised them to his mouth to swallow. Braska was staring into the distance, his eyes bloodshot and puffy; Jecht tried to look away, keeping a tentative hand on Braska's shoulder.

Then, without warning, Braska suddenly burst into noisy tears, clinging onto Jecht to steady himself. "Auron!" he wailed. "Where is he? I need him – Auron!"

Jecht gritted his teeth. "He'll be here in a sec," he promised, giving Braska's shoulder a little pat that he hoped never to have to think about again. He wished he could get up and go out to fetch Auron – then he wouldn't have to deal with Braska himself – but he could tell that leaving the summoner alone was a bad idea.

Fortunately, Auron had already returned to the lower levels of the cloister, and from there he heard Braska's call; he raced back into the chamber. Jecht willingly handed over Braska's

shaking form, springing back to a safe distance as Braska nuzzled his head into Auron's shoulder and clung onto him tightly with both hands, still sobbing loudly.

"Potion?" Auron demanded, looking up at Jecht.

Jecht shrugged. "Already gave him one. Ether too."

"Oh," said Auron, equally impressed that Jecht had had the sense to give Braska the medicines and worried by the fact that Braska was still in this state after having consumed them. "Sir," he murmured, "it's all right. You're safe – I'm here."

There was an obvious reason why Braska might have been so upset, Auron thought; one that would require their future plans to change quite substantially. "Did he fail?" he asked quietly, looking back at Jecht as he held Braska close.

Jecht shrugged again; Braska shook his head fretfully. "I have the æon," he stuttered, "but –"

He dissolved into tears again. Auron glanced at Jecht, who looked extremely uncomfortable, and strangely enough, he felt a certain degree of sympathy for him. "Go and tell them he succeeded," he said. "We'll be out soon."

Nodding gratefully, Jecht sprinted off; Auron turned his full attention back to Braska, who was running a hand desperately over the back of Auron's head, letting his fingers tangle through his hair. Auron suspected that his hair was becoming rather untidy, but he didn't mind. "It's OK, my lord," he said, as calmly as he could. "Take as long as you need."

"Oh, Auron," said Braska, withdrawing his face from Auron's shoulder. "It was awful – I –" He shook his head, too distraught to continue. The experience had been horrific from start to finish: realising he had committed a terrible oversight by not seeing to his æons, then being made to summon them when he already knew he had failed; being attacked by his own æon, and waking to find the nightmare was still going on; having to summon again through his splitting headache; and then reliving the most awful moments of his life, before being subjected to the images of Besaid's destruction, so vivid that he knew he would have trouble adjusting to seeing the village intact once he stepped outside again. It would be impossible to explain exactly what had taken place to Auron; Auron would never understand the extent of his distress. "It was a child," he whimpered, hoping that at least would give his guardian some sense of what was upsetting him so much. "A girl."

As he said it, he was suddenly struck with new sorrow; he missed Yuna terribly, and he felt so ashamed of the weakness that had led to her being removed from his care. He had constantly tried to put that regret out of his mind since embarking on the pilgrimage, but it was impossible to ignore now. He sank his head back onto Auron's shoulder and closed his eyes tightly, hoping the engulfing darkness would smother his guilt.

"I'm sorry to see you in so much pain, sir," said Auron, running both hands slowly over Braska's back in an attempt to soothe him. "I wish I could be more help."

"No, no," Braska protested, clinging onto Auron more tightly to emphasise his sincerity. "You're the greatest help I could possibly ask for. I really –" He sniffed. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

They both fell into silence after that, maintaining their embrace for some time, until Auron eventually felt Braska shifting a little in his arms; he loosened his grip, and Braska drew back, letting go of Auron and rubbing his eyes. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"There's no need to apologise," said Auron firmly; it was a phrase he had used often when speaking to Braska. "I can't imagine how difficult this must be for you," he added.

Braska nodded. "It's unbearable," he said, while his eyes brimmed with tears again; he passed the back of his hand across them to wipe them dry. "You're so good to me, Auron," he went on, before reaching out to take hold of his guardian's face, rubbing his thumb slowly over Auron's jaw. "I owe you so much."

"I could say the same to you, sir," Auron reminded him, concentrating on keeping his voice as steady as he could even as Braska's fingers skimmed lightly over his skin.

"I hardly think so," said Braska, shaking his head. He heaved a long sigh and withdrew his hand from Auron's chin. "Let's leave this place. I need to lie down."

"Of course," said Auron. "And they'll have more medicines for you at the lodge. Are you sure you can walk?"

"I'll try my best," said Braska.

They rose awkwardly together; Auron grabbed Braska's staff from the floor and handed it to him so he could use it as an extra support. He took hold of Braska firmly, ready to guide him out of the temple, before reaching out to tug Braska's headdress into place; it had become lopsided during his ordeal.

"Hold on," he muttered as he did so. One of the trails that hung at the sides of the headdress had become twisted, tucked behind Braska's shoulder; he lifted that out too, letting it hang down in front to match its counterpart.

Braska sniffed, but then murmured, "Presentable?"

Auron smiled, and lowered his head. Braska's eyes were still red from crying, and his face was tight with pain; and yet, to Auron, he was as resplendent as ever.

They advanced through the Cloister of Trials; Auron could tell that Braska was gradually gaining confidence as they went from the fact that the amount of weight he was having to support gradually lessened. By the time they were about to exit the temple and continue through the outdoor cloister that led into the village, Braska gave Auron a weary nod of thanks and then extricated himself from his guardian's grip, finally continuing unaided, if still at a somewhat sluggish pace.

To their surprise, they were met outside by a sizeable crowd of islanders, who immediately burst into enthusiastic applause. Braska's face briefly fell, but he managed to assume a gracious expression and began to make his way slowly

around the group; all of them seemed to want to shake his hand. Meanwhile, Auron scanned the crowd for Jecht, and eventually found him standing to the side with a slightly guilty expression; he made straight for him, and said angrily, "What's all this about?"

"Not my fault," Jecht protested. "I told one of the priests, like you said, then those kids wanted to know, and – I dunno, sounds like it's a pretty big thing here when someone gets the æon. They invited us to some kinda party at the meeting hall." He gestured towards a hut that was somewhat larger than the others.

Auron sighed. "This is the last thing he needs. You saw the state he was in."

"Yeah, I tried tellin' 'em," said Jecht. "I guess it ain't that exciting livin' here – this is probably the only thing they get to celebrate, huh?"

"That's hardly an excuse," said Auron. He turned around and saw Braska approaching, unable not to frown at the sight of his slow, exhausted movements.

"They've asked me to summon," Braska informed them when he drew close.

"I hope you refused," Auron said self-righteously.

Braska shook his head, raising a hand to preempt any further protest. "I understand your concern, Auron," he said, "but I have to. Please – I'll explain later." The request to summon the new æon had filled him with dread, but he now knew from

his experience at the temple that neglecting to call his æons would do more harm than good. This was the only way he would begin to convince Besaid's fayth that he was worthy of her power, he had realised.

"Please," he said again, "just stay by my side while I call her. In case I stumble."

"I really don't think this is a good idea," Auron couldn't help saying.

"I know," said Braska. "I'm sorry." He turned back to face the crowd; seeing they had his attention, a few of them let out whistles and cheers. "Will you summon, my lord?" one shouted.

Braska nodded. "Of course," he called back, before turning to his guardians again. "You're right behind me, aren't you, Auron?" he whispered urgently.

"Yes," said Auron, "but –"

"Good," said Braska, and he turned towards the crowd once more, stifled a sigh, and then flung his arms to the sides, looking up into the sky and willing the æon to descend.

After a moment, she did, settling into the space between him and the spectators, who had begun to clap and cheer again. As he looked at the æon, Braska instinctively knew her name: Valefor. He didn't dare move, lest she interpret his gesture as a dismissal; he merely stared at her, taking in those bright, stony feathers, as she hovered in the air in front of him, facing the crowd.

But then she turned her head, fixing Braska with a piercing gaze. Nobody but him could tell, but it was unmistakably a look of disapproval. He understood exactly what she was communicating to him: utter disdain at his presumption that she might ever do his bidding. He was too weak, as the fayth had said; he was unworthy of wielding this æon's power, and would be still less worthy when he came to the Final Æon. The idea that he might ever defeat Sin seemed nothing short of ludicrous; he didn't know why he hadn't already given up.

Somehow, he found the wherewithal to dismiss the æon. As she departed, leaving behind nothing but a brief glimmer in the air, he staggered backwards; Auron was immediately there, discreetly supporting him from behind. That was enough to allow Braska to regain his balance and stand unaided again within a matter of seconds. With the islanders' attention focused on the departing æon, nobody but Braska's guardians noticed him stumble.

A member of the island synod approached Braska then, insisting that he and his guardians attend the event Jecht had mentioned to Auron; before Auron could come up with a way to interfere, the man had wedged his arm around Braska's shoulders in a friendly gesture and begun to lead him towards the meeting hall, the rest of the crowd surrounding them. Jecht and Auron followed, the latter particularly tense.

Food had been prepared in a sort of buffet, arranged across a long table on one side of the room. Braska was led to the

queue and encouraged to skip most of it, joining the synod in being permitted to select the choicest pieces of fish before the ordinary islanders could take their pick. Auron and Jecht were also ushered ahead of most of the crowd, who willingly gave up their places. Jecht grinned and waved in their direction; he was used to this sort of treatment. Auron accepted it if only as a way of staying closer to Braska, whom he was determined to keep an eye on. The summoner seemed to be doing all right, though, engaging in polite conversation with the synod members as he filled his plate, so he permitted himself to worry a little less.

Prolonged observation, though, would have demonstrated to Auron quite clearly that Braska was struggling. While he was managing to nod and smile at the appropriate points in the conversations he was drawn into, and sometimes even contribute a few words of his own, on the inside he was in deep despair. Summoning Valefor had reawakened all the feelings of grief and inadequacy he had experienced at the temple until spending some time in Auron's embrace had allowed him to bury them away. Now, with no such source of comfort, he was having greater and greater difficulty concentrating on what was happening around him. Soon enough, he began to tremble; he looked down at his plate, piled with food that he hadn't touched, and watched as it shook in his grip.

"Excuse me," he mumbled at last. "I'm not feeling – I need to sit down for a while."

"Ah," said one of the older men he was standing with; "tired out, are you? I'm sure our fayth put you through your paces – they say she doesn't take kindly to mainlanders." He beamed proudly.

"Yes," said Braska faintly, and he made his way to one of the chairs that had been pushed to the side of the room to make space for people to mingle in the centre. Setting the plate down on the next chair and propping his staff against it, he watched miserably as the party went on around him. Even though the celebration was ostensibly for his benefit, nobody seemed to be paying him much attention now. Images from the two lives he had witnessed at the temple were flooding into his mind, growing more realistic and more upsetting by the moment; blinking back new tears, he sought desperately to remind himself what was real and what was merely a memory.

He clasped his hands together firmly, trying to use the sensation of skin against skin as an anchor; it had little effect. Everything in life was so painful, Braska thought; he knew this suffering intimately, but that made it no less overwhelming. He needed to block it out; he needed to find something that would simply make it stop.

At last, he called on the dregs of his magical strength; the harsh sting of lightning magic fizzed between his joined palms until they throbbed with pain, so hot and blinding that the memories lost their vividness. Auron would be disappointed to see him resorting to this, he realised, and that just made him

feel even more useless and ashamed; he squeezed his hands against each other more tightly, prolonging his agony. One thought cut through it all, making itself known to him again and again: this was what he deserved.

Auron had been drawn into a conversation with some Crusaders about combat techniques; he explained that he had formerly been part of the warrior monk corps, heavily implying that he had left of his own accord rather than been forced out, and was surprised to see that they seemed to accept his story. The inhabitants of Besaid were just as ignorant about what went on in Bevelle as Bevelle people were about life on the islands, he realised. He ended the conversation in good spirits, promising the Crusaders that he would demonstrate some elements of swordwork to them before leaving the island, and then, out of habit, looked around for Braska.

It took him a while to spot the summoner, whom he had expected to see standing; only after some time did he catch sight of him huddled on his chair in a dark corner, shaking and distraught. Suddenly alarmed, Auron hurried over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Lord Braska," he murmured.

Braska raised his head; it took more than a little effort to focus his vision and meet Auron's concerned gaze.

"You're not well, my lord," said Auron, trying not to make it obvious how worried he was. "You ought to be in bed. I'll take you back to the lodge."

"Sorry," Braska managed to whisper.

"Wait here," said Auron. "I won't be a moment." He headed back through the crowd in search of Jecht, who he found standing very close to one of the local women, his hand teasing through the end of her plaited hair; one of hers rested on his shoulder. They were laughing at something, loudly and at great length. Auron took hold of Jecht from the other side, and twisted him around to face him.

"Hey!" Jecht exclaimed. "The hell are you, the purity police? I told you things are cool with my wife, right?"

Auron tutted impatiently. "I don't care about that. I just need to talk to you."

"And what happened to waitin' your turn?" Jecht complained.

"It's important," said Auron. "I was right about Braska – he's really not well. I'm taking him back to the lodge. You'll have to stay here as his representative. Got it?"

"Representative?" said Jecht.

"Just to accept their hospitality on his behalf," Auron explained. "Try all the food and tell them it's delicious – I'm sure you won't find that too hard."

"Sure thing," said Jecht. "Is that it? Can I get back to my conversation now?"

"Knock yourself out," Auron muttered, before hastening back to Braska's side. Picking up his staff first and hooking it onto the back of his cuirass next to his own sword, he then

reached down to Braska with both hands. "Come on, sir," he encouraged him.

He helped Braska out of his seat and was relieved to see a side exit through which they would be able to leave without drawing much attention to themselves. Together, they awkwardly shuffled towards it, Auron letting Braska lean against him. Once they had emerged into the open air, Braska began crying more loudly, no longer restraining himself now that he wasn't in company; shaking, he eventually fell to his knees.

Auron crouched beside him, keeping a hand on Braska's back, and looked over towards the Crusaders' Lodge, which was a few minutes' walk away. He wondered whether he would even succeed in getting Braska to stand again; it seemed increasingly likely that he would have to carry him there instead. He was no stranger to this sort of thing, having participated in a number of rescue operations; of course, it would be different with Braska, but everything was different with Braska.

"I'm sorry," Braska sobbed. "I'm sorry, Auron –"

"Don't be," said Auron distractedly, thinking about how best to lift him before he abruptly realised there was something more urgent to attend to. Braska's palms were blistered red with burns, the legacy of his ill-advised magical intervention. Auron hadn't previously noticed, but seeing them at this point, he was in no doubt about what had happened. Suddenly, he felt nauseated.

"Oh, Braska," he said. "By Yevon – what have you –" He almost reached down to grasp one of the hands before realising that would most probably cause Braska more pain. Searching his robe for a potion instead, he raised the bottle to Braska's mouth and let him drink until, mercifully, his palms were back to normal.

With some difficulty, Auron forced his attention back to the need to carry Braska to the lodge. Hauling him over his shoulder would be dangerous with both Braska's staff and his own sword strapped to Auron's back; he would need to position him in front, across his chest. "Keep hold of me," he murmured. "Promise?"

Braska nodded disconsolately; Auron took that as his sign to proceed, and readjusted Braska's left arm so it reached behind his neck, before grasping Braska's knees and back. Satisfied that he was secure, he bent to lift him off the ground. Braska let out a little wail, holding on more tightly; Auron stood still, trying to be a calming presence for all the good it would do. "You're all right," he said. "I won't let you fall."

Braska nodded again, pressing his face into Auron's chest; Auron pulled him close, and set off towards the lodge. Braska was fairly heavy, although having seen how thin he was, Auron suspected much of that was due to his robes. He had carried more substantial weight before, anyway; if the sun had still been out, he might have struggled with this task, but it had mostly set by now and the blazing heat had given way to

what seemed an inappropriately pleasant evening.

He entered the lodge, ignoring the curious look from the Crusader on duty, and deposited Braska carefully on his bed. Braska covered his face with his hands and continued to whimper while Auron did his best to undress him in a way that remained respectful of his privacy: he gently tugged off his headdress and sandals, unhooked Braska's earring from his ear, lifted off his breastplate and bracelets, and unlaced his robe before pulling it away from his shoulders.

"You should sleep, my lord," he murmured, moving Braska's blanket to cover him. "You'll feel better afterwards, I swear. I'm here; I'll be with you all night."

"I don't deserve –" Braska sobbed.

Auron shushed him. "You deserve rest. We'll talk later, but you just need to try going to sleep first. OK?"

"OK," Braska sniffed, turning onto his side.

Auron stood watching him for a moment; he was still crying, but that was the extent of it, so Auron extinguished the lamps, changed into his nightclothes, and lay down on his own bed, still looking in Braska's direction.

Braska's attempts at getting to sleep were uncharacteristically unsuccessful; his distress had remained acute, and the darkness was somehow making it worse. He tossed and turned in his bed, feeling more and more wretched, until he could bear it no longer; just like in the temple, he desperately wished he could knock himself out just as a way of finding some respite.

Slowly, carefully, he sat up, moved close to the wooden wall behind his bed, and then suddenly drew his head back and immediately slammed it forward with as much speed as he could muster. His forehead made contact with the wall with a loud cracking sound, and then bounced away again; Braska was disappointed to find that he was still conscious, and that all he had managed to do was give himself a different kind of headache.

Straight away, Auron leapt out of his own bed, vaulted across to Braska, and knelt on the edge of his mattress, cradling Braska's head against his chest. "Please don't hurt yourself, sir," he whispered desperately. "Please – I can't bear it." He ran his fingers through Braska's hair, clutching Braska close as if mere proximity might defuse his anguish.

"I'm sorry," said Braska, yet again; his voice, dull and quiet, was muffled in Auron's vest. "Auron, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. I just wish I could go to sleep. I'm so tired."

"I'll see if we have any of that Al Bhed powder," said Auron. "The stuff we used in Djose." He headed back towards his own bed to check their supplies, and after passing Braska another potion for his head injury, searched through what they had with hands that were shaking almost as much as Braska's had been. There was no powder to be found, although he did come across the bandages they had been given in Djose, and after a moment's hesitation, he returned to Braska to wrap them around both his palms. They were unhurt now, but Auron had a horrible feeling Braska would try to harm himself again; at

least, he thought, this would make it more difficult.

"They might have some powder for sale," he said when he had finished. "I'll go and ask. I'll just be a moment – please don't do anything to yourself while I'm gone. Please."

He headed out to the reception desk. "Uh," said the Crusader on duty, "is the summoner OK? Is he hurt?"

Remembering he had seen him carry Braska into the dormitory in his arms, Auron shook his head impatiently. "He'll be fine," he said. "I need to give him something to help him sleep – do you have any of the powder the Al Bhed use?"

"Some," said the Crusader, producing a resealed sachet of it from the supply cupboard. "Not enough left for a full dose, but it'll knock him out for a few hours. Will that do you?"

"It'll have to," said Auron, hoping that two or three hours' sleep would be enough to make Braska calmer.

"Right," said the Crusader. "Didn't think you'd use that sort of thing, though – you're from Bevelle, ya?"

"We often trade with the Al Bhed," Auron explained tersely. "How much?"

The price turned out to be extortionate for such a small amount, but Auron didn't want to waste time haggling. He paid, mixed the powder into a glass of water, and presented it to Braska, who drank it down desperately before reaching for Auron's hand.

Auron let Braska take it, and perched on the side of his bed, watching Braska as he mercifully succumbed to sleep. Once

Braska's grip had slackened, he carefully extracted himself and retreated to his own bed, staring at Braska as he slept. Auron knew there was little chance of falling asleep himself: he was far too worried about the summoner. Being able to keep an eye on him at least reassured him that Braska was safe and able to rest for now, and observing the steady rising and falling of Braska's chest brought him some comfort even if he was too alert to drift into sleep himself.

Some time later, Braska stirred in his bed; the effects of the powder had worn off. He gazed down at his bandaged hands for a moment: Auron's preventative action had been unnecessary, but the feeling of the cloth against his skin was a comforting reminder of his guardian's care. Braska turned onto his side to face Auron; Auron quickly shut his eyes, pretending he was sleeping.

"Auron?" Braska murmured. "Are you awake?"

Auron opened his eyes again, slightly disappointed that his feigned sleep had apparently been so unconvincing. "How are you feeling?" he said.

"A little better," said Braska. "I'm sorry to have put you through that. Thank you for looking after me."

"I just hate seeing you in so much distress, sir," said Auron.

"Yes," said Braska distractedly. He sat up, took a deep breath, and said, "Auron – I think I'm going to have to give up. I mean – the pilgrimage. Abandon it."

Auron was speechless. On some level, this was what he

had hoped for all along. But he had always wished that Braska might give up on the pilgrimage because he had found some reason to live, and after the evening's events, it was obvious that nothing of the kind had happened. If anything, Braska's awful craving for death seemed to have grown stronger. If he abandoned the pilgrimage now, it wouldn't mean he had found something that would let him go on: it would mean the opposite.

"And then what?" he asked hesitantly. "We'd go back to Bevelle, I suppose, and …"

"*You* would go back to Bevelle," said Braska. "I would … not."

"Braska," said Auron quietly.

"I know you don't like it when I talk about this, Auron," said Braska, "but there's really …" His voice faltered. "There's really nothing left," he concluded in a whisper.

Auron suppressed a groan of frustration, and then tried a different approach. "Why do you think you need to give up on the pilgrimage?" he asked. "Did something happen at the temple?"

"Yes," said Braska, clearing his throat. "I realised – well, the fayth pointed it out to me. I've been neglecting the æons – I haven't been summoning them at all."

"I did notice that," Auron admitted.

"I haven't managed to win their trust," said Braska.

Auron frowned. "But that's why you visit the temples, isn't it? Don't you win the fayth's trust while you're there – isn't that the whole point?"

"The fayth's trust, yes," Braska explained, "but not the æons'. Receiving them isn't the end of it – I'm supposed to be getting to know them, calling them in battle. Especially the stronger ones – it's harder to convince them to follow my orders, and if I don't manage with them, I've no hope for the Final Æon."

He explained to Auron what had happened at the temple, and how each of the æons had been harder to control. When he got to the part where he had tried to ask Ifrit to attack, and Ifrit had turned on him instead, Auron let out a gasp of sympathy, which Braska found oddly gratifying.

"But she must have granted you her æon in the end," Auron pointed out, "so it sounds like she did think you were worthy after all."

Braska shook his head. "No, that was only because Bahamut's fayth appeared and commanded me to summon again." He released a shuddering sigh, and related the second part of the tale. "I don't really understand what happened," he admitted afterwards, "but she was clearly reluctant to let me have her æon's power. And that was confirmed when I summoned her – there's no bond there at all. She terrified me."

"And that's why you were in such a state afterwards," Auron mused.

"I'm afraid so," Braska concurred. He was silent for a moment, and then added, "So, you see – it's the end of the road for our pilgrimage. I'm very sorry to have to say this – I know you never wanted me to give in, and I appreciate everything you've done for me over the past three years, but –"

"No, hold on," Auron interrupted him, unable to bear hearing the end of the sentence. "Even if Valefor's fayth didn't think you were worthy, Bahamut's must have, mustn't they? Otherwise, why would they have appeared when you were about to give up?"

"I don't think that was anything to do with me," said Braska, thinking back to the snatches of the conversation he had heard between Valefor's fayth and Ixion. "She said –" He suddenly remembered. "Oh, Auron. She said *his guardian*."

The two of them blinked at each other, confused.

"In Djose," Auron said after a while, "didn't you say the same thing? The fayth said something to you …"

"Yes, you're right," said Braska. "I wonder what it could mean."

They both, in fact, had a fairly good idea of what it could mean: there was something about Auron, they both supposed, that was out of the ordinary. Something that would ensure that the Calm would come, or maybe that it would be a particularly long one, even the much desired eternal Calm – or, Auron thought, perhaps some latent power he had that would allow Braska to survive the Final Summoning …

"But that doesn't mean I have to go on," said Braska, before Auron could stop him. "Once I'm gone, you can find another summoner and go to Zanarkand with him."

Auron ignored the suggestion. "You said the problem is just your bond with the æons, isn't it?" he said. "That sounds like it could be fixed. You strengthen the bond by summoning them, don't you – so you can just practise. Start with the weaker ones, and work your way up. That's how it's supposed to work on the pilgrimage anyway. That's what you said."

"I think it might be too late for that," said Braska gently.

"But we'll have a few days in Luca," Auron insisted. "You can work on it then, can't you? Isn't it worth trying? Please?" He sounded desperate, he knew – but he didn't mind. If this was what it took to convince Braska not to go off and die immediately, there was no reason to hesitate.

"Perhaps," said Braska.

"Please," Auron begged him. "Just try. If you don't, you might not get anywhere. But maybe if you work on it, the æons will come to trust you. Please, sir."

Braska hesitated, slightly surprised by Auron's fervour. He could already tell his guardian would keep insisting on it until he relented; there was the option of arguing, but that would surely turn things ugly between them, and he felt too exhausted to initiate it, anyway. If it would keep Auron happy, he supposed, he could indeed make some effort at familiarising himself with the æons in the safety of

Luca. By that time, he thought, Auron might have had more opportunities to process his decision, and would complain less when he took the chance to slip away.

"All right," he said. "I'll work on it in Luca."

Immediately, Auron sprang out of his bed; he approached Braska where he sat, straddled him, and pulled him into a tight embrace. Braska was surprised, to put it mildly; he was usually the one who initiated this sort of contact. But he gladly put his arms around Auron in return and hugged him back, holding him close until he felt Auron fidgeting a little.

"I'm sorry," said Auron breathlessly; he was uncharacteristically flustered. "I crossed a line – that was improper of me." He looked down at where his knees dug into the bed, on either side of Braska's legs, and became still more agitated. "I'm really sorry."

"No, not at all," said Braska. "You're my dearest friend, Auron; of course you can –" He reached out to tuck a lock of Auron's hair behind his ear, failing to find a way to express how thankful he was for everything Auron did.

Auron closed his eyes and nodded, relieved; and then he let Braska pull him back into his arms. They remained there for some time, finding solace in each other's grip. When they broke apart again, Braska mustered a tiny, tearful smile, leant forward, and pressed a fleeting kiss to Auron's forehead; Auron did his best to smile back, staggered back to his bed, and lay down in a daze.

Braska was asleep again soon afterwards; Auron failed to manage it himself until it was nearly dawn.

Chapter **21**

A Children's Fairytale

Having had barely more than an hour's sleep, Auron didn't feel particularly enthusiastic about getting up when morning came. Rubbing his eyes, he nonetheless forced himself to get out of bed and go for a quick bath. Unlike the other establishments they had stayed at, the lodge possessed no shower facilities; he suspected the islanders considered them too dependent on machina. From what he had heard from the Crusaders of Besaid, most of the locals interpreted the teachings fairly strictly – they hadn't even installed a sphere screen anywhere on the island, so it was no wonder the news always took so long to arrive. The fact that having to use the bath took significantly longer than a shower was something Auron found slightly irritating, but at least it allowed him to relax his muscles in the warm water, making him feel a little less tense after his largely sleepless night.

When he returned to the dormitory, it occurred to Auron

that Jecht still wasn't back after the party. It couldn't still be going on, he thought; the islanders were surely too sedate for that sort of thing. He hoped Jecht wasn't doing anything that might harm their reputation: Besaid seemed to be the one place in Spira where nobody was aware of the contempt the three of them were all held in by Yevon. It was a good thing too, when people were so devout on the island: they might have been in trouble if the locals had known about the injunction against them.

He sat on his bed and looked at Braska, remembering the conversation they had had in the night. They had both been more open with each other than they usually were: Braska had talked quite plainly about wanting to die, while Auron had made his desperation for him to stay alive far more obvious than he normally permitted himself in Braska's presence. And the way they had both acted, too: Auron could practically still feel the imprint of Braska's lips against his forehead. With the clarity of daylight, none of that would ever have happened. He still felt ashamed of the way he had behaved, even if Braska hadn't seemed to mind; spending this much time together seemed to be making him more attached than was proper.

Tearing his gaze away, he headed to the reception desk to ask for some breakfast. The Crusaders had changed shift overnight; the one on duty now was one of those Auron had been speaking to at the party, which felt a very long time ago.

"Good morning, sir guardian," he said. "I hear your lord summoner is unwell?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," said Auron. "I'm sorry we had to leave early last night – I hope it didn't seem disrespectful."

"Oh no, Sir Jecht explained," said the Crusader, pronouncing Jecht's name in a way that made it sound as if they were close friends. "He kept us all entertained very well – even charmed the synod, it seemed like."

Auron found that rather difficult to believe, but he decided it didn't matter for the time being; after eating his breakfast, he returned to sit on his bed again, gazing at Braska's sleeping form and wondering how he might be able to help him through what would inevitably be a bad day. He had already concluded that it wouldn't be a good idea to leave Braska on his own; the evening's events had made that clear.

A little later, Braska stirred; in the moments between sleep and waking, he caught sight of the figure at his bedside, and was briefly certain that he knew where he was, at home in Bevelle, secure and loved, ready to face all the challenges that Yevon threw in his way with his Girl beside him. And then, the dream faded; he became aware that the person sitting there, hands clasped in his lap as if in prayer, was none other than a worried-looking Auron. He blinked, and felt wetness spread across his cheeks, and sank his face into the pillow, berating himself for daring to forget that this miserable emptiness was his reality.

"I'll get you a potion, sir," said Auron; they both knew it wouldn't do much, but it wasn't as if there was anything else that might be more useful. Braska pulled himself reluctantly into a sitting position before he took the potion from Auron and drank it, shakily handing back the empty bottle. Everything ached; it was mostly a side effect of his encounter with the fayth, but his low spirits were undoubtedly a factor.

"You should eat too," said Auron, ignoring Braska's grimace and halfhearted gesture of protest. "You need energy, my lord – I promise it'll make you feel better. I'll just be a moment."

By the time he returned to the dormitory with a couple of slices of toast, Braska had mustered the strength to take a towel from beside his bed and use it to cover his hair. It was a good sign, Auron told himself. He handed over the toast and turned away, trying to give Braska the opportunity to eat at his own pace; after a few seconds of wondering what to do, he began busying himself with inventorying their belongings. There were a few items among the clothes that he had forgotten about: one was a spare pair of sandals that had been intended for Braska, but which, he realised, he could wear himself while they were on the island. He slipped them on carefully: they were slightly too small, but wouldn't be that uncomfortable. It would no doubt be preferable to keeping his boots on and having to walk around in two small puddles of sweat for the next three days.

Picking his way through the toast, Braska noted that Jecht wasn't there to take the food off his hands, and slowly realised the absence of one of his guardians was something he might need to be concerned about. "Where's Jecht?" he mumbled.

"I don't know," Auron admitted. "I doubt he's in any trouble. The Crusader out there said he kept everyone entertained last night – maybe he's still at it."

"Oh," said Braska. He set the remaining toast aside, and added, "I don't want any more."

Stifling a rebuke, Auron took the toast and ate it himself – it wouldn't be good form to waste food in a place like Besaid, where the combination of remoteness and the threat from Sin meant there were likely to be frequent supply shortages. Especially, he thought, when it would probably take the islanders several weeks to recuperate the food supplies used for the previous night's party in Braska's honour.

As he was setting the plate down, the face of the Crusader on duty appeared beside the partition wall. "I'm sorry to disturb you," he said, "but there's a man from the synod here – he wants to speak to Lord Braska. I did say he wasn't well, but –"

"I'll take a message," said Auron, standing and striding over towards the reception area; but Braska extended an arm to get his attention as he walked past, and said, "No, it's – I'll see him. It's all right."

"Lord Braska," Auron insisted, his gaze lingering on the bandaged hand, "you're really not in a state to receive visitors.

I'll go and see what he wants."

Braska shook his head; everything felt heavy and overwhelming, but having to pay attention to a visitor might help with that, he reckoned; and hearing someone else express their sympathy and good wishes would bring him comfort. "You can warn him that I'm not at my best," he said, focusing all his effort into speaking at a normal pace, "but if he doesn't mind that, I should see him. Please, Auron – it may be important."

Auron sighed. "All right, then."

The man standing by the reception desk was one of the oldest people he had ever seen; his face was so wrinkled that it appeared to have more folds than skin. Nonetheless, he bent into a deep, reverential bow when Auron approached him, and said, "Sir guardian, an honour. I'm sorry to hear your lord summoner's unwell – our fayth's doing, no doubt."

"Yes," said Auron, "he's finding things very difficult this morning. May I ask why you're here? Lord Braska said he'd see you, but he really shouldn't be discussing anything that might upset him."

"Oh, this is nothing of the kind," said the man. "Just a proposition on behalf of the synod – I hope he'll find it appealing."

Auron frowned – he'd been hoping for a more transparent explanation of why the man wanted to disturb Braska's rest – but before he could protest, the visitor added, "Stand aside now, there's a good chap," and walked into the dormitory.

He gave another surprisingly fluid bow as he approached Braska's bed, so small and wizened that his head was no higher than Braska's. Auron slunk into the dormitory behind him, leaning against a wall with his arms folded and hoping the visit wouldn't last long.

"Thank you for visiting," said Braska, wincing as he adjusted his position. "I'm sorry you have to see this."

"Think nothing of it," his visitor reassured him. "Our fayth's loyalty to this island can make her cruel; I've seen many summoners laid low by her efforts. Do you have everything you need?"

"I have Auron," Braska murmured.

The old man's expression faltered slightly; he turned back in Auron's direction. "Maybe you were right, sir guardian," he said. "I'll have a word with you, then, if you don't mind –"

"No, no," Braska protested. "My apologies. Please – tell me what you have to say. I'm listening."

"Certainly, my lord," said the man, as Auron fidgeted in place; the heat was starting to make his head hurt again, and his lack of sleep wasn't helping. He could feel sweat beading on his forehead, and wished he could wipe it off, but he had left his handkerchief in a pocket of his robe, on his bed on the other side of the room. Not wanting to draw attention to himself by going to pick it up, he tried wiping the area with the back of his hand instead; it wasn't particularly effective.

Entirely unaware of Auron's discomfort, the visitor contin-

ued. "I hear you'd like your daughter to live here after the Final Summoning," he told Braska. "On behalf of the synod, we are most honoured. We wondered if you might like to be shown around the island – I hope we can demonstrate that she'll be in good hands. When you're feeling up to it, of course."

The mention of Yuna and the Final Summoning had made Braska lose much of the composure that he was slowly regaining; he blotted the corners of his eyes with a finger, and then said shakily, "Yes, that would be very kind. Thank you." He paused to clear his throat; Auron stepped forward.

"Perhaps you should leave, sir," he said sternly.

"No, it's all right, Auron," said Braska, before looking back at his visitor. "Maybe tomorrow?" he suggested. "I'll feel better then, I'm sure."

"Excellent," said the old man, before Auron could voice his scepticism. "We'll take a tour of the village tomorrow morning, then, and then we can show you the factories in the afternoon. I'll send someone to collect you after breakfast. And in the meantime, if there's anything the synod can assist you with, do ask your guardian to send us a message. My best wishes for your recovery." He bowed a third time, and made his way out.

Just about managing to resist telling Braska he was sure he wouldn't be fit to go walking around the island the next day, Auron eagerly retrieved his handkerchief as soon as the man had left them. He sat on his bed, wiped his face, and then, once he had put the handkerchief away, gazed in Braska's direction

again.

Braska had put aside any effort at holding back his tears after the visitor left; he sobbed quietly for a minute or so, but then looked back at Auron and said, "You don't … you don't need to sit there watching me."

"Would you rather I stood?" said Auron.

Braska shook his head. "No, I mean – you don't have to stay here all day. I'm going to go back to sleep. It's about the only thing I can face."

"I don't think you should be left alone," said Auron slowly, running a hand through his ponytail. "What if you –" He couldn't help glancing at Braska's hands once more. "I'm worried that you'll … hurt yourself again."

"I'm sorry," said Braska. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"No, it's not –" Auron broke off and sighed. "I mean, yes, it did upset me, obviously. But that's not what matters. You shouldn't do things like that – you need to look after yourself."

Braska frowned, but after a long pause, he said, "I shan't be alone. The Crusaders are here. And even if I did try to – to do something – I don't think I'd have the strength –" He registered Auron's anguished expression. "I promise I'll be all right. And I don't want to hold you captive here – it's just another thing for me to feel guilty about, and goodness knows … goodness knows there are enough –" He sniffed; the tears were back.

"I'm here as your guardian, sir," Auron reminded him. "And you … you said you needed me."

It was so indisputable that Braska felt the incongruous urge to smile. "Oh, I do," he said. "There's no question of it. But … today I need you to go out and see the island for me, Auron. You'll be able to tell me how lovely it all is out there. I think that would do me good."

Auron was still unconvinced, but if Braska was claiming that anything might do him good, he thought, it would be unwise to ignore it; and at least he would be able to visit the temple archives and gather some more information about defeating Sin. After leaving all the healing items and medicinal supplies by Braska's bed for easy access and getting the Crusader on duty to promise he would dispatch someone to find him at the merest hint of trouble, he headed outside, deciding to start his day with a good workout, which he hoped would make him feel more awake and perhaps even allow him to worry less about Braska.

He found a shady area under some trees by the side of the temple, set his sword down, bent into a squat, and placed his hands on the ground before kicking back with his legs, forward again, and finally springing up. After completing a few repetitions, he moved onto pressups, then squats; it was a standard routine among those of the warrior monks who spent more time on the frontlines. Auron hadn't exercised this vigorously in a while, and the heat certainly didn't make it easy, but he

found himself becoming caught up in the rhythm, remembering how addicting it felt to dedicate himself entirely to maintaining his fitness. He wondered briefly whether Jecht ever bothered to undergo training as rigorous as this, and concluded with some satisfaction that he almost certainly didn't.

He had cycled through the pattern and was back into some more jumps when he heard an unusual sound; pausing briefly to identify it, he just about managed before it changed into something else. It was a giggle, quite distinctly the giggle of a young woman; and the sound it had transformed into was more like shushing, the kind of noise the novice monks had made when they were up to something and didn't want to get caught by their elders.

Auron wheeled around; the trees were too thick for him to tell where the sound had come from. "Who's there?" he demanded.

There was silence, and then another brief, choked giggle arose from the trees. Auron frowned; it was impossible to tell where exactly the noise had come from, and he didn't want to embarrass himself by heading in the wrong direction. At least there was nothing malicious meant by it: he was fairly certain from the nature of the sounds that he was being watched by two or three young women who were probably there for the sole purpose of enjoying the sight of a muscular young man exercising. He was glad he had kept his cuirass on, at any rate.

"It's not polite to spy," he said, feeling vaguely ridiculous

as he addressed the trees.

There was no response, so he continued his workout, somewhat self-consciously making his way through the remaining repetitions. By the end, he was sweating heavily, and retrieved his handkerchief from his trousers to wipe his face and arms, glaring into the trees as he did so. There had been no more noise: either his uninvited guests had seen enough and departed, or they had got better at remaining silent.

Shouldering his sword, Auron headed to his next destination: the temple. He had wondered whether to consult the archives the first time he had visited, two days earlier, and then decided it would be more profitable to wait until he was known to the islanders as the guardian of a summoner whom the fayth had accepted. He was right: the priests and nuns were all very welcoming, and were all too willing to accommodate his request to see the archives. They ushered him into one of the side chambers, brought him a glass of refreshing water before he even thought to ask for one, and let him browse their materials without interfering. The only drawback, Auron discovered as he gratefully sipped his water, was that the archives at Besaid Temple were minimal: in fact, they consisted only of one ledger, in which were written the dates of all the attacks Sin had made on the island, along with lists of names of the fallen. The dates of each Calm were inscribed in the ledger as well, in red ink; carefully deciphering the letters, Auron realised that the frequency of the attacks seemed to vary from one incarna-

tion of Sin to the next. In the long period after Sin had reappeared following Lady Yunalesca's defeat of the creature and the Calm brought by Lord Gandof, for example, it had seemed not to approach Besaid that often; but between Gandof's and Ohalland's Calms, it had attacked the island much more regularly, sometimes even multiple times a year.

None of it was particularly helpful for Auron's purposes, though, so he returned the ledger, thanked the clergy politely for their assistance, and left, deciding it was time to drop in at the lodge and see how Braska was doing.

"He's fine," said the Crusader on duty, before Auron could even ask. "He's just been sleeping all morning. There hasn't been any trouble."

Auron nodded, but headed into the dormitory anyway so he could see Braska with his own eyes. The summoner was indeed asleep, the towel he had wrapped around his hair still in place on his head if a little off-centre; Auron was relieved to see that he was dry-eyed and didn't appear to be agitated. He reached out to adjust Braska's blanket so it covered his shoulders more completely, and then headed outside again, deciding to take a stroll around the shadier parts of the island. Just outside the village, he finally came across Jecht.

"Where've you been?" he asked suspiciously.

Jecht grinned. "Ah, you know, here and there."

Auron rolled his eyes. "Fine – if you won't tell me, I'm not going to bother asking." He lapsed into silence for a moment,

and then demanded, "Well?"

"Well what?" said Jecht, trying not to laugh. He was in an exceptionally good mood, partly the result of having been the object of so much rapt attention at the party, and couldn't help finding Auron's demeanour hilarious.

"Aren't you going to ask after Lord Braska?" said Auron tightly.

Jecht shrugged. "Figured you'd tell me, even if I didn't."

Scowling, Auron did so. "He's really not well," he said crossly, as if it were Jecht's fault. "It was a bad night. He was starting to calm down a bit this morning, but it'll take time, I think. He said he'd be up and about tomorrow, although I can't see it, quite frankly." He eyed Jecht expectantly.

"Oh, uh," said Jecht, realising Auron was waiting for a response, "sucks for him, I guess."

"I'm just glad last night's over," said Auron, less stiffly. "He was really distressed – I didn't know what to do. He was –" He sighed: Jecht really wasn't the person to discuss this with, but there was nobody else Auron could confide in. "He was hurting himself."

"Oh man," said Jecht, grimacing. "You mean …"

"Deliberately, yeah," said Auron. He looked at the ground. "He hadn't done that for a long time. I thought I was going to be sick."

"Shit," said Jecht; then he added, almost inaudibly, "I'm sorry, dude."

Auron looked up, and their eyes met; he gave a little nod of gratitude.

"You, uh, want me to check in on him?" Jecht suggested.

"It's fine," said Auron. "I just checked myself – he's asleep. The Crusaders are keeping an eye on him." Another thought suddenly occurred to him. "You told them last night, didn't you? About him asking me to bring his daughter here?"

"Uh huh," said Jecht. "Thought they'd wanna know. You wanted me to tell 'em all how great he thinks this place is, right?"

"I'm just surprised you remembered," said Auron. "And you know it won't happen, anyway – I won't be involved, at least. There'll be no need."

"Yeah, you already said," said Jecht. "But, you know, just in case."

"There's no point making empty promises," Auron insisted. He considered how he might change the subject; the conversation had become unexpectedly frustrating. "You'll join us for dinner later, won't you? I think I might need help getting him to eat."

"Sure," said Jecht. "See you then."

He watched as Auron walked off, feeling a modicum of sympathy for him. Braska was obviously struggling, but it wasn't fair to bring Auron down with him: Jecht was certain of that. Stretching, he resolved to forget about it – he wasn't going to let this ruin his own good mood, not after an enjoy-

able evening of being the centre of attention and a thoroughly satisfying morning.

Strolling towards the beach, he came across a sight that he found very interesting indeed: it was quite clearly the island's blitzball team. There were seven or eight young men dressed in strange rubber dungarees, along with a small number of younger children who weren't wearing the uniform but seemed just as involved as the rest. Jecht guessed that the kids were just hangers on who hoped to join the team when they were older, but as he watched, he noted that they seemed no worse at passing the ball around than the older players; or, to put it differently, all of them were just as terrible as each other. A team of this calibre wouldn't have lasted five minutes in Zanarkand.

He couldn't help continuing to watch, though; he'd heard enough times that blitzball was popular in Spira, but this was the first time he'd seen evidence of it in person. Drawing closer without even really meaning to, he found himself considering the way the young men were passing the ball with an analytical eye. If they just made a few adjustments to their technique, he thought, it would go a long way towards improving things. Some of the kids were quite good, he realised: the smallest boy wearing the uniform showed promise, as did another child who wasn't in uniform but had the same bright red hair. Unknown to Jecht, the latter was the same boy who had attempted to speak to Auron in the temple two days ago; he also wasn't

aware that the two boys were brothers, although their resemblance made it easy to guess. More concerning than their relationship, though, was the fact that while the two of them might have made decent blitzers one day, Jecht was quite sure that their evident lack of access to proper coaching would prevent them from ever making it big.

"Hey!" he called, now unable to restrain himself. "Trainin', huh? Want me to show you some pro moves?"

"Uh, who are you?" one of the players replied.

Drawing closer, Jecht realised none of them had been at the previous night's party; most of those in attendance had been either much older than these young men or, he had learnt, members of the island's upper classes, at least relatively speaking. There were families who had moved to Besaid from the mainland over the years for a variety of reasons, and their descendants still endeavoured to distinguish themselves from the locals by dressing and speaking differently, for the most part. The synod was composed exclusively of members of this group; the Crusaders seemed to be more of a mix, with some using the peculiar island dialect that in some respects was more similar to Jecht's own than anything else he had heard in Spira, but also seemed to rely heavily on the odd verbal tic of appending "ya" to the end of certain phrases. The blitzball team appeared to come entirely from this native population; those of mainland ancestry, Jecht guessed, perhaps believed the sport beneath them, which he considered intensely snobbish.

"You're that summoner's guardian, right?" said another blitzballer, who had been part of the crowd that had watched Braska summon Valefor the previous day despite not having received an invitation to the party afterwards. "What do you know about blitz?"

Jecht couldn't help laughing at that. "What do I know, huh?" he echoed. "More like what *don't* I know. Here, gimme the ball, I'll show you guys a thing or two."

The child holding the ball hesitantly stepped forward; Jecht took it and began to give them all a demonstration. When he had done the same for Yuna, he had confined himself to displaying the Jecht Shot alone, but now that he was in front of a group of players who would know more about the game, he threw in a few other moves as well, prolonging his exhibition to a few minutes. It was the first time he'd handled a ball entirely sober for months, maybe even years; he was more aware of the imperfections in his technique, reminders that he wasn't at the top of his game anymore. But, he told himself, the skill level of his audience definitely wasn't high enough for them to notice; even what was slightly sub-par playing to him was still far out of their league.

He finished the display with a final Jecht Shot, corkscrewing into the air to deliver a powerful kick to the ball, and managed to land on his feet without overbalancing. He held his pose, squatting on the ground, and the ball came back to earth, wedging itself between his knees: a total fluke, but a perfect

end to the demonstration.

The team, who had been letting out a few respectful oohs and aahs over the course of the spectacle, immediately broke into cheers and applause. Jecht stood, grinning and panting a little, and acknowledged the praise with a wave of his hand. "That's me," he said, "the great Jecht. I'm number one."

"That was so cool!" one of the youngest kids shouted, so overcome that he was almost in tears. "Can you teach us? Please?"

Smirking, Jecht prepared himself for a recitation of his usual rates. Coaching was one of his main ways of making money during the off season, along with press features: there were a crop of young players who owed their places in Zanarkand's various junior squads to his teaching, and to their parents' willingness to part with substantial amounts of gil in order to allow their children to pursue their dreams.

He looked at the players, sizing them up; his charges were higher when more advanced techniques came into play. The little he had seen of their skill level suggested they would benefit more from an intermediate-level session, but on the other hand, if they really were the team that represented the island, Jecht wondered if it might be worth going all out, in the hope that one or two of them might pick up something useful, at least. Blitzball was probably one of the few pleasures people experienced on Besaid, he thought; it couldn't be comfortable living in those huts all year round, and he'd seen how the

food supplies had dwindled quickly at the party, with much less appetising-looking fish being left for most of the attendees once the visitors and the synod had received their portions. Life had to be hard for the islanders: that was unmistakable.

And before he knew it, this awareness of how difficult the young men's lives must have been had convinced him to teach them for free. He was already starting to coach the team through a warmup when it occurred to him: he had never done this before in his life. He was the great Jecht – he didn't give his services away for nothing – and yet there was something about Besaid, or about the experiences he had had over the two and a half weeks of the pilgrimage, that meant for the first time, he was quite happy to abandon that principle and to admit that not everything in life could be reduced to a financial transaction.

As the afternoon went on, Jecht learnt more about his pupils. The reason all the blitzballers of Besaid were so young was because most of the men on the island took an interest in joining the Crusaders once they reached adulthood: it was the only way most of them would ever get to see the mainland, beyond the brief glimpse of Luca every year for the annual blitz tournament, which invariably resulted in the team being sent home after the first round. While nearly everyone in Spira enjoyed watching blitzball, many of them had no desire to actually play it: playing full-time was remunerated much less than it was in Zanarkand, and a lot of people

turned their noses up at going into sport as a profession. On Besaid, the Crusaders were seen as a privileged and relatively refined group, in comparison with the general population: playing blitzball wasn't considered compatible with the sort of demeanour a Crusader was supposed to cultivate. As a result, most young men reached a certain age and then decided blitz was too childish, in an effort to show they were mature enough to join the Crusaders. It was a new angle on the topic for Jecht, most of whose previous knowledge of the Crusaders was based on Auron's complaints about them: he had certainly never accused them of being at all sophisticated. Jecht asked if anyone from Besaid ever joined the warrior monks of Yevon, but received a muted response from most of the team, and even completely blank expressions on the part of the younger kids: none of them knew that much about what went on in Bevelle, and despite the strong religious sentiment that was prevalent on the island, they had little interest in the corps.

The discussion of these different combat forces led to a chat about weapons: fascinated, Jecht learnt that people used blitzballs in battle with the local fiends. A couple of the older guys showed him the modified balls they used to defend themselves: they had long, deadly-looking spikes sticking out of them at various angles. Apparently it was quite effective. Jecht wondered if his own combat skills would have been improved at the beginning of the pilgrimage if he had been able to use

a ball to fight: he briefly felt a little annoyed by the fact that Auron had just assumed he would use a sword without taking a moment to consider his preferences. But then, he thought, there was something about using blitzballs for combat that unnerved him. It destroyed the beauty of the game, somehow: sport needed to be kept separate from the mundane brutality of taking down fiends. That seemed even more the case in Spira, where the presence of white magic and healing items meant injuries sustained during blitzball matches were normally gone within a matter of moments, and players could maintain a kind of physical purity that Jecht would have envied if he hadn't been certain that his various scars were an asset in the bedroom.

He found himself hinting as much, in a much more child-friendly way, to one of the youngest members of the group. Unlike the other players, eight-year-old Botta had an unusual condition that meant magic and healing items had no effect on him. It was extremely rare, Jecht was informed: the last islander to have suffered the same affliction had been born over a century ago. But it meant that when Botta was injured, there was no option other than to bandage him up and wait for him to get better over time. Blitzball was a rough game, and although everyone tried to be gentle with Botta on account of his condition – not to mention that he was one of the smallest children present – it was inevitable that he would sustain injuries. It didn't help that he was determined to get involved,

throwing himself into tackles enthusiastically as if to insist on proving everyone wrong. He showed Jecht the bandages on both his knees, and told him about the broken wrist he'd only recently recovered from, and Jecht was able to sympathise.

"Yeah, it gets real annoying when you have to miss a match," he said, raising his own bandaged forearm. "But it just toughens you up for the next one, right? Then once you get back in the sphere, it's even better. Besides – scars make you look cool. Just look at me – I look cool, right?"

"Really cool," said Botta, and the other children nodded enthusiastically.

A few moments later, Jecht even overheard one of the other younger boys telling Botta he wished he had the same allergy, so he could have *awesome scars like Sir Jecht* too. He smiled to himself; one of the older players noticed, and approached him discreetly.

"You're good with kids, ya," he said. "Botta gets kinda worked up about his health sometimes – he can be a handful when he's angry. Looks like you've calmed him down, though – he's got himself a role model."

"Uh, glad I could help," said Jecht, trying to hide his surprise. Nobody had suggested he was good with children before, and he was certain that anyone who saw him spend a few minutes with Tidus would waste no time in coming to the opposite conclusion. But it was impossible to deny that he was getting on extremely well with the younger Besaid blitzballers.

Maybe it wasn't that he was bad with children, he reflected, so much as bad with Tidus.

To change the subject, he said, "No girls on the team, then?"

There were a few muted chuckles among the adult players. "Nah," said one of them. "The synod don't think it's *proper* for girls to play."

"Is it like that all over Spira?" said Jecht. "In Z- where I'm from, all the teams have both." And, he was about to add, a few who were neither, but he decided that would probably confuse them.

"Most of the other teams have them," said Jolla, one of the oldest players, who was used to attending tournaments. "It's just us that don't. I kinda like it, though – it's a chance for us guys to spend some time together, ya?"

There were murmurs of assent at that; Jecht couldn't help feeling jealous. The training session was making it abundantly clear that the blitzballers of Besaid had an extremely close bond, much closer than the relationship he had with his own teammates, which was collegial at best. At least half the group, he learnt, were orphans: Sin's doing, of course. But the way the players acted towards each other made it obvious that they considered themselves a family. A few times over the course of the afternoon, he overheard one of them discreetly asking another whether he was doing all right for food and supplies, and if his friend hesitated, offering to share some

of his own. There was an emotional openness about these men that was entirely alien to Jecht. He had thought Braska's insistence on discussing that sort of thing was an anomaly, perhaps a result of his condition, but he was beginning to understand that it really was a cultural difference.

The training session came to its natural conclusion; Jecht declared that there was nothing else he could teach them, which was very much untrue, but he thought it would be good to bring things to a close by making the team feel good about themselves. They had made some tangible progress – whether it stuck was another matter, but he could see some real improvement, especially among the younger members of the team and the older children, who were starting to get to grips with the game but hadn't yet picked up bad habits. Perhaps the thirteen-year losing streak they had told him about was a little closer to coming to an end.

He sat down with them to celebrate a job well done, and found himself positioned near the two red-haired boys he had identified before the session, whose names were Wakka and Chappu. Wakka had only just joined the team, Jecht had discovered over the course of the afternoon; Chappu, a year younger, was desperate to be like his brother and take up a slot as well, although he would need to wait until one of the older members moved on. They both showed promise; Jecht just hoped they were able to develop their blitz talents without being led astray by the older players.

"I can't believe Lord Braska gets to have a guardian who's a pro blitzer," said Wakka. "Must be the blessing of Yevon, ya?"

"Sir Jecht's the best," said Chappu enthusiastically. "Hey, Wakka, if I was a summoner, you'd have to be my guardian, and I'd get to order you around and stuff."

"No way," Wakka protested, "you'd be *my* guardian. I'm older, I get to choose."

"Hey, don't fight in front of Sir Jecht," said one of the adults.

"Nothin' wrong with a bit of competition," said Jecht. "Anyway, Braska doesn't order me around, I do my own thing. But you were right about me being the best, Chappu." He considered. "Although Auron's got the guardian stuff down – he knows more about æons and fiends and that kinda thing."

"If he's even better than you, he must be the best guardian there ever was," said Wakka solemnly. Chappu, though, wasn't having it.

"Sir Auron?" he said. "He's the guy with the long hair, right?" He gestured behind his back with his thumb to indicate the length of Auron's ponytail. "I saw him in the temple yesterday – no, the day before. He didn't seem all that nice – just yelled at me to get out of his way, then he marched off, all grumpy."

"Huh," said Jecht. "Well, he takes a bit of gettin' used to. I guess he has stuff on his mind." He turned away from the boys and made a face: he couldn't believe he was defending Auron. There was only one explanation, he concluded: Besaid

had made him go soft. "I *am* the best, though," he added, turning back towards them quickly.

"You shouldn't be disrespectful to Lord Braska's guardians," said the young man who had reprimanded Wakka and Chappu earlier. "The pilgrimage is the most sacred task of all. They've been chosen by Yevon."

"Yeah," said Chappu, bending forward in a quick Yevonite bow. "Sorry."

Both he and Wakka now looked a little ashamed; Jecht waited until their older teammate had moved on to a different conversation, and then said conspiratorially, "Hey, to be honest, I don't really care about that stuff."

"You don't care about Yevon?!" said Wakka, aghast.

"Uh," said Jecht, surprised by the reaction: he had meant to reassure the boys, not make them even more unsettled. "It's just cos I ain't from Spira, you know? We don't really have religion where I come from."

"Whoa," said Chappu. "I've never met someone not from Spira before." He turned to Wakka, and hissed loudly, "I told you he was weird!"

"He means weird in a good way," Wakka announced, before adding somewhat sceptically, "I didn't know it was *possible* to not be from Spira."

"Yeah," Chappu agreed, but then his eyes lit up. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "What about the guy in the story?"

"That's just a story, ya," said Wakka. "What are you, a kid?"

"What story?" said Jecht, suddenly interested. It was the first time he'd heard of any acknowledgement that some people might come from outside Spira at all: even if it didn't have much basis in fact, he still wanted to hear it.

"You don't know it?" said Chappu. "But everyone – uh, I guess maybe if you're not from Spira, you wouldn't know. It's about a guy, a thousand years ago –"

"No, you're getting that mixed up with the machina war," said Wakka.

"All right," said Chappu, "when was it then?"

Eventually, Jecht managed to piece the story together from their rather fractured, contradictory account. It turned out to be a tale that was commonly recounted to Yevonite children: according to legend, a man had once travelled to Spira in search of a rare plant. The plant was the only cure for a mysterious illness that had struck the man's son several years earlier; the man had grown increasingly desperate, and had resorted to travelling to Spira, where, he heard, it grew in abundance. It was true, and he found it almost as soon as he arrived; but when he tried to turn back and go home, he discovered he had no way of doing so, and was trapped in Spira for a long time. Years later, the man's son gathered the strength to go and look for his father, and travelled to Spira in turn, but encountered the same problem. He was able to cure his illness, but was unable to find a way of returning to his homeland.

"But did the guy at least find his kid?" said Jecht. "Once

they were both in Spira?"

"No-one knows," said Chappu. "Maybe Sin got him first, ya."

Despite knowing it was just a children's bedtime story, Jecht couldn't help attaching something to it. It was the first time he'd heard people in Spira acknowledge the idea that there might be other places beyond its borders. And as well as that, the tale of the man and his son made it impossible for him not to think of Tidus. It was probably the fact that he had been told the story by the two young blitzball players, but the image of his son was particularly strong in his mind as he considered what he had heard.

It was getting late, he realised; the sky was beginning to turn red. He remembered his promise to Auron, sprang to his feet, and announced, "I gotta go! Said I'd have dinner with the other guys."

He bade goodbye to the team, assuring them all that he would join them for some more practice if he had the time during the remainder of his stay, and hi-fived Wakka and Chappu before heading back along the path to the village. When he had almost reached his destination, he came across Auron, who was just seeing off a fiend with his fists, his sword still strapped to his back; he nodded at Jecht as he approached, and fished out his handkerchief to wipe sweat off his face.

"Thought I should get in some hand-to-hand practice," he explained in answer to Jecht's questioning look. "You never

know when you're going to be surprised without a sword. You should work on it as well – it's a useful skill."

"I'll pass," said Jecht, watching as Auron swallowed a quick potion and the grazes on his knuckles immediately mended themselves. That made him think about Botta, and about how people took care of their health so differently in Spira: in some respects, it was unquestionably superior to the way things were done in Zanarkand, but in others it was so severely lacking. He wondered fleetingly whether Braska might have chosen a different path if he had been able to benefit from medication.

They headed into the village together, and made their way to the Crusaders' Lodge; Braska was outside, his hands divested of their bandages, sitting on a chair that had been specially brought out for him when he requested it earlier in the afternoon. On seeing his guardians, he rose unsteadily to his feet, and said, "Jecht! I'm glad to see you – I was worried."

"Oh, sorry about that," said Jecht, forcing himself not to instinctively pull away as Braska took his arm. "I'd've come earlier if I'd realised."

Braska shook his head. "It's all right. I just couldn't help fearing the worst. I wondered if something awful had happened –"

"Let's go inside, sir," Auron interrupted, shooting Jecht a curious glance; his fellow guardian seemed to be displaying more compassion than he had expected. He approached

Braska on the other side, supporting him at the elbow, and the three of them awkwardly walked into the lodge together. Once Braska had sat down again, Jecht made his way to the reception desk to enquire about dinner, and Auron stayed seated by Braska's side, letting Braska lean against him.

"It's good to see you up," he said. "How are you feeling? You look better."

"I suppose," said Braska. "I haven't been awake long; but I thought a bit of fresh air would do me good."

Auron hummed in agreement, reaching down absent-mindedly to rub his own legs. They were starting to feel heavy and stiff: it had been a good, productive afternoon of exercise despite the heat, but now that he was sitting down, he was beginning to realise how tired he was after an active day and hardly any sleep the previous night. Braska's warm weight against his side was hardly helping him stay alert, either.

Jecht soon returned with a large grin and three bowls balanced in his arms. "Besaid's finest," he announced, starting on his own meal with enthusiasm. After wolfing down half of it, he turned to Braska and said, "Hey, come on! It's good, you know!"

Auron frowned at his directness, but took the opportunity to add, "He's right. You won't recover if you don't eat, sir."

"Yeah, see," said Jecht, before Braska could respond. "You better have some, else Auron's gonna worry."

At that, Braska looked sharply at Jecht, and then at Auron;

they made eye contact for a few seconds until Auron blinked a few times and then dropped his gaze. Braska continued staring at his guardian a little longer before slowly raising his spoon. Over his bowed head, Auron and Jecht met each other's eyes; the latter raised his eyebrows and grinned, and then went back to his own food with gusto.

When he had finished, he pushed his bowl away, leant back, and said casually, "So, did either of you guys ever hear that story about the man that travelled to Spira hundreds of years ago?"

"The children's story?" said Braska eventually, grateful for the excuse to set his spoon aside. "The son, and the rare plant?"

Jecht nodded. "Yeah, that's it. How come you guys didn't tell me, huh? Thought I was the only one."

"I don't think it's true," said Auron quietly. "It's a children's fairytale." He had begun to lean back as well, resting his head against the wall.

"Gotta come from somewhere," said Jecht. "The guys were tellin' me about it – the blitzball team."

"I suppose there may be some truth in it," Braska said. "You're right – these stories must have a source. It doesn't end well, though, does it? The man and his son don't make it back home, as I recall."

"Sounded like it was left open," said Jecht. "Maybe the dad managed to find a way before his kid turned up. Anyway, that ain't what matters – it means it's happened before, right? As-

sumin' it's based on somethin' real, at least. Means it ain't just me."

"Does that reassure you?" said Braska.

"Reassure me," Jecht echoed dismissively, "I guess, maybe, but –" He extended a hand to scratch his neck. "I dunno. Just good to know, is all."

Braska nodded. "I'm glad to hear that," he said sincerely. "If it gives you hope, Jecht – hope is very important. Isn't that right, Auron?"

There was no response; Braska turned to look at Auron, and was surprised to find him asleep. He had drifted off during the conversation, unable to muster the energy to listen and participate beyond his first contribution; having finished his food, he had finally let his exhaustion get the better of him.

"Auron," Braska repeated, reaching for Auron's knee and giving it a little shake until Auron stirred, opening one eye and then the other before he leant forward and passed a hand through his ponytail self-consciously. "I'm sorry, my lord," he mumbled, looking down at the table.

"It's not like you to fall asleep like that," said Braska, his hand still on Auron's knee. "Is something the matter?"

Auron placed his hand on top of Braska's, and then, thinking better of it, withdrew it and used it to rub his own forehead instead. "I'm just exhausted," he explained. "I didn't sleep much. Didn't realise how tired I was until I sat down; forgive me."

"It's all right," said Braska. "I'm just surprised. Did your little nap help?"

"Not really," Auron admitted. "I think I should just go to bed – if you don't need anything?"

Braska shook his head. "No, you go and rest. I know where the potions are."

"OK," Auron mumbled; he stood up reluctantly, registering the stiffness in all his muscles. "Night."

He trudged off. Jecht watched him leave, and then said, "Guess you're goin' soon too, then?"

Braska considered. "No, not yet, I don't think," he said at last. "I haven't been up long, after all – I feel quite awake now."

They settled on playing a few games of cards, much more sedately than Jecht had done with Auron on the ferry to Kilika. Jecht thrashed Braska in every round; after six or seven of them, he couldn't help asking Braska whether he minded.

"Not really," Braska admitted. "I'm struggling to concentrate, to tell the truth. Maybe I'll go to bed after all – let's just take a quick sphere for Yuna first."

Jecht retrieved the recorder, and the two of them took a brief sphere: Braska contributed little other than a very vague account of his success in gaining the æon, explaining to Yuna that he had been too tired to speak to her the previous evening, and then let Jecht take the lead and recount his blitzball exploits. When they had finished, Braska stood and slowly got ready for bed, wincing at the pain that still disturbed his move-

ments. Spending most of the day in bed had alleviated it to some extent, but it had also ensured that during his waking moments he had had little to think about other than how badly his encounter with the fayth had gone. If he had to spend another day like that, he thought, he would go out of his mind; he would just have to hope he would be well enough the next morning to go on the tour that the man from the synod had proposed to him.

He took a potion and climbed into his bed, gazing at Auron's sleeping form on the other side of the room for a while before eventually raising an arm to shield his eyes from the evening light and once again succumbing to sleep himself.

Chapter 22

Skill Upgrade

Auron was woken by Jecht, tugging at his shoulder roughly; he swatted him away before sitting up and mumbling, "What?"

"Some lady from the synod's here," Jecht explained. "Said something about takin' Braska on a tour?"

"Oh," said Auron. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and rubbed his face. "She's early, isn't she? What time is it?"

"Later than you think, I guess," said Jecht, grinning. "Had a good sleep, huh?"

Auron's gaze flicked towards the clock on the wall: Jecht was right. He was normally up at least two hours before this; the realisation momentarily worried him, until he remembered how exhausted he had been when he went to bed. He looked over towards Braska, and saw that unsurprisingly, he was still asleep as well.

"You can ask her to wait while I check with Braska," he decided. "I doubt he's well enough to go walking around the island all day, but we'll see."

Jecht headed back out; Auron dressed hastily, still embarrassed by having risen so late, and then drew close to the summoner. "Sir," he said, bending low towards Braska's ear. "My lord, it's morning. Wake up, sir."

He placed a hand against Braska's arm; only then did Braska stir, opening his eyes and scowling at the interruption to his sleep. "Must you?" he complained.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Auron; he had expected that sort of reaction. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Horrid," said Braska, closing his eyes again. "Let me sleep, please."

"It's just that someone from the synod is here for your tour, sir," said Auron apologetically.

It took a moment to register with Braska, and then he opened his eyes once more; he grimaced for a few seconds, and then said, "Oh, of course. I'll be up in a moment."

"It doesn't sound like you're well enough," said Auron. "I think we should send her away. Maybe tomorrow, if you're better by then – it's another couple of days until we leave."

Braska pulled himself reluctantly into a sitting position. "I shouldn't refuse their hospitality," he said. "They say the fayth's very attached to the islanders, don't they? So if I'm to please the æon –"

"Tomorrow," Auron said again.

"No," said Braska, finding himself wincing at the loudness of his own voice. "If we put it off today, we'll just be in this position again tomorrow morning, won't we? And if I spend another day simply lying here feeling wretched, who knows what sort of state I'll be in by then."

"I don't think it's a good idea," said Auron.

"Auron," Braska retaliated, "you're the one who insisted I need to strengthen my bonds with the æons. How is this any different from what you suggested –"

"It's different," Auron interrupted, "because you'll have rested by then! This is too soon after the temple – you can't spend all day on your feet already. You need to build up to it – we can go for a walk around the village later, and then we'll see how you are –"

"No," said Braska. "Auron, no. I'm doing this today, and that's that. And the more we argue about it, the harder it'll be – you *know* that – so please, let's stop this. Please."

Failing to stifle a noise of frustration, Auron turned and retreated to the reception area; Braska turned his attention to the task of getting dressed, trying to ignore the aches that twinged in his limbs each time he was required to move them. A few moments later, Auron was back with some fruit intended for Braska's breakfast, which he handed over wordlessly; Braska took a few pointed bites, left the rest on the table beside his bed, and headed outside to meet the synod representative, who had

been conversing with Jecht quite happily.

Auron followed. "My lord summoner's still not well," he said, not looking at either Braska or Jecht. "You'll have to let him rest if he requires it."

"Of course, sir guardian," said the woman. "We'll take care of him – no need to worry."

"He might need potions," Auron added. "Are you carrying any?"

"Auron," said Braska wearily; but she merely smiled, produced a potion from the folds of her robe, and said, "Right here, sir. It's all in hand. Perhaps you'd like to accompany us, to put your mind at ease?"

"That won't be necessary," said Braska. "Let's be on our way, please."

"Your guardian is very attentive," she remarked as they headed off. "No doubt it's a sign of Yevon's favour."

The guardian in question had swiftly gone back into the lodge for his own breakfast; he wasn't in the mood for making trivial conversation with Jecht after his minor altercation with Braska. The heat was making his head hurt again, and it seemed worse than before, although, he reflected grimly, the argument had probably been a contributing factor.

Jecht walked in a few moments later, and announced, "We got a visitor too."

"Have we?" said Auron. "Oh. Can you deal with whatever it is?"

"Nah, she's here for both of us," said Jecht. "I got talkin' to her at the party – she's a mage. I was tellin' her about the pilgrimage, and she said she could give us lessons."

"*Magic* lessons?" said Auron, finding the idea surprising enough to provide some distraction from his irritable mood. "You and me?"

"Yeah, c'mon!" said Jecht, heading back towards the reception desk; Auron followed with some reluctance.

"Ah, so you're Auron," said their visitor; she was dark-skinned and wore face paint, like a number of Besaid's native population, but spoke with the neutral accent of someone from a mainlander family. She bowed. "Ginnem – it's a pleasure to meet you. Jecht said you were the one who tends to take charge on your lord summoner's pilgrimage."

Unable to work out whether that was meant in a good or bad way – and suspecting the latter, given that Jecht had apparently volunteered the information – Auron said guardedly, "I suppose I am."

"He also said your lord summoner is the only one of the three of you with any skills in the magic arts," Ginnem went on. "That seems a rather reckless position, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Well, Jecht's a professional athlete, and I'm a former warrior monk of Yevon," said Auron, folding his arms. "We can get by well enough with our swords, you know."

"And what if you come across a fiend that doesn't take well

to physical attacks, and your lord summoner's incapacitated?" said Ginnem. "Or if his magic power's spent, and you're out of potions? Don't you think it would be prudent to have some knowledge of the art yourself?"

"Hey, it'll be fun, right?" said Jecht. "Not as if there's anythin' else we gotta do."

Auron had never had any interest in learning magic, and had never been given the opportunity: the warrior monks didn't generally have the temperament for it. They were plain, direct people, who tended to be more concerned with practicalities than with the somewhat vague inward-looking spirituality required for spellcasting; or rather, Auron was, and he had always been the model warrior monk. He was quite sure that neither he nor Jecht was suited to magic; unable to find a counterargument to Ginnem's points, though, he signalled his acquiescence with a grunt.

Ginnem led the two of them back to the hut that served as the village meeting hall, where the party had been held, and started the proceedings with some breathing exercises. Jecht found them rather infantilising, and didn't see what they could possibly have to do with casting magic, but he humoured her to the best of his ability. Auron was more used to the concept from his spiritual practice, but on this occasion, it was just an unpleasant reminder of the trouble he was having with his faith, and on top of that, it seemed to be making his head sorer.

Ginnem moved between the two of them to correct their postures. "I can't believe you have so little experience," she said, tugging unashamedly at one of Auron's feet to encourage him to take a wider stance. "You said you were in the warrior monk corps – didn't they even bother teaching the basics?"

"Not in my division," said Auron.

"Arrogant fools," she muttered, circling him to ensure he was positioned to her satisfaction. Stopping in front and looking him in the eyes, she said, "I don't suppose that's why you left."

Auron blinked back at her: it was clear from the way she said it that she knew more about the corps than the Crusaders he had spoken to at the party did. They hadn't realised that one didn't just resign; Ginnem, on the other hand, had figured out that something was going on.

"I left for personal reasons," he mumbled.

"I see," said Ginnem, looking at him a moment longer before turning to walk back towards the front of the room to issue her next instruction. "You're tense," she added. "Relax."

Auron bristled; Jecht took advantage of Ginnem's back being turned to grin and mimic a whipping gesture.

After that, they started on the actual process of casting magic. As Auron had suspected, attempting to draw out what Ginnem insisted was his latent magical power was incredibly tedious. Despite his increasingly terse suggestions that perhaps he just wasn't built for this sort of thing, she insisted

that he keep trying. Perseverance was a quality that Auron normally had in abundance: on occasions in the past when he had found himself lacking in certain skills, he had always been happy to practise for as long as necessary until he gained competence in them, particularly when the skill in question was something relevant to his career. At those times, though, he had always been able to discern some progress as he went. Learning magic didn't seem to be like that at all: as much as he tried to focus on his spirit, as Ginnem was urging him, and to perform the various gestures that she demonstrated, nothing was happening beyond the worsening of his headache.

Jecht wasn't achieving much either, but neither was he having anything resembling a bad time, and his natural competitive impulses meant he was determined to succeed in learning at least one spell before Auron managed it. After a while, it turned out he had won by default: Auron suddenly straightened up, dropping the stance that Ginnem had instructed him to assume, and said, "I give up – I'm not feeling well."

Ginnem rolled her eyes – in her opinion, Auron was a complete lightweight – but she made no attempt to call him back as he walked over to the row of chairs lining the edge of the room and found a potion to take. The sensation of the cool liquid on his tongue and in his throat was welcome, but beyond that, it didn't seem to have any effect. He sat there watching Jecht in an attempt to take his mind off his discomfort, pressing the fingers of one hand against his forehead.

Braska was ushered into the meeting hall soon afterwards, sipping a refreshing cold drink: it was the next stop on his tour. He was pale and somewhat slow in his movements, but in a much better mood than earlier; the activity had provided a pleasant distraction.

"You must be Lord Braska," said Ginnem, dropping into a low bow. "Ginnem – it's an honour to meet you, sir. It's not every day a summoner is able to win the trust of our fayth."

"Lovely to meet you too," said Braska, his polite smile faltering slightly when Ginnem mentioned the fayth. "I hear you're the principal mage here."

"That's right," said Ginnem. "The priests and nuns know a little healing magic, but it's useful to have a more rounded set of skills – wouldn't you agree? Sir Jecht made the excellent suggestion that I teach him and Sir Auron a spell or two; I think we'll get somewhere before the day's out."

"Oh, excellent," said Braska, taking note of Jecht's posture. "Good work, Jecht. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yeah, it's kinda interestin'," Jecht started, but before he could go on, Ginnem barked, "Don't speak! Concentrate!"

With a slightly sheepish shrug, Braska left Ginnem and Jecht to it, and went to sit next to Auron, murmuring his name tentatively. "I didn't mean to leave you on bad terms," he added, once Auron had made eye contact. "I know you were trying to take care of me."

"Yes," said Auron. "I'm sorry too – I shouldn't have raised my voice."

"That temper of yours," said Braska fondly. He glanced back at Jecht and Ginnem. "How's the magic going?"

"I don't think it's for me," said Auron. "Not today, anyway – I've got this awful headache."

"Oh, poor you," said Braska. "The sort that potions won't cure, is that right? It's probably a sign that you're about to learn a black magic ability. They tend to have that effect."

Auron shook his head a little. "I think it's just the heat, sir."

"I'm sure it isn't," said Braska. He held out his drink, and said, "Would you like some?"

Auron reached for the cup, placing his lips against the hollowed reed that served as a straw; the drink was ice-cold, and pleasant enough even if it was slightly too sweet for his usual taste. "Thanks," he mumbled.

Braska reached out to brush some hair away from Auron's face as he took the cup back; finding it sticky with sweat, he attempted to hide his grimace and wiped his fingers on his robe. "I should get back to the tour," he said. "Feel better soon."

Auron gave a lacklustre wave goodbye as Braska rejoined the synod members waiting at the door, and then turned his attention back to watching Jecht: he still wasn't making any visible progress. After a while, he decided he had had enough: what he really needed, he thought, was something he could do that would take his mind off his headache.

He stood slowly and made his way to the exit, ignoring the others' looks in his direction. There were some construction workers behind the temple, he knew, building more huts for the villagers; he had seen them on his walk the previous day. Offering his services would give him something to do that was much more suited to his aptitudes than wasting time trying to learn magic.

"Sir guardian!" said the foreman when he approached. "Come to see how we're getting on, ya?"

"I'd like to help," said Auron. "It's the least I can do to thank you all for being so hospitable to my lord summoner."

"Oh, you sure?" the foreman asked. "You look kinda under the weather ..."

"It's nothing," said Auron. "What can I do?"

On account of Auron's evident physical strength, he was given the task of carrying materials from one station to another. As he worked, he learnt why the huts were being built: the same site had previously housed others, but they had been destroyed by Sin. Indeed, it was the same reason why construction work was normally carried out anywhere in Spira, apart from Bevelle. There, the guardian wyrm protected the city from attacks, and so new developments could be carefully planned and built to last; elsewhere, new buildings were usually the result of an urgent need to replace what had stood on the site before. Auron noted that the villagers involved were all intensely knowledgeable about the housebuilding process:

they had no doubt done this many times already.

Auron's headache wasn't getting any better, but at least having something to do was marginally distracting. Each time his hands momentarily became free between deliveries of goods, he found himself taking out his handkerchief to wipe the now quite copious sweat off his face and neck, but he moved onto his next task on each occasion with equal determination. After a few iterations, though, he was starting to wonder whether he was setting too fast a pace for himself: he had begun to feel slightly dizzy each time he bent to leave something on the ground.

"You all right?" said one of the workers.

"I'm feeling a bit lightheaded," Auron admitted.

"You should sit down, ya," the worker encouraged him. "Take a break."

Auron mumbled a response, conceding that sitting down would be wise: it felt as if his vision was narrowing to a single point, losing saturation, and he was beginning to think he might be about to be sick. He scrabbled for something to hold onto, and found nothing before he crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

The men formed a small crowd around him, remarking unanimously on how the poor thing had overworked himself and how Bevelle men weren't used to southern heat; somebody produced a damp cloth from a nearby hut and laid it on Auron's forehead, while another person found a glass of

cool water for him to drink. By this point, he had regained consciousness and was apologising profusely, gently rebuffed by the various people around him. He had never fainted like this before – only during battle, which was very different. Waking up to find himself the centre of attention had been mildly disconcerting.

"You'd better go get some rest, ya," one of the men suggested, before looking around the crowd, which by this point consisted not only of the men who had been working on the huts but also of numerous other islanders who had been intrigued by the excitement of the situation. "Does someone wanna take Sir Auron back to the lodge – oh, Tiki? Amna?"

The two young women he had identified were keen volunteers: they were both around twenty years old, just a few years younger than Auron. One of them, in fact, was the younger sister of the woman Jecht had spent so much time talking to at the party. They surged towards Auron, each looping an arm around one of his, and began to lead him to the lodge, glancing at each other and grinning when they thought he wasn't looking.

"I can walk on my own," Auron protested.

"Oh no," said Amna, "we don't want you fainting again, sir! Don't worry, we'll take care of you."

When the three of them reached the lodge, the two girls exchanged cheerful greetings with the Crusader on duty – Auron avoided catching his eye – and then, having persuaded Auron

to point out which was his bed, they led him to it and manhandled him until he was lying down.

Tiki pressed a hand to Auron's sweaty forehead. "Oh," she sighed dramatically, "you're so *hot*!" The double meaning wasn't lost on Auron; he closed his eyes and tried to block out the sound of the two young women laughing, hoping they would leave him alone as soon as possible. While Tiki went out to fetch some water and dampen another cloth to position around Auron's neck, Amna went to inspect his sword, which had been left propped against the wall.

"Is this yours?" she asked, skimming her fingertips along the blade. "So big. You must be really strong, sir ..."

"Please don't touch my belongings," Auron protested ineffectually.

Tiki returned after that, and while Auron couldn't deny he was grateful for another drink of fresh water and the feeling of cooling liquid against his skin, the effect was somewhat offset by the two girls' fussing around him. They untied his hair, claiming that it would reduce the tension in his head, and then took out their own combs to make a poor and distractible attempt at tidying it; then they took to remarking on his muscles, prodding at his arms under the guise of concern for how much he was sweating.

"Shouldn't you take this off, sir?" said Amna, running a finger over Auron's cuirass. "It doesn't look very suited to hot weather."

"Ooh, that's right," Tiki added. "We'll help you get it off – just lift up your arms –"

The two of them met each other's eyes and giggled again, before giving one of Auron's arms a little tug; that turned out to be the final straw. He jerked away from them and sat up, trying to ignore the wave of pain the sudden movement sent through his head; then he hissed, "Will you get off me? This isn't helping – in fact, you're making me feel worse."

"Oh," said Tiki, her eyes suddenly round with apprehension. "Um – we were just trying to be nice …"

"I can't believe you'd be so mean, sir," said Amna, looking as if she was about to cry.

Auron lay back down and closed his eyes again, clasping a hand to his forehead. "Please leave me alone," he muttered.

Tiki put an arm around Amna's shoulders as the latter sniffed and rubbed her eyes, but fortunately for Auron, they left with no further complaints. He waited until they were definitely gone before gathering his hair into a loose bun and slowly removing his cuirass; his headache was less acute than it had been right before he fainted, but now he felt tired and weak, and the whole interaction with the two girls had additionally ensured he was in a foul mood. He lay back again, and before too long, succeeded in falling asleep.

A little while later, Jecht sauntered in; he had been looking for Auron, and had checked a few places on the island before eventually wondering whether he might be back at the lodge.

As he approached, he caught sight of Auron lying in bed, on top of his blanket; he hesitated, deciding he would rather stay away from Auron when he seemed to be ill, but Auron had already woken up and opened his eyes to dully meet his gaze.

"Uh," said Jecht reluctantly, "you sick?"

"Yeah," said Auron. "Jecht, how can you stand this heat? I feel terrible – I actually fainted out there."

"Right," said Jecht, who would rather not have known. "Guess some people just ain't built for hot weather, you know?"

Auron sighed and sat up slowly. "Would you get me some more water?" he asked, gesturing towards the empty glass beside his bed.

Jecht was about to refuse – he didn't take orders from anyone, especially not Auron – but forcing Auron out of bed unnecessarily in his condition was too cruel even by Jecht's standards. "Sure," he muttered, heading out to the reception area to refill the glass.

"Came to tell you I learned some magic," he said when he returned. "Wanna guess which kind?"

"I'm not in the mood," said Auron.

"Oh, right," said Jecht. "Well, anyway – it's time spells. Haste and Slow, you know 'em? Ginnem said they were" – he put on a high, haughty voice – *"the crudest of the mage's powers*, but they seem pretty cool to me. Never got to do anythin' like

this in Zanarkand. And they'll probably be useful in battle, right?"

"Yeah, maybe," said Auron. Jecht was evidently quite excited about his new skills: Auron didn't share his enthusiasm at all, but decided he should do his best to be civil. The way in which he had dismissed the two young women earlier was weighing on his conscience: he hadn't meant to upset them, but had just been too irritable to prevent himself from speaking harshly.

"I thought if one of us was going to manage, it'd be you," he admitted. "I'm not really that kind of person."

Jecht laughed. "Right, but Ginnem's the most powerful mage on the island."

Auron frowned at the apparent non-sequitur; Jecht smirked, and said, "I mean, she's basically the same as you, right? Thinks she's always right, says what's on her mind, likes tellin' people what to do … you get the idea."

Closing his eyes, Auron lay back down: Jecht's casual dissection of his character had somehow made him feel worse. "That's different," he murmured.

"Uh huh," said Jecht sceptically. Realising he would get no further response, he rolled his eyes and headed back outside, ready to practise his new spells on the local fiends.

After another short nap, Auron was starting to feel better, although he decided it would be wise to stay indoors until a bit later in the afternoon. He took a bath in tepid water and

then dressed carefully, taking care to give his hair a thorough combing before tying it back into its ponytail. After that, he sat cross-legged on his bed and thought over the arrangements for the coming stages of the pilgrimage. They had only one more full day on Besaid: the thought of it was something Auron found immensely relieving. Braska seemed to have taken a shine to the island, Auron reflected, but he certainly didn't feel the same way himself.

Some time later, his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a group of people entering the lodge. He continued to sit quietly on his bed, only half listening until the sound of a familiar sob reached his ears.

Auron rushed into the reception area; there, as he had anticipated, was Braska, seated at the dining table, his cheeks shining with tears. A few of the synod members who had formed his escort on the tour were gathered around him, trying to help by offering a few comforting words or caresses, but when Braska saw Auron approaching, he ignored the islanders and extended an arm towards his guardian; Auron pushed through the small crowd and sat beside him, letting Braska enclose him in an embrace and lean his head against Auron's shoulder.

After a few seconds, Braska leant back a little and spoke. "Oh, Auron," he murmured, "I'm so glad you're here. How embarrassing this all is."

"You're all right, sir," Auron assured him. "Don't worry."

Detaching one of his hands from Auron so he could use it to wipe his eyes, Braska nodded. "I know. I just had a moment, in the factory – stupid of me –"

"It doesn't matter," said Auron.

The islanders had withdrawn from the table, leaving the job of comforting Braska to Auron, but they were still nearby. While some had gone to stand outside, two of them remained beside the reception desk, looking down at Braska with grave expressions.

"Perhaps one of you could get him some water?" Auron suggested.

One of the two men fetched a glass, and brought it to Braska; Braska took it with a small nod of thanks, holding it in both hands as he drank. Auron took the fact that Braska was no longer clinging to him as permission to stand, and drew near to the two synod members. "What happened?" he asked in a low voice.

The man who had brought the water merely frowned in response; his colleague began to explain. "Something upset him while we were demonstrating the textile works," he said. "He seemed perfectly all right, and then – I don't know, it must have been something we said to him. I think someone mentioned one of Sin's recent attacks on the island; but I should hope it wasn't that. He's a summoner; he of all people should –"

"He's a perfectly fine summoner," Auron interrupted, tak-

ing care to continue speaking quietly. "He's just fragile after the encounter with your fayth. It tested him more than we expected."

"I suppose so," said the man. "Still – he was totally beside himself. We didn't know if he'd even manage to walk back here …"

He trailed off as Braska slowly stood and made his way towards them, no longer crying but instead doing his best to smile politely. "I do apologise," he said when he drew near. "I know that wasn't pleasant – I've really no excuse for acting so pathetically. I merely hope you might be able to forgive me."

"Only Yevon can forgive," the man said.

Braska's jaw clenched; he blinked a few times, exhaled, and then said, "Well. Yes."

There was an awkward silence; the two men from the synod exchanged a look. Auron watched as they did so, beginning to suspect the reason behind their apparent reluctance to trust Braska. The rest of the synod seemed very taken with him, as did everyone else they had encountered on Besaid; but these two men's scepticism about Braska's abilities and the pointed reference to Yevon suggested that they disagreed with the majority opinion. Perhaps Braska had been chatting with them during his tour, Auron thought, and maybe he had slipped up and given some indication of the way he felt about the teachings. That would certainly have made them see him differently.

"And the fayth," he said, after reflecting a little longer. "The fayth give power to summoners. And – despite how difficult it was for him – Lord Braska passed your fayth's test. He's in her favour. That's the most important thing, isn't it?"

"Indeed," said the less taciturn of the two men, now looking thoroughly uncomfortable. "And I think we should take our leave, on that note. Have a pleasant evening – and Lord Braska, all the best for your continued recovery." He bowed quickly and hurried out, followed by his comrade.

"In her favour," Braska echoed belatedly; tears were starting to cloud his vision again. "Oh, Auron, you know I'm not. You know I passed her test under false pretences –"

"But you passed it," Auron insisted. "That's what matters. Everything they say about Yevon is just –" He broke off; he didn't want Braska to suspect he might be struggling with his faith. "What happened at the factory?" he asked, more softly.

Braska shook his head and sniffed. "I was thinking about Yuna," he said, "how she'll adore it here – and then they started telling me about all the damage Sin has done to the island over the years. It reminded me of the memories the fayth showed me: they really have suffered terribly. And yet they still carry on. They're so strong, Auron. Stronger than I could ever hope to be."

He wiped his face, said nothing for a moment, and then added, "Until then, though – it was wonderful. Such a charming place. I wouldn't mind taking another walk to see more of

it; would you accompany me?"

"Are you sure you're all right?" Auron asked.

"Strolling around this lovely island with you beside me?" Braska murmured. "If I'm not all right in those conditions, then I really am done for."

Auron quickly made his excuses and went to fetch his sword, sternly reminding himself not to read anything into Braska's words. It was late enough in the day for him to know the heat would be bearable, at least. After he returned, the two of them headed out of the lodge and began making their way through the village. Braska was doing better: Auron could tell from the way he walked, slow but confident and purposeful, even stopping to wave at some of the villagers, who hesitated a little before waving back shyly as if finding it hard to believe they were getting to interact with the visiting summoner. The state Braska had been in when he returned to the lodge seemed thankfully not to have lasted.

They continued along the path to the beach at Braska's request; Auron drew his sword to strike down the few fiends they encountered. After the first such short battle, Braska reached for Auron's arm with the intent of giving it a brief squeeze of gratitude, but found himself clinging on afterwards: he wasn't in desperate need of the comfort that came from physical contact with Auron now, but it was still reassuring in its familiarity. Each time they came across another fiend, he let go while Auron saw to it and then looped his arm through Auron's again

once the fiend was taken care of.

Following the path all the way, they eventually came to the beach; Auron hesitated. "I'd rather not get too close," he said.

"Hm?" said Braska; then he remembered the discussion he had had with Auron a few days ago on the ferry. "Oh – is the sea still troubling you?"

"Not as much," said Auron, "but I'd still prefer not to – I'll wait here, if you want to go on." There would be no fiends on the beach: he was happy to let Braska walk across it alone.

Braska let go of him and continued forward, making his way slowly towards the shore. Once he arrived at the water's edge, he bent to remove his sandals, then took them in one hand and hitched up his robe with the other; then he stepped forward into the water, letting it lap gently against his ankles. He closed his eyes, and concentrated on the salty smell and the feeling of the water washing over his feet. The gentle sea breeze lifted the tails of his headdress a little, cajoling them into an erratic dance; the sun shone at Braska's back, and warmth spread under his robe. The same sensation had made him feel a rare contentment when he had experienced it three days ago, and there was something of the same feeling rising within him again this time: a sense of true, deep peace. His time among the living was drawing to a close, he knew: whether it was the Final Summoning or some other event that would bring about his death, he was ready for it.

Then, he lowered his head, and found himself beginning

to weep. There was no frenzied sobbing this time, no pain in his head or trembling in his limbs; just quiet, slow tears that tracked down his face as he stood there, still motionless. He wept for the sake of the fayth, remembering the five lifetimes he had witnessed at the temples, their stories of futile struggle and, eventually, of sacrifice. And for all the summoners who had gone before, and those like Perula who walked this path with him; for the priests of Yevon and their confused, hard-headed dedication to the teachings; for the Al Bhed, now making their homes in whatever parts of Spira they could; and for all the other peoples of Spira – the Ronso far away on their freezing mountain, the good, kind villagers of Besaid, and everyone in between. And he wept for all the people in Bevelle who had ignored him and blacklisted him, and for his parents, who had cast him out of their lives. For Jecht, still marooned in Spira, a place not meant for the likes of him; for Auron, rejected by his own sworn brothers, bitter and worried as much as he tried to hide it. For Yuna, the picture of childish innocence, an unwitting pawn in the games of Yevon. And, most of all, for Girl: long gone, but sorely missed, a void in his heart that grew larger every day.

Auron watched from the far side of the beach, unaware of the nature of Braska's thoughts; from where he was standing, Braska was just a small human figure dwarfed by the wide stretch of golden sand. He could tell Braska was very close to the water, although not exactly how close: he couldn't work

out whether he had actually set foot in the sea or not.

He found himself wondering what he would do if Braska appeared to walk any further into the sea. He would have to run across the beach and grab him; he hoped he would be able to reach him before it was too late. He shifted his position uncomfortably, shouldering his sword so he could be ready to run to Braska's side; imagining it had made him fear that it would need to happen. Braska had seemed to be in a better place when he had visited the meeting hall during his tour, and he had told Auron he wasn't doing too badly once he had recovered from the incident at the factory, but Auron's stomach churned with unease. Maybe all this had been a ploy, he thought, an excuse, and all along Braska had wanted to come out to the beach only so he could take his own life, in a place where he knew Auron would be reluctant to follow.

If Braska made a single move, he told himself, he wouldn't hesitate; he would dash across the beach faster than he had ever moved in his life. He tensed, ready for it.

Braska stood still for a very long time; then, at last, he raised his head. Auron's breath caught in his throat. He meant to run, but found himself rooted in place; it was as if he had forgotten how to use his legs for a moment. All he could do was watch as Braska slowly turned and began to walk back towards him; and then, as he gradually came to the realisation that Braska had no intention of walking into the sea and drowning himself, he closed his eyes tightly and sighed with

a mixture of relief and confusion. Now that the danger had passed, the idea that Braska might have done such a thing suddenly seemed ludicrous. Auron was under no illusion about Braska's eagerness to die; but he would never have done it like that, leaving Auron at the edge of the beach to watch helplessly as he went to his death without warning. It was impossible to tell why he had had this sudden, upsetting thought.

He opened his eyes again and watched numbly. Braska was heading towards him in a straight line, the imprints of his feet and the end of his staff starting to become visible in the sand as he came closer. He was walking confidently, his head held higher than Auron had seen it since the first day they had spent on the island, striding forward with the utmost dignity. As he approached, Auron noticed that his eyes were red, but he was composed, wearing a peaceful, almost serene expression.

For Braska's part, he could tell as he drew near Auron that his guardian lacked his usual poise. Auron looked miserable – there was no other way of putting it – and Braska thought he knew why.

"I'm sorry, Auron," he said. "I shouldn't have brought you here. I ought to have realised it would make you uncomfortable."

"No, it's not that," said Auron. "I mean – it's nothing."

"Are you sure?" said Braska. He placed both hands on the shaft of his staff and gave it an absent-minded little twirl. "You should tell me when something's troubling you. I know I'm

not always – I haven't been in a position to pay your worries much attention lately, but …"

Auron considered: there certainly had been a few things on his mind recently. But the one that loomed largest at the moment was the same issue he had tried raising with Braska before the pilgrimage began, and he had never succeeded in getting anywhere. Braska was determined to sacrifice himself: solving that problem was a task that Auron would have to tackle alone.

"I know coming on this pilgrimage has changed things between us," Braska continued apologetically. "But we're still friends, Auron – aren't we? I hope you feel as if you can confide in me."

"Yes," Auron assured him. "Thank you. I – I'm all right. I think I just … Besaid just isn't my kind of place. I'm looking forward to leaving, to tell the truth."

"Oh, really?" said Braska. "Goodness. I can't say I feel the same way, but each to his own, I suppose …" He looked up at the cliffs. "We should be getting back, shouldn't we?"

"It's about time for dinner," Auron agreed.

They headed back towards the village; the sun was starting to set. Braska walked ahead, invigorated by the sights and sounds of the landscape around him; little rustles and chirps signalled the presence of small animals in the undergrowth, and the feeling of being surrounded by this undisturbed, unchanging wildlife was something he found especially calming.

A few paces behind, Auron reflected glumly on their conversation: the only positive thing to note, he thought, was that Braska really did seem to be in a better mood. Other than that, nearly everything that had happened on Besaid had been disastrous. For their final full day on the island, he decided, he would stay at the lodge, out of the heat, and then hopefully nothing too bad would befall him.

Almost back at the village, they came across Jecht, who was in the middle of seeing off a fiend. "Oh, hey guys!" he said enthusiastically.

"Working on your fighting?" Braska enquired.

"Well, kinda," said Jecht. "Just practisin' these spells I learned, you know? Didn't Auron tell ya?"

Auron shrugged.

"Oh, you did manage to learn some magic?" said Braska. "That's excellent."

Jecht gave a demonstration, casting Slow on the unfortunate fiend he was dealing with and Haste on himself, before leaping around the dazed creature and slicing into it from all angles at an inhuman rate. It had disintegrated into pyreflies before he had even finished circling around it.

"Wonderful," said Braska once the effects of the spell had worn off and Jecht no longer appeared to be vibrating. "That'll be a great help once we start coming up against more difficult fiends again, won't it, Auron?"

"I guess," Auron mumbled.

"Oh man, show some enthusiasm," Jecht complained, but he was suddenly overtaken by a huge yawn.

Braska raised his eyebrows knowingly. "Tired? White magic tends to do that. We're on our way back to the lodge for dinner – why don't you come back and relax with us?"

"I ain't *that* tired," Jecht protested, but the thought of sitting down for a nice meal and a rest was definitely appealing, so he shrugged and gestured for Braska to lead the way.

"I never thought you'd be a white mage, Jecht," Braska remarked as they progressed. "Isn't it surprising, Auron?"

"Hm?" said Auron, who hadn't really been listening. "Oh – yes." He forced himself to turn his attention to the matter properly, and oddly enough, found himself grinning. "Now you say so – yeah, it is, actually."

"What?" said Jecht suspiciously. "Why?"

"White magic tends to symbolise purity," Auron informed him, getting into his stride. "It doesn't seem very suited to you."

"I wouldn't have put it so bluntly," Braska added, "but that's the gist of it, yes."

"Oh, right," said Jecht, more curious than offended. They were coming into the village now; he exchanged friendly nods with a passing member of the blitzball team. "I get it. But Braska, you can do both types, right? So what does that say about you?"

"Not a lot," said Braska. "I was just a boy when I learnt the white spells – that's how it tends to work among novice priests, especially those who have the summoner's talent. I didn't start tackling black magic until I returned from Home – we thought it would be useful if I knew how to defend myself, given the circumstances." He considered. "But actually, I feel more affinity with the black spells these days. That's what comes of growing older, I suppose; it's a fairly common transition, they say."

Jecht nodded thoughtfully. "Guess you're the least pure out of all of us then, Auron," he said, smirking. "Can't manage one little white spell, huh?"

Auron scowled, his mood immediately souring again. Jecht didn't know it, but he had touched a nerve: indeed, Yevon had decreed that Auron wasn't pure at all. That, in essence, was why he had lost his position in the warrior monk corps.

They arrived at the lodge and ordered some dinner; while they ate, Braska continued to reminisce about his experiences as a junior mage. "White magic does get tiring, doesn't it, Jecht?" he said sympathetically, as Jecht gave another enormous yawn and then immediately sat up straight, waving his hand to protest that he was very much awake. "Still, it's more pleasant than learning the black spells. My first was fire – once I eventually managed it, I felt awful for days. You were getting there this morning, Auron, with that headache."

"I don't think that was connected, sir," Auron tried to explain again.

"Oh, I'm sure it was," Braska said mildly. "They get easier as one goes on, though – once I had fire, water was much less of a struggle. A day in bed and I was right as rain – if you'll excuse the pun."

Auron frowned and looked down at his dish. Two days ago, he thought, Braska had been utterly disconsolate; now he was content enough to be making jokes – terrible ones, but undeniably jokes nonetheless. Besaid really did seem to be doing him good, as difficult as Auron found that to understand.

"Sounds like learning magic would be a lot of trouble," he said to distract himself. "I don't see much benefit over just fighting with a sword."

"Oh, you wouldn't say that if you saw me with one," said Braska. "I'm sure I could barely lift the thing – your sword probably weighs about as much as I do."

Auron hummed in agreement, looking down at Braska's half-eaten dinner.

"Uh, you're both wrong," said Jecht suddenly, drawing himself up from where he had been sitting in a somewhat slumped position. "Obviously the best thing is to do the sword stuff and the magic stuff together, right? Then you could take on anythin'. I guess not many people go for the combo, huh? Just wait and see – now that I can do magic, I'm gonna be the best fighter in Spira. Not even sure why you're still here, Auron – I can take out all the fiends myself."

"I'll leave you to it, then," said Auron sarcastically. "If you

don't fall asleep halfway through."

"What?" Jecht protested, failing to stifle another yawn.

Braska chuckled. "Auron last night, and now you. Perhaps you should go to bed?"

Shaking his head vigorously, Jecht replied, "Nah, I'm fine. We gonna take Yuna's sphere?"

Auron went to find the sphere recorder and reluctantly rejoined the others as Braska provided an account of his tour of Besaid, contributing to the discussion only when Braska prompted him. Concentrating very hard on remaining alert, Jecht told her about his experience learning magic as well, and they were running out of space on the sphere before Auron could be persuaded to add anything of substance, which suited him well enough. After the recorder was switched off, Jecht crossed his arms over the table and leant forward to rest his head against them.

Braska gave him a little poke to the elbow. "You really should go to bed, Jecht," he suggested.

"Not tired," Jecht mumbled, making no effort to raise his head.

Sighing, Braska tried a different tactic. "Well," he said, "I think Auron and I shall go, shan't we, Auron? And you can follow if you like. No obligation." He stood and raised his eyebrows at Auron, and the two of them headed into the dormitory and began to make their preparations; as expected, Jecht

turned up a minute or so later, making straight for his bed without even bothering to remove his armour.

"Goodnight then, Jecht," said Braska, somewhat smugly.

"Yeah, I guess," Jecht muttered. "Night, Braska." He waved a hand loosely in Auron's direction. "Night, asshole."

"Likewise," Auron muttered back.

Chapter **23**

Weapon Upgrade

Everyone felt mostly refreshed the next morning: Braska was almost as cheerful as he had been on their first day on the island, and walked out to the beach in the morning with Jecht, leaving Auron behind at the lodge to fulfil his promise to stay out of the heat. After they arrived at the shore, Braska made himself comfortable on the sand while Jecht eagerly headed into the water for another swim. He hoped it wouldn't be his last opportunity while they were on the island; he knew the three of them were due to leave the next morning, and wondered if he might sneak in a few last minutes in the water between breakfast and the ship's departure.

Later, the blitzball team turned up: they were due to practise on the beach. They didn't make much progress to begin with, being distracted by the sight of Jecht's excellent swimming, as well as the fact that Braska was watching them. Most of them hadn't yet had the opportunity to see the summoner

close up, and they were awkward and reserved in his presence to start with, but after a while one of the bolder players decided to approach him.

"Hey, uh," he said, "just wanted to say I really appreciate what you're doin' for Spira, ya? Sir Jecht told us all about the pilgrimage the other day – it sounds real tough."

Braska raised his eyebrows and sat up – he had been reclining in what he acknowledged was a rather undignified position. "That's terribly kind," he said. "You're right, it can be very hard – but this is what I must do."

"Yeah, I guess," said the young man.

Braska expected him either to continue the conversation or to go back to his teammates, but he did neither; he just stood there, fidgeting a little. "Can I help you?" Braska prompted him.

"Uh," said the blitzballer again, "nah, it's … it's nothin'."

"Are you sure?" said Braska.

"Well," said the young man hesitantly, "I, um, actually wondered if I could maybe shake your hand."

Masterfully suppressing a chuckle, Braska said, "Of course."

The blitzball player grasped his extended hand slowly to begin with, and then very firmly, as if to confirm he and Braska were really making contact; then he mumbled, "Thanks," and hurried back to his teammates.

That was the start of a steady stream of young men and boys making their way over to Braska to exchange handshakes with him. He might have started to wonder if they were doing it to poke fun at him or at each other, were it not for the clearly heartfelt comments about what a wonderful thing he was doing for the good of the Spiran people; they came even from the youngest members of the group, who he suspected didn't really know what the summoner's pilgrimage entailed at all. By the time the queue waned, Jecht had emerged from the sea and was watching with a grin on his face; once Braska was no longer exchanging pleasantries with the blitzballers, he sauntered over to him, aware that everyone was staring at them both.

"Popular, huh?" he said, quietly enough that their audience couldn't hear. "You should've seen them a couple days ago, when I was tellin' 'em about the pilgrimage – they were talkin' about you like you were some kinda god. I thought I'd be the one that made 'em starstruck, but seems like they're just really into summoners."

"Of course they are," said Braska. "What I'm doing means a lot to them."

"Not gonna happen till it happens, though, is it?" said Jecht elliptically. "I mean, I'm actually teachin' them useful blitz stuff right now. They oughta appreciate that."

"I don't see you teaching them anything," Braska pointed out calmly.

Jecht scoffed, and immediately turned towards the blitzballers. "Hey, guys!" he called. "Want another trainin' session with the great Jecht?"

There were a few whoops and scattered applause in response; he turned back to Braska just long enough to convey a told-you-so expression before heading towards them to begin.

Braska watched as Jecht led the team through some exercises: he felt an unexpected swell of pride as he noted how enthusiastically everyone was following his lead. Of course, Jecht's blitzball talent had nothing to do with Braska, but it was gratifying to see his guardian being able to show off his skills. Between the two of them, he thought, they were certainly giving these young men a treat; it was probably one of the most exciting days many of them had ever had.

He leant back again and closed his eyes, smiling at the sounds of the waves and the blitzball players calling out to their teammates as they passed the ball around the group.

As time went on, Jecht found himself getting slightly frustrated: Braska's presence continued to be a distraction, especially for the younger boys, some of whom were going entire minutes without glancing at the ball once. "Come on, guys," he exhorted them, "pay attention! Not every day you get to train with someone like me, right?"

"Sorry," said one of the older players. "I just can't believe I got to shake Lord Braska's hand. And I'm kinda nervous with him over there watchin' us, ya." There was a general murmur

of assent from the rest of the group.

"Aw, come on," said Jecht, "Braska's just a guy."

"He's a summoner," Wakka piped up, "and he only needs one more æon to beat Sin! He could be the next High Summoner, and he's just sitting there on our beach!"

Jecht made a face; he wouldn't have minded the hero-worship of Braska, as misplaced as he thought it was, but when it distracted everyone from the game, that was crossing a line. He glanced over towards the summoner, wondering if there was something he might be able to do to convince the blitzballers that he was just another human being, or at least to force their attention back to their training. A moment later, he hit on something that would achieve both.

"Hold on a minute," he said, and jogged in Braska's direction.

"Yes?" said Braska when Jecht drew near.

"Fancy joinin' in with the practice?" Jecht suggested. "You wanna stay fit, right? Can't do that if you're lyin' around sunbathing all day."

Braska frowned. "I see your point," he said, "but I never learnt to swim."

"You never …" Jecht shook his head: the idea of a grown man being unable to swim was utterly bizarre to him, but this wasn't the time to dwell on it. "No problem," he said, "we ain't goin' in the water. I was gonna finish things off with a quick

game – you know how landball works, right? Me and the kids against you and the older guys: up for it?"

"I don't know," said Braska hesitantly. "It doesn't seem like the sort of thing a summoner should do –" And then he stopped abruptly. All the customs around how summoners were supposed to behave, he realised, came from the teachings. And beyond the core tenets surrounding the pilgrimage and the defeat of Sin, Braska despised the teachings: they had been nothing but a thorn in his side ever since he committed the apparently unconscionable crime of falling in love. If there was a way summoners ought to behave, he realised, his duty was to go against it, especially on Besaid, where everyone was so pious: with any luck, it might show the islanders the value of questioning what Yevon told them.

"All right," he said, "but I'm sure I won't be any good."

"You're kidding," said Jecht. "You saw the rest of 'em, right? You'll be fine, trust me." He clasped his hands together in glee and led Braska back to the others.

After a quick reminder of the rules for Braska's benefit, Jecht divided the players into teams as he had suggested: Braska with the members of the blitzball team, and the rest of the kids with him. It seemed to work as a way of getting everyone to concentrate on the game: most of them were still awestruck by Braska's presence, but at least he was part of the action now, which gave them a reason to remain aware of what they were doing. The problem, Jecht discovered, was

that when Braska had possession of the ball, none of the younger boys seemed willing to tackle him.

"Go on, Chappu!" he exhorted as the latter drew close to Braska, but at the last moment, Chappu covered his face with his hands and shook his head, jogging off in the other direction.

Jecht was too far away from Braska to have a chance of intervening himself, and with little opposition, Braska was now nearing the line in the sand Jecht had designated a goal. In an attempt to dispel the slight awkwardness caused by the fact that nobody from his own team was daring to go near the area, Jecht found himself striking up a commentary. "The summoner has the ball!" he exclaimed, cupping his hands over his mouth to give the impression his words were coming through a loudspeaker. "And he's headin' for the goal – is he gonna make it – he has a clear shot! With only the keeper to beat, he's gettin' ready to shoot – he shoots – and it's gone in! Goal to Braska!"

The goalkeeper had made an especially lacklustre attempt at defending; Braska turned around, grinning widely, and raised both hands to exchange hi-fives with his teammates, who hesitated but then raised their hands to his with enthusiasm. Jecht decided to call it a day there: some of the younger boys were clearly flagging, and with everyone still so distracted by Braska it was going to be impossible to get them to concentrate.

"Right, guys, let's wrap up," he said. "We'll leave you guys

to it, OK?"

As the more senior members of the team made chaotic attempts at corralling everyone, Braska made his way over to Jecht, still smiling. "Thank you, Jecht," he said. "That was a lot of fun."

"You did pretty good," said Jecht, looking back at him. There was a light in Braska's eyes that he didn't think he'd ever seen there before; Braska somehow seemed much younger than usual. Perhaps this was the way he had been before his wife's death, Jecht reflected; if so, it was suddenly much easier to understand why Auron was attracted to him. He found himself wishing Auron was here to see this, in fact: partly so he could be smug about the fact that he had apparently been much more successful in making Braska happy than Auron ever seemed to be, but partly just so Auron could have the pleasure of seeing Braska in this state of rare vivacity. Jecht knew it would mean a lot to him.

"Uh, Sir Jecht?" said a young voice from behind. "I don't wanna interrupt, but before you go, there's something I gotta show you."

It was Chappu, who still seemed a bit embarrassed by his proximity to Braska: he was looking down at the sand, trying to minimise his chance of catching the summoner's eye.

"Yeah?" said Jecht. "What is it, kid?"

"It's in the caves over by the village," Chappu explained. "Me and Wakka were gonna show you, but the team's doing

some more practice, ya." He glanced briefly at Braska. "Um, if this isn't a good time –"

"You can go, Jecht," said Braska pleasantly. "You don't have to mind me."

"You sure?" said Jecht. "What if you wanna go back to the village later? Auron'll be mad at me if I leave you to get through those fiends by yourself."

Braska raised his eyebrows a little. "I hardly think the fiends here are a problem," he reminded Jecht. "I can see most of them off just by knocking them on the head – they'll be no trouble at all with magic."

"Yeah," said Jecht, "but Auron still won't like it."

"I'd no idea you were so afraid of Auron," said Braska.

Jecht scowled. "You know I ain't *afraid* of him. Yeah, fine – let's go, Chappu."

He was slightly annoyed as he followed Chappu onto the path that led away from the beach, but forced himself to put it aside: the complexities of his relationship with his companions weren't Chappu's fault. After seeing off a couple of fiends with quick swordstrokes, he felt much happier: Chappu's amazement at his fighting prowess made sure of that.

"You really are the best," said Chappu as he led the way to the caves. "Pro blitzer, and all those cool scars, and you fight like that too! Me and Wakka made the right decision. I'm gonna tell him that when I see him."

"What d'you mean by that?" Jecht asked.

Chappu shook his head. "You'll see in a minute. It's not far now."

Indeed, they arrived at the mouth of the cave shortly afterwards; Chappu made his way in through a hole in the rock that was barely perceptible, and motioned for Jecht to join him. Jecht climbed in and followed Chappu through the dark passages inside, finding himself having to stoop to ensure he didn't hit his head against the cave ceiling. Chappu, who was small enough not to need to do anything of the kind, raced ahead, disappearing into the darkness.

"Hey, wait up," Jecht complained. "I'm gonna get lost in here. Which way'd you go?"

Chappu's voice floated back to him. "This way. Come on!"

Groaning and massaging his neck, which was starting to get very stiff, Jecht stumbled forward in what he hoped was the right direction. He could still hear the sound of Chappu's small footsteps ahead of him, at least, which he assumed was a good sign. Eventually, he emerged into a larger chamber, and was relieved to find his guide waiting for him.

"What took you?" said Chappu.

Jecht carefully drew himself up to his full height; the ceiling in the chamber was mercifully high enough to allow it. "Not enough room back there," he explained. "I can't go fast in here like you can, Chappu – I'm too tall."

"Oh, right," said Chappu unsympathetically. "Well, anyway, here it is! Pretty cool, right?"

Jecht was about to respond that he didn't know what Chappu was referring to, but then, following the line of the boy's outstretched arm, he eventually perceived a mound of some kind in the darkness. Raising a hand to rub his neck again, he stepped forward to take a closer look.

It was a pile of what appeared to be personal belongings: some clothing and fabrics, trinkets, small items of furniture, and a few simple pieces of jewellery. The variety and the quantity of items were much more impressive than the items themselves, most of which were quite plain. There was, however, one exception: a large, dark sword, leaning against the cave wall, a foot-long chain hanging from a ring attached to the top of its blade.

"Yeah, this is kinda cool," he admitted. "But why're you showin' it to me? You and Wakka didn't steal this stuff, did ya?"

"No!" Chappu protested. "Well … kinda. But it should've been ours anyway. It belonged to our parents."

Jecht remembered what he had learnt during the first blitzball practice: a lot of the players were orphans. "Sin got 'em, right?" he said quietly.

"Yeah," said Chappu, seeming unbothered. "The synod were gonna sell all their stuff. They said they needed the money to rebuild the village. But they wouldn't've got much for it either way."

"Might've for the sword," Jecht pointed out.

"I guess," said Chappu. "Anyway, me and Wakka took as much as we could and hid it here. We didn't want them just selling it all to tourists – it doesn't mean anything to 'em, ya?"

Jecht nodded. "Sure. I get it. How'd you get it all in here without anyone noticing?"

"Just a bit at a time," said Chappu. "It was all mixed in with other people's stuff at the temple, and they were startin' to sell some of it anyway, so no-one realised there was anything going missing. We had to keep sneaking into the temple to get it. Wakka was worried about offending Yevon, but ..." He shrugged. "I convinced him Mom and Dad's stuff was more important. He's more religious than I am, anyway."

"You know what, that's kinda impressive," said Jecht. "Good goin', Chappu."

Chappu beamed at him, and then made his way over to the pile, picked through it carefully, and eventually clasped both his hands around the hilt of the sword at the back: visibly straining with effort, he wrenched it forward and dragged it back towards Jecht.

"Wanna see?" he said.

Jecht took the sword and inspected the blade: surprisingly, it was decorated with bright red patterns that resembled dolphins. He turned it over carefully. "Whoa, this is pretty metal, Chappu," he said. "Uh, I mean, it's real badass. Never seen a sword like it before." Even Auron's weapon wasn't as cool as this one, he thought. "Was it your dad's?"

Chappu nodded. "He was a Crusader. Well, Wakka says he wasn't," he added with a slight frown, "but I'm pretty sure he was. It's awesome, right?"

"Yeah, definitely," said Jecht, still staring at the blade.

"We wanna give it to you," said Chappu.

Jecht almost dropped the sword. "Huh?!" he exclaimed. "No way – I can't take this!" The thought that in Zanarkand he would have accepted such a gift with no hesitation niggled briefly at the back of his mind. "It's probably worth tons," he said. "And it means something to you guys, right?"

"Yeah," Chappu admitted, "but you'll put it to good use, ya? If you're using it to defend Lord Braska?" He dropped into a brief Yevonite bow. "Wakka's still feeling guilty about taking all this stuff from the temple – and I kind of am too. But if Dad's sword gets used on a summoner's pilgrimage, we think that'll make up for it."

"Oh," said Jecht. "I guess. Summoners are really important to you guys, huh?"

"Well, yeah," said Chappu, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Looking back down at the sword, Jecht shook his head thoughtfully. "I dunno," he said. "It's real cool an' all – but big swords like this are Auron's kind of thing."

"But –" Chappu frowned a little. "I know Sir Auron must be really good at fighting and stuff, but … he's not nice like

you are. I told you he yelled at me the other day, right? And yesterday, he made Amna cry. Jassu told me."

Jecht mirrored Chappu's frown, confused by this new information and by the names he didn't recognise. "Wait, what?" he said. "Auron made someone cry? Seriously?" It seemed unlikely to him that Auron would deliberately drive someone to tears: he was normally fairly polite to everyone except Jecht himself. "Who's Amna?" he added.

"Jassu's big sister," said Chappu impatiently, and Jecht just about succeeded in remembering that Jassu was one of the younger children who tagged along with the blitzball players. That didn't clarify much, but Chappu was already speaking again before Jecht could ask for more information.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter," the boy said. "The point is, me and Wakka'd be real happy if you take Dad's sword, right? And go all the way to Zanarkand and use it to fight Sin. We know you can do it."

"Course I can do it," said Jecht. He ran his hands carefully over the side of the blade. "Thanks, Chappu. I won't let you guys down."

They made their way out of the cave: Jecht went first this time, with Chappu giving directions from behind. Once Jecht emerged into the sunlight, he could see the sword better: it looked as if it would be a lot more effective than the one he had acquired in Bevelle. His new weapon would improve his combat skills even more than the time spells already had; the

fiends wouldn't know what had hit them.

He tossed the hilt of the sword from one hand to the other, getting acquainted with its weight.

"You're leaving on the boat tomorrow morning, right?" said Chappu. "Gonna say goodbye to us all before then?"

"Sure," said Jecht. "You'll all be there to see us off, yeah?"

"You can count on it," said Chappu, and he scampered back off towards the beach before Jecht had a chance to thank him for the sword again.

Walking into the village, Jecht knew exactly what he was going to do next: he was going to find Auron, show him the sword, and make him feel very jealous indeed. He grinned at the thought of it. As he headed towards the Crusaders' Lodge, he exchanged greetings with a few of the people he had met over the last couple of days. None of them remarked on his new weapon, which seemed strange; as far as Jecht was concerned, it should have been very obvious that he had acquired something that was going to revolutionise his guardianship skills.

He found Auron sitting at the table in the reception area of the lodge, sipping some cold water. "Hey," said Jecht cheerfully. "How's it going?"

Auron raised an eyebrow at Jecht's friendliness. "Fine," he said. "I've just been making sure everything's in order before we leave in the morning. How's Braska doing?"

"He's great," said Jecht truthfully. "Hey, Auron, what's this about you makin' girls cry, huh?"

"What?" said Auron, before remembering the incident at the construction site and its aftermath. "Oh. I didn't mean to upset them – you know I wasn't feeling well. I shouldn't have lost my temper, but they weren't behaving that respectably, either."

"Uh huh?" said Jecht with interest – women behaving disrespectably was one of his many areas of expertise. "What were they doing?"

Auron frowned, deep lines forming between his eyebrows, and eventually replied, "They were flirting with me."

Jecht burst out laughing. "How ghastly," he said, in a terrible imitation of Auron's way of speaking that in fact sounded much more like Braska. "You know, Auron, if you're so determined to not let anyone know you're gay, maybe you should go along with it, right? What's the harm?"

"Your Zanarkand clearly doesn't have a tradition of arranged marriages," said Auron, folding his arms.

Jecht let out a little burble of laughter, not quite sure what Auron was insinuating, and decided he couldn't put off talking about his new sword any longer. "Anyway," he said, "noticed anythin' different about me?"

Auron made a great show of looking Jecht over, casting his eyes all over his face and arms before looking straight at the sword and letting his gaze flicker from the hilt to the point of the blade and back again several times; then he made eye contact with Jecht again, and said as nonchalantly as he could,

"Can't say I have."

"Ha, good one!" said Jecht, slapping Auron on the shoulder; Auron brushed his hand away with a little snort of amusement. "Don't you wanna know where I got it?" Jecht added.

"I must admit I'm curious," said Auron. "What was a weapon like that doing here? It looks fairly decent."

It was Jecht's turn to snort. "Don't think much of Besaid, do ya?" he said, before telling the story of how he had acquired the sword. To his surprise, Auron was quite unbothered by it.

"Passing on weapons is quite common among Yevonites," he explained. "They're usually worth a lot of money, you know. People don't want them lying around rusting."

"Makes sense," said Jecht. He held the hilt of the sword out towards Auron. "So – you're the expert, right? Any good?"

Auron took the sword carefully, scraping his chair back so there was room to hoist it onto his lap. He ran his fingers over the flat of the blade, then held the sword gently in both hands and rotated it slowly one way and another, checking for imperfections on its surface. Then he stood, walked away from the table, and raised the sword over his shoulder, and then drew it down swiftly with both hands, before moving through a succession of other positions, shifting from each to the next with increasing rapidity.

Jecht watched him, mesmerised. In battle there was always an element of randomness that the fiends added to the equation: there, Auron was compelled to attack in whatever

way would dispatch them most quickly, as were they all. But witnessing this display gave Jecht a sense of the sort of training Auron had undergone as part of the warrior monk corps. It wouldn't have been too unlike professional blitzball, he realised: practising forms and manœuvres over and over again until one could execute them perfectly, without even thinking, ready for any eventuality.

At last, Auron's routine ended; he lowered the sword and made his way back towards Jecht, using his free hand to tuck some loose strands of hair behind his ear as he did so. "It'll do," he said, handing the sword over.

"Better than yours, huh?" said Jecht, trying to forget just how captivating he had found the display.

Auron laughed humourlessly. "Hardly." He sat down, and then immediately sprang up again, adding, "Hold on."

Jecht waited while Auron headed into the dormitory; moments later, he was back, holding the jug that he usually wore attached to his belt. He set it on the table, took the sword from Jecht again, and said, "There's a ritual we use for dedicating weapons. They say it's from ancient Zanarkand."

He took out his handkerchief, uncorked the jug, and poured some of its contents onto the cloth. A strong smell of spirits suddenly filled the air; Jecht flinched a little.

Auron looked up at him, and muttered, "Sorry. I should have –"

"Nah, it's OK," said Jecht, waving a hand dismissively.

"Should've expected it. I was always more of a beer guy, anyway. So this is why you carry that with you, huh?"

"One of the reasons," said Auron. "Comes in handy when I'm being driven to drink by your behaviour, too."

He had said it with a straight face; Jecht guffawed nonetheless, knowing it was a joke. Somehow, he realised, Auron had succeeded in making a few of them over the last couple of minutes. He had a dry, rather subtle sense of humour; Jecht was beginning to wonder if it was something he had previously overlooked.

He leant forward to watch as Auron carefully rubbed his handkerchief over the blade, his eyes narrowed in concentration. Jecht massaged the back of his own neck with both hands. He was almost disappointed to have to admit it to himself, but there was something extraordinarily attractive about Auron when he dedicated himself to a task like this.

Auron sketched out a few Yevonite symbols on the blade with his fingers, murmured a quick, perfunctory prayer, and then frowned. "We're supposed to take it to the temple to have it blessed," he said, "but …"

Jecht straightened up, trying to cast his thoughts aside. "Yeah, better not," he said. "Chappu and Wakka took it without the priests knowin' – they might remember. Might want it back."

Auron nodded with relief. "Fair enough. That's it, then." He handed the sword back to Jecht. "Enjoy."

Their hands brushed briefly as Jecht took the sword; he shivered a little, and then cursed himself internally. His attraction to Auron was normally something he found easy enough to conceal, even to ignore; but sometimes there were these moments where Auron acted in a certain way and it suddenly became almost overwhelming. Jecht was a grown adult – he had bedded more people than Auron could probably ever have imagined possible – and yet –

"Wanna help me break it in?" he found himself saying.

Auron raised his eyebrows. "On these fiends? Hardly worth it. Save it for something slightly challenging."

"No," said Jecht, "I meant, like, me and you."

"Oh!" said Auron. He couldn't deny that the idea was appealing; he hadn't had a proper fight for days, not since the ochu in the Kilika jungle. Even taking on the Besaid fiends with his bare hands had turned out to be very straightforward. Getting to fight another human would be something entirely different, and he couldn't deny that Jecht's skills were high enough now for him to pose something of a challenge.

"Sounds good," he concluded, before heading back into the dormitory again to collect his gauntlet and armguard.

They headed out of the village towards the start of the path that led to the beach. Auron was so keen for a fight that he was almost running. The thought briefly occurred to him that he had broken his own rule about going outside during the daytime, but it was getting towards evening anyway: it was

still uncomfortably hot, but worth the trouble, he decided.

They drew their swords and began to circle each other. After a few moments, Jecht raised his left hand, holding it a foot or so in front of his face.

"No magic!" Auron barked, recognising the gesture. "You're already faster than me – let's keep this fair."

Jecht scowled, lowered his hand, and tossed the hilt of his sword into it instead.

"And you shouldn't be doing that, either," Auron pointed out. "If you keep waving it around like that, you're going to take someone's eye out. Heavy swords should be held with both hands – you'll never get enough power otherwise. See how there's room on the hilt to hold it two-handed, like I'm doing –"

He was cut off: Jecht lunged forward and managed to land a blow against Auron's cuirass, sending him staggering backwards.

"You're so fuckin' irritating," said Jecht. "Would you just give it a rest for one second?"

Auron scowled, and thrust his own weapon in Jecht's direction; Jecht tried to twist out of the way, but the flat of Auron's blade made contact with his exposed right shoulder nonetheless, and he yowled in surprise.

"What's that?" said Auron, feigning concern. "Are you hurt? Surely you don't want to stop already?"

"Fuck you," Jecht grunted, charging towards Auron again.

The fight was more vicious after that than either of them had anticipated. Infuriated by Auron's supercilious behaviour and most of all by his own inability not to continue finding him extremely alluring nonetheless, Jecht barely held himself back, channelling his frustration into a sequence of rather erratic but usually effective blows. Auron responded in kind; he hadn't expected Jecht to go all out like this, but could hardly be blamed for defending himself, he thought.

Before too long, each had succeeded in injuring the other in several places; it was nothing a few potions wouldn't fix, but both of them were finding it increasingly difficult to stay on their feet. Even so, Auron persisted in giving Jecht the occasional piece of advice on improving his fighting technique, if only as a way of winding him up and making it easier to catch him off guard. With the new sword, Jecht was a good match for Auron: he adhered to none of the usual principles of swordwork, but that just meant it was harder to predict his movements. Speed and surprise were still Jecht's two main advantages, and the upgrade to his weapon meant he was now a formidable opponent.

Jecht had sustained a few blows to the chest that meant he was beginning to find the act of breathing somewhat painful, but he kept going, distracting himself from his discomfort by focusing on how he might land a hit. Lashing out to the side, he succeeded in grazing one of Auron's arms with his blade; then, while Auron groaned and instinctively pressed his hand

to the new wound, Jecht made for him again, reaching out with his free hand and leaning against his shoulder.

Auron was weakened enough by this point to succumb to the pressure; he sank first onto his knees and then backwards, ending up lying on his back on the dusty ground. His sword slipped out of his hand at the same time; he was all but defenceless. Grinning in spite of himself, Jecht leapt forward to straddle him on his hands and knees, dropping his own sword in the process.

"Give up?" he wheezed.

Auron shook his head as vehemently as he was able. "Never," he said through gritted teeth. "Not until you knock me out."

Jecht narrowed his eyes, trying to decide whether that was something he might be able to achieve; he cast his gaze over Auron's face, streaked with intermingled blood and sweat, and then a very different thought suddenly occurred to him. Throughout the fight, he had continued to find Auron unreasonably attractive; the exercise had what he considered an obvious erotic charge, which, he reasoned, was surely clear to Auron as well. And now that Auron was pinned to the ground beneath him, his face mere inches from Jecht's own, his brown eyes blinking defiantly – it wasn't as if Jecht was about to do anything without Auron's consent, of course. But, he wondered, if he leant in just a little closer, perhaps Auron would get the message, and if Auron was turned on

just a fraction of the amount that Jecht was, maybe he would respond in a way that would signal that he wanted the same thing Jecht did.

He shuffled in place, preparing himself to bend in closer towards Auron's face – and then before he could initiate anything, Auron took advantage of Jecht's momentary hesitation to seize him by both shoulders, twist him sideways, and roll the two of them across the ground until their positions were reversed, with Jecht lying on his back and Auron kneeling above him.

"Ha!" he said. "Let your guard down, did you? That's cost you the fight!"

Groaning, Jecht grabbed Auron's shoulders in return and tried to force him away, but it was no use. Despite Jecht's improved swordwork, Auron was still stronger than him, and he clearly wasn't going to allow Jecht to take back control. After a few seconds of straining against Auron's immovable weight, Jecht let go, flinging his arms to the sides with a grimace: almost every move he made caused him to feel incredibly sore by this point.

"Ugh, fine," he rasped. "I'm out, then, I guess."

"Do you yield?" Auron demanded, insistent on using the proper vocabulary.

"Sure, whatever," said Jecht; as soon as he did so, Auron let go of him and rolled to the side so he was lying on his back next to Jecht, letting out a triumphant laugh that quickly turned into

a groan of pain. Now that the fight was over, it was much more difficult to ignore the injuries they had both sustained.

"Potion?" said Auron, holding out a hand expectantly.

Jecht turned his head to look at him. "Uh … didn't you bring 'em?"

Auron was so scandalised that he sat bolt upright; his head swam for several seconds, and then, when he felt able to speak, he said, "No, I didn't. Do you mean to say you neglected –"

"Hey, you're the one that went to get stuff before we came out!" Jecht protested. "Thought you'd've picked some up. I was just comin' back from blitz practice – why would I have had 'em?"

"But you suggested the fight!" said Auron. "That's the rule – the person who initiates it has to be in charge of the healing supplies. It was your responsibility."

"I didn't know that," Jecht insisted.

Auron groaned again, pressing both hands against his face; Jecht reached out to punch him lightly on the knee. "Hey, get over it!" he wheezed. "Man up. Just a few scratches, huh?"

"You don't look so good yourself," Auron pointed out.

"Ah, I'm fine," Jecht lied, before struggling to his feet, retrieving his sword from the ground, and leaning heavily on it while he used his free hand to apply some pressure to the bottom of his ribcage, which was now quite excruciatingly painful.

"We'd better get back to the lodge," said Auron. "Potions won't work if we leave it too long." On his knees, he made his way over to where his own sword lay and tried to use it to lever himself into a standing position, without much success.

"Help me up?" he grunted.

Jecht rolled his eyes, but limped in Auron's direction and extended an arm towards him; soon enough, the two of them were standing together, both leaning on their swords and on each other, panting from the effort.

"I could cast Haste on us," Jecht suggested, "and then we might get there quicker …"

Despite everything, Auron laughed. "That's not a good idea," he said. "It'd just be chaotic – we wouldn't be able to stay standing."

With no other option, the two of them set off slowly towards the village, saying no more but letting out a few gasps of pain as they went. Still clinging to each other, they had made very little progress by the time the sound of someone running towards them from behind became audible.

It was Braska. On his way back from the beach at last, he had spotted his guardians from afar, slowly realised there was something odd about the way they were walking, and then, as he came closer, he had finally seen that they were both wounded. After that, he had broken into a run, hoisting his robe up with one hand as he tried to reach them as quickly as possible.

"What happened?" he demanded once he was within speaking distance. "You both look awful."

"Fighting," said Auron; he felt too lightheaded to explain further.

Braska frowned, still not understanding, but decided it would be prudent to heal his guardians first and ask questions later. Auron stepped back and let him see to Jecht first, stumbling back onto the ground and whimpering a little to himself as he did so. He watched as Braska cast white magic over Jecht's injuries and as the two of them quietly spoke to each other; he was in too much discomfort to focus on what they were saying. Eventually, Jecht nodded and started continuing the walk back to the village at a much more sprightly pace; Braska turned immediately to Auron and squatted down in front of him.

"I'm so sorry to have kept you," he said while he began to apply the same healing magic to Auron. Auron flinched as Braska made contact with each of the gashes in his arms and face, but very soon they were closed over with only a little dried blood remaining to indicate where his skin had been broken. The bruises that were beginning to form vanished too; and, most significantly, Auron experienced the gradual sensation of the pain from his injuries ebbing away until he felt totally normal.

"Thanks," he said, getting to his feet once again.

"It's a good thing I found you both," said Braska seriously.

"If you'd had to get all the way to the lodge, I think you might have been too late for potions. What in all the fayth's names were you doing?"

"Jecht's got a new sword," Auron explained. "We thought we'd have a go at breaking it in."

Braska sighed deeply; Auron and Jecht's fascination with their swords was something he would never understand. "You did quite some damage to him," he pointed out. "I think one of his ribs was broken."

"Not my fault he refuses to wear chest armour," said Auron. "And he didn't exactly hold back either. I wasn't expecting it to get that intense, but he really went for me."

"And yet neither of you brought potions," said Braska. "I just can't believe it. What were you thinking?"

"That was a misunderstanding," said Auron.

"Honestly," said Braska, shaking his head, "I despair. I know Jecht can be reckless, but I expected better from you, Auron."

"I can be reckless too, sir," Auron argued gently. "I know – I should have thought first. I was just so keen for a good fight – something other than all these one-hit fiends. It's been a long time."

Braska frowned, but then said, "Well. As long as you're all right, I suppose."

"I am, sir, thanks to you," said Auron.

They walked back to the lodge in silence. Jecht had already gone for a quick bath by the time they got in; once he had emerged, Auron did the same. They were both fully healed, although there was a little residual stiffness in their muscles that hinted that things could have been worse if they had left it any longer before being treated.

"It was a good fight, you know," Auron remarked to Jecht afterwards. "You're really not bad in combat these days."

"Still didn't beat you, though," Jecht pointed out.

"I've been doing this nearly twenty years," said Auron. "Don't take it personally."

Jecht grinned, knowing this was the closest thing to praise he was likely to get from Auron. He felt a little less distracted by Auron's attractiveness now, too; the fight had allowed him to defuse his frustration, and now he was able to ignore such thoughts and take a more rational view of his fellow guardian again.

They were served dinner shortly afterwards; to Auron's amazement, Braska ate nearly everything in his bowl unprompted. Before he could spend much time dwelling on it, a young boy entered the ledge, bowed deeply, and said, "I don't mean to interrupt, sirs, but the synod sent me."

"Yes?" said Braska.

"We sing on the beach once a week," the boy explained. "It's tonight – they thought you might like to join us? This is your last evening on the island, right?"

"That sounds wonderful," said Braska. "What an honour – we'll be right there."

The boy dashed out to inform the synod of their guests' acceptance, while Braska stood and made his preparations to leave. Auron folded his arms and sighed.

"What's this?" said Jecht, amused by Auron's reaction.

"Singing," said Auron irritably. "It's a custom in some of the more rural parts of Spira – they don't have much else to do, I suppose."

"Not into it?" Jecht hazarded.

"Not really my thing," said Auron. He had had some basic instruction in the corps, when it had become obvious he was going to rise to officer level; in the last few years of his service, he had been required to lead prayers at the barracks occasionally, and that had usually involved getting the hymns started. It hadn't been his favourite part of the task: his singing voice was low and raspy, and he had always suspected that it betrayed his rustic origins.

"Braska probably enjoys it, though," he added after a moment's thought. "Lots of the well-off Bevelle families have their children join choirs – I daresay he was in one when he was a boy."

"Cute," said Jecht, smirking.

When they were all ready to go, they headed back towards the beach again, Auron and Jecht engaging in unspoken competition to be the first to strike down any fiends that got in their

way. Contests of the sort based on speed were always likely to have a foregone conclusion, and Auron was unsurprised to find that by the time they reached their destination, Jecht had dispatched twice as many fiends as he had. He didn't mind too much: he was more preoccupied by the fact that he would have to get close to the sea again. As Jecht bounded onto the sand to greet the villagers, Auron felt his jaw tense; he hesitated at the edge of the path.

"Oh," said Braska, looking back at him. "I'm sorry, Auron – I should have thought –"

He clearly hadn't thought, but Auron was used to Braska's rather selective expressions of concern for others. "We'll be at sea all day tomorrow anyway," he said. "I need to get used to it. It's fine – I'll just keep my back to the water."

He walked stiffly onto the sand, joining the circle of islanders and sitting down next to Jecht, who had inserted himself into the group next to a few of the blitzballers. Braska sat down on Auron's other side; he looked the other way and saw a familiar face.

"Ah," he said, "yes, you were the one instructing Jecht yesterday. I'm sorry, I don't quite –"

"Ginnem," she reminded him.

"Of course," said Braska, inclining his head apologetically.

"And look who it is," she said, turning her attention to Auron: "the one who got away!"

"I wasn't feeling well," he reminded her.

"Hm," said Ginnem. "You might have persevered a little."

Turning away from her, Braska raised his eyebrows at Auron in goodnatured surprise; it wasn't often that his guardian was accused of failing to apply himself. Auron shrugged and broke the eye contact. If Ginnem was going to insist on believing his failure to learn any spells had simply been the result of laziness, he thought, there was no point in continuing the conversation.

"Hey, G!" said Jecht brightly from his other side. "I been practising those time spells like you told me. I've basically mastered them now."

"Very good, Jecht," said Ginnem, before turning to a young girl on her other side. "Sir Jecht learnt the basic time spells in less than a day," she said.

"White magic, though," said the girl in a bored tone of voice, fidgeting with a long dark plait that she wore over her shoulder. "I keep telling you I'm no good."

"Nonsense," said Ginnem. "If Sir Jecht, of all people, takes to white magic so easily … just look at him."

The girl did so, raising her head to peer across at Jecht, and shrugged.

"Hey," said Jecht slowly, thinking back to the conversation about magical affinities he had had with Braska and Auron. *"Of all people*? What's that supposed to mean, huh?"

Auron smirked. "Exactly what you think."

"And Lord Braska's proficient in both types," said Ginnem, ignoring them both.

"But he's a summoner," said the girl. "A really good one." Her gaze darted towards Braska for a second, and then flitted away again, as if actually laying eyes upon him was too overwhelming. Braska made no particular response: he had become used to this sort of treatment by the younger islanders.

"Then he should be an inspiration to you," said Ginnem. She turned back towards Braska and his guardians, and added, "This is my young protégée, Lulu. She's terribly gifted in black magic, but she tends to find the other sort rather challenging, don't you, dear?"

"Nice to meet you," said Lulu sullenly, still not meeting Braska's eyes. She looked across the circle, made eye contact with someone on the other side, and then said, "Um, Chappu and Wakka are over there. Do you mind if I …"

"Go on, then," said Ginnem, and Lulu stood up, still clutching her long plait, and skipped over to the other side of the gathering to sit with her friends.

"Dear girl," Ginnem added with obvious affection. "Do excuse her – she's on the cusp of the teenage years, and life isn't exactly easy for the children here."

"I'm sure," said Braska.

A man from the synod stood to give a few announcements before the singing started: they included an acknowledgement to Braska and his guardians for having been kind enough to

join them for the occasion. Everyone bowed their heads while the synod representative intoned a brief prayer intended to give them luck for the onward journey, and then the islanders broke into polite applause for a minute or so as a way of showing their respect and admiration for the summoner. Braska acknowledged it by casting his eyes around the circle and nodding, giving the occasional little wave; he was trying very hard not to appear visibly overcome by this expression of support. Once the islanders' attention had moved on, he permitted himself a little gasp and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Only Auron and Ginnem noticed, being stationed on either side of him; each of them reached out to give him a brief, consoling pat on the knee, before meeting the eyes of the other and exchanging a look of slight confusion.

A small station had been erected to dispense drinks to the islanders: it had been made clear during the announcements that each person was only allowed one cup, although when Jecht visited to collect some for himself and his companions, he was discreetly informed that they could come back for as many refills as they liked. He returned to the circle with two servings of punch for Braska and Auron, and a cup of fruit juice for himself; it was so refreshing that he drained it almost immediately and then went back to the drinks station to take them up on their offer.

The singing started. Auron had been right about Braska: he had indeed been a member of one of Bevelle's many choirs

as a boy, and had even received instrumental tuition for two or three years at his parents' insistence. He had never been a natural musician, but the effects of his training were still clear in the quiet, melodious baritone with which he contributed to the proceedings. Auron, on the other hand, was just glad he could hold a tune.

Singing wasn't a huge part of Zanarkand culture: Jecht had never done anything of this sort before. His voice was worse than Auron's – he had no concept of how to blend with the other singers, and had a tendency to go off key towards the end of a phrase – but he made up for it with his enthusiasm, despite knowing almost none of the songs and singing along using nonsense syllables instead of the proper words.

As the evening wore on, the types of song started to vary. At first, all of them had been simple choruses, with everyone joining in and some of the more adventurous attendees providing improvised harmonies. Now, though, there were a few that included extended verse sections contributed by a soloist, which gave everyone else the chance to stretch their legs and converse quietly with the people around them before dropping back into the song to join in with the refrain. Jecht mostly spent these periods chatting to a couple of the blitzballers next to him; Auron sat quietly, too distracted by the number of conversations around him to succeed in joining any particular one of them. On his other side, Braska and Ginnem were engaged in their own muted discussion of life on Besaid and in Spira in

general. Ginnem touched Braska's knee several more times throughout it; he occasionally returned the gesture. Auron couldn't help noticing, and tried his very best not to react.

"Jealous?" said a smug voice on the other side of him.

Without even turning to look at Jecht, Auron reached out to shove him away; Jecht pushed back, and Auron found himself colliding with Braska's shoulder.

"Dear me," said Braska, more amused than put out. "Whatever are you two doing?" Without waiting for a response, he shook his head placidly and turned back to his conversation with Ginnem.

One of the synod members approached the group a little later to ask whether they would be interested in contributing solo performances to any of the upcoming songs. Auron categorically refused; Braska consented after a little encouragement, and somewhat hesitantly but entirely competently took the lead in a simple call and response number, which all the islanders were thrilled to participate in.

"I'm more familiar with Al Bhed songs these days," he murmured to Auron afterwards, "but I don't suppose those would go down well."

Jecht was keen to perform a solo himself, but the only Spiran song he really had any knowledge of was the Hymn of the Fayth, and even then he didn't know the words. Auron tried to give him a quick lesson, going through each line and getting Jecht to repeat them to him, but without any means of

writing them down, Jecht had no success in committing any of it to memory. Eventually, they came to an arrangement where Auron whispered the words of each line to Jecht right before he was due to sing them, and remarkably enough, it worked. Jecht's voice had hardly improved over the course of the evening, but the villagers were enamoured enough with him for it not to matter, and they all cheered and applauded once the Hymn was over, enthused by the chance to be led in the most sacred of songs by a summoner's guardian.

By the time the singing finished, it was dark; everyone was starting to get tired, and the islanders began to make their way back to their homes, travelling in groups to counter the already minimal threat from fiends. The blitzballers left, and Jecht and Auron chatted for a few minutes before falling silent. Braska and Ginnem's conversation continued, and with fewer people around them, both guardians found it easier to listen in.

"Well," they heard Ginnem say, "if things don't work out on the journey, I'm sure you'd be welcome if you returned here. You seem to get on very well with everyone." She paused. "And I certainly wouldn't mind getting to know you better."

Auron and Jecht immediately exchanged a shocked glance.

"Oh," said Braska, visibly flustered. "Well, I – that's very kind of you. I'm –" He gave his headdress a little tug of adjustment that it by no means needed. "A very generous invitation," he mumbled.

Ginnem smiled warily: Braska's reaction had been slightly

more equivocal than she had expected after the way their conversation had been going, but she supposed it was in his nature to be coy. "It's getting late," she said, in an attempt to defuse the awkwardness. "We should all turn in."

The four of them stood and headed back towards the village; Braska and Ginnem, walking in front, mostly managed to recover the ease of their previous conversation. Behind them, Jecht and Auron were mostly silent; Auron was still thinking about Ginnem's proposition, and Braska's reaction to it. On one of Braska's worse days, he knew, such a suggestion would have distressed him deeply: it would have made him think of Girl, and the fact that he had even got into a situation where a woman might say such a thing to him would have made him feel extremely guilty, as if he was disrespecting her memory. The fact that he had been only slightly agitated when it happened was a clear sign that he was doing well at the moment. Being on the island really had done him good; but thinking back to the way Braska had been after his encounter with the fayth, Auron knew it wouldn't last.

"This is me," said Ginnem, when they reached a fork in the path halfway across the village. "I don't suppose you'll come in for a nightcap?"

The invitation was quite clearly meant for Braska alone. "That's awfully kind," he said, "but we've an early start tomorrow. You'll come and see us off in the morning, won't you?"

"Of course," said Ginnem, managing not to let Braska's gen-

tle rejection affect her poise in any way. "You should get your rest. Well – goodnight, then."

She stepped forward to exchange kisses on both cheeks with Braska; Auron averted his eyes, and by the time he looked up again, Ginnem was on the way to her lodgings, almost impossible to distinguish in the darkness.

"You guys were gettin' on great," said Jecht smugly as the three of them continued on their way to the lodge. "You should've gone over to her place, Braska – nothin' wrong with having some fun. Me and Auron wouldn't have told anyone, right?" He looked at Auron and grinned; Auron glowered back at him.

Braska shook his head, but he was smiling to himself, and when they made their way into the lodge, the lighting made it obvious that his face was slightly flushed.

"It's late," he said, declining to say anything about Ginnem, "but I need to take Yuna's sphere. Excuse me for a moment." He went to find the sphere recorder and stationed himself at one of the tables while Jecht and Auron got ready for bed. Auron refused to make eye contact with Jecht while he did so, and lay down in his bed facing the wall.

Braska came in a few moments later. "Is Auron asleep?" he whispered to Jecht.

"No," said Jecht, loudly and cheerfully, "but he sure is pissed!"

Auron sat up. "I'm *not*," he said, very unconvincingly. "Do you need something, sir?"

"I was just wondering when the ferry's scheduled tomorrow," said Braska, slightly perplexed by Auron's demeanour. "Will we need to get up early?"

"The usual time should be fine," Auron informed him. "It's leaving mid-morning – there shouldn't be any particular need to rush."

"Wonderful," said Braska. "See you in the morning, then. Thank you both for a lovely evening."

"Night, guys," said Jecht; Auron grunted an unenthusiastic goodnight of his own, and turned to face the wall again.

Chapter **24**

Dear Ones

When Braska woke up, he noticed Jecht's bed was in a state: the blanket lay crumpled at one end, the pillow was folded over on itself at the other, and Jecht himself was nowhere to be seen. A little worried, Braska went for a quick bath, dressed, and then headed to the reception desk to make enquiries.

"Oh, nothin' to worry about, ya," said the Crusader on duty. "Sir Jecht just wanted to get another swim in before he left. Said he'd see you there."

Relieved, Braska headed back into the dormitory. Now that the mystery of Jecht's whereabouts had been solved, he found himself turning his attention to Auron, whose bed was in a similar mess. This time, though, Auron was lying there, asleep on top of the sheet, the blanket pushed down so far it covered nothing higher than his ankles.

Braska approached. Auron was lying on his back, his arms

flung to the sides; he had removed the vest that he normally wore to bed. His face and chest were glistening with sweat, as they had been over much of the time Braska and his guardians had spent on the island; the difference was that now, for the first time, Braska had noticed.

Auron really didn't look well, he decided; nobody should be sweating this much while lying still. He wondered whether Auron had contracted some kind of fever. Taking out his handkerchief, he perched on the edge of Auron's bed, and began to dab gently at his face. It reminded him of when Auron had been convalescing at his house after what had happened to him in Bevelle. He had let Auron stay in the bed he had once shared with Girl, and had moved into the second bedroom for the week or so Auron had spent there, the room he still insisted on thinking of as Yuna's.

Some of Auron's hair had escaped its bun. Braska reached out with his other hand to tuck it behind Auron's ear, but then found himself stroking it absent-mindedly, gently using a finger to untangle the dark strands as he traced them down Auron's neck and onto his chest.

In that moment, he felt nothing but deep affection for Auron. Auron had done so much for him over the years, especially since Girl's death; he had been there for Braska at times when others hadn't even deigned to look at him. Auron had somehow balanced his ascent through the ranks of the warrior monks with the duty of being a steadfast presence for Braska,

always by his side when Braska needed his help – even after Auron's career had come to its abrupt and traumatic end, he had never wavered in his promise to support Braska as his guardian.

Sighing quietly, Braska wiped a little sweat from Auron's cheek, and then bent to press a gentle kiss to the same spot. As he straightened up again, he couldn't quite put his finger on why he had done such a thing. All he knew was that Auron was the dearest friend he had ever had.

He tucked his handkerchief away and took hold of the nearer of Auron's hands with both his own, almost overcome by emotion at the mere sight of Auron as he slept. If he were to bring the Calm, Braska thought to himself, Auron would be vindicated. He would be accepted by Yevon once again, and live in a world free from Sin. That alone made the pilgrimage worth it.

At last, Auron stirred; he opened his eyes, became aware of Braska sitting beside him, and said blearily, "Sir?"

"How are you feeling, Auron?" said Braska softly. "You don't look at all well."

Auron sat up; it was difficult with Braska clinging to his hand. "I'm all right," he said. "It's just hot."

"You're sweating terribly," Braska pointed out.

"Just from the heat," said Auron. "I'm perfectly fine – bit of a headache, but it's not as bad as the other day." It had been a particularly warm night; it was true that Auron didn't usually

wake up sweating this much already, but the weather seemed to have got even hotter. He had even woken once or twice overnight: that was when he had cast off his blanket and his vest. Fortunately, there would be no more such occasions now that they were about to leave the island.

"You shouldn't be travelling if you're ill," said Braska. "Maybe we should stay here a few more days and wait for the next ferry."

"Sir," said Auron, "I swear, I'm perfectly able to travel. In fact, staying here longer would probably make me feel worse. As far as I'm concerned, the sooner we get off this island, the better."

Braska frowned.

"It's the heat," Auron said, for what felt like the thousandth time. "Once we get away from Besaid, there'll be no problem."

"I just can't see how the climate alone could make you look so unwell," said Braska. "You can't see yourself, Auron – I'm sure you don't realise how ill you look."

Auron sighed; he hadn't been lying when he said he had only a slight headache, but having to go through this at such great length with Braska seemed to be starting to make it worse. "Perhaps not," he said, "but I know how I feel. Please believe me, sir."

"I just want you to be happy," Braska murmured.

If that was really what Braska wanted, Auron thought uncharitably, he would never have become a summoner.

He wrenched his hand away from Braska's grip, scrambled past him, and stood up. "I'm fine," he snapped. "See? Fine." Suddenly aware of how odd it was that Braska was fully dressed while he himself was wearing only his undershorts, he snatched up his trousers from where he had left them neatly folded on the floor and pulled them on as quickly as he could, before marching off to the bathroom.

Braska scowled and sat down on his own bed; he had only been concerned for Auron's wellbeing, he thought. It just didn't make sense to him that anyone could be as affected by the heat as that: he was still sure Auron was coming down with something.

Auron re-entered the dormitory after a few minutes, his hair back in its usual ponytail, and strapped on his cuirass. "Where's Jecht?" he demanded.

"He's meeting us there," said Braska.

Auron grunted something incomprehensible in response before putting on his socks and boots. It was a few days since he'd worn them; the spare sandals had served him very well on Besaid, but heading back towards the mainland would require him to dress properly.

They headed to the reception area for breakfast, avoiding each other's gaze. Braska sneaked a few glances at Auron; he was wearing a deep frown, and was still sweating copiously, now using his own handkerchief to dab intermittently at his face with brusque, almost violent gestures. Braska tried not to

make anything of it: he was convinced that he had the moral high ground in this argument. It was only concern for Auron's wellbeing that had made him so obstinate, he thought to himself.

After eating and packing away the last of their belongings, Auron went to settle up. He was too annoyed to concentrate properly on negotiating, but the Crusader seemed happy enough to charge a heavily reduced rate anyway, in recognition of Braska's status. "May Yevon be with you on the onward journey," he intoned reverently, dropping into a neat bow as Auron passed over the gil.

"Yeah, thanks," Auron muttered.

He put on his robe, grimacing with distaste as the fabric made contact with his clammy skin, and the two of them left the lodge, keeping a few feet of distance between them. Auron stared ahead grimly as he walked; Braska, in contrast, looked around at the villagers' dwellings around him. He made eye contact with a number of the islanders as they passed by; it was still quite early, but many of them were standing at their doorways. Looking back towards those nearer the lodge, he noticed that their occupants had started to emerge onto the path, walking behind him at a distance.

They were coming to see him off at the beach, he realised. It was flattering, but made him feel uneasy at the same time; all the islanders looked very sombre, apart from the youngest children, and none seemed to want to get too close. This was

their farewell to Braska: their silent show of solidarity as he turned back northward and made his way to the place where he planned to die for their sakes.

He hesitated a little, slightly unnerved by what he was witnessing. He was unsure of how to acknowledge the islanders' support, particularly when none of them seemed willing to approach him.

A few paces ahead, Auron realised Braska had stopped walking. "What's the holdup?" he said, turning back to glare at him.

"They're following us," Braska murmured.

Auron shrugged unsympathetically; Braska hurried forward to catch up with him, and then, still feeling uneasy, he instinctively reached out to take hold of Auron's arm. Auron blinked a few times, wondering if it was intended as a conciliatory gesture, but declined to say anything else, and carefully averted his eyes from Braska's face as the two of them continued to advance.

They followed the path out of the village and towards the beach; Auron dispatched the fiends quickly and wordlessly. By this point, Braska didn't dare look back: he knew the crowd had grown behind them, but he forced himself to keep moving, staring at the vegetation around him instead.

Once they arrived at the beach, they found still more people waiting, all of them equally solemn, with one very incongruous exception: "Hey, guys!" said Jecht, who was dripping

wet and beaming. "Ready to go? Looks like the whole island's here!" He slapped Braska on the back, leaving a moist handprint on his robe that soon faded in the blazing sun. "You made an impression, huh?"

"It seems that way," said Braska, attempting a smile.

They headed to the jetty, ready to board the ship along with the small number of traders who happened to be travelling; at the last minute, the wizened old man who had visited Braska at the Crusaders' Lodge three days ago slipped out of the crowd towards them, and announced, "Lord Braska, on behalf of the synod, may I wish you good fortune and fair wind on your journey."

"That's very kind," said Braska.

"It's not often that a summoner leaves us with five æons," the man said. "We have little to be cheerful about here, but meeting a summoner who may truly be capable of defeating Sin has inspired us all. You have given us hope, my lord – we thank you tremendously. I only wish you may remember us poor islanders as you continue your pilgrimage."

Braska raised a hand to rub his eyes. "I will," he said, "of course. You've all been so welcoming – far more than I deserved. There have been many trials on this journey, but your hospitality has helped lighten the darkness a little; thank you all so much."

The man bowed, and beckoned to somebody in the crowd behind him; a young girl, even younger than Yuna, emerged

holding a garland of flowers, and shyly stepped forward to drape it over Braska's head. He inclined graciously to let her reach; there was a bit of interference from his headdress, but between the two of them they managed to get it into a somewhat secure position. As soon as the girl had stepped back, a boy of around the same age made his way forward and placed a similar garland around Jecht's neck.

"Hey, thanks, kid!" said Jecht. "We'll give Sin a good thrashin' for you guys, I promise."

There was a short, intense discussion at the front of the crowd, and then another boy stepped forward amid a few rather forceful whispers of encouragement. Looking resolutely down at the sand, he thrust a third garland in Auron's direction. Managing not to roll his eyes, Auron bent down so the boy could place it over his head. He was still in a bad mood, and being so close to the sea was making him feel on edge; he barely succeeded in muttering a thank you to the boy, who disappeared nervously back into the crowd as if he feared that Auron was going to lash out at him.

At last, they boarded the ferry, as the members of the crowd waved and sank into Yevonite bows; oddly enough, they all seemed slightly less subdued now that Braska and his guardians were actually leaving. Auron made his way over to the nearest sailor to pay for their passage, while Braska and Jecht stationed themselves at the edge of the deck, waving back at the people below: nearly everyone on the island was

there, although Ginnem was conspicuously absent. As the ship set off, the crowd broke into what appeared to be an impromptu performance of the Hymn of the Fayth, somewhat more tunefully than Jecht's rendition the previous evening had been.

Having settled up with the sailor and tossed his flower garland to the floor, Auron made his way to the middle of the deck, as far as he could get from the water, and closed his eyes. The day really hadn't started well, and being at sea wasn't exactly helping. He was able to cope with it better by this point, having forced himself to undergo some exposure to the water over the previous week, but it still wasn't pleasant. At least, he concluded, he would soon be away from the relentless heat.

"Uh, Auron?" said a familiar voice.

He opened his eyes reluctantly. "What?"

Jecht jerked his head towards the edge of the deck where Braska was still standing. Auron followed his gaze; he didn't realise what the matter was until he noticed Braska's shoulders were shaking erratically.

"Oh," he said. "Is he –"

"You surprised?" said Jecht.

Ignoring his irritated tone, Auron took a deep breath and walked over to Braska. "Oh, sir," he murmured when he drew close: Braska's face was wet with tears.

Braska turned towards Auron, stepping away from the rail, and embraced him. "Such lovely people," he said. "Such a won-

derful place. They're far too kind." He sniffed. "Oh, I am sorry. Typical of me."

"I was surprised to see you holding it together so well," Auron admitted. "When that man started talking about hope …"

Braska let out a little sob of laughter. "You're right; I almost didn't make it. Oh dear, Auron." He wiped his sleeve over his face, and said, "I'm all right, really."

They stood there silently for a few moments, still clinging to each other, and then Braska added, "I'm sorry about earlier. I think I just wasn't ready to leave the island."

"It doesn't matter," said Auron, and he meant it: when he was holding Braska in his arms like this, nothing really mattered at all. It was odd, the way things had progressed over the course of the pilgrimage: when they had crossed the Thunder Plains, such embraces had still been rare enough for Auron to be surprised and awkward when Braska reached for him. By this point, though, it seemed quite natural.

Still gripping Braska's back, he came to a strange realisation: Braska's tears hadn't been provoked by the sort of despair or self-loathing that usually accompanied his weaker moments, but merely by his regret at leaving the islanders behind. It seemed a healthier emotional reaction, although Jecht would no doubt have disputed that. Nonetheless, it had to be a good sign. Braska clearly wasn't ready to turn away from his path yet – his breakdown after meeting Besaid's fayth was proof of that – but they appeared to be making progress. He just hoped

the positive effects of their stay on the island would last.

Gradually, both of them noticed it was beginning to rain. The sky had darkened quite rapidly since the ship had set sail. Braska and Auron exchanged an apprehensive look: there were two potential reasons for such an event. Ordinary changes in climate were nothing to worry about, and rainstorms at sea were hardly uncommon. But the other possibility was much more concerning: rain was often an early sign of the presence of Sin.

"I'll speak to one of the sailors," said Braska at last, his face white with worry. "They should know there's a summoner on board, in case –"

Auron nodded, letting him go. He closed his eyes again. It was more likely not to be Sin, he reasoned, although that didn't seem particularly reassuring. He had travelled by ship hundreds of times, journeying to remote parts of Spira on board the warrior monks' private fleet; there had been numerous storms, and even on those occasions where the bad weather had been a result of Sin's proximity, he had rarely thought very much of it until they had come face to face with the creature itself. But this time he could feel his jaw tightening and his heartbeat accelerating; this was nothing like the old days of sorties with the corps.

He cast his eyes around, looking for a distraction, and came to rest on Jecht, who was sitting cross-legged on the deck, making easy conversation with some of the merchants on board.

The sight of him made Auron suddenly frustrated: Jecht was the kind of person who never seemed to be bothered by anything, he thought. Even finding out the truth about Zanarkand didn't seem to have dampened his spirits for very long. For the first time ever, Auron found himself wishing he could be more like Jecht. It was an unwelcome thought.

Braska returned. "It's just a front," he said with relief. "Warm weather – they were expecting it. He said it'll be a rough crossing, though. Better to go inside."

They headed down into the hull, locating the cabin they had reserved; it happened to be the same one that they had occupied on the outbound journey. Braska and Auron sat on the lower bunks, each of them instinctively selecting the same bed he had chosen on that previous occasion. The rolling of the boat was already starting to become perceptible.

"Perhaps I should fetch Jecht," said Braska.

"He'll be all right," said Auron wearily.

"But just in case," said Braska, and he left the cabin again and headed back up to the deck. As he climbed the stairs, he found himself clinging onto the rail more tightly than he had anticipated: walking in a straight line was getting difficult. He made his way unsteadily across the deck to where Jecht and the merchants were sitting; sparse but large drops of rain spattered his robe as he did so.

"It's going to be a rough crossing, Jecht," he said, trying not to become unnerved by the presence of the two merchants,

who were staring at him with undisguised curiosity. "Auron and I think we'd be better off inside. Will you join us?"

"Nah, I'm good," said Jecht. "Thanks, but I'd rather be out here in the open air, you know?"

"In the storm?" said Braska. "The sailors say it'll be quite bad." He glanced at Jecht's two companions, wondering if at least one of them might be kind enough to back him up, but neither seemed willing to say anything.

Jecht grinned. "Come on, Braska, give me some credit. If it gets that bad, I'll come inside. Promise."

Braska was about to press the point when the ship gave a violent lurch; he just about succeeded in remaining on his feet, but the smirks on Jecht's and his new friends' faces were motivation enough for him to put an end to the conversation. "Very well," he muttered, before staggering back across the deck, somehow managing to get back to the cabin without losing his balance completely.

"That Jecht is more fish than man," he remarked once he made it inside, brushing some of the rainwater off his robe.

"Told you," Auron said.

His voice was muffled; Braska looked at him, and saw that Auron was lying on his back, his bare arm flung across so that his face was buried in the crook of his elbow. "You *are* ill," he couldn't help saying.

Auron sighed and sat up gingerly; fortunately, he was feeling too under the weather to get anywhere near as annoyed

as he had earlier. "Anyone would be," he said, "with the damn ship rocking about all over the place like this. At least we're off that forsaken island."

"I don't think that's necessary," said Braska sternly. "They were very kind to us."

Auron groaned and lay down again.

"It's a great comfort to know Yuna will be able to grow up there," Braska continued, "and if you can't bring yourself to take her in person, I hope you'll at least do me the courtesy of asking someone else to do it."

"Of course I'll do it," Auron muttered. "I promised, didn't I? If that's really what you want." He wasn't exactly eager to return to Besaid, but it didn't matter anyway: he was certain that there would be no need for him to go back. He would find a way of sparing Braska's life, and then Braska himself would be free to decide what he wanted to do with his daughter, even if he did insist on going to live on Besaid with her.

"I don't see why I should have changed my mind," said Braska. Part of him felt guilty about bickering with Auron like this – especially so soon after they had argued earlier that morning, and when Auron clearly wasn't feeling well – but it was a perverse sort of distraction from the fact that he was beginning to feel slightly nauseated himself.

"You saw what it was like there, my lord," said Auron. "They don't exactly have an easy life."

"It's better than Bevelle," said Braska. "You know that."

Auron wasn't sure: Bevelle was corrupt, that was true, and it was a miserable place to live if one had been cast out by Yevon. Both he and Braska had firsthand experience of that. But the machina and the protection from Sin undoubtedly provided much better living conditions. Braska had chosen to take advantage of his residence privileges and return there after his marriage nonetheless: he would have been perfectly able to settle elsewhere with his young family, at least while Girl was still alive and Yuna wasn't yet in the care of the temples. He must have tolerated it enough to stay, Auron reflected.

The ship pitched dramatically; Braska reached out to cling to the post connecting the bunks, grimacing as nausea surged within him. He glanced down at Auron, who had squeezed his eyes shut again and looked distinctly green.

"We should take potions," Braska suggested. They both knew it wouldn't help much: potions were for battle wounds, really, and were much more effective on physical injuries than this kind of sickness. But they would certainly take the edge off, and ideally, reduce the nausea enough for them both to sleep, which was the only thing worth doing during the storm.

Braska found a couple of potions, and handed one to Auron, who sat up again with some difficulty to drink it.

"Better?" Braska murmured, after swallowing his own.

"A bit, I think," said Auron, reclining again. "You?"

"Yes, a little," said Braska, after considering it. "But you have it worse than I do."

It was true, as much as Auron hadn't wanted to admit it. He had perhaps naïvely expected Braska to be the one who might more readily be struck down by seasickness. Auron had a stronger constitution overall, which was partly natural and partly a result of Braska's recent emotional fragility; he was also the one who had experience travelling all over Spira, sometimes in poor conditions. He ought to have been able to handle this – he should have been doing his duty and protecting Braska. But the stress of being at sea, itself an irrational response that he loathed acknowledging, had made him more susceptible. As far as he was concerned, it was utterly disgusting that he should be so weak.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, pressing a hand to his forehead. "I should be doing better than this."

Braska removed his headdress, set it carefully on the small table by his bunk, and then lay down himself. "It can't be helped, Auron," he pointed out.

"I'm supposed to be guarding you," said Auron despondently, "but I'm useless."

Braska paused, wondering how to reassure him, and then said simply, "No, you're not. Nonsense."

Feeling too ill and miserable to say any more, Auron forced himself to go to sleep instead. Braska gazed at him for a while, taking note of the expression of discomfort on Auron's face; but, he decided, there was little he could do about it. Soon enough, he was asleep as well.

Up on deck, Jecht was leaning over the guardrail, looking down at the dark, foamy sea. He had had a good chat with the two merchants; it had almost seemed as if they were becoming friends. By not making any mention of blitzball and relying on the scant knowledge he had acquired about Spira, Jecht had been able to present himself as their equal. That kind of thing was impossible in Zanarkand, where everyone knew his name.

Making proper friends still seemed like an alien process to Jecht, although he supposed it made sense that it might be easier in Spira, where his reputation failed to precede him. After all, he reflected, he had made friends with Braska and Auron – with Braska, at least.

The merchants had eventually made their excuses and gone inside: they had been able to hold out against the storm longer than the rest of the travellers, but there had come a point where even they had found it too much. Jecht was the only person on deck now. He looked up towards the forecastle and saw the blurry figures of a couple of sailors, obscured by the rain. There was nothing else to do, so he headed in to speak to them.

Entering the forecastle, he found that the two sailors were engaged intensely in the navigation. One of them held a large map, while the other gripped the tiller tightly, turning it this way and that to fight back against the strong wind.

"Need some help?" Jecht suggested.

"Who're you?" said the sailor holding the map.

"Just one of your passengers," Jecht explained. "Thought I

could give you guys some advice. I live on a boat, see."

"Live on a boat?" the sailor echoed, sceptical enough to turn away from the map and look Jecht up and down. "Why would anyone do that? You'd be a magnet for Sin."

The other sailor reached for the map, trying to study it while still focusing all the attention he could on the tiller; the first sailor, by this point, was thoroughly distracted by Jecht, who realised he needed to get involved in the navigation before things went entirely to pot. He strode forward and seized the map; looking at it, though, he realised it was labelled in strange characters that looked vaguely familiar from earlier encounters during his few weeks in Spira, but which he had no clue how to decipher.

"Ah, damn," he muttered. "Can't read it."

"Not a reader, huh?" the sailor at the tiller remarked.

"It's just these weird symbols," said Jecht. "Everyone can read where I'm from."

"OK," said the first sailor, still sounding sceptical as he moved to Jecht's side to take hold of the map again. "You come from a place where people live on boats and everyone can read. Sure you haven't been near Sin's toxin recently?"

"Nope," said Jecht. "I just ain't from Spira, is all."

"Is that right?" said the sailor at the tiller. Now that Jecht was standing close to them both, he could see the man was younger than his colleague: he still had a round, boyish face, and a little patch of fluff on his chin that would never have

been tolerated in the Bevelle region. "You're like the guy from the story!" he added.

"Exactly!" said Jecht enthusiastically. "The story about the guy that gets stuck in Spira, right? Maybe me and him come from the same place."

"That's just a fairytale," the older sailor protested.

The younger sailor shook his head, losing control of the tiller a little; Jecht reached out to grab it momentarily. "Always thought it was true," the sailor said. "What kind of fairytale doesn't have a proper ending? If it was made up, it'd have one, right? I always wondered what happened to the guy's son." He gave Jecht a curious look, as if he believed he ought to know the answer.

"Yeah, good point," said Jecht. "Wish I knew too." He looked out at the churning sea, thought of Tidus, and immediately, unexpectedly, felt melancholy.

"Anyway," he said, trying to forget about it, "I swear I ain't from Spira, and I really do live on a boat. So if you guys need help with the navigation, I'm your man."

"Actually, there is something you could do," said the older sailor. "You're OK with minor machina, right?"

Jecht scoffed. "Am I ever."

"There's a tea urn below decks," said the sailor. "We keep bonemint tea in for crossings like this – settles people's stomachs, you know? You could take it round to the cabins. They'd be grateful."

"What, you want me to be your tea boy?" Jecht exclaimed. "No way. Thought you'd appreciate my sailing skills."

"Fair enough," the sailor said, turning away from him. "It was just a thought – I know you're a paying guest. Just assumed you wanted something to keep you busy."

He and his crewmate turned their attention back to the navigation, peering at the map and muttering to each other. Jecht stayed where he was; he wasn't sure what to do. He was slightly surprised that the sailor had been so calm about his refusal to help, but then, he supposed, he had been on the road for a few weeks now and had spent a lot of that time with Auron, who always got extremely angry every time Jecht refused to follow orders. The sailor's utter indifference was novel to say the least.

"Fine," he said, after a few moments. "I'll do the tea thing, I guess. Where is it?"

Several minutes later, he was in the small storeroom below decks, waiting for the water in the large urn to come to the boil. The machina was enormous and looked as if it was about to fall apart; Jecht had never seen such a decrepit device. The lack of proper technology didn't make life easy in Spira, he reflected, but at least nobody knew what they were missing.

The bonemint had a strong, sharp smell. Jecht was vaguely familiar with it: it wasn't a hugely common plant in Zanarkand, but he knew it was used to alleviate nausea there in the same way it was in Spira. They had a bottle of bonemint

tablets at home, he recalled – who knew whether they were actually made from the plant or just from some chemical that had the same properties. Jecht remembered giving them to Tidus on occasions when the boy had complained of stomachaches.

It was the second sudden thought of Tidus he'd had in a short span of time, and it provoked the same immediate stab of regret. He missed his son – of course – he'd felt that way since the moment he set foot in Spira. But this was different: hearing the various versions of the Spiran fairytale had given him a strange, complex feeling that he couldn't name, but which felt connected to Tidus somehow. The memory of the Besaid blitzballer telling him he was good with children was part of it too, and looking back on that exchange only increased his unease. Nobody had ever said that about him before, and he was sure he had never treated Tidus in the same way he had the young blitzball players either.

He had been friendly and patient with them because he was getting used to Spira: somehow he had instinctively known that the type of tough love he was accustomed to showing in Zanarkand would be inappropriate. With Tidus, he had always maintained that the boy needed to toughen up, especially if he wanted to become a blitzball star like his dad. Things were simply like that in the city – men weren't supposed to show vulnerability if they wanted to be taken seriously, and he had initially believed Tidus would thank him in the end. On Besaid, he had

been shocked to discover the closeness the blitzballers shared; it was a sort of relationship he had never observed before, but one that undoubtedly helped them through the hardships of island life. And then there was Braska, a man – a friend – who had never made any secret of the fact that he was struggling with his mental health. It meant he was difficult to be around at times, certainly, but it also made him seem honest and genuine to an extent that was vanishingly rare back home. Jecht had seen Braska in tears on plenty of occasions, probably more times than he had ever seen grown men cry in Zanarkand – it still made him feel viscerally uncomfortable, but it hardly emasculated the summoner.

The tea was ready; the strong odour of bonemint disturbed Jecht's increasingly muddled thoughts. He wheeled the urn out into the corridor, glad of the distraction, before beginning his rounds of the cabins. It really did seem as if he was the only passenger, besides the crew, who wasn't feeling at least a little seasick: the occupants of the cabins were slow to respond to his loud knocks at their doors, although fortunately the sight and smell of the bonemint tea tended to cheer them up slightly. Jecht didn't spend much time with any of the passengers: only long enough to pass over the tea, and check, as the sailors had requested, whether they would be wanting dinner. Only about a third of them seemed brave enough to be willing.

It wasn't long before Jecht found himself at the cabin occupied by his companions. Auron came to the door having al-

ready changed into his nightclothes, even though it was still afternoon; he stared at Jecht and the urn for a few seconds, looking ill and uncomfortable, and then muttered, "What's this?"

"Well, look who it is!" said Jecht, deciding the best way to avoid showing that he was aware of Auron's obviously fragile state would be to act as obnoxiously as he could. "Wondered when I'd get to you guys. Surprised to see me, huh?"

Auron blinked back, clutching the doorframe; Jecht hastily retrieved one of the small wooden cups he was using to serve the tea, filled it, and thrust it in Auron's direction. "Bonemint!" he barked. "You should have some. You'll thank me."

"What?" said Auron again, making no move to take the cup.

Behind them, Braska stirred; he had been asleep, but his guardians' brief conversation had roused him. He frowned, annoyed by the interruption to his rest, but it wasn't long before the distinctive scent of the tea caught his attention.

"Is that bonemint, Jecht?" he asked, peering through the doorway to where Jecht stood.

"You got it," said Jecht. "Want some?"

"I should think so," said Braska with relief. "There's no better remedy for stomach trouble. Didn't you know that, Auron?" Auron had never raised a child, he supposed. Bonemint leaves were commonly fed to children who complained of upset stomachs; he had given a few to Yuna in his time.

At last, Auron took the cup that Jecht held, immediately passing it back to Braska while Jecht filled another, then taking that one too and returning to his own bunk without a word of thanks.

"The guys wanna know if you want dinner later," said Jecht brightly, still doing his very best to give the impression that nothing was out of the ordinary.

Braska grimaced a little and averted his eyes; he certainly didn't feel up to eating, but that was the case a lot of the time anyway. Auron would surely insist that he had something, he thought – but Auron turned out to be just as reluctant to contemplate the thought of food, and merely sat sipping his tea, holding the cup tightly with both hands and staring at it intently as if he thought that would somehow make its medicinal properties more effective.

Shrugging a little, Braska looked back at Jecht. "Looks like it's a no," he said.

No surprises there, Jecht thought; he turned and moved on to the next cabin without saying goodbye, keen to leave his companions to their sickbeds. Auron in particular was clearly suffering quite badly, he thought, before forcing himself to forget about it.

After visiting the rest of the cabins, he found himself drawn into a ferocious few rounds of card games with the sailors who would be manning the forecastle overnight: they had just woken up in preparation for their shift. Like when he had played

with Auron, it turned out Jecht knew all the games even if he was unfamiliar with the terminology and a few minor variations on the rules that sometimes ended up making quite a crucial difference to the outcome. As a result, he wasn't that bothered by the number of games he lost; at other times he might have been more put out by it, but he found himself quite able to remain civil on this occasion.

The shift changed, and the sailors below decks were replaced by those who had been above; their final duty for the day was to prepare the dinner for themselves and the passengers, although so many of the latter category had turned it down that it was a fairly easy operation. Jecht ended up eating with the sailors in their quarters, which, he decided, was probably a better outcome for everyone than having to go to the cabin and have his dinner in the company of his ailing companions. When they had all finished, though, the sailors were ready to sleep, tired out after a day of difficult navigation through the storm. Jecht went up on deck for a while, but it was not only wet and windy but almost pitch-dark, which didn't make the experience particularly enjoyable. Conceding defeat, he returned to the cabin again.

Auron and Braska were in a similar state to how they had been during Jecht's previous visit; the bonemint tea had helped for a while, but its effects were starting to wear off, and the storm showed no sign of relenting. When Jecht joined them in the cabin, he was determined to continue acting as if nothing

was wrong, and so he set about preparing to go to bed, stripping to his underclothes while whistling a cheerful tune.

"Shut up," Auron moaned, but he did so too quietly for Jecht to hear him over the sound of his own whistling. Buffeted by the rolling and pitching of the ship, Jecht lurched around the cabin, finding himself staggering across nearly every inch of the small space. The disruptive nature of his movements made Auron still more agitated; he did his best to ignore it, burying his head under the pillow, but it was impossible to block out the sounds of Jecht thudding haphazardly around the cabin, and the irregularity of his movements just made Auron feel worse.

At last, Jecht finished his preparations and clambered into the bunk above Auron. Hauling himself up, he tugged on the frame that held the two bunks together; the whole structure shook from the force. That was the last straw for Auron, who leapt out of his bed and dashed out of the cabin with a hand clamped over his mouth.

Determined though he was to ignore Auron's condition, Jecht couldn't help sighing. "A lot of that goin' on, huh?" he remarked.

"No, actually," said Braska sleepily from below him. "This is the first time he's had to excuse himself. Poor Auron – he must be quite ill. Do try to be kind to him."

Jecht merely grunted in reply, but he couldn't help feeling slightly guilty. He'd assumed Auron had been in and out all

evening – hearing that he had managed to keep it down until Jecht had come in put a different slant on the situation. If he had been a bit more careful while getting into bed, he thought, Auron might not have had to rush off like that.

Auron came back in a few minutes later, slow and pale, and returned wordlessly to his bunk; being sure not to make any sudden movements, Jecht carefully lowered his head so that he and Auron could see each other, and said, "You want some more of that tea?"

There was a pause, and then Auron said dully, "I don't believe it. Did you just offer to get something for me? I must be so ill I'm hallucinating."

"Look, don't push it," Jecht snarled. "You want some or not?"

"Sure," Auron muttered.

"I'll get some for you too, Braska," said Jecht, and he carefully slid to the ground and made his way back to the crew's storeroom.

"Are you feeling better, Auron?" said Braska once Jecht was gone. "Now that you've – er –"

Auron grunted. "Maybe."

Jecht was back soon with the tea; Auron sat up to drink his cup, and was asleep soon afterwards, having found that the bonemint settled his stomach just enough to let him rest. Jecht, still feeling fairly awake, sat on his bunk for a while, oddly irritated by the fact that Auron hadn't really thanked him for

the tea. Eventually, he succeeded in convincing himself that he should have expected it, and lay down to sleep in turn.

Chapter **25**

Oblivious

By morning, the storm was over. It had passed over in the early hours, leaving enough time for everyone to get a good stretch of uninterrupted sleep; Auron and Braska had sorely needed it. They were woken by a sharp knock at the door: the wake-up call signalling that the ship would be docking at Kilika Port within the next half hour.

"We're awake," Auron called, to avoid needing to get up and answer the door. Once he had said it, though, he found himself leaning back and closing his eyes again. His sickness had passed, mercifully, but now he felt uncomfortable for different reasons, ones that were harder to pin down. He could just about recall his conversation with Braska the previous day, when the two of them had first come down to the cabin to rest, and the words he had spoken: *I'm useless*. It was almost impossible to believe he had said such a thing out loud. He had always been the rising star of the warrior monks, praised and

admired by everyone in the corps; when he had agreed to join Braska on his pilgrimage, he had done it with the full knowledge that he would be more capable of fulfilling a guardian's duties than anyone else. People had told him that; they had stopped him in the barracks to tell him his prodigious skills were wasted on guarding a summoner whose decision to take the pilgrimage was already an offence against Yevon, and he had always smiled as politely as he could and reminded them of the supreme summoner's privilege: to take the pilgrimage without hindrance, submitting to the fayth's judgement and none other. And even after his own disgrace, Auron had still been sure he would overcome the setback and be the guardian he knew Braska deserved.

He turned his head slowly to look at Braska, wondering if it would be completely ludicrous to ask him if he had really said the words he remembered uttering. Now that he felt just a bit better, it was impossible to imagine having such a low opinion of his own abilities. The thought was entirely foreign to him, and the fact that he had had it, however briefly, was worrying.

Braska caught Auron's eye. "The storm's passed, thank goodness," he murmured.

"Yes," said Auron. "Did you sleep well, sir?"

"Eventually, yes," said Braska, and he started slowly getting up.

Auron watched him for a few more seconds, and then stood up himself and gave the rail of Jecht's bunk a brief shake.

"Time to get up, Jecht," he said firmly. "Ship's docking."

"OK, OK," Jecht grumbled.

When all three were up and dressed, they made their way out to the deck and waited for the sailors to prepare for disembarkation. Braska went to look out over the side, grateful that the sky was blue once again but unable to feel completely settled: he was certainly a long way from Besaid now. Those few days of respite were beginning to seem increasingly distant. Now that they were almost back on the mainland, he would soon need to turn his attention to fulfilling the promise he had made to Auron, and try to strengthen the fragile bonds he had formed with his æons; and if that went nowhere, it would be time to put an end to the pilgrimage, and to his life.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, willing himself to retain the strength that would let him leave the ship and spend the morning on Kilika without too much trouble.

"Oh, it's this place," said Jecht to Auron where they stood several yards away. "Kilika, right?"

Auron folded his arms; he wasn't keen on looking out across the water himself. "You ought to remember it," he said. "You're the one who insisted we fight that fiend that poisoned us both."

"Oh, yeah," said Jecht unenthusiastically. "Kind of a shitty place, though, you know? It ain't much like Besaid. Just a ton of wooden boards everywhere – looks like it's gonna fall apart soon as you start walkin' around."

"You can hardly blame them for not building anything more permanent," Auron pointed out. "Kilika gets a lot of attention from Sin. It's a miracle there's anything here at all, but I suppose they've learnt to be resilient."

Jecht grunted.

"Not everywhere can be Besaid, Jecht," Auron couldn't help adding. "I know you and Lord Braska both loved it there – for some reason – but we're back in the real world now."

"I liked you better when you were sick," said Jecht, before stomping off to join Braska at the guardrail.

They disembarked shortly afterwards, and headed to the inn for breakfast. There was a daytime ferry to Luca, so they had no need to stay on Kilika long, but there would nonetheless be a few hours to fill, and Auron in particular was hungry: he hadn't eaten since the previous morning, and most of that meal had vacated his stomach in the intervening time. The walk over the boards to the inn, on the other hand, had a detrimental effect on his appetite. It was nowhere near as bad as when they had arrived at Kilika on the southward journey: that morning, Auron had felt as if he might not even make it all the way there. This time, after several days of carefully exposing himself to the water in small doses, he was able to make his way across much more easily, but he still felt increasingly uncomfortable and was a little shaky by the time they arrived at their destination.

"You can order the breakfast, please, Jecht," he said, sinking

onto a seat in the inn's reception area.

"What?" Jecht complained. "Why do I gotta do it?"

"I thought you said you were going to pull your weight," Auron mumbled.

Jecht scowled, but he headed over to the desk. The clerk on duty was the same woman Auron had dealt with the morning they left the inn a week earlier. "Ah," she said knowingly. "Turned back, have you? I don't suppose it took long for the fayth to turn your summoner down. They say Besaid's is a difficult one."

"Huh?" said Jecht. "You mean … no, he got the æon! Big, kinda stony bird thing, right? Yeah, he got it, no problem."

"Oh," she said. "But if Yevon …" Her gaze drifted towards where the notice warning Yevonites about Braska and his guardians still lay from the week before. As had been the case for the clerk at the Djose inn, the discovery that Braska had gained another æon had suddenly called its theological soundness into question. If Braska was favoured by the fayth – especially Besaid's fayth, known even among the islanders of Kilika as a harsh mistress – that suggested that whoever had written the notice might have been too quick to judge.

"Look, we're just here for breakfast," Jecht said. "Got a problem with that?"

He placed the order and went to join Braska and Auron at the table. None of them spoke very much until the food arrived: Auron was starting to feel better, but Braska had been

quiet and withdrawn since leaving the ship, still weighed down by the thoughts of what he had left behind and what was about to come next.

They had eaten around half their breakfast – less in Braska's case – when a girl a few years younger than Auron entered the inn and approached the clerk. "Excuse me," she said, "I heard a summoner's party had come off the ferry – I wondered if they would be staying –"

The clerk motioned towards Braska and his guardians. "Over there. But it's probably best to stay away; he may have the æons, but ..." She trailed off, still confused.

The girl turned, uncertain, and Braska looked up at her; and then he realised what had happened. Her expression showed it quite clearly. His guardians couldn't tell – Auron might have eventually worked out what was going on by a process of elimination, but not instinctively in the way Braska had. He was the one who had experience with this: not only through his training as a summoner, but also on a deeply personal level.

"Someone needs my help to pass on," he said, almost breathlessly. "Is that right?"

The girl nodded, and Braska stood, taking both her hands gently in his own. "My mother," she said as he did so, clearly on the verge of tears. "It was a sickness –"

"I'm terribly sorry," said Braska, and everyone in the room could tell that he meant it. "How awful for you. Had she been ill very long?"

"Just a few days," the girl whispered.

"What a horrible shock it must have been," said Braska. "You have my sincerest sympathies. When you're ready, we'll go to her, and then she can rest."

"I'm sorry about your mother, Giarla," said the clerk, "but I still think you should try a different summoner. Have you tried the temple?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Auron snapped. "Lord Braska's perfectly able to perform the sending."

"That's enough, Auron," said Braska serenely, before turning back to the girl. "It's your decision," he assured her. "If you'd rather find a summoner who is in Yevon's favour, you will need to look elsewhere. But if you'd like me to do it, I shall. Whichever you prefer – take your time. There's no rush."

Auron couldn't help narrowing his eyes, thinking of the ferry they were due to take to Luca, but the girl almost immediately nodded. "I'd like you to send her," she mumbled. "Please."

"It'll be a great honour," Braska assured her. "Excuse me for a moment." He let go of her hands, took the gil purse from the table, and handed a few coins to the clerk. "I trust this will cover our breakfast," he said. "Auron, Jecht – are you ready?" Without waiting for an answer, he returned to the girl, put an arm around her shoulder, and ushered her gently outside.

The money he had handed over was by no means sufficient to pay for the three breakfasts, but nobody said anything about

it: Braska had in the last few minutes developed a presence that meant talking about anything as mundane as financial transactions would seem highly out of order. Even Jecht was a little awestruck by the way Braska was conducting himself. He had acquired a gravitas hitherto unseen on the pilgrimage, assuming his duties with a quiet but utterly convincing confidence.

"What's this about?" Jecht muttered to Auron as they followed a few paces behind the others. "He's helping someone die?"

"I'll explain when we get there," Auron replied. Walking over the boards to the house was putting him on edge again; he could feel his heart thumping in his chest, but he focused on Braska walking in front and forced himself to keep his breathing slow and steady. He couldn't help reflecting on the fact that Braska always seemed to become invigorated when he was in the presence of death. It was an unpleasant thought.

They entered the house, and Auron took a moment to catch his breath before turning back to Jecht and saying, "The sending. You remember? When people die, summoners have to send their spirits to the Farplane. Otherwise they turn into fiends."

"Right, gotcha," said Jecht doubtfully.

Auron frowned, intending to explain further, but he decided it would be inappropriate to start going into the mechanics of death and sending in this situation. Braska had let the girl lead him forward to the couch where her mother's body

lay, the morbid centrepiece of the room that made up most of the ground floor of the house, which itself was really more of a hut, like those on Besaid. Auron stood back to give them space; a meaningful glance at Jecht sufficed to convince him to do the same.

As Braska continued to murmur reassurances to the girl, there was a noise on the stairs; a second young woman was descending barefoot, looking rather like she had just got out of bed. She cast her eyes around the room, settled on Auron, and then said, "Oh. Hello."

Braska turned around. "A sister?"

"No, a friend," she replied, reluctantly looking away from Auron and meeting the summoner's gaze. "I'm here for moral support." She didn't seem to be providing much of it, but nobody challenged her.

Braska turned away again, having lost interest; his full attention was for the dead woman and her daughter. "I'd normally use fire," he said. "Is that all right?"

The girl nodded, looking down glumly at her mother's corpse.

"I'll let you say goodbye," said Braska. "There's no hurry at all. Tell me when you're ready."

He stepped back to give her some privacy, taking a few deep breaths in preparation for what he was about to do. He had performed sendings before, during his training; he had had it impressed on him that they formed the usual work of most

summoners' trade. Those who had abandoned their pilgrimages, or who had never intended to journey in the first place, rarely found themselves calling the æons but were instead often invited to attend to those who had recently passed away. Braska had known he would never be in that position – if he failed on his pilgrimage, he would quite simply give up on life – but he had undertaken those preliminary sendings as he was told. They had taken place in morgues and houses of healing, with a senior temple summoner watching and assessing him; none had happened in such intimate, emotional circumstances as these.

"Try not to overreact," Auron said to Jecht. "He's going to use fire."

Jecht shrugged. "Yeah? What's that mean, then?"

"Fire magic," said Auron. "What else would it mean? It'll look like he's in danger, but the flames won't hurt him. Just so you know in advance – there's nothing to worry about."

"Whatever," said Jecht. As if he would have been worried, he thought.

"So, are you from Bevelle?" asked the other girl, who had stationed herself on Auron's other side. "You must have been travelling a long time."

"This isn't really the time for small talk," said Auron.

"I ain't from Bevelle!" Jecht chimed in; he received no response. "I ain't even from Spira!" he added, undeterred.

In the middle of the room, the other young woman returned to Braska. "I'm ready," she whispered.

"Are you sure?" said Braska.

She nodded, and let him steer her gently into a chair; he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze before approaching the body.

And then Braska began his dance. He placed both hands on the shaft of his staff, about a yard apart; he held it at first in front of his waist, but then raised it gradually to head height, drawing the flames up from the ground as he went. The fire grew steadily until it engulfed him, the tops of the flames higher than his headdress; within its enclosure, he twisted his staff methodically, spinning it carefully in every direction, letting its weight guide the movements of his hands.

Jecht couldn't restrain himself from yelping in surprise; there was nothing Auron could have said that would have prepared him for this. It was impossible to believe Braska was able to stay on his feet when he was enveloped in fire, and yet there he was, moving with such purpose that it was clear he was in total control. On Auron's other side, the bereaved girl's friend reached out towards Auron, clearly intending to grasp him by the hand; he folded his arms resolutely over his chest.

Her opportunism didn't annoy him for long, though; nothing could when he was watching this. He had seen sendings before, but rarely with fire, and never Braska. Braska, whose dance bestowed on him a beauty that Auron had never seen

before: one that was both glorious and terrifying. As Auron watched the flames licking against him but not hurting him, casting shadows and multicoloured reflections in his blue eyes and subtly distorting the image of his face, he was convinced that this was the most moving thing he had ever witnessed. Braska was consummately in charge of his task, and it now seemed absolutely unimaginable that anyone would ever have doubted that he might succeed in his pilgrimage. This sending had allowed him to transcend worldly concerns; he had become something else, an unstoppable force that bridged life and death.

As Braska continued to dance, the pyreflies started to appear. The woman's daughter had begun to cry, her sobs providing a strange accompaniment to the ritual. The mass of coloured lights rose up from the body, dispersing into a cloud that surrounded Braska's fire and made it seem even more spectacular, refracting the firelight in all directions. Once the cloud around Braska was almost spherical, it began to shift again, breaking into spirals that wove under and over his arms as he continued to rotate methodically. The spiral of pyreflies rose up into a cyclone; and there, above Braska's head, it began to break up, with each point of light glowing a little more intensely before disappearing. Braska kept dancing until every last one was gone; then, finally, he lowered his staff, and the flames vanished. In front of him, the couch was bare.

At that moment, the young woman next to Auron let out

a little gasp, and stumbled to the side; he reached out instinctively to catch her as her knees buckled. She slumped against his shoulder, but then almost immediately straightened up, placing her hands against Auron's arms. "Oh, I didn't pass out, did I?" she breathed into his ear. "How embarrassing."

"Perhaps you should go and lie down," he said flatly, releasing his grip on her and wishing she would do the same to him.

"Yes," she said. "I'll go upstairs. Maybe you could come with me – just in case I fall; I'm still feeling a bit dizzy –"

"Jecht will go," said Auron, "won't you, Jecht?"

"You bet!" was the response.

"Oh," said the girl. "In that case – I think I can manage on my own." She let go of Auron and headed back up the stairs, surprisingly nimbly for someone who had so recently lost consciousness.

Braska looked over at his guardians; he had carefully laid down his staff and was sitting beside the other young woman now, holding her closely while she wept. "Do you mind?" he said sternly, irritated by the disruption.

"We'll give you some privacy," Auron replied, and he grabbed Jecht by the elbow and hauled him out of the house.

Outside, he let go of Jecht and turned to face the wall, which was slightly easier to bear than having to look straight at the water. The image of Braska's face, lit by the firelight and pyreflies, was still vivid in his mind. Still convinced it

was the most extraordinary thing he had ever seen, he let out a deep, ragged sigh. Braska's magnificence was unparalleled; he was quite sure of it.

"OK," said Jecht, "I gotta admit that was something."

Auron nodded.

"So that's what a sending is, huh?" Jecht prompted him.

"They're not all like that," said Auron, deciding it might be wise to speak as a way of distracting himself from how close he was to the sea. "Not many summoners use fire, but it's Lord Braska's preferred element. The others aren't really as impressive." His voice was hoarse; he raised a hand to massage his throat and coughed, before closing his eyes and taking a deep breath.

"Look," said Jecht, observing Auron's odd, fidgety movements, "I know you're gay, but you really need to be less weird about girls flirting with you. I kinda thought you'd be used to it."

"What?" said Auron wearily.

"Most guys don't go into meltdown every time a girl talks to 'em," Jecht explained, but then a thought occurred to him. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "That wasn't it, right? It's cos of Braska that you're actin' all jumpy! This is … this is what you get like when you're horny, huh? Man, you need to loosen up about it! Stop repressin' it all the time – no way that's gonna help."

"I'm not," Auron protested.

"Hey, I don't blame ya," said Jecht, shrugging. "He looked pretty sexy doing that sending stuff. The fire kinda … lit his face up, right? There are worse-lookin' guys you could've picked, Auron."

Auron shook his head, declining to say any more; fortunately for him, Braska chose that moment to emerge from the house. Now that his duty was done, he was no longer possessed of the quiet, serene confidence with which he had conducted the sending: at this point, he was just tired and sad. He looked at his guardians, shook his head, and murmured, "Poor girl."

"Yes," said Auron. "I'm sorry to rush you, my lord, but we should probably get back to the docks."

Braska nodded, and said no more. He said nothing over the course of the entire journey back across the boards to the dock, even when Jecht enthusiastically commented again on the brilliance of the sending; Braska acknowledged the remark with a small nod, but remained silent, and Jecht realised there was no point trying to elicit any more of a reaction.

Taking the lead as they walked back, Auron had to restrain himself from breaking into a run; he was keen to be away from Kilika as soon as possible. The thought that he would soon be back on the mainland was just about enough to allow him to maintain some semblance of composure as he boarded the ferry and arranged passage for himself and his companions. Once everything was sorted, he went in search of somewhere

to sit down, and saw that Braska had already taken a seat close to the middle of the deck; he went to sit beside him, and leant forward with his hands on his knees, forcing himself to breathe slowly and evenly until he felt a little more settled.

Braska still hadn't said anything; Auron sneaked a glance in his direction and saw that he was staring into the distance, his features arranged into a slight frown. "Tired?" he suggested.

Braska shook his head minutely, continuing not to make eye contact.

"Do you need anything?" Auron said.

"Nothing that could help," said Braska faintly.

It was the sort of response Auron had expected. He had seen Braska like this plenty of times, and he knew that all he could do was be near him and be patient, and hope his low spirits would pass before too long. After a moment's hesitation, he reached out with his bare hand and laid it against Braska's arm, hoping it would be of some help. Braska remained still for a long time, but at last, he moved his own left hand to let it rest on top of Auron's, threading their fingers together, and then closed his eyes and slowly sighed.

Auron surmised from that that the gesture had been enough to provide Braska with at least a small amount of comfort. He adjusted his position until their palms were touching, tracing circles against the back of Braska's hand with his thumb. Braska's skin was not only paler but smoother

than his own, he noticed, despite the summoner being the older. He had less experience in battle, Auron supposed.

Before too long, Braska was asleep; Auron was used to that too. After Girl's death, Braska had suddenly gained the ability to spend entire days sleeping – it was preferable to remaining awake and having to acknowledge the bleak thoughts that he was otherwise unable to put aside. Sleep brought him respite, and it was much needed at times like this.

Jecht passed by, on his way from one end of the deck to the other as he wandered about making conversation with the other passengers. He caught Auron's eye, inadvertently let his gaze drift to where Auron's and Braska's hands were clasped together, and grimaced.

"What?" Auron hissed.

Jecht shrugged. "Didn't say nothin'."

"You're clearly *thinking* something," said Auron, still speaking quietly so he wouldn't wake Braska.

Rolling his eyes, Jecht tried to explain why he found the scene before him so viscerally disturbing. "Well, you know," he said, "you don't – you wouldn't do that in public. It ain't right."

"What," said Auron, "trying to comfort him when he's distressed? That isn't right?"

"Not – not like that," Jecht mumbled. "I just don't like it when he gets that way, ya know? Gives me the –" He pulled a face.

"Grow up," said Auron.

"Hey," Jecht hissed back, "he's the one that should grow up! This is what I been sayin' the whole time: like, I get it, he has depression or whatever, but he oughta learn to hide it, ya know? Ain't he supposed to be saving Spira? How's anyone ever gonna take him seriously?"

Auron looked over at Braska, who was fortunately still sound asleep; he let his gaze pass over his face, his shoulders, his breastplate gently rising and falling with each slow breath. Then, reluctantly, he looked back at Jecht, and said, "Summoners are encouraged to stay positive, it's true. But you know Braska's not well. You saw him doing that sending earlier: he's perfectly capable of doing those duties when it's called for. That's what matters; but you should hardly expect him to put on a brave face all the time. Especially right after a sending." He paused. "Look, if you think this is bad, you should have seen him two years ago."

"I don't wanna know," said Jecht.

Auron snorted. "Thought not."

Jecht left them to it, heading off in search of a more cheerful conversation, and Auron turned back to look at Braska. They would be at sea for a few hours more, and yet Auron was perfectly content to spend that entire time sitting quietly together, knowing he was providing Braska with just some small degree of comfort by being beside him. He would have done more if he could, of course: he would have held Braska in his arms if

Braska had requested it, and kissed his face, and told him how wonderful he was, if it might make him the tiniest bit happier. There was no doubt about it now. At the beginning of the pilgrimage, he might have hesitated, but by now it was clear that physical contact was something Braska found a great help, and if that was what he needed, Auron would provide it.

Time passed. Jecht stayed away – he had found himself drawn into an entertaining and informative conversation about Spira's different blitzball teams, just in time for his planned visit to the stadium in Luca. Auron continued to caress Braska's hand, which, apart from anything else, was a remarkably effective way of taking his mind off the fact that they were at sea.

After a long time, Braska slowly opened his eyes; he blinked a few times, and said sleepily, "Auron?"

"I'm here, sir," Auron assured him.

"So you are," Braska murmured.

They sat in silence for a few moments, and then Auron said, "Are you feeling better?"

"A little," said Braska. "Might we take a walk?"

They stood, letting go of each other, but once they were both on their feet Braska reached for Auron again, and they advanced along the deck hand in hand, all the way to the prow. Auron was beginning to feel uncomfortable as they approached it; the sea was increasingly difficult to ignore. Each step he took felt heavier and more laborious than the

last, but Braska was resolutely tugging him forwards, and there was little choice but to step up to the guardrail and try not to look down at the waves below.

There was land in the distance. "We must be getting close," Braska remarked softly. "At least Jecht will be able to get involved with the blitzball while I'm –" He sighed. "While I'm summoning."

"It'll do you good, sir," said Auron. "Having the time to get used to the æons without any fiends around."

Braska grimaced. "I suppose. I just wish they were all as patient as Bahamut." He turned to look at his guardian. "You know if I don't make progress … I still intend to …"

"Just try, my lord," said Auron. "Won't you?"

"Of course," said Braska, "but they may not pay attention to me." He raised his free hand to his breastplate, remembering the sensation of Ifrit's huge fist sending him sprawling to the floor of Besaid Temple. "They might resist. Or worse –"

"I'll be with you, sir," said Auron. He had intended to spend as much of their stay in Luca as he could in the library, looking for more information on how to prevent Braska's death; but he now suspected it would be more important to remain by the summoner's side to ensure he could step in if anything went awry. Perhaps, he reflected, there would be time to fit in a few quick consultations of the archives in the evenings, or early in the morning. It might require him to lose a few hours of sleep, but if so, he would have to accept it.

He looked at Braska again, and felt a familiar sensation in his chest that he knew had nothing to do with being at sea.

They stood there silently as they approached land and the sailors eventually began to make preparations for docking. Braska kept his gaze fixed on the sea, and then on the land once that replaced it in his field of vision; he found it strangely calming to see all Spira laid out in front of him in such a way. That and Auron's presence beside him – the feeling of Auron's rough, warm palm against his own – ensured that he was in a noticeably better mood than earlier, even if he was still a little tired after the sending, and apprehensive about the next few days' activities.

They made their way off the ship, letting go of each other to allow themselves to exit in single file, although once they were on dry land Braska instinctively reached for Auron's hand again; he had become used to the contact by now. Moments later, Jecht joined them, glanced down at where their hands touched, and then looked at Auron, raising an eyebrow; Auron stared back defiantly.

"Nearly time for dinner," he said. "Let's find somewhere to stay."

As they walked, he began to realise just how much less tense he felt now that he was back on the mainland. Being either at sea or close to it for the past week had taken more of a toll on his wellbeing than he had been aware of at the time. There was still Braska to worry about, of course, but he was

starting to feel more optimistic about seeing him through the next few days and then getting back to his quest as the pilgrimage continued. By the time they found a hostel that offered accommodation at reasonable prices, he was cheerful enough to greet the clerk with a friendly hello and even enquire about how far the blitzball season had progressed.

"You're in luck," he said to Jecht, having ordered some dinner and joined the others at the table where they sat. "Lots of blitzball matches at the moment, apparently. I don't know if any of the teams would have space for you, but at least they're all active. Better than the place being deserted."

"Great!" said Jecht. "Thanks, Auron." He considered. "I guess it's gonna be different than what I'm used to. Can't see how you can play in a proper sphere if they ban most of the equipment and stuff."

"Machina?" said Auron. "Blitzball-related ones are fine. Never been any restrictions on them. It's really the only entertainment we have – it lets people forget about Sin for a while. So there are allowances made that you don't see elsewhere."

"And Yevon's OK with that?" said Jecht.

Auron shrugged, removing his gauntlet as a member of the hostel staff began to approach with their dinner. "Seems like it."

"There's a reason why the stadium's in Luca and not Bevelle," Braska added. "People have a looser interpretation of the teachings here. Some of the priests in Bevelle would rather

blitzball didn't exist, I'm sure, but it's so popular they daren't try anything."

"Huh, right," said Jecht. "You know, Braska, I'm surprised you went back to live in Bevelle, considering – uh, you know –"

"My heathen wife and half-breed daughter," said Braska quietly.

"Uh, well, yeah," Jecht went on. "I mean, wouldn't Luca be a little more appropriate? There's tons of Al Bhed here, right?"

"Residence permits for Bevelle are hard to come by," Braska said. "I was entitled to one through my family, even after everything – it would be wrong to turn down that sort of privilege when so many people are struggling. And I had thought those family ties would mean we would have allies there, too – although that turned out to be naïve."

"Oh," said Jecht, looking down at the steaming dish that had been placed in front of him a few moments earlier. "Right, sure."

"There was Yuna's education as well, wasn't there, sir?" said Auron hastily. "You thought she'd get better magical training in Bevelle."

"That's right," said Braska, with a little more vigour. "I suspected she'd be a mage – it's usually passed down through the generations. All my family were quite proficient, even if none ever showed interest in summoning. Bevelle certainly provides a better education in that respect than Luca does –

all those awful priests." He glanced at Auron, and added, "I'm sorry. But they *are* awful."

"They're … particular," said Auron politely.

"You used to be one, though, right?" Jecht pointed out.

"It was expected of me," said Braska. "I learnt my lesson – and I hope Yuna knows as well. People will encourage her to follow certain paths – to become a summoner, even, if everything goes to plan on our journey. But she needs to go the way her heart calls her. I hope nobody takes that from her." He paused. "Besides, it was clear from the start that I wasn't the right fit for the priesthood – that's why they packed me off to the Al Bhed, to begin with."

"That right?" said Jecht.

"Well, they needed someone to do their dirty work, so it made sense to pick the troublemaker," Braska explained. "The Al Bhed hardly tolerated me at first – I never managed to stay with them very long before they sent me away again. After a while they started sending some of their own men in exchange; that at least kept us on an equal footing for a while, but then one poor fellow went too far for the Yevonites and ended up in the Via Purifico."

"Oh, the labyrinth place?" said Jecht, while Auron concentrated studiously on chewing his dinner.

"That's right," said Braska. "Fortunately, he survived – the maesters hushed it up, of course. But it was a good thing too: we'd have had a second machina war on our hands otherwise."

"What did the guy do that was so bad?" Jecht enquired.

Braska shrugged. "I'm sure he was doing his very best to convince them of the utility of machines – but they should have expected that. And it's not as if Bevelle isn't full of the things anyway. Meanwhile, I was over at Home, trying to persuade them all that they should be praying to Yevon." He shook his head. "Ludicrous."

"Did you get much interest?" said Jecht.

"Hardly," said Braska, with a chuckle. "It was mostly just Rin, to begin with; it took me some time to work out that he was more interested in learning how to part the Yevonites from their money than converting. But he was a useful ally, all the same." He drew his spoon absent-mindedly around the edge of his bowl, and added more softly, "After the first few occasions, he was joined by – my future wife. She had an ulterior motive too, although I didn't realise it for a long time."

Jecht opened his mouth to ask another question, but caught sight of Auron's glare and decided to stay silent. After a few seconds, though, Braska took up the thread again, a small smile on his lips. "Can you believe I thought she was just interested in Yevon?" he murmured. "I was so oblivious."

"Yeah," said Jecht. "Sorry, Braska, but that don't surprise me one bit." He caught Auron's eye again, and gave him an exaggerated wink.

Auron frowned, failing to understand what exactly Jecht was trying to communicate. "You see the good in everyone,

my lord," he said, ignoring him. "It's a great asset."

"A great weakness, perhaps," said Braska. He leant back, pushed his half-empty bowl away, and added, "Well, I think it's time I took Yuna's sphere and went to bed – I need to get some rest before all this summoning business tomorrow. Enjoy the rest of the evening." He stood, placing a hand briefly on Auron's shoulder as he did so, and then slowly walked off to the room they had reserved.

Auron watched as Braska went, not even bothering to conceal it from Jecht. Braska was certainly doing much better now than he had been earlier in the day, he concluded: he had mentioned his upcoming practice with the æons and even talked about Girl without becoming too upset. That sort of thing was usually a good sign.

Once Braska was out of sight, Jecht leant forward over the table, and said, "So … somethin' you wanna tell me?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Auron.

Jecht smirked. "Thought you might've gotten somewhere with Braska."

Auron shrugged back, trying not to make it obvious that he still had no idea what Jecht was talking about. "He seems a bit happier," he said.

"Yeah?" said Jecht. "Any particular reason?"

"I really don't know what you're suggesting," Auron admitted.

"Oh," said Jecht. "I just thought, maybe you and him had … made arrangements. Thought that might've been why you were holding his hand all afternoon." Noting Auron's continually blank expression, he added, slowly and deliberately, "I thought maybe he'd agreed to have sex with you."

Auron felt his face suddenly growing very hot. "I don't know where you got that impression," he stammered.

"Guys don't walk around holding hands with their friends, Auron," said Jecht.

"Not normally," said Auron, "but you know he needs my support. He likes it when I'm physically close to him." He lowered his head and ran a hand through his hair. "Um, when I say *likes*, I mean –"

Jecht let out a cackle of laughter: it was always fun witnessing the rare occasions when Auron became this flustered.

"He finds it helpful," Auron went on. "More helpful than words, I think." Now that his initial embarrassment was starting to dissipate, he found the wherewithal to frown at Jecht and sit up a little straighter. "I suppose," he said sternly, "as soon as two people hold hands in your Zanarkand, that means they're involved."

"Involved," Jecht echoed, smirking at the euphemism. "Well, yeah, usually. Wouldn't it mean that here?"

Auron couldn't deny that he had briefly wondered whether the increase in physical contact with Braska had been a sign of something else, but he certainly wasn't going to mention that

to Jecht. He was sure now that it was just a result of being on the road together for so long, and of Braska needing support in the face of the many challenges the pilgrimage presented to him. "Not necessarily," he said at last. "You know what Braska's like. Besides, we've already been through this: he's not interested in men."

"People can change," said Jecht nonchalantly. "You know, maybe he's gettin' horny after travelling for so long. Wouldn't blame him for goin' for you – you're hot."

Auron could feel himself turning red again. "Keep your fantasies to yourself," he muttered.

"Your fantasies, more like," Jecht said, chuckling.

"I'm not going to sit here and listen to you being crude," Auron snapped, standing up. "I'm going to bed."

"Makin' a long stop in the bathroom on the way, huh?" Jecht called after him.

Auron glowered, but Jecht was right: it was undeniable that his body was reacting to their conversation. Grateful that his robe had concealed the evidence from Jecht's prying eyes, he hurried to the bathroom as Jecht had predicted, carefully locked the door, tugged his trousers down to his knees, and perched on the cold toilet seat before taking hold of himself, using his other hand to hold his robe out of the way.

He made short work of it: opportunities to pleasure himself had been rare over the last few weeks, with so much time spent in Braska and Jecht's company, and having spent most

of the last few days either too under the weather or too worried to experience much arousal, the sensation was particularly welcome. With each clumsy, quick stroke along the length of his dick, he nonetheless couldn't help picturing Braska, as if Braska were the one touching him, or as if it was Braska he was seeing to, and that just made sure he came even more quickly, letting out a small gasp as he reached the point of release.

Moments later, he stood and went to the sink to wash his hands, catching sight of his reflection in the small mirror on the wall: his hair was messier than he had expected. Attempting to neaten it up, he couldn't help recalling the fact that Braska's image had come to him so readily while he was touching himself. It certainly wasn't the first time; he had long since given up denying that Braska was the primary object of his fantasies. But despite what Jecht thought, those fantasies weren't just sexual: it was thoughts of what the future could be that sustained Auron's hope for success on the pilgrimage. Braska, safe and happy and loved, with Auron by his side: the two of them quietly living out their lives together in a world without Sin, sharing quiet intimacy until they both grew old. That was the sort of scenario he sometimes allowed himself to picture, and as unrealistic as the nature of his imagined relationship with Braska was, he was determined to ensure that at least there would be a way of allowing him to live on after Sin was defeated.

He cast a final glance at his reflection and headed to the

bedroom.

Chapter **26**

The Greatest Help

Although the prospect of practising with the æons had been starting to worry Braska, he woke in the morning feeling surprisingly at ease. Once they were back on the road in a few days' time, he thought, he would find out for certain whether he was capable of wielding his æons. He would be able to put his doubts aside and decide at last whether to bid his guardians farewell, or to continue the journey to Zanarkand in the knowledge that he was worthy after all.

He rose and dressed as Jecht did the same; Auron, meanwhile, was permitting himself some more time in bed. Sleeping on dry land and not on a boat, and at a normal temperature instead of in uncomfortable heat, was even more pleasant than he remembered. Auron was normally a fairly early riser, but on this occasion, nothing seemed more appealing to him than staying on the hostel futon, which was somehow much more comfortable than the bed he had been given on Besaid. Half-

awake, he watched Jecht and Braska begin their preparations for the day, before turning over and letting himself drift back into unconsciousness.

Partway through breakfast, Braska realised nobody was nagging at him to eat more; he turned to Jecht, and asked, "Where's Auron?"

Jecht shrugged. "Think he's still sleeping."

"Oh," said Braska, frowning. "That's not like him. I hope nothing's the matter."

"Huh," said Jecht. "That'd make a change."

He meant it as a throwaway remark, but Braska narrowed his eyes and pushed his plate aside. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Uh," Jecht replied, meeting Braska's gaze reluctantly, "just – well, he's always kinda uptight, I guess, but this past week ..." He shrugged again.

"Yes?" Braska prompted him.

"I dunno!" Jecht protested. "He got stuff on his mind, I guess? Not like I asked him. And, you know, he was sick a couple days, so ... well, I dunno what's going on with him." He turned back to his food, not wanting to discuss Auron's physical and mental state any further. It had been pretty clear to him that Auron hadn't been on top form over most of the past week, but it certainly wasn't something he wanted to talk to Braska about.

Braska considered. He had known Auron was ill the day they left Besaid, but Jecht had said a *couple* of days; maybe, he thought, something had been going on that he hadn't noticed. Braska knew he wasn't always good at paying attention to Auron's needs; after he had gained the æon, of course, he hadn't been in a fit state to worry about anything except himself. But now, at the breakfast table, he was just settled enough to wonder about it, and he suddenly recalled Auron's confession about his newfound fear of the sea, which was something he had spent the last few days intermittently forgetting. It was no surprise Auron was run down after spending so long near the water, he thought.

"Poor Auron," he murmured, determining at last that this must be the cause of the trouble. "I hope he can relax while we're here," he added, while Jecht studiously ignored him.

Auron entered soon afterwards, fairly content after having allowed himself the indulgence of a little extra time in bed. "Morning," he said to the others, making his way over to the small coffee-making machina.

As the machina ground the beans and drooled out thick coffee into the cup Auron had slotted into it, Braska watched him carefully; he didn't look too tired, he thought, but Auron was always good at putting on a brave face. He wondered how he might speak to him: he didn't want a repeat of what had happened on their last morning on Besaid. Perhaps, he decided, it would be best not to mention the fact that Auron had been hav-

ing a hard time, but instead just go straight to the suggestion that he might think about taking a break.

"Auron," he said, once his guardian had sat down. "You should relax while we're here – take these few days to yourself."

"What do you mean by that, my lord?" Auron asked, sitting at the table with his coffee.

"I mean," said Braska, "I don't want you to be worrying about me all the time. I know you've been busy, organising everything and taking care of me on top of that; now that we're pausing our journey, you should do the same with your duties. I want you to enjoy yourself while you have the chance."

"But you were worrying about summoning," said Auron. "I thought you'd want me there with you." Next to him, he could see Jecht beginning to smirk; he raised a foot, feeling under the table for Jecht's leg with the intent of delivering it a sharp kick.

Braska shook his head. "I'll be all right," he said, not entirely convincingly. "I'm sure it'll be safe in the city. The Crusaders will protect me, if necessary." Registering Auron's displeased expression at the mention of the Crusaders, he hastily went on. "It's important that you get a break," he said, more firmly. "I'll need your support again after we leave this place, and it'll be no good for any of us if you have trouble providing it. You need to take care of yourself, Auron, for my sake too."

"I'm fine," said Auron.

"No, Auron, please," Braska insisted. "You have to look after your health. I don't want to make this an order, but I would be …" He considered. "I would be relieved to know you had taken the chance to rest. I do care about you very much."

Jecht's smile broadened; Auron finally located his shin, and kicked it firmly. Jecht howled in surprise; Braska turned to look at him, bemused.

"Uh, just cramp," said Jecht, reaching under the table to rub his leg.

Braska winced sympathetically, before turning back to Auron. "Please," he said again. "How about this: I'll have a go at summoning on my own today, and then if I decide I do need you after all, I'll ask for your support tomorrow. That's not too unreasonable, is it?"

Auron suppressed a sigh. He would be able to spend at least one day at the library after all, he thought, and it wasn't an opportunity he should turn down: it might make all the difference. "All right," he said at last. "But if anything happens, you should stop. I don't know where I'll end up spending the day," he lied, "but I suppose Jecht will be at the blitzball stadium, so you should seek him out if there's any trouble." He turned to Jecht, silently entreating him not to say anything in protest.

"Hey, he'll be fine," said Jecht dismissively. "Ain't that right, Braska?"

"I certainly hope so," Braska agreed. "Thank you, Auron – I'll be glad to know you're taking some time to yourself."

When breakfast was over, they made their preparations to leave and then went their separate ways. Jecht headed straight to the stadium: he'd spotted it as they walked through the city the previous evening. It was the largest and cleanest building in Luca: everyone clearly took good care of it. He knew now that blitzball was one of the few entertainments in Spira – there wasn't much else that could take people's minds off Sin. Spira might not have had the celebrity culture that Zanarkand did, but its people still revered blitzball – as they should, Jecht thought.

He felt his mood becoming especially buoyant as he drew closer to the stadium: it was almost like being back at home. Breaking into a jog, Jecht covered the last few metres with increasing enthusiasm. When he arrived and made his way inside, he found that the way in which the lobby was decorated was remarkably similar to how it was done in the minor stadiums of Zanarkand, and that realisation ensured there was a large grin on his face by the time he strode over to the reception desk.

"Hey," he drawled, resting his arms on the desk's surface. "The name's Jecht. You may have heard of me."

"I wouldn't say I have, sir," said the clerk politely.

"Oh, uh, yeah," said Jecht, abruptly remembering that as much as everything looked like his Zanarkand, he remained a foreigner. "Well, see, I'm a pro blitzer passin' through, and I'm itching to get in the sphere, you know? Just wondered

if there was a team with space for an extra player." It happened fairly often back home: someone would get injured in the sphere and would need to sit out a few matches. There were substitutes in the teams, of course, but not always enough of them – it was a particularly brutal sport sometimes. But Jecht had failed to realise that the availability of white magic meant such things weren't often a problem in Spira: if players got hurt in the sphere, there were always mages on hand to see to them quickly, and barring the most serious incidents, it was normally possible for things to proceed as if nothing had happened.

"As it happens," said the clerk, "the Al Bhed are down a player, if you're that desperate."

"Cool, I'll take it!" said Jecht. Braska would be pleased anyway, he thought. "You got a number for them?"

After talking at cross-purposes for a few minutes, Jecht succeeded in gaining directions to the Al Bhed team's locker room, and headed down there eagerly. When he arrived, though, he found the room deserted, save for a small device with a resemblance to Braska's sphere recorder.

There was a button prominently displayed below the small blue sphere; with nothing else to do, Jecht pressed it. After a few moments, there appeared a blurred image of a middle-aged man wearing goggles and some kind of skintight jumpsuit, his head and shoulders projected into the air above the

sphere. "Oac?"[4] he barked.

"Uh," said Jecht, remembering that the Al Bhed had their own language. "Sorry?"

The man seemed just as confused. "You're no Al Bhed," he said.

"Yeah, that's right," Jecht replied. "I was lookin' for a blitz team to join – heard you guys are a man down. You wanna take me on? I'm good."

"Never seen a Yevonite using our communications machine before," said the man. "Real urgent, is it?"

"I just wanna join the team," said Jecht.

"Look," the Al Bhed said, "I'm not falling for your tricks. We get enough Yevonites trying to fool us."

"Hey!" Jecht exclaimed in annoyance. "I ain't no Yevonite – you can tell, right? I wouldn't have used this thing if I was one – ain't that what you said? I'm here for blitz; I don't give a crap about Yevon. So will you let me on the team or not?"

The man paused thoughtfully. Hanta was his name; he'd been captain of the Al Bhed Psyches for many a long year, and had had the misfortune to see his team targeted by a number of Yevonite tricks in that time, usually attempts to discredit him and his players. He'd wised up to their schemes as he gained experience, although sometimes the saboteurs had managed to get one past him: the fact that one of his players was currently

[4] Yes?

out of commission, framed for a crime she hadn't committed, was the result of the most recent assault.

Few Yevonites were comfortable with using the prototype commsphere, though, and they certainly wouldn't casually profane the name of their faith, as Jecht had just done. For Hanta, that was evidence enough. He would give Jecht a trial, at least, and see if he really was a competent blitzer, before getting the rest of the team involved.

"Meet me in front of the stadium," he instructed him. "I'll be there in half an hour – we'll see what you're made of."

"Sure thing, gramps," said Jecht smugly.

Meanwhile, Auron had arrived at the library. He had visited Luca a few times before, but never this part of it; the library was right in the city centre, in a cleaner and quieter district than he had seen so far. It almost reminded him of Bevelle.

He went inside, and made himself known to the librarian at the front desk, explaining that he was hoping to use the facilities for research. "I'm interested in the Final Summoning," he said. "I'd like to consult your archive on that – and anything else you have about Sin."

"Have you visited before, sir?" she asked.

Auron shook his head. "Never."

"I see," said the librarian. "Well, you'll need to register to view those materials. The maesters are very strict about them, you see – they usually require written permission from one of

the temples in Bevelle. Either that, or we'll accept a recommendation from one of our regular patrons."

"I'm a summoner's guardian," said Auron.

"Ah, looking out for your summoner?" she said. "That's commendable – but rules are rules, I'm afraid."

Auron frowned, trying to think of a way he might be able to gain access to what he wanted. "It has to be a temple in Bevelle?" he said. "Won't one of the ones here do?" He might be able to persuade one of the local temples to provide a reference, he thought; they would no doubt be impressed by the fact that he was guardian to a summoner who had gained five æons. More importantly, they would probably be unaware of his disgrace, unlike their counterparts in Bevelle.

"Bevelle only," she said. "I'm sorry, that's the order."

Auron let out a frustrated sigh; he had come so close to locating some materials that might give him the information he needed, and to be turned away because of bureaucracy at this point was deeply irritating. *"Please*," he said. "My lord summoner is about to go to Zanarkand and petition for the Final Æon. It would be a great help –"

The librarian interrupted him. "No exceptions. I'm sorry."

"Damn it," Auron hissed, driving his gloved fist into the desk in annoyance. His outburst clearly offended the librarian, who moved a pile of papers hastily out of his way and said, "Sir, please. People are trying to study."

Auron grunted in response, lowering his gaze; if he pressed the point further, he knew, things would end badly. He turned around, preparing to leave, and came face to face with a familiar figure: it was the old man he had encountered a handful of times on the pilgrimage so far.

"Ah, a pleasure to see you again!" Maechen exclaimed. "Here to learn more about Spiran history, are you? A wise decision, I must say."

"No, I'm –" Auron began, and then he remembered what the librarian had said to him a few moments earlier. Turning back towards her, he said, "You said you'd accept a recommendation from a regular patron, didn't you? Would …"

"Maechen is one of our most valued supporters," she confirmed.

"And indeed," said Maechen, "it is very generous of you to say so. Most of my knowledge comes from roaming Spira and observing its wonders, 'tis true, but a visit to your facility always helps stimulate the old grey matter, and forge those cerebral connections that once seemed quite out of reach –"

"I'm sure," said Auron, cutting him off before he could launch into an extended monologue. "You wouldn't give me a reference, I don't suppose? I need to see these materials – they'll help me with what I was asking about when we met before. You remember?"

"Of course, of course," said Maechen. "You and your friend had the most fascinating queries: I really have racked my brain

trying to puzzle over the conundrums you put to me." Addressing the librarian, he added, "I can assure you that this young man has a fine enquiring mind. He will treat your holdings with the utmost respect."

"You'll be his guarantor, will you?" she said.

"Most certainly," said Maechen. "It is a joy to see the younger generation taking an interest in the mysteries of our land. Too often they are unduly concerned with swordfighting and spellcasting."

"You're very kind," Auron managed to say, while the librarian retrieved a form from her side of the desk and passed it across to them to sign. Maechen did so first, putting down an elaborate and rather illegible signature; then he handed the pen to Auron, who suddenly realised it might not be a good idea to supply his own name when Braska's pilgrimage already seemed to be under surveillance.

Adjusting his grip on the pen, he attempted to come up with a pseudonym. The only names that sprang to mind were Braska, Jecht, and Kinoc, none of which would be any less incriminating than his own; he cast his mind back over the last few days, trying to remember the names of the people he had met. It seemed that only the women had been keen to introduce themselves to him. Eventually, he recalled one of the conversations he had had with Jecht on Besaid, and carefully marked down the name of the boy Jecht had told him about: the one who had given him his new sword.

While he was wondering whether he had used the correct spelling, the librarian took the form and looked down at where he had signed. "Chappu," she announced. "From one of the islands, then? And you can read, can you?" She had become noticeably less friendly since Auron's brief outburst.

"Well enough," he said, hoping it was true.

"Fine," she said, handing him a small token. "Here's a pass for our classified archive – give that to the guard at the back and she'll point you to what you're after. When you hear the bell, that means we're closing and you'll need to leave as soon as possible. Anything else?"

"That's fine, thank you," said Auron, heading towards the shelves before anyone could call him Chappu again. He presented the pass to the guard as instructed, was shown to the materials on the Final Summoning, and grabbed an armful of books from the shelves in preparation for the day ahead.

Not too far away, Braska was getting his hair cut. He wouldn't have bothered, but it was gradually becoming difficult to ensure all of it was properly concealed under his headdress each morning. He had recently intimated to Auron that keeping the summoner's hair tidy should perhaps be counted among the duties of a guardian, and even located a penknife that Auron might be able to use to do so, but Auron had seemed rather reluctant, and so he had given up on asking and resolved to wait for this stopover in Luca.

There were several barbers in the city, but it took a few

tries before Braska was able to locate one that would cater to men of his ethnicity. Most seated their clients in a long row, where each could easily see what the next was having done: Braska needed a place with private booths, or at least with a screen that might shield him from the other men's view. Eventually, he found a barber who was familiar with these specific requirements, and who had a screen that could easily be set up and would hide Braska from everyone but the barber himself. He got into the chair and let his gaze settle on his own reflection, finding his energy rapidly drained by the barber's idle questions.

"That's you done, sir," said the barber at last, holding his portable mirror to the back of Braska's head so he could inspect the outcome; Braska forced himself to focus on the haircut, nodding to signal his acceptance. There had been a time when getting his hair seen to like this had given him confidence: even though he always went about with it covered up, the knowledge that it was neatly trimmed underneath whichever turban or skullcap he was wearing had made him feel smart and professional, more competent in carrying out his priestly duties. But these days, such things were rare, and on this occasion he felt much the same as ever: tired, disengaged, and much older than his thirty-five years.

It wasn't the barber's fault, he knew. He thanked him politely, put his headdress back on, and went over to the till to pay, handing over the requested sum without trying to hag-

gle. Having done so, he retrieved his staff and began to make his way to the docks, attempting to put aside his growing apprehension about spending the day summoning the æons – despite everything, it was coming back. He was increasingly convinced that sending Auron away had been a mistake.

Coming to the docks nonetheless, he forced himself to consider where he would stand so as to exercise the æons while maximising his own protection. He settled on a short pier that culminated in a set of steps, leading down to a small jetty below. There, he would be able to stay at the top and ask the æons to station themselves on the jetty, ensuring he was out of their way while still being close enough to issue orders, and allowing himself to practise commanding the æons in a combat situation: they would be able to attack the fiends that swam close to the water's surface.

He began with Bahamut: it almost felt like cheating. Bahamut already seemed like a friend – the creature was already so willing to respond to Braska's commands that practising with it was almost a waste of time. But it helped Braska become accustomed to how he would need to call the rest of the æons, at least. He worked his actions into a rhythm, repeating them over and over again until they felt like an unbreakable cycle: summon, attack, dismiss. After enough iterations of this pattern, it was beginning to feel no less natural than standing there and breathing. Now that the motions of summoning were so familiar, it would be easier to dedicate his attention

to the more difficult part of the task: persuading the æons to come that he was worthy of their service.

He dismissed Bahamut for the last time, and called Shiva. As he had discovered when he first did so, weeks ago in Macalania Woods, the gesture she favoured as a summoning was different from Bahamut's, and so it took him a while to integrate it into his routine. Knowing she would show some resistance, he held off on asking her to attack the first few times he called her, just concentrating on asking her to appear and then to take her leave again, focusing his mental entreaties on ensuring her smooth descent to the jetty and equally smooth return into the aether.

She was still strikingly beautiful: her otherworldly quality meant she looked like no living woman Braska had ever seen. It was impossible to deny that the sight of her aroused him: it was so easy to imagine reaching out and touching that frozen skin, running his hands over her scarcely covered breasts. What he didn't know was whether that was what she wanted. It could be a test, he supposed: perhaps summoners were required to give in to her charms in order to show their respect for her – or maybe, instead, they were supposed to keep their thoughts pure and demonstrate their capacity to resist.

He dismissed Shiva once more, and called Bahamut instead, reacquainting himself with the familiarity he shared with his first æon. There was nothing remotely sensual there, of course:

Bahamut's fayth was a child, and the æon a huge winged beast. But he used the opportunity to consider why it was that summoning Bahamut felt so comfortable. It was almost as if he knew them both well, the fayth and the æon: as if they were friends of some kind. He thought back to the moment they had first met, deep within the bowels of Bevelle's largest and most splendid temple. The journey through the Cloister of Trials had been long and confusing, serving only to make Braska more anxious about meeting the fayth while Auron had become increasingly frustrated by the convoluted system of gates and conveyor belts. The sheer number of machina had been enough to disconcert him, although Braska had barely been aware of it. He had had to devote all his energy to remaining on his feet and continuing towards the chamber of the fayth, trying to appear confident when all he really wanted to do was turn around and crawl out of there.

And then, for the first time, he had experienced the totally foreign sensation of having to share his memories with the fayth, and receiving the fayth's memories in turn. The retired temple summoner who had taught Braska had never spoken of this experience: it seemed to be the sort of secret that summoners weren't willing to reveal. Certainly Braska had found himself unwilling to describe it to Auron after that first encounter, even though he could tell Auron was keen to know what had happened inside the chamber. For weeks after that – and he had intended it to be longer, until Auron's arrest had

necessitated a change to their schedule – Braska had had to accustom himself to the feeling of having a second soul joined to his own. Bahamut's memories had seemed so vivid at the time, before he had received any of the other æons; sometimes, when he was on the verge of sleep, those memories had come back to him, and he had occasionally had trouble telling which of his thoughts were his own and which were Bahamut's.

It had been an uncomfortable and almost frightening feeling, and he had taught himself to reject it, sometimes finding that he had to empty his mind completely. But that time in Bahamut's company had at least been enough to strengthen the bond between the two of them and make it easy to summon the æon, knowing Bahamut would do his bidding. After meeting Shiva, he had been wary of something similarly unsettling happening, and had guarded himself against it – moreover, it turned out, the fact that Bahamut was already present within him had meant it was less easy for Shiva's memories to make themselves known. As he had received more and more æons, the chance that each one might present itself distinctly within his subconscious had decreased. He could still tell that their spirits were joined to his own, and he would have been able to draw them out individually if necessary; indeed, that was what summoning required. But at other times, there was little chance of being distracted by their memories.

Maybe, he thought, that was what he was doing wrong. Calling the æons would require him to let them into his mind

and begin to open himself up to their memories again: by avoiding the act, he had minimised the chance of that happening, and had, in turn, made them less receptive to him. The longer he had left it, the more he had pushed away those connections between himself and the æons – but they were connections he ought to be strengthening.

He understood what to do now. He needed to summon Shiva, and invite her into his mind; her resistance towards him was only because he resisted her. He needed to open himself to her, show her that he was willing to understand her and know her thoughts, and then, in turn, she would trust him enough to do his bidding.

He dismissed Bahamut, and called Shiva again. This time, he let her fully invade his mind, thinking back to the memories her fayth had shared with him and trying to recall them in as much detail as he could. He did his best to leave his own thoughts behind, and focus completely on hers: he pushed away all the sensations that were unrelated to the æon. The sea breeze, the contact his feet made with the pier, the tiny prickles against the back of his neck from the little cast-off strands of hair that had lodged themselves there during his visit to the barber. The smooth wood of his staff against his palms, the weight of his robe on his body. Even the dull knot of grief and fatigue in his stomach: all of it had to go.

It didn't happen all at once: that was impossible. But as Braska focused on Shiva, calling and dismissing her with me-

thodical regularity, all those things he was really feeling began to fade away, and he found himself drawn deeper into the æon's spirit, starting to see her thoughts as his own, feeling her distrust of him decrease as they gradually became one.

The afternoon was drawing to a close; Auron had worked his way through about half the material that looked relevant to his enquiry. There were fewer books on the subject than he had expected: had he been concentrating less hard on deciphering their contents and trying to piece together the infrequent scraps of potentially useful information within, he might have realised it was because the most revelatory publications had been moved to a secure location in Bevelle many years ago. But no such thought occurred to him, and so he continued to plough through what he had, even though his vision was starting to blur a little after hours and hours of careful reading.

At last, a bell rang out over the library: it was the signal that the librarian had warned him about. Auron was less disappointed by the fact he was required to leave than he had anticipated: most of the books he had consulted were very dull and largely irrelevant. Being a slow reader made the process of working through them seem even more interminable.

He left the library and began to head back to the hostel, rubbing his eyes as his vision readjusted to the outdoor light. As

he went, he considered the new information he had acquired: all it amounted to was a few simple facts, which, Auron knew, might not point to anything at all. He turned them over in his head nonetheless: Sin's behaviour had different patterns between each Calm. The time the Final Summoning took was apparently similarly variable. Summoners rarely made it back from Mount Gagazet with all their guardians – the climate and the fiends, it was supposed, formed a deadly combination.

None of it quite helped yet, but he would be able to consult the remaining books the next day if Braska insisted on leaving him to his own devices again. He had just finished ruminating on these few discoveries when he arrived back at the hostel; entering, he found Jecht stationed at one of the tables.

"Hey!" Jecht called, raising his cup of shoopuf milk in Auron's direction. Auron acknowledged the greeting with a nod before ordering a drink for himself – a measure of the same Macalanian vodka he had been served during their previous visit to Luca – and once it had been poured, he went to join Jecht at the table. "Is Lord Braska with you?" he asked.

Jecht shook his head. "Didn't see him. Guess he's still out."

Auron nodded, sipped at his drink, and then said, "How was blitzball? Did you join a team?"

"I sure did," said Jecht proudly, "the Al Bhed Psyches!"

"Fitting," said Auron, with a smirk. "Are they any good?"

Jecht shrugged. "Dunno. It was their day off – I was just practisin' with the captain. He wasn't that great, but maybe

the rest of 'em will be better." They'd spent the morning in the sphere, and then they'd had to give way for a team who had booked it for the afternoon – there didn't seem to be a record of the booking in the logbook, but the stadium staff had been adamant. After that, they had returned to the Psyches' dressing room and Jecht had listened to Hanta talking about anti-Al Bhed discrimination until he had been able to make his excuses. It was clearly a problem in Spira, he could tell, but it wasn't *his* problem.

"The team'll be there tomorrow, though," he added, more brightly. "Then the day after, we got a couple matches."

"Oh?" said Auron. "So we'll be able to get on with the journey the day after that? That's a relief."

Jecht raised his eyebrows. "Well, yeah, I guess. You just wanna get on with it, huh? Not interested in seeing the sights for a few days?"

"There aren't that many *sights*," Auron muttered. "Every day we spend here without collecting fiend bounties is just a drain on our finances," he explained. "There's no sense in staying longer than we need to; especially after we were on Besaid so long." His tone made his feelings about the island very clear.

"Braska thinks you need time off," Jecht pointed out slyly.

"What I need," said Auron, "is to get on with the pilgrimage without pointless distractions."

Jecht grinned, shaking his head minutely; if Auron ever took a day off, he thought, he would be a changed man. Then

again, he realised, it wasn't as if he had spent this particular day at Braska's side. "What were you up to today, anyway?" he asked.

Auron considered; there was no real point in lying to Jecht when he already knew what Auron was trying to do, he decided. "Don't tell Braska," he said, "but I was at the library. I'm trying to find out what happens when we get to Zanarkand – see if I can find a way of changing things."

"Oh," said Jecht, "yeah, gotcha."

"There aren't that many materials on the subject," Auron continued, detecting his companion's scepticism, "but I've still got more to go through tomorrow. I'm sure I'll find something."

"Yeah?" said Jecht. "And what if you don't?"

Auron shrugged matter-of-factly. "I have other leads. There's a man in Guadosalam – he said he'd show me their archives when we're back there. And the Ronso are bound to know something –"

"Auron," Jecht interrupted him. "I know you've thought about it an' all, but – seriously. What're you gonna do if … if there isn't anything?"

It wasn't like Jecht to be serious. Auron frowned, leant back, and then said, "Jecht, I had the highest honours of any warrior monk in living memory – and some of those priests have lived a long time. If anyone can work out what to do, it's me. I'm sure it'll all be clear enough by the time Lord Braska petitions for the Final Æon."

"You really think that?" said Jecht.

"Yes," Auron insisted.

Jecht shrugged. "OK, fine." He stretched out his arms, looked around, and then said, in a much lighter tone, "So, how about gettin' some dinner somewhere? I know this place does food, but there's gotta be more interesting stuff out there, right? I hear this is like the only place in Spira with a nightlife. We could check it out."

"Don't we see enough of each other?" Auron replied.

"Uh," said Jecht. He hadn't exactly been expecting enthusiastic agreement, but the bluntness of Auron's response had somehow surprised him. "I guess," he said, feigning disinterest. "Sure, guess I'll see you later then." He stood up and left; Auron bade him goodbye with a small, rather lacklustre wave.

Meanwhile at the docks, Braska was still practising with the æons. He had decided he felt comfortable enough with Shiva a couple of hours earlier, and had therefore moved on to Ixion. At that point, he had found himself having to go back to the beginning of the process, and had been somewhat discombobulated; he had become used to the intense familiarity he had begun to share with Shiva, the feeling that he and the æon were one and the same. It had taken him a while to acclimatise to the fact that he would have to do the same thing over again with each of them in turn, but at least he now had some awareness of how the process worked.

Still doing his best to shut out everything around him, it

took him a while to realise that it was starting to get dark. He hadn't yet summoned Ixion enough times to feel absolutely secure about him, but, he decided, he could stop for now and resume the process tomorrow. Dismissing Ixion for the last time, he stood at the end of the pier alone, taking deep breaths as he tried to reacquaint himself with his surroundings.

It was difficult, after having spent all day trying to dedicate himself to the æons – difficult to convince himself that he was really, fully in the physical world. He walked along the pier, frowning at the strange feeling of the ground under his feet. It was almost as if he wasn't moving his legs himself, but feeling them being controlled by some other being, one much more grounded and decisive than he was. He came to the other end of the pier, where it met the main concourse of the docks, and slowly registered the fact that there was a small crowd of people there.

Two of the people were Crusaders; the rest were civilians, mostly children and young adults. The Crusaders nodded at Braska as he approached. "Evening, sir," said one of them. "That was quite the spectacle."

"You were watching?" said Braska, the words feeling like somebody else's as they left his mouth.

"The kids were watching," said the Crusader, nodding towards the rest of the crowd. "Thought we should keep them back – didn't want them to disturb you. You're on pilgrimage, then, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Braska, "yes, that's right."

The Crusader peered at him for a moment, and then said, "Are you all right, sir? You seem –" It was difficult to describe Braska's condition: the summoner was clutching at his staff and blinking down at the ground as if unaware of how to react to the world around him.

"You're staying at one of the local boarding houses, are you?" the other Crusader suggested. "Maybe one of us could walk you back there?"

Braska nodded slowly. "Yes, that's kind of you. Thank you."

He could recall how to get back to the hostel, and led the way there with the Crusader by his side; he didn't really need a chaperone, but it put the Crusaders' minds at ease to know he would get back to his lodgings safely. When Braska had staggered back across the pier after finishing his practice, they had wondered if he might be about to collapse; now it was clear he could stand and walk of his own accord, but there was definitely something wrong with him. Once or twice as they went, his companion said a few words, but there was no response: it was as if Braska hadn't even registered it.

At the door of the hostel, Braska murmured, "Thank you. This is it."

"All right, sir," said the Crusader warily. "Have a good evening."

Braska nodded and went inside; he was immensely relieved to see Auron finishing off some dinner at one of the tables, and

made his way over to join him, still feeling as if he wasn't quite in control of his own actions.

"Sir?" said Auron. "How did you get on with – is something wrong?"

Braska had sat down beside him and rested his elbows on the table; he was covering his face with both hands. "I feel very peculiar," he mumbled.

Auron frowned, unsure whether to suggest Braska should go and lie down or to order some food for him; he knew full well that he wouldn't have eaten anything since breakfast. He placed a hand on Braska's shoulder, and said, "I think you should get some rest. Go back to our room and make yourself comfortable – I'll bring you something to eat in a moment."

"Oh," said Braska, "OK."

He rose to his feet and made his way clumsily to the room; inside, he removed his headdress and then sat down on the bed, looking down at his hands and wondering whether they were really his own. There was something not quite right about his surroundings: everything seemed much too neat and unremarkable to be a true reflection of how chaotic the world was. Human life was so complex, Braska found himself thinking, and yet people tried to make sense of it by building these hostel rooms and furnishing them with beds and mats and tables and candles: there was simply no point to any of it.

And then suddenly, the thought receded, as if Braska had been pulled back from the brink of a philosophical

breakthrough. He ran his fingers through his newly trimmed hair, already unable to tell whether the thought had even been his own. He could feel the æons' spirits inside him, Shiva and Ixion especially: they were so close to the surface. It was almost as if they were about to take him over. He wondered what would happen if he allowed them to do so. Perhaps it would destroy his body, he mused, but that didn't seem at all alarming; his body hardly felt as if it belonged to him anyway.

Soon enough, Auron arrived with a steaming bowl of soup, set it down on the table beside Braska's bed, and eyed him with concern. "Is there anything else you need?" he asked, wondering if Braska would even manage to answer.

Braska shook his head, looking up at Auron and willing himself to concentrate on the sight of him; like everything else, he didn't quite seem real. He wondered briefly whether his guardian was a product of his imagination; and then, quite abruptly, he realised that his imagination would never have succeeded in conjuring up anyone as attentive and loyal as Auron.

"Just you," he eventually murmured in response. "Would you stay with me for a while, Auron? Sit here beside me?"

"Of course," Auron replied. He sat down as Braska had commanded, beside him on the bed, and looked him over carefully, hoping Braska might be able to explain what was wrong so he could try to give more concrete assistance. But Braska merely sat there, looking at him with a somewhat dazed expression

before reaching out and taking hold of Auron's bare forearm, rubbing his thumb against his guardian's skin.

The act comforted Braska more than he had imagined. Making this physical contact with Auron served as proof that Auron was a real, living person; and by extension, that was going a little way towards convincing Braska the same was true of himself. Auron was nothing like an æon, he realised: he was a man who really existed in the world, a physical being, and at this moment, that was exactly what Braska needed.

"The new haircut's nice," said Auron, a little awkwardly.

Braska smiled at the sound of his voice: still more proof that the two of them were real people, truly existing in this room. He could feel himself gradually beginning to resurface from whatever strange abyss the æons had led him into. Having Auron beside him was the cure, and he couldn't believe it hadn't been obvious immediately. Being able to hear Auron's voice, and to touch his warm skin – that was all he required, as it so often was.

He shifted his position on the bed, gently nudging Auron to the side at the same time, until he was facing Auron's back; then, slowly, he hooked a finger underneath Auron's robe where it covered his right shoulder, and tugged it down to expose his arm so that he could take hold of both Auron's upper arms at once. He ran his hands over them, and let out a contented sigh: this was indeed reality. Auron had saved him from himself, and not for the first time.

"Lord Braska," said Auron, his voice shaking a little as Braska reverently ran his hands over his shoulders.

Braska stilled. Hearing Auron's voice again, so low and close, made him aware enough of his surroundings to realise that Auron might not want to be manhandled like this. He should have asked his permission, he realised.

"I'm sorry, Auron," he murmured. "You don't mind – do you?"

"I'll do anything you need, sir," said Auron. "I'm here to serve you. I just want to know why you're –" He stopped himself. "I want to know what's wrong. Let me help you."

"This is the greatest help you could give me, Auron," Braska assured him.

Auron frowned; something had clearly disturbed Braska, he thought. He wasn't acting as if he was upset and distressed; it wasn't quite the same as the occasions when he became withdrawn and sluggish, either. He had never seen Braska in this kind of state.

His attempts at rational thought were abruptly cut off by the feeling of Braska's hands in his hair, loosening the cord that held it in its ponytail; moments later, his hair fell over his shoulders, but then Braska had his hands in it again, twisting it gently one way and the other, passing his hands through again and again. Then, at last, he took all the hair and moved it aside, tucking it over Auron's shoulder to expose the back of his neck; and then he began to run his hands over Auron's neck and the

parts of his shoulderblades not obstructed by his cuirass, his breath slow and rhythmical against Auron's ear.

Auron had closed his eyes, and was trying very hard to keep his own breathing steady. This was entirely for Braska's benefit, he kept reminding himself; Braska was struggling with something, and this close contact was the best way of soothing him. But it was increasingly difficult to hold onto such thoughts, especially when Braska adjusted his position, resting his forehead in the place where Auron's neck met his shoulders and moving his hands to Auron's upper arms again, gently kneading his muscles. Auron couldn't help leaning into the contact; the experience was beginning to resemble several of his recurring fantasies.

And then Braska drew his head back again, and brought his lips to Auron's neck and kissed it; and he lifted them and brought them down again, moving ever so slightly to form an invisible path from one kiss to the next; and Auron sat there, holding his breath while Braska dotted three more sweet kisses across his neck, working his way gradually towards his ear –

Suddenly, it was too much. Auron flinched, letting his breath out in a quick gasp; Braska drew back at once as Auron leant forward and passed a hand over his face.

"I'm sorry," said Braska again. "I thought you said it was all right."

"It's fine," Auron lied. "If … if that's what you need, it's no problem." He turned to face Braska, barely daring to believe

that he was about to utter the words now in his mind, and then started to speak again before he could hold himself back. "You can – you can kiss me again if you –"

Braska smiled and shook his head; he now felt entirely himself again, just barely aware of the æons' presence. "Thank you, Auron," he said. "You're very kind, but that was quite enough. I feel perfectly all right now." From the bed, he picked up the cord that normally gathered Auron's hair, and said, "Let me –"

"I'll do it," said Auron hastily, taking the cord from him and tying his hair back again before pulling his robe back up over his shoulder. Braska watched silently as he did so, and then turned back to the long-forgotten bowl of soup.

"This is probably getting cold," he remarked. "I'd better have some, I suppose."

Auron watched incredulously as Braska picked up the bowl and slowly took a few spoonfuls of soup; that certainly proved he was feeling well enough now. He wanted to ask Braska what had been wrong, but he also wanted to leave the room immediately and put as much distance between the two of them as possible; and at the same time, he had to admit, he also wanted to take the soup bowl out of Braska's hand, set it carefully back on the table, and then manœuvre Braska into a supine position, straddle him, and allow things to proceed from there.

"Can I get you anything else?" he asked, deciding not to take any of those options.

Braska shook his head. "No, I think I'll just rest now. You should go out and enjoy yourself. Maybe you'll find Jecht out there somewhere."

Finding Jecht was very low on Auron's list of priorities. "Yes, maybe," he said. "Thank you, sir. I hope you rest well."

He made a swift exit, heading straight for the bathroom; once he had taken care of himself with somewhat embarrassing speed, he was able to think more clearly. Braska had obviously needed physical comfort, he considered; that had been the only thing motivating his actions. None of it had meant anything in terms of how he felt about Auron; Auron had just happened to be the person who was there, and so Braska had taken advantage of his guardian's services, as he had every right to do. It was Auron who had overstepped the mark, he concluded; he was the one who had practically begged Braska to kiss him, like some lust-stricken teenager. Now that he was at some distance from the situation, he could see how inappropriately he had acted.

He studied himself in the mirror. It was inevitable that there would be more occasions like that, he thought. The pilgrimage was clearly taking its toll on Braska, and Auron knew that kind of physical closeness was the best remedy for his struggles. He would just have to deal with it – it wasn't Braska's fault that Auron had deeper feelings for him.

He left the hostel and went for a walk around the district, drawing strength from the peaceful solitude it brought him.

Jecht had been right about Luca's nightlife, but there were sufficiently few people around for Auron to succeed in staying out of their way. After walking for a while, he found himself in a familiar street: it was one he had had pointed out to him on a previous visit with the corps.

There was an establishment on this street that catered to men of Auron's persuasion: it was unsanctioned by Yevon, of course, and was apparently the only such place in Spira. He had never visited before; among other reasons, there hadn't been much time for it when he'd been in the city on military business. Things were different now, though – and it had been a while since he had slept with another man. Perhaps, he thought, spending the evening in company would allow him to put aside his constant thoughts of Braska, or at least keep them sufficiently under control for him not to end up saying something embarrassing again.

He located the tall and grimy building, tugged the unmarked door open, and stepped inside, finding himself in a small, brightly lit room whose only hint of what lay beyond was the opulent beaded curtain hiding a set of stairs from view.

"Well, hello there," said the man behind the desk. "First time here?" Then he frowned, and added, "Wait – do I know you? You look familiar."

Auron studied him – he was about twice his own age, and entirely unrecognisable. "I don't think so," he started to say,

but the man interrupted him.

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "You were in the news, weren't you? A month or so ago?"

It had been more like six weeks by this point, but Auron nodded reluctantly, hoping the man wouldn't dwell on it. At least he could be fairly sure that he would be sympathetic to his circumstances.

"So you survived, then," the man said earnestly. "There's a few of us here – a sort of campaign group, I suppose. We were following your case – one of the boys sent you a letter of support, although I don't suppose it reached you …"

Auron shook his head, and said, "I'd rather not talk about it, to be honest."

"Of course, of course," said the man. "Just glad to see someone making it out of there with his life. But then, you're a warrior monk, isn't that right?"

"I was," said Auron.

"Yes," said his interlocutor. "My apologies, I didn't mean to – look, we'll give you a discount on our services. Fifty percent off, for your trouble." He passed Auron a sheaf of papers. "These are the lads we have in tonight. Not the biggest choice we've ever had, but I hope you'll find one who takes your fancy."

Auron leafed through the papers. Each one bore the likeness of a man, as well as an impressively detailed list of the same man's measurements.

He could tell he was being watched – rather more intently than he was comfortable with. "Quite a few Al Bhed," he remarked, trying to dispel the awkward silence.

"Unfortunately so," was the reply. "We can't always source many of our own sort – other things they'd rather be doing. You might be luckier if you come back tomorrow."

"Hm," said Auron, still looking through the options. None of the men stood out to him overall, but he found his attention settling on a pair of blue eyes here, a prominent cheekbone there; a pale, slender wrist – and then he stifled a groan. This wasn't letting him forget about Braska at all; quite the opposite.

He placed the sheets of paper back on the desk, and said, "Actually, I don't think I'm in the mood for it tonight. Thank you."

"No good?" said the man, visibly put out. "I can increase the discount, I suppose – sixty percent? And if you have unusual tastes, our lads are very obliging –"

"It's not –" said Auron. "There's nothing wrong with the … *lads*. I've just changed my mind."

"Maybe tomorrow?" the man suggested. "We'll have a better selection, I'm sure. I'll hold the discount for you."

"Thanks," said Auron. He doubted he'd be back, but there was little point trying to communicate that. "Bye," he added, and left without a backward glance.

Outside, he looked up at the moons, sighed, and walked back to the hostel. It was getting late; Jecht was still out enjoy-

ing the fabled Luca nightlife, but Auron was content enough to turn in. He changed into his nightclothes, got ready for bed, and then made for his futon, planning to get some good rest – but on the way there, he found himself pausing by Braska's bed, and looking down at the summoner briefly as he slept. There was no doubt about it: Auron had never had such strong feelings for any man before. Ensuring Braska's protection, and salvaging his happiness, was all he cared about. He would do anything for Braska's sake.

Chapter **27**

Shamefully Personal

"I assume you'll want me to accompany you today, sir," said Auron the next morning over breakfast.

"I told you to take time off while we're here," Braska replied.

"I took enough *time off* on Besaid," said Auron irritably. "Anyway, you weren't yourself last night. We agreed that I'd go with you today if there was any trouble."

"Yes," said Braska. "I know. I've been thinking about it, though – I really don't think there'd be any point in your being there. In fact, what I'm doing with the æons is –" He hesitated; it was complicated, and strangely embarrassing to explain. "It's very ... personal. I need to block out the outside world, as much as I'm able. Please don't take offence, but if you were there with me, I think it would actually be more difficult."

Auron blinked at him. "Oh."

"I'm sorry, Auron," said Braska softly, reaching over the table to give him a conciliatory pat on the hand. "I'm sure I'll cope. Please don't worry about me."

Auron looked down and willed himself not to argue. At least he would be able to spend the day at the library again; the thought wasn't that appealing, but he needed to make good use of the opportunity while he had it, as much as he was keen to get back on the road and return to the more practical types of research he preferred. He turned back to his breakfast, trying his best to concentrate on the food instead of on Braska, although when Braska eventually bade his guardians farewell and left for the docks again, Auron couldn't resist turning to watch as he departed.

"Had trouble with him last night, did ya?" said Jecht gruffly. As reluctant as he was to discuss Braska's mental health, the look of yearning on Auron's face was equally unpleasant to see. Jecht had thought Auron had more self-respect than that.

Auron looked at him, blinked a few times, and said, "No, not exactly. It was different. He was acting … unusually."

"Yeah?" said Jecht.

Auron hummed in response and raised a hand to his neck, gently touching the places where Braska had kissed it. It had been hours ago, and yet he still knew the precise spots where Braska's lips had touched his skin: he could almost recall the exact sensation. The kiss Braska had delivered to his forehead a week ago on Besaid had been shocking enough, but these

more recent ones – a whole chain of them, in a place that made it much more difficult to rein in his own desires – everything that had happened was still affecting him. Not that Braska had had any sexual intent, he reminded himself. It seemed to be quite hard to remember that.

"I thought you said you had two matches tomorrow," he said, somewhat hoarsely. "Shouldn't you be in the sphere?"

"Yeah, but gotta fill up first, right?" said Jecht. "Need a lot of energy for blitz, you know." He grabbed a bun – his fourth or fifth – stuffed it into his mouth, demolished it in seconds, and then lent back and let out a contented belch. "Right," he said once all that was over, "time to head out. See you later, tightass."

Auron raised his eyebrows to acknowledge the insult, and reached for the newspaper in another attempt to take his mind off Braska. It was the first time in a while he'd been able to catch up on what was going on around Spira, and, he supposed, he would do well to see if there had been any developments regarding the bill that proposed restricting the summoner's privilege.

It turned out nothing out of the ordinary had happened: Sin had been sighted in the last few days near Macalania, but, mercifully, hadn't attacked. After grappling with the articles on the first two or three pages, Auron resorted to looking at the headlines alone; he would have to spend the rest of the day reading, after all, and he was already fed up with it. Eventu-

ally, towards the back of the paper, he found a short column that covered the deliberations of the court in Bevelle. The bill on summoners was afforded only a few brief sentences, but it was clear from those that little headway had been made in coming to a decision. Clearly it was proving more controversial than its proponents had anticipated, which was good news for Braska and his guardians.

Admitting that he couldn't put off going to the library any longer, Auron finished his preparations for the day ahead, and made his way out. Reading through the books seemed to be an incredibly slow and dull way of acquiring the necessary information, he thought again, particularly when many of the sources he had consulted had said nothing of use at all. Talking to people usually allowed him to get to the point, although he had gleaned nothing useful by that method so far either.

Arriving at the library, he looked over the shelves housing the remaining books he would need to consult, and decided to get the oldest materials out of the way first. The first one, so fragile it was almost falling apart, was entitled *Antient Zanarkand: A treatise on her people and customs.* Auron leafed through it, mostly looking at the pictures, line drawings that depicted what were supposed to be scenes of daily life in a large machina city. Auron didn't know how accurate they were, but as he studied them and deciphered the surrounding text, he recognised a number of similarities with the Zanarkand Jecht had often talked about.

It seemed to confirm that there was some link between the two cities, he thought, just as he had suspected. But then – he frowned and ran a finger absently over the pages. Most machina cities would have been like this, he reasoned. They would all have had access to technology that was mostly unknown in modern-day Spira. And Jecht's Zanarkand was clearly a machina city as well, so perhaps the apparent similarities were because both places seemed strange and foreign to Auron, rather than any actual connection between the two of them.

There was nothing in the book about Sin or the Final Summoning, so Auron put it aside quickly. He supposed it was shelved with the others because Zanarkand was where the Final Æon was housed, although the book hadn't made any mention of the ruins the city had become. Like most of the materials he had consulted the previous day, it seemed to have been nothing more than a waste of time. He sighed and adjusted his position in his chair; it was something he was going to have to get used to.

Meanwhile at the blitzball stadium, Jecht was training with the full complement of Psyches for the first time. He had been relieved to discover that the poor quality of the captain's playing wasn't a reflection on the team's overall skill level: in fact, it turned out, he had won his position merely by being the only member of the team with reasonable competence in the common language. The other players were younger, faster, and

more accurate; Jecht didn't understand a word of what they were saying to each other, and Hanta usually didn't bother to translate, but they seemed to be accepting enough of his presence on the team, even if his abilities were quite clearly superior to theirs. Over the course of the day's training, he managed to pick up a few words of their language, the sorts of terms that were usually used in blitzball: bycc, pmulg, tnub, vispma, iddan fycda uv cbyla.[5]

As Jecht had noticed the previous day, the setup of the stadium was largely similar to those he was familiar with in Zanarkand; the sphere itself was also almost identical. The machina that were used to aerate the water in the sphere and make it easier for the players to breathe were larger and more primitive-looking than their Zanarkand counterparts, but they clearly did the same thing with the same level of effectiveness. The main difference was that a small group of Al Bhed sat close to the sphere, at the bottom of the tiered seating: they were ready to come to the team's aid with potions in case of any injuries. Hanta had explained their presence the day before, referring to them as alchemists, which Jecht had thought sounded a bit dramatic. Other teams would have mages on hand to do the same job; the Al Bhed didn't tend to use magic much, so they relied on potions that Hanta had promised him were more powerful than the Yevonite ones. Either way, it

[5]Pass, block, drop, fumble, utter waste of space.

meant immediate healing was available, which was something Jecht had never been able to benefit from during a Zanarkand match. He knew to expect even more vicious playing than he was used to at home as a result. Given that all he had experienced so far in Spira was training, nobody had performed any particularly nasty manœuvres, but he suspected things would change once they came to playing proper matches.

Thinking about the differences between Zanarkand and Spira was making him wonder about the similarities too. They used the same currency, as he had fortuitously discovered not long after arriving; and the language spoken by Yevonites was the same as his own. It was true that Auron and especially Braska occasionally used turns of phrase that Jecht found excessively formal or old-fashioned, but at least he understood what they meant most of the time. He didn't want to think about it too deeply, but it was a source of comfort nonetheless: it made it seem as if he wasn't that far from home.

Time wore on; back in the library, Auron was working through the last set of books. Most of them were short tracts on how good Yevonites should live their lives, which he found dull at best and deeply offensive at worst; some of the temples' convictions had mellowed over the centuries, and he could see why. Abiding by the rules listed in these books would be impossible. Indeed, a lot of their advice revolved around purging machina from one's environment, and living without those *was* impossible: that was why some of them were assigned to

the nebulously defined category that meant they were permitted, while the use of others was an open secret in Bevelle.

After a long and fruitless period scouring the books for mentions of the Final Summoning, Auron at last caught sight of a slim volume called simply *A cyclopædia of Sin.* Opening it, he found a handwritten note affixed to the inside cover.

This book, donated from the private collection of Yo Tertt, was damaged during an Al Bhed attack on his archive, a suspected sabotage attempt against Yevonite knowledge. Praise be to Yevon.

The note itself was yellowed and clearly fairly old; the book had to be older. As Auron leafed through it, he could see that the damage was extensive; whole sections had been torn out, and many of the pages were strewn with burn marks, so small and precise they could have come only from a mage's hand. The most intact part of the book dealt with the effects of Sin's attacks on the Spiran population; there was little there that Auron didn't already know, and the rest was quite clearly irrelevant. A section entitled *The birth of Sin* had been entirely removed; frustratingly, another, *The Final Æon*, was so damaged as to be mostly illegible. It was clear that reading it would be particularly difficult and would offer little reward; Auron wasn't particularly inclined to struggle through it. Turning the pages nonetheless in case anything caught his eye, he came across a set of illustrations.

The images were four depictions of Sin: each differed noticeably from the last. All of them were unmistakeably the

huge whale-like creature that was familiar to every inhabitant of Spira, but its monstrous structure was different every time: some had fins, some different kinds of limbs, some seemed almost short and squat while others were much longer and lither. None of them was quite like the Sin Auron knew, either.

Under each picture, there was a simple caption: the second read *Lady Yunalesca's Sin*, and this was followed by *Lord Gandof's Sin* and *Lord Ohalland's Sin*. The images showed the form Sin had taken at the point when it was defeated by each of these High Summoners, Auron supposed; Lady Yocun's Final Summoning was too recent to be accounted for. The way it was expressed seemed odd, though; it was a way of referring to Sin that he hadn't come across before. He had never heard anyone suggest that Sin *belonged* to the High Summoner who defeated it.

The biggest puzzle of all was the caption under the first picture. Lady Yunalesca was understood to be the first person who had defeated Sin, so long ago that she was popularly considered more like a deity than a High Summoner; but this sequence of images seemed to suggest that there had been another before her. The caption was impossible to read: it was obscured by the same kind of burn mark that adorned the book's other pages. Auron could make out the beginning of a *Lord*, and the usual *'s Sin* at the end, but the short name between them was impossible to discern.

He sank his chin into his hands and tried to understand. If

someone had defeated Sin before Lady Yunalesca, he thought, when could it have happened? Sin's emergence had marked the end of the war between Zanarkand and Bevelle, and Yunalesca had tamed it not long afterwards. That meant either somebody else had defeated it even more quickly, and brought a Calm that was remarkably short, or perhaps that hadn't been Sin's first appearance after all. But if that was the case, had Sin first manifested itself during the war, or before it? And, Auron realised, there was a much more important question: how had Sin been taken down on that occasion? It was always said that Yunalesca had been the first person to call the Final Æon: that was why Yevon venerated her. Perhaps that element of the story was true, even if the claim that she had been the first to defeat Sin wasn't; and that, Auron thought feverishly, must mean her predecessor had managed it using some other method.

A warm feeling rippled through his chest, at once soothing and exciting: it was the same influence that he and Braska knew well. *Hope.* Here, for the first time, he had come face to face with an indication that there was some alternative to the Final Summoning. All that was left to do was find it.

He exhaled quietly, forcing himself to remain rational as he considered the evidence. Sin's form changed between Calms; that suggested the Final Summoning really did destroy it, but that it somehow remade itself not long afterwards. Similarly, the rest of his findings suggested that Sin acted differently on

each appearance as well. It was as if Sin had a completely new mind each time. But he couldn't piece it together: he couldn't tell what it really meant, and how he would be able to use this knowledge to his advantage in his plan to find a different way of subduing Sin.

Conceding defeat for the time being, Auron rose to collect the final few books from the shelves, and spent the rest of the afternoon scouring them for additional information. Now that he knew what he was looking for, he noticed a few more indications of the fact that Sin changed from one manifestation to the next. None of what he read revealed more information than this, though, and by the time the bell rang to signal that the library was closing, he was no further with his investigation. But the discoveries he had made were certainly encouraging, he concluded. He took a circuitous route back to the hostel, glad of some fresh air and exercise after spending most of the day at the books, and pondered this new information about Sin as he went.

Meanwhile at the docks, Braska was engaged in summoning Ifrit. He had worked on Ixion as much as he was able, eventually feeling confident that he had won the æon's trust to the best of his ability; and after that he had reluctantly turned his attention to the next of them. Like the previous day, switching from an æon he now felt familiar with to one that seemed like a stranger was jarring – especially in this case. The first time he called Ifrit, he was reminded of the last time he had

done so, back in Besaid Temple, where Ifrit had turned on him and struck him down. He was glad of the physical distance between himself and the æons on this occasion.

Familiarising himself with Ifrit was a struggle; he could feel more resistance than with the previous æons. All Braska could do was cling to the fact that fire was the element he felt most comfortable with, and use that in conjunction with his awareness of Ifrit's fayth's memories to encourage the æon to bond with him. Gradually, over the course of the afternoon, he found himself slipping back into the state he had fallen into when he was calling Shiva, and then Ixion: the same feeling of disconnection from the world around him, of losing himself in the æon, melding its mind with his own. Abandoning himself to Ifrit's memories, he let himself forget that he was standing on a pier in Luca and embraced the initially vague but increasingly clear thought that he might in fact be a merchant sailor on a Kilika Island of hundreds of years ago. Braska was hardly cut out for a seafaring life, not least in his inability to swim, but the more time he spent with the æon, the more it felt as if it was the only thing he'd ever known.

Eventually, an abrupt impact against the back of his knees brought that feeling to a sudden end. Braska had just dismissed Ifrit, and was preparing to call him again, but the unexpected sensation disturbed his concentration. Turning around slowly, he came face to face with a young boy who stood holding a blitzball, and who now seemed rooted to the spot by embar-

rassment.

"What do you think you're doing?" said Braska crossly. Had he been in his right mind, he would have undoubtedly spoken more kindly to the child; after all, the boy looked no older than Yuna. But while the interruption had drawn him out of the very depths of his communion with Ifrit, he still hadn't totally been transported back to reality, and the thought that he might wish to be lenient had failed to occur to him.

"Um," said the boy, "sorry. I was just practising."

"Well, you can practise elsewhere," said Braska. "Off with you."

The boy nodded glumly and scarpered off; Braska looked down at the ground and blinked a few times. Like the previous day, he had reached a point where the words coming from his own mouth felt as if they were spoken by someone else. On some level, he was perfectly aware of where he stood and who he was, but on another, he still felt as if he was very far away. At least, this time, the feeling was more familiar, and somewhat less alarming for it.

It was getting late, he slowly realised. There were no Crusaders in the vicinity who would be able to accompany him back to the hostel this time: that was clear enough from the fact that none had prevented the young boy from getting too close to him with his blitzball. But he managed nonetheless to find his way back, just as he had before, even though he was once again afflicted by the odd feeling of not really being part

of the physical world.

Auron was sitting at the same table as before, eating his dinner; relieved by the sight of him, Braska hurried to the next seat and settled into it, reaching out to clutch Auron's arm.

The contact still made Auron slightly uneasy after the previous night. He tried not to make any visible reaction, and turned to study Braska's face, attempting to discern whether the summoner was in the same strange state as before.

"Don't worry," Braska mumbled, feeling Auron's gaze on him.

"Are you all right?" said Auron sharply.

Braska gave him a slow nod. "I'm used to it," he murmured, "after yesterday." He looked down at his free hand and flexed his fingers, willing himself to believe they were real, all the while continuing to rub his other hand against Auron's skin.

"You haven't eaten, I suppose," said Auron.

Braska shook his head with a faint smile; Auron took that as his cue to stand, and gently tugged his arm out of Braska's grip before heading to the reception desk to order some food for him. Braska made no move to take hold of him again once he returned; it provoked in Auron a strange mix of relief and disappointment.

"Talk to me, Auron," Braska murmured, remembering that hearing Auron's voice had been an immense help to him previously. "Tell me what you've been up to."

"Oh," said Auron. "Well, I've just been looking around the city, I suppose …" He considered how much of the truth he might tell without making it obvious what he had really been doing. "I stopped in at the public library, actually. Thought I should read up on the sorts of fiends we'll encounter north of Bevelle."

Braska smiled; he was starting to feel better already. "That's very conscientious of you. But I shouldn't imagine there's anything you don't already know about fiends, Auron."

"Not much," Auron agreed, before undertaking to change the subject. "Did Jecht tell you he's playing two matches tomorrow? We'll be able to leave the day after, if you're ready. How have you been getting on with the æons?"

"We'll know once we're back on the road," said Braska, still looking down at his own hands. "But you're right, I don't suppose I should spend too much longer working with them like this. Better to get on and see … see whether the results are at all sufficient."

Auron paused, and then said, "What is it that you're doing with them, exactly?"

"It's difficult to explain," said Braska truthfully; there was something intensely and almost shamefully personal about the way he had been interacting with the æons over the past two days. "You shouldn't worry about it."

"I can hardly help it," Auron muttered.

At that, Braska looked up; he forced himself to focus on

Auron's face, and noted his guardian's tense expression. Auron was the sort of person to worry when something wasn't right, and Braska knew that full well. He had told Auron to take the time off and relax, he thought, and yet Auron still couldn't help being caught up in Braska's own problems. He should have known to expect it.

He raised a hand towards Auron and placed it against his cheek, letting his thumb brush against Auron's jaw in a way that he hoped would soothe his worries a little. "Forgive me, Auron," he murmured. "You know I couldn't do any of this without your help – but the æons are a burden only I can bear. Please allow me to do that."

"Sir," Auron replied automatically; the touch of Braska's soft, warm hand against his face was so distracting that he couldn't tell whether he was about to give in to Braska's request or protest against it. Braska now seemed much more himself than he had the previous night, he couldn't help thinking, almost completely normal, and yet he was still reaching out to touch him, still sitting so close –

A small sound startled them both: it was a member of the hostel staff, who had discreetly come to serve Braska's food. Placing it on the table, she walked off straight away, but the distraction was enough to make Auron regain his senses and draw back, while Braska let his hand drop.

"Eat," Auron muttered, pushing the dish closer to Braska. Braska frowned, but began to do so; Auron tried to look else-

where, but found himself unable not to stare at Braska as he slowly worked his way through the food.

Halfway through his meal, Braska laid down his spoon and said, "That's enough. Those æons have tired me out – I'm going to take a nap."

"Do you want me there with you, my lord?" Auron asked.

Braska shook his head; then, he reached out to take hold of Auron again in the same way for a moment, before letting his hand move towards Auron's hair and caressing it in a single long stroke, tangling his fingers gently through the end of Auron's ponytail. "Thank you for your help, Auron," he murmured, before standing a little unsteadily, taking hold of his staff, and walking away.

Auron's face was hot; he pressed his hands against it briefly in an attempt to cool himself down. By this point, he was completely confused about what Braska wanted from him. Such constant and intimate contact had made it extremely difficult for him to think clearly; all he knew was that he was in desperate need of either some fresh air or a few minutes alone in a locked room, and he opted for the former, hurrying outside, where the cool evening breeze was eventually enough to restore him to his senses.

Gradually, he concluded that the question of what Braska required from him was immaterial: all that really mattered was keeping him alive. The intense longing he felt for the summoner was a much smaller concern than this overall goal –

one that ought not to be affected by such irrational desires, even if those same irrational desires were exactly what motivated Auron to ensure he succeeded in his task. Not for the first time, he swore that he would leave no stone unturned for the remainder of the journey. It was time to do the rounds of the Luca temples, he decided, and see if there was anything to be gained from consulting their private archives and speaking to their resident summoners.

A few hours later, Auron emerged from the final temple, with little to show for his investigations. The opportunity to do some more research, and in a more practical way than he had undertaken so far in Luca, had at least brought a welcome change of scene and allowed him to turn his attention away from his feelings for Braska enough to go about his business without undue disruption. But the archives he had consulted had been of little more use than the one on Besaid, and the few temple summoners available had been interested in his enquiries but unable to offer much advice, given that hardly any of them had even attempted the pilgrimage themselves. At this point, Auron was tired and very much unenthused by the prospect of another day of similar investigations; moreover, with nothing more to act as an immediate distraction, his thoughts were beginning to turn to Braska again.

"Hey, Auron!" said a loud and familiar voice behind him.

He turned around. Jecht was heading in his direction, each of his arms draped over the shoulders of an Al Bhed man; the three of them lurched forward as a rather unstable unit. As they approached, Auron noticed a strong smell of beer and spirits; realising what Jecht had been doing, he suddenly felt even more exhausted.

"Fru ec drec?" one of the Al Bhed slurred, looking Auron up and down. "Ec drec dra puovneaht uv Jecht?"[6]

"Hud y puovneaht," the other protested. "Ra ec y Yevoneda."[7]

"Y crysa," said his companion, "frah ra muugc cu hela!"[8]

Neither Auron nor Jecht understood what they were saying; Jecht laughed along nonetheless, and addressed his fellow guardian. "Headin' back, huh?" he said. "Yeah, I was planning to turn in myself. Don't think I can party as hard as these guys. Not when we got a match tomorrow, you know!" He let go of the two Al Bhed and eyed them with mock gravity. "Don't forget, guys, we're playin' in the morning ..." Some of the few Al Bhed words he had picked up over the course of the day occurred to him just in time. "Dusunnuf! Sydlr, dusunnuf!"[9]

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[6]Who is this? Is this the boyfriend of Jecht?

[7]Not a boyfriend. He is a Yevonite.

[8]A shame, when he looks so nice!

[9]Tomorrow! Match, tomorrow!

"Blitzball!" the two Al Bhed replied, with a heavy accent but unparalleled enthusiasm. "Blitzball, blitzball!"

"Yeah!" said Jecht, hi-fiving them both before they clumsily took hold of each other and staggered away in the opposite direction.

Auron shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jecht," he said. "You were doing so well. What had it been – two weeks?"

"Huh?" said Jecht.

Carefully, Auron stepped towards him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You managed to stay sober for a while," he said, slowly and clearly. "But it was only a matter of time, wasn't it? Do you remember how much you've had?"

"What the hell?" Jecht exclaimed, shaking Auron's hand off himself. "I didn't have anything, you weirdo. Those guys were the ones drinkin', not me."

"Really?" said Auron sceptically.

Jecht leant forward and breathed noisily into Auron's face; Auron flinched away in disgust, but he had to admit that the one scent he could detect in Jecht's hot, moist breath was nothing more incriminating than the now regrettably familiar smell of shoopuf milk. "Fine," he said. "Those two smelt strong enough to make me think –"

"I know," said Jecht. "Dunno how they'll be ready for the match tomorrow, to be honest. But I kept my promise, Auron, give me some credit."

"Yeah, sorry," Auron mumbled, turning away to stare down the street.

"It's this way, right?" said Jecht.

Auron turned back towards him slowly, and then said, "Do you ever wish you were normal?"

"What's that meant to mean?" said Jecht suspiciously.

"I suppose it's different for you," said Auron, "when you're interested in women as well, but …" He shrugged and began making his way back to the hostel, letting Jecht walk alongside him. "I don't know. I've mostly made my peace with it, but sometimes I can't help wondering. It would certainly have avoided a lot of trouble."

"Is this about Braska?" Jecht guessed, remembering the expression he had noticed on Auron's face during breakfast.

"Yeah," said Auron. "Mostly." He considered: it wasn't as if he was keen to share the details of recent events with Jecht, of all people, but at least Jecht knew what it was like to be attracted to other men, and was even willing to talk about it. "Whatever he's doing with the æons," he said reluctantly, "it's making him a lot more … physical than he was before."

"Even more than that, huh?" said Jecht with a grin.

"When he got back tonight," said Auron, ignoring the remark, "he just started, er, stroking my face – and last night, he –" He really hadn't wanted to tell Jecht about this. "He *kissed* me. Several times."

"What?!" Jecht yelled. "Seriously? Hey, uh, congrats, man! Why'd you keep that quiet?"

Auron frowned. "No, I don't mean – it wasn't – it was on my neck." He indicated the area with a trembling finger.

"Hot," said Jecht appreciatively. "So you didn't go any further?"

"That's not what he wants," said Auron. "He's not doing it because he has feelings for me – he just needs someone beside him. He'd have done the same to you."

"You really think that?" said Jecht.

"If I start thinking otherwise," Auron said quietly, "I'll – by Yevon, Jecht. I'll go out of my mind."

They were both silent for a while, and then Jecht said, "I dunno why you're talking to *me* about this, Auron. You should tell him. He obviously don't realise it's, you know, affecting you."

Auron shook his head. "I can't tell him. He's having a hard enough time as it is – he doesn't need to know I'm pining after him like a little boy. I just wish I didn't have to be so stupid about it. As soon as he touches me like that, I just lose the ability to think straight."

"Yeah, no wonder," said Jecht. "It's natural. Not like you can stop it happening."

"I don't know about *natural*," said Auron. "Something must have made me this way. Growing up in the barracks with all

those other boys, maybe – none of them turned out like me, but I was younger when I moved in –"

"You serious?" Jecht interrupted him. "Growing up surrounded by guys ain't gonna turn you gay. And even if it did, what's the problem? No point regretting it, right?"

Auron hummed in agreement, but ran a hand through his hair at the same time, still feeling uncomfortable. Discussing the matter with Jecht had made him feel a little less on edge about it, but Jecht's responses hadn't entirely lined up with what Auron had been expecting. It was one of those cultural differences, he supposed.

They walked the rest of the way back without much more conversation. On reaching the hostel, they headed to their room and found Braska awake, having taken his sphere for Yuna and started reading a novel from the hostel's meagre collection. "Evening," he murmured as his guardians walked in.

"Hey," said Jecht. "Good book?"

Braska smiled, and showed him the cover. "It's terrible. Typical popular Yevonite literature: completely convoluted plot, far too moralistic, and an awfully inaccurate portrayal of the Al Bhed, of course."

"Sounds pretty lame," Jecht concurred. He turned back to glance towards Auron, and found his fellow guardian sitting on his futon with his legs crossed, resting his chin in his hands and staring at Braska; he looked suspiciously like he was about to cry. Jecht instinctively found the sight repulsive. He was

used to Braska's emotional moments by now, but the thought that Auron might succumb to something similar was highly disturbing. He'd thought Auron was a real man, at least.

Searching for a conversation topic that might distract Auron from his emotions, he said, "So, Auron. You said you joined the monks young, right? So what, you were a little kid, huh?"

Auron slowly looked up at him, and said, "Yeah, that's right. Around five, I think."

"No fucking way," said Jecht. "So you were, like, a child soldier?"

"Not as such," said Auron, frowning as he considered how to explain it. "Apprentice monks usually start training at about eleven or twelve – and we weren't sent into combat for another three or four years. I started a bit early, but in the early days I was more like a ward of the barracks, really. The first few years of my training were just fundamental self-defence and a few key points of doctrine – nothing that complicated."

"It's odd that they sent you to the warrior monks," Braska pointed out. "Usually children orphaned by Sin enter temple service, and eventually join the clerical order. The military division tends to get more young men and women from Bevelle families. It's quite an exclusive group."

"Well, I wasn't sent there straight away," Auron explained, his face flushing only a little as he made eye contact with the summoner. "I spent a few months in a temple first – apparently the priests decided I wasn't suited to it. They thought

the warrior monks would be a better fit for someone with my temperament. That's what I was always told."

"That must have been unusual," Braska mused. "Although, having said that – when I was starting my own clerical training, I remember the priests in the temple where I was apprenticed were having awful trouble with one of their wards. I think they did something similar with him in the end – persuaded the warrior monks to take him in instead, even though he was small."

He had only been a teenager himself at the time, but he just about remembered the boy in question: a much more headstrong, emotional child than the few other temple wards had been. He had been easy to upset, and had always picked fights with the other children; the priests had clearly struggled to control him. But there was no wonder the boy had been so troubled; his family had been brutally killed by Sin, in one of the most devastating attacks on record.

"Oh," said Braska out loud, a smile slowly spreading across his face as he realised what must have happened. "Thank all the fayth. What a remarkable coincidence."

"Sir?" said Auron.

"The temple where you spent those few months," said Braska, "it was the minor sanctuary of Ramuh, wasn't it? On the northern side of Bevelle?"

Auron frowned. "I know it was north Bevelle, but I'm not sure which temple it was. I barely remember it."

"Oh, Auron," said Braska, still smiling as he shook his head in disbelief. "That's where I undertook the first part of my training. That boy I mentioned – I'm sure it was you. It fits, doesn't it?"

"You think so?" said Auron.

"The more I think about it," said Braska, "the more certain I am. I can almost picture him – dark hair just like yours, tall for his age –" He chuckled. "You always looked so angry."

"Sounds like Auron, all right," said Jecht smugly.

"You were constantly fighting with the other children," Braska went on. "The priests really didn't know what to do with you. I remember one occasion when you broke another boy's collarbone; they asked me to heal it. It was quite a test of my abilities at the time. Goodness me, Auron – the more I think about it, the more I remember. You really were uncontrollable."

"Kinda hard to imagine," said Jecht.

Auron shrugged. "There was a lot of emphasis on discipline at the barracks; I suppose that was what I needed."

"Well, they clearly did a much better job of raising you than those priests did," said Braska. "Look how splendidly you turned out in the end."

"You're very kind, sir," Auron mumbled, lowering his head. He was usually better at accepting compliments – after all, until recently, he had received them fairly often – but he was still wrestling with his feelings for Braska, and the discovery

that they had briefly known each other so long ago had hardly helped with that.

"I just can't believe it," said Braska. "And that we met again, after all those years – it must have been fate."

"I suppose so," said Auron.

Braska smiled at him, and then stood up. "Time to get some rest, I think," he announced, before donning his headdress and heading out to the bathroom.

Once he was gone, Auron covered his face with both hands and sighed deeply.

"Fuck's sake!" said Jecht, stepping across to Auron's futon and shoving roughly against his shoulder. "If you ain't gonna say anything to him, at least try to get over yourself, will ya? You ain't doin' yourself any favours actin' all pathetic like that, come on."

Auron raised his head; Jecht was supremely unsympathetic, he thought, but it was a valid criticism. "Yeah," he said, "you're right. I ought to be used to it by now. Thanks." He stood up and began to change into his nightclothes, aware that Jecht was watching him; when he had finished, he turned back towards him, and hissed, "What?"

Jecht snorted in amusement; this was a side of Auron he was much more comfortable seeing. "You OK now?" he teased him.

"I'm *fine*," said Auron. "As if you care."

Jecht chuckled. “Sweet dreams,” he said, as Auron rolled his eyes and lay down.

Chapter **28**

Hot Stuff

Braska left early the next morning; he was determined to give the æons his best shot on his final day of practice. His guardians took a more leisurely breakfast; Jecht knew he would need plenty of energy for his blitzball matches, so he was careful to sample as much of the food as possible.

"Wanna come watch the games?" he said to Auron. "You ain't seen me doing my stuff yet."

Auron was instinctively inclined to refuse; but, he found himself thinking, he wasn't keen on spending a third day at the library either when there was undoubtedly no more information to be found in Luca. As he had concluded the day before, the best thing to do at this point was simply to get back on the road again. If he tried to spend the day doing more research, his only reward for it would be increasing frustration. If he spent the time at the blitzball stadium, on the other hand, he would have some time to think while being able to benefit from

the distraction of watching Jecht play. The fact that he would need to get so close to a body of water was unappealing, but blitzball spheres were nothing like the large lakes and seas he had found difficult to cope with on the journey, and as he had found on Besaid, exposing himself to it seemed to be beneficial anyway.

"I can get you a good seat, probably," Jecht added. "Right up front, near the action, you know?"

"That won't be necessary," said Auron. "But … I mean, I don't really have anything else to do today." He would need to ensure there were enough clean clothes and rations before they resumed the journey the next morning, but that wouldn't take too long. "I suppose I could come and watch."

"Really?" said Jecht, beaming. "Awesome, man! You won't regret it – my skills are gonna blow your tiny mind. Did I tell you about my shot?"

He launched into an enthusiastic explanation of the Jecht Shot, for about the fourth or fifth time since the two of them had met. Auron nodded and hummed along, finding his mind turning back to what he would need to do over the coming days of the journey: speaking to the Crusaders was a priority, as much as he was reluctant to admit it. That was if Braska even consented to continue the pilgrimage. If not – he would have other, more urgent priorities.

Jecht departed soon afterwards, eager to get to the Psyches' final short practice before their matches; Auron made a start

on some of the domestic duties, and then, when the time came, he headed over to the stadium himself.

He took a seat towards the back as he had planned, finding it bearable enough. There weren't many people in the audience; Auron was a bit early, but at the big matches, the stadium would fill up a long time before the match started. The population of Luca were clearly uninterested in the morning's fare. He watched idly as a few people drifted in and took seats in the rows in front of him; with the place so empty, there was no need for any of them to sit as far away as he had.

"Hey," said a voice behind him. "Uh, don't you wanna get closer?"

Auron turned around and frowned at Jecht. "I'm fine here," he said. "Shouldn't you be getting ready?"

"In a minute," said Jecht. "Just came to give you this." He held out the sphere recorder; before leaving that morning, he'd had the bright idea to ask Auron to capture some footage that he would be able to show to Tidus. In Zanarkand, the filming rights for matches were strictly controlled by the local television companies; Jecht had correctly guessed that Spira had no such restrictions. If the kid really wanted to be a blitzball star, Jecht thought, he would do well to see how the professionals did it.

Auron looked down at the machina, unimpressed. "Really?" he said. "Why?"

"I'll explain later," said Jecht. "Just do me a favour, yeah,

get some good shots for me? Don't suppose you'll manage any close-ups from here, but you'll get a good overall view of the action, at least."

"There's probably not enough space on the sphere to record the whole match," Auron pointed out.

Jecht shrugged. "I guess. Just turn it on when it looks like I'm gonna take possession, then. Although that'll probably be the whole thing anyway, ha! I'm gonna smash these guys."

"Who are you playing?" said Auron.

"I was gonna ask you about that, actually," Jecht replied. "Tried askin' the team, but the language barrier, you know – it's the Ronso Fangs. We ain't been through Ronso, right? Where is it – other side of Bevelle, I'm guessing?"

Auron blinked at him for a moment before realising the exact nature of Jecht's misunderstanding. "Ah," he said. "No, it's not a *place* – the Ronso are a people. North of Bevelle is right – they live on Mount Gagazet."

"Oh, yeah," said Jecht. "You said we're goin' that way later, didn't ya?"

"That's right," said Auron. "You'll know the Ronso when you see them – they're pretty unmistakable." He suppressed a grin; tempting as it was to describe the Ronso's appearance to Jecht, he knew he would also enjoy seeing Jecht's expression when he came face to face with them in the sphere without prior warning.

"Ain't heard you guys talking about 'em before," said Jecht. "So, what, are they like the Al Bhed or something?"

"Not as such," said Auron. "They're Yevonites, for a start. You'll see."

"See what?" said Jecht suspiciously.

Auron shrugged. "The match is about to start, isn't it?" he said, affecting innocence. "Shouldn't you get going?"

Jecht grunted, and then said, "I guess. Wish me luck – not that I need it."

"Have fun," Auron muttered.

Not long afterwards, the Psyches and Fangs took up their positions in the sphere. In prime position, Jecht directly faced his opposite number, one of the Ronso forwards; he had rapidly realised why Auron had seemed to take such delight in refusing to reveal any details about them. The Ronso were enormous, all more than two metres tall; but that was hardly their most remarkable feature. Much more disconcertingly, they looked more like huge cats than like humans, with flat, solemn faces and dark blue fur growing all over their bodies. And yet they were positioned in the blitzball sphere ready to play and, Jecht suspected, would have been perfectly capable of walking around outside on two legs and even interacting with the general public. If Jecht had ever doubted that Spira was a deeply bizarre place, this just served as proof.

The match began, and he found himself noticing more about the Ronso that undoubtedly contributed to their id-

iosyncratic playstyle. Their excessive size meant they were particularly difficult to tackle, but they moved slowly, making it possible to mount a number of offences, of which one would always eventually succeed. When the Psyches had possession, the Fangs were notably less of a challenge; they seemed unable to channel their physique into effective attacking in the same way that they could use it for defence. The main thing to watch out for was the sharp horns protruding from their foreheads; Jecht had been so blindsided by their general appearance on first entering the sphere that he hadn't even noticed these at the time, but they quickly became difficult to ignore. As the match went on, all the Psyches found themselves gored by these horns with increasing frequency, requiring several visits to the medics who were ready at the edge of the sphere. The Al Bhed remedies acted instantly, though, like all Spiran medicine, and so it never took much time to dash away from the action, be healed, and enter the fray again.

Up in the stands, Auron was making judicious use of the sphere recorder. He had looked forward to seeing the expression on Jecht's face when the latter realised what sort of creatures he was facing, but Jecht's ability to hide his instinctive reactions on the outside was too developed. The only clue to his surprise was the fact that he was slightly less decisive in his moves than he would normally have been, although Auron lacked the experience that would have

allowed him to recognise this. Now that the match had been underway for a while, he had become quite invested in the process of capturing footage on the sphere, trying to predict when Jecht would take possession so he could set up the optimal shot each time. He was frequently incorrect, and suspected that most of what he recorded had failed to capture Jecht's feats at all. Still, it was an entertaining challenge, and a welcome distraction.

Half-time came and went; Jecht returned to the sphere with increased determination. Now that he was somewhat accustomed to the Ronso and the need to dodge their horns, he felt renewed optimism about his performance. In the second half, he succeeded in rightfully dominating the sphere, scoring several goals with increasingly ambitious setups, and making victory for the Psyches inevitable.

Auron couldn't deny that he was impressed by Jecht's performance. The need to record it on the sphere was forcing him to pay attention, and he could tell that Jecht was getting into his stride as the match went on. Even with only rudimentary blitzball knowledge, he could recognise that Jecht was leagues better than most of the other players. The Fangs had never been known for any particular prowess in the sphere; the Psyches seemed to have good and bad seasons, although their reputation was harmed by the fact that Yevonite blitzball fans universally insisted they were terrible. Regardless, Jecht was clearly the one carrying the team. When he scored a final goal

with seconds to spare, the few scattered Al Bhed in the audience rose to their feet, pumping their fists in delight; Auron was surprised to find himself briefly doing the same, and sat down again feeling rather sheepish. He could only hope the sphere recorder hadn't picked up the quiet yell of triumph he had found himself letting out when the ball made it past the goalkeeper.

Soon after the match finished, Jecht returned to Auron, energetic and dripping wet. "Well done," said Auron. "That was quite impressive."

Jecht sat down next to him, and said, "Whoa, must've been good, if you're complimenting me."

Auron shrugged. "Well, I expected you to be good at it. It's your job."

"And I am," said Jecht. "Took me a while to get into my stride, though, cos some asshole thought it'd be funny to not tell me the Ronso are, I dunno, giant fuckin' cats or something …"

"You didn't seem that put out by it," said Auron.

"Could've used a warning," Jecht grumbled.

Auron smirked, and then said, "You shouldn't call them that, by the way." He lowered his voice. *"Giant cats.* They find that sort of language quite insulting, and, well, you've seen the damage they can do with those horns."

"You guys say worse about the Al Bhed," Jecht pointed out.

"Not personally," said Auron. "But you're right, a lot of Yevonites don't think twice about insulting them." He himself had been accustomed to referring to the Al Bhed in disparaging and often coarse terms as a boy – they all had, in the barracks – but meeting Braska had quickly put an end to that.

"Kind of a double standard, then," said Jecht.

"People are prejudiced," said Auron, "what's new? The Ronso are the custodians of Mount Gagazet, and that's a sacred place for Yevonites, so nobody wants to get on their bad side. It's like how the Guado control the Farplane – especially since they were converted to Yevon, everyone knows it's best to respect them. People just don't see the Al Bhed as having much to offer."

"Except machina," said Jecht.

"And Yevon teaches that those are wrong," Auron promptly responded.

"But you guys use them all the time."

Auron raised his eyebrows. "I never said the teachings weren't hypocritical."

They sat there a little longer, going through the motions of a political and religious debate without really putting much feeling into it: it was a conversation they had had a few times on the pilgrimage, and Auron was no longer sufficiently invested in Yevon to care very much about winning Jecht over. It was strange, he reflected: he felt very detached from the faith he had once been so determined to serve. The temples

and their priests were a means to an end now, that end being saving Braska's life; any other value they might once have had to him had entirely faded.

"Guess I oughta be getting back," said Jecht at last.

"Who are you playing this time?" Auron asked.

"The Luca Goers," said Jecht. "The home team, right? Might get a bigger crowd; you sure you don't wanna get closer to the action while you have the chance? Now you know what a hot property I am?"

"I'm fine here," said Auron, smiling thinly.

Meanwhile, not far away at the docks, Braska was concentrating on solidifying his relationship with Valefor. He had arrived to find a small crowd of people already waiting for him; the news had clearly spread that some dedicated and slightly unhinged summoner was using the area to practise. Having made his way past the spectators as quickly as he could, he had started by putting the final touches on his work with Ifrit, glad to be able to ease in with an æon he was already familiar with from the effort he had made the day before. Then, not without apprehension, he had turned to Valefor.

She was hard to placate, as he had known she would be. He could tell she was resisting his attempts to let their minds meld and break through each other's defences, more so than the other æons had done, and he knew why. It was difficult not to be reminded of the traumatic day he had spent at Besaid Temple, as much as he was trying to block it out like everything

else; he was aware that Valefor would have a low opinion of his abilities after how that day had gone. But there was little he could do other than persist, summoning and dismissing Valefor over and over again without even trying to command her to attack.

Soon, he had slipped into the familiar trancelike state, hardly aware of anything but the need to become one with the æon. His movements had become mechanical: one gesture to summon Valefor, a few seconds' wait while she descended, then another gesture to dismiss her and another wait while she retreated into the clouds, and then the same cycle again. To begin with, he felt no change in the æon's attitude towards him; but gradually, he became aware that he was making some progress, albeit at a much slower rate than he had with the others. It was exhausting work: if Braska had been more aware of his own physical condition, he would have been in desperate need of a few moments to sit down and take a drink of water. As it was, he pressed on, waiting as little by little Valefor became marginally more receptive to his entreaties.

After hours of this inching progress, Braska decided it was time to advance to the next step. There were a few fiends swimming in the water below; Braska could tell they were weak, and would have been able to take them out easily himself with a handful of lightning spells. Asking Valefor to attack them would be a useful way of strengthening the tenuous bond they were beginning to form without demanding too much of her.

He concentrated on the command in his mind, eyeing the æon anxiously; she was still resisting, and for a moment, Braska thought he had made a terrible mistake. But then she bared her claws and swooped down, and shortly afterwards, a small explosion of pyreflies rose from the water's surface.

Braska smiled with relief; but, pleased with his success, he let his guard down for a moment, and allowed his intense concentration on Valefor to wane. Suddenly, the æon shot upwards towards the pier, heading in his direction with her claws still outstretched; Braska instinctively threw his arms in front of his face to protect himself, letting his staff clatter to the ground and his sleeves recede to his elbows. It was the right course of action: Valefor made straight for him, sinking her claws into his left arm and leaving a long, deep scratch.

He cried out, stumbling onto his knees and cradling his stinging arm with the other hand for a moment before gaining the presence of mind to cast a spell that would heal the wound. The sudden, sharp pain had brought him abruptly back to reality: he was acutely aware of who and where he was, and of the fact that there was a little laughter and jeering coming from the remnants of the crowd that had gathered behind him.

Doing his best to ignore them, Braska rubbed his arm to dispel the last lingering ache before carefully pulling his sleeve down again. He picked up his staff, got to his feet, and then reluctantly raised his head to look up at Valefor, who had returned to her position above the water.

As he did so, he realised he had some awareness of her thoughts: that in itself was unexpected, and proved that he had made some progress in strengthening their relationship. He could tell, to some extent, how she perceived him in this moment, and what he could sense was equally surprising. For unlike when he had called her on Besaid, and she had surveyed him with such disdain, now he could detect an unmistakable current of sympathy.

The more he considered it, the surer Braska was that this was the result of witnessing his injury. Valefor had watched him stumble to the ground, briefly overcome by pain, and perhaps seeing such weakness had softened her attitude towards him in some way. She knew now that he made no pretence at being above anyone else: he was just a mortal man, with all the flaws that entailed.

It was a small success. Braska permitted himself a quiet smile, and then waved his staff to dismiss the æon. Only then did he truly realise how exhausted he was: communing with Valefor had been much harder work then with any of the others, and even though it was still early in the afternoon, he knew he lacked the strength to continue.

He trudged back along the pier, ignoring the last of his spectators as they looked him over and offered a range of opinions on his suitability to the task of summoning, and made straight for the nearest bench; even the short walk was rapidly draining the remnants of his energy. An Al Bhed man was

already occupying the seat, but there was plenty of room for another beside him.

"May I sit here?" Braska panted.

The man looked at him, frowned a little, and gestured towards the bench; Braska hoped that signalled approval, and gratefully sank onto it, too relieved by the opportunity to sit down to mind the hardness of the stone from which it had been carved. He closed his eyes, intensely aware of how stiff his whole body was after hours of standing there concentrating on Valefor. The dazed state he had been in after working with the other æons had made him less able to detect his physical condition before, but this time he was entirely cognisant of how tired and parched he felt after doing nothing but summoning for so long.

He opened his eyes, somewhat reluctantly, and caught sight of a public drinking fountain on the other side of the path, close to the blitzball stadium; water would help, he knew. But having sat down, he now felt incapable of standing again, especially without having had any of the refreshing cool water to drink first.

Braska allowed himself another glance at his companion, who seemed to be studiously avoiding his gaze, and then murmured, "I'm terribly sorry. I know this is rather presumptuous of me, but –" He paused and swallowed, trying to lubricate his dry throat. "I don't suppose you could fetch me some water from the fountain over there?"

The man looked back at him, slowly shrugged, and said, "E tu hud ihtancdyht oui. Al Bhed uhmo."[10]

"Oh," said Braska, realising he should have expected it. Luca was the only place in Spira – apart from Home, until recently – where there was a substantial enough Al Bhed population for those who desired it to be able to live their lives without having to interact with Yevonites. It was quite possible for Al Bhed to settle there and never need to learn a word of the common tongue, he knew.

He tried to formulate his request in Al Bhed, but was too exhausted to remember how the grammar worked, to say nothing of the vocabulary. "Fydan,"[11] he said at last, gesturing towards the fountain. "Fydan, please." He fumbled in his robes and eventually retrieved his small drinking gourd, handing it over shakily.

The man still looked suspicious, but he slowly got up and made his way to the fountain before returning with the filled gourd. Braska grabbed it eagerly and took a gulp; never had the simple taste of municipal water seemed so delicious. "Thank you," he gasped. "Dryhg oui."[12]

He was still aware of the Al Bhed man watching him as he savoured the rest of the water, but did his best to ignore the

[10] I do not understand you. Al Bhed only.
[11] Water.
[12] Thank you.

piercing look he was being given. The man's lack of skill in the common language must have meant he rarely interacted with people not of his own race, Braska reminded himself; this was probably an unusual experience for him. He set the empty cup aside and closed his eyes again.

"Oui yna y summoner," said the man. "E cyf dra æon."[13]

Braska opened his eyes once more and turned towards him. Despite his exhaustion, this was an utterance he had no trouble understanding: the Yevonite vocabulary the man had borrowed made sure of that. "Yes," he said, "oac. E ys y summoner. Cunno."[14]

"Pid oui cbayg uin myhkiyka,"[15] the man said suspiciously.

Nodding slowly, Braska sought to formulate his reply. It was only natural that the Al Bhed should be surprised, he thought. Plenty of Al Bhed, especially those who lived away from Home, made the effort to learn the language that was spoken natively by Yevonites; the same went for the Ronso, although they often seemed to struggle more with acquiring it. Yevonite humans, on the other hand, rarely made the effort to learn the tongues spoken by the other peoples and races with whom they shared Spira, normally believing them unworthy of their attention. His own study of the Al Bhed

[13]You are a summoner. I saw the æon.

[14]Yes. I am a summoner. Sorry.

[15]But you speak our language.

language had originally been a necessary preparation for his missionary work, and had mostly involved teaching himself from books, as there had been nobody he could find in Bevelle capable of instructing him. After that, immersion in the language at Home had been much more fruitful, and after a few embarrassing occasions when he had found that the Al Bhed he had learnt from written sources was hopelessly formal and out of date, he had become fairly fluent for a while. During his later stays, Rin had taught him some of the more complex nuances of the Al Bhed language in exchange for Braska's fairly patchy knowledge of Yevonite commercial practices.

Haltingly, he did his best to explain to his interlocutor that he was familiar with Al Bhed culture. He couldn't bring himself to mention Girl, but noted that he had spent time at Home and still considered himself to have a few Al Bhed friends. None of this seemed to lessen the man's suspicion of him, but that made sense: the Al Bhed saw the summoner's pilgrimage as something only those who were thoroughly indoctrinated by Yevon would ever undertake. The idea of a person from a Yevonite background becoming familiar with and somewhat sympathetic to Al Bhed ideals, but then choosing to become a summoner anyway, was clearly incomprehensible to him. But while Braska had gradually lost his faith in the majority of the teachings as he became steadily more irritated by Yevon's hypocrisy, he had never quite been

able to let go of that central tenet, and after Girl's death, the need for him to become a summoner had been quite obvious.

The Al Bhed man was clearly trying to be polite, holding himself back from fully expressing his disapproval of Braska's decision, but he was unable to stay silent. "Ed ec hud dra nekrd fyo du tavayd Sin,"[16] he said at last.

"Drah fryd ec dra nekrd fyo?"[17] Braska asked, slightly frustrated. "Fryd sadrut ryc ajan cahd ed yfyo, ev hud dra pilgrimage?"[18]

"Ed femm lusa pylg,"[19] the man said.

It was undeniable that he had a point. But first, Braska thought, there would be a Calm, and even the shortest of Calms would be better than none at all. Besides, there was always the chance of an eternal Calm, and especially now that it seemed there was something special about Auron, perhaps it would turn out that the two of them might be the summoner and guardian to bring it – provided the æons would trust him enough to permit him to continue.

He didn't know how to explain all that in Al Bhed, and doubted it was worth trying. "Pid fa ryja ruba,"[20] he said instead.

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[16]It is not the right way to defeat Sin.

[17]Then what is the right way?

[18]What method has ever sent it away, if not the pilgrimage?

[19]It will come back.

[20]But we have hope.

"Ruba," said the man dismissively. "Ed ec hud ahuikr."[21]

He stood up after that, casting Braska a final disappointed glance, and stomped off. Braska scowled, wishing he had had the chance to get in a final word: he firmly believed that the Al Bhed man was wrong. Hope *was* enough; the hope that he might give his life in exchange for the defeat of Sin had sustained him through his darkest moments. And it was hope that had motivated these three days of practice with the æons. He merely hoped they would look favourably on his diligent efforts and give due consideration to the question of whether he was worthy of wielding them once he attempted to resume his pilgrimage. If they still thought otherwise, then he would accept their decision.

Back at the stadium, Jecht's second match was drawing to a close. Despite Auron's lack of interest in blitzball, he had been well aware before it started that the Luca Goers were likely to be much more serious opponents than the Ronso Fangs, and the scenes that had played out in the sphere confirmed it. It hadn't helped that the stands were now almost entirely filled with Goers fans; Auron could understand why the Al Bhed would be reluctant to show their faces at a match against the home team.

The Goers' higher skill level was also making it quite clear that while they outranked most of the Psyches, Jecht's exper-

[21] Hope. It is not enough.

tise was still greater. Facing more formidable opponents had pushed Jecht to perform at his very best, and even the loud boos and jeers from most of the audience did nothing to curtail the astonishingly acrobatic moves he was now pulling off. His feats had ensured the Psyches had maintained a modest but consistent lead over the Goers throughout the match, and Auron had enjoyed the challenge of trying to anticipate when Jecht was about to do something particularly spectacular so he could get the sphere recorder set up and capture some footage – a task in which he had again had only moderate success. This failed to disappoint him, though, because most of his attention was captured by the progress of the match itself. Auron had seen a number of them in his time, often under duress, but had never cared much about the longstanding rivalries among Spira's various teams; but now that someone he knew was playing, and that same person was undoubtedly the best player in the sphere, everything seemed much more interesting. During the morning's match, he had found himself openly celebrating Jecht's last-minute goal; this time, he was quite prepared to jump to his feet on a number of occasions, held back only by the fact that nobody else seemed to be supporting the Psyches and he would almost certainly be making a spectacle, if not a target, of himself. He contented himself instead with a few whispered exhortations and hisses of delight when the Psyches took possession of the ball, still hoping the sphere recorder wouldn't pick them up and produce a record of his investment

in the game.

At the final whistle, the Psyches were two goals ahead of the Goers; their victory was indisputably thanks to Jecht. Auron clenched a fist in silent jubilation as he switched off the sphere recorder, and was met by disapproving stares from the family seated next to him.

"Something the matter?" he said cheerfully, still buoyed by Jecht's performance.

"What are you supporting the Al Bhed for?" one of them asked.

"I can support who I like," said Auron. "Doesn't do any harm, does it?"

"Come on," said the woman to her children, "let's get away from the heathen."

Auron snorted to himself as they left. It was the first time he had been called such a thing, and he was much less offended by it than he might have been a few weeks earlier. He had been called worse recently, anyway.

He joined the queue of people slowly filing out of the stadium, planning to wait for Jecht in the lobby, but even that area was so full of disappointed Goers fans that he decided it would be better to meet up with him outside. Heading to the paved area in front of the stadium, he stood and fiddled with the sphere recorder in an attempt to keep himself occupied. Now that he was no longer distracted by the blitzball, a sense of guilt was beginning to creep in about how he had spent the

day. He had been so sure in the morning that Luca had nothing else to offer regarding what he was looking for – he still was – but at the same time, part of him wondered whether he still ought to have dedicated this final day in the city to making every possible enquiry he could.

Auron looked out over the scenery around him. The stadium was close to the sea – just a stone's throw from the dock where Braska had been practising with his æons. Fortunately for Auron, the water was shielded from view by several large trading ships, moored for a long time while merchants and sailors relieved them of the goods they carried. There were few crates on the dock where the boats were stationed; on top of one of these, a gull stood preening itself.

Thoughtfully, Auron let his gaze settle on the bird. There was an old suspicion in Spira, a legend so rooted in the culture of the land that even hundreds of years of Yevon's teachings had failed to snuff it out. Every child who grew up in Spira knew that making a wish in the presence of one of these gulls supposedly meant that wish would come true.

Auron had never believed it, of course. He was far too sensible to set any store by those old tales – similarly, he remained sceptical about the story of the foreigner and his son visiting Spira, despite its having seemingly captured Jecht's attention. But now, his thoughts were turning to Braska again with alarming rapidity, and as he watched the gull groom its feathers, he wondered if his commitment to pursuing every

possible lead ought to extend even to things he considered hopelessly childish.

It couldn't hurt, he decided; nobody would know. Glancing down at the sphere recorder in his hands, he came to the conclusion that the idea seemed slightly less foolish if he framed it as a sort of bet with himself. If he could switch the recorder on, he thought, and aim it at the gull, and express his wish in its entirety, all before the bird flew out of shot, perhaps that would count for something.

He carefully positioned the device, doing his best to keep his hands steady, and began thinking through how best to express his wish. Really, he thought, it was straightforward: of course, he wanted Braska to decide that he would continue the journey of his own accord, to avoid the surely laborious task of convincing him that he could see occupying many of the coming days otherwise. And then, whatever they discovered in Zanarkand, however Sin ended up being defeated – even, although he would never dare say this out loud, if Sin wasn't defeated at all – what he wanted was to return from the pilgrimage with Braska by his side, and for Braska to understand at last that giving life a chance would be –

"Hey, Auron!"

Auron whirled around, almost dropping the sphere recorder and eventually managing to point it at Jecht, who had picked his way through the crates and come to stand beside him without Auron even noticing.

"Did you get that last match?" Jecht went on, nodding towards the sphere recorder.

"Yeah," said Auron, trying not to look too embarrassed. "But I don't understand why you wanted me to." Jecht had insisted on how revered blitzball was in his Zanarkand plenty of times, Auron thought; he'd also done quite a lot of talking about something called the television. There were bound to be hours of footage of Jecht's illustrious career available already without having to add material from the matches he had played in Spira. "Didn't you say you had blitzball in your Zanarkand?" he added pointedly – or tried to, but the sight of Braska suddenly emerging from the direction of the docks and nonchalantly heading towards where they were standing threw him off a little.

Ignoring Auron's poor attempt at humour, Jecht said, "Not a sportsman, are ya?"

"Working on your form?" Braska hazarded from the other side of the crates. He had had a good rest after his conversation with the Al Bhed man, sitting on the bench and watching the world go by, and now felt unusually alert despite his long session with Valefor.

Jecht scoffed. "My form don't need no work – I'm the great Jecht. It's for my kid," he explained, walking in Braska's direction.

"Your son plays blitzball?" said Braska.

"Yeah," said Jecht, "and he wants to beat his old man bad.

Once, I told him to give it up – he didn't speak to me for a week." He remembered that week well – Tidus had kept glowering at Jecht in a way both he and his wife found hilarious, and they'd had to pretend to be extremely offended when he was around. Tidus had started talking to Jecht again only after Jecht had made a crude sculpture of the Abes' home stadium out of mashed potato; he had scowled and said, "That's lame," in a way that now for some reason made Jecht think of Auron, and Jecht had said, "Aha, made you talk," and then they'd had an impromptu mashed potato sculpting competition, which Jecht definitely would have won if his wife hadn't walked in and started scolding both of them for making a mess.

The memory of it was unexpectedly vivid; Jecht suddenly found himself unable to look his companions in the eye. He wandered over towards the crates instead, and added, "Wonder what he's doin' now. Hope he got bigger and put on some muscle."

Auron blinked in amazement; it was quite clear that Jecht's recollection had had some kind of emotional effect. Jecht, the man who constantly criticised others for daring to show their emotions, now seemed almost overcome by his own. Auron couldn't help finding it fascinating; he moved past Braska and inched towards Jecht, barely able to believe what he saw.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" Jecht grumbled, emerging abruptly from behind the crate. "Stop shooting!"

Auron obediently turned off the sphere recorder – he had

half forgotten it was switched on anyway – but his suspicion had in no way decreased. Braska clearly hadn't realised it, but it was clear enough to Auron that Jecht wasn't entirely dry-eyed.

"Look," said Jecht, rubbing his face for, he insisted to himself, no particular reason, "I gotta go back inside. Say goodbye to the guys, ya know? They wouldn't –" He was suddenly aware of an overwhelming need to clear his throat, and did so. "They wouldn't've won those matches without the great Jecht," he concluded, glaring at Auron in the hope that he wouldn't ask any piercing questions.

"Sure," said Auron. "See you later, then." He watched as Jecht headed back towards the stadium, and added quietly, "Huh."

"Something the matter?" Braska asked.

"Did you think he seemed –" Auron began, and then decided it wasn't worth asking; Braska wouldn't have noticed. "Never mind," he said. "How are you, sir? Did everything go well with the æons today?"

"Not especially," Braska admitted. "But it was the best I could have hoped for with Valefor, I think – she's certainly a difficult one. I feel much better about the others, at least. I shall just have to see how things go tomorrow, and then I'll know what to do."

"Are you sure you don't need more time?" said Auron. "You know we can wait as long as we need to –"

Braska shook his head. "No, I said these three days, and that'll be plenty. I shouldn't spend too long summoning constantly like that. You saw what I was like after a whole day of it – I really wasn't myself. The first night especially."

"Yes," Auron murmured. "I was worried about you, sir."

"I'm sure you were," said Braska. He sighed. "I'm sorry about all that, Auron. Thank you for – well, for everything you did. It was a great help." He paused, and then added, "Perhaps we could go somewhere nice tonight – just the two of us? We talked about it on one of those ferry crossings, didn't we? I'm sure we've the gil to spare for a meal at one of the better places by now. Why don't we go and enjoy the evening together – or try to, at least?"

Auron dearly wished he could say yes. If Braska was suggesting a meal out he was clearly in a relatively good mood, and an evening in each other's company at one of the nicer cafés would be just as enjoyable as it ever had been. But over the last couple of days, things had changed: Auron knew he couldn't be trusted to spend time with Braska in that sort of setting. He would end up saying something that revealed too much of how he really felt, and in doing so he would selfishly add to Braska's burden.

"I'm sorry, my lord," he said. "There are still a lot of preparations to make before we get back on the road tomorrow – I'd planned to get everything ready tonight."

Braska was unconvinced that there would be much prepar-

ing to do when the pilgrimage might be about to end anyway. Depending on how things went, this could be the last chance for the two of them to spend time together; he wondered about pointing that out to Auron, and then decided Auron probably considered the pilgrimage of more importance. He was an excellent guardian; of course his concern would be ensuring they were prepared for the next part of the journey, regardless of how much of it actually took place.

He nodded. "Of course. Well, I'm sure dinner at the hostel will be perfectly adequate. Come on, then." He extended an arm to loop around Auron's, and began leading the way back.

Even though Jecht's formal association with the Psyches was over, he ended up spending most of the evening with them again: they traditionally went for dinner and drinks after their matches as well as before them, and it would have been wrong not to have the star player in attendance. Most of the conversation was in Al Bhed, as it had been the previous night, but Jecht had a good enough time listening out for the few words he had picked up, occasionally repeating the fewer he could pronounce, and grinning at anyone who gestured in his direction.

When the meal had finished and everyone was about to move on to one of the Al Bhed bars, Hanta slammed a fist onto the table and bellowed, "Byo yddahdeuh, ajanouha!"[22]

[22]Pay attention, everyone!

Obediently, the team stopped getting out of their seats and looked in Hanta's direction. Switching into the common language so Jecht would understand, he continued: "Now, before we all go out and enjoy ourselves, I gotta say a few words of thanks to the man who saved all our asses today. While the rest of us were playing like animals, we were lucky enough to have one guy among us who actually knows his way around a blitzball sphere! And it was thanks to him that we won those matches. Jecht – when you called me up a couple days ago, I thought you were just some Yevonite screwball. But after the way you played today, I think you gotta be the best blitzer in Spira."

"Too right I am!" Jecht exclaimed, while those present who could understand the common language well enough to know what was going on applauded politely.

"And as a token of our appreciation," said Hanta, "we wanted to give you something to remember us by." From under the table, he suddenly produced a ball, before throwing it at Jecht and barking, "Lydlr!"[23]

Jecht grabbed it. "For me?" he said. "Awesome! A genuine Spiran blitzball – thanks, guys!"

They moved on to the next venue not long afterwards; Jecht stayed out for a while, but being the only sober person in the group as well as having no language in common with

[23] Catch!

most of his companions was starting to get wearing when it was the second night in a row. Eventually, he made his excuses, exchanged a few hi-fives and back slaps with the team, and walked cheerfully back to the hostel.

Auron was in the common area, seeing to everyone's change of clothes with an iron he had borrowed from reception. He nodded to Jecht as the latter walked in.

"Oh," said Jecht, looking down at Auron's handiwork, "should've figured you'd be the kind of guy that irons his boxers."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Auron grumbled.

Jecht snorted. "So," he said, "what did you think of my playing? Kinda spectacular, huh?"

"Yeah, I was actually quite impressed," said Auron reluctantly. "I mean, like you said, I'm not a sportsman, as such, but … you obviously knew what you were doing."

"You bet I did," said Jecht. "Man, I must be good, if even *you* say I am."

"I'm no expert," said Auron coolly.

"Well," said Jecht, "I am. And I can tell you: I'm pretty hot stuff." He tossed the blitzball the Psyches had given him from one hand to the other, leering at Auron all the while. Perhaps, he thought, now that Auron had seen how skilled he was in the blitz sphere, he might be more amenable to seeing what Jecht could do in the bedroom.

"Did you just get that?" said Auron, meaning the ball. "I hope you're not intending to bring it on the journey. There's hardly room."

Jecht stopped throwing the ball and held it protectively to his chest instead. "It was a gift," he said. "I gotta keep it. The guys got it for me."

"So what are we getting rid of, then?" said Auron. "The tent? Or the medicines? Or something else that's obviously less important than your blitzball?"

"Fuck's sake," said Jecht. "Calm down, would you? Look, I'll take the air out, if you're gonna get that pissy about it." He located the seal, tugged out the pin, and squeezed the ball until it had deflated. "Better?"

"We still don't have much room," Auron mumbled.

Jecht rolled his eyes. "Fine, I'll take care of it. I can just put it in my pocket when it's like this, anyway." He searched his shorts for one, stowed the deflated blitzball inside with only a little difficulty, and said, "Happy?"

"Thrilled," said Auron flatly. He turned back to the ironing, turned the underclothes over, and began to run the iron across them before something occurred to him. "Jecht," he said, "is there something you want to talk about?"

"Huh?" said Jecht.

"I couldn't help noticing, outside the stadium earlier," said Auron, "when you were, um, talking about your son …"

Jecht shrugged aggressively. "Yeah? What?"

"You seemed a bit …" said Auron. "Look, I'm not trying to insinuate anything. I just – you've been away from home a while now, and I'm sure that must be, er, challenging sometimes, so I thought, if there's anything you want to get off your chest …" He trailed off, wondering if it was a good sign that Jecht hadn't interrupted.

"Who are you, Braska?" said Jecht scornfully. "I'm fine, relax."

"OK, great," Auron muttered. "I won't ask again."

Jecht grunted in response, and then said, "Braska sleepin', is he?"

"I think he's reading," said Auron.

"Right," said Jecht. "Well, see you later, I guess." He stomped off towards the bedroom as Auron turned back to the ironing.

Chapter **29**

A Turning Point

"Jecht," said Braska as the three of them finished their breakfast the next morning, "I need a word with Auron."

"Uh huh?" said Jecht.

"Yes," Braska replied, gazing at him expectantly. Several seconds passed; eventually Auron added, "He wants you to give us some privacy for a moment."

Jecht scowled, but then he abruptly stood and left the room, scraping his chair noisily against the floor as he did so.

"Never mind him," said Auron, noticing Braska's concerned expression. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I just want to make it clear, Auron," said Braska quietly, "that the agreement we made that night on Besaid still applies. I shall see how things go with summoning today, and if it's not a success, then I'm going to put an end to the pilgrimage. And to … well …"

Auron stifled a sigh; it was disappointing to hear, of course,

although he had expected Braska to say as much. Nothing about his attitude during their time in Luca had hinted that he might be having second thoughts.

"At least wait until evening to decide," he said. "We're aiming for the Mi'ihen Highroad travel agency – we can talk about it when we get there."

"All right," said Braska, "but I want us both to know by the time we go to bed tonight. I'm not putting this off any longer."

Auron grunted in response. He was in no doubt about what he would do if Braska proclaimed his intention to abandon the pilgrimage and take his life instead: he would simply argue until Braska changed his mind. It would be uncomfortable and upsetting; if Braska concluded that he was going to go on with the pilgrimage, that would give Auron more time to find a way of saving him, and to follow some of the leads he had identified. But if his attention had to turn to preventing Braska's death more urgently, there was no question that he would give it his full attention.

They made their final preparations to leave; while Braska was in the bathroom, Jecht approached Auron and said, "So, what did he wanna talk to you about?"

"You wouldn't want to know," said Auron truthfully. "It was … about his wellbeing."

Jecht grimaced and turned away, but he felt oddly relieved to hear it. He had thought he was in Braska's confidence; being asked to leave while private matters were discussed had been

unexpectedly disconcerting. If Braska had merely wanted to spare him the embarrassment of hearing him talk about his mental health, though, that was much more justifiable – although, Jecht had to admit, Braska wasn't usually so considerate.

Soon, they were back on the road for the first full day of walking in almost a fortnight. In order to verify his bond with the æons, Braska decided to summon them at regular intervals, calling one during every fifth battle to dispatch whichever fiends had been unfortunate enough to emerge from the undergrowth. The æons were much more powerful than the fiends were, and each of their attacks ended the battles immediately; Braska's normal magic would have been more than enough, coupled with Auron and Jecht's swordwork, but he was determined to put the progress he had made in Luca to the test.

Neither Auron nor Jecht had previously seen Ifrit or Ixion; Jecht was particularly impressed by the latter. "OK," he said, "I know I said you needed more æons like the sexy ice lady, but the electric horse is pretty cool too, I guess."

"Electric what?" said Auron.

"Horse?" Jecht repeated. "Uh … do you not know what a horse is?" Of the two words, he had expected *electric* to be the one his companions might have trouble with.

"If I knew," said Auron, "I wouldn't have bothered asking." Despite his certainty that he would be able to talk Braska out of doing anything drastic if necessary, the knowledge that such

a conversation might be forthcoming was doing his temper no favours. He had thought he would be glad to be on the move again, but the reality of it had turned out rather differently. Braska's insistence on summoning so often wasn't helping either; he could tell that it was starting to tire him out, even though they had only just set off.

"I thought the æons didn't appreciate being used for trivial battles," he couldn't help saying after a few more entirely unnecessary summonings.

"That's what I was told during my training," Braska admitted, "but they didn't seem to mind it in Luca. And I do need to spend today testing our bonds, Auron – you know that."

Auron frowned; it was a good sign that Braska was really trying, he knew, but on the other hand it seemed increasingly unlikely that they would make it all the way to the travel agency, and if they ended up having to have a difficult conversation in the tent with Braska close to exhaustion, it would be even more unpleasant. Braska was already walking at a noticeably slower pace than usual; a few battles later, having dismissed Ixion, he stood still for a while to catch his breath, and then declared that he would need to stop and rest properly.

Auron peered down at him as he sank onto the grass. "Are you sure this is how you should be doing it?" he couldn't help asking. "You're exhausting yourself. I know you're worried about the æons, but you need to consider your health. I'm sure you don't need to call them this often."

"I think you'll find you don't know much about the æons, actually, Auron," said Braska sternly.

Auron blinked; that had assumed unnecessarily harsh, even coming from Braska. "No," he said, "I – I suppose not."

Belatedly realising the callousness of his own words, Braska frowned and said, "Dear me, Auron, I'm sorry. I don't know what possessed me to say that. I know you're trying to look out for me." He patted the ground beside him, and said, "Sit."

Avoiding his gaze, Auron did so; Braska reached out and put an arm around his shoulder, drawing him close and failing to hear the small sigh the gesture elicited. "A lifetime of hearing summoners' testimonies," he continued in a low voice, "would never have prepared me for how it feels to –" He touched his breastplate again. "To receive them. And still less to get to know them. They feel so *present* now, Auron – as if I could bring them bursting to the surface with a single word."

"So you are managing to bond with them, then?" said Auron quickly.

"That remains to be seen," Braska replied. "But either way, this feeling is so rare – so hard to –" He leant his head against Auron's shoulder, and said, "Forgive me. I'm tired."

"I can tell," said Auron. "My lord, I know you're working on the æons, but if you insist on summoning them this often, I really don't think we'll make it very far today. You need to

be in an adequate state to – to make your decision. And we should try to get to the travel agency if we can."

"Hey," said Jecht, who had been reluctant to involve himself in the conversation so far; now, though, a thought had occurred to him, in tandem with the realisation of exactly why Auron didn't know what a horse was. "We can get chocobos here, right?" he suggested. "Saw a place back there hirin' 'em out. Can't we just ride to the agency? It'll be faster, won't it?"

"That's not how it's usually done," said Auron, "but …"

"The teachings tell us the journey should be completed on foot," Braska concurred. "And you both know what I normally think of the teachings, but when it concerns the pilgrimage …" He yawned. "I'd rather not take any chances, after what happened at Besaid Temple. And besides, we need to expose ourselves to the fiends; I have to practise summoning."

"But not as often as this," Auron couldn't help saying again. "Sir, I know you have to, but can't you just save it for the stronger ones? We've barely made it out of Luca, and look at you."

Braska groaned, but he reached to take Auron's hand. "I know, Auron," he said, "but – you know what, I'm too tired to argue. Fine – I'll reserve the æons for the more formidable fiends. Does that satisfy you?"

"Thank you, my lord," said Auron.

"Let's get on with it, then," said Braska, pressing a fleeting kiss to Auron's cheek before standing up and taking his staff.

He looked back: Auron had made no move to stand up, and seemed to be frozen in place. "Auron?" Braska prompted him, extending an arm.

Auron ignored the arm and scrambled to his feet. "Yes, of course," he said breathlessly. "After you, sir."

He watched as Braska began to walk on, still unable to give much thought to the idea of moving forward himself.

"He really ain't got a clue, does he?" said Jecht.

Auron shook his head.

Jecht studied him for a few seconds – he was still wide-eyed and largely motionless – and then cuffed him sharply on the shoulder. "Hey!" he said. "We talked about this before, right? Either you talk to him, or you get over yourself, OK?"

"Yeah," Auron mumbled, rubbing his shoulder where Jecht had struck him. "I'll … get over myself. Actually," he said less weakly, "I should. There are more important things to worry about. What is it you always say – man up?"

"Uh, yeah," said Jecht.

"Well," said Auron, "I'll have to do that, then. Thanks."

In front of them, Braska turned and said, "What's the holdup? I thought you were keen to get to this travel agency, Auron."

"Sorry, sir," said Auron, hurrying forward.

As they continued, he forced himself to think rationally. It was quite clear that Braska had no romantic interest in him, he reiterated to himself. These moments of intimate contact were

merely for the purpose of allowing Braska to seek some comfort. He had naturally become more willing to express himself around Auron as the pilgrimage had gone on, and this was the result of that: nothing more.

A while later, they came upon Maechen. "Ah, we meet again!" he said. "I wondered if I might find you on this most illustrious highway. The name of Lord Mi'ihen is an inspiration to us all, is it not?"

"For capitulating to Yevon?" said Braska, yawning. "I hardly think so."

Mi'ihen had founded a mercenary force eight hundred years earlier: the same organisation, in fact, that had later become known as the Crusaders. They had received that name when Yevon had formally incorporated them into its own ranks; prior to that, they had been considered a threat to Spiran unity, and were publicly condemned in the Yevonite court. Eight hundred years afterwards, Mi'ihen was widely admired by Yevonites for the fact that he had walked the length of the Highroad to meet his accusers, and had convinced them in an astonishing display of rhetoric to welcome his forces into the fold. It was generally believed that Mi'ihen had been a courageous man, and a true Yevonite; the Al Bhed saw him as an unprincipled coward, and the rank and file of the warrior monks, who continued to believe the Crusaders were usurpers, still wished Yevon had turned down his request.

Maechen merely raised his eyebrows at Braska's response, seeming uncertain about how to react, and then shifted his gaze to Auron. "And how did you find your visit to Luca's fine repository of knowledge, Sir Chappu?" he asked, failing to notice Braska and Jecht's expressions of bewilderment when he said the name. "I trust you found everything you were after?"

"Yes, thank you," said Auron stiffly.

Fortunately for him, Maechen turned to address Jecht. "What about your research, Sir …"

"Wakka," said Jecht promptly.

"Sir Wakka," Maechen repeated. "Last we met, you were very keen on finding a way to leave Spira. I have given the matter some thought, but have failed to come to any remotely noteworthy conclusions – but what about you? Has your own pursuit of knowledge resulted in any beguiling and bountiful breakthroughs? I should be very interested in comparing notes."

"Uh," said Jecht, "well, I ain't heard anythin' about *leaving* Spira, but I did find out there was a story about a guy and his son that came here once. You know it, right?" he asked, ignoring the sceptical look that Auron had suddenly assumed.

Maechen frowned. "Perhaps. I must confess that after many long years of travelling this blessed road, hearing so many of the stories and tales of Spira, there are certain elements of our land's rich folklore that fail to spring to mind without a little prompting. Perhaps you would be so kind as to

remind me of the story?"

Jecht related the tale to the best of his ability. He had heard a few different takes on it by this point, from the Besaid blitzballers, Braska and Auron, the sailors on the ship to Kilika, and even, with the help of Hanta's translation, the Al Bhed he had spent time with in Luca: each seemed slightly different from the last, and nobody was sure what was supposed to have happened at the end of the story. Maechen nodded along, though, unfazed by Jecht's slightly confused and occasionally contradictory delivery.

"Ah, yes," he said, when Jecht had finished. "I know the tale well. A favourite of Spiran children since time immemorial. Although in my day, we told the story in the future tense."

"How d'you mean?" said Jecht.

"Well," said Maechen, "like this. In days to come, a man from far away will manage to breach the borders of our land, and will find himself among us, cast adrift from his people; motivated by the need to find a cure for his son, who suffers from a terrible sickness, he will succeed in making a journey other men cannot, and will arrive on our shores without knowledge of what awaits him. A long and perilous journey he will undertake, and – you see?"

Jecht was quiet for a moment, and then he said, "So … it's like some kinda prophecy?"

"Who knows, indeed," said Maechen. "A prophecy, or merely a work of fiction, none can tell. Or perhaps a word of

warning, or of advice – such things are hardly rare in societies as superstitious as ours."

"Huh," said Jecht contemplatively.

There was a silence, broken eventually by an enormous yawn from Braska: decreasing the frequency with which he summoned the æons had helped, but it certainly hadn't prevented his inevitable slide into exhaustion. At this point, he would have preferred to be on the move; standing still for so long was making the thought of going to sleep increasingly difficult to resist.

"We should move on," said Auron, picking up on it. It was odd, he reflected, how Maechen always seemed to preempt them on the road – as if he had found some faster method of travelling. The thought of the old man riding a chocobo seemed almost ludicrous, though.

"Indeed, indeed," said Maechen, nodding at Auron and Jecht in turn. "I shall see you again soon, Sir Chappu. Sir Wakka." He turned his piercing gaze briefly towards Braska, frowned a little, and then pottered away.

Braska and his guardians resumed their own journey; it wasn't until a few minutes later that Jecht turned to Auron and said, in a tone that lacked some of its usual animation, "So, you gonna tell us why he thinks your name's Chappu, or not?"

"I've no idea," Auron lied. "Must just be confused. You know he's not entirely … with it."

"Chappu, though?" said Jecht. "Bit of a coincidence, right?"

"You hardly helped," said Auron, "telling him your name was Wakka."

Jecht snorted, but then fell silent again. He continued not to say very much until they had fought a few more fiends, and then at last asked, "Do you guys think it *is* a prophecy, though? What he said?"

"What ..." Auron began, and then remembered. "Oh – about the man coming to Spira? We've discussed this, Jecht: it's a story. It doesn't mean anything."

"But," said Jecht, "what if – what if it's about me?"

"I doubt that," said Auron. "Anyway, so what if it is? Don't tell me you think that's supposed to change things."

"What about the son?" Braska pointed out. "The man travels here to find him a cure for his sickness. Is your son ... sick?"

"Sick in the head, maybe," said Jecht with an uneasy laugh that neither of the others joined in with. It wasn't as if he hadn't spent time wondering how to get Tidus to toughen up, he reflected. Perhaps that was what the story was getting at. And if it really was about him, that meant Tidus would come to Spira too, and find himself unable to easily make his way home, just as Jecht was. He tried to remember whether the story had said the son would ever find a way back, but the different versions of it had disagreed on that point, and all of them had been ambiguous regarding how things ended.

"I guess it's just weird," he mused. "I know you keep sayin' it's a story, Auron, but it's a story that might be about *me*.

Kinda makes it feel like my life is already planned out. Like I don't have control over what I'm doing."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Auron. "You act of your own accord, don't you? You don't really think you're being … controlled by some divine force?"

"Course I don't," Jecht snarled. "Look, I do what I want. Always did and always will. And now I come here and find out there's some story from hundreds of years ago or whatever that might be – I dunno, it might be *my* story, and it says what's gonna happen to me before I even know it, and I just have to play along? It's like I'm part of something I don't even know about. It's creepy."

"I don't see why you're so worked up about it," Auron retorted. "It's probably not about you at all."

"Cases of people accurately predicting the future have been very rare in Spiran history," murmured Braska, who was more familiar with the subject than Auron was. "Rare, although not unheard of. I remember learning about a company of prophets who travelled the land, back in Lord Ohalland's time …"

"That was ages ago," said Auron dismissively. "Jecht, honestly, so what if it *is* about you – what's that supposed to change? You feel like you're making your own decisions and doing things under your own steam, don't you – isn't that good enough? Surely this doesn't mean you'll just give up on the idea of getting back to your Zanarkand? The story doesn't even make it clear whether the man manages to get back or

not."

"Course I won't give up," said Jecht. "It's just weird, is all." He still found it deeply unsettling: not just the idea that the course of his life might have been somehow preordained, but also the implication that Tidus would make the same journey to Spira in the future. For some reason, that thought was particularly bothersome. Tidus needed to grow up in Zanarkand: that was the only way he would succeed in becoming a blitzball star. Now that Jecht had firsthand experience of the Spiran league, he knew it wasn't the same. Some of the teams were decent, no doubt – the Luca Goers had been moderately challenging as opponents – but the overall quality was hardly sufficient to push a young player to do his best.

Jecht always rubbished Tidus' proclamations that he would be as big a star as his dad one day, but it was only to urge him on. He knew from his own younger days that the need to prove people wrong was a far more useful source of motivation than most. Realistically, he would need to retire in a few years anyway; the thought that Tidus might take up the mantle of being Zanarkand's most adored blitzer after that was too tantalising not to hold onto. That was why he'd asked Auron to take those spheres at the blitzball matches he'd played in Luca: to get some recordings of a real match without having to worry about distribution rights, and show them to the kid and get him to learn what to do in the sphere.

Still, Jecht thought, if Tidus *did* end up coming to Spira,

at least he would be able to see the boy again. Although, he reflected, every version of the story he had heard agreed that the son didn't arrive in Spira until his father had left.

He scowled and rubbed his neck, realising he had forgotten the main counterpoint to all this: the fact that he *would* find his way back to Zanarkand. They would get to the city of the same name in Spira, and then everything would be clear enough; even if it wasn't, Braska would call the Final Æon, and then Jecht himself would be celebrated as a legendary guardian, a term Braska had brought up a few times on the journey. After that, everyone in Bevelle would be falling over themselves to get him what he wanted. He'd ask all the scholars in the city to work out a way to get back to Zanarkand, and order all the warrior monks to travel to the furthest corners of Spira and see what lay beyond. With the Calm's arrival, he reckoned, they would need things to do anyway. Auron's quest to save Braska was foolishly idealistic, but Jecht's own was much more achievable; he was sure of that.

The day went on; the sky was starting to cloud over. After a while, sparse drops of rain began to fall; Auron and Braska exchanged a wary glance.

"What's up?" said Jecht.

"We don't get rain very much," said Auron. "Not outside the Thunder Plains. It could be nothing, but – it often means Sin's in the area."

"We should be on the lookout for its spawn," Braska con-

curred.

The rain worsened; nobody said much more about it, or about anything else. Jecht could tell that Auron and Braska were both worried about the possible appearance of Sin: Auron's frown had become more pronounced than usual, and he had given up on pointedly checking that Braska was feeling all right each time the latter called and then dismissed one of his æons. Braska himself was on the verge of tears, a result of the combination of his increasing exhaustion and the worry that Sin was nearby.

At last, they rounded a corner and Auron spotted the familiar black shapes on the path before them. "Sinspawn!" he bellowed, charging towards them with his sword held aloft; the others followed.

The spawn were the same type as those they had encountered before on the Thunder Plains; there was one large shelled fiend, surrounded by its smaller minions. Jecht and Auron got to work cutting through the latter, trying to forge a path to their main foe so they could concentrate their strength where it was most needed.

A few moments later, Braska caught up with them. "Stand back," he said, coming to stand as close as he could to his guardians without getting in range of their swordstrokes. "Let me summon."

"Don't be ridiculous, sir," Auron grunted between blows. "Jecht and I can deal with this."

Braska shook his head, and thrust his staff forward to tap it against Auron's shoulder. "Auron," he begged as his guardian turned to face him, "I must. Stand aside, *please*."

Turning back briefly to ward off another of the smaller sinspawn that had begun to make an assault on his legs, Auron scowled. He could tell Braska was hardly in a fit state to be summoning by this point; he also knew being denied the chance to call an æon to take down the sinspawn would potentially be more damaging than forcing him to stay away.

"All right," he said, grabbing Jecht and hauling him out of the path of the largest fiend.

Braska knew he had to act quickly: the largest of the sinspawn was rooted in place, but the smaller ones had little legs and were poised to use them to scuttle back towards him and his guardians. With little time to think, he called Bahamut, hoping the æon would understand what he needed, and barely daring even to blink as he focused on willing Bahamut to attack.

It was a close fight, but after a while, the air was filled with pyreflies; a few moments more, and enough of them had dissipated to make it clear that all the sinspawn were vanquished. Braska sighed, letting his concentration slip enough to signal that the æon was no longer needed; Bahamut immediately twisted up into the sky, fading simultaneously into nothing.

Braska groaned and lowered his head; there was now

nothing he wished for more than the chance to lie down and close his eyes, if only for a few seconds. He felt a strong arm wrap around his shoulders, and realised that was as good as he would get; letting himself lean into it, he murmured, "I'm sorry, Auron."

"I'll pitch the tent," said Auron.

The thought of having to sleep in the tent when they surely weren't far from somewhere with proper beds was one Braska found especially unappealing; the idea that he might have to continue walking, though, was just as bad. "Aren't we close to the … the travel agency?" he asked, so tired that it took him a moment to recall the term. "How far is it?"

"It's … not far," said Auron reluctantly.

"Auron," Braska whined.

"Just around the next bend," Auron admitted. "It wouldn't take us more than an hour or so to get there – but I really don't think it's a good idea, sir. You look as if you're about to collapse."

"But you were right earlier," said Braska. "We really should try to make it – especially tonight. I should be well rested before I decide, shouldn't I? You were right, Auron, of course you were …" He blinked a few times, feeling sure he was about to give in to tears, but then mustered the fortitude to prevent them, drawing away from Auron's embrace and offering him his staff instead. "I shan't summon any more today, I promise. I'm sure we can make it there if I don't."

Auron took the staff with a sigh, recognising that this was a sign of at least some capitulation. "Don't you want to rest first?" he said.

"If I sit down," said Braska, "I'll never get up again."

"You set the pace, then," said Auron. "We'll be right behind you."

Nodding his thanks, Braska began the slow advance forward. Auron retreated to a few paces behind, and Jecht fell into step by his side. The rain was easing off, at least: dealing with the sinspawn had ensured a return to the usual climate.

"He doesn't even need practice with Bahamut," Auron couldn't help muttering.

"So what'd he summon it for?" said Jecht.

"Probably the only æon he had the strength to call," said Auron. "Pointless."

"Got rid of the sinspawn, though, right?" Jecht pointed out.

Auron grunted. "We could have done that."

The appearance of a few more fiends on the road forced them to surge forward and see them off quickly before they could get to Braska; at the end of each brief battle, Auron and Jecht dropped back again and let Braska lead the way on, but after a few iterations, Braska reached out for Auron's arm as he was about to fall back. "I'm sorry," he said once again. "Would you –"

Wordlessly, Auron allowed Braska to lean against him as they advanced. The travel agency was in sight now; suggesting

they camp at this point would have been ludicrous. If Braska started really struggling to go on, Auron reasoned, he would be able to carry him the rest of the way, as he had briefly done on Besaid.

In the end, though, Braska made it, even though he and Auron ended their journey shuffling forward at an almost imperceptible pace. Once they made their way into the travel agency, Auron guided Braska to a seat, staying close to the summoner while he leant back and closed his eyes with a frown of discomfort.

"You can arrange the room, please, Jecht," said Auron.

Jecht averted his eyes from the scene and approached the desk. "Reoy!"[24] he said brightly, trying out one of the Al Bhed greetings he had picked up over the last few days.

"Oh," said the man who stood there, raising his eyebrows at Jecht's willingness to use the language coupled with his distinctly non-native accent. "A good afternoon to you too, sir." He cast his eyes over Braska, who had now crossed his arms over the table and bent forward to rest his head against them, and added, "Is your friend all right?"

"Just needs a rest," said Jecht cheerfully, before embarking on the process of reserving a room. Tempted as he was to splash out on accommodation with a bed for each of them, as they had had on Besaid, he knew Auron would take issue with

[24] Hiya!

it, so he asked for the usual setup instead, and soon headed back to the others with the keys.

"You can go and lie down now, sir," said Auron, leaning close to Braska's motionless form. Braska made no reaction for a moment, but then blearily lifted his head, nodded, and allowed Auron to draw him into a standing position and guide him to the newly secured room. Once inside, he let himself topple onto the bed straight away. Auron succeeded in tugging off Braska's headdress and reached for his breastplate to do the same, but Braska waved him off.

"I'll do it later," he mumbled. "Let me sleep."

"Of course, my lord," said Auron, drawing back at once. "Do you need anything else?"

"No," said Braska.

Auron headed back to the common area and asked the clerk for a coffee; Jecht was still there, sitting at the table he and Braska had just vacated. "Uh," Jecht called, "favour?" He sent a meaningful glance towards the coffee-making machina.

Nodding brusquely, Auron turned back to the Al Bhed man and said, "Make that two – one with sweetener."

When the drinks were ready, Auron joined Jecht at the table, trying to guess what the outcome of Braska's decision would be. He had seemed to wield the æons competently enough in battle, although he hadn't called Valefor once, and the fact that it had been Bahamut he summoned against the sinspawn didn't seem a particularly good sign. But it had

also appeared from their conversations that what Braska was looking for was something entirely inside himself: the outcome of their battles seemed to have nothing to do with whether he judged his interactions with the æons a success. It was impossible to predict what he would say, although at the same time, it was difficult not to speculate.

"You think the Yevonites are still after us?" said Jecht after a while.

"Hm?" said Auron. Being asked to consider something not directly related to Braska felt very strange after spending all day worrying about the summoner.

"They were doin' all that stuff before, right?" said Jecht. "Stopping the boats and tryin' to get in our way – you think they gave up, or what?"

"Unlikely," Auron concluded. "They'll know that Braska has nearly all his æons from the recording spheres in the temples – they're probably taking him seriously for the first time. And they don't want him getting to Zanarkand; that was clear enough from the notice they put out. I'm sure they're planning something." They might not have needed to bother, he thought, depending on what Braska said later.

Jecht frowned, and then said, "I don't get why they care. You all want Sin to go away, right? I know he's meant to be a heretic, but shouldn't they just be glad if anyone makes it?"

"It's bad for their image," said Auron. "A High Summoner who's a known Al Bhed lover – it would destabilise people's

faith in the teachings."

"But you believe in the teachings," Jecht pointed out.

Auron blinked; over the last few days he had become gradually more convinced that he no longer felt any connection with Yevon, and the reminder that both Jecht and Braska assumed he was still a devout Yevonite was surprisingly jarring. "Well," he said, "actually, I've been –"

He trailed off as the door of the travel agency opened and a familiar boy walked in: it was the older of the summoner Perula's two nephews, the young men she had taken as her guardians. Looking rather furtive, he approached the counter.

"Do you do machina vehicle servicing?" he asked the clerk without a word of greeting. "We've been lent one, but it's broken down."

"I can take a look," the man said.

"Good," said the boy. "We're just outside – hurry up." He turned around and marched out again, looking resolutely straight ahead as if he feared the sight of more of the travel agency than strictly necessary would turn him into an Al Bhed.

"That was one of Perula's guardians," said Auron, suddenly alert.

"Who –" Jecht began, before he remembered the altercation at Kilika Temple. "Oh, that bitch? Hey, why wasn't she on Besaid? She was going the same way as us, right?"

"Not all summoners take the same æons," said Auron, only half-concentrating on the conversation as he sought to turn his mind to what the boy had said. They had been lent a machina vehicle, apparently; but the idea of using such things while on pilgrimage was impossibly sacrilegious. Perhaps Perula had found other guardians more suited to the task, he thought, and her nephews had elected to make their own way back to Bevelle.

He stood and approached the small window, finding to his satisfaction that it allowed him a view of the very place where the machina had broken. Perula was indeed there, looking extremely annoyed while she waited for the Al Bhed man to attend to them. The machina itself seemed fairly advanced: it was too large and unusual-looking even for Bevelle.

"Unbelievable," he murmured, stepping back from the window.

"What is?" said Jecht.

"They really are using a machina to get around," said Auron. "Or trying to, at least. That's bad enough at the best of times, according to Yevon, but on pilgrimage …" He turned to face Jecht. "You heard what Braska was saying earlier: even using chocobos is considered improper. If people knew she was a summoner, riding around on that thing, they'd be outraged. I just wonder who lent it to her – and why she accepted."

Jecht snorted. "Cos she's an asshole?"

Auron merely frowned thoughtfully in response.

The clerk had headed out to see to the machina during their conversation; he returned soon afterwards, looking somewhat irritated. Auron and Jecht exchanged a glance, and Auron turned to look through the window again; the machina was still at the side of the road, but Perula and her guardians had vanished. He nudged Jecht, who had a quick look too before sauntering towards the desk.

"So," he asked casually, "did you fix it?"

The clerk glowered at him. "I am not a specialist in machines," he muttered. "You Yevonites seem to think we all know everything about them – that was one of the newer models, and I left Home a long time ago."

"Newer, huh?" said Jecht. "Yeah, it looked kinda fancy. Did she say where she got it?"

"She refused to speak to me," said the man. "It was the boys who did the talking – they must have been the ones driving it as well. No wonder it broke down. They clearly had no idea how to handle it."

"So what are they doing now?" Auron couldn't help asking.

"She," said the clerk, "announced that she had never trusted the Al Bhed or our machina, and said she would continue on foot. Is that all, or are you going to keep interrogating me?"

"Only askin'," said Jecht, but he withdrew: it was clear that the man was on edge after having had to interact with a con-

firmed Al Bhed hater. He retreated to the table, sat down next to Auron, and muttered, "So what does it mean, genius?"

"I don't know," said Auron, wondering if they would ever find out. "It's strange."

Some time later, Braska awoke, slowly opening his eyes and staring up at the dark ceiling. The sleep had done him good; he had been so tired after fighting the sinspawn that he could barely remember the rest of the journey to the travel agency. As he regained consciousness, though, he remembered that he needed to make his decision, and his thoughts turned towards the æons. He had gone from barely summoning them at all to summoning them too much; while he hadn't wanted to admit it earlier, Auron had been right, and calling the æons as often as that clearly hadn't been the correct way to go about things. He had a horrible suspicion that there was a skill he should have acquired, some way of telling when it was right for his body to call on their strength and when he should let them rest. He would need to face Sin, after all, and summon the Final Æon in such a way that his stamina would run out just at the right time: he would need to give his life for the Final Summoning, but not so early that his æon's power would be insufficient. He needed to know how to judge that, and so far, it had eluded him entirely.

After the work he had done in Luca, he was able to call on Shiva, Ixion and Ifrit, and be sure they would do his bidding – but he was still unconfident with Valefor. Bringing Bahamut

out against the sinspawn had been a waste of time when that was the only æon he had fully mastered, and yet he had felt too weak by then to call any of the others despite insisting to Auron that it was his own responsibility to finish off the fiends. Summoning while on the road, trying to protect himself and his guardians from fiends that really could hurt them instead of being able to remain at a safe distance – and balancing that with the need to spend most of the day walking – it really was different. There was a knack to it, Braska was sure: other summoners managed it routinely. Even though only three had made it all the way to Zanarkand and back, and managed to defeat Sin, countless more had at least reached the Calm Lands, and found themselves failing only on the snowy slopes of Mount Gagazet. Those men and women had clearly worked out how to balance paying attention to their æons with making sure they remained capable of continuing, but it was a skill that he had completely failed to master.

That was it, then, he thought: his decision was made. He had thought he would be relieved to know his death would come so soon – he had longed for it for three years, after all – but he was surprised to find his throat growing hot and tight. He blinked, and his eyelashes came away moist; before long, he was sobbing, letting his body convulse with each ugly hiccough, but making no move to adjust his position. It hardly seemed worth trying to sit up, or to attempt to wipe his face or take deep breaths or do any of the other things

Auron normally encouraged him to do when he got into this sort of state. He couldn't understand why he was so upset: this was what he wanted, he was sure. But giving up was an admission that his determination to take the pilgrimage had been misplaced all along: he was too weak to deserve the æons' trust. He should have known, he thought, that someone so pathetic would never have succeeded as a summoner. And he had brought Auron all this way, and made him protect him and look after him, for no reason at all. He was a failure – he should have known he was a failure – and that, in turn, made him even more disgusted with himself.

Gradually, he managed to begin considering the question of how to proceed in a way that would cause minimal additional inconvenience for everyone he had burdened with his struggles. He would go back to Bevelle, as much as he hated the idea; he would apologise to the few people who had believed in him. He would introduce Jecht to the local Al Bhed population; his own relationship with them was strained, but with their superior technology, they would certainly be better equipped than any Yevonite to help Jecht find a way back to his Zanarkand. Then he would bid farewell to the two people who meant the most to him; and then he would leave the city and take his own life.

All that remained to do was inform his guardians. Now that he had given up on the pilgrimage, they would be able to hire chocobos and would reach the Moonflow in a day. There,

they might charter a boat that would take them up one of its tributaries and lead them straight back into Bevelle – except, Braska belatedly realised, Auron would hardly be comfortable travelling that way. For reasons he couldn't fathom, he found that the thought made him more disconsolate: his sobs became more violent again, each one making his whole body shake horribly. Feeling as if he was about to choke on his tears, he struggled into a sitting position; and then, suddenly, he was overwhelmed by a strange sense of serenity.

Braska sniffed and dragged a hand across his face, but the tears had stopped. He felt wonderfully calm, and he could sense that that calmness came from no source but himself. It was as if a light had been switched on somewhere in his chest or stomach, and then its rays had gradually spread to illuminate his whole body. Everything was bathed in light, and everything was at peace.

"What –" he stuttered.

Fear not, Braska, said a chorus of voices.

Startled, Braska leant forward sharply; the voices spoke again.

You have won us. We are with you.

As they spoke, he found himself recognising the individual voices even though they were speaking in unison. The high, childish tone he had first heard at Bevelle Temple; the older woman's voice from Macalania, and the two deeper ones he had encountered in the subsequent temples –

The fayth? he thought.

Your æons.

Yevon have mercy, Braska thought instinctively. Slowly, he straightened up, and forced his thoughts into something more controlled: Forgive me. I was unaware this could happen to summoners. None of those I spoke to mentioned –

It is rare, they said. *But you have worked hard to gain our trust, Braska. Your pilgrimage has a special importance. If you can make the final sacrifice, the consequences will be invaluable.*

Yes, he thought. Yes, of course.

We see that you doubt yourself, they continued. *But have courage, Braska. We are with you; we are your strength.*

There was a voice missing, Braska realised; he couldn't help but let his thoughts turn to it.

Worry not for Valefor. She has never been quick to trust. In time, she will join us.

Thank you, he thought. That is a relief.

Braska, they said, *you are but a man, but you bear a terrible burden. For that, we are sorry. But you are able to succeed where others have failed. Braska, you are our hope.*

"Your *hope*?" he said out loud, hardly believing it.

Your guardian can be our salvation, said the fayth. *If he gives himself to us, there will be a chance for our suffering to end. Spira is covered by a great veil of sorrow – but at last, after so long, there may be a way to lift it.*

Blinking in amazement, Braska tried to understand what this meant. It was the third time on the journey he had been told that Auron had some special quality; he didn't doubt it. The exact role he was to play in the dénouement of the pilgrimage was still unclear, though; Braska was nonetheless sure that whatever it was would only increase the acclaim he would win when he returned to Bevelle a legendary guardian. Everybody would realise that the shame they had caused Auron to suffer was misplaced: they would look beyond the sins he had supposedly committed and acknowledge that he was one of Yevon's most loyal servants. Braska owed him that, he reasoned.

What will you have him do? he thought.

When you arrive at Zanarkand, they replied, *it will be clear.*

It was an answer that Braska should have expected, he realised. He will not disappoint you, he thought. He is strong, and loyal; I trust him more than anyone. He will not fail.

And you, Braska? said the æons. *Do you still carry doubt within your heart? Or will you finish your journey, and play your part in ending Spira's torment?*

Slowly, Braska nodded. Knowing that you are with me, he thought – knowing that I am your hope – yes. If ever I doubted, now it is certain. I will go to Zanarkand, and see this pilgrimage to its end; I swear it.

There was no response, but he could feel their acceptance of his answer: the feeling of peace that had overcome him

somehow intensified. It was a gratitude that could not be expressed in words. He let himself give in to the light, finding himself almost overcome by its warmth; closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and felt its comfort fill him completely. Then, gradually, it receded once more.

Braska slowly stood, adjusting his robe; he walked over to the window and pulled back the curtain that Auron had drawn earlier. Sunsets at the Mi'ihen Highroad were often spectacular, and the one he now found himself faced with was no exception, lighting up the grassy banks with soft pinks and oranges; but Braska barely registered it. Instead, he wondered about the æons, and Auron, and the end of the journey: there were so many mysteries. Only on arrival at Zanarkand would everything become clear, he mused.

Carefully, he put on his headdress, wincing slightly; there was a dull ache behind his eyes, and he couldn't tell if it was from the tiredness, the crying, the experience he had had with the æons, or all three. But he left the room nonetheless, slowly making his way back to the common area to rejoin his guardians.

Auron looked up at him as he approached, intending to ask Braska how he was; but he found himself incapable of doing anything other than simply staring into Braska's red-rimmed eyes as the summoner drew nearer.

"It's decided," said Braska when he arrived at the table. "We continue."

"Tomorrow?" said Auron, barely daring to believe what he had heard.

Braska nodded slowly. "Yes."

"Thank you," Auron whispered.

Braska went to sit beside him, unable to prevent himself from stealing a few glances at his guardian; it was no wonder Auron was special, he thought. He was such a remarkable man; even the ordeal he had been made to suffer before they left Bevelle had done nothing to decrease his strength and his conviction. Braska was quite sure that no other summoner had ever had such an excellent guardian, and he knew Auron would perform splendidly in whatever task he would be required to complete at Zanarkand.

He reached for Auron's bare arm and ran his fingers over it lightly, taking comfort from the contact with his warm skin.

Auron did his best not to twitch away; he avoided making eye contact with Braska, and looked over towards Jecht instead, who met his gaze with a smirk. "It's probably time for dinner," he found himself saying, in a slightly strangled voice.

"I suppose," Braska murmured.

Grateful for the excuse to extricate himself from Braska's grip, Auron sprang up and headed to the reception desk; Braska watched him go with deep admiration. He found himself noticing the way Auron walked, confident and proud as he had every right to be; then the way he ordered the food, commanding and yet simultaneously polite. Braska couldn't

help smiling a little. The æons had chosen well, he reflected; Auron would surely save Spira from its unknown fate.

Across the table, Jecht watched his companions carefully. Braska now seemed to be staring at Auron in almost the same lovelorn way Auron habitually looked at his master. As much as Auron continued to insist that Braska had no particular interest in him, Jecht had become more and more certain of the opposite. But if Auron went on denying it – as he surely would, Jecht thought smugly – no doubt the only outcome would be that Auron would end up driving himself completely mad with desire, and perhaps then Jecht would succeed in persuading him to turn to another source for gratification instead. All he had to do was keep asking. It was clear that Auron had been getting increasingly desperate over the course of the journey, and when he eventually broke, Jecht would be right there.

They ate their dinner; Jecht and Auron bickered a little about the quality of the food, but it was more a way of keeping themselves entertained than anything. Braska's headache was showing no signs of abating, and he was starting to feel tired again; he soon excused himself to take a potion and record a brief sphere for Yuna before returning to his bed. After he had gone, Auron finally let himself breathe a sigh of relief. He had been sure he would have been able to talk Braska out of suicide – it wouldn't have been the first time, in fact – but knowing that Braska had chosen the other option of his own accord was another sign that there was some hope. Everything really

did seem to be pointing towards his imminent success.

Chapter **30**

The Man I Once Knew

Braska woke up slowly, finding himself alone; characteristically, he was the last to have woken. He lay still for a moment, savouring the feeling of the soft bedsheets, until he suddenly remembered: the æons had spoken to him. It had been a truly miraculous experience; he had never known a mortal could be so blessed.

He pressed a hand to his chest again, reflecting on it. That the æons had seen fit to show themselves in his time of need, and reassure him that he had won their favour – it was a sign that his pilgrimage could still succeed, despite his having been so sure he couldn't go on. This alone would carry him to Zanarkand, he was sure of that. He would never doubt his vocation again.

The thought brought Auron to his mind: he had used that word in Auron's presence once, *vocation*, and Auron had taken exception to it. In fact, he recalled, it had been the first time

the two of them had properly argued about Braska's decision to take the pilgrimage. After a few weeks of merely frowning and becoming rather taciturn as soon as Braska brought it up, Auron had eventually lost his temper when Braska innocently uttered the term, and had openly expressed his displeasure at the fact that in his view, Braska was using the task of becoming a summoner as an excuse to end his life. They had shouted at each other for so long that Braska had suspected he would lose his voice; in the end, Auron had stormed out, and Braska had dissolved into angry tears, mercifully after Auron's departure. They hadn't spoken to each other for several days afterwards; eventually, Braska had left his house, something he still found difficult then, and had gone to find Auron at the barracks, and forced himself to talk to him until Auron acknowledged his presence. Braska had been in great need of his support at the time, after all. There had been more arguments while he pursued his training, but that first one had been the rawest.

Now, Braska wondered whether he should tell Auron about this latest development with the æons. Auron was undeniably in charge of the practical aspects of the pilgrimage; he was looking out for Braska's fragile wellbeing, and it would no doubt be useful for him to know what was happening. And yet, Braska thought, it had been such an intensely personal experience that he was highly reluctant to mention it to another person, even Auron. He understood why no summoner he had spoken to had ever brought it up: if they had had something

similar happen, they would no doubt have felt the same way as he did. It would be impossible to describe the previous night's events in a way that did them justice.

The more he thought over it, the surer he was: he would not speak of it. As he came to his conclusion, he felt a brief, warm glow in his chest, and understood: the æons approved. They were keen for him to keep this privilege to himself.

He got up slowly, becoming aware of how much his legs ached. After having done comparatively little walking during the part of the journey that had taken them from Luca to Besaid and back to Luca, getting back to it had been harder than he had expected, and he was feeling its effects now. His feet stung as they made contact with the floor; his knees twinged and creaked as they bore his weight. Wincing a little, he made his way towards the tidy pile on the floor where Auron had left most of the supplies, retrieved a potion, and gulped it down; then he caught sight of the bandages they had been given in Djose, rolled into two neat lengths. They would give him some support, he decided, and so he bent to wind them around his knees, carefully tying each one in place.

He dressed and made his way to the breakfast table.

"All right, sir?" said Auron.

"Not too bad," said Braska. "I had a good rest – I needed it. Sorry to have kept you."

"It's fine," said Auron. "You did need it – I know that."

"Yeah," said Jecht, suddenly and unexpectedly. "You know

what your problem is, Braska?" He set the orange he had been messily peeling onto the table, ignoring the look of intense suspicion that Auron had suddenly turned on him. "You apologise too much. When you do somethin' people ain't gonna like, you gotta own it, ya know? I mean, you obviously wanna do it that way, so just stick to your guns, right."

"Sorry," said Braska automatically. "I mean – yes, I suppose I'm not apologising for what I *do*, exactly. It's more that I regret causing inconvenience."

"Ah," said Jecht, giving a lazy wave. "Auron don't mind it when you cause him inconvenience, do ya, Auron?"

Auron shot him an unimpressed glare, and then said, "Braska's the summoner. He can inconvenience us as much as he needs."

"Kind of annoying when he keeps saying sorry all the time, though, right?" said Jecht.

Braska frowned; there seemed to be something unspoken going on between Auron and Jecht, based on Jecht's smirks and the deepening crease between Auron's eyebrows, but he didn't know what the cause of it was. "I don't mean to annoy anyone," he said, slightly irritated himself. "I'll try not to apologise as often, then, if it offends you so much."

"It doesn't offend me at all," said Auron sharply. "Apologise as much as you want." He glared at Jecht again, sighed, and then abruptly stood and walked off towards the corridor that led back to the bedrooms.

Jecht let out a brief laugh. "Don't worry about it," he said, in response to Braska's doubtful expression. "I was just windin' him up. But I meant what I said, Braska – you don't gotta say sorry about everything. If people don't like what you're doin', that's their problem."

"I suppose," said Braska.

"Well, that's something, I guess," said Jecht. "Now, you better eat some breakfast, or Auron'll kill me."

Soon enough, they were on the road again. Braska was thoughtful as he progressed, concentrating on the feeling of the æons latent within him. Now that they had spoken, he found himself able to identify them as long as he took a moment to reflect: the light inside him was sometimes bright and sometimes a mere flicker, but when he looked hard enough, he could always tell it was there. This was his signal for when to call on the æons, he realised: when he focused on the light and found that it shone in a certain way, it meant one of them was ready to do his bidding. And when he picked up on it and waited a little longer, coaxing out the exact message being transmitted to him, he could eventually work out which one was its source.

It happened just a few times over the course of the day – too often would have tired him, and left him in the same state

as he had been in the previous afternoon – but on each occasion, calling the æon to fight seemed to make more sense. He was starting to understand how these battles worked now: just taking a moment to consider each æon's natural inclination helped him see exactly how he should deploy them against the fiends. Braska had studied the elements since he was a boy, and yet he had never had the profound understanding of how they worked that he was rapidly gaining now. It was a completely different way of conceptualising it, relying on intuition instead of calculation. Without the æons' trust, he would never have come to see magic in this way.

Each time he dismissed an æon, he couldn't help smiling privately to himself. He had trained as a summoner for over a year, and only now, more than halfway through his pilgrimage, was it finally starting to make sense.

Jecht too was uncharacteristically introspective as he walked; his thoughts had returned to the story of the man and his son. He knew Auron would scoff if he said anything more about it, but the idea that Tidus would need to come to Spira on his trail had taken hold of him, and the thought that he too would be unable to find an immediate way back was somewhat unpleasant. He had long since tacitly admitted to himself that he ought to be a better father to Tidus – how, he thought, was he supposed to do that if the two of them were in completely different places? Moreover, he was still sure that Tidus would find Spira unbearably boring. He thought it

was bad enough himself; Tidus was even more capricious, and weak besides.

He mulled it over, wondering how he might try to convince Tidus that he meant the best for him. Taking more spheres might help, he decided: that would show his son he was thinking of him. And if it seemed likely that Tidus would arrive in Spira before Jecht made it back to Zanarkand, he would hand the spheres over to Auron and ask him to pass them on.

Late in the afternoon, the three of them approached the junction that marked where the Mi'ihen Highroad became the Mushroom Rock Road: the sudden change from grassy to rocky terrain marked one of the abrupt transitions that were customary in Spira. When they had passed through on the southward journey, the area had been thronging with Crusaders whose presence had seemed to have no purpose besides blocking the path; this time, it was oddly deserted.

"Quiet here," Auron grunted.

As if in response, a woman dressed in one of the variants of the standard Crusader uniform emerged from the direction that led towards the narrower and more circuitous path running under the Highroad. "Be on your guard, sirs," she said by way of greeting. "There's a fiend we often have trouble with in this area – they say it's back today. We found one of our chocobos back there – what was left of it, I mean …"

"Oh, that's terrible," said Braska. "I do hope nobody's been harmed."

"Most of our men have fallen back to headquarters," she informed him. "It's a tough one – much worse than any of the fiends we usually get around here. We sometimes have to call in our units from the other side of the Moonflow if it doesn't back off."

"Oh yeah?" said Jecht. He turned to Auron. "Hey, that's where we started out, right? You can deal with this kind of thing no problem, I bet."

"Probably," said Auron, "but I hope you're not suggesting –"

"You're the one that always says you want a challenge," Jecht pointed out. "Come on, it'll be fun! And these guys'll love us. We need good press, right? Sounds like an easy win."

"It doesn't sound like anything of the sort," said Auron. "We know nothing about it, for a start."

"So we find out, right?" said Jecht, before turning towards the Crusader. "What's this fiend like, doll?"

Somewhat mystified by the term of address, the Crusader took a moment to respond. "We don't know much about the species, I'm afraid," she said eventually. "There don't seem to be any others like it in Spira. I can tell you it's enormous – almost as wide as the whole cliff." She gestured towards the edge of the path behind her, where a sheer drop led to the other road below. "Two big strong arms that could knock you right off there. It's got a taste for flesh too: it's eaten a few of our chocobos this year."

"Nothin' we can't handle," said Jecht. "Ain't that right, Auron? Don't tell me you're scared?"

"Of course not," said Auron. "I just think it would be a waste of time when it might not even show itself. And we shouldn't put Lord Braska in danger."

"But Braska wants to help," said Jecht, "don't ya, Braska?"

Braska shrugged apologetically. "You know me too well, Jecht," he said. "You're right, I shouldn't like to leave these people behind if there's something we could do to help them. I'm sure the three of us could make a good go of it. Couldn't we, Auron?"

"Right," Auron muttered. "How likely are we to see it, do you think?" he said, turning to the Crusader.

"Oh, if it's in the area, I'm sure it'll appear soon," she said. "Thank you so much for doing this, sirs – it'll save us a lot of trouble."

She hurried away; Braska and his guardians could do nothing but stand around and hope the fiend would make an appearance. "I can't believe it's like no other fiend in Spira," Auron muttered. "There must be similar ones somewhere. It's probably just that the Crusaders around here aren't familiar with the other regions."

"She said it had arms, didn't she?" said Braska thoughtfully. "And that it's as big as the length of the cliff edge …"

While they discussed it, Jecht located the sphere recorder. Having resolved to take more spheres to show to Tidus, he had

decided it wouldn't be such a bad idea to get some footage of the upcoming fight. It would show Tidus that some interesting things went on in Spira; what was more, it would also demonstrate that Jecht, being so eager to come to the Crusaders' aid, wasn't a wholly bad person. He would need to appear on camera himself for the full effect to be achieved, he realised.

He slotted a blank sphere into the device and approached Auron. "Favour?" he said, holding it out towards him.

Auron scowled. "Seriously? This sounds like it'll require some effort, Jecht – you want us to mess around taking pictures?"

"It's for my kid," Jecht said stubbornly.

"Oh," said Auron; he had become less and less sure of how to react when Jecht talked about his son, given that Jecht's own emotional response to the topic was wildly unpredictable. He sighed. "Fine. I'll get some shots while we wait – don't expect much after the fiend turns up, though."

"Ah, knew you'd come through," said Jecht, before turning his attention towards Braska. "So," he added, "you guys worked out what kinda fiend it is yet?"

"Not as such," Braska admitted. "It doesn't sound at all familiar. A giant fiend that attacks chocobos …"

Having switched on the sphere recorder, Auron had resumed his careful scanning of the area. The fiend was still declining to appear; he settled on pointing the recorder in Jecht's direction, which he presumed was what Jecht wanted, after all.

"What's it waiting for?" said Jecht as Auron slowly repositioned the device. "Hey!" he called. "Come out and fight!"

"I told you this was a waste of time," Auron pointed out.

"Hey, come on," Jecht countered, while Braska, who had gone to see if he could spot the fiend by peering over the cliff edge, returned to his side. "It's the right thing to do," Jecht added. "Everyone's depending on us; besides, it's good practice."

He had a point, Auron conceded, and Braska's presence beside Jecht now reminded him that the summoner had also seemed keen to help rid the Crusaders of this as yet still absent menace. "I guess you're right," he said reluctantly.

"Well, then," said Braska, glad Auron seemed to have been won over.

As he finished speaking, there was suddenly an enormous rumble underfoot; nobody could doubt that the fiend was on its way. Surprised by it, Auron dropped the sphere recorder and reached for his sword instead: the latter would unquestionably be more useful.

"There it is!" Jecht exclaimed as the beast made its way towards them. "Auron – let's get 'im!"

"Right!" Auron agreed, dashing off towards the fiend with Jecht in tow.

Braska approached the sphere recorder instead, carefully turning it off and scooping it up before he caught up with his

guardians. "You dropped this," he said, showing the machina to Auron before tucking it away into the folds of his own robe.

"Er, yeah," said Auron, who was more concerned with the need to size up the fiend and determine the best method of attack. "Sorry – thought we should take care of the fiend first –"

Braska raised his eyebrows; in fact, he was surprised that Auron apparently had such a cavalier attitude towards the device. Its primary use was for recording spheres to send to Yuna each evening, as Auron knew perfectly well. Braska had always made it clear that Jecht was welcome to borrow it and take what he needed from the copious supply of spheres, but that was on the understanding that taking spheres for Yuna was the priority. He had thought Auron understood that as well.

Slightly aggrieved, he joined the fight nonetheless, taking a moment to reflect and see if the æons were communicating anything to him. They weren't: he knew by this point that their silence meant none of them wished to be summoned. It would have helped in the fight, but it was clear enough that they were unwilling to be involved. He stuck to black magic instead, settling on fire as the element that seemed to do the most damage.

Despite what Jecht had anticipated, it was hardly an easy battle. Each of Auron and Jecht's blows, and Braska's blasts of fire, clearly did the fiend some damage, but never enough to have a huge impact. As the battle went on, Braska found

himself having to spare some white magic to keep himself and his guardians in good physical condition; that meant he had fewer opportunities to cast the fire spells, and so their already low rate of damage decreased further. Their proximity to the cliff edge meant it was a very real possibility that the fiend would swipe at one of them and end up forcing its prey into a fall of considerable distance. Auron was beginning to wonder whether it would be more productive to attempt to push the fiend over the edge instead than continue trying to defeat it.

As for Jecht, he was finding it increasingly odd that Braska hadn't yet summoned one of his æons, especially when he had done so a number of times earlier in the day for the sake of dispatching much less dangerous foes. "Braska," he hissed between swordstrokes, "ain't you gonna call an æon? They're meant for big fiends like this, right?"

Braska shook his head, quickly healing Jecht's latest injury with a flick of his staff. "Not now," he replied. "It's not the right time."

"Not the right *time*?!" Jecht echoed, appalled, as the fiend lashed out with its other enormous arm and knocked Auron onto his back. "Then when the hell is the right time?"

Auron winced as he stumbled to his feet, waving off Braska's offer of white magic; he returned his attention to the fiend, facing it squarely before charging at it with his sword aloft. He connected with a strong blow; the fiend shuddered back, evidently weakened; but then it lumbered forward again,

making for Auron once more. He leapt back to keep himself out of swatting range, drawing closer to the cliff edge than he realised; and the fiend kept advancing, reaching continually towards him with its massive fists. There was nowhere for Auron to go – he had backed himself into a corner, and all he could do was try to hold his ground.

"Attack from the rear!" he called to Jecht.

"You got it!" Jecht replied, but his attempts to draw the fiend away from the edge and give Auron some more room to manœuvre were fruitless. The fiend lunged forward again, slamming a fist into Auron – Auron was driven back, further than there was room to stand, and with a cry, he stumbled over the cliff edge and plummeted towards the ground below.

"Auron!" Braska gasped. The fiend had drawn away, seemingly indecisive after its triumph; Braska hurried forward to where it had stood, and looked down to see Auron lying on his back on the lower path, unmoving, one leg bent at an unnatural angle.

"Jecht," he said urgently, "cast Slow on me."

"Uh," said Jecht, wondering if Auron's fall had caused Braska to lose his senses. "Slow? You sure?"

"Just do it," Braska hissed, and Jecht obeyed, no less bemused. Once the spell was cast, Braska broke into an almost comical slow-motion run, made for the edge of the cliff, and launched himself off; Jecht watched as he descended gradually to the ground below.

It was an ingenious way of getting down there without causing injury, he realised, before looking back at the fiend and noticing it was beginning to advance once more. With both Braska and Auron absent, there was no chance that Jecht would be able to finish it off on his own; there was nothing he could do but cast Slow on himself in the same way and float down to the lower path in Braska's wake.

Once they had both landed, Braska impatiently twitched his staff to dispel the magic before hurrying to Auron's side. Auron was still unconscious; Braska carefully felt the back of his head, checking for signs of impact, and was relieved to find nothing. It must have been the pain and shock of his leg injury that had made him pass out; now that Braska was close, he was certain the leg was broken. Tugging Auron's trousers down a little revealed more evidence: dark bruising was already beginning to spread over his thigh.

"Oh, Auron," Braska murmured. "This is bad."

"Need me to do anything?" Jecht asked.

Braska considered for a moment, trying to recall his medical training. Healing Auron and Jecht during battle had never been at all difficult for him; having to see to Auron when he was this seriously injured was a different story. Braska was so worried that his hands had begun to shake; he forced himself to take a few deep breaths and recall the correct procedure.

"I'll need to revive him before I can cast the healing spell," he found himself saying. "It won't be pleasant – he'll be in a

lot of pain when he comes to, and he'll probably try to move the leg – but we need to keep it as still as we can to make sure the magic is effective."

"You want me to hold him still?" Jecht suggested.

Braska nodded. "Please. The leg especially. We should try lining it up before I cast, as well."

Between them, they manœuvred the injured leg into a more natural position. "I'm going to revive him now," said Braska breathlessly. "Ready?"

"Go ahead," said Jecht, using both hands to hold Auron's leg firmly in place.

Braska leant over Auron's face first, casting the spell to revive him; as he had anticipated, Auron began yelling out and writhing in pain. Jecht gripped him more tightly as Braska whispered an apology and then turned his attention to the leg, channelling as much white magic as he could through his hands and over the injury. As the fracture was gradually healed, Auron's cries died down and he stilled; the dark bruising faded to pale. Jecht could feel the intensity of Braska's magic against his own hands; their appearance remained the same, but it felt almost as if fifteen years of professional blitzball injuries had vanished. He flexed his fingers a little, finding them as supple as those of a boy half his age.

At last, Braska drew back, panting; he had directed as much energy as he could into the spell. He sank onto his knees, took

a moment to catch his breath, and then murmured, "Auron – are you all right?"

"I think so," Auron replied, sitting up carefully with a grimace. "What happened?"

"Femoral fracture," Braska explained. "You must have passed out from the pain. I've done my best to heal it, but I couldn't get to you immediately – do you think you can stand?"

Auron reached out to touch the faded bruise on his thigh, wincing a little; the area was still tender. He pulled up his trousers, then reached for Jecht's outstretched hand and scrambled to his feet; it was undeniable that his leg hurt, but it seemed able to bear weight.

"I'm all right," he said.

"Are you?" said Braska.

"I can walk," said Auron. "What about you, sir? You look terrible."

"Just tired after healing you," Braska explained. "Auron, I'm sorry – I should have summoned. I didn't think it was the right time, but I ought to have called an æon against a fiend like that. I never meant to put you in danger."

"You didn't put me in danger," said Auron irritably. "It was my own fault – I shouldn't have let it corner me. I'm sorry you had to use all your energy seeing to me."

"Will you guys stop apologising?" Jecht grumbled. "You heard what I said earlier, right?"

Auron turned to him, unimpressed. "Yeah. Actually, you're the one who should be apologising. You were the keenest to fight that thing – the *right thing to do*, wasn't it? Now Braska's exhausted, and I'm –" He cut himself off; he didn't want Braska to worry about him. "We're going to have to walk all the way back up there." The thought of it seemed to be making his leg hurt more.

Jecht shrugged. "Wasn't like I knew what was gonna happen. And like Braska said, if he'd summoned an æon –"

"I hope you're not suggesting it's his fault," said Auron sharply.

"Auron, please," said Braska. "We're here now – it hardly matters how we got here." He stood and retrieved his staff, which he had cast aside in a panic before healing Auron. "Come on," he added, heading towards the path that led back to the upper level.

Auron advanced slowly, trying not to walk with too pronounced a limp; the pain was residual, he knew, and things would have been much worse if Braska had been unable to get to him at all. The next morning he would in all likelihood be fine; until then, he would simply have to try not to worry Braska.

Braska soon noticed, though, that every other step Auron took made him grimace slightly; he wouldn't have been aware of it had he not suspected that Auron would try to disguise the remnants of his injury. He drew beside him, and murmured,

"Let me help you, Auron. I haven't the strength for more magic, but I can give you some support, at least."

"I'm all right," Auron reiterated. "You don't need to trouble yourself – I know you're tired."

Braska shook his head. "And you're still hurt, clearly. Please, Auron – you always look out for me. Let me do the same for you."

"You're the summoner, sir," said Auron. "It's my duty to take care of you, not the other way around."

"I heal all of us in battle," Braska argued; "why should this be any different? And we're friends, Auron, are we not? I don't want to see you struggling."

Auron sighed, but made no further protest as Braska placed an arm behind his back and began to grip him tightly, letting Auron lean into the support.

"Hey, you're lucky Braska knows magic," said Jecht, bounding into position beside them. "If that'd happened in Zanarkand, you'd need surgery, most likely. They'd put, like, a metal rod into your leg." He gestured towards his own thigh and grinned.

"Great," said Auron humourlessly.

They continued their slow advance; fortunately, the few fiends that appeared were weak enough for Jecht to see off on his own, as long as Auron offered him a few words of advice on strategy. Braska was beginning to lean on Auron as much as Auron was leaning on him: the walk up the slope was taxing

when using his magic had tired him out so much. By the time they returned to the area where they had fought the fiend, they were both sorely in need of a rest, and they mutually agreed to pause for a while and sit down on the ground, leaning against the rock face at the point where it began to rise.

Braska made no move to let go of Auron as they did so; in fact, he began to rest his head on Auron's shoulder as soon as they sat down, drawing solace from Auron's warm presence. Auron might normally have become tense and awkward at such contact, but this time, it was enough of a distraction from his injury for him to lean into it, letting the feeling of Braska resting against him console him in turn.

Jecht took the opportunity to inspect the sphere Auron had taken before the battle. One of its halves seemed to have gone missing, probably during the commotion while Braska hurried to Auron's aid; the other was intact, and showed a clear record of what had happened before the fiend turned up, if nothing else. He hoped Tidus would understand that he had wanted to help.

Not long afterwards, the Crusader they had spoken to earlier reappeared. "Sirs!" she exclaimed. "It's good to see you again. I wanted to thank you – you've done us a great service."

"Uh, the fiend's still out there," said Jecht sheepishly. "There was, um, an accident …"

"You still weakened it enough for our men to move in and drive it back," she explained. "I daresay we'll be free of trouble

here for a few weeks, at least. So, you see, I really must thank you." She sank into a Yevonite bow, before straightening up and properly noticing for the first time the way that Braska and Auron were huddled together. "Is something wrong?" she added. "You don't seem to be in the best form, sirs."

"My lord summoner's tired," Auron explained; at the same time, Braska said, "Auron's hurt."

"Oh," she said, pensive for a moment before continuing cheerfully. "I know – you could rest at our command centre. We have spare beds there – you can stay the night. I can even lend you some of our chocobos for you to get down there. It's down in the ravine, just off the main path." She gestured towards the Mushroom Rock Road. "It's the least we can do after you helped us."

"Ah," said Jecht knowingly, "but we're on pilgrimage – chocobos are cheatin', ain't that right?"

"I think we could make an exception on this occasion," said Braska, lifting his head away from Auron's shoulder. "We wouldn't be using them to advance our own journey, just to make a diversion – so there'll be no effect on our progress if we return here and resume on foot tomorrow. If we don't accept this, I think we'll need to camp here – Auron probably shouldn't try walking much further."

Auron shook his head in protest, but found himself cut off before he could voice his thoughts as the Crusader spoke again. "Then you must," she said. "No point camping on the road

when we can give you proper beds down at command. Especially if you're injured. I'll fetch some of our birds – hold on a moment."

She disappeared, and was soon back with three obedient chocobos. Jecht observed the birds with interest: he hadn't yet seen them this closely, and the knowledge that he was about to ride one for the first time made him consider them in a different light. Wondering how difficult they would be to ride, he mounted one experimentally, finding to his satisfaction that it was easy enough to assume a posture that didn't seem totally uncomfortable.

Auron and Braska climbed onto the other chocobos; Auron had more experience riding, but had never found it an especially pleasant way to travel. He had to admit, though, that being able to take the weight off his leg was helpful.

"Give them this," said the Crusader, proffering a small token to Jecht, whom she had deemed the most competent of the three travellers. "Tell them Oselma sent you – they'll know my name. They'll certainly have some beds available for you."

They rode into the rocky tunnel and down to the ravine, following the twisting path around to the Crusader command centre. Jecht was rapidly getting accustomed to chocobo riding; after the first few turns, he increased his speed to a canter, and then to a gallop. By the time he arrived at the lift that led into the Crusader encampment, he had left Braska and Auron far behind; they trotted into view some time later, the latter

looking rather disapproving.

"These aren't racing chocobos," he said crossly. "I expect they want us to return them in satisfactory condition."

"Hey, relax," said Jecht. "She's fine, ain't ya, girl?" He patted the chocobo firmly on its neck; it squawked.

"How do you know it's a female?" said Braska, yawning.

Jecht shrugged. "Instinct. Come on!"

The others followed him onto the lift, and they rose up towards the command centre, whereupon Jecht presented the token he had been given to the nearest unoccupied Crusader and explained that they had been offered lodgings. The man seemed rather surprised, but he accepted Jecht's story and directed the three of them to a small building.

"I'll stable the chocobos," he said, "and then we'll see about getting you a room and some dinner. You can wait in there in the meantime."

The building turned out to be some kind of storehouse; in days past it might have been used to keep provisions, but it now served as the Crusaders' archive of sphere recordings. It was sparsely furnished beyond the shelves that covered each wall and housed the spheres, although fortunately for Braska and Auron, there was one small wooden table and a bench beside it where they could sit down. Braska did so eagerly, tugging on the back of Auron's robe and practically dragging him onto the bench next to him; Jecht examined the spheres in the meantime.

"Never seen this many spheres in one place before," he remarked.

"I suppose the Crusaders are in the habit of keeping records," Auron explained, rubbing his thigh and wincing. "Makes sense – there's a lot of tension between them and the clergy. They probably want to make sure they're not misrepresented."

"Right," said Jecht, half-listening as he perused the shelves. Now that he was looking closely, he could see that each sphere was labelled with a name and date; Auron's suggestion seemed to have been right.

"Hey," he exclaimed after a while, "it's your friend!"

"My friend?" said Auron suspiciously.

"You know," said Jecht, "the one that's trying to sabotage the pilgrimage. Looks like he was here yesterday – you just missed him."

"Kinoc?" Auron muttered.

"You got it," said Jecht. "Wanna watch?"

"I don't think we should …" Auron began, before turning to Braska in the hope that he might arbitrate. He was out of luck: Braska was already fast asleep.

"I suppose he must have dealings with the Crusaders these days," he mused. "Now that he's second in command."

"So you wanna watch it or not?" said Jecht, tossing the sphere from one hand to the other.

"Don't do that," said Auron, but he couldn't deny that he was curious. "Fine … go on."

Grinning, Jecht set the sphere on the table, and the image of its contents slowly took shape.

Kinoc and another man from the corps by the name of Garnif were approaching a desk where a young Crusader sat; the man saluted as they drew close, and said, "Morning, sirs. You must be the party from Bevelle – I was told to expect you. Auron, isn't it?"

"No, no," said Kinoc, after a brief pause. "There was a change of personnel – you mustn't have heard. My name is Wen Kinoc."

"Wen Kinoc!" the Crusader repeated, clearly impressed by Kinoc's noble title. "My apologies. I suppose you're here to speak to command. I'll go and fetch someone – please wait here."

"I thought the news would have reached them by now," said Garnif once he had gone. "It's been a couple of months since all that, hasn't it?"

"News doesn't always make it out of Bevelle," said Kinoc.

"I suppose not," Garnif concurred. "Can't say the same for the man himself, though, can we? Where's he got to by now?"

"Auron?" said Kinoc. He was silent for a moment, thinking. "Last report I heard put them in Luca. The heretic summoner has five æons now – it's enough to make you laugh."

Neither of them did. "Bet you're glad he's out of your way, though," Garnif remarked.

"You got that right," said Kinoc. "They were talking about not allowing him to go on the pilgrimage, just stripping him of his rank instead. It'd have humiliated him, that's for certain – but he'd have worked his way back up through the corps soon enough. At least now he's out of the picture for a while. Long enough to be out of the running for that promotion, at least – just have to watch out for if he comes back."

"You don't really think anyone in the corps would make time for him?" said Garnif. "Not now that everyone knows what he is?"

"There are people in Bevelle who believe in second chances," said Kinoc. "Especially after how his punishment went; they'll say it was a sign he's in Yevon's favour after all. And the further he gets on this pilgrimage, the more prepared they'll be to pretend he's just like the rest of us. At least now that *Lord* Braska has most of the æons, the maesters are starting to take me seriously when I tell them we need to step in."

"Is that right?" said Garnif.

"They don't want this pilgrimage to be a success any more than I do," Kinoc explained. "An Al Bhed lover as High Summoner – it would make people question the teachings. We tried passing that law, but it's met more opposition than we expected; I doubt we'll get it through in time to stop them mak-

ing it to Zanarkand. Fortunately, I've managed to persuade the maesters to let me use some more direct methods."

"Oh really?" said Garnif. "I heard there was a notice sent out to the travel agencies. And something involving one of the ferries?"

Kinoc nodded. "Yes, although that kind of thing's getting hard to enforce too: if our provincial friends find out he has an æon from the area, they start bending over backwards to help him instead, no matter how much we tell them. We've been trying to assist some of the other summoners out there instead, to make sure they stay ahead of him; we just convinced one of them to accept the loan of a machina vehicle. That might get her to Zanarkand before Braska and his friends even make it back over the Moonflow. She took some persuading – typical Bevelle priestess, far more devout than she needs to be – but she understood it was for the good of Yevon in the end."

Garnif laughed; Kinoc went on. "Of course," he said, "Perula may not make it to Zanarkand anyway – and Braska might. I think the maesters are finally starting to see that now. He could still become High Summoner, even with everything we're doing – it'll be a travesty. But at least it'll get Auron out of the way for good."

"You think so?" said Garnif.

"You know even the best guardians rarely survive the Final Summoning," said Kinoc, after a slight hesitation. "Collateral damage, I suppose. It must be very violent."

Garnif nodded. "But don't tell me – you have a plan for if that happens, I'm sure? I know you, Kinoc."

"You'd be right," Kinoc replied. "Yes, if Braska makes it, we're going to have to go down a different route: rehabilitation. Convince everyone he never so much as spoke to an Al Bhed. We'll start putting about the story that he was the most committed Yevonite of any – and we'll repeat it until we believe it ourselves."

"Sounds like a difficult job," said Garnif.

"It's happened before," said Kinoc, with a shrug. "Did you ever hear the rumours about Lord Gandof? Well, anyway – I'm sure it'll work, if that's what it comes to. People will be all too happy to believe it, won't they? Rather that than admit Sin could be defeated by a drunken heathen, an Al Bhed lover, and a –"

"Turn it off," said Auron suddenly, his voice rising over the sound of the recording. "Jecht. Turn it off."

Jecht lifted the sphere from the table; the images immediately died away. He looked in Auron's direction, and then wished he hadn't; Auron was wide-eyed and trembling, clearly in distress.

"I," said Auron, and then he stopped, heaved out a long sigh, and tried again. "I thought he was my *friend*."

"Ain't gonna say I told you so," said Jecht, "but ..."

Auron shook his head. "We've known each other for years," he said breathlessly. "We were always rivals, but – I thought

it was friendly – I never knew he – he didn't even mind if I *died –"* He clenched his fists. "And the things he said about Braska …"

They both looked over at the summoner; remarkably, he was still asleep.

"I spoke to him the day before we left Bevelle," Auron went on. "I thought he cared about the pilgrimage – even told me I should have got the promotion – *guard Lord Braska well*, he said. *Lord* Braska – as if he had any intention of respecting him. By the fayth – I've been so stupid." He leant back and closed his eyes for a moment, then abruptly pitched forward again and opened them. "And he's the one who tried to get Lady Perula to use that machina cart. Of course. I should have expected it. What a … an awful hypocrite."

"You can curse if you want, Auron," said Jecht. "No-one's gonna stop you."

Auron ignored him. "All those years," he said, "and he was just waiting for the chance to stab me in the back. Damn it! He was the one who pleaded my case with the maesters, persuaded them to dismiss me so I could come on the pilgrimage instead of just demoting me – I thought he was doing it because he was my friend, and now I find out he just wanted to send me off to Zanarkand because he thought he'd be rid of me!"

He sighed again, and then spoke once more, his voice suddenly quiet and shaky. "I hate this. I hate it."

Jecht watched him for a moment; he found himself wishing

he knew how to make Auron feel better. This proof of Kinoc's betrayal had clearly upset him: he was at least as affected by it as he had been by Braska's recent behaviour. Auron was naturally quick to anger, Jecht knew, but these recent lapses in his composure were different from the usual brief outbursts, and they seemed to be getting more frequent. Jecht knew he would far prefer to see Auron get angry than watch him fall apart.

"Gonna cry like a little girl?" he said at last.

Auron looked up at him and shook his head wearily before shifting his gaze towards Braska's sleeping form. He thought Jecht's reaction was horribly unsympathetic, as usual, but he didn't have the energy to argue. All he could think about was the fact that Kinoc, his supposed friend, had never really respected him: that he was content to see Auron disgraced, or dead, or both, as long as it furthered his own career. The two of them had always had a fierce rivalry, but Auron – perhaps naïvely, he now realised – had never thought Kinoc's concern for his own status was such that it overrode basic decency.

He had only one true friend, he thought, and that was the man sitting next to him. The need to save his life was more urgent than ever – and Kinoc, of all people, was the person making the pilgrimage even more difficult for Braska than it might already have been.

Braska was still asleep; Auron permitted himself to shuffle a little closer and lean against him slightly. He didn't stir,

and Auron found himself moving in further, leaning his head carefully against Braska's and letting the soft fabric of his headdress distract him from his mood. Jecht had asked if Auron was going to cry; that was something he hadn't done since he was a boy, but for a moment, he thought perhaps he might. He closed his eyes, hoping that no longer having to look at Jecht and the spheres might prevent it.

Not long afterwards, he heard the sound of the door opening, and abruptly opened his eyes and sat up; the Crusader they had briefly spoken to earlier was back. "Thanks for waiting," he said. "We've prepared a room for the three of you, and you'll find some dinner waiting for you there."

"Thanks," Auron muttered, before embarking on the task of waking Braska. "Sir," he said, grabbing him by the shoulder and giving it a little tug. "Braska – the room's ready –"

"Must you, Auron?" said Braska crossly; opening his eyes fully, he realised the young Crusader was standing before him. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Dear me – my apologies. What is it?"

"They've got the room ready for us, my lord," Auron said again.

"Oh, of course," said Braska. "Lead the way, then."

They followed the Crusader into the much larger building that served as dormitories, and were led to a modestly appointed twin bedroom. "We often house guests here," the young man explained. "I'm afraid we couldn't get you a room with three beds – we've put a mat out as well. And your din-

ner's on the table. Need anything else, just let me know." He nodded a goodbye, and was gone before anyone had thought to ask how exactly they were supposed to contact him.

Braska immediately went to recline on one of the beds; Auron and Jecht both looked down at the other. In tandem, they looked up again; their eyes met.

"Fine," said Jecht, "you can have it. Only cos of the ..." He gestured vaguely towards Auron's thigh, and said no more.

Auron couldn't bring himself to thank Jecht out loud; he nodded minutely before sitting down carefully on the bed.

"Yes, how is it?" said Braska somewhat sleepily from his recumbent position. "The leg?"

"Getting better, I think," Auron mumbled; he hadn't paid it much attention since watching the sphere. He paused, and then added, "We should eat. Come on."

They sat at the table where the dinner had been left for them: it was good fare, tasty and filling, and even Braska ate a not insubstantial portion. He and Jecht did most of the talking throughout the meal; Auron had practically fallen silent.

"I feel a bit more awake now," Braska remarked afterwards. "I know you don't think much of the Crusaders, Auron, but they seem to be able to cook well, at least."

"Hm," said Auron; to say he wasn't in the mood for such frivolous conversation was putting it mildly, and he could foresee himself losing his temper if it continued. It would be best to spend some time alone, he decided.

"I'm going to step outside for a moment," he muttered, and headed out without waiting for a response.

He walked down the long corridor, past the rooms with the Crusaders' bunks, and made his way out of the building, still limping a little. It was getting dark; the rocky terrain made it seem darker than it might have elsewhere. With some difficulty, he wondered what might be the best way to let off steam. A good fight would normally have helped, but there were no fiends around, and every time he and Jecht had sparred, he reflected, it had seemed to end in disaster. Nor was it a good idea to engage in strenuous physical activity when his leg still wasn't fully healed.

Thoughts of Kinoc inevitably distracted him. They had made an unlikely pair: Kinoc was a scion of one of the most noble families of Bevelle, Auron an unruly orphan from a village that no longer existed, whose only way of making his elders take notice of him was by demonstrating his prowess in combat. And yet they had gravitated to each other as soon as Kinoc joined the corps, perhaps motivated by their shared dedication to their career. Kinoc had never matched Auron in swordwork, but he had been on a par as far as strategy was concerned, and his ability to form and maintain connections with the right people was unparalleled. As boys, they had been inseparable, and when they had become men, their mutual pursuit of the highest honours had sometimes divided them, but they had remained close. So Auron had thought.

Besides Braska, Kinoc was just about the only person who had stood by Auron after his disgrace. And now Auron found himself wondering whether any of it had been genuine: he knew now that Kinoc's petition to the maesters regarding his position and his authorisation to take the pilgrimage had just been a way of getting him out of Bevelle. Perhaps it had gone back further than that, he thought. Perhaps Kinoc had never really been his friend, and had always just thought it a good idea to ensure he was in Auron's confidence because he was his most significant rival.

Auron remembered, then, that he still had the sphere Kinoc had left for him the day before they had set off on the pilgrimage. The recording of their last meeting: the occasion when Kinoc had uttered the words *guard Lord Braska well*, those words that Auron now knew to have been spoken without a shred of sincerity. He fished the sphere out of his robes and eyed it; he had carried it with him since that day, motivated by some lingering sentimentality that he now knew had been undeserved. Now he wanted nothing more than to be rid of it immediately. He raised it beside his head as if he was bowling for a ball game; then, with a grunt of effort, he extended his arm and let go, flinging the sphere into the distance, with as much force as he could. It rolled loudly across the ground for a while, then met the edge of the rock and dropped into a lower part of the ravine.

The physical sensation of throwing the sphere had helped

a little. But still, it hurt: not only Kinoc's betrayal, but the knowledge that he had never thought to suspect any of it. Kinoc had never been particularly friendly towards Braska, but then Auron was about the only warrior monk who had, and he had known Kinoc's concern for his status probably prevented him showing an attitude that was overly tolerant of those who so brazenly defied the teachings. But to have heard him call Braska an Al Bhed lover and a heretic, and to speak of him in such dismissive tones: that hurt, too. Even if Kinoc was unaware of the extent of Auron's feelings towards Braska, he certainly knew they were good friends, and that speaking in that way would upset him.

He let himself sigh, long and slow. It was impossible not to return to the conclusion he had drawn earlier: that Braska really was his only friend, and that saving his life now seemed even more critical. He would ask the Crusaders what they knew about Sin before they left in the morning, he decided; that was the most useful thing he could do during this unanticipated diversion. And he would have to be grateful that he now knew not to waste time imagining Kinoc had any affection for him, or that there would be anything waiting for him in Bevelle once the pilgrimage was over. Braska's company was preferable to that of any warrior monk of Yevon. Even spending time with Jecht wasn't so bad, he reflected – at least his fellow guardian said what he thought.

He returned to his companions, and found them engaged

in a conversation about the difference between fiends and the unsent. The latter were an uncommon phenomenon in Spira: a strong attachment to the living world was occasionally enough to keep the souls of the dead from becoming fiends, instead retaining both human shape and full sentience after death.

"Run it by me again," Jecht was saying. "Fiends used to be people, but unsents …"

"No, the unsent were once human as well," Braska corrected him. "The terminology is a bit confusing: most people who aren't sent actually end up becoming fiends. They lose their humanity straight away, so they're easy to spot; but the unsent remain in human form. It's said that if a person dies weighed down by some important task he needs to fulfil, the strength of his determination can force him to remain among the living."

"So they could just be walkin' around here, and we wouldn't know?" Jecht hazarded.

"It's possible," said Auron, crossing the room to sit on his bed. "Then again, they say some unsents are gradually driven mad by whatever it is that keeps them from turning into fiends. They maintain their appearance, but they stop acting like ordinary people."

"Yeah?" said Jecht eagerly, more relieved by the fact Auron seemed to be calm enough to contribute to the conversation than he would care to admit. "You ever seen one?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Auron.

"I suppose there must be a fair few around," Braska mused. "If they need to stay in Spira until their tasks are complete … some of them probably never leave at all."

"Eternal life, huh?" said Jecht. "Sounds sweet."

Auron grunted.

"What," said Jecht, "you don't think so? I bet bein' dead has its advantages."

"Such as?" said Auron.

"Well, if you were dead, nothing could kill you," said Jecht insightfully. "And think about all the time you'd have! You could be the best at anything you wanted. You could be a celebrity, right?"

"Oh, sure," said Auron, "and never mind that all your loved ones would be gone and you'd just be watching the world change around you, with no hope of rest for, I don't know, maybe hundreds of years. You think that's the price worth paying for fame? Come on, Jecht – it'd be torture."

"You ever thought it might be nice to look on the bright side?" Jecht growled back. "You know, just for a minute?"

"I'm just trying to be realistic," said Auron. "I know that's a foreign concept to you, but one of us has to be sensible."

"Auron, Jecht, please," said Braska. "There's no need to be so uncharitable. You have different opinions – there's nothing wrong with that." He yawned. "I'd better take Yuna's sphere before I get too tired again. I hope the two of you won't start fighting while I'm doing so."

Auron glanced towards him, and was relieved to find that Braska was smiling a little; he seemed to have been at least partly joking, which was probably better than his earlier tendency to become upset when his guardians argued like this. It reflected the fact that Auron and Jecht had begun to tolerate each other more, of course; their disagreements rarely contained much vitriol these days.

They each made their contributions to Yuna's sphere: Auron was rather taciturn, but as far as Braska knew, it was only because of his injury and his usual awkwardness when talking to children. After that, there was little left to do but get ready for bed and hope the next day of their journey would be less eventful.

Chapter **31**

Yevon's Blessing

"How are you feeling, Auron?" Braska asked the next morning.

Auron hesitated; knowing Braska had slept through the entire unpleasant process of discovering Kinoc's betrayal, he couldn't understand why he was asking about it. Eventually, he realised Braska was referring to his injury.

"Fine, I think," he said, poking at his thigh cautiously. Getting a full night's sleep had helped complete the healing process; now it felt as if he had never broken anything at all. Such was the way things worked in Spira: Auron had taken it for granted all his life. Even serious injuries like the one he had suffered were no trouble, as long as a white mage or a sufficient potion supply could be located quickly.

Soon afterwards, the Crusader who had shown them to the room was back with some meagre but acceptable breakfast. "Can I have a word?" Auron asked, after setting the food

on the table.

They went into the corridor; Auron carefully closed the door behind him, and then said without further ado, "I'm sure you've noticed we're a summoner's party. My lord summoner is due to receive the Final Æon in less than a fortnight, if we stay on schedule. It's crucial that we have all the information on Sin and the Final Summoning you can give us."

"Oh," said the Crusader, "right …"

"Do you have some sort of archive of your battle records?" Auron demanded. "Any documents I could look at, or a chief strategist I could consult?"

"Our strategist is in Bevelle at the moment," said the Crusader; he had been slightly taken aback by Auron's brusque demeanour, but now managed to recover his composure. "I don't think he could tell you anything useful, though. We don't tend to concern ourselves with the Final Summoning; our focus is on trying to drive Sin back when it attacks."

"So shouldn't you be trying to defeat it for good?" Auron replied. "Never mind, then. What about the techniques you use to see it off? Are there any methods of attack that seem especially effective?"

"Well," said the Crusader, "we've been trying to update our gear recently, but … you'll probably think it's heretical."

"I'll be the judge of that," Auron growled.

"Right," said his interlocutor. "It's, er, more advanced guns, I'm afraid. We've started working with an Al Bhed supplier. Of

course, now there's been a reshuffle in Bevelle, the new man there might shut that down. Depends what he wants."

Kinoc had always been a supporter of the use of firearms, in fact, although it was possible that Al Bhed-made equipment would be going too far even for him. Either way, Auron didn't want to think too deeply about that. "And are these Al Bhed guns any more effective than your previous ones?" he asked.

"They're much more responsive," said the Crusader.

"But are they better against Sin?"

"Well, they're faster," the man explained; "you can reload them more quickly."

"You misunderstand me," said Auron. "I need to know if these guns have some kind of special property that we can harness for defeating Sin. Is there some difference in the bullets they use, maybe? Any particular substance that gets added to them?"

"Not that I'm aware of," said the Crusader. "They're built to use our bullets from before, anyway – we had a big stock, didn't want them going to waste. I think the main difference is just that we can land more of them in a short time."

"And that helps drive Sin back?" Auron said.

The man shrugged. "Maybe. Hard to tell."

Auron threw his head back in frustration: this was getting him absolutely nowhere. It was quite clear that the Crusaders' focus was on trying to stave off Sin when it appeared, and nothing beyond that; they seemed to have no sense of any longterm

plan. "Forget it," he muttered, before heading back into the bedroom, taking a seat at the table, and reaching for some of the breakfast the man had delivered.

Braska, who had already eaten the tiny portion he deemed sufficient, regarded Auron with some interest. "What were you asking him about?" he said.

"Oh," said Auron. "Um, the fiends in the area. Just wanted to be sure we weren't in for any surprises."

"We've passed this way before," Braska pointed out.

"Good to be cautious, though, after yesterday," said Auron, taking the opportunity to level a glare at Jecht. He attempted to lift a grape with his spoon; it rolled away and dropped off the edge of the table, and he couldn't help letting out a grunt of frustration.

Jecht guffawed. "Someone got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, huh."

"Are you all right, Auron?" said Braska. "Is something bothering you?"

"Nah, he's always like that," said Jecht smugly. "Ain't that right, Auron?"

"Oh, shut up," Auron replied, before turning to Braska. "It's fine, sir. I'm just a bit tired."

Braska immediately leant over the table and pressed a hand to Auron's forehead, channelling a generous amount of white magic into him. "Trouble sleeping?" he asked as he did so.

"I guess," said Auron. "My lord, you don't have to –"

"Auron, you know we wouldn't last a moment without you," said Braska, leaning back at last. "You're crucial to this pilgrimage, you know that." Auron didn't know quite how crucial he was, he reflected; now that the æons had made that clear, it was surely even more important to ensure Auron was in good health.

Auron shook his head. "So are you. You shouldn't exhaust yourself."

"But did that help a little?" Braska pressed him.

It hadn't; it was Auron's mind, not his body, that was discomforted, and no amount of white magic could help with that. "Of course," he lied. "Thank you, sir."

Braska nodded, pleased, and the three of them set about getting ready to leave. Only when Braska excused himself to visit the bathroom did Auron let out a sigh and bury his face in his hands.

"It's the Kinoc thing, ain't it?" said Jecht impassively. "Why don't you just tell him about it? He knows what it's like to lose friends, right?"

"It doesn't matter," said Auron fiercely. "He has enough to worry about – I don't want to make things harder for him. You've seen how he tires himself out casting magic on me when he thinks there's something wrong."

"Fuck's sake," said Jecht, "you guys are the most stubborn sons of bitches I ever met. So what are you gonna do, just act like an asshole all day?"

"Don't I always?" Auron hissed.

Jecht shrugged. "Well, mostly, but sometimes you're an OK guy, Auron."

Auron grunted, too bad-tempered to consider the fact that Jecht had, in a backhanded way, acknowledged that they sometimes got on. He found himself reflecting on the completely unproductive conversation he had had with the Crusader: if he had been in a better mood, he knew, it might have gone somewhere more useful. He forced himself to take a few deep breaths, acknowledging that if he was calm and emotionally stable, the day would undoubtedly go better.

"Just," he said to Jecht, "please don't mention it while we're on the road today. Or make any of your … remarks. I just need to forget about it."

"Sure, whatever," said Jecht.

Once all three were ready, they left the command centre and made their way back to the Mushroom Rock Road through the ravine. On foot, it was a long and convoluted journey, requiring them to see off a fair few fiends; Auron briefly wondered whether the whole incident with the chocobo eater and the diversion to the Crusader command centre had been a ruse to delay them, part of Kinoc's machinations, before deciding that was an unduly paranoid conclusion.

The usual routine of continuing onward and fighting fiends succeeded in improving his mood a little, especially given that it seemed to be one of Braska's better days. Unbeknown to Au-

ron, Braska was still buoyed by the æons' presence within him. Again and again over the course of the day, he reached for their light, and was gratified to find it, more familiar and soothing on each occasion. He summoned as they commanded him, still taking pleasure in how easy it had become to understand them.

In the afternoon, they reached the fork in the road that would lead them west towards the Moonflow, or north towards Djose. There was no particular need to visit the latter: the æon was long since acquired, and Auron had already fruitlessly searched the temple's archives.

"What do you think, sir?" he asked Braska. "We can press on towards the Moonflow, although we might not make it there in time for the last crossing. Or we can make a diversion to Djose and stay in the inn there instead of needing to camp."

"I wouldn't mind doing that," Braska admitted. "I've a bit of a headache coming on, actually – it might help to rest properly."

"Too much black magic?" said Auron.

Braska shook his head a little. "I don't think so – I didn't think I'd used that much today. Just one of those things, I suppose."

"I hope you're not getting ill," said Auron, while Jecht avoided looking at his companions and kicked at the ground with his toes. "Have you had a potion?"

"Not yet," said Braska, taking the one Auron offered him and drinking it down. He stood still for a moment, waiting for

it to take effect, and then said, "No change, I'm afraid."

"We'll head into the village, then," said Auron.

Braska made contact with the æons a few times as they walked over the bridge, hoping the comfort of their presence might ward off his developing headache; it seemed to have no effect, though, and by the time they arrived in Djose, he was undeniably feeling worse. He was used to getting headaches from the overuse of black magic, and often experienced them when he was feeling particularly low, but neither of those seemed to apply in this case. Maybe, he thought, he was getting ill, like Auron had said; it was bound to happen at some point, he supposed.

"It's got worse, hasn't it, sir?" said Auron, noticing Braska's frown.

Braska nodded. "Let's just get to the inn."

They made their way inside; Auron caught sight of the man behind the counter, and froze.

"Hey!" Jecht complained, almost colliding with him from behind. "What's the big idea?"

"I just remembered," said Auron quietly. "Last time we were here, the man who works here – he – never mind. Maybe you should arrange the room, Jecht."

"OK," said Jecht, grinning. "You gotta tell me what's up. Your face don't normally go that red unless you're talkin' about Braska."

Auron scowled and glanced in the summoner's direction, but he had already taken a seat at one of the tables and seemed not to have noticed. "He … it's stupid. You remember when we were here before, and we had to camp? Because *someone's* behaviour meant we lost all our money?" Pointing out Jecht's misconduct allowed him to mostly recover his composure. "Remember all those pastries they gave us for breakfast?"

"Uh," said Jecht, "oh yeah, I do!"

"They were from him," said Auron. "I ran into him that morning, and he – well, he tried to, er, proposition me."

"What?!" Jecht exclaimed. "Seriously?" He glanced towards the man. "Let me guess, you turned him down? Seriously, Auron, you got hot guys throwing themselves at you all the time, and you don't even wanna go there? You sure you're gay?"

"All the time?" said Auron sceptically. "Who else has –"

"Me," said Jecht, as if it was a great offence that Auron hadn't mentioned it.

"Oh," said Auron. "Right. Look, I was hardly going to go off and … have my way with him the morning we were meant to be leaving. Guardians aren't supposed to have casual encounters with random strangers on the pilgrimage, oddly enough."

Jecht snorted. "Yeah, and since when do we do what guardians are supposed to do? Anyway – I'm not a random stranger, am I? If that's what's stopping you …"

Auron sighed and made his way towards the reception desk, deciding an awkward conversation with the man would be preferable to more time spent having to try to convince Jecht that he didn't want to sleep with him. "Um," he said, "good evening."

The man looked up and met Auron's gaze; then, suddenly, he realised who he was talking to, and his cheeks became as flushed as Auron's had. "You're back," he said.

"Er, that's right," said Auron. There was a brief and excruciating pause, and then he added, "We're making the return journey. Lord Braska has most of the æons now."

"You must have been on the road for a while," said the clerk. "It's probably … lonely … isn't it? Maybe you've changed your mind about …"

Auron sighed again. "No, I'm – I haven't changed my mind. I told you I don't do that sort of thing these days."

"But …" said the man. "You might not have another opportunity until you get back to Bevelle – if you even make it back there. This could be your last chance, and I … I'd love to … know what it's like to be with someone. You must know how that feels – don't you?"

Before Auron could formulate a response, Jecht approached from behind, and said, "What's goin' on? This guy giving you trouble?"

"Er –" said Auron. Before he could say or do anything else, he found that Jecht had grabbed him by the waist.

"Sorry, dude," said Jecht. "He's taken."

There was a stunned silence; eventually, the clerk said, "You mean – you're his –"

"What's it look like?" Jecht jeered.

"Right," said the clerk, no less surprised. "I see – um, you want a room, I take it?"

"You got it," said Jecht nonchalantly; Auron still appeared unable to speak. Once the keys were handed over and a mark made in the ledger, Auron had recovered enough to mutter a terse word of thanks, slip out of Jecht's disconcerting embrace, and head over towards where Braska sat.

"Come on," he said irritably, waving the keys at him.

They made their way to the room; Auron was immensely relieved to find the usual setup of one bed and two mats awaited them despite Jecht's insinuations. Braska removed his headdress and sat on the bed, raising a hand to massage his forehead.

"How is it?" Auron asked him.

"Much the same," said Braska. "I'm sure it'll pass."

Auron grunted in agreement before turning to Jecht. "OK," he said, "are you going to tell me what that was about?"

Jecht shrugged. "Just bailing you out. He was comin' onto you, you weren't interested, so … seemed like the right thing to do."

"You can't be serious," said Auron.

"What?" said Jecht.

"You thought it was better," said Auron, "to *humiliate* me in a public place – to treat me like some – some *woman* you'd picked up –"

"What the hell?" Jecht interrupted him. "I wasn't trying to humiliate you! It's just – it's what people do if someone don't wanna be hit on, right? He wasn't lettin' it go, so what else was I gonna do?"

"Was it that hard to stay out of it?" Auron hissed back. "Or were you that keen to just parade my private life around the place? I told you I didn't want you drawing attention to any of that."

"Well, it wasn't like he didn't know!" Jecht protested. "Fuck's sake, Auron, no need to be weird about it – I'm not tryin' to embarrass you. Hell, I'd have done the same if it was Braska, even though he's straight! People do that kinda thing in Zanarkand all the time –"

"Oh, because everyone in Zanarkand's so enlightened, I suppose," Auron snapped. "You can just have relations with whoever you want, and you don't have to worry about the consequences – that must be great. It must be such a nice place to live –"

"Auron," said Braska suddenly, getting up from the bed and making his way towards him. He approached Auron from the front and embraced him, wrapping his arms firmly around Auron's back, raising one hand to caress Auron's hair. "Auron," he said again. "Auron."

Auron looked at him; he could hardly bear the sight of Braska's face, pale and tense with concern. That was enough to turn his own anger into despair. Braska had taken care of Auron in Bevelle, after what he had endured; he had recovered, and had sworn that from that point on he would be the one to take care of Braska again. He needed to be capable of that, he reminded himself.

He closed his eyes, and let his head drop so it was buried into Braska's shoulder. The two of them stood there silently for a moment, each feeling nothing but the other's warm body against his own, until Auron twitched and began to move back.

"I'm going to go for a walk," he muttered, moving away from Braska and making especially sure not to catch Jecht's eye before he turned away and left the room.

Braska sighed.

"I was tellin' the truth," said Jecht defensively. "Just thought it'd be the quickest way of getting the guy off his back. Didn't think it'd make him go crazy like that."

"I think your Zanarkand has a very different culture from Spira," said Braska.

"I wasn't tryin' to make him uncomfortable," Jecht mumbled.

"I know," said Braska. "It's not your fault. Please don't blame him either – it's very difficult for him."

"I keep tellin' him there's nothing wrong with being gay," said Jecht.

"There isn't," Braska agreed, "but …" He slowly returned to the bed and sat down, leaning against the wall. "He's a Yevonite," he added, rather irrelevantly as far as Jecht was concerned. "Do you … do you think he's all right?"

Jecht shrugged.

"I was just thinking," Braska went on, "he's been very quiet today. But … he'd tell me if there was something worrying him, wouldn't he?"

"Maybe he thinks you got too much other stuff goin' on," said Jecht, declining to mention the fact that Auron had explicitly said as much. "You know, with the pilgrimage, and, uh …"

"I do wish he'd tell me," said Braska. "Perhaps I should ask him. Poor thing – I do worry about him. I hope he knows he can talk to me." He closed his eyes. "Now, if you don't mind, Jecht, I'm going to have a nap – see if that puts a stop to this headache."

"Right, see you later," Jecht grunted, before heading out into the corridor.

Auron was already outside: he had left the inn as quickly as he could. He walked through the village, finding that away from Braska's embrace, his distress was turning back into anger again. He knew Jecht hadn't meant to make a spectacle of him, but that didn't stop him thinking uncharitably about his fellow guardian's presumption. Most of all, though, he was livid at himself for letting these things affect him so much. He had always been short-tempered, but during his days

in the corps that had usually amounted to brief and easily dissipated periods of irritability – certainly nothing that had ever prevented him from doing his job. Now, all the occasions on the pilgrimage when he had been faced with something that had distracted him from his duties came back to him, going as far back as that first sight of Macalania Lake. Some of those occasions had left him unable to defend Braska on the road as he should have done; others had meant he acted in ways that had inconvenienced and upset the summoner; worst of all, still others had prevented him thinking clearly at times when he should have been able to be rational in his pursuit of information that might save Braska's life. That very morning, his only hope of getting anything out of the Crusaders had been lost due to his inability to remain civil in the wake of the news from Kinoc.

He had come to a stop outside the temple, and went inside for want of anywhere else to go. It was here, he recalled, that he had last prayed without any sense that his faith might be waning – he now suspected that occasion might have been the last time he would do such a thing in his life. This time, standing at the foot of Lord Gandof's statue, he found himself completely devoid of any desire to kneel and work his way through the hundreds of lines of Yevonite scripture he had once learnt so diligently.

"Good evening," said a voice behind him.

Auron whipped around, startled: he came face to face with

a teenage boy, dressed in the robes of a junior priest and looking entirely unfazed by Auron's own surprised expression.

"I haven't seen you here before," said the young man, casting his eyes over Auron's robe. "You must be passing through – not a trader, surely, but a Crusader, perhaps?"

It took Auron a moment to respond. "I'm a summoner's guardian," he said.

"Oh," said the boy, sinking into a deep Yevonite bow. "How fortunate I am. My name is Isaaru – it's an honour to meet you." He straightened up again, and reached forward to shake Auron's hand.

Auron gave his name, too distracted and bemused to think of a pseudonym; Isaaru, mercifully, gave no sign of recognition. "Will your summoner be petitioning for our æon tomorrow?" he asked.

"No," said Auron, "we're on the return journey. He's already gained your æon – it must have been a couple of weeks ago."

Isaaru bowed again. "Then Yevon is surely with you. I take it only the Final Æon remains."

"That's right," said Auron, watching the young priest carefully; this must have been what Braska was like twenty or so years ago, he supposed. Despite the discovery a few nights earlier that the two of them had spent time at the same temple in Bevelle, Auron had been too young at the time to remember the details of it now. Isaaru had a slightly darker tone to his

skin, suggesting his family was from somewhere around Luca, if not one of the southern islands; the way he spoke and acted, on the other hand, made him sound like a Bevelle man, carefully educated so as to seem mature beyond his years. He was polite and curious, and clearly eager to serve Yevon; Braska would have been that way too, until he was sent off to the Al Bhed.

"Might I ask a question?" said Isaaru. "If you would be so kind as to indulge me, sir – you see, I've felt the call myself, ever since I was small."

"You want to be a summoner," said Auron.

Isaaru nodded. "That's right. I shall complete my training for the priesthood first, but once the time is right, I plan to take the pilgrimage. I just wanted to know how he's finding it? Your lord summoner?"

Auron considered. The pilgrimage had been very tough for Braska, he knew, but that was undoubtedly exacerbated by his mental state. Perhaps other summoners had an easier time, he reflected; their encounters with Perula had suggested as much, although that didn't explain why so few of them ever made it to Zanarkand.

"It's difficult," he said carefully, before thinking back to Braska's reception on Besaid. "But seeing people place their hope in him – that means a lot to him, I think. He draws strength from knowing that he's helping people."

Isaaru nodded. "Of course. And gaining the æons – perhaps I shouldn't ask ..."

"I can't speak for him," said Auron. "But I know he finds it very hard – they cause him pain. Do you have summoners in your family?"

"None," said Isaaru.

"It would be the same for you, then, I think," said Auron. "You should be prepared for it to hurt. I don't mean to put you off –"

"No, it's all right," said Isaaru. "I understand that the fayth would need to test me. If your lord summoner can do it – what is his name?"

"Braska," said Auron, hearing the word slip out of him like a sigh. He wondered when he had become so transparent: it was the result of recent events, almost certainly.

"Braska?" Isaaru repeated. "Surely not the same Zo Braska who was sent to negotiate with the Al Bhed – it must have been at least ten years ago?"

"Yes," said Auron, trying to hide his sudden surprise. Braska, like Wen Kinoc, was from one of the small number of noble families of Bevelle that carried a hereditary title as a prefix to each member's personal name. He had been sent off on his missionary duties bearing that name, and had been stripped of it on his return, as part of his punishment for eloping with Girl. As Auron hadn't met Braska until several years later, he had initially been unaware of this aspect of

Braska's background – by that point, he had long ceased to be known by the additional name, and it had been only by chance that Auron had come to know of it, on some occasion when Braska had spoken dismissively about his family. Braska was notorious in Bevelle, and yet nobody ever spoke of him using the title he had once held; it had been entirely forgotten, except by Isaaru, apparently.

"My family moves around a lot," Isaaru said, as if he had been aware of Auron's thoughts. "It's difficult to keep up with the news from Bevelle – I hadn't heard anything about Lord Braska since he first went on his mission. It's silly, maybe – I must have been very young, but I remember it clearly. It made a mark on me: the thought that a priest from Bevelle could go and speak to the Al Bhed, and try to find some compromise with them when our doctrines are so different. I've looked up to him ever since, even though I never heard anything more about him. And he's a summoner now – I see. It must be the blessing of Yevon."

"You think so?" Auron couldn't help asking.

Isaaru nodded fervently. "I'm sure of it. My boyhood hero, a summoner? If ever I doubted my calling, I am sure of it now."

Auron glanced back towards the statue of Lord Gandof, and then said quietly, "Don't you mind, though? Knowing that you'll need to sacrifice yourself?"

"It is what Yevon ordains," said Isaaru.

"But," Auron found himself saying, "you're only a boy. You

would throw your life away, just for a short Calm? Don't you ever wonder if there might be another way?"

At that, Isaaru frowned for the first time. "I wouldn't dare think such things," he said. "The teachings tell us to live piously and atone for our faults, and to call the æons to defeat Sin. That is all we can do."

"But –" Auron began again, increasingly desperate – and found himself trailing off at the sight of another, younger boy, who had suddenly entered the temple and was now hurrying in their direction.

"Is it time?" Isaaru asked him.

The other boy nodded. "The healer says it'll be any moment. Hurry!"

"I must beg your leave, sir guardian," said Isaaru, suddenly filled with boyish excitement. "We are about to be blessed with a new sibling – and on the day I should meet Lord Braska's guardian, of all days. It truly is a sign, I am sure."

"May the child live to speak of its dreams," said Auron, using the words of a traditional Yevonite blessing.

"You are kind, sir," said Isaaru. "I shall pray for Lord Braska's success." He placed an arm around his younger brother's shoulders, and the two of them dashed out, all propriety forgotten as soon as their backs were turned.

Auron stood still for a moment, still slightly puzzled by the whole interaction. The thought that someone had looked up to Braska all those years, without hearing about his disgrace,

was almost unbelievable, although if Isaaru and his family had moved away from Bevelle while Braska was still conducting his missionary duties, it could fit. The chances of running into that very person on the pilgrimage seemed still less likely – as if, like Isaaru had said, it really was a sign of Yevon's blessing. If Auron had found himself any less insecure in his own faith, that might have motivated him to kneel and pray at last. As it was, he looked back up at Lord Gandof's statue one last time, found that he still had absolutely no desire to do so, and then slowly turned and began to make his way back through the village.

He stopped off at a stall for a quick dinner; the thought of having to ask for something at the inn gave him a tight, painful feeling in his chest. Leaning against the side of the stall to eat the food, he tried to determine whether the visit to the temple and the unexpected conversation with Isaaru had made him feel any better. It had been an adequate distraction at the time, he thought, but now that it was over, things were barely any different from how they had been earlier. He was still angry, at himself, at Jecht, at Kinoc, at Yevon. Only Braska seemed beyond reproach.

Having finished the food, barely noticing what he was eating, he trudged back to the inn and found Jecht sitting in the common area, finishing off his own dinner. "Hey," said the latter, somewhat warily.

Auron shook his head minutely and sat down a few seats

away from Jecht. He wasn't especially interested in talking to him – even looking at him didn't seem particularly appealing. He closed his eyes instead and leant his head against the wall.

A few seconds later, a thought came to him; he opened his eyes and said, "Has Braska eaten?"

"Don't think so," said Jecht through a mouthful of vegetables. "He came out to get some, uh, medicine stuff, but that was it."

"Could you order something for him, then," said Auron, "and I'll take it in."

"Why can't you order it?" Jecht began to protest, and then he remembered who was manning the reception desk. "Oh – right," he said. "Sure."

He sauntered over to the desk and asked for a second portion; the clerk was almost as stiff and quiet as Auron was, but he informed Jecht he would bring it over when it was ready. Jecht headed back to his seat, stealing a glance at Auron as he did so; he had closed his eyes again.

"Look," said Jecht, "if you're expectin' me to apologise – I already told you I wasn't tryin' to offend you."

"I know," said Auron flatly.

"Like," Jecht went on, "if there's something you're waitin' for me to say –"

"I *know*," said Auron again. "It doesn't matter. It's ... not that, anyway."

"What, you mad about somethin' else?" said Jecht.

Auron shrugged. "Kind of. I … it's … complicated."

"Kinoc?" Jecht guessed.

"Partly."

"So what else?"

Auron's eyes flew open. "In Yevon's name, Jecht, do you want me to list everything that's gone wrong in my life in the last two months?" he snapped.

"Well, you ain't the one that got transported to some other fuckin' planet," Jecht countered.

"And I suppose that means I'm not allowed to complain about anything," said Auron. "Never mind that they tried to *execute* me –"

"Wait," said Jecht, his temper suddenly defused. "They – what? They tried to execute you? Seriously?"

Auron merely sighed in response.

"What did you do, man?" said Jecht with incredulity. Capital punishment had been outlawed in Zanarkand many years earlier; Jecht vaguely remembered Braska mentioning it in the Spiran context, and it seemed to make sense that the Yevonites might use it, given their generally primitive way of doing things, but the thought that Auron himself might have been sentenced to death was highly unnerving.

"Isn't it obvious?" said Auron.

"No?" Jecht replied. "Does Braska know?" he added, when it became clear that Auron wasn't going to elaborate.

"Of course he knows," said Auron. "He's the one who took me in after it happened. No-one else in Bevelle dared go near me. Well, Kinoc, after a while, but ..." He trailed off.

"Whoa, dude," said Jecht. "I guess ... it ain't surprising that you got issues."

Auron remained silent; Jecht found himself continuing to wonder what he had done. He was capable of killing, almost certainly, but didn't seem the type to commit murder. The notice they had seen when they first passed through Djose had contained some reference to Auron's crimes, he recalled, but nothing specific.

The clerk came to deliver the extra dinner for Braska, leaving it on the table before quickly moving away.

"Uh," said Jecht when Auron continued to make no reaction, "ain't ya gonna take that ..."

"What?" said Auron.

"To Braska?"

"Oh," said Auron. "Right."

Jecht watched him as he wearily reached for the dish. "You know," he said, "I wasn't gonna say this, but ... Braska said he was worried about you. He said if you got stuff on your mind, you should tell him. I know you don't wanna bother him, but maybe ... it'd help?"

"Maybe," said Auron.

"So," said Jecht, "you gonna talk to him, then?"

"You think I should?" said Auron.

"Well, he does," Jecht pointed out.

Auron gave a little grunt in reply, and headed over to the bedroom.

He opened the door carefully; Braska had drawn the curtain, and it was dark. Auron placed the food on the bedside table, and then perched on the side of the bed, placing a hand on the blanket where it covered Braska's arm.

"Braska," he said softly, unsure whether he was awake. "Sir."

Braska stirred a little. "Auron?" he said sleepily.

"How are you feeling?" Auron asked him.

"Better," Braska mumbled.

"Good," said Auron. "I brought you some food. I don't think you've eaten."

"I'll have it later," said Braska. "When I'm more awake ..."

"OK," said Auron. He paused. "Sir – Jecht said you wanted me to tell you – if there was anything on my mind –"

Braska gave a small hum of assent; he rearranged his arm so it protruded from under the blanket, reached for Auron's hand, and eventually located it, clasping it firmly. "Yes," he murmured, "of course you can tell me. Do tell me, please, Auron."

"Actually," said Auron hesitantly, "there's a few things. I suppose I should start with what happened yesterday. After we arrived at the Crusader encampment, Jecht and I watched a sphere, which made it clear that it's Wen Kinoc who's been

interfering with our pilgrimage. Maybe that doesn't surprise you – I know the two of you never got on, but …" He looked down at where their hands met, and willed himself to continue. "He also said some things about me. That he negotiated my release from the corps just because he wanted me out of the way – and that if you make it to the Final Summoning, at least I'll … probably be killed in the fight against Sin. I … I'm starting to think he was never really my friend at all."

He took a deep, shuddering breath. "It's proved to me that I can't trust anyone in Bevelle. It's as you always said: they don't care about anyone but themselves. I'm starting to realise that about Yevon now – the teachings are … I don't know. I think I might be losing my faith. No – I know I've lost it. I can't pray anymore. It just – it feels wrong. Empty. And it makes me wonder what the point of all this was. I dedicated my whole life to it. All those years spent training, trying to rise through the ranks, thinking I could become a maester – none of it means anything. I …" He traced a finger over Braska's palm. "I don't know who I am anymore."

Braska made no response.

"Sir?" Auron whispered, leaning close to peer at his face.

He was asleep; and part of Auron had known he would be. Jecht had encouraged him to open up to Braska, but that hadn't meant he needed to do it there and then. If Auron had really wanted to tell Braska about his problems, it would have made more sense to wait for a time when the summoner was more

awake. Instead, he had described his troubles half-hoping that they wouldn't reach Braska's ears; the thought of burdening him with such things remained unwelcome. He had spoken about what was on his mind, as Braska had wanted; and if Braska hadn't been awake to hear it, that was nobody's fault, and probably, he thought, a better outcome for everyone.

It was still early, but he didn't want to go out and face Jecht again, so he got ready for bed instead and lay down on his mat, trying to purge all the whirling thoughts from his mind. Talking to Braska had helped, in fact, even though Braska hadn't been awake to hear it. Just hearing his own voice talking through the situation had convinced Auron that his uncharacteristically heightened emotions were justified. He had been wronged, and he was entitled to be upset by it – he had no need to be angry at himself. Now he could focus on moving on and dedicating himself to Braska's protection: that was all that mattered until the pilgrimage was over.

It wasn't late enough for Auron to sleep; he lay on his mat attempting to meditate until he was disturbed by the sound of Braska stirring, and then sitting up. Braska rubbed his eyes and yawned, unaware that he wasn't alone; after a moment, he noticed the dark shape of Auron on the floor, and gave a little start of surprise.

"Goodness me, Auron," he said. "How long have you been in here?"

"Since I brought in your dinner," said Auron. "You don't

remember?"

"I thought I could smell something," Braska murmured. He reached for the food Auron had left by his bed and began to pick at it; it had mostly gone cold, which didn't make it any more appealing.

Auron stood and opened the curtain a fraction; the days were getting long, and the sun hadn't quite finished setting. With the dusk light shining in, Braska found it easier to see what he was eating, and also realised that Auron had already changed into his nightclothes.

"I don't remember you bringing this in at all," he said, in eventual answer to Auron's question. "I mustn't have been awake."

"Not fully, at least," Auron agreed. "How's your head now?"

"Fine," said Braska. "I don't know what the cause of it was, but I don't suppose it's anything to worry about." He set the food aside. "Will you take this back out? We shouldn't keep it in here overnight, I don't think – it'll smell."

Auron threw on his robe over his vest and shorts – it was long enough for him to feel sufficiently covered up – and took the dish back to the common area.

"I talked to him," he said when he reached where Jecht was still sitting.

Jecht shrugged. "Right. Good. I just said you should do it, didn't mean you gotta report back."

"Not much to report anyway," said Auron. He placed the half-eaten meal on the table. "You want Braska's leftovers?"

"Course I do," said Jecht.

Auron stood there for a while, watching him eat. He still felt upset and shaken; he still resented Jecht for what he had done earlier, even though he knew he hadn't meant to offend. But time and sleep would help, he knew.

"Goodnight, then," he said, turning to leave.

"See ya," Jecht replied.

Chapter 32

Our Enemy

"All right, Auron?" said Braska when he awoke.

"Yeah," said Auron. "What about you?"

"I'm all right," said Braska.

They dressed and slowly made their way to join Jecht at the breakfast table. Braska placed a hand on Auron's back as they went, hoping the touch was comforting for him, although Auron was more relieved by the discovery that the reception desk was now staffed by a different clerk.

"Eat, sir," he said, passing some fruit to Braska as the latter sat down.

Jecht was as quiet as his companions during breakfast, wary of how he had upset Auron the previous day. While he was still adamant that there was no need to apologise, he didn't particularly want to make things worse for Auron either.

Auron, meanwhile, was internally reiterating his resolu-

tion not to let anything distract him from the pilgrimage. The incident with Kinoc had proved that there was nothing left in Bevelle for him – at least, not until the Calm arrived and he could return there victorious. Once Braska defeated Sin, and Auron saw him safely back to the citadel, everyone would be forced to admit that they had been wrong about both of them. Until then, there was no point getting upset about what had come before, he reminded himself. None of it would matter when the Calm began.

He went to pay for the room and board; the new clerk seemed slightly aloof, as if she had heard about the previous day's incident from her colleague, but Auron made it through the conversation without any additional awkwardness, and was pleased that he had managed to do so.

"Right," he said to the others, in a relatively good mood given the circumstances. "Time to go?"

As they headed out of Djose and across the bridge, Braska watched his guardians walk ahead. He was pleased to see Auron having a better time, he reflected, although it hardly seemed surprising that he had recovered from his recent setbacks. Auron could never be down for long, he thought.

He wondered, again, whether he should tell Auron about the æons' interest in him. He had already mentioned what had happened at the temples of Djose and Besaid, after all: Auron had been aware that he had some important function in the fight against Sin for some time, even if neither he nor Braska

knew exactly what that meant. Confirming to him that the æons had said the same thing would remind him of that, and, Braska hoped, encourage him to look after himself as the journey continued. But the more he thought about it, the more he could feel the æons resisting; he could tell they were still reluctant to have this secret shared, even with the person it concerned.

He moved forward to loop his arm through Auron's instead, regretting that he couldn't emphasise his importance to the pilgrimage as openly as he had wanted, but hoping to convey his affection and gratitude towards his guardian nonetheless.

"Are you OK?" Auron asked.

Braska nodded. "Perfectly well. Thank you, Auron."

It seemed an odd response, Auron thought, but he said no more and allowed Braska to continue clinging onto him as they progressed.

After a few hours of walking, interspersed with the usual routine encounters with fiends, they came in sight of the south bank of the Moonflow.

"Ah, Jecht," said Braska, detaching himself from Auron's arm, which he had taken hold of again after each battle. "This is where you made your promise to give up drinking. Remember?"

"You bet," said Jecht. "And looks like I kept it, huh, Auron? Didn't you say I was gonna forget about it?"

"I suppose I spoke too soon," said Auron, a little stiffly. Being close to the river was making him feel on edge; he was relieved, though, to find that he was having much more success in remaining composed than he had on similar occasions in the past. Forcing himself to visit the beach on Besaid had helped him develop a tolerance, he supposed.

Smiling at his guardians' bickering, Braska looked out over the Moonflow. On the southward journey, he had been too mired in his constant grief to appreciate its beauty; this time, he found his smile broadening at the sight of the lilies. It was unexpected; he averted his gaze, suddenly puzzled by the unfamiliar feeling.

"On to the crossing?" he suggested, turning back to the others.

Auron nodded, glad to be moving on, and he led them around the corner to the dock where the shoopuf stood with its Hypello attendants.

As always, there was a small crowd of people waiting to board: this was the principal crossing point for traders, and the only one close to the main road between the Djose region and Guadosalam. While travel and tourism were generally rare in Spira, the shoopuf crossing received enough traffic to make it seem as if things were always bustling. Braska and his guardians joined the back of the queue; Jecht passed the time by quizzing Auron on the various goods transported and clothes worn by their fellow passengers. Auron found the in-

cessant questioning rather annoying, but it was a distraction from the water at least.

When they drew level with the Hypello overseeing the travellers' passage onto the lift that transported them onto the shoopuf's back, it took one look at them and then thrust out a bright blue, webbed hand. "Oh no," it said, "yoo cannot be permitted to ride ze shoopuf. Imposhibbible!"

"What?" Auron demanded.

"After what happened lasht time," the Hypello explained, "we cannot allow yoo to approach ze shoopuf. Shafety ish very importantsh."

"So it's your fault," Auron said to Jecht.

"Hey!" Jecht yelped, before addressing the Hypello. "Look, it ain't gonna happen again," he said. "I promise. I'm sober now, right, Auron?"

"It's true," said Auron. "It may not look like it, but his behaviour is mostly acceptable these days."

"And you let us on before, didn't ya?" Jecht pointed out, ignoring Auron's somewhat equivocal testimony. "What changed?"

"We have had more time to make a deshishion, yesh," said the Hypello. "Lasht time, ebberything wash very quick. Shoopuf was in shock, yesh. Thish time, we think it ish better not to let yoo go near."

"Auron," Braska murmured, "last time, they needed a bit of …" He rubbed his fingers together meaningfully.

"I suppose so," said Auron. He took the gil purse and retrieved a few coins, being careful not to let the Hypello see how much remained inside. "We know it was an inconvenience," he said obsequiously, "and in recognition of that, we hope this will help. We can't give you as much as last time, but I hope this is sufficient to thank you for your kindness."

The Hypello's eyes had widened at the sight of the money, but then it abruptly drew back, casting a brief glance to the side before shaking its head. "I cannot acshept," it said.

With some suspicion, Auron turned his head in the direction the Hypello had momentarily looked; he was only slightly surprised to see a man in priestly garb standing under the awning of the nearby trading post, looking as if he was trying to be inconspicuous. "Hold on," he grunted, and headed towards him; Braska and Jecht followed.

"You're from Bevelle, aren't you?" Auron asked the man.

The priest gave him a disparaging look. "So what if I am?"

"Yevon sent you here," said Auron. "No – Wen Kinoc. You're here on his orders, aren't you? To tell the Hypello not to let us on? It's nothing to do with Jecht's behaviour before at all. You were expecting us."

"Very astute," the priest said guardedly.

"So what are you trying to do," Auron asked him, "promise them a bigger bribe than ours if they hold out? Or – wait, Yevon funds the crossing, doesn't it? You're trying to blackmail them! You've told them the funding will be withdrawn if they

take us, and the Hypello won't be able to earn their keep – that's it, isn't it?"

"And what are you going to do about it?" said the priest.

"What, you think me and Auron can't take you?" Jecht jeered, tapping against the hilt of his sword.

"I can take him alone," said Auron to Jecht, "but that won't help. They have Braska's daughter in Bevelle – we can't do anything that might compromise her safety. We'll just have to try negotiating." He turned back to their interlocutor. "Look. I know you think Lord Braska's a heretic, but he has five æons now. He's closer to the Final Æon than most summoners get; doesn't that suggest the fayth want him to succeed? Surely they'd have turned him down straight away if they thought he was unworthy?"

"I suppose so," said the priest. "But that doesn't really bother me – I'm not some kind of Al Bhed hater. I make enough use of machina myself."

"So Kinoc's paying you off too, is he?" Auron said.

The priest shook his head. "Oh, no. I volunteered to come here – I don't care much about stopping your summoner, but you, on the other hand …" He looked Auron up and down. "I can't stand the thought of someone like you going to Zanarkand. It's a holy place – it shouldn't be besmirched." Shifting his gaze towards Braska, he added, "I can't believe you'd accept him as a guardian, sir. Don't you think it's disgusting?"

"Huh?" said Jecht. "What is?"

"Nothing," said Braska. "There's nothing he's done that –" He turned towards the priest. "I think you should learn to think for yourself," he added coldly, "and stay out of other people's personal business." Placing a hand on Auron's shoulder, he gazed at him for a moment before continuing. "A word in private, please. You too, Jecht."

Auron let Braska steer him to the other side of the trading post, doing his best to remain composed; he had been feeling much better than he had in Djose, but the priest's words threatened to undo the progress his mood had made. The water suddenly seemed much harder to ignore.

"I know of another crossing, Auron," said Braska, still holding onto his guardian's shoulder. "And I don't want you to have to argue with that bigot any more than necessary."

"Another crossing?" Auron asked, still trying to put the priest out of his mind. "Where – how?"

"The Al Bhed use it," Braska explained. "Not all of them are comfortable relying on a means of transport funded by Yevon, so they've been operating an alternative for a while – it's further upstream. The only thing is – I don't think you'll like it."

"Don't think he'll *like* it?" Jecht echoed, no less bemused than before. "What, is it run by hot chicks or somethin'?"

"Jecht," Auron groaned. "Sir – it's fine. Whatever it is, I'll cope – I have to, if it's the only way of getting across. Especially if it's my – my faults preventing us from using the shoopuf."

"That's nonsense," said Braska firmly. "You know they'd find some excuse to deny us passage either way. It's nothing to do with you, it's Yevon's scheming –" He paused. "You mentioned Wen Kinoc, didn't you? You think he's the one behind this?"

"We can talk about it later," said Auron. "Let's find this other crossing. Do you think it's far?"

"It'll add some time to the journey," said Braska, "but not too much, I hope. Are you all right?" Being in a relatively stable mood himself had made him more able to pay attention to the nuances of Auron's behaviour than usual, and he could tell Auron still seemed slightly agitated.

Auron shrugged. "I think so. I'd almost forgotten how they'd started treating me in Bevelle – I guess I should expect things like that to happen."

"That would hardly make it any easier," Braska mused. "I should know; I've had it happen to me." He drew Auron into a quick embrace, kissing the side of his head before he broke away. "Let's get away from this place," he added. "We'll have to keep an eye out for the crossing."

"You didn't tell him jack shit, did ya?" Jecht murmured to Auron as they followed Braska along the path. "Thought you said you talked to him about all the stuff you got goin' on, but he didn't know about Kinoc, and he's still goin' around kissing you all the damn time."

Auron sighed. "And that bothers you, does it?"

"Bothers me that you *lied* to me," Jecht fired back. "You're a stuck-up asshole, Auron, but I thought you were honest, at least."

"I did talk to him," said Auron. "About Kinoc, anyway – the rest is … more complicated. But he … I don't think he heard much. He fell asleep while I was talking."

Jecht stifled a laugh. "Sounds like him, all right. So you not gonna try tellin' him again?"

"Since when were you so interested?" Auron grumbled.

"I ain't interested," said Jecht. "Do what you want, I don't care."

A few inconsequential battles with fiends helped Auron let off steam as they walked, but as the path mostly followed the bank of the river, he remained slightly on edge. The eventual sight of a somewhat bored-looking Al Bhed woman standing next to a rickety machina boat did nothing to help.

"Ah," said Braska, slightly apologetically. "This is it, I believe. Auron, are you sure –"

"It's no problem," Auron lied. Crossing the Moonflow on the shoopuf's back would have been fine, as it had been last time: the size of the animal and the construction of the cab that passengers sat in during the crossing made it easy to forget one was near the river at all. This was very different: the boat was small and narrow, and apart from the small platform at the back that housed the machina motor, its sides only just protruded from the water's surface.

"What's goin' on?" said Jecht.

"Auron," said Braska, "I don't want you to –"

"I said it's fine," Auron interrupted him.

Braska looked at him for a moment, sighed, and approached the woman guarding the boat. "Kuut yvdanhuuh," he said, enunciating as clearly as he could. "E fyc dumt uv drec puyd. Syo fa ica ran?"[25]

"Yeah?" the woman said in common Spiran. *"Who* told you, exactly?"

"I lived among your people for a while," Braska replied.

"You?" she said. "A Yevonite? Pull the other one."

"I'm no longer a Yevonite," said Braska firmly. "And why else would I have learnt to speak Al Bhed?"

"Well, you ain't very good at it," she said.

"It's been a few years," said Braska ineffectually.

"We don't have time for this," said Auron, surging forward while trying to ignore the feeling of his heart pounding against his chest. "We need to get across the Moonflow, and the Yevonites have seen fit to ban us from using their crossing, so it has to be yours." He exchanged a glare with the Al Bhed woman. "We've got plenty of gil – we can pay."

"Sounds like a load of *pimmcred* to me," said the Al Bhed. "Not the first time we've had Yevonites try to sabotage our operation."

[25]Good afternoon. I was told of this boat. May we use her?

"Don't you remember me?" Braska tried. "I spent quite a lot of time at Home, until about eight years ago. Were you there at the time?"

She shrugged. "You expect me to remember that?"

"I was supposed to be converting everyone to Yevon," he explained. "You'll surely remember my abject failure, if nothing else."

His self-deprecation failed to have much impact. "Guess I wasn't paying attention," said the woman. "I was more interested in playing blitzball back then."

"Blitzball?" said Jecht immediately. "You a fan?"

She looked at him, frowned a little, and said, "Well, yeah. Who isn't?"

"You been keepin' up with the latest scores?" he said.

"Mostly," she said guardedly.

"You know the Al Bhed Psyches won the last tournament, right?" Jecht continued. "Guess who you gotta thank for that?"

"Actually," she admitted, "I watched the matches on the sphere. That guy did look a bit like you ..."

"Yeah!" said Jecht. "So we ain't got nothing against the Al Bhed, see? Braska loves you guys, and I just saved your asses at blitz. We ain't gonna do anything bad to ya."

"And we can pay," Auron reminded her.

"How much?" she asked.

There was a short negotiation over the price; Auron ended up handing over more money than he would have liked, and

more than he had initially offered the Hypello, but he was starting to feel shaky and breathless, and wanted to get the whole thing over with.

"After you," said Braska when the transaction had been concluded; he ushered Auron into the small boat and towards the plank that served as a front-facing seat, before squeezing onto the other plank with Jecht. Auron sat down cautiously, resting his chin in his hands and closing his eyes; he wanted to block as much of this out as possible.

"What's up with you?" said Jecht.

Auron opened his eyes reluctantly. "Doesn't matter," he mumbled.

Jecht snorted. "Hold on … you got some kind of issue with boats?"

"Don't," said Auron.

"It ain't gonna hurt ya, Auron," said Jecht, grinning. Reaching into the water at his side, he flicked a little in Auron's direction; Auron recoiled.

"Jecht," he hissed, "just … just piss off, would you."

"Piss off?!" Jecht repeated, before laughing loudly. "Oh man, you really don't like this, huh? Don't think I ever heard you curse before. Never knew anything could freak you out this much."

"Jecht," said Braska, "please try to be nice. It's a sensitive subject for him."

"And you never told me?" Jecht chuckled. He wondered how he might be able to use this new information to his advantage.

Braska leant forward to give Auron a consoling pat on the hand; Auron shrank back. "Please don't, sir," he muttered. He didn't want Braska drawing attention to his discomfort; he wanted to spend the crossing doing nothing but looking down at his knees and counting down the seconds until it was over.

Slightly put out by Auron's rejection of his support, Braska looked up instead, letting his gaze fall on the ferrywoman, who was now standing on the platform at the back of the boat, operating the motor. It occurred to him for the first time that she looked reasonably similar to Girl; it wasn't surprising when most Al Bhed women of around his own age shared a resemblance. Braska was a little puzzled by the fact that he hadn't noticed it until this moment. It was appropriate, he thought, to remember Girl on such occasions; he let his hands settle in his lap and lowered his eyes in preparation for some quiet, solemn reminiscence.

Meanwhile, Jecht found himself watching Auron with increasing suspicion. When they had first stepped into the boat, he had found Auron's reaction nothing short of hilarious. As time passed, though, he was beginning to realise that it went beyond mere distaste. Auron was clearly deeply uncomfortable: his head was bent low, almost resting against his knees, and he was digging into the back of his neck with the fingers of

both hands, his breathing becoming laboured enough so as to be audible. Jecht looked away, casting his eyes over the river instead in an attempt to forget about Auron's plight. After a few moments, he became aware of a large, dark shape in the distance.

He gazed at it for a while; it looked familiar. Something of the sort had appeared in Zanarkand, just before Jecht had somehow lost consciousness and then found himself at the docks in Bevelle. It had suddenly surged up in the sea where he was training, and its enormous, ugly fins had passed underneath him, and the next thing he knew, he had been lying on the ground, spitting out seaweed and being shouted at by a handful of merchants for getting in their way.

It hadn't occurred to him at the time, but the sight of the creature in Spira made him realise: that was what had brought him here. It had taken hold of him somehow, and travelled to Spira, and deposited him on the shore. He had no idea what kind of journey it had involved, as he had only regained consciousness once the whole thing was over. He had also never seen, or heard of anyone else seeing, anything like it in Zanarkand before. He suspected that it had been the cause of his sudden and uncharacteristic passing out in the water; he remembered that it had a malevolent air. Being in its proximity had made him feel restless and uncomfortable.

And then he suddenly realised what the creature was: its vastness and the sense of dread it was again provoking in him

made it clear. This was the wicked force that everyone spoke of in hushed tones – the scourge that had plagued Spira for a thousand years. The creature that had taken Braska's wife, and Auron's family, and had driven people over the centuries to be turned into fayth so that they might play their part in the constant and often fruitless fight against it.

Speaking in a low voice in the hope that Auron wouldn't hear, Jecht leant close to Braska, and said, "Don't say anythin', but – over there – is that Sin?"

"What?" Braska yelped. He turned to look to the side, the way Jecht had pointed; the sight of what loomed over the water immediately filled him with dread. "Sin!" he cried, completely ignoring Jecht's instruction to be discreet.

Auron's head snapped up; he grabbed his sword. He felt dizzy and disorientated, but Braska's shout had been unambiguous, and he suddenly found himself with one single goal: to ward Sin off and get Braska to safety. Every muscle in his body seemed hot and tight from the urgency of it. He rose unsteadily to his feet, hoisting his sword over his shoulder; the boat rocked a little, and some water splashed over the side and trickled into the hull, forming a small puddle around Auron's boots.

"Auron!" Braska exclaimed; he was white-faced with worry, but managing to hold himself together better than his guardian was. "Really – what are you doing?"

"We need to get you out of here, sir," Auron said, not taking

his eyes off Sin. "This isn't safe! Why are we going so slowly?" He turned towards the ferrywoman. "Can't you make this boat go faster? Come on!"

"How am I meant to do that?" she snapped. "Don't you think we're going as fast as we can? How about you sit down and wait until we get to shore?"

"Yes, come on, Auron," said Braska. "Be reasonable."

"We have to get out of here," Auron pleaded. "Sin's right there – we need to fight! Why aren't we fighting?" He brought his sword into the space in front of him and sliced haphazardly into the air, causing the boat to rock more violently.

"Hey!" the Al Bhed woman complained, clinging tightly onto the structure that housed the boat's motor.

"Auron!" said Braska. "Sit down, will you? This isn't like you at all!"

Jecht restrained himself from rolling his eyes: Braska was being absolutely no help, and he was well aware that he would need to deal with Auron himself. Carefully, he stood and placed both hands on Auron's shoulders, taking care not to get in the way of his blade; Auron met Jecht's gaze with wide, confused eyes.

"It's OK," Jecht said firmly. "We can fight in a minute, right? Just gotta get to shore first. How about we sit down, huh?"

Gently pushing on Auron's shoulders, he slowly succeeded in getting him to sit, and squeezed onto the plank next to him, keeping one arm tight around him to make sure he didn't try to

stand again. With his free hand, he reached for Auron's sword and cautiously tugged it out of his grip, laying it down in the hull beside their feet.

"We have to fight," Auron repeated disconsolately.

"In a minute, OK?" said Jecht again. "Nearly there now – you see the riverbank, right? We can fight it once we get there, promise."

Auron let out a loud groan, slamming his bare fist into the side of the boat in frustration.

"That's enough, Auron," said Braska sternly. "Calm down."

Jecht had been doing his best to ignore Braska's useless attempts at dealing with the situation, but that was the last straw. "Fuck's sake, Braska!" he hissed. "You ain't helping, you know!"

At that, Braska frowned and folded his arms. If Jecht wanted him to stay out of it, he thought, then he would. He turned to the side, in the opposite direction from where Sin loomed, and stared resolutely out across the water, trying to ignore his pounding heartbeat. If anyone had the right to lose their composure at the sight of Sin, he thought, it was him: he was still raw from Girl's loss, and he was the one who had sworn to give everything in exchange.

Jecht retained his grip on Auron for the rest of the journey; Auron had mercifully stopped lashing out against the boat and disturbing their equilibrium, and had taken instead to tugging at the end of his ponytail as he took rapid, shuddering breaths.

"Nearly there, dude," said Jecht. "Just hold on."

At last, they reached the shore. Braska cast Jecht a disparaging look and stepped out of the boat in as dignified a way as he could muster; being in Sin's presence made it even more difficult, given that his hands had begun to shake slightly. Jecht collected Auron's sword and guided him out, tentatively letting go as they set foot on dry land. Auron sank to his knees at once, pressing his forehead against the grass with relief.

Jecht turned back to the ferrywoman. "Ain't you gonna get out of here?" he suggested. "Sin might attack, right?"

"Good idea," she said sarcastically. "Never thought of that." Mooring the boat against an insubstantial-looking post, she shot a final look of distaste towards Auron's crouched form before marching off.

"Cunno ypuid res,"[26] said Braska as she walked past, but she ignored him. He looked down at Auron instead and sighed. Now that they were on dry land, he could acknowledge that his attempts at calming him had been useless; but he had been worried about Sin too, so it was no wonder that he hadn't been much help. Jecht was the one who was in the wrong, he thought; it wasn't becoming for a guardian to shout at his summoner.

Slowly, Auron rose to his feet.

[26]Sorry about him.

"Uh," said Jecht, "I don't wanna rush you, but – Sin's right over there. What are we gonna do?"

Auron looked back at the water and sighed, running a hand over his hair. "It'll send its spawn," he said hoarsely. "We need to be ready to fend them off before it can do anything worse. We should go and see if there's anyone else nearby who can help – there might be some Crusaders on patrol."

"Sure," said Jecht. "You wanna, uh, take a breather first?"

"No, let's just get on with it," said Auron. He felt exhausted and still somewhat disorientated, but knew he wouldn't be able to relax until they had dealt with Sin and moved away from the Moonflow.

"Right," said Jecht. "Split up and look for Crusaders, then? I'll go this way – Braska, you wanna try the woods? Or I'll do the woods and you head up the shore?"

"I can cope with the woods, thank you," said Braska icily, before disappearing into the trees.

Auron watched him go, perplexed by his demeanour; he had expected Braska to be worried about Sin, but he seemed to have an odd way of showing it. "What's going on?" he said. "Did you do something to offend him?"

"Guess you don't remember what happened back there, huh?" said Jecht. "You were kinda out of it."

"I don't remember much," Auron admitted. He had seen Sin, he knew, but the rest was mostly a blur. He had a vague

recollection of Jecht's arm around his shoulders, firm and surprisingly comforting.

"You sort of freaked out a bit," said Jecht. "Wasn't that bad. You … got some real problem with boats, huh?"

"Water," Auron corrected him. "I don't want to talk about it." He looked at the ground and ran a hand through his hair again. "Damn it. I shouldn't have let that happen – I should have been able to deal with it. Stupid of me. I was weak."

"Hey!" Jecht exclaimed; he gave Auron a fairly forceful punch to the upper arm. "We talked about this, right? Lay off of the whole self-pity thing! It don't suit ya."

"I guess," said Auron, rubbing his arm where Jecht had made contact with it. "Sure. Let's go and look for these Crusaders – meet you back here in a bit." He trudged off.

A little later, they reconvened at the shore. Braska was the only one who had succeeded in coming across any Crusaders, and had brought two quite young and rather nervous-looking men with him. Auron cast his eyes over them sceptically; they certainly didn't seem to be of the same calibre as the warrior monks, but it was better than nothing, he supposed.

"What's the plan, boss?" Jecht asked him.

Before Auron could reply, the slightly less young and nervous-looking of the two Crusaders spoke for him. "We'll shoot at it," he announced. "You swordsmen can defend us all from the spawn, and you –" He turned to Braska. "What sort are you? Black or white?"

"Both," said Braska, somewhat defensively; he didn't think the man was being very respectful.

"Well, do whatever you think might help, then," said the Crusader, in an unmistakably condescending tone.

Auron frowned. "You're shooting straight at Sin? Shouldn't you focus on the spawn too? We'll have more chance of driving it back if we take them out quickly."

"Worth taking a shot at Sin while it's there, though, right?" said the younger Crusader. "We don't often get the opportunity. Might be able to do it some damage."

"But only the Final Summoning can do that," said Auron. "I mean, as far as anyone knows." He tried his best to put aside the sudden stab of urgency that had arisen as a result of considering Braska's fate. "I was speaking to one of your comrades just yesterday – he didn't seem to think there was anything particularly special about your guns or bullets. I don't see how they could harm Sin at all, quite frankly. It sounds like the lot of you don't have a clue what you're doing."

"You're probably not used to guns in Bevelle," said the older Crusader. "I can assure you they're very effective."

"No," said Auron, starting to get slightly agitated by the man's demeanour. "Guns are common in Bevelle. I've handled them before." It was somewhat true: he had tried them out once or twice, before quickly concluding that he preferred the sword, unlike most of his contemporaries. But he had seen them in use plenty of times, at least. Despite the fact that they

were favoured by many of the warrior monks these days, he thought, the people of Spira seemed to persist in believing the corps were so devout as to avoid them. It was odd how people sometimes seemed determined to ignore the evidence before their own eyes.

"Let's not argue," said Braska. "I understand you don't want to lose this opportunity to wound Sin, but I think Auron's plan is more prudent, given the circumstances." He permitted himself an apprehensive glance at Sin, which had inched slightly closer.

"Oh, you *would* say that," said the Crusader.

"Because it's the truth," said Auron sharply. "Have some sense."

"Sense!" the younger Crusader exclaimed. "You ought to take a look at yourself before you start lecturing us about *sense –"*

"I hardly think that's necessary," said Braska.

"And what do you know about it?" said the older Crusader. "You summoners – you're no good in battle. You'll just be swinging your staff around casting your little spells, trying to fool us all into thinking you're actually helping when all you'll be concerned about is saving your own skin –"

"How dare you," Auron snarled, grasping the hilt of his sword with both hands. "You have no idea what he's been through. You don't know anything about him – what he's lost – how *dare* you."

Before the Crusader could reply, something black and oily lodged itself in the ground beside them at high speed: the first of the sinspawn. Auron shot the Crusaders a final look of loathing and turned to vent his frustration on the spawn, which served as a convenient target. Soon, enough spawn had been sent their way to engage guardians and Crusaders alike, with the latter too busy fighting off the creatures to consider enacting their plan of shooting straight at Sin.

Meanwhile, Braska stood back, still worried by Sin's presence but doing his best to remain capable of contributing to the fight. He wasn't particularly inclined to help the Crusaders after that display, although he would have given all his white magic to keep Auron in good health. Summoning was clearly out of the question: doing so in such close proximity to Sin, while not yet in possession of the Final Æon, would no doubt be disastrous. It wasn't even worth reaching inside himself to find the æons' light and hear it confirmed; this was plainly not the time to call them. Instead, he eventually began to make his way around the others and cast some minor white magic spells to relieve them of their developing injuries, as trivial as they were.

After a while, the rate at which the sinspawn appeared had started to decrease, and Auron and Jecht found themselves able to slow the pace of their counterattacks, which was welcome. However, it didn't take long before the two Crusaders turned their attention away from the spawn and, after a whispered

conversation, began aiming their guns at Sin itself.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" Jecht protested between sword-strokes. "Didn't Auron tell you guys –"

"Never mind," said Auron harshly. "Concentrate on the spawn – if they want to waste their ammunition, let them."

There was a shout of triumph from the Crusaders; one of their bullets had succeeded in connecting with Sin. The fact that it seemed not to have made any impact on the creature at all did nothing to discourage them, and they reloaded their guns with enthusiasm.

"Dicks," Jecht muttered.

"Leave it," said Auron, narrowly dodging a snaking tendril of lightning from one of the sinspawn.

The Crusaders sent another volley of bullets at Sin as Auron and Jecht struck down what seemed to be the last of the spawn; Auron wondered whether Sin would have begun to make a retreat by this point if their companions hadn't insisted on engaging it directly. At least, he thought, it seemed to have stopped coming closer.

"What now?" said Jecht.

"We –" Auron started, and then he was cut off. A new creature had spawned from Sin, larger and seemingly more sentient than the rest: while the others had been little more than oily, magic-endowed shells, this new production had numerous long, clawed limbs. It hurtled through the air towards them, seeming almost purposeful in its trajectory; and perhaps

it did indeed have some level of control over where it was going, because before anyone could intervene, it attached itself to the younger Crusader's face.

He fell to the ground immediately, dropping his gun as his arms slackened. Auron and Jecht converged on the apparition, trying to use their swords to lever it off the man's face, but it had no effect. In the end, Auron dropped his sword and dived for the sinspawn with his hands, succeeding in tearing it away from the now motionless Crusader.

"Burn it!" he ordered Braska, as it writhed in his grip.

Braska lifted his staff and conjured a blast of fire around the sinspawn; it convulsed, and then burst into pyreflies, just as the flames began to lick at Auron's bare left hand. Overcome by pain, he shouted out loud; Braska moved in, seized his arm, and followed up by casting ice, then white magic, which was enough to heal Auron instantly. They stayed in position, though, Braska clinging onto Auron's arm and the two of them holding each other's gaze. The larger sinspawn had appeared and taken down the Crusader almost before anyone had had time to realise what was happening; now, the idea of turning around and facing the aftermath was deeply unappealing.

But turn around they did, eventually, to join Jecht and the remaining Crusader, both of whom were staring in silence at the latter's fallen comrade. His face was unrecognisable, a blur of blood and sinew, with the remains of one eye gazing up at the rest of them as if to reproach them somehow. Dark blood

was strewn over the grass around his head, forming an unpleasant halo; here and there, it was possible to identify the occasional uprooted, displaced tooth.

"Guess he died quick, at least," said Jecht tonelessly. "Didn't even hear him scream." He stood still for a moment more, and then clasped a hand to his mouth: he had suddenly been struck by the urgent need to vomit.

As Jecht staggered away to do so, the Crusader who still lived turned towards Braska. "You've got white magic, haven't you?" he pleaded. "Can't you do something?"

"He's dead," said Braska gently. "I'm very sorry."

"But you have that revival spell," said the man, "and you can heal wounds, and –" He broke off, staring at his comrade in desperation.

"I'm sorry," said Braska again. "All I can do is send him."

"Damn you," the Crusader choked; he was starting to cry. "Yevon damn you summoners, all of you! What's the point, when –" He dabbed furiously at his face, bent to snatch up his companion's gun, and then hurled both it and his own into the river. Then he took off, running away into the woods after a final, tearful glare at Braska and Auron.

"Sin's gone," Auron pointed out wearily. "That's something. We should move on."

"I do need to send him, though," said Braska. "It won't take long."

Auron grunted his acquiescence and retreated a few paces, leaving Braska to perform the sending. He watched as Braska conjured the fire and began his dance; it was the same process as the earlier sending on Kilika, but things felt very different this time. There, none of them had known the woman who died; here, they had seen the death, and it had been caused by everyone in Spira's worst enemy. Braska made precise, almost vengeful movements with his staff, wearing an expression of grim determination as the man's body gradually broke down into pyreflies. To Auron, the sight of Braska's actions was still beautiful, but it was a harsh, almost intimidating beauty.

As the last pyreflies faded away, Braska lowered his arms and sighed. He felt calmer now that Sin had departed, but having used a significant amount of white magic and then added a sending to that, he was exhausted. "All right," he said. "Let's go on."

Auron nodded. "I'll just fetch Jecht," he said.

Fetching Jecht was no trivial task; he had sat down right by the edge of the river, which didn't make Auron particularly keen to approach. He steeled himself nonetheless, and went to sit next to him, looking straight at Jecht's face in an attempt to block out the sight of the water.

"Don't tell me that kinda thing's normal here," said Jecht.

"Death is normal," said Auron. "Death like that, not so much."

"Braska's really gotta defeat Sin, huh," said Jecht.

Auron sighed. "I suppose he has."

They sat there silently for a few more moments; Jecht was looking out over the Moonflow, but Auron kept his eyes on Jecht. He seemed unusually disturbed, almost vulnerable; the Crusader's fate had deeply shocked him, Auron could tell. Jecht came from a society where Sin and its spawn were unknown – it was no wonder he had reacted badly.

"We should get going," said Auron at last. "Are you all right?"

"I just watched a guy get his face torn off, Auron," Jecht replied. "What do you think?"

He scrambled to his feet, leaving Auron to follow. The two of them rejoined Braska, who had given in to his sudden tiredness in the meantime and sat down himself. He stood again, using his staff to lever himself upright, and gave his guardians an unconvincing smile.

They walked on in near silence, speaking only when it was absolutely necessary. A few trivial battles with ordinary fiends required a little coordination on strategy, but other than that, there was no real need to talk. Jecht had wondered about bringing up the fact that it seemed to have been Sin that had brought him to Spira, but now that he had seen what else Sin was capable of, he thought it better to keep it to himself. Instead, he tried to suppress the vivid images of the dead Crusader's mangled face, which seemed to be resurfacing in his mind every time he blinked. Auron and Braska had clearly found the sight

unpleasant as well, he surmised, but they didn't seem to be as troubled by it as he was. They were more used to these sudden, violent deaths.

Auron could tell all three of them were flagging: Jecht was distressed by what he had witnessed, Braska was tired, and he himself was starting to feel worn out now that the adrenaline from the battle with Sin was fading, no doubt a result of his panic during the boat crossing. He still couldn't remember exactly what had happened: it was a strange and disturbing gap in his memories of the day, although he was glad not to know exactly how badly he had embarrassed himself.

He looked at his companions, taking note of their weary faces, and said, "Maybe we should call it a day here. I know it's early, but we could all do with rest."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Braska admitted.

They got the tent ready; after not having been used for over a fortnight, it now had a slight smell of damp. Meanwhile, Braska recorded a very brief and uninspired sphere for Yuna; once he had finished, he mustered the magical strength to light the campfire, and they consumed the evening's rations in silence.

"So, Auron," said Jecht eventually, "you got some kinda … water issue."

Auron frowned, but he could tell Jecht hadn't said it out of malice; it was more likely that he was trying to distract himself from thinking about the Crusader's death. "Yeah," he admitted.

"You always had that?" said Jecht.

Auron shook his head. "Just recently."

"I guess it makes sense," said Jecht, and then in response to Auron's quizzical look, he elaborated: "A lot of people gotta have problems with it in Spira, right? Cos it's where Sin comes from?"

Auron was torn between insisting that nobody in Spira had the luxury to be that cowardly, and agreeing so as to ensure Jecht didn't connect this with his ordeal in Bevelle and start asking the kind of questions that would make him even more uncomfortable. He shrugged noncommittally.

"Kinda ironic, though," Jecht added, "when I'm Zanarkand's biggest blitz star, and you freak out as soon as you have to get in a boat …"

Fortunately for Auron, Braska chose that moment to yawn. "Time for bed, I think," he said, making no reference to the previous conversation. "Are you coming, Auron?"

Auron thought back to the last time they had camped. "I think it's my turn to take first watch," he said.

"Oh," said Braska. "But it's been a difficult day for you, hasn't it? Perhaps you could take his place tonight, Jecht? Well, I'll leave the two of you to decide." He yawned again and made his way into the tent.

Auron turned to Jecht. "Sorry. I don't think he realises you found it hard as well."

"Found what hard?" said Jecht, suddenly defensive.

"Oh, come on," said Auron. "What happened with the sinspawn. There's no use pretending to be tough all the time, Jecht. Anyone would have been disturbed by that – especially when you're not used to Sin."

Jecht grimaced. "It's fine. Braska wants you in there – you go in."

"He doesn't *want* me anywhere," Auron insisted. "He just thinks I could do with a rest – but so could you. You look like you feel worse than I do."

"I said I'm fine," Jecht snapped.

Auron rolled his eyes and went to join Braska in the tent.

He shrugged off his robe and gauntlet as he went inside, aware that Braska, already in his nightshirt, was watching him. They met each other's gaze; neither spoke for a moment, and then Braska said, "I'm sorry about making you get into that boat. I knew it would be difficult for you." Jecht would no doubt have insisted he not apologise, but Jecht was outside, safe in his ignorance.

"It's done now," said Auron.

"But I knew it would upset you," said Braska. "I should have suggested we continue upstream. We'd have found a place to ford the river eventually."

"That would have taken days," said Auron. "It's fine, sir. It's not your fault I couldn't deal with it – there's no need to apologise."

"You'd have dealt with it perfectly well if it hadn't been for Sin," Braska murmured.

"It would have been easier," Auron admitted.

Braska gave him a weary smile, held out his arms a little, and said, "Come here?"

It was a request, not an order; Auron had the right to refuse, and, he thought even as he made his way in Braska's direction, he should have done. But it was too tempting, and he found himself settling into Braska's embrace, with Braska's hands slowly caressing his own arms, Braska's head nudging against his neck and collarbone, and then, as he should have come to expect, the touch of Braska's lips, slow and careful, at his cheek and ear and jaw.

"Sir," he whispered.

"You mean so much to me, Auron," Braska replied. "Never doubt it."

"You … mean a lot to me too, my lord," said Auron, wondering how he could possibly have ended up in this situation, where what he had just said somehow sounded less sincere than Braska's equivalent declaration about him.

"I know I don't always manage to look out for you," said Braska, "but you know I have a lot to …"

"I know," said Auron. "How are you doing at the moment, though? You haven't seemed too bad recently. Even when Sin was there today, you weren't …"

Braska nodded, carefully stroking Auron's ponytail. "You're right," he said. "I suppose things haven't been that unbearable these past few days." As he said it, though, he felt a sudden prickle of guilt, and couldn't help thinking back to when he had remembered Girl during the Moonflow crossing. It wasn't appropriate to cast his burdens aside, he reminded himself, not when he was so close to gaining the Final Æon and surrendering to death.

For Auron, though, who had been privy to none of these thoughts, Braska's admission made him feel truly happy for the first time in days. Perhaps, he thought, there was hope after all; perhaps, when it came to it, Braska would see there was merit in living. He found himself unable to prevent a smile slowly spreading across his face; and then, still overcome by optimism, he reached out to cup Braska's chin in one hand, leant in, and planted a firm kiss on his cheek.

Braska smiled back, but Auron immediately moved away: he had overstepped the mark again. "I should get ready for bed," he mumbled, before hastily withdrawing and changing into his nightclothes. His lips stung with the shame of what he had done. Braska's kisses and caresses were a way of comforting himself – of comforting them both, Auron supposed. But when he was the one who initiated it, it was entirely different. Braska didn't know about Auron's desires, and he didn't need to.

"Rest well, won't you?" said Braska, when Auron had lain

down on his bedroll.

"I'll try," said Auron; despite everything, he was relieved that Braska didn't seem to have taken offence at the kiss or the way he had retreated so quickly afterwards. "And you must too, sir."

"Of course," Braska murmured back.

Chapter 33

Between Life and Death

Braska made sure to turn his attention to the æons as soon as they set off the next morning; after Sin's appearance, he had been too tired to give them much thought, and he was keen to make it clear that he valued their guidance. Auron, meanwhile, was still thinking about what had happened in the tent before the two of them went to sleep. Braska was reasonably content: even a few weeks ago it would have been impossible to imagine. But, he reminded himself, it was important not to get carried away. He still needed to find a way for Braska to survive the Final Summoning, and, almost as importantly, he had to remember not to lose every ounce of self-control whenever he came within two feet of him.

Despite everything, though, kissing Braska on the cheek like that had been much less disastrous than he might have anticipated. Sharing such moments was helpful for both of them: even that brief embrace, after an immensely difficult day, had

been enough to alleviate the stress of everything that had happened, and it was obvious that the contact had the same effect on Braska, even if it was for different reasons. If Braska could take his hand and stroke his hair and place his lips softly against Auron's face, then surely, Auron thought cautiously, it wasn't too bad for him to do the same, especially when it had positive consequences for them both. And if it was a choice between that and speaking frankly to Braska about his feelings, it was obvious which he should do. As much as Braska insisted there was nothing wrong with Auron's preference for other men, Auron was still sure he would think differently if he were to learn that he himself had been the main focus of those desires for a long time.

He walked on, wishing, not for the first time, that he could have embarked on the pilgrimage without having to account for such carnal matters. Fighting the fiends was a welcome distraction, although after some time, he noticed that Braska was flagging a little.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm getting a headache," Braska admitted.

Auron frowned. "Another one that isn't magic-related, you mean? You don't think it's all the summoning?"

"I don't think it can be," said Braska. "Summoning is white magic, technically – it might make me tired, but –" He broke off and yawned. "Evidently it is. But this is separate, I think." He raised a hand to his forehead and winced a little.

"Either way, perhaps you should stop for today," said Auron. "You can let Jecht and me handle the rest of the fiends from here; it's not far to Guadosalam now."

Braska seemed to be happy enough with that, but a couple of battles later, he raised his staff and summoned Ixion as if the conversation had never happened. When the fiends were gone, Auron turned to him.

"I thought you were going to stop summoning for today," he said.

"I was," said Braska apologetically, "but Ixion called me." He took note of Auron's quizzical expression, and added, "They're communicating with me. I'm getting a sense of when they want me to summon them – it must be a good sign, don't you think?"

"Right," said Auron, trying not to appear too surprised; he had never heard of æons making contact with summoners before. It was something he knew he should give more thought to, but Braska's health was more important for the time being.

"Can't you say no to them?" he couldn't help asking. "It's pointless summoning in a situation like that. You could have seen them off with magic in half the time."

Braska sighed. "I know. Don't ask me why they're doing it. It's not as if I can refuse."

"But you can," Auron insisted. "You're meant to be their master, aren't you? I know you're supposed to have a bond with them, but you still need to be in charge –"

"I *know*," said Braska again, more loudly. "Auron, I'm sorry, but you don't understand. I'm the summoner – I'm the one experiencing this, not you. This connection with the æons is very special; it's a blessing. I can't jeopardise it."

"And you can jeopardise your health, can you?" Auron fired back. "My lord, this is – it's stupid! You're tiring yourself out for nothing, and you're already not feeling well. Surely it's more important to look after yourself than just – just be a slave to these æons –"

"And you're hardly helping me *look after myself* by standing there shouting at me, Auron!" Braska countered, before turning on his heel and continuing along the path.

Auron stood there open-mouthed; after a moment, he gathered himself and then began to follow Braska. Jecht did the same, grateful that neither of the others had sought his input during their brief argument. Only a short stretch remained before their arrival at Guadosalam; they encountered a handful of fiends on the last part of the road. Braska mostly stayed away from battle, but wordlessly summoned Ixion one more time as the æon bade him; Auron looked away and said nothing, but he could tell that Braska was still troubled by his headache.

"Whoa," Jecht muttered when they arrived at Guadosalam. The town seemed impossibly vibrant in colour: its unusual design was difficult to take in.

"You've been here before," Auron reminded him.

"Yeah, I guess," said Jecht. "Don't remember it bein' this

crazy, though."

Auron thought back, and then said, "I'm not surprised. You spent most of the time blind drunk."

"Oh," said Jecht, "yeah, right." Embarrassed, he said nothing else, but continued casting his eyes over the town's unique architecture. Now that he was able to appreciate it while sober, he found himself coming to the odd conclusion that the sight of it had something in common with the experience of watching the Crusader's death the day before: both were so different from anything that had ever happened to him at home. Spira was unpredictable and vivid in a way that Zanarkand never could be: it had a kind of authenticity that the sanitised, regimented urban life he had once known could never provide. He couldn't help thinking about how Tidus would react, if he ended up coming to Spira like the prophecy said: at least he would get the chance to share these rich, varied experiences, and spend some time in a place where everything that happened really meant something. He knew it wasn't worth mentioning such ideas to Auron, who would insist that the story wasn't a prophecy; the latter's mood had visibly soured anyway after his disagreement with Braska.

They made their way to the inn; Auron reserved a room, dropped off the tent, and then passed the keys wordlessly to Braska, who trudged off to lie down without thanking him.

"The Farplane's here, right?" said Jecht to Auron. "It's meant to be like Spira's top tourist attraction, yeah?"

"We don't exactly have *tourist attractions*," said Auron. "Not unless there's a Calm, anyway." He took a seat beside Jecht. "But yes, it's quite well known. Most people who come this way take some time to visit."

"Braska didn't want to," said Jecht, "last time."

"No," said Auron.

"And you said you didn't wanna go there either," said Jecht, "but that was just cos you were trying to impress him, wasn't it?" He hadn't realised at the time, but looking back and knowing what he now knew about his companions' relationship, it was fairly obvious.

Auron scowled; he'd hoped that Jecht's drunken state during most of their previous visit might at least have prevented him from noticing that. "The Al Bhed probably have a point," he said. "The Farplane can't really put us in contact with the dead. It wouldn't be that easy."

"Don't the teachings explain it?" said Jecht sceptically.

"Not fully," said Auron. "The interpretation can vary. Your friends from Besaid would probably think it really is their dead relatives up there, but in Bevelle we tend to have more sophisticated beliefs." Ignoring Jecht's small snort, he continued: "It's like we told you before. The visions on the Farplane in Guadosalam are more likely to be caused by pyreflies, and the real Farplane is beyond our reach, if it exists at all."

"Sounds kinda interesting though, either way," said Jecht. "I wouldn't mind takin' a look."

Auron shrugged. "Go ahead."

"Don't you wanna come too?"

"I shouldn't leave Braska on his own when he's not well," said Auron unconvincingly.

"Bullshit," said Jecht. "Auron, he ain't gonna know if we go up there now. I promise I won't tell him. And even if he does find out somehow, you can just say I asked you to come with me, as a favour. Which is what I'm doin', anyway. Come on!"

He stood and headed towards the door; Auron scowled, but followed, and they walked up to the Farplane.

"So," said Jecht when they got there, "what are we meant to do? Just, uh, think of a dead person and they're supposed to appear?"

"That's right," said Auron.

"Creepy," said Jecht. "So you got someone you wanna …"

"Plenty," said Auron, "but you're the one who wanted to come up here."

"Right," said Jecht. He considered: he didn't know many people who had died. The most obvious example was the Crusader who had been mauled by the sinspawn the previous day. Jecht pictured him, and immediately, a ghostly, lifesize image of the young man appeared before him, his face mercifully intact once more. "Whoa," he muttered.

"Seriously?" said Auron.

"What?" Jecht complained. "What's wrong with –"

"He's only just passed on," Auron explained. "It's in poor taste. Isn't there anyone you actually knew?"

"Not really," Jecht admitted. "There was my grandpa, I guess – died when I was a kid."

"Try him, then," said Auron dully. "I'll leave you to it – I've got … people to see."

He retreated to a distant area and began thinking about the various fallen comrades to whom he needed to pay tribute. Letting his thoughts linger on each one in succession, he watched as their images slowly formed and faded again in front of him. As he did so, he couldn't help wondering which of the explanations of the Farplane might be correct. A few weeks ago, when his faith in Yevon had been stronger, he would undoubtedly have espoused the view that was common in Bevelle: although it was difficult to believe that these translucent, silent images were the actual spirits of those who had passed beyond, their presence at least suggested that there was a real Farplane somewhere, where the dead enjoyed their eternal rest. Now that his faith was broken, though, he found himself wondering about the Al Bhed explanation: the idea that the entire phenomenon was due merely to pyreflies. In the Al Bhed's view, death was an ending, and it was as simple as that.

Trying not to get too entangled in the metaphysical complexities of the situation, he distracted himself by turning his attention to the last group of people whose images he had planned to summon. On the walk up to the Farplane, he had

debated whether to call them at all: he barely remembered them, after all, and had no idea what they had looked like. But the temptation was too strong, and so he took a deep breath and thought of his family, and immediately, they took shape in front of him.

They all looked very like him, his father and brother especially. The same dark hair and broad features, although they wore their hair shorter than he did, and his father's was liberally streaked with grey. They were tall like he was, but Auron was the tallest now. His older siblings all seemed so young; even his brother, proud in his glistening Crusader uniform, looked like a child.

"Is that your family?" said Jecht quietly.

Auron flinched; he hadn't noticed his companion approaching. "Yeah," he murmured.

"That your old man?"

"Yep," said Auron.

"Looks like you," Jecht remarked.

Auron gave a grunt of agreement, and they stood there without saying anything else for a while until he shook his head and turned away from the scene. Behind him, the images of his family vanished.

"Who knows," he muttered.

"Who knows what?" said Jecht.

Auron met his gaze. "Whether any of it's real," he said, "or just the pyreflies reacting to our thoughts. Impossible to tell."

"You were just a little kid when they died, right?" said Jecht.

Auron nodded.

"So how would you know what they looked like? It's gotta come from somewhere, don't it?"

"Maybe," said Auron. "Perhaps they didn't look like that at all. Might have just been what I expected – that's why they looked so much like me. Everyone always said I didn't have much imagination."

He began making his way to the exit, thinking it over. There had been some comfort in seeing the images of his family, although it had hardly been a satisfying experience when they had taken such insubstantial form, silent and immobile. But if he hadn't visited the Farplane, he would no doubt have regretted passing through Guadosalam twice without doing so, regardless of what Braska had said.

It was thanks to Jecht that he had seen them at all, he remembered; he almost turned to thank his fellow guardian for the suggestion, before deciding that Jecht would probably count that as one of the displays of emotion he always seemed so offended by. Deciding it was better to say nothing, he remained silent as they continued the journey back.

They both arrived at the inn, and were immediately called over to the reception desk by the Guado on duty. "Sir Tromell is here to see you," he said obsequiously.

Tromell, an older, finely dressed Guado who was standing

by the desk, bowed deeply in greeting. "You are Lord Braska's guardians, then?" he asked.

"That's right," said Auron. "Can we help you?"

"My name is Tromell," he explained; "I am retainer to Lord Jyscal. He heard your lord summoner was passing through, and has seen fit to hold a banquet in his honour tonight. I trust the three of you will be able to attend."

"That's extremely generous," said Auron sincerely. Despite the Guado's conversion to Yevon a few years ago, they continued to mostly keep to themselves; like the Ronso, they were a naturally private race. The idea that their leader had decided to honour Braska and his guardians with a formal banquet was humbling, although Auron didn't see why they should have attracted his interest. "Might I ask what it was about our lord summoner that gained his attention?" he added.

"Lord Jyscal did not see fit to inform me," said Tromell.

"Oh," said Auron. "Well – we'd like to accept, of course, but I don't know if Lord Braska will be up to it. He hasn't been feeling too well this afternoon."

Tromell nodded sympathetically. "They do say some of the most accomplished summoners can be vulnerable to illness. A consequence of their need to tread the line between life and death with the utmost care, I am sure."

"Er," said Auron, "yes. I don't think it's as bad as that." He hesitated, torn between the need to look after Braska and the social faux pas of turning down Jyscal's invitation. "Maybe I'll

go and see how he's doing," he decided, before heading to the room he had reserved earlier.

He walked in; Braska was lying in bed, and had removed his headdress, but was awake. He reached out to take Auron's hand, and said, "Oh, Auron. I'm so glad to see you. I'm sorry about earlier – I didn't mean to lose my temper."

"It's all right," said Auron.

"It's just that the æons –" Braska began.

"I know," Auron interrupted him, not wanting to get back into the argument. "How are you feeling?"

"A little better," said Braska. "Especially now that you're here."

Auron looked down and adjusted the hem of his robe for a moment; when he had composed himself, he said, "A messenger from Lord Jyscal's come to see us. He says Jyscal would like to hold a banquet in our honour tonight – well, yours, by the sound of it."

"Goodness," said Braska. "Why?"

"Unclear," said Auron. "I said I'd come and see if you were well enough to go, but I think I'll go back and tell him we can't make it."

"Oh, no, we can hardly refuse," said Braska. "I wouldn't want to snub him."

"Are you really sure you're well enough?" said Auron.

"It's only a headache," said Braska. "Not as if I'm not used to them. Go on – you'd better confirm with Jyscal's man."

Auron did so with some reluctance; he found Jecht and Tromell still in conversation at the reception desk. "It's OK, Auron, we worked out a plan," said Jecht brightly. "You know that party on Besaid, when you said I had to be Braska's representative? Thought I could do that again here. I can go to the dinner, and you can stay here and, uh, look after him, you know."

From the expression on Tromell's face, Auron correctly guessed that this plan was entirely of Jecht's devising. "That won't be necessary," he said. "Lord Braska insists he'll be able to make it. As long as you don't mind that we can't change into more appropriate clothing, sir – I'm afraid this is all we have." He cast a disapproving glance towards Jecht's bare chest.

"Lord Jyscal was most insistent that you all come as you are," said Tromell. "He understands the demands of the pilgrimage – a close relative of his took the journey, some years ago."

"Really?" said Auron. "I hadn't heard."

"Well, it was ..." Tromell began. "The news never spread far beyond the Guado at the time. But I'm sure Lord Jyscal will be most eager to discuss the pilgrimage with Lord Braska. I shall deliver him the good news of your acceptance. Please join us at the manor in an hour or so." He nodded politely and departed.

"The manor?" said Jecht when he had gone. "Who is this Jyscal guy, some kind of big shot?"

"Yes, he's the leader of the Guado," said Auron. "They don't mix with humans much, and they certainly don't hold banquets for every summoner passing through. I just wonder why we've caught his attention."

"Hey, don't complain," said Jecht. "Free food, right?"

"Yes, I'm sure Braska will love that," Auron said sarcastically. "Come on – we should get ready. You ought to have a shower."

Jecht snorted in amusement, but willingly took the advice. When he joined the others in their room, they were discussing the etiquette of formal dining.

"It's been many years since I was invited to anything like this," Braska explained apologetically. "My family used to attend dinners in Bevelle quite a lot, but I was blacklisted after my marriage, of course. You'll have to remind me how it all works, Auron."

Auron hadn't been to many formal dinners himself, but had started being invited to them on occasion after his promotion to officer; before the first one, he had made a point of methodically learning the large number of rules that concerned how one was supposed to sit, hold one's cutlery, pass the food, interact with those seated nearby, and so on. "Do what you like, sir," he said nonetheless. "You're the guest of honour – nobody's going to mind if you slip up."

"Thank goodness for that," said Braska, who had always had trouble remembering the intricacies of mealtime etiquette

even in the days when he had frequented Bevelle's high society.

"*You* should bear your manners in mind, though," said Auron, turning to Jecht. "We ought to try making a good impression. These things are important to the Guado – they're very attached to tradition."

Jecht scowled while Auron launched into a long and minutious list of the various customs and rules associated with Spiran fine dining. Despite Jecht's best efforts at listening, Auron's insistence on going into great detail made it difficult for him to find the motivation to concentrate, and his mind wandered quite significantly; he even started thinking it might have been preferable to use the time for a quick nap, as Braska seemed to be doing. Eventually, though, Auron's monologue came to its long overdue end.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Uh," said Jecht, trying to give the impression that he had been listening. "Well … what?"

"Does it make sense?" said Auron. "Do you have any questions?"

"It's a lot to take in, is all," Jecht bluffed. "Can't you just write it down?"

"That would take far too long," said Auron dismissively. "Are you really incapable of remembering things unless they're in writing?"

"Yeah, when there's that much detail," said Jecht. "Sorry, Auron, gotta admit I switched off pretty early there. You better just give me the most important bits again."

Auron sighed. "It's all important. Well … I suppose just make sure you're doing what everyone else does. You don't seem to have any trouble with being observant, so watch what we're all doing and copy that."

"Don't watch me, though," Braska murmured sleepily. "I'll lead you astray."

"Are you really sure you're well enough to go, my lord?" Auron asked him. "We'll need to head over there soon, if you're feeling up to it."

Braska forced himself to open his eyes and sit up straight. "Let's go, then," he said. "Stop looking at me like that, Auron, it'll be fine."

"Of course, sir," said Auron quietly.

They headed to Jyscal's home; it was easily identifiable, being the largest and grandest building in the town. Braska clung to Auron's arm as they walked, but eventually let go once they reached the manor, and stepped forward to knock at the large double doors. Before he could do so, though, they swung open, handled by two footmen who had been keeping careful watch from inside.

"Thank you," he said as he walked in.

Tromell emerged immediately, bowing low. "Lord Braska," he said, "may I welcome you to the home of my master, Lord

Jyscal Guado. You have honoured us by accepting our invitation tonight."

"The honour is mine," Braska assured him.

As Tromell led the three of them into the dining hall, Auron's thoughts turned again to the strangeness of Jyscal's having invited them to dinner. As he had told Jecht earlier, the Guado usually didn't take much interest in humans, and summoners passed through their town often enough for the event to be entirely unremarkable. He was starting to feel uneasy about the fact that they had accepted the invitation without considering it more carefully – especially when he knew there had already been attempts to interfere with their pilgrimage. Perhaps, he thought, Jyscal Guado had struck some sort of deal with Wen Kinoc and was planning to use the occasion as a means of hindering their progress.

He half-listened as they were introduced to the various Guado dignitaries who had already taken their seats at the large dining table; the archivist he had spoken to during their previous visit was among them, and Auron made a mental note that he would need to seek him out later. For the moment, though, his priority was working out whether the three of them were in any danger. As he sat in the chair that was indicated to him, he found himself looking down at the empty plate and cup that had been set on the table. The food and wine would be served from communal dishes and bottles, but the crockery had been laid out for him specifically.

He stared at the cup. Poisoning wasn't unknown in Spira; it was a relatively convenient way of disposing of one's enemies. If his winecup had already been laced with something, the smell of the wine would mask it and he would be none the wiser once he began drinking. He briefly wondered whether Braska was in similar danger, but concluded that he himself would be the most likely target of any foul play. As the summoner, Braska's life was considered the most precious: while nobody in Bevelle liked him, exactly, a botched assassination attempt would have more repercussions than it would if the mark was Auron, who was of very little worth to Yevon following his disgrace. And he knew Kinoc well enough to be aware that his so-called friend would be keen to satisfy his personal ambition at the same time as meddling with the pilgrimage. If he could dispose of Auron, it would be unlikely that Braska and Jecht would make it to Zanarkand alone, and Kinoc's perpetual rival would be out of the way for good.

The poison, if it was there, would be slow-acting: it would be too obvious and too chaotic to have someone collapse at the dinner table. Auron had never personally witnessed this sort of thing, but he had heard enough stories about it: victims would begin to feel ill over the course of the evening, ascribe it to excessive eating and drinking, and then be found cold and unresponsive in their beds the next morning.

An attendant passed by to pour the wine. Auron watched as it splashed into his cup, wondering how he would be able

to avoid drinking it without causing any fuss. Across the table, he could see Jecht refusing his own serving, but a non-alcoholic substitute was quickly located and poured for him instead. Not drinking at all would look suspicious, and probably induce them to use more direct methods; pouring the liquid away and pretending to have drunk it was impossible while sitting at the table.

Finally, inspiration struck him. He turned to his left, reached for the winecup belonging to the Guado on that side of him, and took a drink.

"Excuse me," said the Guado imperiously.

Auron feigned ignorance. "Oh," he said, "was that one yours? I'm terribly sorry – you'd better have mine, then. Here." He moved his own cup to where the other had sat.

"Have you no manners at all, sir?" said his neighbour, while a few more of the surrounding diners began to peer at Auron with bemused expressions.

"Please excuse me," said Auron. "I'm a former warrior monk of Yevon – I never had many opportunities for fine dining like this." It had been true for most of his life, after all.

"If you don't know how to conduct yourself," said another of the Guado, "you should observe others before leaping in thoughtlessly like that."

It was the same advice that Auron himself had given Jecht not long before; he suppressed a smirk and said, "You're right,

sir. Do forgive me – I was too eager to try the wine. I'm very sorry."

His continued apologies didn't seem to placate the Guado guests, who turned away with furrowed brows. Auron glanced across the table at his fellow humans instead: both Braska and Jecht had noticed his unexpected lapse in table manners. Jecht, who had clearly worked out that Auron had acted deliberately, looked suspicious; Braska merely wore an expression of slightly amused surprise. Auron shrugged at him, doing his best to appear mildly embarrassed.

He turned his attention back to the cup, which was now a problem for his neighbour to deal with. Either the Guado knew the drink was poisoned, in which case he would avoid touching it, or only a small number of those present were aware. If that was the case, the man's life could be in danger, but Jyscal would surely send someone to discreetly warn him and provide the antidote before things got too bad. Meanwhile, Auron decided, he would stay alert and try to work out if there was anything else that might pose a threat.

The first course was served, a light salad of Moonflow fish. At the head of the table, next to his host, Braska looked down at his plate and steeled himself. There would no doubt be three or four courses altogether; he hoped the Guado wouldn't take offence if he didn't manage to eat all of them. Customs varied across Spira in this regard: in Bevelle, where supply shortages were minimal, nobody ever minded much if food was wasted.

The Al Bhed, on the other hand, who had a much more difficult existence, rightly treasured anything edible they could get hold of, and they accordingly saw failing to finish one's meal as a great insult. Fortunately, the time Braska had spent among them had been before he developed this difficult relationship with food. It was after Girl's death that he had succumbed to it, often lacking the energy to convince himself it would be worth eating when going without seemed a much simpler way to bring about what he desired. Even after the worst of his grief had passed, the effect on his appetite had lingered; now that he was in a relatively good mood and his headache seemed to have passed, he would certainly be able to eat some of what he was given, but he knew there would soon come a point where he would start to feel sick.

He took a few small bites, mindful of the need to pace himself, and pushed some of the salad leaves around the plate in an attempt to make it look as if fewer of them remained.

"Not to your liking?" said Jyscal Guado next to him.

Braska flinched. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, and decided it would be simplest to tell the truth. "I don't have much appetite these days."

"Is that so," said Jyscal, studying Braska curiously for a moment before turning back to his own food.

Braska looked down at his plate again. Perhaps, he thought, he should have asked Auron to warn Tromell about this issue before accepting the invitation. Holding a banquet

in honour of somebody who barely ate seemed like a foolish thing to do – although he, like Auron, knew it was strange that Jyscal had seen fit to honour a passing summoner in this way at all.

"Lord Jyscal," he said hesitantly, "might I ask why you invited me here? I haven't heard of your extending such courtesy to summoners before."

"Indeed," said Jyscal, turning back towards him, "I have not. To tell the truth, Lord Braska, I had heard a little of your story, and I was intrigued. You were excommunicated from Yevon, were you not?"

"Not excommunicated, exactly," Braska explained. "I was once a priest – they banned me from practising."

"And so you lost your faith in the teachings," said Jyscal, "but became a summoner anyway."

"It's complicated," Braska explained. "My faith is … well, I no longer follow Yevon, that's certain." He bowed his head contritely. "Forgive me. I know you brought the teachings to your people; this must sound like heresy."

"One thing I have learnt," said Jyscal gravely, "is that each man's relationship with the teachings and Yevon can be quite different from those of his neighbour. We Guado have our own traditions; I never wanted to ask my people to abandon them. We are Yevonites now, yes, but our practices certainly differ from what you would be used to in Bevelle."

"I see," said Braska.

"We have had many disagreements with the citadel, in fact," Jyscal added. "Asking my people to accept Yevon was difficult enough, but asking Yevon to accept us sometimes seems harder still."

Braska paused, and then confessed in a low voice, "The only part of the teachings I still believe in is the fundamental truth of the summoner's pilgrimage. I believe I can journey to Zanarkand and receive the Final Æon, and use it to defeat Sin. And that if the fayth see fit, we may bring an eternal Calm. But all this nonsense about how one should live one's life –" He permitted himself a quick glance at Auron across the table. "And the idea that avoiding machines is supposed to have anything to do with Sin. It's just a way for Bevelle to control us."

"You are a most unusual summoner," said Jyscal.

"Indeed," said Braska. "In fact, my contemporaries in Bevelle were more accustomed to calling me a *fallen summoner* – before I even started my pilgrimage."

Jyscal nodded, and then said, "I have also heard rumours about why you were stripped of your priestly duties. Another term was used to describe you – it failed to escape my notice."

"Al Bhed lover, I suppose," said Braska.

"So it is true?"

"Yes," said Braska. He took a deep breath, and said, "I was sent to the Al Bhed as a missionary. And I … met someone."

"Someone you chose over your faith," said Jyscal.

"We married," said Braska. "The Al Bhed cast us out, so we returned to Bevelle, but my people were hardly any kinder."

"Lord Braska," said Jyscal, "I take it you know of *my* history?"

Braska considered. If Jyscal had done anything newsworthy in the last three years, it was unlikely he would have been in a fit state to come to know of it. But there were some older stories, he remembered: gossip he had heard in the temple years ago, when he was still training to be a priest. Suddenly, it struck him.

"You married a human woman," he said.

Jyscal nodded. "That I did. I'm sure I was discussed in Bevelle in quite unfavourable terms. But you see, Lord Braska, the two of us have much in common."

"That's why you invited me here," said Braska.

"Forgive me," said Jyscal. "When I heard that one who might understand was passing through our town, I could not help but hope to have the chance to speak with him. When my dear wife and I were wed, I found that many of my trusted allies turned against me. We bore a son, hoping that his birth might placate my people, but it proved to be a mistake. The Guado considered him an abomination, and refused to accept him. There were rumours of an insurrection. Only my faithful servant Tromell stood by me."

"But you won their trust in the end, didn't you?" said Braska, leaning back so one of the servants could take away

his mostly untouched plate. "If you succeeded in converting them to Yevon – that was more than I ever managed with the Al Bhed, even if the Guado's brand of faith isn't what Bevelle expected."

"It was a long and arduous task," said Jyscal. "It could begin only once I sent the two of them far away."

"The two of them," Braska echoed. "You mean … your wife and son?"

"Indeed," said Jyscal. "Shortly after his birth – almost eighteen years ago now. It was a difficult decision. There have been more of them since. It is hard to know whether one is doing the right thing, but one must persist, I suppose."

"Are they still in exile?" Braska asked hesitantly.

Jyscal frowned. "My son … yes. I am not ready to bring him back. I fear he cultivates darkness in his heart. More errors on my part, and I must seek a way to reverse them before I dare reintroduce him to my people. And my poor wife …" He bowed his head and paused for a long time. "She is gone."

"Dead?" Braska whispered.

"Yes."

"Sin?" he guessed.

"No," said Jyscal quietly, "not as such. She was found to have a wasting disease. There was nothing I could do." There was more to the story, and any Guado would have been able to fill in the gaps, but this was the version Jyscal normally pre-

sented to those unfamiliar with what had happened. It was easier, and less agonising, than going into the full explanation.

"When did she die?" Braska murmured.

"Eight years ago," said Jyscal. "Eight years, two months, and three days."

They both sat in silence. The second course was served; neither moved forward to inspect his dish.

"My wife was taken by Sin," said Braska eventually.

Jyscal inclined his head. "I was reluctant to ask," he admitted, "but I wondered if that might have been the case. I thought it odd that a so-called Al Bhed lover would choose to take the summoner's pilgrimage – if something drastic had not happened."

Braska's eyes were beginning to moisten. "She and my daughter were all I had," he said, "and then, when she died, they took Yuna away too. They said I was unfit to look after her in my – I was grieving. I wasn't coping well." He sniffed. "And so I was left with nothing. I had no choice."

"You journey for her sake," said Jyscal.

Braska nodded. "I must defeat Sin," he said. "It's all I'm good for now."

"Then I most sincerely wish for your success," said Jyscal.

"Does it ever get easier?" said Braska.

Jyscal gave him a long, thoughtful look. "Gradually," he said, "if you let it. It never goes away, but with each passing

day, one begins to find a little more hope in one's life, I think." He turned to his food, and slowly began eating.

Braska tried to remain composed, but it was too late; the word *hope* had been too much. "Excuse me," he managed to say, before standing and hurrying away from the table. The tears were clouding his vision, but he fumbled his way to the door, emerged into the grand entrance hall, and went to sit at the bottom of one of the two large spiral staircases, burying his face into his knees and releasing the sobs that he had been holding back.

Soon, he felt a strong arm over his shoulders, and a warm, familiar presence by his side. "Auron," he murmured.

"I'm here, sir," said Auron. He had seen Braska's quick exit; it had been obvious that something was wrong.

"Thank you," said Braska, raising his head to meet his guardian's gaze.

Resisting the urge to lean in and kiss the tears away from Braska's cheeks, Auron said, "What's wrong? I thought you were talking to Lord Jyscal – did he say something that upset you?"

Braska shook his head. "Did you know about his wife?" he said hoarsely.

"He married a human, didn't he?" said Auron. "A long time ago – but why does that –" He stopped. "Oh. A bit like you, I suppose."

"Exactly," said Braska. "Just like me."

"Well, not …" Auron began. "It's not really the same. A Guado marrying a human is a bit more extreme than a Yevonite and an Al Bhed. Even the fact that they were able to produce a child –"

"He understands, Auron," Braska cut in. "He knows what it's like to risk everything for love, and to lose everyone's trust. And he's a widower, too. She died of an illness years ago, and still he carries on. I don't know where he finds the strength." He sighed shakily. "That's why he asked us here. He was interested in me because he knew I'd been through the same things he had."

"I see," said Auron, immensely relieved to find that his fear of an assassination plot had been unfounded. He tightened his grip around Braska's shoulders, and said, "If you want to go back to the inn, I can go and make our excuses."

"Oh no, that won't be necessary," said Braska. "It just took me by surprise. I'll manage – in fact, I'd quite like to speak to Lord Jyscal again."

"Really?" said Auron.

Braska nodded. "Yes, I think so. Thank you for coming out here to find me – as ever, I don't know what I'd do without you."

He wiped his face, and walked back in to take his seat, murmuring an apology to his host.

"I understand," said Jyscal. "You can be assured of that. Are you all right?"

Braska couldn't help sighing. "No," he admitted. "It's … it's been a very long time since I was all right."

Jyscal paused for a moment, and then gestured towards Braska's winecup. "I've had your wine refilled," he said. "Drink, please – and then we can talk, if you'd like that."

"Yes," said Braska, raising his cup to tap its rim against Jyscal's own. "I think I would."

Chapter **34**

Interspecies Cooperation

Auron had been worried about Braska when they both returned to their seats, and had wondered whether he should keep a closer eye on him; but the summoner seemed to be having a good enough time in Jyscal's company, and Auron knew it wasn't his place to intrude, so he turned back to his food instead. Since the incident with his winecup, the guests sitting in his immediate vicinity hadn't paid him much attention, and he had found it hard to choose a conversation to attempt to become involved in when there were several of them going on around him at once. He worked through the rest of his dinner exchanging only a handful of words with his neighbours, keeping himself occupied by examining the manor's unusual architecture. Occasional glances at Jecht sufficed to prove that his fellow guardian seemed to be getting on well with the Guado; he was adapting well to Spiran dining etiquette, as he did to most things, and was entertaining the

guests around him with one of his stories. Braska and Jyscal continued their own quiet conversation, apparently oblivious to everyone else at the table.

Once the fourth and final course was over, Jyscal got to his feet and waited for the chatter to die down. "Friends," he said, "distinguished guests, I must thank you for your attendance tonight. It cheers me to see so many of you within my walls – especially when I called you here at such short notice. But when I heard of Lord Braska, I could not let him leave our town without inviting him to take advantage of the finest Guado hospitality we have to offer."

He laid one of his large, broad hands on Braska's shoulder, and continued. "Lord Braska is a fine summoner: honest, bold, and determined. I have gathered as much merely from speaking to him tonight. He has told me many stories of his pilgrimage, and of his guardians, Sir Auron and Sir Jecht, whom I am delighted to see among our company here. Lord Braska speaks of them both most highly."

Braska caught Auron's eye and raised his eyebrows; Auron couldn't help smiling a little.

"It would be naïve of me to predict that we shall soon see a Calm in Lord Braska's name," Jyscal went on gravely. "We are all aware that even the best summoners sometimes fail to win favour in Zanarkand. Even those who reach the last stages of the journey can fall – I know that better than most." The Guado guests nodded soberly in response to this, although Braska and

his guardians failed to understand exactly what Jyscal was referring to.

"Thus," he concluded, "I ask you not to celebrate Lord Braska's Calm prematurely, but instead, to join me in wishing him good fortune and fortitude as he pursues what he most desires. Lord Braska: the Guado are with you on this final stage of your journey."

The guests followed Jyscal's lead in raising their winecups and toasting Braska's pilgrimage. Auron watched with a mixture of relief and anxiety: it was gratifying to see that they had some allies when there was nobody they could depend on in Bevelle. If Kinoc's attempts to interfere with the journey became more disruptive, they might even be able to call on the Guado for help. But Jyscal's words were yet another reminder that if Auron wanted Braska to survive, he needed to act soon.

Once the table was cleared, the servants returned to dismantle it in an efficiently choreographed movement that created a large space in the middle of the room: with dinner over, it was time for more drinks and for mingling more freely with one's fellow guests. Jyscal introduced Braska to some of his advisors before excusing himself and beginning to make the rounds of the other diners. Auron, meanwhile, headed straight for the archivist.

"I believe you promised me a look at your spheres," he said, without any preliminaries.

Byelas frowned. "I think I said I'd consider it. But I'm afraid

it won't be possible."

"Won't be possible?" Auron snarled. "What are you talking about? You said you'd show me once Lord Braska had five æons – well, you know we're getting close to Zanarkand now. And Lord Jyscal clearly supports Braska's progress, after that speech. Why are you being so uncooperative?"

"It's out of my hands," Byelas explained. "There's no point asking – why don't you forget about it and enjoy the party? It'll be your last chance to relax for a while, I'm sure."

"This is ridiculous," said Auron. "I'll go straight to Lord Jyscal, in that case, and maybe he'll let me –"

"That won't help," said Byelas. "It just can't be done – look, I'll show you to the archives, and then you'll understand. Come with me."

Auron followed him out of the mansion; the sun had set, and it was getting cold. By night, the town was still and quiet, showing no signs that Jyscal's mansion was so full of life. They walked down a short path that appeared to lead to a dead end; Byelas brushed a pile of leaves aside, revealing a large, round wooden door set at an angle into the ossified undergrowth.

"Stay still," he said, before suddenly reaching towards Auron and tugging a few strands of hair out of his ponytail.

"Ow!" Auron complained. "What do you think you're –"

Byelas moved the door aside, held his fist over the opening, and released the hairs; they began to drift down towards the passageway below, before suddenly bursting into flames. Mo-

ments later, there was no discernible evidence of them at all: they had burnt to cinders.

"Magic," Auron guessed.

"That's right," said Byelas. "Ancient Guado magic, from long before Yevon. It is an enchantment to keep out any person with human blood who tries to enter. If you were to go inside, you'd be burnt to ashes in minutes."

"So why did you lie to me?" said Auron. "You said I might be able to see them on the way back – couldn't you have told me this at the time?"

"We have a lot of guardians passing through, wanting to view the archives," Byelas explained. "Often they are backed by Yevon – as you told me you were. When Lord Jyscal converted us to the Yevonite faith, and began to draw up the accords that would allow our people to integrate more fully with human society, the priests in Bevelle demanded that all our secrets be shared with them. We complied to the best of our ability – but ancient bonds like these cannot be broken. Of course, we knew they would look unfavourably on our failure to satisfy their request in full, so we decided it was best to pretend the archives would be accessible, and simply hope none of them would visit and attempt to view the spheres."

"And they fell for it?" said Auron sceptically.

"We were aided by their hubris," said Byelas. "While our archives are famed across Spira, our comrades in Bevelle were unwilling to believe that we might hold anything beyond what

is in their own temple libraries. So none of them has ever been at all curious – apart from the desperate guardians of the summoners who pass through."

Auron bristled. "I'm not *desperate*," he said. "So these archives go against your agreement with Bevelle. Then why are you showing me this now? Don't you worry that I'll betray your secret?"

"You? To Bevelle?" said Byelas. "I'm not worried. After Jyscal started talking about holding a banquet for your summoner, I did some of my own research. You told me you had Bevelle's backing – but that's not true at all, is it? You wouldn't go back and tell them."

Auron was silent for a moment, and then said quietly, "I just want to understand how it works. I want to see if there can possibly be another way. You've seen the spheres yourself, I'm sure – can't you tell me anything?"

"Normally, I would not reveal Guado secrets to an outsider," said Byelas. "But Lord Jyscal has taken a liking to your summoner, so it would be remiss of me not to offer some guidance. All I can say is this: it is worse than you imagine. If you want to live, you must turn back."

Auron stared into the Guado's uncanny red eyes, the same shade as his stiff, treelike hair; his gaze passed over the bright red veins that protruded from the man's skin. Byelas was standing absolutely still, with only those scarlet eyes moving, considering Auron with an expression that conveyed pity and

suspicion at once.

Auron stepped back. "Thank you for your advice," he said, before hurriedly turning and making his way back to the manor.

The bright lights and laughter inside seemed in poor taste after what Auron had just been told, but he did his best to adjust. Jecht headed in his direction immediately: Auron was relieved that he didn't have to make an awkward attempt at joining a conversation with some Guado strangers.

"Where did you go, dude?" said Jecht.

"Just stepped out for some fresh air," Auron replied. "Big dinners like this aren't really my thing," he added truthfully.

"So how come you're so obsessed with all the rules, then?" said Jecht.

"I had to go to a few of these in Bevelle," Auron explained. "That doesn't mean I enjoy it."

"Man, no need to be such a fun killer," Jecht groaned. "You're ruinin' the vibe. Don't tell me you're still mad about Braska yelling at you earlier?"

"No," said Auron. "I'm just … thinking."

"Aw, that's no fun," said Jecht. "You know what you need? Less *thinking*, more, uh, drinking. As much of it as you want – you ain't gonna pass that up, are ya? Especially when I ain't havin' any – you ought to have twice as much to make up for it. Don't want my share to go to waste."

As if on cue, Jyscal appeared next to them. "Sir Jecht," he said warmly, "Sir Auron. I was hoping to find the opportunity to speak to you both. May I offer you some wine – or something else from my cellars?"

"Got any shoopuf milk?" Jecht asked, as Jyscal led them both to the drinks table.

"Shoopuf milk!" Jyscal echoed in delight. "We certainly have. I never expected to hear a human asking for it – they usually think us Guado out of our minds for enjoying the taste."

"Yeah, I figured," said Jecht, "but I don't get it. Sure, it's a different flavour than what I'm used to from Zan- uh, from home – hell, I never even heard of shoopufs before I ended up in Bevelle and wound up joining Braska's pilgrimage. But I like it – kinda sharp."

Jyscal poured him a cup and handed it over. "You've come a long way, then?" he said, suddenly interested.

"Yeah," said Jecht carefully. "All this Spira stuff – you know, Yevon, æons, all that – took a lot of gettin' used to."

"You're from outside Spira?" said Jyscal.

Jecht nodded. "Yep."

Jyscal turned to Auron. "And what about you, Sir Auron? Are you a man of similarly mysterious origins?"

"I'm afraid not," said Auron with a wary smile. "I've lived in Bevelle nearly all my life."

"You'll have some wine, then, I take it?" said Jyscal.

Auron frowned. "Er, I suppose so."

Jyscal inclined his head politely, and placed one of his enormous hands on the shoulder of a younger Guado woman who was standing nearby. "Hebat," he said to her, "perhaps you would pour Sir Auron some wine? I'm sure you'd be interested in hearing his stories of the pilgrimage."

"Oh, I'd love to, sir," said Hebat, blushing a little.

Failing to notice Auron's momentary scowl, Jyscal turned his attention more fully towards Jecht. "My niece," he explained. "She's always been very … curious."

Jecht grinned. "Sure seems real *curious* about Auron."

"Never mind that," said Jyscal. "I'm more curious about you, Sir Jecht. How did you come to be in Spira? I've never heard of anyone from another land coming to our shores."

"Uh … well … you never heard that story, then?" said Jecht. "About the guy and his kid that come here?"

"A Yevonite fairytale?" Jyscal guessed. "Such stories had not reached Guadosalam in my youth."

"Oh, right," said Jecht, taking the opportunity to change the topic. "You're the guy that brought Yevon to the Guado, right? Why'd you do it? Dunno why anyone would wanna get mixed up with those priests if you had the choice."

"They are a difficult breed," Jyscal agreed. "But I do believe in the teachings. I think they offer us a very good model for living our lives – for the most part. And my people must have seen it too, in the end, because here we stand today."

"You guys don't like machina, then?" said Jecht.

"We treasure our traditional ways of life," said Jyscal.

Jecht managed to keep himself from rolling his eyes: the part of the teachings that forbade machina was one that he would never get on board with, especially knowing those who lived in Bevelle tended to ignore most of the relevant injunctions anyway. The islanders of Besaid had viewed machina in the same way the Guado did, although it had seemed more genuine on their part. Being relatively isolated from the rest of Spira and living a more precarious existence, it made sense that they turned a blind eye to technology that they wouldn't have been able to afford anyway. The Guado seemed to have a much more comfortable life: their own avoidance of machina could surely come from nothing more than pointless prejudice, Jecht thought.

"You're not a Yevonite yourself, then," said Jyscal. "What made you decide to join Lord Braska on his pilgrimage?"

Deciding it was best not to admit it had been his only way of escaping jail, Jecht considered for a moment, and then found himself remembering his thoughts from earlier in the day. Arriving in Guadosalam had reminded him just how serious and genuine everything seemed in Spira; that seemed important, even if it hadn't at the outset. "Wanted to do something useful, I guess," he said. "Being a blitzer is fun an' all, but this seems more … meaningful."

"Just about the most meaningful thing one can do, in fact," said Jyscal. "And there are those who would throw that oppor-

tunity away, even after they reach Zanarkand."

"Come again?" said Jecht.

"Forgive me," said Jyscal. "I supported a summoner once, and he chose to repay me by – no, I shouldn't speak of it. More shoopuf milk?"

"Uh, sure," said Jecht, watching as Jyscal fetched them both another drink.

Jyscal swallowed his wine rather quickly, looked down at the mostly empty cup, and then said, "Tell me, Jecht, do you have a family?"

"Yeah, a wife and kid," said Jecht. "And … yeah, I guess I wanna do the right thing for them too, you know? At least my son might be proud of his old man if Braska brings the Calm. Uh, I mean, that'd just be a bonus, right? We get to save Spira, and my boy'll …" He would look his father in the eye without telling him he hated him, he thought, glad that he had had the wisdom not to finish the sentence out loud.

"I too have a son," Jyscal said.

"Yeah?" said Jecht, glad of the chance to change the subject again. "He ain't here tonight?"

"He is far, far away, on the island of Baaj," said Jyscal. "His birth disturbed my people – I had no choice but to exile him, as a means of quelling their revolt."

"Uh, really?" said Jecht, to whom this sounded like a considerable overreaction. "They seem OK now though, right? You never thought about fetching him back?"

"Had his birth been our only transgression," Jyscal mused, "I should perhaps have considered it. But he has since chosen to defy and disappoint me. The thought of welcoming him back to Guadosalam turns my stomach." Normally, he was more careful to avoid speaking about his son, but his mild inebriation was causing him to voice thoughts that he usually tried hard to keep to himself. Talking to Jecht and knowing that he was from outside Spira and unfamiliar with local traditions was oddly freeing.

"How old is he?" said Jecht.

"Eighteen," Jyscal replied.

"Oh," said Jecht, surprised – it was younger than he'd expected. "It was recent, then, this *disappointment*?"

"Not as such," said Jyscal. "Eight years ago now."

Jecht gaped at him. "Hang on a second – he was ten years old? And you sent him into exile for like, years and years just cos of somethin' he did when he was a kid? That's fucked up, dude."

"I beg your pardon," said Jyscal.

"You know what," said Jecht fiercely, "it's been just about a month since I last saw my son – and I wish I could go back to him. Or get him to come here, whatever. Point is, I miss him, and there's – there's stuff I wanna say to him, you know? And you just sent your kid away, and you could've brought him back at any time, but you just held onto some dumb grudge

and – didn't you want to see him grow up? You're meant to be his dad!"

"You think I have done wrong, then," said Jyscal miserably.

"Well," said Jecht, "I mean …"

"It has occurred to me, from time to time," Jyscal admitted, pouring himself some more wine without asking Jecht if he wanted his milk topped up. "Tromell tells me my decision was prudent. But I do wonder, sometimes …"

"You should get him back here," said Jecht. "Cos some dads don't get to see their sons even if they want to. There's no point being so …" He searched for the word. "So petty. You should try fixin' your relationship with him while you still got the chance." He wondered briefly whether he still had that chance with Tidus – and then did his very best to suppress the thought.

"You have given me much to think about," said Jyscal. "I thank you, Sir Jecht."

He shuffled away. Jecht glared at the drinks table, reflecting on their conversation: insulting the leader of the Guado in his own house probably hadn't been the most sensible thing to do, but Jyscal hadn't been that offended. It had seemed he was too drunk to take much notice. Jecht was more bothered by the things he had said and thought about Tidus. He had never spent much time regretting his decisions before coming to Spira, but things seemed very different these days.

"Jecht?" said Auron suddenly, having finally been able to escape Jyscal's niece.

Jecht turned around. "Huh?"

"You were looking very intently at the alcohol," said Auron. "Don't tell me you're tempted?"

"Nah," said Jecht, stepping away from the table. It wasn't entirely true. His days of needing Braska's white magic to keep the withdrawal symptoms under control were over, but drinking would at least make him care less. That was the problem with being on the pilgrimage: it had made him care too much. He wouldn't have minded not caring, just for a while.

"How much've you had, anyway?" he said to stop himself thinking about it.

"Enough," said Auron. "The Guado girl was trying to get me drunk – it didn't work."

Jecht managed a chuckle. "Yeah? Takes more, does it?"

"A lot more," said Auron humourlessly. "I don't know what Lord Jyscal was thinking, trying to pair us off like that. He of all people should know interspecies relationships are a bad idea."

"But Braska –"

Auron shook his head. "I don't mean like that. Al Bhed are still human – it was the religious differences that caused the trouble there. Bad enough, of course, but a human and a Guado marrying and having a child is on a whole different level. No wonder they all took against his son."

"Jyscal's son?" said Jecht, piecing it together. "So, what, he married a human, and people didn't like their kid, so that's why he sent him away?"

"Did he?" said Auron. "Yes, by all accounts the Guado thought the child's appearance was very disturbing. I don't know what they'd expected, quite frankly."

"Jyscal was tellin' me about him," Jecht explained. "The kid's still in exile even now. Some island called, uh, barge?"

"Baaj," Auron corrected him. He raised an eyebrow. "Even more remote than Besaid, then – that does seem quite extreme. What was the boy's name … Simon? Something like that … well, it doesn't matter."

"You agree with me, right?" said Jecht.

"On what?" said Auron.

"About Jyscal being too harsh," said Jecht. "He said the kid disappointed him, so he wasn't gonna bring him back here, but the little guy was only ten years old when he did whatever it was. That's crazy, right? You agree that he should've called him back by now?"

"Guado society is very traditional," said Auron. "I'm sure their parenting is quite strict."

"I mean, I get the whole tough love thing," Jecht insisted, "you bet I do, but what he did is like … a whole other planet. There's a thing called goin' too far, you know?"

Auron shrugged. "Not for me to say. It's their culture." He studied Jecht. "You seem unusually invested in this."

"Course I ain't," Jecht growled back. "Damn, I've had enough of this place. Ain't we gonna split soon? You want Braska to get some sleep before we hit the road again, right?"

"It's his decision," said Auron. "Although …" He looked around the room and spotted Braska, talking animatedly to a small group of stony-faced Guado. "You have a point. I'll go and ask him."

He manœuvred himself through the crowd and touched Braska on the shoulder. "My lord –"

"Oh, Auron!" said Braska, reaching for his hand enthusiastically. "What a coincidence! I was just telling these people how wonderful you are."

"That's very kind," said Auron, "but Jecht and I wondered if you might be hoping to leave soon. We'll need to make it all the way to the Thunder Plains travel agency tomorrow, so it'll be important to get a good night's sleep beforehand."

"Oh," said Braska, his face falling slightly, "I suppose so. Just as I always say – Auron knows best." He smiled at the assembled Guado. "I must go and thank Lord Jyscal for his, um, his hospitality. I won't be a moment."

He relinquished his grip on Auron's hand and made for Jyscal, slightly unsteadily, leaving Auron to make their excuses to the group. "Thank you for being so welcoming to my lord summoner," he ventured.

"He certainly seems very fond of you, sir guardian," said one of the Guado, while the others smirked.

"Right," said Auron hastily. "Well, have a good evening."

He went back to Jecht. "Good news," he said, "Braska's just saying goodbye to Jyscal, and then we leave."

They both turned to watch as Braska spoke to Jyscal; then, quite unexpectedly, Braska reached out to embrace the Guado leader.

Jecht chuckled. "Bet *that* goes against every rule in the book."

"You'd be right," said Auron, trying not to worry too much about it; after a moment's hesitation, Jyscal had, after all, returned the gesture. The two men exchanged a few more fervent words, and then Braska made his way back to his guardians, almost tripping over another guest's large Guado feet in the process but seeming not to be at all ruffled by it.

"Right, that's done," he said. "We're out of here."

Jecht burst out laughing at Braska's uncharacteristically casual turn of phrase; Braska laughed too, without really knowing why. Auron, the only one to have remained straight-faced, led the way out of the manor; once they were outside, Braska positioned an arm over each of his guardians' shoulders, pulling them in close.

"Jyscal's a delightful man," he said, as the three of them awkwardly began the journey back to the inn. "Most charming. It really was kind of him to invite us."

"Hey, go easy, or Auron's gonna get jealous," said Jecht.

Auron scowled; Braska laughed again. "Yes, he is, isn't he?" he said. "Oh dear, Auron, I didn't mean to upset you. You know how much I appreciate you. Don't worry, you'll always be my … oh, what is it they say?"

"Number one?" Jecht suggested.

"Yes, that'll do," said Braska, laughing yet again.

"Cut it out," Auron hissed at Jecht; Jecht snorted.

They entered the inn with some difficulty, ignoring the clerk's curious glances, and made their way to their room. Once Braska was semi-recumbent on his bed, Jecht slapped Auron on the back, muttered "Have fun" into his ear, and wandered off to the bathroom.

"Are you feeling all right, my lord?" Auron asked, glad that Jecht wouldn't be annoying him for a while. "Can I get you anything?"

"I'm fine!" said Braska. "Really … very fine."

"Maybe you should have a drink of water," said Auron, going over to the sink to fill a cup. Braska sat up and took it, concentrating very hard on not spilling anything.

"You should try to get some sleep, if you can," Auron reminded him.

"Yes, I suppose so," said Braska, draining the cup and setting it aside. He pulled off his headdress, tossed it onto the floor, and ran a hand through his hair. "Just need to get this damn robe off," he muttered.

"I'll leave you to it, then, if you don't need anything else," said Auron loudly.

"I just need …" Braska frowned. "Ah, yes! I just need to tell you something."

"What is it?" said Auron.

Braska beckoned him close. "I don't thank you enough, Auron," he said. "I ought to be thanking you …" He considered. "Every minute of the day. For what you do for me. You're unreasonably kind." He briefly wondered if *unreasonably* had really been the right word, but let it slide.

"You don't need to insist on it," said Auron.

"No, Auron, I do, I do," said Braska. "And you know what? The æons know you're important. They've been telling me –" He tried to remember what the æons had said. "You can be Spira's salvation."

Auron frowned; the information was a little more specific than what the fayth had told Braska earlier on the journey, but it was hardly the time to try finding out more. "That's … good," he said. "But you should –"

"So, you see," Braska interrupted him, and then he scrambled to his knees, kneeling on the bed and facing Auron, his hands on Auron's shoulders.

"Go to sleep, sir," said Auron weakly.

"Auron," said Braska. He moved his hands to cup Auron's face. "They will welcome you back, once this is over. I'm sure of it."

"That's not what I'm …" Auron began.

"A legendary guardian," said Braska. "My own legendary guardian … I'd never have dreamt I'd be so fortunate."

He leant in, and kissed Auron sloppily on one cheek; then he turned to do the same to the other. Auron had come to

expect this sort of contact, but Braska's next move took him by surprise: keeping his face close to Auron's, Braska leant in once more and kissed him right on the lips.

Auron instinctively closed his eyes; for a moment, there was nothing but the strong, sweet taste of red wine. Gradually, he became aware of the rest of the sensation: Braska's slender, warm nose pressed against his own. Braska's eyelashes fluttering delicately against his face, his soft hair tumbling forward to brush Auron's cheeks, his quiet huffs of breath, his thumbs stroking Auron's jaw. He opened his eyes, wanting to experience this with every one of his senses, and found himself reaching out in return, winding his fingers through Braska's hair, desiring nothing more than to grasp Braska by the back of his head and keep him there – but before he could do so, Braska broke the kiss and moved his hands back to Auron's shoulders.

"You see," he murmured, "how much I appreciate you. You are truly magnificent."

Auron could feel his face burning. *Appreciate* was right – that was all this was. Braska had merely wanted to show his affection, as he often did. A kiss on the lips meant as little as one on the cheek, especially when Braska was drunk and disorientated.

"Thank you, my lord," he said. "But you really should go to sleep." He adopted a stern tone. "I've told you a few times now."

Obediently, Braska lay back. "Yes, sorry, Auron," he mumbled.

Auron sighed. "It's all right. Put your nightshirt on. I'll be back in a minute."

He made a quick exit, found his way to the bathroom, and almost ran into Jecht, who was standing by one of the sinks.

"What are you up to?" Auron demanded.

"Just taking my time," Jecht informed him with a smirk. "Thought you guys could do with a little privacy."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Auron. He set about washing his face, scrubbing at it rather harder than he was used to.

Eventually, he finished and raised his head; Jecht was still grinning at him. "What?!" he snapped.

"Bit of a waste if you didn't go for it," said Jecht. "Bet he'd do anything you wanted right now."

"You think I want to take advantage of him?" said Auron. "I suppose that's how you treat all your *conquests*, is it? You're disgusting."

"I'm just sayin', people are more prepared to do stuff when they're drunk," said Jecht. "Gotta make good use of the situation."

Auron almost wanted to tell Jecht that Braska was the one who had initiated the kiss, but he managed to stop himself. He had revealed enough already, and this was something that Jecht could never know.

"Nothing happened," he said, scowling at his wet face in the mirror. It wasn't really a lie, he told himself – nothing that meant anything had happened. "Got it?"

Jecht shrugged. "OK, cool. No need to lose your shit." He leant in. "But you *wanted* something to happen, right? Bet you could do with … relievin' some of that tension."

"Leave me alone," said Auron, shoving him aside and marching back to the bedroom.

Braska had succeeded in changing into his nightshirt; his breathing was slow and heavy enough to suggest he had already fallen asleep. Auron changed as quietly as he could and lay down on his mat; Jecht, having followed him at a safe distance, did the same.

Auron had almost managed to get to sleep himself when he was disturbed by a rustling sound: Braska had awoken, and sat bolt upright. "Oh no!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" said Auron, scrabbling around for his sword in the darkness.

"I forgot to take Yuna's sphere!" said Braska.

Auron relaxed. "Oh. You can do it in the morning, sir."

"Do you think so?" Braska asked.

"Yes," said Auron. "Go back to sleep."

"OK," Braska replied. "Goodnight." He lay back down, and within moments, was sleeping again.

Chapter 35

Celestial

Braska awoke gradually and reluctantly: he had another headache, and this one was worse. Groaning into his pillow, he wondered whether the sound of his distress might alert Auron, but nobody came, so he opened his eyes and forced himself to sit up even though it somehow felt even more unpleasant than lying still had been.

Someone had been thoughtful enough to leave a potion on the bedside table, he realised. He reached for it, fumbled with the stopper, and gulped it down. For a moment, he felt as if he was going to be sick, but as the potion quickly took effect his nausea receded and his headache lifted. It had been the sort that potions could alleviate, he belatedly realised, unlike those he had been getting used to over the past few days. That was one small mercy.

He still didn't feel quite right, but the worst of the physical symptoms had gone. Finding it a little easier to concentrate,

Braska found himself thinking back to the previous night's events: he remembered saying goodbye to Jyscal and leaving the manor, but the journey back to the inn and anything that had happened since then was a blank.

There was a cup of fresh water by the bed too, and a note. Braska reached for the water keenly, knowing by now that it would have been Auron who had left it and the potion there. He cradled it in both hands as he sipped; his mouth was impossibly dry, but the water was beginning to see to that, even if one cup was hardly enough to hydrate him and get rid of the stale wine taste on his lips.

He turned to the table once more to read Auron's note.

Jecht and I have gone to stock up on suplies. You should rest.

The precise yet oddly disjointed handwriting and the misspelling of *supplies* betrayed Auron's lack of formal education; Braska found it oddly endearing, and smiled a little, but he was unable to stay in a good mood for long. His night of excess had left him in worse spirits than he had been used to over the last few days – not only because of the hangover, but also because of his long conversation with Jyscal over dinner. It seemed as if he had told the story of his entire life, revisiting memories that he hadn't dared call on for years. With the aid of the wine, it had been enjoyable; now, though, he couldn't help reflecting on how much he had lost. It was difficult to believe that he had once been so happy. He had always been a somewhat melancholy person, but that was nothing compared with how

he had felt over the last three years, since the very moment they brought him the news of her death.

He set the empty cup aside and lay down again, tugging the blanket over his nose. For a long time after losing Girl, he had spent many of his days in this position, hiding from the world around him as he slowly came to realise that his life was already over at thirty-two years old. Auron had visited, encouraging him to look out at the clear blue Bevelle skies, or to eat a morsel of something tasteless, or to walk around the house to get a little exercise. He had dragged himself out of bed to shuffle to the bathroom and relieve himself, or sunk into an armchair while Auron changed his bedsheets. Occasionally, he had dressed fully, putting on the most formal and impressive clothes he could bear, and had gone to meet the men from the citadel who had taken responsibility for Yuna's welfare. Those meetings had been attempts to convince them he was fit to have her back, although he had never been successful. Eventually, he had realised that his mental state was only a pretext: now that she was in the temple's hands, they were keen to keep her away from a man who had proved himself a dangerous source of anti-Yevon sentiment. Declaring his intent to take the pilgrimage had at least given him the leverage to negotiate the occasional overnight stay; he had always mustered as much energy as he could for those occasions, trying his best to ensure Yuna had a good time with her father.

He wished he could see her now, but more than anything

after his conversation with Jyscal, he wished he had Girl back. It hadn't escaped his notice that he was currently in the one place in Spira where it was possible to see her, or at least an image of her. On their previous visit to Guadosalam, Braska had told his guardians the Al Bhed thought visiting the Farplane disrespectful. That was true, but the temptation was strong – at this moment, feeling absolutely wretched, he cared little about courtesy.

He stood shakily and dressed. Making contact with the æons might have helped, especially in Auron's absence, but he felt too fragile to give the idea much consideration. Instead, he poured himself some more water from the sink, gulped it down, used a little more to wash his face, and then took hold of his staff and made for the exit.

It wasn't a long journey to the Farplane; fortunately, Braska was there before he really had time to have second thoughts about it. Passing through the strange membrane that led to the elevated viewing platform and taking up a position at the edge in imitation of the small number of other visitors who were already paying tribute to their own loved ones, he was confronted by her image almost immediately.

She was just as he remembered, and yet there were details of her appearance he had forgotten. Yuna was starting to look like her – he hadn't realised it until now. The sight of her was more vivid than his memories or even the few spheres in his possession had ever been, and yet, silent and translucent, she

remained incomplete.

"I miss you," he croaked. The image blinked back.

She wouldn't have wanted him to visit the Farplane – neither would she have wanted Braska to take the pilgrimage at all. The Al Bhed had never supported such things. Even though Girl had been amenable enough to Yevonite customs to agree to live in Bevelle, she had always made it clear in private that she was unable to accept Yevon's core doctrine. Braska, in a way, had been the opposite. Turning away from Yevon had convinced him to reject the majority of the teachings, but there were elements that were too fundamental for him to cast aside. The pilgrimage was Spira's hope. Without it, in his eyes, there was nothing to believe in at all.

He wondered whether the fact that he was doing it for her sake – because he couldn't bear to be alive now that she was gone – would have made her more sympathetic to his decision. His determination to become a summoner had developed a very long time ago, and he had known after only a few hours of considering it that it was the right path. His decision to visit the Farplane, on the other hand, now embarrassed him with its spontaneity: it was a betrayal of both of them. It came from nothing but his own weakness. Had it not been for the evening with Jyscal, his resolve would never have faltered.

"Forgive me," he whispered.

There was no reaction; she just stood there with the hint of a smile, seeming to look at something behind him, blink-

ing from time to time like looped sphere footage. Nonetheless, Braska was suddenly overcome by a strange urge to approach the three or four other people visiting their own ghosts, seize them by the wrist, and drag them across to where Girl hovered. He would show her to them; he would tell them she was his wife, and they would be shocked to see that a Yevonite had married an Al Bhed, and he would relish it. He would be proud.

There was a part of him that wondered if he would ever be able to leave the Farplane; and yet at the same time, he hated the whole experience. He counted backwards from ten under his breath; when he reached zero, he closed his eyes, turned around, then opened his eyes again and walked resolutely to the exit.

Making his way back towards the town, Braska took a shuddering breath. Whatever the Farplane truly was, and despite how uncomfortable it had made him feel, it almost seemed as if he belonged there. If the fayth saw fit to grant his desires, he would be dead in less than a fortnight. He continued down the slope with faltering steps, half sure that he was about to collapse, but clinging to his staff tightly in the hope that would prevent it.

Reaching the bottom of the slope, he came face to face with Jecht.

"Thought you said it was disrespectful," said the latter.

It would have been hard to pretend that Braska had come from anywhere but the Farplane: the slope led directly to its

steps and nowhere else. "Forgive me, Jecht," he said wearily, slightly surprised by his own ability to speak. "It was a moment of weakness. I shouldn't have gone up there."

He looked utterly defeated; Jecht was beginning to wish he hadn't tried engaging him in conversation, and wished he could walk away, but he felt too much responsibility for Braska to leave him alone when he was in this state. "You, uh, wanna sit down?" he said, indicating a nearby bench.

Braska nodded. He shuffled onto the bench and folded his hands into his lap, dropping his staff as he did so; it clattered to the ground. He made no reaction; Jecht scooped the staff up and held it awkwardly in one hand, trying to think of something he could say to make Braska look less miserable.

"Uh," he said at last, "so what is the Farplane really? Auron said somethin' about pyreflies, but ..." He vaguely remembered his companions providing a fuller explanation the first time they had passed through Guadosalam, but the nuances of it had been lost in his drunken state.

"The pyreflies take the form of those who have passed on," said Braska tonelessly. "Nobody knows why – there are different theories."

"And what do *you* think?" Jecht prompted him.

"When I was a boy," said Braska, "I was taught that the pyreflies form a bridge between our hearts and the souls of the dead. That their manifestation is proof that the spirits of those who have passed on remain conscious somewhere, and that as

long as we are sent, we shall all join them in time. It's a … a comforting thought. But the Al Bhed believe …" He paused to wipe a tear from his eye. "They say it proves no such thing. The pyreflies merely react to our thoughts, and it's nothing more than that."

"Sounds kinda like Zanarkand," said Jecht. "Most people there don't really believe there's anythin' that happens after you die. I mean, you get people that are into, like, pagan stuff, but not that many of 'em, you know?"

Unable to muster the energy to show interest in Jecht's story, Braska remained motionless.

"You, uh, wanna talk about her?" said Jecht, deciding to try another technique. "What was her name? Don't think you ever said."

"The Al Bhed never speak the names of those who have recently passed," Braska murmured. "They believe one should leave one's past behind."

"OK, fine, fine," said Jecht, deciding not to mention that Braska didn't seem to have had a great deal of success in doing that. "What about … uh, what'd she look like?"

"Like every other Al Bhed woman you've seen in Spira," said Braska, annoyed by Jecht's constant questions. Then he reconsidered: Jecht was only trying to help, he thought. "Sorry, Jecht. She was … she was uncommonly beautiful, as far as I was concerned. I never understood how anyone could look elsewhere when she was around. And yet she chose me. It

was the greatest honour."

"Hey, you're a good-lookin' guy, you know," said Jecht.

"I'm – I *was* a Yevonite," said Braska. "She risked everything for me." He was almost smiling. "But once she had her heart set on something, there was no stopping her. She was almost as stubborn as I am. We had truly ferocious arguments sometimes."

"Yeah?" said Jecht.

Braska nodded. "She was unfailingly principled," he added. "I've rarely met anyone with such an unshakeable moral compass. People used to think her stern, but they barely knew her at all."

The description was increasingly reminding Jecht of a certain mutual acquaintance. "Just down to earth, huh?" he said.

"That's right," said Braska. "Ever so practical. A great help to me, as you can imagine. And now, I –" He hesitated, and then said quietly, "I never quite worked out how to live without her."

Jecht wasn't sure how to respond to that. He had thought he was having some success in cheering Braska up, but now the mood had suddenly shifted again.

"I don't have long to worry about that, anyway," Braska added. "Only a week or so, and then we'll be in Zanarkand. And not much later, I'll be ... gone."

"That's ..." said Jecht, "that's what you want, ain't it?"

Braska nodded. "So much. So much, Jecht. Even if there really is no Farplane at all – even if all that lies ahead of me is eternal sleep. I –" He gulped out a sudden, shaky sob. "I really don't think that would be so bad."

"Uh," said Jecht, scratching his neck, "look, I'm no good with, uh –"

"I know," said Braska abruptly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable." He stood and reached for his staff. "Auron probably wants us to make a move soon," he said, turning to head back to the inn without waiting for a response.

The composure that he had inexplicably regained in the face of Jecht's discomfort didn't last long; by the time he had arrived at the inn and made his way to their room, he felt too awful even to greet Auron, who was busying himself with ironing the group's spare clothes. Instead, he walked past him with no acknowledgement, climbed onto the bed, and lay down on his side on top of the blanket.

Auron set the iron aside, refilled the cup of water he had left for Braska earlier, and placed it carefully beside the bed. "There's some water for you here, sir," he said.

Braska made no reaction for several seconds; eventually, he mumbled, "I went to see her."

"Ah," said Auron.

"I shouldn't have," said Braska, twisting his head to bury his face into the blanket as his tears started to flow. "I'm terrible," he gulped out. "I was weak – I let her down."

"My lord, you're not weak," Auron insisted. He began to approach Braska, knowing that laying a hand on him might bring him some comfort, before the memory of what had happened on that same bed the previous night suddenly struck him – not for the first time – and he found himself retreating with a strange, hasty sidestep that he was glad Braska hadn't seen. "No-one could blame you," he said when he was stationary again. "When we're so close to the Farplane – and when I'm sure you can't have been feeling well this morning. It's all right."

Braska made no response, so Auron continued. "Jecht and I went up there yesterday – while you were resting. I saw my family. It was …" He trailed off, wondering how to characterise the experience. The word *underwhelming* came to mind.

Still whimpering into the blanket, Braska ignored him: it wasn't the same thing at all, he thought. Auron had been so young when his family had been killed, close to Yuna's age when Girl was taken. Children bounced back from these things. Auron could have no idea of his pain.

"She wouldn't have wanted me to go," he sobbed. "She wouldn't have wanted any of this. If she'd seen me taking the pilgrimage …"

He himself had that in common with Girl, Auron reflected. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, deciding it best not to pretend that she would have approved of Braska's decision for the sake of trying to console him. "I know this is hard for you."

"You have no idea how hard it is," said Braska.

"No, I suppose not," Auron replied. Braska didn't want his support, then, he thought irritably; he just wanted to wallow. He crossed the room and went back to the ironing, keeping one eye on Braska's trembling form as he did so.

Soon enough, the laundry was taken care of and Auron was running out of increasingly insignificant tasks to occupy himself with. He cast his eyes carefully over Braska; the summoner was still curled up on top of his blanket, but it appeared that he had stopped crying, at least.

"I don't mean to nag," said Auron, "but we need to decide whether we'll be moving on today. If you don't think you can make it to the Thunder Plains travel agency, we'll have to stay here another night – I assume that's more likely at this point."

"It'll be fine," said Braska monotonously.

"Lord Braska," said Auron, "we won't be able to camp in that storm. If you're not absolutely certain that you'll make it, we need to stay here. We can leave first thing tomorrow, and then we'll have plenty of time to get there."

"No," Braska insisted. "I can't bear the thought of another night in this place." If he woke up in the same bed the next morning, he thought, he would probably head straight up to the Farplane again, and refuse to come down.

"You really don't sound –" Auron began.

Braska raised a hand. "Just give me a moment, Auron," he said, before laboriously sitting up and turning away from him.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the thought of the æons. In his anguished state, it took longer than usual to latch onto their response, but soon he could feel it, and he let the sensation overwhelm him, filling him with light.

Are you with me? he thought.

We are with you, Braska, came the reply. *You will defeat Sin, and give Spira what it most desires.*

He breathed out slowly, immensely comforted by their voices, and opened his eyes. Turning to face Auron, he said, "I'm all right. Ready to leave when you are."

Auron hesitated: after years of dealing with Braska's low moods, he could tell this sudden improvement was genuine. He should have been pleased, he knew, but the abruptness of it was somewhat unnerving. "Right," he said, making a mental note to consider it later. "As soon as Jecht gets back, then, we'll –" He scowled suddenly. "Where is Jecht, anyway? He's late, as usual. What's taking him so long?"

He headed out into the corridor, planning to take a quick look outside to see if Jecht appeared to be anywhere nearby. He soon found out, though, that no such thing was necessary: Jecht was sitting at one of the tables in the reception area, doing his best to look nonchalant.

"What are you doing?" Auron demanded. "We were waiting for you. Weren't you going to come and tell us you were ready to go?"

"Well, uh," said Jecht, "you know … Braska."

Auron shot him an impatient glare.

"He seemed kinda …" said Jecht. "Didn't wanna get in the way of one of his, um, moments."

"Oh, grow up," said Auron. "Well, he's fine now, anyway. Come on, we need to get going."

Jecht raised an eyebrow, sceptical of the claim that Braska had made a recovery; his depressive moods tended to last a full day or more. Like Auron had been, he was surprised to find on entering their room that Braska was doing much better, although he was perfectly happy to accept it. Before too long, they had settled up and were on their way, heading across the dreary, wet Thunder Plains.

"I suppose you're going to try dodging the lightning again," Auron said to Jecht.

"Course," said Jecht. "I'm the only one fast enough, so I gotta give it a go, right? Don't wanna miss out on givin' you guys a chance to see the great Jecht in action." The sky flashed white around him; he hopped back, narrowly avoiding the tendril of lightning that followed, and exclaimed, "Ha! Score!"

"Honestly," said Auron. "We don't have time to fool around. We're behind schedule – we should have left Guadosalam much earlier."

"Sorry, Auron," said Braska placidly. "I think that was mostly my fault."

"Yeah, you can't blame me," said Jecht.

"I can blame you for slowing us down," Auron countered.

Jecht snorted. "I ain't the slow one," he said, before casting Haste on himself and dashing off at inhuman speed.

Scowling, Auron made to run after him, but remembered just in time that doing so would leave Braska vulnerable to fiend attacks. He drew by the summoner's side instead, feeling very self-righteous.

"He's just trying to wind you up," said Braska. "Don't let it get to you."

"I know," Auron muttered.

Braska chuckled and took Auron's arm. It seemed natural to do so while walking now; he had been clinging to Auron like this while they walked over much of the past few days' journey. But this time, something completely unexpected happened: as he leant into Auron, he felt a brief and sudden stab of pain at the side of his head.

It was over in an instant, but the feeling made Braska gasp out loud. Reflexively, he grasped Auron more tightly.

"What?" said Auron.

Braska blinked back at him. If he told Auron what he had just experienced, he thought, Auron would probably take it as the final proof that Braska wasn't in a fit state to make it to the travel agency, and would insist they return to Guadosalam. Braska, on the other hand, was eager to get as far as he could from the Farplane.

"What?" he echoed, trying to sound unbothered.

Auron frowned. "I thought you – did you just say something?"

"Not me," said Braska. "Must have been the thunder."

"Oh, OK," said Auron, who had no reason to suspect that Braska might wish to keep anything from him, and was in any case more concerned with maintaining his own composure now that the two of them were in such close proximity. It was another reminder of what had happened the previous night: he could taste those wine-stained lips again, slender and firm against his own, the sweet haze of Braska's breath flooding his mouth like some miraculous drug – he blinked and clenched his jaw a little. This had to stop.

Fortunately for Braska, the mysterious pain seemed to have been a one-off, and the two of them caught up with Jecht and continued the journey without incident, other than the sporadic attacks from the various fiends that emerged from the shadows. Now that they were heading further north, the fiends were starting to pose more of a challenge, although it still wasn't enough to be particularly worth worrying about. They had dealt with these sorts of fiends earlier on the journey, and that had been before Jecht had gained his magical abilities and his new sword, Auron had honed his close combat techniques on Besaid, and Braska had begun to understand the ways of the æons. More substantial impact on their progress came from the constant lightning strikes, although those too were more of an annoyance than

a real cause for concern: Jecht had mostly got the hang of avoiding them, while Braska and Auron intermittently found themselves sent tumbling to the ground by a bolt they had failed to evade.

Not having left Guadosalam until later in the morning, they reached the travel agency at dusk. Jecht, who was less worn out than the others thanks to his superior reaction times, booked a room and put in an order for some dinner; they ate in near-silence, and Braska headed off to bed soon afterwards, finding that he had yet another headache coming on. He was starting to wonder whether they would be a constant fixture of the rest of the journey. It was less worrying than the strange, sudden pain he had experienced earlier on, at least; he was no stranger to headaches from spellcasting, even if he was sure he hadn't used enough magic on this occasion to provoke one.

Auron was quite tired too, but stayed at the table in the reception area so Braska could have the chance to rest without being disturbed; Jecht was still energetic. After a lengthy conversation with the clerk, he bounded back to Auron's side and said, "They got some kinda competition here. If I can dodge the lightning enough times, I get a prize! I'm gonna smash it!"

"What kind of prize?" said Auron, yawning. "And how do they know how many times you've dodged it?"

"Machina, the guy said," Jecht explained. "They got some kinda drone trackin' it. Pretty cool, huh?"

"But they're Yevonites," said Auron, glancing at the clerk for confirmation. It was indisputable: he was very clearly not an Al Bhed. But then, Auron thought, if the Yevonites of Bevelle could flagrantly violate the teachings with their constant use of unsanctioned machina, there was no reason why their brethren elsewhere couldn't do the same. He leant back; he was too tired to give it that much thought.

"They ain't gonna know what hit 'em," said Jecht proudly. "Gonna have to make a whole new prize just for me, I bet. Top of the leaderboard."

"Yeah, have fun," Auron mumbled.

Jecht dashed out to try his luck; Auron found himself drifting off to sleep soon afterwards. With his subconscious at last unrestrained, the memory that he had spent the day trying to repress returned in full force. He dreamt of Braska's breath melting into his, Braska's pale fingers trailing over his jaw. Shutting off Braska's mouth with a firm kiss and watching his eyes tremble shut, running a hand over Braska's shoulder, up his neck, feeling his warm skin move minutely with each breath. Braska was naked and perfect, everything Auron had ever wanted. And Braska would ask for him, beg for him. *Will you let me take you, Auron?*

Braska's hands in Auron's hair now, tangling through his ponytail, and Auron kissing his neck, kissing his chest, drawing him in with each touch. *I adore you, sir.* Braska straddling him – grasping his thighs, pulling him nearer. Gripping his

cheeks and holding him there as he enters – meeting his whimpers with kisses. It's all right, *it's all right, sir, don't hold back.* Braska's breaths quickening, his hands shaking, he moans into Auron's neck as Auron moves inside. Wet, desperate kisses at his throat, his jaw. Braska's dick – sublime – stiff and ready as it presses against Auron's belly – *that's it, Auron, so good* –

Some distant noise woke him; instinctively, he shot a quick glance towards the reception desk, and found to his relief that it was unstaffed. With that established, Auron let out a long sigh. The images from the dream were still vivid in his mind – he could almost feel the sensation of Braska's body pressed against his own.

It was impossible to resist now: he couldn't cast those images aside. It occurred to him that he should get up and go somewhere private to finish himself off, but at this point, he was too far gone to believe that he would have much success in calmly standing and walking to the bathroom. Instead, he leant forward and raked both hands through his hair, trying to regain his senses while still assailed by the ghostly feelings of Braska straddling him. Without even touching the prominent bulge at his crotch, his arousal was still overwhelming; he breathed in and out as deeply as he could, trying to regain some control over himself.

The front door opened; unfortunately for Auron, it was Jecht. Soaking wet, he approached him with a grin, stopping short when he noticed Auron's appearance. Given his red-

dened face and unkempt hair, his loud, rapid breaths, and his transported expression, it was fairly obvious to Jecht what Auron had been engaging in.

"Uh," he said. "Seriously? You're just jerkin' off in public?"

"No," Auron mumbled, flinging both hands onto the table to make it clear they were nowhere near his groin.

Jecht snorted. "What, you can just get like that without even touching yourself, huh? Man, you really need to get laid. You know it's like a medical condition if you don't do anythin' for a long time, right? You don't wanna do yourself damage, do ya?" He cast his eyes appreciatively over Auron's vulnerable state: Auron was especially attractive in this condition.

"Don't be ridiculous," Auron muttered. Now that Jecht had walked in on him, he was finding it easier to regain his senses. He was sure what Jecht had just said had no basis in fact. He vaguely remembered somebody having said something similar many years ago, back at the barracks, but teenage boys said all sorts of crude things.

"Let me guess," said Jecht, "there's some religious bullshit about keeping yourself pure, so Yevon can take your virginity when you die or somethin' –"

"Yevon isn't a person, Jecht," said Auron. "It's a system of beliefs. And my –" He stumbled over his words a little. "My *virginity* is long gone, thanks."

"Can't have been gettin' much lately, though, right," said Jecht smugly, taking the seat opposite. "Lemme guess, you just

been sneakin' away to the restroom to whack one out when you get a moment? Believe me, I know it's rough. It's been what now, a month? And always sharin' rooms with Braska – having to watch the guy you're in love with get in his bed each night and not being able to get in there with him? Sucks pretty bad, dude."

He paused, realising something: he'd used the phrase *in love* to provoke Auron, and yet Auron hadn't reacted at all.

"You are," he said more quietly. "Ain't ya."

"I am what?" Auron hissed back.

"In love with him."

Auron scowled and fidgeted in place.

"You know," said Jecht, "back when you first said you were into him, I thought it was just, like, a physical thing, but … you're actually in love with him."

"What's your point?" said Auron at last.

It was that Auron was mere days away from getting absolutely heartbroken, Jecht thought. "My point is," he said loudly, "it's no wonder you're so tense! I been offering to help you for weeks, ain't I? Why don't you just say yes? It's just a bit of fun, right – we don't gotta go all the way if you don't wanna. They say I give good head."

Auron's expression was blank.

"Sucking dicks, Auron," Jecht explained, smirking at Auron's squirm of embarrassment. "Ever tried it?"

"I –" Auron began, before abruptly cutting himself off.

"Aha, you have!" said Jecht in delight. "No way, you gotta tell me."

"It was years ago," said Auron. "It didn't *mean* anything. You know how boys are with experimenting – all of us growing up together in those barracks. You can imagine the sort of thing that went on." He cast his mind back to those boys: many of them were married now. No doubt they would deny they had ever engaged in homosexual activity. It was an open secret among those who grew up in the monks' charge that all sorts of experimentation happened in the young men's quarters; it never meant anything about the leanings of those who engaged in it. Auron was the exception, apparently.

"Whoa, OK, I don't wanna hear about kids sucking each other off," said Jecht. "This is about me and you, Auron. We'd be doin' each other a favour. You know I think you're hot – just like everyone else in Spira."

Auron frowned. "You think everyone in Spira's –"

"No, everyone in Spira thinks *you're* hot, dumbass," said Jecht.

"What?" said Auron.

"You ain't noticed?" said Jecht. "Let's see: that guy in Djose. Jyscal's niece last night. Me, Braska –" He moved on quickly, noticing Auron's face fall at that one. "The Al Bhed guys on the blitz team kept askin' about you after they saw you that time in Luca. Then there was that girl on Besaid – Jazzu's sister or whatever. And that other girl from Kilika. And I think

the guy we got my old sword from had some kinda thing for you. And like, every woman we ever meet checks you out. Don't tell me you never realised."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Auron.

"You know," said Jecht, "maybe that's why your pal Kinoc's so eager to get you bumped off. Maybe he's into you too and it's some kinda weird kink thing –"

"Oh, you're just being childish now," said Auron. "Come on, Jecht."

Jecht grinned. "Fine, whatever. But look, if all those people knew you weren't getting any, they'd all be disappointed, right? And I'm offering. You kind of owe it to all of 'em to accept."

"That doesn't make any sense at all," Auron countered. "Anyway …" He wondered if pointing out the impracticalities of Jecht's proposition would be a more productive line of argument. "How would we even – where would we do it, for a start? Like you said, we don't have a lot of opportunities for privacy."

"Ah, you *are* interested!" said Jecht gleefully. "I dunno, we'll find somewhere. Use the bathroom, if we gotta. I know it ain't the nicest place, but trust me, you won't be worryin' about the atmosphere when the great Jecht starts working his magic."

Auron grimaced. "I'm *not* interested," he insisted. "Can we please just talk about something else? How did your lightning

challenge go?"

Jecht was sure that he had managed to make some progress in winning Auron over; torn between pursuing the subject and bragging about his lightning dodging expertise, he opted for the latter, and resolved to save the other topic for a later date. "Yeah, I was gonna show ya!" he said, fishing in his pockets for the prizes he had gathered. "Picked this stuff up from the box outside. These potions were for dodging five bolts – that was a joke. These were for ten …"

Auron watched as Jecht went through his treasures. They were surprisingly useful: the travel agency seemed to take the challenge much more seriously than he'd anticipated. There were some unusually effective potions among the items Jecht had picked up, and other rare goods Auron didn't think he'd seen for sale anywhere.

"And for dodging two hundred," Jecht concluded, "I got this thing." He placed a small rectangular token on the table. "Dunno what it is, but it's gotta be good, right?"

Auron peered down at it. "I guess," he said.

"What, you don't know either?" said Jecht. "Huh. Thought you could tell me. I mean, it looks like a piece of junk, but it's the top prize, so I guess it's gotta mean something."

"Yeah," said Auron, looking at the vaguely familiar symbol carved into the token. "Looks like it might be something astrological. Braska might know." Saying the name out loud suddenly made him hesitate. "Jecht," he said, "does he – do you

think he knows?"

"About this thing?" said Jecht, meaning the token.

Auron shook his head impatiently. "About … me. You know."

"About you bein' in love with him?" Jecht guessed.

"Yeah," Auron murmured.

Jecht scoffed. "Come on, Auron. You know what he's like. He'd only know if you got up in his face and said it. And I'm guessing you ain't gonna do that."

"Of course not," said Auron. "It's – it's *wrong*."

"I mean, it'd be awkward, yeah," said Jecht, "but he wants you to tell him what's up, right?"

"I don't mean telling him," said Auron. "I mean – having these feelings for him. It isn't proper."

"What, cos you're his guardian?" Jecht guessed. "Cos he's older than you? Cos he's straight? At least, you think he is. Don't say it's cos of his wife, that don't count."

"No, I –" Auron tried, before giving up. It puzzled him that Jecht really didn't seem to know that his feelings were fundamentally inappropriate, and it wasn't something he was particularly keen on explaining.

"I'm not telling him, either way," he said at last. "I don't want to burden him."

"Yeah, I think he kinda likes being burdened," Jecht muttered.

Auron frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you know," said Jecht. "Loves being sad; loves it when other people are sad; that's what he's about, ain't it?"

"You know he's not well," said Auron, thinking back even as he said it to the morning, and to his own irritation at Braska's insistence that nothing could lessen his distress.

"Yeah," said Jecht. "Usually, when people ain't well, they wanna get better, right?"

"I'm going to bed," said Auron abruptly. "So should you – it's late." He stood and gestured to his crotch. "Anyway, thanks for helping me get rid of my … affliction."

"Haha, yeah, good one!" said Jecht as he watched Auron walk off. He was sure he had made progress in convincing Auron that the two of them would benefit from engaging in some kind of sexual activity together. It was only a matter of time, he knew.

Chapter **36**

Never Told Him I Loved Him

Jecht showed his prize for dodging two hundred lightning bolts to Braska over breakfast; Braska knew no more about what it was than Auron had. With neither of his companions able to identify it, Jecht was starting to suspect the whole thing was some kind of joke. After finishing his breakfast, he took the token back to the reception desk.

A different member of staff was on duty from the evening, but Jecht didn't let that stop him. "Hey," he said, "I got this for dodging the lightning last night. It's the top prize, right? So what's it actually for?"

The clerk looked down at the token, and then shrugged. "Can't say I know. The competition's been going a long time."

"Long enough for you guys to forget what the prizes are?" said Jecht incredulously.

"What's wrong with that?" she asked him.

"It's ..." he tried; "I dodged two hundred bolts for it! And

after gettin' all those potions before, and like, actually useful stuff … I thought it'd be somethin' real good, you know! How many people do you get comin' in here and dodging the lightning that many times, huh?"

"It's quite the feat," said the clerk. "You should be proud of yourself."

"What, so the prize is just that I get to feel satisfied?" said Jecht. "Come on, I'm not a kid. If you're gonna make people work for it, you need to give 'em real rewards."

"I'm sure those who went before us knew what they were doing when they established the competition," she said. "Think of it this way – its mystery makes it more interesting, doesn't it? Once you eventually find out what it is, the knowledge will be all the sweeter."

"Aw, this is a load of crap," said Jecht, flinging the token onto the desk. "Forget it. You can have it back – maybe one day *you'll* get something out of it. You can tell everyone it belonged to the great Jecht, that'll get the crowds in." Her politely bemused expression reminded him she would be unaware of his celebrity status. "You know," he added, trying a different approach, "in a couple weeks I'll be a legendary guardian. Maybe then they might start taking notice. You tell all your guests the legendary guardian Jecht gave you this piece of junk, then they'll come running."

"Do you mind?" said Auron behind him.

Jecht turned around. "What? What did I do now?"

"We'll discuss it later," said Auron grimly. "I need to settle up."

He paid, and the three travellers headed back out into the perpetual rain. "So what did I do to get you pissed this time?" Jecht said to Auron after they had been walking for a few minutes.

Auron sighed. "Calling yourself a legendary guardian like that – especially ahead of time. It's tempting fate, don't you think?"

"Braska keeps doin' it, though," said Jecht. "You're always saying we're gonna be legendary guardians, right, Braska?"

"I have the utmost faith in you both," Braska confirmed.

"It's different when he says it," said Auron. "It's not right to say it about yourself. I know you have a high opinion of your own abilities, but humility is a useful asset too, in case you hadn't realised."

"Look who's talkin'," said Jecht. "What, you never been tempted? Don't you think you could get us even bigger discounts on the potions and everything if you tell 'em we're about to defeat Sin?"

"Lord Braska's the one who'll defeat Sin," said Auron. "Is that what you think it means? Guardians who assist a successful High Summoner?"

"Figured it had to be," said Jecht.

"It's simpler than that," Auron corrected him. "According to the tradition, the definition of a legendary guardian is one

who outlives the summoner, after the Final Summoning. The whole concept is based on the summoner's death."

His unwillingness to utter the term suddenly made a lot more sense to Jecht – as did Braska's liberal use of it. Despite now knowing why Auron seemed so uncomfortable, he was irritated enough by his fellow guardian's scolding to add, "Summoners die, though, right? That's what happens."

Auron responded with nothing more than a glare. At his other side, Braska gave his hand a brief squeeze; he had taken it in his own as they left the travel agency.

"It doesn't offend me," he said.

"I just think it's presumptuous," said Auron.

"Perhaps," said Braska, "if the two of you use it of yourselves. But that doesn't stop me. You'll both be splendid legendary guardians, if all goes well. They'll be singing your praises all over Spira."

Jecht nodded enthusiastically, thinking back to Besaid. "And you mean that literally, don't ya? Man, everyone used to *talk* about me non-stop back in Zanarkand, but singing's a new one. Wonder what kind of songs they'll sing about you, Auron."

Auron rolled his eyes.

"Yes, legendary guardians are venerated almost as much as High Summoners themselves in the years after the Final Summoning," said Braska. "Their legacies don't seem to last as long,

though; no statues, I suppose. One of Lady Yocun's guardians survived, but nobody knows what became of him."

"I heard he had some kind of mental problem," said Auron. "They never managed to get any sense out of him after he came back from Zanarkand, apparently."

"What, he went crazy up there?" said Jecht.

"There are dangerous fiends on Mount Gagazet," said Auron. "That's why so many summoners and guardians die towards the end of the pilgrimage. We shouldn't let our guard down; there might be fiends up there that can cause lasting damage. That's probably what happened to the poor man." He considered. "But who knows whether the stories about him are even true – there are all sorts of ludicrous rumours about High Summoners and their guardians anyway."

"Indeed," said Braska. "They'll certainly come up with some tales about you, Jecht."

Despite himself, Auron chuckled. "As if winning the blitzball league for the Al Bhed Psyches wasn't unusual enough. They'll probably start telling people you travelled around the islands teaching blitzball to cactuars, or something."

"Cactu- … uh?" said Jecht.

"Devilish little creatures," said Braska. "They crop up on these plains sometimes, isn't that right, Auron?"

Auron nodded; that was why it had come into his head. "If one of them engages us," he said, "we should probably just run.

They're deadlier than they look."

"Ain't like you to be a coward," said Jecht.

"There's no point being needlessly reckless," Auron argued. "You'll be sorry when you have a thousand cactuar spines lodged into your flesh."

Jecht winced. "A thousand? Yikes."

"They do say odd things about previous High Summoners and their guardians," Braska mused as they walked on. "I remember a few years ago, there was a man who turned up in Bevelle claiming to be Lady Yocun's grandson – or was it her great-grandson?"

"Yes, I heard about that too," said Auron. "I don't think it was the first time, either. I suppose it's a way to make some gil, if people are taken in by it. High Summoners' families have always picked up a lot of bounties."

"Maybe in a few years," said Braska, "there'll be a whole group of enterprising young people trying to make a little money from our legacies too."

Auron pulled a face.

"Hey, you oughta appreciate it," Jecht said to him. "You're always lookin' out for a way to cut costs, right? It's exactly the kind of thing a kid of yours would do."

"Jecht," said Auron, but he couldn't get that annoyed when Braska was laughing on his other side. He turned to look, finding the sight of Braska's amused expression even lovelier

than he had imagined, and felt his own mouth twitching into a smile.

"I think," he said, "if any of us is going to have illegitimate children … it's certainly not going to be me."

Braska glanced at Auron in turn, and was glad to see that he had made the remark in good spirits; he began to laugh again, and gradually, Auron joined in. As for Jecht, he watched the two of them with a strange sense of satisfaction. It was unusual to see both his companions seeming so happy, he realised. It might have been only a brief moment, but it was something to treasure.

The three of them laughed together for a few seconds as they advanced across the plains, eventually lapsing into a contented silence.

"I feel fairly confident in saying none of us has been going around fathering illegitimate children on this pilgrimage," said Braska at last. "I know I'm not always the most observant, but I think I'd have noticed if the two of you were sneaking off for encounters."

"Yeah, Auron said the same thing to me last night," said Jecht. "But you'd be surprised."

"What does that mean?" said Auron, suddenly suspicious.

"We're not in the same place *all* the time," said Jecht. "Sometimes there's opportunities. And I'm hardly gonna turn 'em down."

"What opportunities?" Auron demanded.

Jecht smirked. "Well, seeing as you been tellin' me so many of *your* secrets, Auron … you remember that day we went to Besaid Temple? And you told me I had to stay late at the party? I couldn't say no to the local hospitality, could I?"

"That woman you were talking to," said Auron in increasing horror. "You – don't tell me you slept with her. You didn't."

"Hey, she was hot!" said Jecht. "Not that you'd've seen it. Braska, I bet you – uh, maybe not," he said, remembering how distressed Braska had been that evening. "But, point is, she was into me, and I wasn't gonna say no to that."

"The way you talk about women is appalling," said Auron. "I'm amazed any of them would ever go near you." He hesitated, and then added, "Anyway – that's not the point! I can't believe you've been … you've been copulating with random civilians!"

"Copulating?" said Jecht with a grin.

Auron ignored him. "I told you guardians aren't supposed to pick people up on the journey. What if you did get her pregnant? Don't you think that's highly irresponsible?"

"She ain't pregnant, Auron, relax," said Jecht. "We used protection."

"How's that supposed to help?" said Auron, frowning.

Jecht returned the same expression. "Uh … cos we …" he started slowly. "Wait. You guys don't got …"

"I thought you didn't know that spell, anyway," said Auron.

"No, not *Protect*," said Jecht, identifying the misunderstanding. "You really don't have 'em, huh." He reached into the pocket of his shorts, produced a small, square packet, and handed it to Auron.

Auron opened the packet with some suspicion; what he found inside did nothing to enlighten him.

"Do I gotta spell it out to you?" said Jecht. "Look, you put it on your, uh –" For some reason, Braska's presence made it much more embarrassing to openly discuss such matters than when it was just him and Auron.

Fortunately, it was Braska himself who broke the stalemate. "It catches the … emissions?" he suggested.

"Yeah, exactly," said Jecht.

"Goodness," said Braska. "If the people of Spira knew about such things – we have to rely on other methods. The Al Bhed have certain … devices, but they can be quite painful for the female partner, by the sound of it."

"Do we have to talk about this?" said Auron, in a somewhat strained voice.

Braska chuckled. "Sorry, Auron."

Auron was glad, at least, that Braska had no reason to suspect it wasn't the topic under discussion that he wasn't comfortable with, but instead the person who was discussing it. The subject of heterosexual intercourse was one that he was merely uninterested in rather than completely repulsed by. But hearing Braska talk about it brought a reminder of

his recent fantasies to the surface, and it was hardly the right time – moreover, the mention of *devices* had made him recall something even more inappropriate. A few months earlier, while Braska had been undergoing his summoner's training, he had asked Auron to help him get his affairs in order. There had been drawers and cupboards in his house that he hadn't dared open since Girl's death: Auron had tackled those, discreetly disposing of the clothing and machina he found inside. In one of the drawers, though, he had come across a small number of items – and not the sort of items that were intended to prevent pregnancy, but ones that had a different purpose. It seemed that Braska and Girl had experimented with taking different roles during sex – more than once, judging by the range of objects they owned.

Auron had said nothing about his discovery, of course, and had got rid of those items along with the rest, but the knowledge that Braska had been penetrated before had certainly changed the nature of his own private moments. He had lost a lot of sleep in the week or so that followed; it had been entirely worth it.

"So, ain't ya gonna keep goin' on at me about how much of a disgrace I am?" said Jecht, disturbing Auron's thoughts. "Expected you to be complaining more about my unseemly behaviour."

"You know what," said Auron, "I don't even want to think about it. You know it's not right for guardians to do that kind of

thing – no point trying to reiterate it when you clearly haven't taken any notice."

Beside him, Braska caught Jecht's eye and raised his eyebrows.

They managed to clear the northern half of the Thunder Plains in reasonably good time: with Jecht's fighting skills having vastly improved since the same point on the southern half of the journey, and an absence of any especially problematic fiends, it was much easier. When they reached the abrupt transition to the woodland of Macalania at the north end, it turned out the sky trail was still in place after their previous journey, although it wouldn't help them this time; they were to head straight to the Calm Lands.

"We should make it to the Calm Lands side by nightfall," Auron informed the others. "That's probably the best place to stop; then we'll be out of these woods first thing tomorrow. Does that sound all right, my lord? How's your head been today?"

The headache was back, in fact: it had come on during the journey across the Thunder Plains, and taking the occasional tumble as a result of the lightning strikes hadn't helped. "That's fine," said Braska. "It's not too bad; I'm getting used to it by this point, anyway."

Auron sighed. "This isn't normal, sir. I'm worried about you."

"It's really the least of my troubles," said Braska. "Come

on."

They moved forward; once again, Jecht was struck by the variety of Spiran nature. The sudden shift from the rainy Thunder Plains to this peaceful, rich woodland was almost impossible to take in: he would never have believed such things could happen if he hadn't just witnessed it with his own eyes. Quite apart from that, the woods were remarkable, and even with his fairly undeveloped magical abilities, Jecht could tell that they were throbbing with mysterious, ancient power.

Not for the first time, he wished Tidus could see it. He considered taking a few spheres to show him, but the recording machina was somewhere in the pack Auron was carrying and it would have been too much bother to try getting it out. He would take one later, he decided. Seeing the woods while sober was certainly allowing him to appreciate his surroundings a lot more than he had the first couple of times they passed through.

They continued along the path; Braska was starting to wonder whether he had been right to insist they push on. His headache was getting worse; each time they paused to see off a fiend, it seemed to increase in intensity. After one such battle, he approached Auron, and murmured, "I don't think I can make it much further."

"We're nearly there, anyway," said Auron, glad that Braska had admitted it. "Jecht, maybe you and I could check some of these thickets and see if there's space behind any of them?"

"Sure thing," said Jecht, keen not to have to spend any time

alone with the ailing Braska, who had taken the opportunity to sink onto the forest floor. He and Auron set about cutting back some of the tree branches with their swords, looking for hollows where they might spend the night without too much chance of fiend attacks.

After a few attempts, Jecht stumbled across a large clearing that seemed perfect. A small, clear pool of water lay at the foot of a thick, twisted tree; its surface glistened beautifully, refracting light into tiny rainbows that danced unpredictably towards the shore before twinkling into nothing. The whole scene seemed like something out of a fairytale.

"Hey, guys," said Jecht, heading back to alert the others. "I found a place. It's real cool, come see it!"

Auron helped Braska up and led him in the direction Jecht had dashed off; they regrouped in front of the lake.

"Oh," said Jecht. "Uh, Auron, you OK with the water? I forgot ..."

"I'm fine," said Auron. The lake was fairly shallow; he could just about see the bottom, and was relieved to find that meant he was able to stand there without having to avert his eyes.

"It's not water, anyway," said Braska wearily, letting go of Auron and shuffling forward to get a better look. "Not really. This is the liquid that spheres are made from." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath: he could feel the magic in the air, old and unknowable. Even Jecht had sensed it: for Braska, a practised mage, it was almost overwhelming.

"Spheres?" Jecht echoed. "They're made of liquid?"

"There's liquid on the inside," said Auron. "Although I never realised it was … natural."

Braska nodded, still looking down at the pool. "This must be the spring," he said. "I knew it was in these woods, but I don't think the exact location is ever spoken about. I'm sure nobody wants to see it exploited."

"It doesn't look like enough," said Auron.

"Yeah, I was gonna say," Jecht agreed. "Spheres are all over the place, right? And they all need some of this stuff in 'em?"

"As long as it's not harvested too quickly, more will appear in turn," said Braska. "But you're right. There have been worries voiced in Bevelle about their sustainability. It's not as if there's any alternative, though, without joining forces with the Al Bhed and making us all much more reliant on machines. That's the thing about spheres: while some of the devices we use them with are considered to be heretical, the spheres themselves aren't. Not even the most devout of Yevonites can object to them when they're entirely magical."

"That explains why there's so much magic around here," said Jecht. "I can feel it."

Auron shot him a curious glance; not yet having learnt any magical abilities himself, he was unable to detect its presence in the way his companions were. "Jecht and I will put up the tent, my lord," he said, deciding it was best to focus on practical matters. "You need your rest."

Braska turned away from the lake, intending to thank him, but as he opened his mouth, the ground suddenly started to shake. All three of them found themselves struggling to maintain their balance; Auron and Jecht managed to remain standing, but Braska fell to his knees, and hauled himself back onto his feet with a pained expression.

"What the hell's goin' on?" Jecht yelled.

"Probably a fiend," Auron explained; he had drawn his sword and was casting his eyes carefully across the undergrowth. "A big one, most likely. We'll know in a moment."

He was right: a large splash announced the fiend's arrival from somewhere within the lake. Slowly, it rose into the air above, shimmering and trembling as it did so. It was almost like a sphere itself, round and translucent, but much larger and clearly capable of doing considerable damage. Fiends of this type in fact appeared frequently at this site: Braska and his guardians didn't know it, but the spherimorph was a well-known and highly feared inhabitant of the area, and those who were sent to harvest liquid for the spheres usually did so only after making their most earnest supplications to Yevon that they might return safely.

"It doesn't look like it'll take much sword damage," said Auron. Fiends that didn't resemble living creatures tended to be that way; Braska was the likeliest of them to be able to take it down, he thought. But after a full day of travelling, and when

he clearly wasn't in the best form, it would be a lot to ask of him.

"We should run," he concluded.

"Talking about runnin' again?" said Jecht scathingly. "Come on, Auron, where's your –"

"It's a perfectly valid battle technique," Auron interrupted, as the spherimorph momentarily became rigid and did its best to press against Braska from above; Auron grabbed Braska by the forearm and managed to drag him away just in time. Once the fiend drew back, he turned around and prepared to flee, keeping a tight hold on the summoner. "Come on, Jecht!" he yelled. "Quick!"

Jecht hurried after them, and even cast Haste on the three of them to aid their escape, but they failed to get away from the fiend, which wasted no time in pursuing them. It followed them out of the clearing and back onto the main path; Auron tried to steer his companions towards the sky trail, where he thought the spherimorph might not be able to follow, but under the influence of Jecht's time magic there was barely any opportunity to change the direction in which they were heading. They ended up hurrying into another hollow, still closely tailed by the fiend, which trembled and burbled in apparent satisfaction when it became clear that it had backed its prey into a corner.

"We'll have to fight after all," said Auron, the words tumbling from his mouth with unusual speed due to Jecht's spell.

"My lord, I'm afraid you'll probably need to do most of the work here – Jecht and I will do what we can, of course, but –"

"It can't be helped," said Braska, equally quickly. "Perhaps I can call an æon once we've determined its weakness."

"Yes," said Auron, "it came from the lake, so maybe try lightning to start with –"

Braska did so, but it seemed to have no effect; if anything, the fiend appeared to draw strength from the lightning strike. Undeterred, Braska tried fire instead, and this time, the spherimorph flinched back.

It just about made sense that the fiend was weak to fire, Auron decided: that meant its affinity would be ice, which was fairly common in the Macalania region. But just as he came to that conclusion, the spherimorph started to ripple ominously, seemingly pulsating from the inside out. The odd movement lasted a few seconds, and then it faced them in the same way as before.

"What was that?" said Jecht. "It wasn't … like … rebuilding itself?"

"I don't think it was that time," said Auron, as Braska went in for another fire spell – on this occasion, though, the fiend reacted to it in the same way that it had to the initial blast of lightning. Having done so, it seemed to have recovered the strength that Braska had taken from it: it was just as vigorous as it had been before his first spell landed.

"The element's changed," Auron murmured, as Braska

drew back in confusion. "Don't attack again – it might keep absorbing –"

"Well, what else are we meant to do?" said Jecht.

"I'm trying to think!" Auron snapped. "Give me a moment, would you –"

The fiend stiffened again and made for Braska, knocking him onto his back before anyone could prevent it. Auron retrieved a potion as quickly as he could, handing it to Braska as the latter clambered to his feet. He gulped it down with a grimace: it had had no effect on his headache, which was starting to rapidly worsen now that he was casting black magic with such frequency.

"Aw, this sucks," said Jecht, leaping forward to take a swipe at the spherimorph with his sword.

It seemed to do negligible damage, as Auron had suspected; interestingly, though, the fiend counterattacked, sending a tendril of lightning in Jecht's direction. While Jecht let out a yowl of pain, Auron turned back to Braska.

"I might be wrong," he said, "but try water –"

Braska did so, and the jet from his staff found its mark: the fiend recoiled again. Straight away, though, it began the same rippling motion as before.

"I think I've got it," said Auron. "It changes its affinity if we do it substantial damage, but if it's attacked physically, the counterattack will show us what it is, so we just need to use the opposite –"

"Huh?" said Jecht. "Slow down, Auron, I dunno what you're trying to say."

"I can't *slow down* when you cast that Haste spell on us!" Auron said irritably. "You don't need to understand – just listen. One of us has to land a hit first, then we'll know which element to use. You're faster than me, so you do it – Braska will need to concentrate on black magic, so I'll take care of the healing."

"So you want me to hit it again?" said Jecht.

Auron nodded. "Yeah. It'll counterattack – let me know when you need a potion. Sir, you just use the opposite of whatever it does to Jecht. Got it?"

The fiend lunged for Auron; he was alert enough to see it coming, and dodged just in time, almost stumbling to the ground but managing to stay upright.

"Understood," said Braska grimly.

They began the routine: Jecht sliced at the fiend, doing it minimal damage but always provoking an elemental response; Braska used the least similar of the elements to fight back; and then, more often than not, the spherimorph rippled its way to a new affinity, requiring Jecht to start the cycle again. Auron stationed himself between his companions and handed out potions when they were needed: more of them went to Jecht, who was taking the full force of the fiend's elemental attacks. The potions could at least heal the resulting injuries, while for Braska, whose primary issue was his worsening headache,

they would have done nothing at all. His magic was succeeding in weakening the fiend, but it was a slow process against such a powerful enemy, and the fast switches from one element to the next were making him feel worse.

As well as its ongoing assault on Jecht, the spherimorph continued to make repeated attempts at physically damaging its assailants by stiffening and slamming itself into them; Jecht succeeded in dodging more often than not, and Auron about half the time. Braska too had been able to get out of the fiend's way towards the start of the battle, but as it went on he found himself in too much pain to think about doing anything other than his core task of casting black magic. At one point, without warning, the fiend stretched itself out over an improbably wide area and pressed itself across all three of them, forcing them all onto the ground.

"Crap," Jecht gasped, taking a laboured breath; he suspected he had broken a rib. Auron crawled across to where he had stationed the potion supply, tossing one in Jecht's direction and drinking another down himself; with his own injuries healed, he was soon able to approach Braska with a third.

"Auron," Braska groaned, his head throbbing so badly even after taking the potion that tears were beginning to leak from his eyes. "This is awful – I can't –"

"We're nearly there, sir," Auron bluffed; in reality, he had no idea how close they were to finishing the fiend off. "Just

keep going. No need to stand – all we need is the spells. I'll tell you which element to use." He crouched down beside the summoner and held him tightly in a one-armed embrace, hoping that would soothe his pain a little. "Jecht!" he called. "Get on with it!"

Jecht leapt forward again, his ribcage newly intact, and was rewarded for his efforts with a strong jet of water to the face. "Lightning," Auron murmured to Braska, and without opening his eyes, Braska jerked his staff towards the fiend and cast.

They continued that way, with Auron watching the counterattacks and telling Braska which element was required; Braska kept his eyes squeezed tightly shut, trembling and whimpering with each spell but still managing to land them mostly on target. Auron caressed his back slowly, occasionally lobbing potions in Jecht's direction with his free hand.

"I can't do this, Auron," Braska whispered, and Auron wondered for a moment whether this would be the end not only of their pilgrimage, but of all three of their lives.

"Just a bit more, sir," he pleaded. "It'll be over soon, I promise. Water now, that's it – fire – lightning –"

Braska's spells were decreasing in power; the fiend made for Jecht again, knocking him to his knees; Auron instinctively tried to search his robe for the distress flare he had been issued as a warrior monk, even though it had been some time since he had worn the uniform it had been part of. The flares had been more for the purpose of alerting others to the imminent

need for a sending than to call for any real help in battle.

Jecht managed to climb to his feet, grunting with pain, and drove his sword haphazardly into the fiend once more; it lashed out with a bolt of lightning. "Water," Auron gasped out, and Braska responded with an agonised groan.

"You can do it, sir," Auron murmured, still rubbing Braska's back carefully. "We're so close. Please."

Braska drew a clumsy gesture in the air with his staff one last time; the water spurted forth and struck the fiend. It was enough: the spherimorph exploded into countless pyreflies, just as Braska pitched towards the ground with a loud wail.

"It's all right, sir," said Auron. "It's OK – you did it. It's over." Braska was fumbling at his headdress, trying to remove it; Auron leant forward to help him, and once the headdress was cast aside, he let Braska collapse into his arms.

Jecht limped over to the potion supply, helped himself to a final and somewhat overdue bottle while trying not to look at Braska, and then said, "Uh, maybe I'll … go someplace else. Take a couple spheres for the kid, you know?"

"Sure," said Auron, not paying him much attention. As Jecht began to head off, though, still walking a little stiffly, he called his name.

"Yeah?" said Jecht.

"Be careful on your own," said Auron. "If any more fiends turn up, you just shout, OK?"

Jecht nodded. "Gotcha."

With Jecht gone, Auron turned his full attention to Braska again, stroking his head with his bare hand and supporting his back with the other as Braska's tears splashed onto his cuirass. "I'm so sorry, sir," he murmured. "I wish I could give you something to help. If there's anything I can do –"

"Just keep doing that," Braska stuttered. "Please."

"This?" said Auron, twisting his fingers through Braska's hair.

"Yes," Braska sighed. "Keep going –"

Auron understood: the gentle pressure against Braska's head was helping relieve his pain. He used his teeth to remove his gauntlet, not wanting to interrupt the motion, and then added his right hand, carefully rubbing his fingers into Braska's scalp.

"That's perfect, Auron," said Braska, his voice muffled in Auron's cuirass. "That's so helpful."

As Auron continued, Braska nestled against him more securely, burying his face into Auron's neck. Auron's own face was close enough for Braska to feel his warm, steady breaths against the top of his head; their regularity was almost as calming as the movements of his fingers. Braska felt his own breathing settling into the same rhythm as his tears ceased.

"Girl used to do this," he murmured. "When I was learning black magic – I used to come home with the most terrible headaches, and she would know just what to do. Just like you, Auron."

Being directly compared to Braska's late wife was hardly helpful for Auron, who was having to reiterate rather forcefully inside his head that this was merely the most effective way of soothing his master. They had once again ended up in a situation that was more intimate than he had ever anticipated before the pilgrimage. Each time Braska adjusted his position, it seemed that the top of his head drew closer to Auron's lips, until his hair was practically brushing against them. Braska was certainly too tired and sore to think straight, Auron reasoned; the fact that he had said Girl's name aloud was proof of that. It was clear that he needed all the support Auron could give, and so Auron found himself pursing his lips into small kisses against his hair, instinctively seeking to provide Braska with the same comfort he was supplying with his hands, and reminding himself that the nature of his own feelings was irrelevant when Braska needed him like this.

Meanwhile, Jecht had been wandering around the area, taking in the atmosphere: now that the threat of the spherimorph was gone, he was once again able to appreciate how vivid everything in the woods seemed. A few fiends accosted him as he took his walk, but none was enough of a challenge for him to take up Auron's offer, and he dispatched them without much trouble. His leg was still slightly sore from the spherimorph's last lightning attack; another potion would have been enough to see to that after the end of the battle, although by now he knew he had left it too long for such things to be of much use.

He didn't think it was too bad, anyway; he would no doubt sleep it off.

Jecht's meandering took him back to the place where he had left Auron and Braska, and he took a quick look through the overgrowth to see if it was safe to return. What he saw was enough to convince him that it wasn't: his companions were sitting on the forest floor in a close embrace. Braska's arms were tight around Auron's waist; Auron's hands were in Braska's hair. Braska's head was tucked against Auron's chest, and Auron was leaning down to kiss him, pressing his lips reverently against the top of Braska's head.

Jecht turned away quickly. If their actions had been purely physical, he might have enjoyed watching what came next, but he could tell that this was a deeply emotional moment for his companions, and it seemed wrong to intrude. If they really were confessing their feelings for each other, he thought, they would need to be left alone for a long time.

He shuffled away, leaving them to it and trying to come to terms with his own reaction to the situation. They both needed to be open about how they felt about each other, he knew; it would do them good to stop trying to hide it, especially with everything else going on. He couldn't help feeling a little disappointed that he would probably never get anywhere with Auron now; he'd been sure that he was making some progress in convincing Auron that they should fool around together. If he and Braska were going to be an item, there was no chance

he would ever look Jecht's way. But it was better for Auron this way, Jecht supposed.

Trying to distract himself, he fiddled with the sphere recorder; he had picked it up earlier, intending to capture some footage for Tidus. Now knowing how dangerous it was to gather the liquid that was used for the spheres, he looked over those in his possession and found one whose two halves could still be pieced together, which would allow some more footage to be added to what was already there. Starting a new one seemed unnecessarily wasteful.

He slotted the sphere into the device and pointed it at the trees, taking in a few seconds of footage before sighing and turning the camera off. It was hardly helping him feel more comfortable: instead, he was just thinking about the supposed prophecy again. If Tidus came to Spira one day, he thought, at least he would get to see all this. But that would mean Jecht might never get to see his son again. He would never get the chance to try making amends with him.

He needed to leave him a message, he decided. If he took a sphere of himself saying at least something to Tidus, that would be better than doing nothing at all. He could leave the sphere with Auron, along with all the others he had taken, and then if Tidus did come to Spira, Auron would be able to show him the spheres and Tidus might understand that Jecht had only ever wanted the best for him.

He had returned to the clearing where the spherimorph

had first appeared. Setting down the sphere recorder carefully, he went to sit cross-legged in front of the lake, took a deep breath, and began.

"Hey," he said, wondering how old Tidus would be by the time he came to Spira and saw the sphere. "If you're sitting there, watching this, it means you're stuck in Spira, like me. You might not know when you'll get back home, but you better not be cryin'."

He considered, and then added, "Although I guess I'd understand." To begin with, he had been so sure he would make it back to Zanarkand himself – by this point, he'd never been less certain about it. And the thought of it did worry him – he was hardly going to say so out loud, but it was frightening to think he might never find a way back.

Braska's pilgrimage was the priority for now, though: he had known that for a long time. "But you know what?" he said, addressing Tidus again. "There's a time when you have to stop cryin' and move on." They would both be all right in the end, he thought, even if they might never get to see each other again. "You'll be fine. Remember, you're my son. And, well, uh …"

He hesitated. None of what he had said had really come close to what he knew he should be saying. He should have been apologising; he should have been telling Tidus he loved him. "Never mind," he muttered instead. "I'm no good at these things."

He scrambled forward to turn off the device, cringing at his cowardice. If only he had a pen and paper, he thought, and then he could have planned what he was going to say in advance. He would still give the sphere to Auron and ask him to pass it on – it was better than nothing – but he certainly hoped Auron would never watch it himself. It was deeply embarrassing.

Standing, he removed the sphere from the device and watched as it broke smoothly into its two halves. In accordance with the Spiran custom, he left one of them on the ground, kicking a few leaves over it, and added the other to his collection, resolving to hand them all over to Auron. Even while considering the practicalities, though, it was impossible to ignore the fact that his vision was gradually becoming blurred by tears. He wiped them away impatiently. Real men didn't cry, he reminded himself, but the thought had no effect.

As Jecht stood there trying to regain his composure, there was a rustling in the leaves, and Auron appeared.

"Oh, there you are," he said, before looking more closely at Jecht's face and noticing his red, wet eyes. He frowned – it was an unusual sight – and added, more quietly, "What's wrong?"

Jecht sniffed. "Nothing."

"Jecht," said Auron in momentary exasperation. "Were you thinking about your son?" he guessed. That was the only subject that had seemed to make Jecht emotional like this on previous occasions.

"Yeah," Jecht admitted, wiping his face clumsily. "Just

thinkin' about that prophecy. Trying to … you know, get used to the fact that I probably ain't gonna see him again."

"We've talked about this before," said Auron. "It's just a story, not necessarily a prophecy – and if you don't want things to go that way, you just need to make sure you do what you can to prevent it. You don't have to just be a slave to what you think is your fate –"

"Shut up, all right?" Jecht interrupted him. "I get it already. Can't you just let me be sad about it for a bit?"

"I thought you might want some encouragement," said Auron.

Jecht shook his head. "You know what, I … I don't deserve it. I've always been a crappy dad. Thought some kinda hardline stuff would be best for him, and now the little runt hates my guts. I was gonna make him a blitzball star – that's what he wanted. But maybe I started him on all the trainin' stuff too young, and now he's … he's always crying! He's always fucking crying! Whatever I do, he just … I lost my chance with him. Just wanted to be his dad."

He turned away with an anguished expression; Auron watched, uncertain about what to do. Moving forward to embrace him was an option, but he suspected Jecht didn't take as well to that as Braska did.

"He's only young," he tried. "He'll forgive you."

"Not if I never get to talk to him again," said Jecht. "He'll just remember his old man as some drunk fuckin' tyrant. I …"

He gulped, and forced himself to turn back towards Auron and look him in the eye. "I never told him I loved him. Never found the words."

"I'm sorry, Jecht," said Auron.

Jecht let out a long, rattling sigh. "I took all those spheres for him, anyway," he said, picking them out of his pockets. "Thought maybe you could give 'em to him when he gets here." He offered the spheres to Auron; Auron made no move towards them.

"I still think you're being too quick to believe that story," he said. "You should hold onto them."

"Fuck's sake, just take 'em," said Jecht, forcing the spheres into Auron's hands. "Just in case. Right?"

"Sure," said Auron, carefully tucking the spheres into his robe. "But you shouldn't give up hope either, Jecht. Hope is what keeps us going, after all. It's important."

"I guess," said Jecht. "I mean, yeah, I know. Thanks, Auron."

He stared down at the ground for a moment, and then muttered, "Do me a favour?"

"What is it this time?" said Auron gently.

Jecht gave him a brief, tearful grin. "Just … don't tell anyone you saw me cryin'," he said. "It don't go with my image, you know. If someone finds out, I'll know who told 'em."

Auron didn't know why it should be a big deal – but he was well aware by this point that Jecht was oddly reticent to acknowledge his own emotions. "You have my word," he said.

"Thanks," said Jecht. He rubbed his face. "Anyway, enough about my shit. Did you guys finally do it?"

"Do what?" said Auron, before realising what Jecht was referring to and scowling. "Oh. Of course not. What gave you that idea?"

"You seemed pretty … close," Jecht pointed out.

"He was in a lot of pain," said Auron. "You know it helps him if I …"

"If you kiss him?" said Jecht.

"I …" Auron went on. "It's not because I … *like* him. I'm just trying to make these headaches less hard for him. It seems to be the best thing I can do."

"Kissing him?" Jecht repeated.

Auron shrugged irritably. "He said it helped."

"Uh huh," said Jecht. "That the only thing he said?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well," said Jecht, "maybe after the whole near-death experience thing … hell, you saw what it did to me. Thought you guys might've finally had the sense to get everything out in the open too."

"There's no need for that," said Auron firmly. "You know he doesn't think of me in that way. You're right about the fiend, though – it was a close one. If Braska had been in a better state when we started, it probably wouldn't have been so bad. But we all did what we could. There might be more of that calibre on Mount Gagazet; we'll have to make sure we're prepared."

It was a clumsy attempt at changing the subject, but Jecht went along with it. "Gotta hope they take sword damage better, right?" he said.

Auron nodded. "I should say so. I felt useless in that fight, just handing out potions. At least I could help Braska afterwards."

They headed back to the other clearing; Jecht found that he felt a little better. It was no doubt helped by the discovery that Auron and Braska hadn't confessed anything to each other at all: that meant he still had a chance at getting somewhere with Auron.

Auron had already erected the tent, and Braska was long since asleep inside: Auron's caresses had made him feel a lot better, although not quite well enough to eat, and so he had gone to bed immediately after taking Yuna's sphere. Auron and Jecht sat outside in companionable silence, eating their own rations before dividing Braska's between them.

"What's the plan for tomorrow?" said Jecht.

"The Calm Lands," said Auron. "It's just an enormous field, really."

"Way to make it sound interesting," said Jecht. He yawned. "Anyway, I'm gonna turn in. You're on first watch this time, right?"

"That's right," said Auron. "See you later, then."

"Yeah, see ya," said Jecht, heading into the tent.

Auron watched him go, thinking to himself; as reluctant as Jecht was to show his emotions, seeing him in a vulnerable state had somehow made him more likeable. When he didn't insist on keeping up the *great Jecht* persona and actually acknowledged that he was a person like any other, he was much easier to be around. Not that Auron wanted Jecht to be miserable and regretful all the time, but at least it was a reminder that he had some awareness he wasn't above everyone else.

There was no campfire: Braska hadn't been in a state to light one. Auron drew his robe around himself and settled into position, listening to the sounds of the forest. It had been a difficult day, once again – there would be no easy ones for some time, he knew. He cast his mind back to the memory of the three of them heading across the Thunder Plains that morning, laughing together at the thought of others posing as their illegitimate children in the future. It was important to retain that memory, he concluded, and to do what he could to ensure there would soon be a time when that laughter was commonplace.

Chapter 37

Moving On

Braska's head was already hurting when he woke up the next morning; it was no great surprise. He dressed slowly and made his way out of the tent to find Auron and Jecht finishing their breakfast.

"How are you feeling, sir?" Auron enquired.

"I've been better," Braska admitted, moving to sit beside him.

Auron handed him some bread. "You should eat something. It'll help."

Braska doubted that, but he took the bread and ate what he could while Auron yawned to himself. He hadn't slept well; after ending his watch, it had taken him a long time to feel relaxed enough to sleep, and he had found himself waking up once or twice in the night, forced into alertness by the smallest sounds.

In fact, Auron suddenly realised, it wasn't the first night

in the past week or so where he had had trouble sleeping. It wasn't something he normally had difficulty with. He certainly didn't sleep as much as Braska did, but he was used to being able to rest properly during the hours he didn't need to spend keeping watch, and to waking up feeling adequately refreshed.

He stood and embarked on a short workout, hoping it would make him feel more awake while he waited for the others to finish their preparations for the day ahead. Once everyone was ready, they regrouped and headed towards the path that led into the Calm Lands. There, however, they came across a surprising sight: after travelling through the forest encountering nothing but fiends and the occasional strange woodland creature, it was disconcerting to see at least ten Crusaders standing on the path in small groups, conversing in serious tones.

"What is it now?" Braska muttered.

"I'll find out," said Auron. "Wait here."

He strode towards the nearest cluster of Crusaders, and asked, "What's this?"

"Trying to get to the Calm Lands, are you?" said one of them. "The road's closed. Sorry." She didn't sound it.

"The *road's closed*?" Auron echoed sceptically. "Why? Fiends, is it?"

"No, no," said the Crusader. "Just … um … the Al Bhed made a terrible mess of the ground with all their transport machina, you know how it is. We're waiting for someone to come and

clean it up. You wouldn't be able to get through, the state it's in – you'd sink straight into the mud."

"Oh, come on," said Auron. "This is ridiculous. Whatever orders you've received from Bevelle, the summoner's ultimate privilege is to journey unimpeded. You know that."

"I don't know anything about any summoners," said the Crusader.

"Don't play the fool," Auron snarled. "You can see my lord summoner behind me. You know exactly who we are, and you're messing around playing Wen Kinoc's stupid games when you should be doing something useful like actually protecting people from fiends. This has been going on for weeks – I suppose you all think it's some kind of joke, coming up with new things you can do to get in our way every time you see us?" He was barely restraining himself from drawing his sword. "It's pathetic – all of you are. And Kinoc is too – you can tell him that. Tell him I was a damned idiot for ever thinking he was my friend."

"No-one told me you'd had a disagreement with Lord Kinoc," said the Crusader placidly. "We're just following orders."

"And this is how you claim to serve Yevon," Auron spat. "By trying to stop summoners getting to Zanarkand – it's disgraceful. I hope there's nobody around to send you when you die."

By Spiran standards, it was a grave insult: the Crusader

was deeply offended, and lost her composure at last, stepping forward to jab the barrel of her gun against Auron's cuirass. "You take that back," she hissed.

Before Auron could retaliate, Braska and Jecht hurried to intercept the scene: they had been too far away to hear the conversation, but the Crusader's gesture had made its tone unmistakable. "What's going on?" Braska demanded. "Auron, is this lady threatening you?"

"He's the one who threatened me!" the Crusader protested.

"Probably had a good reason, doll," said Jecht. "Trust me, Auron loves fights, but he ain't gonna start one out of nowhere."

Braska reached out slowly, took hold of the Crusader's gun by the barrel where it was lodged against Auron's chest, and steered it away from the area; she let him do so without resisting. As much as she had been told Braska was a heretic and that his pilgrimage had to be impeded by any means necessary, she was still a Yevonite, and so the need to respect summoners had been impressed on her since her earliest childhood.

"We can go the other way, can't we," said Braska, placing a hand on Auron's arm. "That would be a better idea than standing here arguing."

The other way would take them to Bevelle, via the road they had first taken to leave the city; it would add time to the journey, but Braska was probably right, Auron thought. The Crusaders wouldn't be able to block the Highbridge; it was an

important route for traders. He grunted his acquiescence and began to retrace his steps.

"Really, Auron," Braska said as he caught up. "You should try not to lose your temper so quickly."

"They're playing us for fools," Auron muttered. "Telling some stupid story about machina churning up the road – they're just trying to laugh at us."

"Why's it matter, anyway?" said Jecht. "If there's another way we can go, why'd they bother closing the road off?"

Auron shrugged. "It'll delay us. Might be enough time for other summoners to gain the advantage on us – or for them to come up with some other stupid scheme. We'll have to stay alert."

"There'll be plenty to watch out for in Bevelle," Braska added grimly.

"Yeah," said Auron. "Wait – you don't think it's a trap? If they get us in there, they might not let us leave …" He ran a hand over his hair in frustration. "No, they've got no grounds for doing that. If they thought there was some reason to stop us, they'd just send someone to arrest us – they wouldn't bother with all this meddling. They can't prevent us from journeying completely, unless they've got somewhere with passing that bill. It seemed a long way off last time I checked, but that was a while ago." He frowned; he'd meant to check the previous morning's paper at the Thunder Plains travel agency, but it had slipped his mind.

"Nah, there's nothing new there," said Jecht. "Looked in the newspaper yesterday – they got another debate on it comin' up."

"Oh," said Auron, surprised by Jecht's diligence. "Well, that's good. So they don't have any legal grounds for arresting us – unless they use my conviction –"

"You've already been judged," said Braska firmly. "And as unscrupulous as the lot of them are, they wouldn't go against Yevon's decree. We'll just have to go into Bevelle and make sure we stay alert, as you say."

"Hey, it ain't all bad," said Jecht. "If we gotta go through Bevelle, you can see Yuna again, right?"

Braska stiffened slightly. "I don't think that would be a good idea," he said hesitantly. "We've already said our goodbyes. I shouldn't want to complicate things."

It was an opportunity to encourage Braska to reconsider his decision, Auron thought; at this point, it would seem reckless to turn down anything that might help him convince the summoner there was something to live for. "Are you sure?" he said. "Wouldn't she be happy to see –"

"No," said Braska, cutting him off. "It was hard enough the first time – if we were to meet again now, it would upset us both, especially so close to the end of the journey. I really can't afford to let that happen to me – you know that, Auron."

"Of course, sir," said Auron hastily. "We'll just head straight for the Calm Lands gate, then."

Braska nodded. "Rin's other travel agency is in that area," he added. "Just outside the city walls, I believe – perhaps we might stay there tonight."

"Sounds like a plan," said Jecht. "Head in there, don't let anyone get in our way, and get to Rin's place in time for dinner. Let's go!"

As they made for the path that led out of the woods and towards Bevelle, Auron reflected on the plan. It seemed to be the best they could do under the circumstances, but he couldn't help feeling uneasy about it: it really did seem as if they were being funnelled into Bevelle, and it was unlikely that they would be able to pass through the city without someone trying to get in their way. Perhaps Kinoc himself would make an appearance, Auron thought glumly. If that happened, he could see himself getting arrested after all, for aggravated assault.

His unease deepened as they continued. Going back to Bevelle would mean returning to a place where most people knew who he was. Being away from the city during the pilgrimage, he had become used to relative anonymity, which was a blessing after recent events. In Bevelle, people would laugh at him again. The thought of it made his stomach churn.

He tried to put it out of his mind, but it was impossible to ignore, and it was making him feel more and more uncomfortable. He hadn't anticipated returning to Bevelle in any capacity other than as a legendary guardian, one who had ended the tra-

dition of the summoner's sacrifice and returned triumphantly with Braska by his side and the Calm underway. Going back there before the pilgrimage ended would be very different.

The thought continued to worry Auron as they came closer to the woods' exit; he was distracted enough to miss a few easy openings during the largely mundane fiend encounters they came up against. Jecht shot Auron a curious look each time he failed to land a hit or to dodge something slow, but Auron said nothing, and Jecht certainly wasn't going to ask him if something was the matter. Meanwhile, the uncomfortable feeling in Auron's stomach was getting so severe that he was beginning to feel as if he might be about to be sick. The presence of various poisonous fiends in the area didn't help: Jecht was usually the one with the weakest stomach, not being as used to Spiran ailments, but this time, Auron was sure he would succumb first.

They reached the edge of the woods and the beginning of the short, dusty path that connected the area to the south end of the Highbridge; Auron stayed at the rear, not wishing to draw attention to his troubles. He was having trouble thinking straight as he followed his companions onto the bridge and towards the dimly visible city gate; he was just glad that the gradually rising path and the high walls on each side allowed him to forget that they were passing over the water. Eventually, though, he remembered exactly what was at the other end, and almost collapsed with relief.

"There's another way," he panted.

The others turned to look at him; even Braska didn't fail to notice that Auron was in a bad way. "What's wrong?" he said.

"I –" Auron tried. "I really didn't want to go into Bevelle."

Braska understood, at least partly – he knew what Auron had been through in the city. "Oh, Auron," he said, hurrying forward to offer him a quick embrace and a little white magic in the hope it would make him feel better. "I didn't realise it would upset you so much," he said.

"Neither did I," Auron admitted, wishing Braska's arms were still around him.

"I'll be with you," said Braska solemnly. "If anyone gives you trouble, I'll –"

Auron shook his head. "You don't need to – it doesn't matter, anyway. I remembered: there's another option." He turned to point a not quite steady finger at the far end of the bridge. "Once we reach the gate, we can come off the path and head down to ground level. There's a way through the foundations – goes right through to the north side."

"What, like underground?" said Jecht.

"Bevelle is built over the sea," Braska explained, as Auron continued trying to stabilise himself. "The foundations are set into the coast on either side – they extend outwards and the city itself perches on top. So they have to be quite substantial to sustain its weight, naturally; I suppose it's conceivable that there could be room in there for someone to walk through."

"Sounds kinda complicated," said Jecht. "Why didn't they just build it on land?"

"No-one knows," said Braska. "I'm sure it made sense at the time. It was what they call a machina city – the knowledge of how it was constructed is long lost, even to the Al Bhed, but evidently it's still standing, so nobody worries about it too much."

Jecht shook his head in disbelief. "You guys. So it's not just that everyone in Bevelle is secretly using machina the whole time, but the city's actually made out of it? Do people not see how dumb it is havin' all those rules about not using it anywhere?"

"Most don't," said Braska. "Is that right, Auron – we can get through the foundations to reach the other side? It might keep us away from whatever they're planning."

"Yes," said Auron. "I've been down there before; you can get right through. I'll explain later."

They continued along the long bridge, at last reaching the north end. "We should try climbing down from here," said Auron. "If we get over this wall, there's a ledge on the other side."

They climbed over – Braska's robe made it more difficult for him than for his guardians – and reconvened on the other side, where there was indeed a jutting platform that gave the three of them enough room to stand. Underneath, the foundations of the bridge and the edge of the city were visible, an odd mixture of intricate piping and thick, weathered stone.

"All right, genius," said Jecht. "How are we meant to get down?"

Auron pointed at the scaffolding below. "I used to climb down that way," he said. "Should be easier with your magic, though."

"Oh right, I can do the Slow thing!" said Jecht, remembering how he and Braska had drifted slowly to earth after the unsuccessful battle with the chocobo eater. "Bet you're glad I'm here, huh? No need to bother with all that parkour shit. Right, who's goin' first?"

They floated down to a lower ledge, landing in unkempt undergrowth. While Jecht attempted to clear some of the bracken around his feet with his sword, Auron headed towards the city foundations. This far down, out of sight of Bevelle itself, the apparently pristine stone revealed cracks and gaps. Some of these defects had been clumsily plastered over by Al Bhed contractors over the years; others had simply been left.

"These plants never used to be so big," Auron muttered as he peered through the bushes in search of a wider opening. It had been in this area before, he knew; he hadn't had to move far from the end of the Highbridge in order to find a way inside. But it had been a few years, he reflected. Perhaps things had changed since those days.

In the end, though, he found the place, not before accidentally hitting himself in the face with a large tree branch that he had bent back to reveal it. After hastily drinking a potion

to heal the injury, he decided the best course of action was to cut down the tree entirely, and made short work of it with his sword, revealing the gap in the foundations the three of them would be able to pass through.

"It's here," he said to the others. "We can get in this way."

"Should we be on our guard?" Braska asked, clutching his staff tightly.

Auron shook his head. "No fiends inside. Just watch your step – the ground's not always even."

He was right: as well as being rough and pitted, the ground inside the foundations was strewn with dead leaves and what appeared to be castoffs from ancient machina, making it somewhat tricky to navigate. Braska was glad of his staff, which he was able to use to clear the path in front of his feet as well as to steady himself when necessary. The low light meant it wasn't always easy to see the ground, and it was difficult to focus with his headache, which was gradually worsening as usual.

"So, you gonna tell us why you used to come down here yet?" said Jecht to Auron as they progressed.

"Not if I can help it," said Auron. "Although … there's something I need to warn you both about. If you start hearing noises, don't worry: there are people living here."

"Oh, like another race, right?" said Jecht. "Like the Hypello or the Ronso or whatever. Underground people?"

Auron scowled at him. "No, humans. Yevonites – or they were to start with. I wouldn't blame them for turning away

from their faith."

"People *live* here?" said Braska softly.

"Yeah," said Auron, unsurprised by Braska's shock. Most inhabitants of Bevelle knew nothing of those who made its foundations their home. No doubt they would have been disturbed to hear that there was a whole community under their feet.

"They're refugees," he explained. "People whose homes were destroyed by Sin."

"So they've nowhere to go, and they come to Bevelle," said Braska, still slightly dazed by the discovery. "Of course they would. Those poor people."

"Bevelle's better protected than anywhere else in Spira," Auron continued for Jecht's benefit. "When people lose their homes, they sometimes think they'll have better lives here, so they try getting into the city – what they don't realise is that it has very strict residence controls. If you don't have a permit, you're effectively banned from renting property there."

"So how'd you get in?" said Jecht. "Same thing happened to you, right?"

"He was young enough," said Braska. "They willingly take in very small children as wards of the temples – they're easier to indoctrinate. Anyone old enough to think for himself is turned away. But I thought they just made their homes elsewhere in Spira – I never realised they stayed here."

"Some of them do," Auron corrected him. "If they think they might still have a chance of getting into the city, or if someone takes pity on them and tells them where they can find shelter nearby."

"How many of them are there, Auron?" Braska asked.

Auron shrugged. "A few hundred, maybe. Or more. It's been a while since I was last here."

"I still can't believe it," said Braska.

"I'm not surprised," said Auron. "You'll meet some of them in a minute, probably."

He offered a hand for Braska to take; Braska declined, fearing that taking hold of Auron would make him even more likely to lose his balance on the uneven ground. He was still a little distressed by the thought that so many refugees lived underneath Bevelle, while people like him led their comfortable lives above. If the noble families he had known in his youth were to find out, he thought, they would surely be similarly troubled.

The thought of how hard their lives must be was almost enough to reduce Braska to tears; he found himself making contact with the æons a few times just to make himself feel more stable. It did the job: they soon came across the first signs of human habitation in the form of some clothing that had been draped over one of the beams that protruded from the ground, but he managed not to falter.

Not long afterwards, though, they passed by some of

the inhabitants themselves, and nothing could prevent the tears from springing to Braska's eyes. Many of the people who lived under Bevelle were clearly in a bad way. Some had visibly untreated injuries, or were even missing limbs in a few cases. Others appeared to be weak or drowsy with illness. Even those who seemed healthy looked worn down and distrustful as Braska and his guardians passed them.

"Oh, Auron," Braska murmured, taking Auron's arm at last. "Poor things. What tragic lives they must live."

"Most of them are all right, sir," said Auron. "They're probably keeping themselves busy somewhere else. They wouldn't all be in such a bad way."

"But it's awful," said Braska. "I should help them – I shan't be able to heal them properly, but perhaps a little white magic would ease their pain."

Auron sighed – he had been wondering when Braska would make that sort of suggestion. "I don't think that's a good idea, sir," he said. "You'll exhaust yourself trying to see to that many people. And it doesn't look like you're in the best condition yourself – how's your head?"

"It's been getting worse," Braska admitted. "But – Auron, look at them. Perhaps I could just offer some comfort to those suffering the most."

"If the others find out you're a mage," Auron pointed out, "they'll start asking you to cast magic on them as well. It's simpler just to leave it."

"But they're in such terrible conditions," Braska said. "I could just tell them I'm a summoner – that would give them some hope, at least. Wouldn't it? If they knew I was so close to defeating Sin?"

"I'm not sure it would make much difference to them," said Auron. "They'll probably realise you have white magic if you tell them that, anyway. Really, it's better not to get involved."

Braska was unhappy with this outcome, but he was too upset to argue properly, and settled for advancing along the now mostly clear path trying not to catch the eyes of any of the people sitting at its borders. He dearly wished he could help them, but he knew Auron was right: he couldn't do much for them, and what he could do would undoubtedly make him feel still worse.

As they progressed through the city foundations, they began to come across members of the local population who were more healthy and active, many of whom were engaged in tasks relating to the upkeep of their community: sweeping paths, dealing with laundry, mending the tents and other ramshackle shelters that allowed each family a little of its own space. Most of these people ignored the three passersby, but before too long, they came face to face with a young man who stopped in his tracks at the sight of them.

"Auron," he said. "I don't believe it."

His name was Radu; he had come to the community as a teenager, a decade or so ago, newly orphaned as a result of

Sin's attack on his coastal village. Strong and strong-willed, he had soon risen to prominence; by this point, he was well known among his fellow refugees, although his relationships with them varied in conviviality. A recent disagreement had left him with a black eye and a long, nasty graze across his jaw.

"It's … good to see you again, Radu," said Auron.

Radu laughed, somewhat nervously. "Yeah," he said, "it's been ages! Three years – wow. Hard to imagine."

"Still getting into fights?" said Auron, casting his eyes over Radu's injuries.

"Comes with the territory," said Radu. "But it pays off – I practically run this place these days." He paused. "You're looking well."

"So you're in charge now?" said Auron, ignoring the last remark. "Congratulations. I remember that was an ambition of yours."

"One of them," said Radu. He studied Auron's face for a moment, and then added, more energetically, "Anyway, who are these two? Aren't you going to introduce us?"

"Yeah, I was gonna say the same!" said Jecht. "This an old flame, Auron?"

"This is Radu," said Auron coolly, turning to his companions. "Radu – Jecht. And this is Lord Braska."

"Lord …" Radu repeated. "Hold on – you're a summoner? What are you doing down here?"

"That bruise looks painful," said Braska. "You should have taken a potion for it."

"It's not that bad," said Radu. "Can't waste potions on something like that – we've never got many to go around. Best to save them for people who really need them."

"Oh, of course," said Braska. "I never knew this place existed – what an awful way to live." His eyes were brimming with tears again: the thought that so many people lived in these conditions was still difficult for him to bear. "I suggested to Auron that I might cast a little white magic, but he said –"

"It would tire him out," Auron explained to Radu, raising a hand to slowly rub Braska's back. "He's already unwell – he can't start casting magic on all these people. He suggested just seeing to those in the worst state, but if the others saw, they'd start pestering him for some as well. You know they would."

"It's not often that a mage passes through," said Radu. "If word got around, everyone would be asking for a spell."

"Exactly," said Auron.

"But it feels so wrong to stand by and do nothing," Braska protested. "Can't I help at all? Please?"

Radu thought about it for a moment. "You know what," he said, "if you tell them you're with me, they ought to back off. If people start nagging you for magic, you tell them I said no."

"That'll work, will it?" said Auron, raising an eyebrow. "You've got that much authority?"

"I told you I'm in charge," Radu insisted. "If anyone makes a fuss about it, tell them I'll fight them."

"You would do that for me?" said Braska.

Radu nodded, but he was looking at Auron. "Yeah," he said.

"Thank you," said Braska reverently, before Auron could voice his scepticism. "You're very kind, er – sorry, what was your name again?"

"Radu, sir," said Auron. "Let's go, then, if we must."

His hand still on Braska's back, he steered him towards some of the groups of people sitting by their makeshift homes.

"Are they …" Radu began, before shaking his head.

Jecht snorted. "Together? Wouldn't you like to know."

"You … you know about Auron, then?" said Radu.

"That he likes guys?" said Jecht. "Course."

"So you've known him a long time?" Radu asked.

Jecht shrugged. "Just since we started the pilgrimage. About a month, I guess. I mean, it's long enough to get him figured out when we're in the same place pretty much all the time. Feels like we've gotten to know each other."

"After a month?" said Radu.

"Yeah," said Jecht. "What, you don't believe me?"

Radu gave him an uneasy smile. "Well, I've known him nearly five years." he said. "So … I think I have a better idea of what he's like than you do."

Jecht shrugged. "Sure, I guess." He hadn't expected this to turn into some kind of competition, but now that it had, he was

as determined to win as ever. "You said you ain't seen him for three years, though, right? So that time don't count. Maybe he's changed. How would you know?"

"Unlikely," said Radu.

"Yeah, whatever," said Jecht.

They stood in uneasy silence for a while, and then Jecht added, "You guys dated, then?"

Radu paused for a moment, and then said, "So what if we did? Life down here isn't much like it is up in Bevelle."

"Just askin'," said Jecht, now finding himself suddenly having to resist the urge to ask what Auron was like in bed. "Why'd it end?"

"You know what," said Radu, "you tell me. He always used to come and see me down here – then one day, he just stopped. Thought he might have been away on a job, but he never came back. At first I wondered if he'd found someone else up there, but ..." He shrugged. "Slim pickings, though. It was probably work. You know Auron's always put his career first."

"Course," Jecht bluffed.

"Well, I think it had something to do with that," said Radu. "One of his promotions, maybe. Something he decided was more worth his time than me."

"He didn't even tell you he was gonna break it off?" said Jecht. "Harsh, man."

"Yeah," said Radu. "I ... didn't take it too well. But I came to terms with it in the end. Just had to force myself to get

over him." He paused. "Seeing him again now, though – three years later – damn. I'd take him back, you know. It's stupid, but, well."

"Yeah, stay strong, dude," said Jecht. "Sounds like he was a total dick to ya. I'm kinda surprised."

"Well, you don't know him like I do," said Radu.

Jecht conceded defeat with a grunt.

"Let me tell you just how focused on his career he is," Radu went on. "I was trying to get a residence permit back then – it's the only way anyone has of getting out of here. Sometimes they give them to people with talents they can use in Yevon's service – that's why we don't have mages down here. They usually make it out quickly. Anyway, my main hope was that I knew how to fight. Not properly, like Auron – I never had the sword training, but I'm good with my fists."

Jecht glanced down instinctively at Radu's hands: his knuckles were scabbed and bruised. "Get a lot of practice?" he guessed.

"Yeah, you could say that," said Radu, flexing his fingers and wincing. "I'm in charge now – got to assert my authority, you know?"

He didn't seem to have much authority if he was always having to settle things physically, Jecht thought, but he declined to comment.

Radu resumed the story. "I thought I could join the warrior monks," he said. "Thought Auron might give them a rec-

ommendation. He was getting pretty high up in the corps by that point – I know he was ranked higher than the recruiting officers. And if they took me, they'd be training me in Bevelle, so they'd have to give me a permit. It wouldn't have been any trouble for him to put in a good word for me. But he always refused."

"Why?" said Jecht.

"Too worried about his own status," said Radu. "He thought there might be issues for him if they found out he knew someone from down here – let alone that we were seeing each other. He was always going on about his rank. Used to tell me about all these promotions he was getting – felt like there was something new every week. He was always talking about his grand plan to be made maester by the time he was thirty. And meanwhile, I was stuck down here."

"Damn," Jecht muttered.

"You probably haven't noticed how insecure he is about it," said Radu. "But in the end, he's just an orphan from some village that doesn't exist anymore. Same as me – difference is that he was young enough to be taken to Bevelle, while I had to fend for myself. But he'd do anything for his career. Never known anyone more obsessed with it."

He glanced towards Auron and Braska, just about visible in the distance. "And now he's a summoner's guardian. This Lord Braska must really be something. Tipped to bring the Calm, is he? I'm sure Auron wouldn't have agreed to guard just any old

summoner."

"He's … gettin' on OK," said Jecht cagily. "You ever get the news from up top?"

"No sphere screen," said Radu.

"Never try goin' up there to get the newspaper?"

"You think I ever got the chance to learn to read?" Radu pointed out.

"Right, yeah," said Jecht.

Auron and Braska returned to them then, the latter yawning but still managing to stay on his feet. He had done the rounds of the refugees, and cast some white magic on those who were particularly in need; as for the others, he had shaken their hands and promised he would soon defeat Sin. Some had told him their stories, giving harrowing accounts of how they had lost their families and been driven from their homes; Braska had shared his own misfortunes in turn, telling them how Girl had been taken by Sin and Yuna by the temples. There had been tears, but having Auron close by had helped.

"Quite a few people took you up on your offer," Auron told Radu. "There's a whole queue of them wanting to fight you – you'll have to ask them to make appointments."

"Hey, no need to be like that," said Jecht, finding Auron's deadpan humour rather distasteful for once. "He's doin' it for you, you know."

"For Braska," Auron corrected him.

"No, Auron," said Radu quietly. "For you."

Auron sighed. "Radu," he said, "let's not. We need to get moving, anyway. Lord Braska will need to rest soon."

"Can't we talk?" said Radu. "Just for a second?"

"Yeah, sounds like you owe the guy some closure, Auron," said Jecht. "Me and Braska'll start making tracks – you catch up with us." He clasped Braska's shoulder and began to steer him away down the northward path before anyone could protest.

"The Final Summoning's not far off, then?" said Radu.

"That's right," said Auron.

"You think he'll make it all the way?"

"He intends to," Auron replied. "Look – I didn't mean to be so dismissive. I should have thanked you for helping us. But I wish you hadn't done it just because it was me."

Radu shrugged. "You always said I had trouble being rational."

"Radu," said Auron, "we don't need to –"

"You know," said Radu, "once your pilgrimage is over, I'll still be here. I shouldn't, but I'd take you back. I tried telling myself it didn't matter, but the moment you turned up –"

"Please stop," Auron cut in. "There's no need to humiliate yourself – you're better than this. You deserve someone better." He steeled himself. "I'm sorry. Sorry I stopped coming down here."

"What did I do?" said Radu. "I know things weren't always – but I thought you'd tell me, at least, if you didn't want

to see me anymore."

"It wasn't that," said Auron. "It wasn't you – honestly. Something happened; it was very sudden, and I had to give it my full attention, or things might have got worse. I didn't get a spare moment for months – I kept telling myself that when I did, I'd come down here and explain. But it was ages before I was in a position to do that, and by then, it had been so long I thought it probably wouldn't help. I should have come – I'm sorry."

"Was it work?" said Radu.

Auron shook his head. "No – something else. Something that convinced me there were more important things than work, in the end."

Radu smiled a little. "Never thought I'd hear you say that."

"I've changed," said Auron. "I'm still changing."

"For the better?" said Radu.

"I hope so," said Auron. "I think I treat people better these days, at least. You know we weren't good for each other, Radu."

"That doesn't mean we can't make another go of it," said Radu.

Auron shook his head. "I don't think so. I'm glad I could explain – and I hope you really can move on now. I'll stay out of your way from now on."

"Auron …" Radu tried.

"Bye, Radu," said Auron.

"You'll remember this place when you're maester, won't you?" Radu said hurriedly, before Auron could turn away. "Never mind me, but – the conditions here – you'll make sure they're improved, like you always said –"

"I'm not going to be maester," said Auron. "Please – look after yourself. Goodbye."

He turned and headed away, forcing himself not to look back even when he heard the unmistakable sound of something slamming into one of the metal beams that held up Bevelle's foundations. He had expected it; Radu had always been an angry person, and had often released that anger in unhealthy ways. Trying not to let himself get distracted by the sound, Auron couldn't help wondering what it was that drew him to men who were so insistent on doing damage to themselves.

He caught up with the others. "You guys sort things out?" said Jecht, fixing Auron with a stern glare.

"I apologised," said Auron.

"For what?" Braska asked sleepily.

"It doesn't matter," said Auron. "Come on, sir – you look as if you're about to pass out. Let's get out of here and find this travel agency."

Braska let Auron take him by the hand as they made their way out, almost stumbling a few times on the uneven ground but managing to right himself with his guardian's help. Eventually, they came to the hole in the foundations' outer wall that

served as the northern exit; like its southern counterpart, it was almost entirely covered by a tree. Auron cut it down carefully with his sword, briefly wondering whether anyone living in the foundations ever ventured out anymore: the obstruction of both exits seemed to suggest they had stopped bothering to try sneaking into Bevelle.

The northern bridge leading out of the city was much shorter than the Highbridge; it didn't take long before the three travellers had rejoined the main route that led out of Bevelle towards the Calm Lands. "Do you have any idea where this travel agency is, sir?" Auron asked Braska.

Braska shook his head. "I'm sure Rin wouldn't hide it away."

He was right; after a few more turns in the path, Rin's small but colourfully decorated travel agency stood before them. Braska was hugely relieved to see he would have the chance to rest: the need to keep walking after they left the city foundations had forced him to feel slightly more awake, but his headache was as bad as ever, and he was looking forward to being able to lie down somewhere dark and quiet for a while.

They went inside; Braska mustered the strength to approach the reception desk. "Good afternoon," he said, too tired to attempt to formulate his request in Al Bhed. "I don't suppose Rin is here?"

"You've just missed him, sir," the clerk informed him. "He

was here until this morning, but – oh! You must be Lord Braska, isn't that right?"

"I'm afraid so," said Braska.

"Mr Rin left a sphere for you," she said. "Hold on a moment."

She retrieved the sphere and switched it on: the face of Rin, a young, tanned Al Bhed with bright blond hair, materialised above the desk. "Famm sad, Braska!"[27] he said. "I recorded this sphere for you, just in case you passed by. I am sorry to have missed you again – perhaps we shall run into each other soon. Meanwhile, I must insist that you and your guardians each take one of our rooms free of charge. I hear the Yevonite agencies have been giving you trouble."

"Got that right," Jecht muttered. "Where's he gettin' his intel?"

"He's very perceptive," Braska explained.

"The rooms are a little shabbier here than at our Mi'ihen branch," Rin continued, "but it is the least I can do. And Braska – E ys cunno. E fuimt hud ryja fecrat oui du dinh tufh drec bydr. Ev E sekrd tu yhodrehk dryd luimt syga oui naluhcetan –"[28] He cut himself off. "Well, all the best to you and your guardians, anyway. I hope to see you before it ends."

[27] Well met, Braska!

[28] I am sorry. I would not have wished you to turn down this path. If I might do anything that could make you reconsider –

The image faded; Braska sighed quietly to himself. He should have expected that Rin would express such regret at what he was doing, he thought; all the Al Bhed were adamant that the summoner's pilgrimage was a misguided tradition. But he hadn't meant to upset Rin by taking it on, he thought. He remembered those arguments he had had with Auron about his vocation, long ago; he hadn't meant to upset him, either.

"I must inform you that I agree with him, sir," said the clerk. "We all do."

"I'm not feeling well," said Braska. "Would one of those rooms be ready?"

She produced a key. "Certainly. Room one."

"Do you need anything, sir?" said Auron as Braska turned to leave.

"Nothing, Auron, thank you," said Braska.

"You'll have some dinner later?" said Auron, but Braska headed into his room without making any response.

Auron turned towards Jecht, expecting to exchange an exasperated glance with him, but was surprised to find that Jecht seemed to be reluctant to make eye contact. "What's the matter?" he said.

Jecht shrugged. "Uh … dunno. I mean, I guess when you think you know a guy, and then it turns out he's a massive jerk – kinda messes with you, you know …"

"What?" said Auron, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Radu told me," said Jecht, "about all the shit you put him through."

His standoffishness suddenly made more sense to Auron. "Well, you're hardly a paragon of virtue," he pointed out.

"That ain't the point," said Jecht. "You know, I thought you were a good guy, Auron. An annoying, preachy, deluded asshole, but a good guy on the inside, at least. But you really fucked him over. Now I dunno what to think about ya."

"I don't know what he told you," said Auron, "but at least let me explain." He went to one of the tables and sat, gesturing for Jecht to do the same; Jecht looked reluctant to comply, but after a moment's hesitation he drew up a chair. "This better be good," he mumbled.

"Right," said Auron, carefully unstrapping his gauntlet and laying it on the table. "What exactly did he say I'd done to him?"

"As if you don't know," said Jecht. "The whole residence permit thing, for starters; said you were too up your own ass to get him a try-out for the warrior monks."

Auron sighed. "I explained this to him – more than once. He was so fixated on that residence permit, he just wouldn't accept it. You can't just arrange for someone to be assessed for the corps out of nowhere."

"Could've tried," said Jecht.

"No, I couldn't," Auron argued. "Jecht, the warrior monks recruit children – fourteen-year-olds at the very most. The whole point is to get them accustomed to combat while they're still developing – make it seem instinctive. Then they can be sent to the front lines as soon as they reach majority. Radu was at least twenty when he was asking me this – they wouldn't have given him a second glance."

"He said you had a higher rank than the recruiting officers," said Jecht.

"The recruiting officers assess candidates," Auron explained, "but they don't make the rules about what sort of person we –" He broke off. "What sort of person *they* can accept. I didn't have the slightest hope of changing those – never would have unless I'd been in charge of the whole corps. And I never made it that far." He had told Radu that he would, someday – looking back, it seemed so shamefully naïve.

"And besides," he went on, "they wouldn't have been interested in him even if he had been able to get an assessment. He was reasonably good in close combat, but we –" He stopped abruptly again, clenching his fists. "Damn it. *They*. *They* wouldn't have cared about that. Everyone in the corps carries a weapon of some kind – there aren't any units with fistfighters. I said all this to Radu, over and over again."

"Right," said Jecht, "but what about the way you broke it off? Dude seemed really bitter about it – not surprising, either. I can't believe you just disappeared on him."

"Yeah," said Auron. "I wish I hadn't had to do that. I'm glad I finally got the chance to apologise."

Jecht shrugged. "Yeah, so? Apologisin' don't make it any less of a dick move in the first place."

"I had no choice," Auron insisted. "Did he tell you when this happened?"

"Uh, three years ago?" said Jecht.

"Right," said Auron. "And you know what else happened three years ago?"

Jecht thought briefly. "No?"

"That was when Braska's wife died," said Auron. "I had to spend that time with him – he had no-one else. He was inconsolable. I was convinced he was going to do something to himself."

"Like … kill himself?" said Jecht quietly.

Auron nodded. "Yeah. Every moment I was on duty, I was worried that I'd go back to see him and find him –" He grimaced. "And as soon as I was off duty, I would go back to his side straight away. He needed me. I was the only person he had – he wasn't in a good way at all. If I'd left him for a moment, and if he'd –" He sighed. "I couldn't have lived with myself."

"Wouldn't've been your fault," said Jecht.

"I know," said Auron, "but I wanted him to live. I wanted him to be happy again. I – I still want that."

"Yeah," said Jecht. "Auron …"

"So that was why I stopped seeing Radu," said Auron, speaking again before Jecht could say anything about his chances in his current endeavour. "I just didn't have the time. Braska started getting a bit better, but then my division was sent on a tour of duty, and by the time I was back in Bevelle it had been over a year since I last went down there. By that point, I thought I should just leave it. I thought he'd have probably moved on – didn't want to turn up out of the blue and upset him."

"Don't think he ever did move on," said Jecht. "He said he'd take you back."

Auron nodded. "Said that to me too. I was surprised – it never seemed that serious to me. I think he must have been more into it than I realised."

"How did you guys meet?" said Jecht.

"I had an acquaintance," said Auron, "who knew about my, um, my inclination, and he told me about the people living under Bevelle. Said it was easier to be oneself down there. So I went down one day, and Radu caught my eye, I suppose. He was walking with a crutch at the time – I asked if there was any medicine I could bring him from the city, and he told me it was a combat injury, so I promised I'd give him a few lessons on safe battle techniques. And at some point during that, we discovered we were … compatible."

"Both gay, you mean," said Jecht.

"Yeah," said Auron. "That's how it started. It was never

a big deal. We weren't great for each other – spent most of the time arguing, when we weren't, er, in bed. He had a lot of problems – well, you would, being orphaned at fifteen. At least in my case I was too young to really understand what I'd lost."

"Damn," said Jecht. "Spira's a real tough place to grow up, ain't it?"

"It always will be," said Auron. "As long as Sin's around."

They stared at each other wordlessly for a while, and then Auron stood up. "I'm going to go to my room for a bit," he said. "Try getting used to having my own space for once – it'll be strange going to sleep tonight without having to put up with your snoring."

"Like I'm the one that snores," Jecht protested.

"You definitely are," said Auron, exchanging a brief, somewhat halfhearted grin with Jecht before picking up his key from the clerk and heading to his room. It was small, and the bedclothes were a little frayed, but having a bit of privacy for the first time in over a month made those things a small price to pay.

He piled his equipment in the corner, and then removed his robe and boots, and lay back on the bed. After a while, he sat up to take off his cuirass, and then lay down again.

Despite everything, Auron quickly began to see the disadvantages to being alone. Even listening to Jecht's inane blitzball stories was better than having no company but his

own thoughts, given the way recent events had gone. Nothing had been particularly disastrous over the last few days, but enough things had accumulated to make it seem as if the latest stretch of the pilgrimage had brought nothing but bad news and misfortune; the various regrets and anxieties that he had experienced earlier in the journey were coming back, slowly filling his mind now that they had the opportunity to resurface. He thought of the people he had wronged, and the people who had wronged him: Radu. Kinoc. The man he had had those fleeting relations with on Kilika. Even the poor girl they had offered him for a bride in Bevelle, in a final attempt to test his loyalty: a test he could never have passed.

And he thought of Braska, most of all. At times over the last few days, he had looked at Braska and seen the light of hope in his face, and he had wondered if it was more than hope for Spira and for the Calm; perhaps, he had dared think, it was a hope that might encourage him to see the value in living. And yet, at other times, Braska still seemed close to despair instead, mired in grief and anguish, as if three years of the most careful attention and love had been for nothing. Perhaps it was merely his belief that he would soon die that was sustaining him; that thought, unpleasant as it was, had occurred to Auron more than once.

Auron knew he should have been using this quiet moment to go over the information he had gathered on the Final Summoning, and to determine the next steps in his quest to ensure

Braska's survival, but he felt too restless to concentrate on it. Meeting Radu again had reminded him that he had once been as focused on his career as he now was on making the pilgrimage end how he wanted, and that career had come to a sudden and ignominious halt. If the task he had now sworn himself to were to end in the same way –

He sat up abruptly, rubbing his eyes. That was a thought he couldn't bear to complete. Failure was out of the question. He had to find a way; he *would* find a way, he told himself, pressing a hand to his chest and feeling the pounding of his heart inside. Even if he could no longer take comfort in praying to Yevon, he would rely on his own fortitude.

In an effort to calm himself, he thought once more of Braska, remembering what it was like to hold him in his arms, to lean in and press consoling kisses against his hair. He found it difficult to understand how he had ever ended up in this situation where Braska seemed to make intimate contact with him so frequently, and he was still convinced that it had nothing to do with any romantic intent on the summoner's part. But the thoughts of it were fodder for his own sorely needed distraction, at least. Carefully, he stood to retrieve his handkerchief from his robe, placed it on the bedside table, and sat on the bed again, shrugging his trousers and underclothes down enough to allow him to lay a hand on himself. It made sense to do it when he had the luxury of his own room, after all.

He let out a shuddering breath as he began to work at himself, closing his eyes and letting his thoughts of Braska veer towards fantasy. He imagined the two of them in that forest clearing, naked and close, and Braska's perfect, slender dick swelling to meet his touch in the dim light of dusk.

The mental images felt stilted, though: he was too tense and worried to commit to them, and his discomfort was making it difficult for the movements of his hand to achieve very much. He tried increasing the intensity, moving faster and pressing a little harder, but it remained impossible to become fully erect. The thoughts of Braska were slipping away, replaced by much less pleasant ones; he felt breathless, but not in a good way.

Straightening up, Auron ran both hands through his hair. "What are you playing at," he muttered. "Get it together."

He returned his right hand to his dick for a third attempt, rubbing his neck with his left while he closed his eyes again. Despite the continued stimulation, he remained mostly soft. Before he had managed to make much progress, he was disturbed by a loud sound at the doorway, and looked up in horror to find Jecht standing there.

"What in all the fayth's names are you doing?" Auron exclaimed, quickly letting go of himself. "Just walking in here –"

"Hey, hey, don't worry about it," said Jecht, throwing his hands up in surrender. "It was a mistake – thought she said this was my room. You should've locked the door if you didn't

want anyone comin' in."

"I thought you'd knock, at least," said Auron. His face felt very hot. "Honestly, Jecht –"

"Yeah," Jecht cut in, "I told you, it was a mistake! All right?" He couldn't help taking a few steps forward and letting his gaze flicker towards Auron's crotch, noting with interest that he had been circumcised. "Damn," he remarked. "Not that I didn't expect it, but … you are hung, dude."

Auron sighed, but he couldn't help feeling relieved. Self-pleasure was forbidden by the teachings: it was one of those passages of scripture that nearly everyone ignored, but it had nonetheless remained a very private matter, and the custom was to express strong disapproval if the subject ever came up in public. Auron already knew Jecht's attitude was different, based on the conversations they had had; but he had wondered if that was all talk. If a Yevonite had walked in on him, he would probably have found himself being denounced for debauchery; Jecht didn't seem to mind at all, and, Auron reflected, had even complimented him on his size, which was surprisingly gratifying.

"Sounds kinda desperate," said Jecht, "but you know what, I might as well say it. You're fucking stunning, Auron. I'd love to suck you off, seriously."

"Jecht," said Auron, but he felt a small twinge of desire. The thought of Jecht's hands, lips, tongue on his dick, now that Jecht was actually in the room with him, was having much

more success in getting him in the mood than his distractible fantasies about Braska had. The fact that Jecht was really standing there, not expressing any disapproval or disgust, but complimenting him and wanting to give him pleasure, was so much more arousing than trying to stimulate himself alone had been. He would at least be able to hold onto that, he decided, and allow himself to fantasise about Jecht a little, if that was what it took.

"I can … take care of myself," he said, resisting the urge to place his hand back on his dick as it finally began to stiffen.

"Worth a try, I guess," said Jecht. "Whatever, have fun."

He turned to leave, and almost immediately, Auron's dick started softening again. He reached for it before Jecht had even made his way back to the door, desperately trying to use his hand to regain the progress he had made, but it was no good; even that small amount of arousal was ebbing away.

"Wait," he blurted out, and Jecht turned back to face him, his hand already on the door.

"Yeah?" he said, quietly and attentively.

"Actually, I …" Auron began. "I wouldn't mind. I need a … a distraction. If you're really offering."

"You sure?" said Jecht.

Auron nodded. "Yeah."

Jecht tried not to grin too widely: he had succeeded in his self-imposed challenge at last. Auron seemed strangely trou-

bled, but he put that out of his mind and clambered onto the bed, facing Auron and placing a hand on him.

"I'll take it from here," he said. "Get you good and hard."

Auron nodded his acquiescence, leaning back a little as Jecht got to work. It was undeniable that being touched by somebody else was having much more success in getting him aroused than his solo attempts had been. The unpredictability of Jecht's motions, the feeling of his rough palm against Auron's skin, the fact that Jecht was giving his complete attention to making sure Auron received pleasure: all of it was leagues better.

"You're tense, man," said Jecht, gazing into Auron's eyes. "Relax. It's gonna be good – I'm an expert. Just enjoy it."

Auron closed his eyes again. After a little more help from Jecht's hand, he had reached his full length and girth. He was starting to feel better too: Jecht's attentions were undoubtedly calming his mind.

"You ready?" said Jecht.

Auron nodded.

Jecht leant forward, adjusting his position to take Auron in his mouth. As he began to drag his tongue over Auron's dick, Auron couldn't help letting out a gasp. Having Jecht see to him with his hand had been one thing, but with his mouth was something else entirely. Jecht's boasting at the last travel agency hadn't lacked substance: he knew what he was doing.

After teasing at Auron with his tongue for a minute or so, Jecht drew back a little. "You like that?" he murmured.

"Yes," Auron stammered, "yes, Jecht, that's amazing –"

Jecht grinned and moved back in, hollowing his cheeks as he sucked and licked at Auron's dick. Auron's occasional whimpers of delight were becoming more frequent, turning to small, stifled moans; that was encouragement enough for Jecht to go faster, moving up and down his shaft with his lips and tongue. It was the first time he had been with a man who had been cut; he felt as if he could fit more of Auron into his mouth as a result, and the sensation was immensely enjoyable.

Soon, Auron's hand was in Jecht's hair, trembling against Jecht as he continued his movements back and forth. Jecht tried not to let himself get distracted: Auron was losing control, and it was because of him. The sound of his irregular, stuttering yelps was making Jecht incredibly turned on. He could tell that he too was growing erect; he wished he could take hold of his own dick with the hand that was currently pressed against Auron's thigh, but reaching for it would have disrupted the flow too much.

"Jecht," Auron panted, "Jecht, I'm –"

Jecht drew back, red-cheeked, his lips wet with spit and pre-come. "Yeah?" he said, reaching to brush his hair away from his warm face. "What is it, Auron?"

"I'm *close*," said Auron.

Jecht beamed. "I can tell," he purred. "It's fine – don't hold back. I'll take it."

He moved back in before Auron could react, working at him harder and faster. Auron's free hand came to rest on top of Jecht's, the one that was pressed against his thigh; he withdrew it after a few moments, but brought it down again soon afterwards, gripping onto Jecht tightly. Jecht knew Auron was at the point of release: his pelvis was starting to twitch erratically, and his quiet sounds had become almost constant. He tightened his hold on Auron, preparing to see him through.

At last, Auron climaxed, jerking forward as he emptied into Jecht's mouth; Jecht gulped down the hot, thick come as quickly as he could before moving back. He scrambled to his feet as Auron reclined, unzipping his shorts and getting to work on his own dick immediately.

"Scuse me," he said. "Just – damn, that was somethin', makin' ya –" Not letting go of himself, he went to lean against the wall with his free hand, building momentum into a frantic and imprecise rhythm. "Damn," he said again. "Shit, Auron, you don't know how fucking hot you are –"

Auron stared up at him, wondering if he should offer to help. "Need a hand?" he suggested eventually.

"You wanna?" said Jecht.

"Not really," Auron admitted.

"It's fine, then," said Jecht. "I'm good – I mean, more than good. Oh man." He continued working at himself furiously,

and then said, "Shit, I'm gonna come."

Auron reached for the handkerchief that he had been keeping ready; Jecht leapt forward to take it from him. "Thanks," he grunted, holding it in place, and moments later, with a long sigh, he released.

He folded up the sticky handkerchief, shoved it into his pocket, and went to lie down on the bed, turning onto his side to face Auron.

"You good?" he murmured.

Auron nodded. "Yeah. That was ..."

"Amazing," Jecht supplied. "That's what you said."

"I guess," said Auron.

Smiling, Jecht reached for Auron's ponytail, and ran his fingers through it carefully. "You're a noisy guy, huh?" he said. "That's such a turn-on, you know?"

Auron raised a hand to lazily bat him away.

"See," Jecht went on, "enjoyed that, didn't ya? No need to get all hot and bothered thinkin' about Braska when you can have a good time with your pal Jecht. No strings attached: that's the best way."

"Yeah, thanks," said Auron. Jecht was right about the positive effects: he felt profoundly relaxed, and ready for a much better sleep than he had enjoyed for some time. He yawned. "You can go now."

Jecht laughed, tracing a finger over Auron's arm.

"I mean it, Jecht," said Auron.

"Uh, OK," said Jecht, drawing back. "Sure, I'll let you … get some rest." He stood and zipped up his shorts. "See you at dinner later, yeah? I mean, I kind of already had it, if you get what I mean, but …"

Auron closed his eyes. "Yeah, see you later," he mumbled as Jecht retreated.

Chapter **38**

From A Dream

But Jecht didn't see Auron at dinner; Auron had fallen asleep shortly after Jecht took his leave, and with the increasingly rare opportunity for some untroubled, uninterrupted rest, he hadn't woken until shortly after midnight. After that, though, he found it difficult to get to sleep again. The relaxed state his encounter with Jecht had left him in was no more, and the doubts and worries that had assailed him the previous afternoon were back.

He tried meditating, which he had had variable success with recently anyway; he tried exercising, to the extent that he could do it indoors and in the dark, and succeeded in making himself tired but progressed no further with actually being able to sleep. In the end, he lay back down and forced himself to close his eyes; eventually, he managed to drift off, but he was soon jerked awake again by some unpleasant thought. The next few hours proceeded in the same way, with snatches

of sleep interspersed with much longer periods of wakefulness. When dawn came at last, Auron was desperate for a change of scene, and he dressed and headed into the travel agency's common area, stationing himself at one of the tables and waiting for breakfast to be served.

"You're up early," said the clerk, who had also just left her own quarters. "If you're expecting breakfast, it might be some time."

"It's fine," Auron mumbled. "No rush."

There was an obvious reason why he was feeling so unsettled, he reflected. Enough unpleasant things had happened recently to destabilise him: meeting Radu again, the Moonflow crossing, the discovery of how Kinoc really felt about him, the constant fleeting reminders of how he had been treated in Bevelle. But one thing made all those pale into insignificance: it was Braska, as it always was. They were coming closer and closer to Zanarkand, and Auron still hadn't found a way to save him. He was running out of time.

After a while, the front door of the agency opened and a well-dressed man walked in; he initially looked apprehensive, as many Yevonites did when they were likely to have to deal with the Al Bhed. When he noticed Auron, though, his expression changed to surprise, and then, gradually, to an almost imperceptible smirk.

Auron felt himself stiffen. This was the kind of treatment he had begun to receive in Bevelle – the reason why he had

found the idea of returning to the city prematurely so hard to deal with the day before. He had been able to avoid moments like this while on the pilgrimage, for the most part, but there were enough people in Bevelle who had been at the trial to have witnessed his utter humiliation firsthand, and for the story to have spread.

The man turned away, approaching the reception desk. "I've been sent from the citadel," he announced to the clerk. "There's a notice we sent out a few weeks ago – it's been retracted. I need to take it back from you."

"The one about your heretic summoner?" she said. "It's long gone. Mr Rin told us not to take any notice of it in the first place."

"So you defied Yevon?" he growled.

She shrugged. "If you were just going to take it away, what's the problem? It sounds like we did what you wanted."

"You were supposed to follow our directive," he said. "You're very lucky that we allow you to operate so close to Bevelle. If you step out of line, there could be consequences for the business – you can tell Rin that."

"Why were you trying to stop Lord Braska anyway?" the clerk said, undeterred. "Don't your teachings tell you to support everyone who takes the pilgrimage?"

"Not if they repeatedly disrespect Yevon," he replied, "and not if they insist on choosing inappropriate guardians, and ca-

vorting with the Al Bhed –" He glanced back at Auron briefly, and scowled. "He's here now, isn't he?"

"Yes," she said. "He'll be heading into the Calm Lands today, I'm sure. So he has nearly all the æons. The fayth must trust him – more than they trust all those other summoners who come out of Bevelle. It sounds as if you're backing the wrong people."

He laid a hand on the desk. "Are you trying to lecture me about who should be in Yevon's favour? Don't make me laugh. Al Bhed cow."

"Hey –" Auron protested.

The visitor turned towards him. "What's your problem, you pervert?" he spat.

"You should leave," said Auron.

The man looked sceptical, but after a moment's pause he strode away, shutting the door loudly behind him.

Auron looked at the clerk; she appeared to be busying herself with something else. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I've had worse," she said. "Are you?"

"I'm fine," Auron muttered.

"You know the Al Bhed don't think there's anything wrong with it," she said. "It's just one of those things Yevon has rules about for no reason. That's what we always say."

He shrugged.

"I'll get your breakfast ready," she said.

Auron waited quietly to be served; the altercation certainly hadn't made him feel any better. By the time the clerk brought his food, he had begun to experience an uncomfortable ache in his stomach, not dissimilar to the one that had developed the previous morning. Skipping dinner probably hadn't helped, he reasoned.

"Is it hard being a guardian?" the clerk asked him.

Auron gazed at her blankly; good Yevonites, he eventually realised, would be using this as an opportunity to school their Al Bhed interlocutor on the importance of the pilgrimage. Had it not been for the unwelcome conversation earlier, he might have mustered the ability to say something vague and optimistic, but he found himself nodding. "Yeah. It is."

"Mr Rin said he'd be upset if Lord Braska dies," she said.

Auron closed his eyes. "I'm going to find a way to save him," he said through gritted teeth. "Don't tell Rin – don't tell anyone. But I'll think of something, I promise."

"That would be good," said the clerk. She gazed at Auron for a moment, and then added, "Do you want a potion? You look a bit under the weather."

He accepted, suspecting it wouldn't do much. It was the Al Bhed blend, stronger than the sort favoured by Yevonites, and to Auron's surprise it did succeed in making him feel somewhat calmer, reducing the uncomfortable knot in his stomach to the point that he felt able to finish his breakfast without difficulty. By the time Jecht came in to eat his own, Auron was

mostly composed.

"Hey," said Jecht. "Thought I'd see you for dinner last night."

"I slept right through it," Auron admitted. "Needed it."

"Yeah, I figured you were probably sleepin'," said Jecht. "Thought you'd come out to get something for Braska, at least."

Auron tensed: it had completely slipped his mind. For him, skipping one meal was hardly a disaster: for Braska, who constantly had to be encouraged to eat, everything he could be persuaded to have was a much-needed source of energy.

"Damn it," he whispered, hardly able to believe he had forgotten. Letting his troubles affect his own wellbeing was bad enough; letting them get in the way of looking after Braska was unforgivable. He suddenly felt terrible again.

"Hey, it's fine," said Jecht. "Don't worry about it, I took a tray in for him."

Auron sighed with relief. "Thank you. Really, I – that would have been on my conscience. Thanks."

"That and everything else, huh?" said Jecht. "Sure, it's no problem. I'm his guardian too, right?"

Auron managed an uneasy smile.

Jecht turned his attention to his breakfast; he could tell Auron wasn't his usual self, but couldn't quite bring himself to initiate a conversation about it. Eventually, Braska emerged from his room to join them, and Jecht was glad to see that Au-

ron seemed a bit more animated as he went through his standard routine of asking Braska how he had slept and whether he felt well enough to set off for another day's walking.

The answer was yes, as it always was; Braska had woken up with a headache again, but it was bearable, and he was as determined to go on as ever. After finishing breakfast, the three of them got ready to leave.

"Well, Lord Braska," said the clerk cheerfully, "if you decide to give up on the pilgrimage, I'm sure Mr Rin will be happy for you to stay with us as long as you like, free of charge."

"You can save that for my guardians," said Braska. "I'm afraid I fully intend to see it through; and if you see Rin, you may tell him that."

"It was worth a try," she said. "Good luck!"

They went outside, and continued northward; soon, the path led them to the edge of the vast plains that bordered the Bevelle region. The expanse of grass was enormous; Braska stopped in his tracks and took a deep breath.

"Come here, my friends," he said to his guardians.

They obeyed, joining him on either side; Braska put an arm around each of them, drawing them both in close.

"The Calm Lands," he murmured. "If the fayth of the Final Æon wills it – this is where I'll fight Sin. But first, we cross to the other side and make for Zanarkand."

"Zanarkand," Jecht echoed thoughtfully. "Huh."

"It may not be your Zanarkand, Jecht," Braska told him, "but perhaps you'll find some answers there nonetheless."

"Hope so," said Jecht.

"Hope, indeed," said Braska. "Our constant refuge."

Jecht said nothing for a moment, and then added in a livelier tone, "The fields look pretty big, huh? How long's it gonna take to get across?"

"Up to three days to cross the plains," said Auron. "Another couple to get over the mountain. We should stay alert – the fiends will be dangerous."

Braska turned to look at him: Auron sounded unusually morose. As he tried to study his guardian's expression, though, Auron quickly turned the other way.

"Auron?" said Braska gently. "Is something the matter?"

Auron briefly wondered how things would unfold if he were to allow himself a moment of selfishness. He could say yes, he thought, and then what would happen? Braska would hardly agree to turn back there and then. Nor would he suddenly, miraculously find that life was worth living after all. Auron's honesty would only bring Braska more sorrow.

"No," he said, forcing himself to turn and face Braska and trying to ignore Jecht's unimpressed expression on his other side.

Braska gave him a swift, soft kiss on the cheek. "Good," he said. "Then – my dear friends – let us begin the final part of our journey."

He let go of his guardians and continued forward, invigorated by how close he was to the end. Jecht and Auron followed; Auron began to walk a little faster, intending to catch up with Braska, but Jecht grabbed him by the wrist and held him back.

"So we're doin' this again, are we?" he said in a furious whisper. "Pretendin' everything's fine and dandy cos you think he don't need to worry about your shit?"

"Looks like it," Auron hissed back. "Why do you care, anyway?"

"You gotta let this stuff out, Auron," said Jecht. "It ain't healthy."

"So you want to hear it, do you?" said Auron.

Jecht scowled. "No. You know I ain't no fucking therapist. But Braska'd actually want you to go cryin' to him about all your problems."

"It's not going to happen," Auron insisted.

Rolling his eyes, Jecht declined to say any more until a thought suddenly occurred to him. "Hey," he said. "You ain't … having some weird crisis about what we did last night, are ya? Cos you seemed real into it at the time. I wouldn't've tried anythin' if I thought you –"

"I know," said Auron. "It's not that."

"Good!" said Jecht enthusiastically. "And, you know, there's plenty more where that came from. If you ever want another round."

"I'm sure," said Auron. He had resisted Jecht's advances for a long time, he thought, but finally giving in had actually helped him feel a bit better, at least for a while. He didn't plan on making a habit of it, but if this new unease persisted, he supposed, maybe it would be useful to have such an effective calmative on tap.

Jecht took in the sight of the plains as they advanced. Braska had said this was where he would fight Sin, but it seemed strange that somewhere so quiet and beautiful would be the scene of such a momentous battle. He grimaced almost as soon as the thought entered his head: he was sure Spira was making him go soft. But it wasn't his fault, he reasoned: everything about the place still somehow seemed more vivid than Zanarkand ever had.

"Why's Spira gotta be like this?" he couldn't help remarking.

"Like what?" said Braska.

Jecht searched for a way to describe it. "I dunno – it's like – everything's so *real*."

"Because you were always drunk before?" Auron muttered.

Jecht scowled. "Nah, that ain't it. Do you guys not think this place is … I dunno, a lot? Like, every sense at once?" He could tell he wasn't having much success in conveying what he meant.

"I suppose we're just used to it, Jecht," Braska suggested.

"Yeah, I guess," said Jecht.

They proceeded through the plains, following Auron's rather terse navigation; Braska's headache was getting worse, as usual. It seemed as if every day the speed with which it advanced was greater. After a somewhat drawn-out encounter with a fearsome malboro, where Braska had found himself summoning Ifrit to see the fiend off, he placed a hand on Auron's shoulder, and said, "We're going to have to stop for a moment. I need to rest."

"Your head?" said Auron quietly.

Braska nodded, wincing. "I just need to sit down for a while. It's just … you know, the usual."

The two of them sat together on the grass; Jecht stayed standing, driving the tip of his sword into the ground and leaning on the hilt. At other times, Auron might have chastised him for improper sword care; as it was, he was mostly attempting to focus on Braska, and too distracted by his own ongoing discomfort, with the result that he was barely able to pay any attention to Jecht at all.

Braska gingerly removed his headdress. Prior to the battle with the spherimorph, leaving his head uncovered was something he had never done in public, at least not since he was a very small child; he had never even done it in his own home if there was the slightest possibility of visitors. These days it seemed inevitable. He leant forward, rubbing his head with both hands, trying to ease the aching as Auron placed a hand

on his back.

"Can I help?" Auron murmured.

"Please," said Braska, shuffling closer to him. He nuzzled into Auron's shoulder; before too long, Auron's fingers were in his hair, working their way over his head with the same steady, soothing motions that had eventually brought him some respite after fighting the spherimorph.

Auron closed his eyes; being able to hold Braska close like this was a comfort for him too. But if Braska was in this much pain already, he thought, only by mid-morning, it seemed unlikely he would succeed in making it far across the plains. Maybe, Auron wondered, his own best hope was that Braska would become too ill to continue the pilgrimage and would need to return to Bevelle to recover.

He leant in to kiss the top of Braska's head a few times, and then said, "Sir – I'm worried about your health. Do you really think you're well enough to go on?"

Braska looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"These headaches seem to be getting more frequent," said Auron. "I'm just wondering if they might get to a point where you start finding it hard to keep going. We're still not far from Bevelle – if you think we might need to turn back, now would be the time to do it. We could take a break from the pilgrimage and see if an Al Bhed doctor could have a look at you – they might be able to get to the bottom of it. And then," he concluded reluctantly, "we could get back to the journey."

"No, we can't turn back now," said Braska. "I'll manage. Especially with your help – I'm feeling better already." It was true.

"But what if it gets worse?" said Auron.

"It won't be so bad that I can't go on," Braska promised him. He was sure of that: he had confidence in the æons, and they would see him to Zanarkand. Even if he was delirious with pain, he would still get there.

He reached up to cup Auron's jaw, tugging him down to receive a swift kiss, which ended up somewhere between Auron's lips and his chin. "Trust me," he said. "Trust in hope. I'll make it."

"Sir …" Auron protested weakly, but Braska extracted himself from his embrace, put his headdress back on, and stood up with only a slight twitch of discomfort.

They walked on. Auron could feel his heart pounding so hard that it seemed almost ready to burst out of his chest. Their encounters with fiends occasionally distracted him from his unease, but sometimes it was the other way around: just as the thought of having to go to Bevelle had made him struggle to act effectively in the battles they had had leaving Macalania Woods, he found that his current anxieties were having a similar effect. As he had warned the others, the fiends in the Calm Lands were more dangerous, too. It was a deadly combination: a few times, Auron made a poor decision, and somebody ended up injured as a result, meaning they had to be generous with

both white magic and potions.

Jecht could tell, again, that Auron was struggling; he still didn't want to raise it with him, but nonetheless found it unnerving. Battle was a context where Auron normally excelled, and seeing him fumble easy opportunities was enough to convince Jecht that something was badly wrong with him. He wondered if Braska would say something about it, but Braska himself was feeling too unwell and increasingly tired due to his efforts at keeping the group healed. Indeed, they found themselves stopping to rest a few more times, with Auron and Braska returning to the same position, huddled together on the ground with Auron's fingers carefully working across Braska's head to soothe them both.

Not long after one of these rest stops, they came across a woman who appeared to be travelling the plains alone. It was an unusual sight: the area was mostly deserted, give or take the stalls and rudimentary dwellings belonging to a few traders whose medicines were crucial in ensuring summoners' safe passage through the fiend-riddled area.

"A summoner party?" she said.

"What of it?" Jecht countered.

"My name is Belgemine," she explained, unfazed by his abruptness. "I too am a summoner."

"But you haven't any guardians," said Braska. "I don't mean to doubt your abilities, but surely it's not safe to take the pilgrimage alone."

"Oh, my pilgrimage ended a long time ago," said Belgemine.

"So you're a High Summoner?" Jecht guessed.

She chuckled. "I didn't quite make it that far. My intent is no longer to defeat Sin myself. Instead, I seek to find another summoner who might be worthy."

"I mean, Braska's pretty good," said Jecht, gesturing towards him.

"Is that so?" said Belgemine. "Then perhaps you would care for a contest of æons?"

"Huh?" said Jecht, but Braska understood. Belgemine wanted him to pit one of his æons against hers. He was fairly confident in using them by now – all except Valefor, whom he hadn't attempted to summon since the events in Luca – but he had mostly been calling them against fairly innocuous fiends. An æon-on-æon battle would be more challenging. But he supposed it could be a good idea to accept: he needed to show the æons that he was confident in summoning them, even when he wasn't feeling well.

He wondered what Auron would advise, and turned to ask him, but found that he had wandered further away and was looking in the other direction, so he settled for Jecht instead.

Jecht shrugged. "I say go for it. Show her who's boss."

"It's decided, then," said Braska, "I accept."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Belgemine. "Then I shall summon my æon first. Choose yours well, summoner."

She took a few steps back and waved her staff; Ifrit slowly descended from the sky in the way Braska had become closely familiar with. He considered. Calling Shiva would allow him to exploit Ifrit's weakness to ice attacks, but she would be similarly vulnerable to Ifrit's fire. Moreover, Shiva's fayth had granted him only a little of her power: she was one of his weaker æons. He decided on Ixion instead, watching carefully as the sky filled with electricity and he galloped into the space between Braska and the opposing æon.

"An interesting choice," said Belgemine, raising her voice to be heard above the sparks of fire and lightning that filled the air.

They began the battle. The æons circled and swiped at each other, each following his summoner's commands. Braska found that he was constantly at a disadvantage, and Ixion began to look tired and weak while Ifrit was still energetic, but then he remembered he could encourage Ixion to cast lightning spells on himself to regain health. That improved his odds, but the battle remained close, and it was only by the skin of his teeth that Braska was eventually able to defeat Belgemine's æon.

He clenched his jaw as he dismissed Ixion: his headache was getting worse again.

"You bested me fairly," said Belgemine, looking him over, "but it was close. I should practise more, if I were you."

"Noted," said Braska, briefly pressing a hand to his fore-

head.

She continued to study him. "Wielding the æons seems to cause you pain," she said. "Perhaps they have seen potential in you. They do always say the best summoners must suffer."

"It's just a headache," said Braska.

"Yes, it would be," said Belgemine. "It tends to happen that way."

"Sorry?" said Braska.

Belgemine smiled cryptically. "You would benefit from further training. Perhaps I could persuade you to visit me at Remiem Temple – we could talk more about it there."

"Remiem?" Braska echoed. "I've never heard of it. Is it far?"

"On the other side of these plains," said Belgemine, pointing into the distance.

"Oh," said Braska. The mere thought of getting all the way there made him feel exhausted. Lowering his voice to ensure Auron wouldn't hear, he said, "I'm terribly sorry, but I can't afford to make such a lengthy diversion. I really haven't been feeling well recently."

"That doesn't surprise me," she said. "Let me offer you a word of advice here, then: don't let them drain your strength completely. Remember, you are their master. They shouldn't be exploiting you."

He had no idea what she meant by that. She made to move off, walking behind out of his sight, and by the time he had

thought to turn around and ask her to explain, she seemed to have disappeared completely, which was rather unexpected.

"Let's go on," Braska found himself saying. He turned to face his guardians: Jecht was ready, but Auron was still a few paces away, looking into the distance. "Auron?" Braska called.

There was no reaction.

"Auron!" Jecht said, much more loudly. "We're goin' – get your ass over here!"

Slowly, Auron turned to face his companions. "Oh," he said. "Sorry." He approached them without another word, taking Braska's outstretched hand but not meeting his gaze.

Braska didn't give it much thought; he had something more important to consider. It seemed, he concluded, as if Belgemine had been suggesting that his recent aches and pains were caused by the æons themselves – and the more he thought about it, the more it seemed to fit. He considered his recent interactions with them: he had become accustomed to seeking them out as soon as he awoke, letting their light fill him just as a way of ensuring he didn't start the day feeling too miserable. That very morning, his head had already been hurting when he got up and headed to the breakfast table, but considering it now, he wondered if it had indeed come on in the time between waking up and leaving his bed.

Even if it was the æons causing it, though, he thought, it was undeniable that they brought him comfort when he was in low spirits, more quickly and successfully than any magic or

potion could. The physical effects seemed a small price to pay for that. Physical pain was surely preferable to emotional pain, even when it couldn't be healed by the usual medicines, and the encounter with the spherimorph had shown Braska that Auron's caresses were an effective way to make the constant headache a little easier to bear.

Nonetheless, he decided, it would be worth trying to speak to the æons about it. Perhaps they didn't know they were hurting him; perhaps they might take care not to do so if he pointed it out to them. Carefully, he sought them out within himself.

I need to ask something, he thought.

You may ask, Braska, they said.

I've noticed, he thought, that your presence brings me great comfort. I am truly grateful. But –

He could feel them waiting for him to go on, their light fizzing expectantly within him. His headache was rapidly getting worse: that just about proved it.

It hurts, he thought. Did you know that?

We knew, they said.

I see, he replied. Then what is it for? Why do you cause me this pain?

We are connected, they told him. *You are ours.*

When they had first made contact with him, back at the Mi'ihen Highroad travel agency, they had told him they were his. Now it seemed to be the other way around. Braska recalled

Belgemine's words: she had warned him to remember he was their master.

Are you trying to gain power over me? he thought. Surely, if you want me to do what you need, we could just discuss –

He was cut off by a sharp stab of pain, and stifled a gasp. Directly questioning their behaviour was displeasing to them, he realised. They were punishing him.

You must not speak of this, they said. *Few summoners succeed in making this bond with their æons. You will keep it to yourself, won't you? We believe in you, Braska.*

Their demeanour bewildered him: they seemed to be encouraging him and scolding him at once. Gathering himself, he tried to communicate his confusion to them, but the light had faded. All that was left was the pain, starker now that the æons' presence was no longer there to cushion it. He raised a trembling hand to his forehead and said through gritted teeth, "We'll need to rest again, I'm afraid."

"My lord," said Auron, "this is happening more and more. You really should consider putting the pilgrimage on hold."

"No, Auron, I really shouldn't," said Braska irritably, sitting on the grass and pressing both hands to his head. After a moment, he sensed Auron moving to sit next to him, obedient despite everything. A familiar feeling of guilt came over him; he reached out to embrace his guardian, and whispered, "Sorry," feeling Auron's strong arms enveloping him in turn.

If either of them had been in a better state, he might have

had the wherewithal to notice that the other was especially troubled; as it was, all they could really do was hold each other. Jecht, as always, stayed standing, telling himself he was doing the important job of keeping a lookout for fiends.

Braska continued clinging to Auron as he gradually started to feel better, and wished he could tell him what he had discovered. While it was disturbing that the æons seemed to be using the headaches as a way to assert some kind of power over him, and that they were doing so with greater intensity from each day to the next, he had realised there was one positive aspect to the situation. The æons wanted Braska to get to Zanarkand: their goal was the same as his. Because of that, he knew, the pain would never be so bad as to prevent him from advancing. Auron's fears that they wouldn't be able to keep going were unfounded, he thought.

He shifted in Auron's grip, pressed a hand against his cuirass, and murmured, "Your heart's beating awfully fast, Auron."

Auron made no particular response, so Braska said nothing else himself until he felt well enough to press on again.

They continued on their way, making slow but steady progress. The occasional traders' stalls allowed them the opportunity to stock up on their supplies; Auron and Jecht took turns approaching them, the latter doing a much better job of conversing with the stallholders. Most of them were Yevonites, eager to play a part in supporting those who were

close to becoming High Summoner; it was while visiting a stall operated by two of the rarer Al Bhed traders that Jecht detected a familiar and yet surprising smell, one he hadn't encountered since leaving Zanarkand. It was the unmistakable scent of ethycil, a plant whose leaves were smoked by many of the young people of Zanarkand as a recreational drug. Jecht had partaken quite frequently in his younger days, but had mostly sworn off it once Tidus was born as part of an attempt to clean up his act, which hadn't lasted long as far as drinking was concerned. He'd managed to stay away from the ethycil after losing touch with his former dealers, although it would hardly have been difficult to get back into the scene; ethycil was almost entirely harmless, and while it was technically illegal, the police tended to turn a blind eye even to large groups of people smoking it in public.

The smell took Jecht back: he remembered the evenings he had spent enjoying a spliff, both alone and with teammates. It had always been extremely relaxing to inhale the pink-tinged smoke of the ethycil and let his mind wander freely. The two Al Bhed manning the trading post seemed to be having a pleasant experience with the drug too: they were chuckling to each other as they handed over Jecht's purchases. One of them was wearing goggles, but he could see that the spiral pupils of the other were noticeably dilated, a telltale sign of ethycil use.

Jecht gathered up the supplies and glanced back at Braska and Auron. They had sat down together again; Braska was rest-

ing his head in Auron's lap. He was clearly sore and exhausted, but it was the sight of Auron that made Jecht want to turn away again: his fellow guardian was obviously troubled. The tense, despairing expression on his face was one that Jecht had seen only rarely until they began their crossing of the Calm Lands; but since that point, he realised, it had been almost constant other than at times when he was directly addressing Braska.

Jecht averted his eyes quickly. Seeing other men suffer like this still made him feel viscerally repulsed; especially Auron, whom, he realised, he had always seen as something of an equal. Braska's demeanour made him obviously a little different from his guardians, but Jecht had always considered Auron no less of a man than he was. The sight of him starting to fall apart like this made Jecht feel a little disturbed himself.

A whiff of the ethycil smell hit him as one of the Al Bhed traders took a drag on the spliff. He turned back to the stall pensively: ethycil was known and praised for its calming effects. If Auron and Braska had the chance to smoke some themselves, they might benefit from it. Jecht was hardly going to draw attention to the fact that they were both struggling, but if the three of them shared a spliff, they would all be able to have an enjoyable time.

"You guys selling any puff?" he said to the Al Bhed. Their blank faces indicated that the slang used in Zanarkand wasn't something Spira shared. "Ethycil?" Jecht tried.

They still looked uncertain. He pointed at the cigarette.

"This?" said the one holding it. "This is adrolem. Never heard of what you said."

Jecht hadn't heard the name before, but he was sure it was the same substance; the smell was too recognisable. "I guess," he said. "Got any spare? I can pay."

"Why are you asking?" said the other Al Bhed.

Jecht sighed; he was used to ethycil being somewhat difficult to procure. While Zanarkand's police force had never minded people smoking it, they were always tougher on suppliers. "I ain't a cop," he said. "Just out for a good time, you know? Been a long time since I smoked any – just wanna have a nice evening with my buddies back there." He jerked a thumb towards Braska and Auron. "Take the edge off, know what I mean?"

They argued for a few more minutes; Jecht would have dropped it, but the Al Bhed were insinuating that he was a Yevonite, and he was as always very keen to put them right about that. The traders were adamant that recreational drug use was against the teachings, and that Jecht must therefore have been trying to catch them out; once he had eventually convinced them he had nothing to do with Yevon by explaining his stint with the Psyches, talking fulsomely about machina, drawing attention to his blasphemous attire, and taking Yevon's name in vain several times, they were finally persuaded to roll a spliff and sell it to him at a grossly inflated price.

He bade them a cheerful thank you and carefully placed the spliff into his pocket before making his way back to the others. "Picked up something nice for the evening," he announced with a grin as they slowly got to their feet, both declining to respond.

They continued a little longer, but evening was approaching, and despite having had to take numerous rest breaks, they had managed to traverse a significant portion of the plains. Auron forced himself to concentrate on calibrating the progress they had made, and found that it matched his plans for the first of the three days they were to spend in the Calm Lands. If they stopped to camp at this point, it was probable that they would make it to the area's single travel agency by the following evening.

"We've come as far as we need for today," he said, feeling a little as if the voice coming out of his mouth belonged to somebody else. "We can set up camp now, if that suits everyone."

They found a place that seemed reasonably sheltered, on the underside of a small ridge: the geography would help ward off fiend attacks from at least one side, although as always, it was likely that the fiends would be less bothersome at night anyway. Auron gathered some nearby scraps of plant matter for a campfire; Braska sat down to light it as his guardians assembled the tent. Auron, finding himself shaky and a little breathless, had some trouble getting the poles into the right places, and had to let Jecht take over. They met each other's

eyes and said nothing; Auron let Jecht finish the task and went to sit with Braska by the fire.

Braska extended an arm to Auron as he sat down; Auron found himself nestling against him, leaning his head on Braska's shoulder and closing his eyes.

"All right, Auron?" Braska murmured.

"Yeah," said Auron.

"You've been very quiet," said Braska.

"I'm just …" Auron shrugged. "Just thinking." It was true: he just didn't want Braska to know what he had been thinking, or how frantically he had been thinking it.

Braska shifted a little and kissed Auron's hair. "That makes two of us," he told him. He had spent a good portion of the afternoon reflecting on his discovery about the æons, but had done so with difficulty: any time he had dared wonder anything remotely negative about their motivations, his reward had been a brief, sharp stab of pain in his head. Now that he was aware they were the cause of his headaches, it seemed that the æons were sparing nothing in inflicting them on him. He was merely thankful that he had Auron, even if he didn't want to reveal to his guardian quite how much pain he was in. Getting to Zanarkand was the priority, and Braska didn't want Auron to think he wouldn't be capable of that.

With the tent erected, Jecht produced the ethycil spliff from his pocket and carried it reverently towards the others. "OK,

guys," he said. "Remember I promised you a treat? Well, look what I got for us."

Braska peered at the small item. "Is that ... adrolem?" he said doubtfully.

"Smoked it before, huh?" said Jecht.

"Not personally," said Braska. "The Al Bhed were quite keen on it, but I could never be persuaded to try."

"Right, right, it's against the teachings," said Jecht. "But you've gotten over that now, ain't ya? I used to smoke it a lot, back before we had the boy. It's good. Relaxing."

"I did always wonder," said Braska. "They always seemed to have a terribly good time with it."

"Yeah, I bet!" said Jecht. "So what do you say? Might be nice to have some fun for once, don't ya think? Everything's been kinda heavy the past couple days. This'll take your mind right off of it."

Auron stirred at that; he had been trying to avoid paying attention to the conversation until then, but the idea that the adrolem might distract him from his worries made it a lot more tempting. Before his dismissal from the corps, he would never have believed recreational drug use anything other than a great sacrilege; by this point, he was totally uninterested in evaluating anything according to the rules of Yevonite morality.

"I did hear," Braska murmured, "that it provided effective pain relief."

"Sure thing," said Jecht. "So you gonna have a puff or not? Can't smoke the whole thing on my own."

"Do you promise you're telling the truth?" said Auron. "This isn't some kind of trick?"

"Why would it be?" said Jecht. "Yeah, Auron, I promise. People swear by this stuff for a good time."

"Maybe it would be good for you, sir," said Auron, twisting to face Braska.

Braska nodded. "It's worth trying, I suppose. I shouldn't turn down anything that might help with this headache."

"Great!" said Jecht, brandishing the spliff. "You can light it, Braska."

"You'll have some too?" said Braska to Auron.

Auron nodded, and moved away from Braska as the latter reached forward to light the spliff with a tap of his finger. Jecht settled into the space between them, raising it to his lips and taking a long drag.

"Oh yeah," he said, exhaling a plume of pink smoke. "That's the stuff. Forgot how it hits ya ..."

He gave the spliff an appreciative glance and then handed it over to Braska. "Right, let me show you how it's done," he said. "Just suck it in, nice and slow. You got it?" He took the spliff back from Braska and lifted it back to his own mouth.

"What about Auron?" said Braska.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm gettin' to him," said Jecht. "What do ya think?"

Braska nodded slowly. "It's … nice. I like it."

Chuckling, Jecht offered the spliff to Auron. "Your first time too, right?" he said.

"Yeah," said Auron, taking the spliff between his fingers carefully.

"Right, just breathe it in," said Jecht. "Enjoy it."

Auron took a careful drag, feeling the smoke fill his lungs. It wasn't quite what he'd expected; the harsh taste made him cough.

"Hey, relax, relax," said Jecht. "You gotta chill. Just let it do its thing." He turned back to Braska. "Want another go?"

Braska nodded and reached for the spliff.

"Got the hang of it now, huh?" said Jecht, watching as he inhaled.

"Yes," said Braska slowly. "I'm starting to see what it's like." He closed his eyes.

Jecht took another puff himself – he had built up more of a tolerance, he reasoned – and then handed it back to Auron. "Don't mess it up this time," he said.

Scowling at him, Auron raised the spliff to his lips. He knew what to expect by this point, and managed to avoid coughing, but the sensation still made his eyes water. It didn't seem to be helping him relax, he thought: he still felt restless and uncomfortable.

In fact, Auron realised as Jecht took the spliff back for another quick turn, his heart was beating even faster than before.

It was so fast that his chest was starting to hurt.

"You good, Braska?" said Jecht.

Braska nodded, his eyes still closed. "This is really quite remarkable," he murmured. "My head feels much better. It's extremely calming, Jecht. Incredibly calming."

"Yeah, yeah, good stuff," said Jecht.

"It really makes you think," said Braska. "Makes you wonder ..."

"Jecht," said Auron suddenly.

Jecht turned to him. "What's up?"

"Jecht, I –" Auron tried, looking down at his hands and finding it difficult to focus on them. He had found his breathing becoming faster and shallower; he was convinced that something very bad was happening. His stomach, which had persisted in feeling uncharacteristically sore throughout the day, was now aching terribly. Maybe, he thought, he was going to die. After considering the idea for a second, he was reasonably convinced of it.

"This isn't good," he choked out. "I'm not feeling good. I want it to stop, Jecht –"

"You just have to relax, Auron," said Braska ethereally. "Just let it come to you."

Reluctantly, Jecht shuffled in Auron's direction. "OK, Auron," he said. "You gotta ride it out. It'll be over soon, yeah? Just breathe deep, man."

Auron shook his head. "I can't," he said desperately. "I can't, I can't …" Something awful was about to happen, he was certain.

Jecht sighed; he didn't appreciate having to spend his own high dealing with Auron, but Auron was so panicked that there didn't seem to be another option. "OK, hang in there," he said. "I'm gonna get you some water." He checked their supplies; they were out. Briefly considering getting Auron to drink from his own jug before deciding mixing spirits with ethycil probably wouldn't be a good idea in this situation, he picked up one of the empty drinking gourds and approached Braska.

"Hey," he said, "can you do a water spell into this? I think Auron needs it."

Braska waved a hand dismissively. "Auron worries too much. He'll be fine."

"Yeah, he will," said Jecht, "but he's kinda freaking out right now. Bet he'd appreciate it."

"If I must," said Braska, taking the gourd in both hands and concentrating until it was full. The ethycil had affected his magic, and the result had a slightly pink tinge. It was better than nothing, though, Jecht decided, so he took the gourd over to Auron. "Drink this," he said. "It'll help, I promise."

Auron was shaking so violently that he almost dropped the gourd, but with Jecht's help he managed to tip it up and gulp the water down. The need to stay composed long enough to swallow it meant he was forced to breathe a little more steadily.

"Have some food too," said Jecht, handing Auron a parcel of the rations intended for that evening's dinner.

Auron tore it open haphazardly and took a few bites, but his stomach was too disturbed to allow him to have any more. He clutched at himself with a groan; moments later, he suddenly turned to the side and began vomiting onto the grass.

"There's no need to overreact," said Braska; fortunately, Auron was retching too loudly to hear him.

"You wanna do some more water?" said Jecht, shaking the gourd in Braska's direction.

"Must I?" said Braska. "I'm thinking, Jecht. I'm … I'm experiencing a great many thoughts."

"Yeah, I bet you are," said Jecht. "You wanna help Auron, though, right?"

Braska grimaced and leant forward to take the gourd again.

Once the gourd was filled, Jecht offered it to Auron; Auron snatched it from him and chugged the water down. No longer believing himself in danger of imminent death, he felt just about well enough to glare at Jecht as he did so.

"Hey, chill, dude," said Jecht. "It ain't my fault. People have a bad reaction to it sometimes. Especially if you ain't in the right place to relax, you know? Nothing to do with me."

"I can't believe you'd do this to me, Jecht," said Auron breathlessly. "As if I wasn't already feeling absolutely awful."

"Uh, yeah," said Jecht. He took another quick puff from the spliff, wondering how he might get Auron out of the way and

become able to give in properly to the high at last. "You wanna go lie down in the tent? Might help."

"I'm never taking advice from you ever again," Auron hissed, but he shakily got to his feet and made his way into the tent, drawing his robe around himself.

"Oh man," Jecht muttered. He looked at Braska, wondering if he would say anything about Auron, but Braska had closed his eyes again and was sitting in contented silence.

"Jecht," he murmured after a few more seconds, "do you ever wonder?"

"Uh," said Jecht, "wonder about what?"

Braska opened his eyes. "This. Life. Everything."

"Oh, right," said Jecht unenthusiastically; it was turning into the sort of ethycil-inspired conversation he had had quite enough times in his younger days. "I mean," he said, "sometimes, I guess. Since I came to Spira … I been askin' myself how I ended up here. But you know, I don't wanna think about it too much. That'd be enough to drive a guy crazy."

Braska hummed in agreement. "Maybe you're right. If you can stave off those thoughts … alas, some of us are just prone to them, I think. I was always the type to think too much. It got me in trouble sometimes."

"Rough, dude," said Jecht.

"It's kind of you to sympathise," said Braska.

Jecht laughed uneasily.

"I was just thinking," Braska went on, "about how it all works. It's something of a miracle, isn't it? That we can all live our lives, and meet one another and make a mark on someone else, and come to call him a friend? Isn't it strange?"

"I guess," said Jecht.

"Everything we do affects somebody else," said Braska, "and then everything *he* does affects someone else, and then that person goes out and perhaps eventually he affects us, and it all goes around again. It's something of a spiral, isn't it? It's remarkable."

"So," said Jecht, trying to sum up in the hope it would put an end to Braska's fruitless musings, "you're saying we're all connected."

"That we are," said Braska. "And yet all those connections are overshadowed by Sin. Sin is really what all this is about, you see? It … circles over us all." He smiled a little, convinced that he had said something extremely profound.

"If I were to break that bond," he went on, "people would have the chance to forge new relationships, wouldn't they? Without all this hatred and suspicion and death?"

"I guess," said Jecht. "But it comes back. That's what I don't get about it. Why do summoners keep goin' after it when it just comes back anyway?"

"No, Jecht, you don't understand," said Braska. "It's because of hope. Even if the Calm is short, a few years of peace would be better than nothing. And some Calms are longer than

others. One day, the teachings tell us, the Calm will be eternal. To have the chance to be the High Summoner who could bring that Calm – that would be worth anything."

"You don't believe in the teachings," said Jecht scathingly.

"There are *parts* of the teachings," Braska corrected him, "that I believe in more than I have ever believed anything in my life. I want to give Spira that hope. I want Yuna to grow up in peace. I want Auron to be happy and free."

"You know, Braska," Jecht admitted, "I ain't convinced."

"I used to doubt, too," said Braska. "Even after I began this journey, there were moments. But now – with the æons …" He sighed contentedly. "And with this … this clarity. I'm ready for it, Jecht. Spira's final hope, and mine. I must defeat Sin, Jecht – I *must*."

They sat silently for a while, and then Jecht said, "Dude. I gotta ask you something."

"Ask away, my friend," said Braska.

"Auron," Jecht began, but Braska shook his head.

"I cannot reveal his secrets," he said. "As much as I'm sure it would do him good to share his burden –"

"No, no, I don't mean that," said Jecht. "I mean – what is he to you?"

Braska gazed at him. "A good question," he said. "He is … my dearest, truest friend. He stood by me when I had nothing. He helped me through my very worst moments. He is a blessing I never deserved."

"Yeah," said Jecht, "but …" He hesitated. Braska's behaviour towards Auron didn't seem to align with that: neither the occasionally abrupt tone he took with him, nor the increasingly frequent and intimate embraces they shared.

"He's just your friend, then?" he said. "It's as simple as that?"

"Friendship is hardly simple, Jecht," said Braska.

"I guess not," said Jecht.

Braska said nothing for a moment, and then murmured, "Jecht. I'm … I'm hungry."

"It does that," said Jecht. He went to find the two remaining packages of evening rations, and sat there as Braska eagerly ate his share, half-wondering whether he should go and fetch Auron so he could watch.

Braska belched, and then looked mortified. "Oh, goodness," he said. "You must excuse me. I'm terribly sorry."

"No worries," said Jecht, grinning, and then they both burst briefly into laughter.

"You like it, then?" said Jecht, inclining his head towards the spliff.

Braska nodded. "It's peculiar," he said. "I feel as if I'm dreaming. Or perhaps as if I've woken from a dream. It's hard to tell."

"Yeah," said Jecht. He found Braska's words surprisingly disturbing: *woken from a dream.* The idea seemed somehow

familiar, although he was still too affected by the ethycil to really put his finger on why.

"I'm feeling very relaxed, either way," said Braska. "I suppose I should think about going to bed – but we'll need to take Yuna's sphere first. Just a quick one, I think."

They recorded a short and good-spirited sphere for Yuna, boosted by the effects of the ethycil; Braska explained, in somewhat euphemistic terms, that Jecht had found something that had made them both feel relaxed and content.

"I should thank you, Jecht," he said once he had switched the recorder off. "It was very thoughtful of you to help me feel better. I don't suppose it'll last, but every minute of respite is worth something, I suppose." He shuffled towards Jecht and embraced him; Jecht tensed instinctively, but forced himself to stay still until Braska had let go.

"Goodnight, then," said Braska.

Once he was gone, Jecht eyed the used spliff thoughtfully. The experience hadn't gone quite as he'd planned, but Braska had enjoyed it, at least. Auron's problems were outside Jecht's control, he decided, especially when he insisted on keeping them to himself. Jecht had even tried to help; Auron should have been grateful, he thought. It wasn't his fault that things had gone wrong.

Chapter 39

Lashing Out

Auron had still felt shaky and anxious when Braska joined him in the tent, but he had quickly lain still and feigned sleep. When Jecht fetched him to take over the watch, he had managed to calm down enough to sleep a little for real. He dressed, trying to avoid Jecht's gaze, and went outside without saying a word.

By the time morning came, he was extremely angry. A few hours on his own had allowed him to cement his belief that Jecht was too unreliable and chaotic to be trusted. They had been growing closer over the course of the journey – Auron could admit that – but he now saw it had been a mistake. Pursuing a friendship with Jecht was totally unnecessary in terms of what the pilgrimage required. Jecht was an irrelevance, he concluded, and every moment he had spent paying attention to him had been a moment wasted.

When Jecht emerged from the tent for breakfast and bade

Auron good morning, Auron made no reply.

"Aw, come on," said Jecht, his mouth full of food. "You ain't still mad about last night? I told you it wasn't my fault. Smokin' puff makes you relaxed, like, ninety-nine percent of the time. It's just bad luck that it didn't work for ya."

"Will you shut up?" Auron hissed. "Will you just – I don't care, Jecht. I'm not interested."

Jecht rolled his eyes, but said nothing else.

In the tent, Braska was trying to steel himself for the day ahead. Waking up, he had felt much the same way as ever, and had been about to make contact with the æons as a means of fortifying himself, but then he had remembered Belgemine's words and his subsequent discovery. Wondering if he had come to rely on the æons too much, and paid the price for it, he decided there and then to try going about the day without calling for their help; he had just about managed to get through the last three years without it, after all, and things didn't seem to have been too bad recently. But having got used to their support over the past few days, the idea of getting up and continuing the journey without it now seemed unbearable. He lay in his bedroll, feeling so low-spirited that even trying to move seemed out of the question.

He stayed that way until Auron entered, too annoyed by Jecht's presence to bear the wait outside. "Are you all right, sir?" he said, forcing himself to be civil.

Braska shook his head.

"Is it the headache?" Auron guessed. "Or – wait, it's because of what that disreputable lowlife gave us last night, isn't it? I knew it. I should never have trusted him."

"No, Auron," Braska managed to say; speaking was requiring a huge amount of effort. "It isn't that. I just … it's … it's going to be a bad day. Sorry."

"Oh," said Auron, feeling his heart sink. He knew what those words signified, and he had been in this position more times than he wanted to remember, trying to offer Braska some useless comfort while he struggled to gain the energy that would let him get up and go about his day. But being on the pilgrimage seemed to have made those occasions less frequent, and Auron had to be thankful for that even if it was because Braska was spurred on by the closeness of his own death. Seeing him like this now, Auron wondered if they had ever really made any progress at all.

"I'll get up in a moment," Braska mumbled, almost inaudibly.

"Are you well enough to walk?" said Auron.

"I have to try," Braska said.

Gradually, aided by Auron's supportive touches and murmurs of encouragement, Braska succeeded in dressing himself and making his way outside.

"Pack up the tent," said Auron to Jecht.

Jecht bristled. "Why do I gotta do it?"

"Because I said so," said Auron. "Get on with it – we need to make a move."

With everything packed away, they moved on. Braska was slow and weak, relying on Auron's firm arm around him to keep himself upright. His eyes stung with tears as they advanced; he hadn't felt this bad in a long time. Calling on the æons would make him feel better immediately, he knew, but that would mean allowing them to hurt him. If he could get through one day without them, he thought, the rest would be easier; but the fact that he was struggling this much to make it through just one day was making him feel even more pathetic.

Beside him, Auron was starting to worry again. Although their progress was slow and laboured, he couldn't deny that each step was bringing him closer to Zanarkand. His time was running out, and he still hadn't thought of anything. He could tell the same uncomfortable feelings from the previous day were coming back: he could feel his heart fluttering in his chest, his stomach starting to grow tense and tight with anxiety. It was increasingly difficult to focus.

The fiends they encountered were challenging. Braska's low spirits had dulled both his reaction times and the potency of his magic, while Auron was once again becoming distracted by his own troubles. Having resolved not to pay attention to Jecht unless it was absolutely necessary, he also made no effort to coordinate his attacks with those of his fellow guardian, with the result that both were required to expend

significantly more energy, and Jecht occasionally found himself dangerously exposed. Meanwhile, Braska felt so pitiful that it wasn't long before he had convinced himself the trouble they were having in battle was all his fault.

After a close encounter with a pair of vicious cœurls, where all three had alternately been knocked unconscious and had to be revived with the liberal application of phoenix down, Braska could bear it no more, and collapsed in tears against Auron's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he wailed, almost incomprehensibly. "I'm no use – I can't do this. Forgive me, please …"

"It's all right, sir," said Auron wearily, steering Braska into a sitting position before turning to glare at Jecht. "Lord Braska needs to rest," he said. "Put the tent up."

"Whatever you say," Jecht muttered.

Once he had performed his task, Auron guided Braska inside. "What if we don't make it to the travel agency?" Braska sobbed.

"We'll camp tonight, and get there tomorrow," said Auron. "It's really not a problem."

"OK," Braska gulped. "Can you stay with me – please –"

"Of course," said Auron.

He stroked Braska's hair as Braska shuffled into his bedroll, watching as his tears gradually stopped and his breathing slowed. Once it was clear that Braska was asleep, Auron leant in to kiss his cheek and then quietly retreated from the tent, sitting down on the grass before burying his

face in his hands. Seeing Braska like this again, on top of everything else, was distressing. It had always worried him when Braska had struggled this much; before, he had been able to put on a brave face, but now that he wasn't feeling well either, that felt impossible.

"Look," said Jecht, "I know you don't wanna talk to me, or whatever, but we gotta work together when we're fightin' at least."

"Leave me alone," Auron mumbled.

"No, this is important," said Jecht. "We're meant to be protecting Braska, right? Don't you think it's kinda irresponsible to flake out like that when we're being attacked? You must've had to team up with people you don't like before. It's just part of the job, ain't it?"

Auron lowered his hands from his face. "Fine," he said irritably. "I'll communicate with you in battle, if I must. But outside it – I can't stand looking at you. You disgust me. Get out of my sight."

"Whoa, harsh," Jecht muttered, but he went to sit on the other side of the tent.

He scowled at the ground. Auron was prone to overreacting, he knew, but he couldn't deny that his words were somewhat upsetting. He'd become accustomed to thinking of Auron as a friend: a strange kind of friend, but a true one. They had supported each other in their own ways, he could admit. And only two days ago, they had been lying in bed together, and he

had been telling Auron just how irresistible he was. It seemed as if it was a memory of two completely different people.

Despite himself, Auron's thoughts weren't too dissimilar. He had been convinced at breakfast time that the best course of action was to cut Jecht out of his life as much as he was able. In practice, though, it seemed more difficult. He hadn't held back in making it clear to Jecht exactly what he thought of him, but even while doing so he had been aware of just how cruel he sounded. His uncertainty about how he was handling the situation was yet another thing to worry about.

Inside the tent, Braska awoke, feeling no better. He blinked tearfully up at the canvas, finding himself lacking the energy to do much else. As much as he had been trying to avoid it, he could tell that there was one simple solution: letting the æons in. He had hoped he wouldn't need to rely on them, but he could see now that if he continued to refuse their help, he wouldn't be in a fit state to continue the journey until the following morning at the very earliest. Auron would assure him it wasn't a problem, he knew, but he hated the thought of delaying the fate he longed for. He didn't have long to live anyway – he would have to suffer through the headache, and the knowledge that the æons had power over him, if that was what it took.

He felt too disconsolate to sit up at first, but began to reach for them anyway. In his weakened state, their light took a while to come, but he persisted, and gradually, they started to

make themselves known to him in the way that had become familiar. As they did so, two entirely predictable things happened: the weight of despair slowly fell away from him, and his head started to hurt.

You see now, they told him. *You need us, Braska.*

I do, he thought, sitting up and pressing a hand to his forehead. You are right.

We are here to help you, they said. *That is all we do. We are at your service.*

Then why do you hurt me? he couldn't help thinking.

To remind you that you belong to us, they said. *You are no longer meant for the living world. Your home is on the Farplane.*

I know that, he replied.

He could tell they were pleased with his response, but the headache was no less intense. Sighing, he put on his headdress, made his way out of the tent, and approached Auron.

"Sir?" said the latter, surprised to see him.

"I'm doing better," said Braska. "We can move on now. Sorry about the disruption."

Auron blinked at him. "Are you sure? You were completely –"

"I know," said Braska. "It's the æons." He wondered how much he would be able to tell Auron without incurring their wrath. "You know I have this connection with them – I thought I might try to get through the day without their help. I was unduly ambitious."

"They help you?" Auron echoed. "So is that … are they doing that now?"

Braska nodded. "I need them," he said. "I need you too, Auron, without a doubt, but … I had to call on them. Forgive me."

"I'm just glad you're feeling better," said Auron. He got to his feet and dismantled the tent, the new information doing nothing to soothe his unease. Braska was relying on the æons, then, he reflected, so much that he needed their support merely to get through the day. The thought gave him an unexpected twinge of jealousy. He sighed: it was wrong to feel resentful about it when Braska's wellbeing was the most important thing – and yet, he thought, he was surely right to be worried by the fact that Braska's mental state apparently depended so much on the æons' whims.

He finished stuffing the tent into its bag, trying to ignore the fact that his hands were still trembling, and then approached the others. "Let's go," he said.

After that, they fell into much the same pattern as the previous day. Now that Braska had conceded that he needed the æons' support, his headache was as bad as ever, and he once again found himself frequently needing to stop for short rest breaks. The breaks were beneficial for Auron too, giving him the opportunity to spend a few moments in Braska's embrace. The only difference was that he remained determined not to speak to Jecht, aside from during battle, where he reverted to

issuing him a few gruff instructions.

Despite Braska's recovery, Auron felt increasingly uncomfortable as he proceeded across the plains. The only way he would be able to break out of it, he was sure, was by devising some kind of plan laying out what he would do to ensure Braska survived the Final Summoning. But he wasn't in the right frame of mind to concentrate on tying together all the scraps of information he had gathered on the journey: he was finding it difficult to concentrate on anything at all. At times, he felt so breathless and lightheaded that even the grass in front of him seemed blurred.

They reached one of the traders' stalls; it was Auron's turn to replenish the supplies, and so he left Braska to sit on the ground and approached the table, hoping that the need to perform the transaction would force him to regain some composure. He had no such luck: he found himself barely able to understand what the trader was saying. Gripping the table to hold himself steady, he closed his eyes as panic washed over him. He was drowning, again, back in that place where there was only water and death, and the unbearable stench of the sewers filled his nose – he was trying to fight it, but he was failing this time, and his body would be left to the fiends. He couldn't breathe.

Standing some distance away, Jecht could nonetheless tell there was something wrong. He made his way to the stall quickly, gave the trader an apologetic grin, and placed a hand

on Auron's shoulder.

"You OK, buddy?" he said.

Auron was shaking, staring at some unknown terror in the far distance; his face shone with sweat as he took desperate, rapid gulps of air.

"It's all right," said Jecht firmly. "You're safe – you ain't where you think you are. You're in the Calm Lands, with your pal Jecht."

"Jecht?" Auron croaked.

"That's right," said Jecht. "That's me. I'm here, Auron. No need to worry."

Auron shook his head, still trembling violently.

"You're gonna need to breathe, Auron," said Jecht. "Nice and slow, OK? Breathe in with me? That's it, now out …"

He coached Auron through a few more deep breaths, noting with satisfaction that Auron seemed to be regaining control of himself. "You keep at it," he told him, before turning to the trader and buying a few potions and antidotes.

"And an extra fifty gil for your trouble," he said to her with a wink.

She simpered. "Oh, thank you very much. My very best to your lord summoner."

Jecht and Auron began to walk back towards where Braska was sitting. "OK now?" said Jecht.

Auron nodded slowly; he felt slightly detached from reality. "I … think so," he said. He turned to meet Jecht's gaze. "That

helped."

"Yeah?" said Jecht.

Auron nodded, and then went to help Braska up, grateful that the summoner was unaware of what had just happened. Braska needed Auron's support; Auron couldn't afford to let him think he was unreliable.

As they advanced, he reflected despairingly on what had happened. He had been in such a bad state that he had found himself reliving the very worst moments of his life. In the days after that incident first happened, he had been plagued by similar memories, but after a short time in Braska's care, those unwanted thoughts had subsided. None of them had made it feel as if he was actually experiencing the ordeal again, either; this was a new and unfathomably horrible experience.

He found himself grateful for Jecht's intervention, and even more guilty about having resolved to have nothing to do with him before. Now that more time had passed since the incident with the ethycil, he could see that he had acted irrationally. He would apologise to Jecht, he decided: that would take care of one of the many things that were troubling him, at least.

On their next rest stop, he sat with Braska as normal, then pressed a quick kiss to his head and stood up again. "I have to talk to Jecht," he said. "I won't be long."

He made his way towards his fellow guardian, still feeling as if he wasn't quite in control of his own body. "Jecht," he

murmured.

Jecht turned around warily: after Auron's behaviour throughout the day so far, he didn't know whether he was going to apologise, insult him, or have another breakdown. "What's up?" he said.

"I … I need to thank you," said Auron. "For earlier. You were very helpful."

"Hey, no problem," said Jecht, still cautious.

"How did you know what to do?" said Auron.

"What, the breathing stuff?" said Jecht. "Seen that kind of thing before. Sometimes when we get a new player on the team, before their first match, they get the nerves, you know? Usually happens to the girls." He studied Auron. "But when you … that was different, right? You were … somewhere else."

Auron nodded slowly. "Yeah," he said. "It was awful. Felt like I was back in the –" He cut himself off abruptly. Even saying the name was about to provoke a similar reaction, he could tell: he was dizzy and breathless again.

"Hey, Auron," said Jecht. "Breathe, remember? It's OK. You can do this."

Slowly, Auron regained enough of his senses for the feeling to ebb away. "Right," he said. "Thanks. That's twice you've – it's good of you."

Jecht shrugged. "Sure. No worries."

"Look, I'm sorry about this morning," said Auron. "I was … it was childish of me. I still think you shouldn't have given me

that substance, but I shouldn't have acted that way, either. I didn't mean what I said."

"So I don't disgust you?" said Jecht.

Auron almost smiled at that. "Not usually."

"Well, that's somethin', I guess," said Jecht. "Sucks that the puff didn't work for ya – it was meant to be calming. Braska liked it."

"That's good," Auron murmured.

"Good thing I got other ways of makin' you relax, huh?" said Jecht. "Seriously, Auron, if you ever wanna ..." His gaze drifted towards Auron's crotch. "You just say."

"In the middle of the plains?" said Auron.

"Aw, I'm sure we'd find a place," said Jecht. "You think about it, right?"

Auron nodded slowly. "Yeah," he said. "I should get back to Braska."

"Sure," said Jecht. "Hey, Auron?"

"Hm?" said Auron.

"You ..." Jecht began, and then he sighed. What he was about to say felt so alien that it was almost excruciating to get the words out. "You ... take care," he managed eventually.

"Yeah," Auron replied. "I'll try."

He walked back over to Braska and nestled into his embrace.

"Is something the matter, Auron?" Braska asked him. "You seem unhappy."

"I'm just tired," said Auron. "I didn't sleep too well."

Braska leant in to kiss him. "Poor you. This part of the journey hasn't been kind to us, has it? At least we'll be able to rest at the travel agency tonight."

It was true: despite the slow and painful start to the day, and Braska's constant need to stop and take short breaks, they remained within reach of the travel agency. After a few more hours of walking and fighting off the various fiends that attempted to surprise them, the building came into view. Braska was so grateful for the opportunity for a proper rest that he almost wept with relief.

Jecht arranged the room when they arrived; a quick glance at Auron sufficed as proof that he wasn't up to it.

"You'll come and rest, Auron?" said Braska.

Auron needed sleep, but suspected he wouldn't be able to get any – he was too restless. He nodded, though, and followed Braska to their quarters.

Braska let himself collapse onto the bed, watching as Auron slowly removed his robe and gauntlet and lay down on one of the mats. "Those mats don't look terribly comfortable," he said. "We could share the bed, if you like – there's plenty of room."

"The mat's fine," said Auron, turning to avoid his gaze.

Before long, Braska was asleep. Auron could hear his breathing, deep and regular: he was glad that at least one of

them was able to rest properly. As he had anticipated, he was having no success doing so himself. He felt sick.

He got up, put his robe on, and slowly made his way to the outdoor seating area by the travel agency reception, wondering if there was the slightest possibility that the fresh air might make him feel better. Jecht was still out there, chatting to some travelling traders; Auron certainly wasn't in the mood to talk, and accordingly kept his distance. He sat down with his back to the others, and looked out over the Calm Lands, forcing himself to breathe slowly and deeply as Jecht had advised. It seemed to be preventing him from going completely out of his mind, he concluded, as he raised both hands to the back of his neck and dug in with his fingertips.

He sat there for some time, finding that his worries seemed to come in cycles. At certain moments, he felt almost calm, removed from the reality of where he was and what he needed to do. Then, suddenly, the panic would come back, and he would lean forward, shaking and gasping for breath while the grass around him shifted out of focus and appeared to take on a gruesome, watery tinge. Being alone seemed to be making it worse, but Auron was adamant that he couldn't burden Braska with his troubles, and he knew Jecht wouldn't want to be involved.

He was increasingly convinced that he was going to be sick. He stood and unsteadily made his way inside, clinging to the various tables and walls he passed, and found his way to a bathroom. There, he stood over the sink and began to retch, but

nothing came out.

There was a small mirror on the wall above the sink. Slowly, Auron straightened up, catching sight of his reflection as he did so. The young man who blinked back at him looked utterly defeated. His hair was tangled and greasy, a result of his having dragged his hands through it countless times in a subconscious and largely fruitless attempt to calm himself. There was a light graze on his cheek that he must have received in battle – he'd been too distracted to notice it at the time. His eyes were small and red with fatigue, ringed with dark circles.

He hated the sight of himself. This was the man who not long ago had been the pride of Bevelle's warrior monks, the celebrated young officer who had made his way through the ranks despite his undistinguished origins to become the most decorated soldier of his generation. People had taken him aside at functions to whisper to him about how they had heard he was slated to become maester next time there was a vacancy. He had lost all that because he had been unable to lie about who and what he really was – but he had maintained his determination and, once he left Bevelle, his dignity. He had been so sure that he would be able to turn his talents to finding a way to prevent Braska's sacrifice. And here he was in the Calm Lands, mere days from the Final Summoning, and he had found nothing. All the careful preparation and research he had done had led him nowhere. For the first time in his life, he was failing.

Suddenly overcome by rage, he lashed out at the pathetic image in front of him. His fist connected with the mirror; it broke into shards around his hand, crashing noisily to the floor. He yowled in pain, instinctively cradling his injured hand in the other before deciding it was a better idea not to: he was bleeding profusely. Swearing under his breath, he thrust the hand into the sink instead and turned on the tap, watching the blood and water mingle.

There was a knock on the door. "Excuse me?" said a muffled voice. "Is everything all right?"

Quickly, Auron turned off the tap and stood with his back to the sink, hiding his injury from view; he leant forward to open the door with his left hand, and found an employee of the travel agency on the other side.

"I'm sorry," he found himself saying, his voice somehow managing to remain steady of its own accord. "My hand slipped, and I knocked the mirror down. I'll reimburse you for it."

"Are you hurt, sir?" the man asked.

Auron shook his head.

The other man paused slightly before speaking again. "You're a summoner's guardian, aren't you?" he said. "We don't get many summoner parties making it this far, but those that do … they all find it hard. The guardians as much as the summoners."

"What's your point?" said Auron tightly.

"You should talk to your lord summoner, sir," he said. "If you haven't. It's best not to leave things unsaid in these circumstances."

"You know nothing about our circumstances," said Auron.

The man nodded respectfully. "Indeed, I don't – my apologies. Thank you for offering to reimburse us; you can bring the money to the reception desk." He withdrew quickly.

Auron faced the sink again, turning the tap back on and doing his best to pick the tiny glass shards out of his skin. His hand was starting to feel very painful; he knew he would need to avail of a potion or some white magic soon. The longer he left it after receiving the injury, the less easily it would be healed. He was still bleeding heavily; he grabbed the hand towel by the sink and wrapped it over his knuckles.

Trying to work out what to do next was difficult when the pain was worsening. He had to find some way of healing himself, he knew, but the obvious source of white magic was out of the question. He went to the bedroom, checking that Braska was asleep, and searched around one-handed in the healing supplies, but found only antidotes and a few other items that worked only on some of the more esoteric fiend-induced ailments. It wasn't a great surprise that they were out of potions when the battles in the area were so tough. He took some gil instead, deciding he could buy a potion from the reception desk and hand over the money for the mirror at the same time.

He made his way there as quickly as he could, but found

the staff to be indisposed; a shipment of food had arrived from Bevelle, and everyone was busy unloading the chocobo-drawn cart. Auron sat at one of the tables and waited, cradling his injured hand and whimpering quietly to himself.

Once the desk was manned again, he leapt forward and flung down the coins he was carrying. "A potion, please," he said. "A high-strength one …"

"Oh, sorry, sir," said the clerk. "Your friend was here a while ago – bought us right out."

Normally, Auron would have been thankful for the attention Jecht was paying to their supplies, but no such thought occurred to him in this situation. "Do you know where he is?" he asked through gritted teeth.

She shrugged. "No idea. Sorry."

"There isn't anyone working here who knows any white magic?" he tried.

"Oh, I'm afraid not," she said.

Auron bit back a groan of frustration: he would have to ask Braska to heal him after all. "Keep the gil," he said. "It's for – your colleague will explain."

He hurried back to the bedroom and approached Braska, who was still asleep. "Sir," he said, reaching out with his uninjured hand to give Braska a little tug. "Sir, I'm sorry to disturb you –"

Gradually, Braska woke. "What is it, Auron?" he said moodily, before becoming a little more awake and noticing

the bloody towel wrapped around Auron's other hand. "You're hurt," he exclaimed, sitting up at once.

Auron nodded. "No potions," he explained. "Would you mind –"

"Of course," said Braska, taking the hand in both of his and peeling the towel away from it as gently as he could. "This is nasty, Auron," he said. "How did you –"

"Braska," Auron gasped; with Braska running his fingers over the injury, he was in agony. "Please –"

"Sorry!" said Braska. He closed his eyes and let out a strong wave of white magic; immediately, Auron's pain began to subside.

They watched as the swelling and bruising receded. It was still soon enough after the incident to undo the worst of the damage, but with the time that had passed, Braska was unable to heal Auron completely. The places where the glass had cut into his skin still shone red, and as Auron carefully flexed his fingers, new blood trickled slowly across his knuckles.

"I'm sorry I can't do more," said Braska, still clinging to Auron's hand with both his own. "How long had you left it?"

"Not that long," said Auron. "It's all right – doesn't hurt much now."

"You should have come to me straight away," said Braska.

"I didn't want to disturb you," said Auron truthfully.

"But you were hurt," Braska insisted. He tugged Auron towards him and leant into his side, drawing strength from

his guardian's steady, calming presence, before realising that bandaging Auron's hand would probably be a good idea when it was still bleeding. Slowly, he let go of Auron, got up, and located one of the bandages that he had intermittently been using to support his own knees.

Auron let Braska take his hand again and bandage it, watching him as he worked. Braska's skill in healing usually manifested itself in the form of magic; it was easy to forget that he had also been trained in non-magical aspects of first aid. The neatness of his bandaging technique now left it in no doubt.

"Now," said Braska, tucking in the end of the bandage securely, "are you going to tell me what happened?"

Auron looked down at him as he sat on the bed: he wasn't keen for Braska to know the truth. Slowly, he said the first thing that came into his head: "I was arguing with Jecht. He said something that offended me, and I went for him." He closed his eyes briefly, trying to picture the scenario as if that would make it more plausible. "He dodged, and I just … hit the wall."

"Oh, Auron," said Braska. "I did notice you were being rather short with him earlier. But you shouldn't let your temper get the better of you."

Auron nodded.

"What were you arguing about?" said Braska gently.

It was another test of Auron's imagination, which was lim-

ited at the best of times. He could say that Jecht had insulted Yevon, he supposed, but the idea that he himself might have taken such offence at that seemed entirely unbelievable, even if Braska might have been convinced by it. Looking into Braska's blue eyes, lost in his impossibly, unbearably tender expression, there was only one thing he could think of. "You, my lord," he said. "He insulted your honour."

Braska frowned for a second, but then said, "Auron. Jecht is the last person you need to defend me against. You know that."

Auron nodded miserably.

"You know what he's like," Braska went on. "Whatever he said, I'm sure he didn't mean to be hurtful."

"You're right," said Auron. "I overreacted. I should –" He was keen to end the conversation before he had to tell even more lies. "I should apologise to him."

He left the room quickly, deciding he needed to talk to Jecht anyway and tell him to play along if Braska brought up the fight they were supposed to have had. Jecht was still nowhere to be found; Auron sat at one of the outdoor tables and waited for him to make an appearance. He rubbed at the bandage on his hand; it felt itchy and foreign. He was no stranger to being injured in combat, but those wounds had nearly always been dealt with immediately and had hence had only momentary consequences.

He could feel his breathing starting to quicken again.

Strangely, the incident in the bathroom had somehow made him feel more like his usual self for a while; the intense pain in his hand had distracted him from his other worries. Now that the injury was only slightly sore, the rest of the unpleasant sensations he had spent the day experiencing were creeping back.

By the time Jecht appeared at the travel agency entrance, accompanied by a young woman from one of the groups of traders, Auron was shaky and nauseated again, but he stood up carefully and made his way towards him. "I need to talk to you," he said.

Jecht glanced at him incredulously: Auron was clearly distressed, he thought, but it was surely obvious that he was in the middle of something. "Can it wait?" he said.

Auron blinked a few times, seeming to notice the girl Jecht was with for the first time. "Oh," he mumbled. "Sure."

He dragged himself back to his chair; Jecht and his companion, a travelling trader by the name of Ileena, took seats opposite each other at another of the tables, but Jecht had made the mistake of positioning himself so he could see Auron in the background. Every time he looked Ileena in the eye while trying to impress her with one of his blitzball stories, he caught sight of Auron behind, looking fidgety and distraught.

"Look," he said at last, "it's been nice chatting to you, but I don't think this is gonna go anywhere, you know?"

"Really?" she said.

"Yeah, don't seem like we got much in common," he said, getting up from the table.

Her protests that he was the one who insisted they go for a walk together in the first place fell on deaf ears; he was already making his way to where Auron sat.

"OK," he said, trying to avoid looking at Auron's bandaged hand, "what did you wanna tell me?"

It took Auron a moment to remember. "If Braska says something about us having a fight," he said in the end, "you have to pretend you know what he's talking about."

"Huh?" said Jecht.

"Just go along with it," Auron pleaded.

"Right, sure," said Jecht, still mystified.

He watched as Auron looked down at the ground. It was impossible to deny that he didn't look well at all. The sight of him made Jecht supremely uncomfortable; he wished he could just walk away and forget about it, but somehow, he had developed enough of an attachment to Auron to feel like he had some responsibility.

"Auron," he said slowly, "I think you need to talk about it. And if you ain't gonna talk to Braska … I guess it's gotta be me."

Auron raised his head. "What?" he muttered.

"Do you wanna tell me what's on your mind?" said Jecht, cringing at every word coming out of his mouth.

"Everything," said Auron despondently. "I can't stop thinking about … everything."

"Uh huh," said Jecht. "And, uh, if you had to pick one thing that's the most important …"

"Braska," Auron replied without hesitation. "Saving him. I need to find something. I'm running out of time."

"And that's what's makin' you act so weird?"

"Maybe?" said Auron. "I don't know. I just – we're so close to the end, Jecht, and I checked everything I could think of, and there's still *nothing*. I'm running out of options. I don't know what I'm going to do if I don't find anything."

"You still got Zanarkand, right?" said Jecht. "Might find some answers there. That's what I'm hopin' for, anyway."

"You're trying to think of something too?" said Auron.

"Uh," said Jecht, "I meant, like, finding out how to get home, you know …"

"Oh," said Auron. "Yeah."

"So, no point worrying about it till then, right?" said Jecht, trying to steer the subject back to Auron's troubles. He had already resolved to bury his own deeply away until they reached the other side of the mountain.

Auron grimaced. "If only it was that simple. I can't get it out of my head. And I can't even concentrate enough to think about it properly. I just wish I could think clearly. It's torture."

He folded his arms on the table in front of him, buried his head in them briefly, and then looked up again. "I keep …" he

said. "My mind keeps going back to … what they did to me."

"In Bevelle?" said Jecht.

"Yeah," said Auron. "I thought I'd got over it, but I just keep thinking about it again. Feels like I'm constantly one step away from …" He shuddered. "From drowning."

"Wait," said Jecht, "that's what they … They tried to kill you by *drowning* you? Fuck, that's messed up." No wonder Auron had such negative reactions to water, he realised. He regretted ever teasing him about it.

"How did you get out?" he couldn't help asking.

Auron closed his eyes. "Don't," he muttered. "Please – don't make me talk about it." He clenched his fists: he could see the shadowy fiends, the walls closing in around him, his blood turning the water red. Rattling at each grate to see if it might lead to a way out, gasping for air each time he briefly resurfaced, remembering the laughs and the pointing fingers as they had forced him to recount his most private memories and then thrown him into the labyrinth.

He became aware of Jecht telling him to breathe again. Jecht's hand was on his arm, warm and solid.

"You back with us?" said Jecht.

Auron nodded slowly. "I think so." He shuddered. "Damn it. I don't know what's happening to me. I'm falling apart."

Jecht had no idea what to say. He was deeply regretting having started the conversation. He had done the right thing, he thought, and encouraged Auron to talk about his problems;

now, knowing that those problems went far beyond anything he might have been equipped to deal with, there was really nothing else he could do but walk away.

"I think I need a distraction," Auron added after a few moments.

"Yeah, sounds like it," said Jecht.

Auron gazed at him for a while. "No, I mean – a *distraction*. Like the other day."

"Oh," said Jecht, suddenly realising that Auron was talking about sex. He frowned to himself; oddly, he didn't immediately feel enthusiastic. Even when he had suggested the two of them have some more fun together earlier that same day, he hadn't been aware of the extent of Auron's struggles. At this point, he wondered if Auron was possibly too mentally fragile to be doing anything sexual at all.

"You sure it's a good idea?" he said. "I don't wanna … you know …"

"What?" said Auron.

"Well …" said Jecht. "You know, hurt you."

"What are you talking about?" said Auron. "You were the one who kept suggesting it. You haven't changed your mind?"

"Well, kinda," Jecht tried to explain. "I mean, you ain't … in your right mind. I don't wanna do stuff if you might look back on it later and say you didn't want to, know what I mean?"

"I still know what I'm saying," said Auron. "I want to, Jecht. Really."

"OK," said Jecht. "If you're sure – let's go find a place."

They walked to the back of the travel agency, locating a narrow passageway between two of the smaller buildings that housed some of the facilities. There wasn't much room to do anything other than stand.

"Hand job?" Jecht suggested, supplying an explanatory gesture.

Auron nodded. "Sure, yeah. Just get on with it."

He adjusted his belt and pulled his trousers down to his knees, letting Jecht take hold of his dick. Soon, Auron was leaning against the wall and gasping with pleasure; he had pressed his left hand to his mouth to stifle the sounds he was making.

The sight of Auron struggling to hold back made Jecht almost as aroused himself; he adjusted his position to push Auron more firmly into the wall. Auron let out a small moan in response; Jecht leant forward to press a series of firm kisses onto his exposed throat. He was starting to realise that Auron seemed to enjoy being manhandled, and the discovery turned him on enormously.

"Faster," Auron murmured, and Jecht obeyed, working at Auron's dick with increasing speed and watching his dark eyelashes flutter with pleasure. Auron was whimpering with delight now, throbbing under Jecht's touch like an exquisite instrument. Jecht tugged Auron's hand away from his mouth and pressed a firm kiss against it, relishing the sound of his quiet moans.

"I said this before," he muttered, "but you're so fucking hot, Auron. I love hearing you. Drives me crazy."

It didn't take much longer for Auron to reach release: he just about managed to reach out and move Jecht's hand off his dick before stumbling forward and emptying onto the ground, clinging onto Jecht's shoulder for balance.

"You good?" said Jecht.

"Yeah," said Auron. "That was really something. You know what you're doing." He straightened up slowly, enjoying the last remnants of orgasmic thrill before they faded, and let out a long sigh of satisfaction.

"Right," said Jecht. "Good stuff. I'm gonna go find a bathroom."

He hurried off, wincing slightly as his clothes chafed against him. Auron followed more slowly, returning to the outdoor seating area and letting himself tumble into a chair. It was by far the most relaxed he'd felt since his and Jecht's previous encounter: his worries were still at the back of his mind, but the physical effects they had been inducing seemed absent for the moment. He leant back and found himself drifting into much-needed sleep.

In the bedroom, Braska too had fallen asleep again after healing Auron, newly tired by the use of his white magic.

Later, finding himself waking, his thoughts turned to the need to record Yuna's sphere. He was unusually apprehensive: it was to be the last one he would send her. Beyond the Calm Lands travel agency, the only outpost of civilisation was the Ronso settlement on Mount Gagazet, and Braska suspected that they wouldn't be connected to the general Spiran postal system. That meant this travel agency was the last place that would have the facility for him to have the spheres sent to Bevelle.

He turned on the sphere recorder, perched on the side of the bed, and gazed at the device for a long time before speaking.

"Yuna," he said at last. "We're making good progress across the Calm Lands now. The fiends are tough here, but we've managed so far. Sir Jecht and Sir Auron have been looking out for me, and I for them, as much as I'm able." He paused, briefly wondering whether his guardians had made up after their disagreement. "I hope you're being treated well there. I'm sorry I didn't …" He cut himself off; it was wrong to make Yuna listen to this. He had failed to be a good father after Girl's death; Yuna knew that well enough.

"This is the last sphere I'll send you," he said instead. "Tomorrow, we're leaving human civilisation behind. So, Yuna, I shall have to say –"

He stopped speaking again; he couldn't say goodbye to her, not for good. Slowly, an idea came to him.

"I shall take another sphere," he told her, "when we're on the way to Zanarkand. And I'll give it to Auron so he can pass it on to you when you're older. This will not be the last time you hear my voice, I promise." The thought of it made him feel better.

"Until then," he continued, "you won't see me for a while." She knew, of course; she was old enough to understand what the pilgrimage meant. "So – I shan't say goodbye to you, but I shall merely ask you to keep us in your prayers. I … I love you so much, Yuna. Whatever happens – whatever they tell you – remember that."

He reached to turn off the recorder before it captured the tears welling in his eyes. Taking out his handkerchief, he dabbed at his face until he felt more composed, and went out to the reception desk to ask for the new sphere to be posted to Yuna's lodgings in Bevelle along with the one he had taken the previous night.

"Of course, sir," said the clerk. "Telling her all about the pilgrimage, are you? Getting her ready for her own?"

Braska hesitated. While it was traditional for the children of successful summoners to attempt the pilgrimage themselves, he had never hoped Yuna would follow in his footsteps. It was upsetting to think that one day she might be as ready to throw away her own life as he was, even if her pilgrimage was to be less born of despair than his.

"I hope she'll make that decision for herself," he said, walk-

ing away before he could be questioned further about it. He caught sight of Auron at one of the tables, and went to sit next to him, realising as he did so that Auron was asleep.

He stirred as Braska sat down, though, gradually waking and becoming aware of the summoner next to him. "Good evening, sir," he mumbled.

"Good evening, Auron," said Braska, stretching up to kiss his forehead.

Auron reached out and put an arm around him. "All right?" he asked.

"I suppose so," said Braska. "I was just thinking about Yuna. They'll tell her to take the pilgrimage, when she's grown. Won't they?"

"I suppose so," said Auron.

"I hope she knows she doesn't have to," said Braska. "I never intended to have her imitate me. I hope she has the strength of will to choose her own path. You'll support her, won't you? You'll see that she does what she thinks is right, instead of just being pushed thoughtlessly into some old Yevonite tradition?"

"Of course," Auron mumbled, not really thinking about it.

"How are you doing?" Braska asked, after a moment of silence. "Did you get some sleep?"

"Yeah," said Auron. "I'm OK."

"Good," said Braska. He stroked Auron's hair for a moment, and then added, "How's your hand now?"

Auron looked at it and shrugged. It had stopped hurting; at this stage, it was simply an embarrassing reminder of his outburst. The bandage, neatly tied though it was, made him feel awkward and uncoordinated.

Braska took the hand in his own and lifted it briefly to his lips. "You should keep it covered for another day or so," he said, running his thumb over the rough fabric.

They sat in silence for a while, until Jecht strolled into view. "Dinnertime?" he suggested. "Dunno about you guys, but I'm starving."

Auron wasn't particularly hungry, but he nodded and slowly untangled himself from Braska. "It's getting late," he said. "We should go to bed soon, anyway."

"More walking across these interminable plains tomorrow?" Braska guessed.

"I'm afraid so," said Auron.

Jecht headed off to order the food. "Did the two of you resolve your disagreement?" Braska asked.

"Yeah," said Auron, briefly recalling the sensation of Jecht's hands against his skin, and those firm, urgent kisses, a world away from Braska's slow and soft ones. He raised his fingertips to his neck; it felt a little tender.

They ate without much conversation. Auron was gradually starting to feel unsettled again, but the nausea hadn't returned, so he managed to eat his food and even a little of Braska's once

the latter had insisted he had had enough. Jecht polished off the rest, and then they got ready for bed.

"It did help, right?" said Jecht to Auron while Braska was using the bathroom.

Auron nodded, crawling under his blanket. "Yeah. It was good. I liked the –" He touched his neck again. "You know."

"Huh, yeah," said Jecht. "Yeah, that was hot. And if you ever wanna return the favour, I'm up for it. Obviously."

"Right, yeah," Auron mumbled. Lying there, he could tell that his heartbeat was already starting to quicken again. It was a good thing he had slept a little during the evening, he supposed. Tossing and turning, he did his very best to empty his mind, and eventually succeeded in falling into uneasy, fractured sleep.

Chapter 40

All The Way

As Auron had expected, he didn't sleep well. He almost wished they had been camping; at least that would have allowed him to put his wakefulness to good use.

He dragged himself to his feet and went to the bathroom. The mirror above the sink had been replaced with another that looked identical; it reminded Auron that the travel agency employee had seemed unsurprised by his outburst. Perhaps, he thought, guardians were prone to erratic behaviour at this stage of the journey, and the agency had a stock of such mirrors to replace any that turned out to be collateral damage.

He forced himself to look at his reflection this time, even though the sight still appalled him. Catching sight of an unusual glimmer at the front of his head, he peered at it more closely, and found the culprit: a short white hair growing from his hairline, curling in against the rest.

On top of everything, he thought, he was going grey. At

the age of twenty-five, he was beginning to grow old. At other times, he might have been able to react more rationally; as things were, the realisation just made him feel even more sick. He had been handsome; Jecht's list of all the people who were supposedly attracted to him had been a surprise, but he knew he had turned heads, more so as he had grown in age and confidence. And now, here was proof that he had passed his peak. From this point, there was only decline.

He washed and dressed himself shakily and went to join the others at the breakfast table, half-listening to their conversation. Braska, having conceded that he needed the æons to get through each day, had already drawn enough strength from them to feel reasonably settled. His head was hurting, but he was getting used to that.

Jecht settled up, and then they were on their way. Auron had had to forgo his gauntlet; it was designed to fit tightly against his skin, and was now impossible to fit over the bandage on his hand. Being without it was disconcerting: it did nothing to assuage his unease.

As they advanced, Braska reached to take Auron's arm in the way that had become natural; but as soon as he did so, he found that the intensity of his headache suddenly increased. A few days earlier, he would have been unable not to let it show, but by this point, he was used enough to the pain to simply grit his teeth and wait until it passed. Once it seemed to have retreated to its usual level, he remembered that he had

experienced the same thing the morning they left Guadosalam. The fact that it had now happened twice while he reached for Auron was enough to convince him that it was no coincidence; now that he knew his headaches were caused by the æons, he suspected that these moments too were their doing.

He sought them out, and asked, What are you doing? Are you punishing me for wanting him by my side?

Close to the surface, they answered at once. *You are ours, Braska.*

I know that, he thought irritably. So you are saying I have to give up on my friend?

Correct, they said. *You must not maintain these trivial attachments to the living. You know that soon you must die.*

Yes, of course, he thought. There's no doubt about it – I've wanted this for years. But until then, is it so wrong to take comfort in Auron's strength?

Use us, Braska, they said. *Let* us *be your strength.*

You are, he thought, but he is too.

They were displeased by that, he could tell: the pain had worsened to an unpleasant throb, enough to force him to grit his teeth. But while he was willing to concede that the support the æons gave him was essential, he was adamant that Auron's help was just as necessary. The æons had no physical presence unless he summoned them, after all, and even then they couldn't hold him and kiss him in the way Auron could. Auron's embrace was somehow more soothing than any white

magic; the æons might have been able to calm Braska's mind, but they would never be able to take him in their arms like his dear guardian.

And besides, he remembered, the æons themselves had told him Auron was important to the journey. They had insisted he was of some critical significance to the Final Summoning. They should be glad of his assistance, he thought. He almost called them back to make the point, but he knew it would make his headache still worse, so he merely clutched Auron's hand more tightly and resolved to continue.

He was getting used to it, anyway; that had been clear in his ability to push through the increased pain. Since his discovery that the æons were causing it, it had become more relentless, as if they were no longer restraining themselves, but that had merely forced him to cope. He was now able to walk and fight in conditions that would have seen him needing to lie down only a few days ago. The æons *were* strengthening him, in a way.

He found himself talking about Girl as they went on. It was a sign that his mood was relatively stable; early in the pilgrimage he had barely even been able to think about her, and still a few days ago at the Farplane, the sight of her image had distressed him. By this point, things seemed to have progressed to the point where he was able to offer extensive, detailed reminiscences of their time together and find that it made him pleasantly wistful rather than distraught. He still

avoided speaking her name aloud, in accordance with the Al Bhed custom, but it remained obvious who he was referring to every time he spoke the word *she* unbidden.

They were far from civilisation now: even the traders' stalls were becoming less frequent. Jecht and Auron made sure to buy as many potions and tufts of phoenix down as they could carry whenever they had the opportunity; with the increase in fiend bounties as they came closer to Zanarkand, money hadn't been an object for some time, and it wasn't as if there was anything else they could spend it on.

Auron's intermittently panicked state had given way to an odd sense of detachment. He felt as if he was observing the pilgrimage from a great distance, barely aware of the feeling of Braska's hand in his own. When they were forced into battle, he had just as much trouble as he had during their crossing of the plains so far, but while his mistakes in combat had previously made him feel even more worried and disgusted by his own failings, they seemed to have stopped affecting him very much.

He said very little as they walked, other than to buy items at the few traders' stalls; he was always surprised by the calmness of his own voice, which seemed to come from some force out of his control. Once or twice, Braska said something that required a response, and he managed largely monosyllabic answers. Each time they sat down together to rest, he was unable to restrain himself from reaching out to kiss him, pressing his

lips to Braska's hair and face simply because it seemed to be the only way to feel something beyond this worrying numbness. In return, Braska kissed Auron in the same way, thinking defiant thoughts towards the æons as he did so. He knew he needed them, and he would consent to almost anything they asked of him, he thought, but telling him to stay away from Auron was crossing a line.

Auron knew he should have been holding back: when Braska had first started this, he had been able to do so, knowing that it meant something very different when he was the one to initiate it. But at this point, he was no longer at liberty to exercise rational thought. Kissing Braska made his chest burn with longing, and not with panic; that longing sustained his determination when nothing else could; and that was all there was to it.

The journey continued. Jecht wondered what to make of Auron's seemingly calmer state: he could tell that under the surface, things still weren't right. Auron was hardly a great conversationalist, but he wasn't usually this taciturn, and he had certainly never been as vacant as he now seemed. It wasn't something Jecht had any great desire to dwell on, but it was hard to put it out of his mind when the evidence was right in front of him. At least Auron wasn't crying, he thought; that would have been the final straw. He was gradually starting to get used to the way that men were more ready to express their emotions in Spira, but there were some things he knew

he would never be comfortable with.

Resolving not to mention it, he directed his attention towards their progress instead, doing his best to make up for Auron's unpredictable errors in battle. After they had been advancing for some time, though, he noticed that something else was amiss, and knew he was going to have to say so.

"Auron," he said.

There was no reply.

"Hey!" Jecht barked. "Auron!"

His raised voice sufficed to attract Auron's attention; the latter slowly turned his head towards Jecht, and mumbled, "What?"

"We're going the wrong way," said Jecht.

Auron blinked at him.

"We're meant to be goin' north, right," Jecht explained, "so the sun oughta be over there by now, yeah? Gotta be past midday, cos the shadows are getting longer …" He gestured towards the ground.

Auron looked down slowly. "Yeah," he said at last. "I guess you're right."

"It's not like you to misjudge the route, Auron," said Braska, yawning.

"Give me a minute," said Auron, barely registering the remark. "Let me just work out where we are …" He looked up towards the sun, and at the mountains in the distance, and then down towards the shadows again. It almost made sense, but

at the same time it seemed utterly incomprehensible. It was as if he was listening to a conversation about something he was very familiar with, but in a language he had never heard before.

"The Al Bhed have these devices," said Braska, "that are like clocks, but in miniature – and one can carry them on one's person. Terribly useful. I don't know why they never made it to Bevelle." He pressed a hand to his forehead and grimaced.

"Yeah, we got those too," said Jecht. "Hey, why don't you sit down, pal? Me and Auron'll work out which way we're meant to be going."

He waited until Braska had sunk ungracefully into a sitting position, and then placed a hand on Auron's shoulder and steered him out of Braska's earshot.

"Look," he said urgently. "You gotta get a grip, or we're gonna get lost out here, and then he won't be the only one dying."

Auron frowned at that. "I told you," he said, "he's not going to –"

"Well, he is if you keep droppin' the ball like this!" Jecht insisted. "Come on, Auron, I know you got problems, or whatever, but you can't just check out! You're meant to be in charge here, right? Me and Braska ain't gonna know which way to go if you don't tell us!" He knocked his fist lightly against the front of Auron's cuirass.

"Yeah," said Auron. "I'm sorry. I just can't focus. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"It's a simple choice," said Jecht. "Either you get over yourself, or we ain't gonna make it up that mountain. You know that."

Slowly, Auron nodded. "I'll … try," he muttered.

Jecht rolled his eyes.

"Look, that's the best I can do!" said Auron, sounding almost like his usual self. "I'll *try*, Jecht – I will. You know I don't want to make this even more difficult."

"Good," said Jecht. "Now, are you gonna tell me how you do the navigation stuff?"

Auron gave him the best explanation he could, and between them, they worked out roughly where they were and how to correct their course. The conversation made Auron feel slightly more grounded. Jecht had been right, he thought as they continued; he was responsible for the progress of the pilgrimage, and abandoning it would do nothing but make things worse. The realisation hardly cured him of his affliction, but he found himself making the effort to concentrate on his surroundings enough to gain some idea of what was going on, even if it made him feel shaky and sick again. He could see now that becoming detached from his surroundings had been a way of shielding himself from the reality of his worries; now, the task was to remain sufficiently conscious of what was happening around him while not letting it affect him so

much that he panicked again. It was going to be a difficult balancing act.

They headed on, finding the fiends a little easier to overcome; they had fought enough battles in the Calm Lands now to start becoming accustomed to the sort of direction these encounters tended to take, and Auron's slightly increased alertness was helpful too. The fights at least broke up the long, monotonous walk across the plains; there was little else of interest going on. Braska was even starting to run out of anecdotes about Girl.

Suddenly, though, a rumbling in the ground put an end to this monotony. A loud sound behind the three travellers signalled the arrival of a large transportation machina; moments later, it came into view, overtaking them first, before coming to a screeching and undignified halt. Three young men jumped out.

It would have made sense for them to be Al Bhed, not only because of their mode of transport, but also because it was said that the Al Bhed occasionally tried to interfere in the summoner's pilgrimage. They went through phases, sometimes leaving the Yevonites to it and at other times making their opposition to the teachings clear by attempting to sabotage the journeys of whichever summoners happened to be on the road at the time. But there had been no reports of such things for a few years – and it was quite clear from their attire that these men weren't Al Bhed at all. They were warrior monks.

"So you've come to stop us at last," said Braska icily. "I wondered if this might happen."

"We can take 'em," Jecht scoffed. "Three on three, huh? Dunno what you guys were thinking. We been on the road for weeks – fought off some pretty intense fiends. This'll be a piece of cake."

"I certainly hope so," said Braska, gripping his staff – but then he suddenly paled and whispered, "Yuna."

"Huh?" said Jecht.

Auron spoke at last. "They have his daughter. If we harm them – if he's involved – that'll give them an excuse to retaliate." He stepped forward. "You two need to keep going. I'll handle this."

"All three of 'em?" said Jecht. "Auron – are you –"

"We're his guardians, Jecht," said Auron. "You remember the Code of the Guardian, don't you? It's our duty to protect him, even if it puts our own lives in danger." He took a deep breath. "And besides – they were sent here for me."

"How do you know that?" Braska murmured.

Auron looked back at the three warrior monks: their swords were the obvious clue. Most fought with guns these days, spurred on by reformers like Kinoc even though it technically went against the teachings. But while the monks' helmets were pulled low over their faces, he could recognise them from their noses and jawlines. It would have been

impossible not to; he had seen them almost every day for most of the past two years.

"I know these boys," he said. "I trained them."

The operation had Kinoc's fingerprints all over it. It wouldn't be merely a physical fight, but a psychological one. Kinoc loved pitting people against each other, using their relationships to destabilise them; it was the dark side of his aptitude for sweet-talking people into giving him what he wanted. Auron knew that Kinoc saw him as the strongest link in Braska's pilgrimage: without him, Braska and Jecht wouldn't have the skills to go on. This was a concentrated attack, and one that was designed to wound him as much as possible.

"Jecht," he said, "you need to stay with Braska. Leave this to me – I'll catch up with you."

"You sure you can fight three of 'em at once?" said Jecht, casting his eyes over Auron with concern. "You know you ain't been –"

"I can do it," said Auron. "I taught them everything they know. It'll be fine." It would have to be.

"Auron," said Braska shakily, "I can't leave you to – not when they might –"

"Go," said Auron. "I'll join you in a minute. I promise."

Braska stood unmoving, unable to tear his eyes away from Auron, but Jecht placed a hand on his shoulder and he soon found himself being steered away from the scene. Moments

later, he was already sobbing; the thought that he had left Auron to fend for himself in a life-threatening situation was too horrific for him to bear. Even the æons' presence brought him no comfort.

"We can't go on," he stuttered. "We can't just leave him behind."

"Yeah, I know," said Jecht, who had been thinking the same. Spotting a nearby rock, he led Braska towards it. "Let's wait here," he said, sitting down in its shadow.

Braska sat there too, and reached for Jecht's hand, but it somehow seemed a poor substitute for clinging to Auron. They could both hear the distant sounds of steel against steel, and the grunts and yells of the four men engaged in battle. For the first time, Jecht thought, there was a benefit to Braska's crying; it was drowning out some of the sounds of the fight.

"This is awful," Braska whimpered. "I can't bear it – what if he –"

"Don't even say it," said Jecht, surprising himself with his own vehemence. "Just don't go there."

They lapsed into miserable silence; eventually, Braska noticed that the sounds of fighting had stopped, and leapt unsteadily to his feet. Hurrying back towards the place where they had left Auron, he soon spotted him in the distance, slowly making his way across the plains; as he got closer, he realised that Auron was limping. There was blood on his robe and his bare arm. Braska gathered up the front of his own robes and

broke into a sprint.

"Auron," he gasped when he got to him, drawing him into his arms and pulling him close. "I was so worried – I thought you'd –" He took hold of Auron's face with both hands and scattered kisses over it before drawing back and examining him. "You're hurt," he said, keeping a tight grip on Auron as he channelled white magic into him with all his strength.

Auron fidgeted a little. "I'm all right," he said quietly. "The blood isn't mine – most of it."

"Scared 'em off, did ya?" said Jecht, who had jogged over to join them.

Auron gazed at him for a long time before replying. "I tried to," he said at last. "They just kept bouncing back – as soon as I'd knocked one out, the others would be on him with phoenix down, and then …"

"It's all right, Auron," said Braska, caressing his arm.

"They just didn't let up," said Auron. "I don't know what Kinoc must have told them to make them hate me so much. They really wanted to … to kill me. Or die trying."

"You didn't," Jecht couldn't help muttering.

Auron blinked back at him, and then looked at the ground. "May the fayth forgive me," he mumbled.

"Shit," Jecht whispered, turning away instinctively.

"After the first one fell –" said Auron. "Darnan. That was his name. I gave the others the chance to run. Thought they'd take it once I'd actually –" He broke off. "It just made them

even more determined. They could have stopped it. I'd have let them go – of course I would."

"I know, Auron," Braska murmured.

"Pekko," said Auron. "He's … he's dead too. He was from the islands – Kilika, I think. I never asked. Must have moved to Bevelle when he was small. He was my first apprentice. I …" He kicked at the ground. "Damn it. Damn it!"

Braska enveloped Auron in his arms again. "Hush, Auron, hush," he said. "You mustn't blame yourself. Your life was in danger, and you did it for my sake. I'm so –" He sighed. "So grateful. And so sorry."

Auron nodded miserably, trembling against Braska as Braska leant in to kiss his face.

"The third guy?" Jecht couldn't help asking.

"Knocked out," said Auron. "No-one to revive him – I took my chance to get out of there."

"Then we should be on our way before he comes to," said Braska, stroking Auron's hair.

Auron blinked at him. "Shouldn't you send –"

"Their comrade can take care of them," said Braska. "It won't take long for him to get them back to Bevelle in that machina cart – there are plenty of summoners there. We should get away while we can."

"I'm sorry," said Auron.

Braska looked him straight in the eyes. "It is not your fault," he said, slowly and deliberately. "Believe that, Auron."

Auron just about managed to nod. "Thank you, sir," he whispered.

As they advanced, Braska found himself invigorated by the knowledge that Auron needed looking after. It was an odd phenomenon, but he had experienced this before: when somebody else was struggling more than he was, he was often quite prepared to cast aside his own troubles to help them. The same had happened after Auron's condemnation in Bevelle: Braska had brought Auron to his home, healed his wounds, and let him stay until he felt ready to face the outside world again. During that period, he had found himself in a much better mood than usual; now, it suddenly seemed as if he was almost able to ignore the æons and the headache.

He held Auron close as they walked, an arm around his waist to give him support. On that previous occasion, he had tried to give Auron space when he wasn't bringing him food or medicine, but they had developed this physical closeness since then, and Braska wanted Auron to know that he stood by him and cherished him.

"How are you feeling?" he murmured the next time they sat down to rest.

Auron shrugged, and his lacklustre response was motivation enough for Braska to wrap his arms around him tightly, and press kisses into his hair, and remind him in a whisper that he was a better man than anyone who could still be counted among the warrior monk corps.

Secure in Braska's embrace, Auron let himself close his eyes and nuzzle into him. Killing humans was nothing like killing fiends: the latter turned to pyreflies, the former expelled thick, dark blood. It had spurted out as he cut their throats, strangely vigorous even as they grew still and fell back. The blood had splashed his robe; he could still smell it. The shameful bandage on his hand was stained brown. He had killed Darnan, and then he had killed Pekko too, and he had done it with his own hands and his own blade.

He knew, suddenly, that he was going to vomit. Scrambling out of Braska's embrace, he turned to the side and heaved until there was nothing left to come up, coughing the last dribble of bile from his raw, stinging throat. He gradually became aware of Braska's hand against his back, a single source of solace amid unrelenting despair.

"We should put the tent up now, shouldn't we?" said Braska, his voice trembling slightly with concern. "We've come quite far today. What do you think, Jecht?"

Stationed at a safe distance, Jecht made an ambivalent gesture. "Sure, I guess," he said.

Auron turned around. "We can go a bit further," he said hoarsely. "There's still time to get as far as I planned – then we'll be on the mountain first thing tomorrow."

"But you're not well, Auron," said Braska. "You need rest."

"No, I …" Auron began. "You know what it's like, sir, when you have to go on because – because it's the only thing you

can do, and if you don't, it'll just make things worse –"

Braska reached for his hand. "Oh, Auron. I know. All right – we'll continue."

He slipped his arm around Auron's waist again as they stood. It was a slow last leg of the day's journey: Braska's headache was getting too severe to ignore despite everything, and Auron was sluggish and exhausted. With the sun about to set, the one advantage was that the number of fiend encounters had decreased. Each time something attacked them, Auron broke away from Braska and somehow succeeded in gathering himself enough to play some part in the battle, even though every swordstroke was a reminder of what he had used the same weapon for earlier in the day.

It was Braska who eventually had to call time on the day's walking: he had struggled through the headache for some time, but his energy had run out at last. Sitting with Auron for a while allowed him to feel a little better, and he mustered enough magic to light the campfire; after that, the two of them shared a portion of the evening's rations while Jecht ate the rest and then assembled the tent.

Braska coaxed Auron into lying down; he tugged Auron's head onto his lap, untied Auron's ponytail, and ran his fingers through his hair, hoping the feeling would soothe his troubled soul. Auron closed his eyes, but he still looked anguished.

"Why don't you tell us one of your blitzball tales, Jecht?" Braska suggested, wondering if that might serve as a helpful

distraction for Auron.

"Uh, sure," said Jecht, equally keen for the opportunity to think about something that wasn't Auron's mental state or the ever more imminent arrival in Zanarkand; he sat at the other side of the campfire, grateful that the flames distorted the image of Auron in front of him enough for his expression to be obscured from view, and considered. "OK, so this must've happened a couple years ago, I guess. There was this guy on the team called Hedra. Little squinty guy, didn't look much like a blitzer, but man, he could kick."

Braska let himself zone out; his headache was making it hard to concentrate anyway. He looked down at Auron as he continued to work his fingers through his hair, tracing it down onto his shoulders and chest. His heart ached as he looked at him: Auron deserved so much better than the treatment the Yevonites had given him. The Final Summoning would at least be a lesson to them all, Braska reflected.

"… But get this," Jecht concluded at last, "our publicity guy was on vacation for a whole month, so they didn't even find out till they'd already shipped the T-shirts; the guy had to go into every store in Zanarkand and basically beg them not to sell 'em. I ain't even kidding – he literally went around with a van and was like, oh, you guys gotta give me the stuff back, so they were passing these boxes to him same time as people were actually trying to buy 'em, and he was like, pulling them out of kids' hands and stuff. Unbelievable, right?"

The others made no reaction; neither had really been listening, and even if they had been, they wouldn't have understood more than about half the story.

"Maybe we should go to bed, Auron," said Braska. "I'm sure you'll feel better in the morning."

Auron's eyes slowly opened. "I'm on first watch," he said.

"Oh," said Braska, "but we could make an exception tonight, couldn't we? Jecht, perhaps you could take both shifts, just this once?"

Jecht's jaw fell open. "What, you want me to stay up all night? Seriously? Look, if you don't want Auron doin' it, *you* could –"

"There's no need for that," Auron interrupted, sitting up wearily. "It's my turn – I'll do it."

"But –" Braska tried.

Auron squeezed his eyes shut. "Sir," he said. "I have to do my duty. It's the one thing I *can* do – if I don't, I'll just –" He opened his eyes again and turned towards Braska's concerned face. "It's the only thing I have. I need it."

"Very well," said Braska, reaching out to stroke Auron's cheek. "I'm so sorry, Auron." He let go and turned to Jecht. "Well, then," he said; "shall we retire?"

They headed into the tent; Jecht did his best to avoid Auron's gaze.

Once they had gone, Auron halfheartedly retied his ponytail, and then sank his chin into his hands. Braska had been

right, he thought; he would feel better in the morning. He would have to, because if he still felt just as bad, he doubted he would be able to make it up the mountain. Things had been hard enough before Kinoc's trick – afterwards, they had become unbearable.

He knew sleeping would help distance him from what had happened; the difficult thing would be getting any sleep in the first place. If he tried giving in to his subconscious in this state, it would take him straight back to the water: that was inevitable. After the encounter, he had spent much of the afternoon feeling as if he was close, as if one false step would plunge him back in to drown in a sea of blood and fiends. Recalling it now was having a similar effect: he could feel his breathing quickening, his fragile grip on reality loosening as the water began to seep in at the edges of his mind. Scrabbling at the grass, he sat trembling and whimpering as he waited for it to pass – it felt as if it was taking hours.

Eventually, he gained the presence of mind to breathe slowly as Jecht had instructed him, rubbing the fingers of his left hand over the bandage on his right. As much as it sickened him to see it, it at least had the benefit of reminding him where he was – it made him think back not to the water, not even to the awful battle, but to Braska, patiently healing and wrapping his knuckles at the travel agency. Braska was his salvation, as ever. And if he were to lose him, all the trouble he had experienced so far would pale into insignificance.

Drawing himself up shakily, he forced himself to think through his plans at last. His mind was still muddled and racing, but he had put it off long enough. With difficulty, he thought back to each of the unenlightening discoveries he had made over the course of the pilgrimage. First, in Djose, he had discovered there had once been a full set of elemental æons available, although that information had taken him nowhere. At Besaid Temple, he had found that the pattern of Sin's attacks tended to change between Calms; at the library in Luca, he had learnt that the shape Sin took seemed to change as well. The apparent existence of another High Summoner prior to Lady Yunalesca was the most promising sign that the Final Summoning might not be the only way to defeat Sin, and the fayth's insistence that Auron had some unusual quality, according to Braska, perhaps meant that he would be the one to rediscover it. But on the other hand, the Guado archivist had told him that the fate that awaited them in Zanarkand was somehow even worse than the stories said.

He swallowed; his throat felt hot and sore. It was possible that whatever it was that was special about him had nothing to do with Braska's fate, he decided. Maybe it related to the Calm: that was what most summoners and their guardians were focused on, after all. Every pilgrimage was undertaken with the hope of giving Spira some immediate respite, but that was always underpinned by the deeper and more fervent desire to bring a Calm that would last. The promise that there would be

an eternal Calm one day was what motivated summoners to attempt the pilgrimage: if they could bring peace to Spira for good, their sacrifices would be worth it. But it was hard for Auron to think that way about Braska. As selfish as it felt, he valued Braska's life above Spira's future. If he were to go up the mountain and find himself presented with that choice, he would choose Braska over anything.

Admitting it to himself did nothing to make him feel better. He forced himself to refocus his thoughts on the evidence; it was too easy to become distracted. Sin changed; perhaps he could stop it from changing. But fixing its form would surely make no difference either. And the change would happen after the Final Summoning anyway, so whatever he might do in that respect would be too late.

He looked down at his shaking hands. None of it led to any clear answer, no matter how he tried to frame it. He was supposed to have some special ability that eluded most guardians, but the fayth's announcement of this had really been less than useless when they hadn't seen fit to explain to Braska what it actually entailed. And Auron was having trouble envisaging what would happen at the end of the journey: whenever he tried to picture their descent back into the Calm Lands in pursuit of Sin, the water began to pour into his mind again, drowning his attempts at rational thought before he could come to any remotely valuable conclusion.

He knew he could ask the Ronso: they lived on the moun-

tain, far from human civilisation, and they would have stories of summoners and their guardians passing through before and after they visited Zanarkand. And it was still possible that Zanarkand itself could be the answer. Perhaps the fayth of the Final Æon would enlighten Braska about how Auron differed from other people, and then he would be able to take it from there.

The thought that he would be unable to make any progress until later was unpleasant. It wouldn't take long to get to the Ronso settlement – they were now on the north edge of the Calm Lands, so it would be the following morning – but that would mean a few more hours of feeling useless and dispirited. Leaving the Calm Lands would help a little, perhaps: there was something about its wide plains that seemed to have made it particularly difficult to cope with. Seeing the scars and crevasses in the land where summoners had fought Sin had just made Auron feel even more sick.

He had raked his fingers through his hair again and again, so much so that more of it was now out of his ponytail than in. He had torn at the grass in front of him, and chewed on his fingernails until they were sore and red, and failed to make any progress at all. But more would come when he spoke to the Ronso, he told himself firmly, and more at Zanarkand, and then, at last, he would be able to piece everything together. Before that, he would need to get some sleep; and to achieve that, he would have to make use of every resource available.

He drew himself up, feeling so weak and unsteady that he almost fell down again; then he took a long, deep breath, and went to fetch Jecht to take over the watch.

Jecht hauled himself out of his bedroll, trying not to look at Auron; he was disappointed to find that instead of staying in the tent, Auron followed him back outside.

"What's up?" he said, hoping Auron wouldn't tell him.

"I don't think I'll sleep," said Auron. "Not unless we …" He nodded towards Jecht's crotch. *"Do* something again. You know."

"Really, dude?" said Jecht. "You wanna do it outside?"

"Nobody around," said Auron. "And I thought you wanted it. You – you want me, don't you?" It was a comforting thought: even with everything else falling apart, the idea that Jecht might still desire him made him feel like he was good for something.

Jecht sighed. "Auron," he said, "I don't wanna do it if – you ain't …"

"No, it'll do me good," Auron insisted. "Like it did before. I need this, Jecht."

He stepped towards Jecht then, and took him by the shoulder, and kissed him hard, so hard that Jecht had to push back to ensure he wasn't forced to stagger away.

"Please," Auron whispered.

Jecht still had his doubts, but he could hardly resist Auron: he was human, after all, and he couldn't say no to one of the

most attractive people in Spira, especially when that person was practically begging him. There was clearly still something wrong with Auron, but at the same time, Jecht reasoned, nobody could deny that he was giving his consent.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, OK. You wanna –" His gaze drifted towards Auron's trousers. "Get those off?"

Between them, they tugged Auron's trousers and underclothes down to his knees. Jecht took hold of his dick, coaxing it into stiffness before very much time had passed at all. Auron's eyes were closed; he was already breathing deeply, pressing his face into Jecht's neck.

"That good?" Jecht murmured.

"Yeah," said Auron. "Jecht, I – I want –"

"Yeah, what do you want?" Jecht asked him. "Tell me, Auron. I'll do it. I love doing this."

"I want you," Auron gasped. "Please."

"That's OK," said Jecht. "That's cool – I can do that. Where do you want me? What do you want me to do?"

"You know," said Auron.

"I wanna hear you say it," Jecht told him.

"Jecht," Auron stuttered. "I want … I want you inside. Want you to penetrate me."

Jecht sighed with delight; he'd never imagined he would be turned on by hearing someone say the word *penetrate*, but Auron was full of surprises. "Fuck," he said. "Yeah, I'll – I'll do it, Auron. Course I will. You're gonna love it, I promise."

He reached for Auron's head with his free hand, twisting it into position so he could give him a firm kiss, and then took hold of his robe in his finger and thumb and said, "Now, you gonna take this off and let me see your ass, hot stuff?"

Auron fumbled at his belt, casting it and his robe aside, and then got onto all fours; Jecht knelt behind him eagerly. His own dick was stiff and desperate; he unzipped his shorts and took it in one hand, using the other to squeeze and rub Auron's firm cheeks.

"You'll love it," he murmured again. "I'm gonna make it so good for you. You just relax, Auron – you're gonna have a great time."

Wetting his fingers in his mouth, he found Auron's hole and began to work at it, carefully rubbing the rim as Auron squirmed and whimpered with pleasure. Gradually, Jecht started to feel his way inside with his fingers, exploring the warmth of Auron's entrance.

Without withdrawing, he leant forward over Auron's back, and whispered in his ear, "You like that?"

"Yes," Auron panted. "Want you."

"I'm gettin' to that," Jecht promised him, dropping to place a quick kiss on the back of Auron's neck before turning back to the task at hand. His dick was as rigid as it would ever be, dribbling pre-come in anticipation; he gave it a few final strokes and then entered, gripping Auron by the cheeks as Auron writhed around him.

"Man, you feel so good," said Jecht. "So tight. You're fuckin' delicious, Auron."

He began to thrust, gradually building speed as Auron's little moans and whimpers increased in volume. Auron's dick had begun to soften once Jecht had taken his hand off it, but the occasional glimpse proved to Jecht that it was getting hard again, reaching its full, glorious length. "Gonna jack off for me?" he murmured.

Auron instinctively raised his right hand, clumsily placing it on his dick before remembering the bandage. The rough fabric against him was an unusual sensation, but not unpleasant; at this stage, very little would have been. "Faster," he managed to say as he began to stroke himself. "Please, Jecht."

Jecht obediently increased the speed of his thrusts. He was enjoying himself immensely; he could tell Auron was too. Every one of Auron's yelps of pleasure was unbelievably thrilling. He could feel himself approaching release, but was determined to hold himself back until Auron had come first: Auron was younger and less experienced, after all.

"Faster," Auron hissed again, taking his hand off his dick and placing it back on the ground to steady himself. Jecht couldn't help laughing with disbelief: he'd already been going unusually fast, he thought. But with Auron, everything always seemed to be extreme. He increased the pace again, lunging back and forth in as quick a rhythm as he could manage.

"This ain't hurting you?" he stammered out.

"Don't stop," Auron gasped.

Jecht's dick was hitting Auron's most sensitive spot, again and again; each time the sensation came closer to taking Auron over completely. He wanted to give in to it; he wanted to let it obliterate everything, leaving him new and clean and pure. And at last, the waves of pleasure began to throb through him, spreading from that place gradually, right through his body, to the tips of his fingers and toes. He could hear himself moan, long and loud, as scorching bliss rippled out again and again, cleansing him from the inside out. It felt endless and eternal, and yet it all happened so fast: Jecht emptied into him, and he released in turn, dripping onto the grass beneath him as pleasure overwhelmed him from every direction.

They came apart, soft, and lay there watching each other.

"Fuck," said Jecht after a moment. "You're such a good fuck, man." He leant over to kiss Auron lazily, was silent a little longer, and then added, "That do the job?"

"Yeah," Auron murmured, closing his eyes briefly as tiny frissons of delight continued to erupt inside him. "That was … pretty incredible."

"Yeah," Jecht echoed. "So good."

"I don't usually take that role," Auron admitted.

"More of a top?" said Jecht.

It was obvious from Auron's expression that he didn't know the term. "You're the one that …" Jecht tried again, gesturing with his finger.

Auron nodded. "Most of the time."

"Fancied something different, huh?" said Jecht.

"Yeah, I suppose so," said Auron, yawning.

They stared at each other in contented silence for a few more moments, and then Jecht said, "Look, as much as I'm enjoying lookin' at you, you should go get some sleep."

"You're right," said Auron. He stood slowly and picked up his discarded clothing. The urge to sleep was so much stronger now than his worries, which he had succeeded in confining to some distant part of his mind. His encounter with Jecht had had exactly the effect he had hoped for.

He glanced at Braska as he entered the tent; the summoner was sound asleep. With a little embarrassment, he recalled the amount of noise he had been making; only Braska would be able to sleep through that.

Too drowsy to stop himself, he bent to kiss Braska on the forehead, and then removed the rest of his clothes and settled into his bedroll. Soon, his eyes were closed again.

Chapter 41

Last Advice

Jecht spent much of his watch thinking about his encounter with Auron; he wasn't in a hurry to forget it. Being able to receive pleasure as well as give it at last had been so satisfying; he found himself recalling Auron's flushed face and his unrestrained moans so vividly that shortly before sunrise he ended up pulling down his shorts and laying a hand on himself until he came again. On a purely physical level, it had been an excellent experience. But, he couldn't help thinking, Auron still seemed reluctant to acknowledge the fact that Jecht was doing him a service. He had begged for it beforehand, but when it was over, he had acted as if it was something he was supposed to take for granted. He hadn't even admitted to finding Jecht attractive.

Auron was struggling; Jecht could see that, as much as he didn't want to draw attention to it. He understood that conveying gratitude was probably one of the last things on

Auron's mind. But he had helped him enough times, Jecht thought, whether through sex or other means, and there had never been anything more than the most fleeting expression of thanks. Braska was hardly much better. It wouldn't have been so irritating, he realised, if not for the fact that his companions seemed perfectly capable of reiterating how grateful they were for the support they received from each other. Then again, he hardly wanted the two of them to involve him in their public displays of affection. But there had to be something between that and treating him like a distant acquaintance who occasionally turned up to do something vaguely useful before receding and becoming irrelevant to their lives again.

He sighed. Like with his relationship with Tidus, it was difficult even to understand what he really wanted himself. Despite clearly being the most mentally stable of the group at this stage, he still found it hard to deal with these complex emotions. But the simple desire to be appreciated was easy enough to identify: he had craved it back in Zanarkand, and in this respect, he hadn't changed.

He couldn't help casting his eyes over Auron anyway when the latter emerged from the tent; his appearance was a welcome reminder of how thrilling their encounter had been. "Hey," he said. "Good sleep?"

Auron nodded. "It was all right, actually."

"All thanks to the great Jecht, huh?" Jecht prompted him.

"Right, I guess," said Auron.

He turned away from Jecht, whose allusions to their nighttime activities so early in the morning were starting to make him feel uncomfortable, and looked down at the bandage on his hand. It had once been bright white, but was now stained with grass and dried blood among other things. Carefully, he unwrapped it and was relieved to find that the deep grazes on his knuckles had scabbed over. He strapped his gauntlet on in the bandage's place, feeling slightly better for it.

Braska rose a little later. "How are you feeling this morning, Auron?" he asked, sitting down beside him without even acknowledging Jecht. "Better, I hope?"

Auron nodded. "A bit, yes. Thank you, sir."

"Good," said Braska emphatically. "It was utterly disgusting, what they did to you – I'm still appalled by it. Sending out your own men to –"

"Braska," Auron cut in. "Sir – if you don't mind – I don't want to talk about it."

"Oh," said Braska. "But it's not good to repress these things, Auron. You can tell me how you feel."

"Thank you," said Auron, "but I'd rather just try to move on for now."

"But –" Braska began.

"Hey, Braska," said Jecht, despite himself. "Drop it. OK?"

Braska looked at him with an expression that quickly shifted from surprise to displeasure, before moving a few paces away from Auron and fixing his gaze on a point in

the distance. Auron looked down at the grass; the relative stability of his mood now seemed much more precarious.

Hoping they might all be able to move on from the disagreement, Jecht located the breakfast rations and attempted to hand them out, but Braska folded his arms, refusing to take his portion. Jecht suppressed the urge to shove the food right into Braska's mouth himself; he was sure he had never seen a grown man act so immaturely.

"Come on," he growled, waving the rations in front of Braska's face.

Braska glared at him. "I'm not hungry. I've a terrible headache, Jecht."

Scowling, Jecht tossed the food onto the ground beside Braska and retreated to eat his own portion.

Auron gulped down what he could manage of his, sneaking the occasional glance in Braska's direction. If Braska's headache was already bad, he would be able to soothe it; but he doubted Braska wanted him to get close. Normally he would have known this awkwardness would pass soon enough, but now, emotionally compromised, he was having trouble envisaging a time when Braska would ever want to speak to him again. The thought, ludicrous as it was, was threatening to plunge him straight back into despair.

"Sir," he found himself croaking. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. Forgive me, my lord, please – I'm so sorry."

Braska turned slowly to look at him, his resolution waver-

ing when he made eye contact. He shuffled back towards Auron, and before too long he was holding him close in his arms. "It's all right," he murmured. "I shouldn't have lost my temper – you know it's just this headache making me irritable." He kissed Auron's forehead.

Out of Braska's sight, Jecht rolled his eyes. If Braska's mood was just because of the headache, he thought, that was a first; he didn't normally bother trying to find an excuse for it.

"You'll eat something, sir," Auron pleaded.

"If you insist," said Braska, and he let go of Auron and went back to retrieve the discarded rations.

"I dunno what you see in him," Jecht couldn't help muttering when Braska had made his excuses and gone to relieve himself.

Auron sighed. "You know he's not well. He wasn't always like this – he used to be happy." It seemed a very long time ago indeed.

They packed the tent away and continued, passing between the mountains that bordered the north side of the Calm Lands and stepping onto the short path that led to the foot of Mount Gagazet. The change of scene made Auron feel slightly better: it seemed that the vastness of the plains really had been one of the factors contributing to his unease. Now, at least, there was a clear goal in sight. He still didn't feel like talking much, but his heart seemed to be beating at a more

normal pace.

As they approached the mountain pass, they found that the climate was affected by another of the sudden changes that Jecht still found so odd. While the Calm Lands had been sunny and even fairly warm, there was now a biting wind and the air was so cold that thick snow lay on the ground. Braska shivered at the mere sight of it.

"Aren't you cold, Jecht?" he said once they had been on the trail for a few minutes.

Jecht shrugged. "Eh, not really. Spend a lot of time in the sea, you know – I'm used to this kind of temperature."

"But your feet," said Braska, looking down at them; they were mostly obscured by snow.

"Goin' barefoot works wonders," Jecht explained. "Last time I wore shoes must've been ... maybe fifteen years ago? If you get used to walkin' around without 'em, your feet just toughen up right away. Probably wouldn't feel it if I stepped on a nail these days." He raised one foot and tapped a finger against the sole; it sounded as if he was making contact with a piece of wood. "You guys oughta try it," he suggested.

"I think it's a little late for that," said Braska. "Well, my feet are freezing, at any rate. I don't suppose you've any spare socks, Auron?"

"Probably," said Auron, rummaging through his belongings to look for them.

Braska ended up taking two pairs of Auron's socks, awkwardly putting his sandals back on over the top; they also found the remaining bandage from Djose, and ended up using Auron's hunting knife to cut it into two lengths that Braska wrapped around his hands like mittens as a further measure against the cold.

"Perhaps you could let Jecht wear your robe," he suggested to Auron. "He can't walk around bare-chested like that."

"Seriously, I'm fine," said Jecht.

Auron took off his robe anyway. "So am I," he said. "Just take it – let's not have another argument." He thrust it into Jecht's arms.

Jecht put it on reluctantly, but cheered up when he had done so: wearing Auron's signature garment felt a bit like putting on a costume for a party, and what was more, the robe had Auron's smell, which was anything but unpleasant. "Do I get the belt as well?" he asked.

"No," said Auron, putting the item in question back on and drawing it tighter over his cuirass.

Jecht grinned. "Aw, shame."

It didn't take them long to reach the Ronso settlement; most of the buildings were obscured from view behind the steep inclines that bordered the mountain pass, but a few of the tall, grave Ronso were standing around, casting inscrutable looks at the three travellers.

Auron found that the long-awaited opportunity to make some progress in his task had filled him with renewed determination. "You go and stock up on supplies," he told Jecht. "I'm going to see if I can talk to their elder."

"You really think these guys have a potion store?" said Jecht.

Auron shrugged. "I'm sure they'll sell you something. They must need medicine for their own tribe."

He let go of Braska, who had taken his hand as usual, but Braska took hold of him again and said, "Where did you say you're going? You want to speak to the elder?"

"Yes," said Auron. "I just want to ask about the fiends we'll encounter on the mountain. They do say they're very dangerous."

"Then we should all go," said Braska.

"No, that's all right," Auron assured him. "You should rest while you have the chance, sir. Go with Jecht and find somewhere to sit down."

He moved in to kiss Braska on the cheek, catching the eye of a nearby Ronso as he did so. The beastman broke the eye contact quickly, but it was enough to give Auron pause. It was strange that he and Braska had developed this intimacy, he had to admit. Men often did express their affection for their friends with physical gestures in Spira, as adamant as Jecht seemed to be that they shouldn't; but Braska certainly took it further than most. And it was only over the last few weeks of the pilgrimage

that he had begun to behave quite like this. Those first kisses in Luca had been so overwhelming that Auron had had trouble thinking straight; now they seemed entirely normal, and Auron had grown accustomed to giving as well as receiving them himself.

There was no point speculating, Auron decided; he had enough other things to worry about, and he had already concluded that during his worse moments, Braska's kisses were a greater help than most remedies. He walked between the wide, squat Ronso buildings, looking for some sign of where the elder might reside; at the settlement's central point, he came upon a house that seemed grander than most and was flanked by two sentries.

"Is this where I would find Lord Kelk?" he asked one of them.

"This is house of Elder Kelk," the Ronso confirmed.

"Good," said Auron. "Is he in?"

The Ronso shook her head. "Elder Kelk is in Bevelle. Called to meet by Lord Kinoc."

The name felt like a knife in Auron's chest. Stunned, he staggered backwards, his vision blurring a little as he looked down at the snowy ground. They were almost at Zanarkand, and Kinoc – the man who had made him a killer – was still up to something.

He felt the Ronso's large paw make gentle contact with his arm. "Traveller is unwell?" she said.

"No," said Auron, still trying to focus on the ground in front of him. "No, I'm fine, I –" He couldn't go on. He wasn't fine: it was an obvious lie.

"Gagazet is cold for humans," said the other sentry. "Humans think too cold. Ronso bring heat."

The first Ronso led him to a long, hard bench while the other headed into the house. Some of the other nearby members of the tribe had begun to gather, intrigued by the presence of a somewhat distressed human. Auron sank onto the bench and closed his eyes; this was reminding him of the experience he had had trying to help with the construction project on Besaid Island. It had been frustrating and embarrassing at the time, but it seemed like nothing in comparison to the problems he had been having recently.

After a while, the Ronso sentry returned with a thick blanket and a bowl full of thick, spicy liquid. "Brings warmth," he said.

Auron didn't feel particularly cold, but he took them both anyway, drew the blanket over his shoulders, and began to drink: some distant, obscure memory of his studies of etiquette in another life had resurfaced, reminding him that the Ronso were sparing with gifts, and that refusing them was considered a great insult. The soup was more comforting than he had expected, too; it helped him think a little more clearly even if all that achieved was forcing him to realise that another of his avenues of enquiry had been cut off.

"I have to speak to someone," he said breathlessly. "If not Lord Kelk, then maybe someone else of his generation? I need to find out about the summoners – what happens to them when they climb the mountain –"

He was trembling. A little soup made its way over the rim of the bowl and splashed onto his trousers.

"Gagazet has many secrets," said the female sentry. "Even Ronso not understand secrets of Gagazet."

"Few summoners pass," her colleague added. "Fewer return."

"I *know*," said Auron, "but – isn't there any kind of pattern? Isn't there anything that tells you what might happen up there?"

Nobody said anything in reply. Auron closed his eyes and bent over his soup bowl; he raised his free hand to his face. He had been composed for a short time, thinking he might learn something important from the Ronso; now he felt sick and desperate again.

"Mimme can tell," said a quavering voice at last. "Mimme can share knowledge."

"Stories of Mimme are stories!" said another Ronso. "No truth in stories of Mimme. Traveller should not listen."

"Traveller decide," said yet another.

Auron felt a paw prodding at him. "Traveller," said the female sentry, "Mimme offers stories. But traveller must know,

Mimme is old Ronso. Frail body and mind. Ronso not listen to stories of Mimme."

He opened his eyes. Beside the sentry, a thin, wizened Ronso had materialised, with a yellowed horn and a beard of at least a foot in length. His eyes were clouded: he was clearly completely blind, and so small, by Ronso standards, that he was no taller than Auron himself.

"Traveller must decide," he said. "Will hear stories?"

It hardly filled Auron with confidence – not least the use of the word *stories*, which reminded him of Jecht's insistence on believing the folk tale about the man who visited Spira – but he couldn't afford to turn anything down. "Tell me," he said.

Mimme nodded solemnly, and felt his way onto the bench beside Auron as the others moved back. Auron shrank away a little; Mimme's breath stank of ale.

"Mimme has seen many guardians," said the elderly Ronso. "Many, many, until fayth took Mimme's eyes. Mimme saw too much, so they took his eyes away. But Mimme still remembers."

"What did you see?" said Auron.

"Summoner go up with one guardian," said Mimme, "summoner die on mountain. Sometimes summoner come back alone. Sometimes with one guardian, but never Final Æon. Summoner cries. Ronso look for dead summoner and guardian on mountain, but find only summoner."

He paused. "Summoner go up with two guardians, come back with one guardian. Sometimes alone and sometimes die. With two guardians, never Final Æon. Ronso not find two guardians dead on mountain. Go up with three guardians, back with two, one, no guardians. Or three guardians, not Final Æon. Traveller understand?"

"No," said Auron. "You're saying – not all the guardians come back with the summoner, if the summoner has the Final Æon? But when has a summoner ever come back with a Final Æon anyway? There've only been three High Summoners –" He stopped, remembering what he had seen in the library at Luca. "Are there more High Summoners? Ones we're not told about?"

Mimme shook his head. "No more High Summoners. But more summoners gain Final Æon. Then choose not to call Sin."

"Why?" said Auron.

"Too sad," said Mimme. "Too angry. Not enough guardians. They hide – never go back to Bevelle."

Auron blinked in frustration. "I don't get it," he said. "I don't understand! Can't you be more specific?"

"Mimme not understand either," said the Ronso. "Tries to count guardians. But guardians go, and then fayth take Mimme's eyes."

"They go?" Auron exclaimed. "Where do they go?"

"Mimme tried to find out," said Mimme. "Never succeeded. Mimme said to Elder Kelk, and Elder Kelk said to Maester Mika,

but Maester Mika never said back to Elder Kelk."

"I still don't understand," Auron said.

"Mimme tell stories of two summoners," said Mimme. "First summoner was small boy, not know if human or Guado. Guardian was human woman. Summoner come back alone, crying, crying, never stopped – but he had Final Æon. Would not go down mountain. Stayed three days with Ronso. Guado men came to fetch him."

"Didn't he say what happened up there?" said Auron.

"Never," said Mimme. "Only crying."

Auron frowned.

"Mimme tell story of second summoner," the Ronso went on. "Summoner Yocun; Mimme was young Ronso then. Yocun went up with two guardians. Traveller knows story?"

"One of the guardians died," said Auron.

"Yes," said Mimme. "Went up with two guardians, came back with one guardian and Final Æon. Familiar?"

"Yes," said Auron, "but I don't see how –"

"Then became High Summoner," Mimme continued. "Ronso went to Bevelle to pay respects. When Ronso returned, searched mountain for guardian's belongings. But Ronso never found. Grand Maester told Ronso to stop."

"Grand Maester Mika?" said Auron, before realising it would have been his predecessor. He had been made to learn all the Grand Maesters' names by rote once; at this point, they eluded him.

"Grand Maester Sahanan," said Mimme. "Lived very long time: one hundred and seventy. Older than Ronso."

He had said that as if it was supposed to fit into the story somehow, but Auron didn't see how there could be a connection. "So you think guardians are going missing?" he attempted to summarise.

"Maybe go missing," said Mimme. "Maybe exchanged."

"What?" Auron muttered.

"Mimme has no more stories," was the reply.

"But –" said Auron. "What do you mean, exchanged?"

"Summoner go up with two guardians," said Mimme, "come down with –"

"Yes, you said that," said Auron. He stood up, frustrated, and exhaled. "Thank you," he said more calmly. "That was –" *Helpful* certainly wasn't the right word. "It was very interesting."

The other Ronso had left them alone, evidently uninterested in hearing Mimme's stories. Auron walked back to the larger building where the two sentries had resumed their posts, and attempted to hand back the empty soup bowl and blanket.

"Traveller keep," said the sentry, gently pushing the blanket back into Auron's arms.

"Oh," said Auron, looking down at it. "That's very kind."

The Ronso nodded gravely. "Traveller is guardian of summoner, true? Then must be well to climb mountain. Ronso prayers follow."

"Thank you," Auron murmured. In his compromised mental state, he found himself uncharacteristically moved by the gesture: his voice came out almost as weak as Mimme's had been.

He cleared his throat and headed back towards the pass to find the others, finding them sitting on a bench at the outskirts of the settlement. They were discussing something in low voices, chuckling as they did so; the sight of it was so incongruous to Auron that he stopped in his tracks, wondering how it was possible to be the slightest bit happy in this situation.

"You took your time, Auron," said Braska, wincing a little due to his headache but still smiling nonetheless. "I suppose you know all about the fiends now?"

"Yeah," said Auron.

"Well?" Braska prompted him.

"They're tough," said Auron. He made for Jecht and thrust the blanket towards him. "The Ronso gave me this. You take it and I'll have my robe back."

"Aw, but I liked dressin' up as you," said Jecht, smirking. "I make a pretty convincing Auron, right, Braska? *No time to waste, let's go!"* He and Braska exchanged an amused glance.

"Come on, Jecht," said Auron sternly. "I'm not in the mood for this."

Reluctantly, Jecht stood and took off Auron's robe, handing it over to him in exchange for the blanket. Auron put the robe

back on without a word.

"Did you stock up?" he said eventually.

Jecht nodded. "Yeah. They were sellin' a lot of weird herbal stuff, but I found the potions in the end."

"I think he bought their entire stock," said Braska.

"Good," said Auron. "Let's go, then."

"No time to waste, I suppose?" said Braska knowingly.

Auron couldn't bring himself to return the summoner's grin, but he took his hand and they continued along the mountain pass.

No longer sheltered by the wind by the aspect of the Ronso settlement, Braska found himself shivering even with the efforts he had gone to to cover his hands and feet. The climate wasn't helping his headache, and the æons didn't seem inclined to make any allowances for the weather either. From time to time, he remarked mournfully on how cold it was; there was nothing that could be done about it, though, so it never attracted much of a response.

Auron's guess about the fiends had been right: they were tough. It was quickly agreed that keeping Braska out of danger was the main priority, not only because he was the summoner, but also because he was the only one with the magical ability to heal the others and therefore had to be in adequate condition himself. Auron and Jecht worked together to protect Braska from the fiends' advances, taking as many of the hits themselves as they could. Fortunately, leaving the Calm Lands

behind had allowed Auron to regain possession of his mental faculties even though he still felt anxious and desperate; during battle, he was able to gather himself enough to assess the fiends and determine the best combat strategies.

Given the strength of their foes and the fact that Braska was mostly reserving his powers for healing, though, even Auron's most judicious decisions weren't enough to lead them to easy victories. By the end of nearly every battle, at least one of the two guardians was seriously injured, and Braska had to step in quickly before it was too late. Auron's bare arm and Jecht's legs were constantly being ripped open by scratches from the fiends' claws; during one battle, Jecht broke two of the fingers on his unarmoured hand, while in another, Auron was knocked down so many times that he could have been quite badly concussed if Braska hadn't been able to heal him immediately.

The constant cycle of injury and healing was making them all feel exhausted, none more so than Braska, who was starting to need even more frequent rest breaks. Each time, he tugged off his headdress and let himself sink onto the snowy ground, grateful for the opportunity to spend some time in Auron's embrace and warm up a little. Occasionally, he reached out to the æons, even though doing so brought new pain to his head that was so acute it made his eyes water.

Why must you make me suffer? he asked them. This is hard enough – what do you gain by punishing me?

You must do as we command, Braska, they replied. *You must be ready for the end. Only death will end your pain.*

I know, he thought. That is what I want – I've wanted it for years.

It felt embarrassing to say so, especially while secure in Auron's arms, but he wondered whether convincing the æons that he wanted to die anyway would finally show them there was no point hurting him constantly. It seemed to have no effect: the headache remained just as bad. He shifted in Auron's grip and groaned quietly.

"Has it been getting worse, sir?" Auron murmured.

Braska nodded. "I just wish it could be over," he admitted.

Trailing his fingers through Braska's hair and pressing gentle kisses to his forehead, Auron wondered what Braska was referring to. He didn't like to ask: he hoped it meant the headache, but had a horrible feeling that Braska was really talking about his own life. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I hate seeing you in so much pain."

Braska was so tired that he ended up having a short nap, falling asleep right there in Auron's arms and waking a little later to find that his headache was perhaps slightly more bearable. "We should move on, shouldn't we?" he mumbled.

"If you're up to it, my lord," said Auron.

"Not really," said Braska, "but we've hardly much choice."

He stood wearily and walked towards Jecht, who had spread his blanket in the snow and was lying on top of it.

"Come on, Jecht," he said quietly, poking him with his toes. "Time to go."

Jecht groaned. "Do we gotta? I don't wanna get ripped apart by fiends again."

"I know," said Braska. "I'm afraid we must."

Jecht clambered to his feet, shaking the snow off the blanket before gathering it around himself again; the armour on his left shoulder meant he had taken to draping the blanket over his right and securing the rest of it around his waist. He still didn't think he really needed it; he would have been fine in the cold without it, but it had stopped Braska insisting he must be freezing, at least.

He was much more bothered by thoughts of what lay ahead. Like Auron, he was pinning all his hopes on Zanarkand; by this point, he was certain that it wasn't his city, but the fact that they shared a name couldn't be a total coincidence. Nothing else in Spira had been sufficient to explain how he could get home – Zanarkand now seemed to be his last hope. He felt guilty and regretful about Tidus, now convinced by the prophecy that he would never get to see him again even if he did make it back home. The thought that he had been a bad father had been worrying him intermittently ever since his brief breakdown in Macalania Woods.

He had had to put it aside in the Calm Lands to support Auron, though, and he knew he would have to do the same now, despite the fact that Auron clearly wouldn't thank him

for it. Auron was in a better state than before, but he was obviously still troubled, and Braska was tired and ill. If Jecht spent the day being miserable, it would just make things even more grim for all of them. He had forced himself to be in good spirits at the Ronso settlement, and that had seemed to lift Braska's mood as well; he would have to keep adopting the same strategy, he decided. If he did his very best to have fun, some of it might work, and maybe it would even encourage his companions to lighten up in turn.

As they advanced, he noticed an odd structure just off the edge of the path; it appeared to be composed of several large items and scraps of fabric, with a long object similar to Braska's staff protruding upwards. With the details obscured by snow, it was difficult to tell exactly what any of the components of the strange collection were, even after Jecht had bounded forward to inspect them. "Hey!" he called, waving back to the others. "Look at this heap of junk, huh! Do people not clean up after themselves around here?"

Braska and Auron approached slowly; the latter's expression was sour. "Show some respect," he said. "This is a grave marker."

"Now, Auron, he can't have known," said Braska weakly, before addressing Jecht himself. "These indicate where summoner parties have fallen. The Ronso sometimes scout the mountain to see if any have been lost – particularly if a group passes through their home and fails to return. They gather

their belongings together as a sign of respect."

"The temples pay them to do it," Auron muttered.

Braska turned to him. "Sorry?"

"That's what I heard," said Auron, shrugging a little. "Someone said so at the barracks once."

"Oh," said Braska. "Well, regardless, that's what they signify."

"So people are buried down there?" said Jecht.

"Buried?" Braska repeated. "No, of course not, they –" He cut himself off, remembering again that Jecht was unused to certain aspects of Spiran society. "Jecht," he said, "if somebody dies and isn't sent within a few days, he turns into a fiend. Don't you remember that?"

Jecht scratched his neck. "Ah, yeah. I forgot."

Auron made a small noise of displeasure; Jecht just about managed to stop himself retaliating.

"So," he said, trying to find a way to fill the awkward silence, "a lot of people die up here, then? If the Ronso go searching for 'em ..."

"More summoners die here than anywhere else on the journey," said Auron, who had looked into the statistics. "Shouldn't be a surprise – we've seen how strong the fiends are."

"And the cold can't help," said Braska.

"We're doin' OK, though, right?" said Jecht. "I mean, yeah, the fights are tough, but that big orb thing in Macalania came way closer to killin' us than any of these ones."

"You were relying on me for offence during that battle, though," said Braska. "With the two of you, our combined physical power is far greater than our magical power. Different groups are challenged in different circumstances; you and Auron are both excellent swordsmen, and perhaps a concentration on the physical side is the sort of combination that works well here. But this is more your area, Auron," he added, giving Auron a little nudge.

"Yeah," said Auron. "Well, whatever happens, we should be careful. Just because nothing's got us yet, it doesn't mean this is going to be easy."

Jecht couldn't help rolling his eyes. "Man, you always gotta bring it down, don't you? Would it kill you to look on the bright side for once?"

"Yes, actually, it might," said Auron. "Do you really think this is the time to be frivolous?"

"Course I don't," said Jecht. "Just think there's some benefits in havin' a positive attitude."

"Well," said Auron, "you'll forgive me if I'm finding it pretty damn hard to have a *positive attitude* right now."

"Auron, Jecht, please," said Braska. "I thought you were past this sort of thing."

Jecht glanced at Auron; Auron glared back. "Might get past it if he grows up," he hissed.

"Hey!" Jecht yelped; he had been able to overlook Auron's other comments, knowing he wasn't in the best way, but be-

ing accused of childishness always stung. "You're the one that needs to grow up! You gotta stop deludin' yourself and accept what's gonna happen –"

Auron let go of Braska's hand and surged towards Jecht, his eyes wide with indignation. "Don't you dare," he said. "Don't say another word. You know how much this is *destroying* me –"

"Auron," said Braska, raising a hand to his forehead. "Both of you – really. Must you bicker all the time like this? What are you even arguing about? No – on second thoughts, I don't want to know. My head's hurting enough as it is; I would have thought you might consider that before you started shouting at each other." He pulled off his headdress and sat down abruptly in the snow. "I shall have to rest again. Please spare a thought for my health next time we attempt to move on – perhaps we might make it more than twenty paces."

"See what you've done," Auron muttered to Jecht; Jecht shrugged unrepentantly.

Auron turned away from him and sat beside Braska. "Forgive me, my lord," he said. "I can't seem to get anything right at the moment – I'm sorry."

Braska gazed at him curiously for a second; it was unlike Auron to make mistakes, and just as uncharacteristic for him to admit to it. He was in too much pain to give it much thought, though, so he closed his eyes and said, "Never mind. Just – your hands, please."

Knowing what he meant, Auron took off his gauntlet and began to run his hands through Braska's hair again. Braska leant in, sighing with relief, but his expression remained tense.

"It's still bad, isn't it?" said Auron, trying to distract himself from his own misery.

"Terrible," said Braska. "Worse than it's ever been."

Looking up at Jecht over Braska's shoulder, Auron watched him roll his eyes and retreat a few paces; he scowled at him before leaning in to kiss Braska's head. "I'm sorry, sir," he said.

"It's awful, Auron," said Braska. "If it weren't for all these fiends, I probably wouldn't feel as rotten, but having to use so much magic really doesn't help. If only the potions were more effective."

"I know," said Auron. "I wish there was an alternative. We could try running up the mountain, I suppose, and then the fiends might not catch us –"

"Oh, I'd rather not," said Braska. "Although at least that would warm us up. Aren't you freezing?"

"I don't mind the cold," said Auron.

Braska sighed. "You're lucky – Jecht too. I can't stand it. I think that's why my head's so bad, actually. Absolutely horrible."

At that, Jecht stomped back over towards them, unwinding the blanket from around his torso. "Look, this is dumb," he said, thrusting it towards Braska. "You take this, right?"

"But you can't go around like that in this weather," Braska protested.

"I already told you, it don't bother me," said Jecht. "No point me havin' it when you're the one that needs it."

"I don't believe it," said Auron dully. "Is this kindness at last, Jecht? Are you turning over a new leaf?"

"Aw, come on," Jecht said. "I only had it cos you wanted your robe back, and I only had *that* cos you guys made me wear it. And anyway ..." He leant in to leer at Auron. "I been plenty *kind* to you already. You can't deny that."

Auron looked away moodily.

"I wouldn't," said Braska as he reached for the blanket, "but I really do feel terrible. If this helps even a little, it could make all the difference."

Jecht shrugged. "Yeah, like I said, I don't need it." He moved away quickly before Braska could say any more about how bad his headache was.

With some help from Auron, Braska succeeded in wedging the blanket under his robe and breastplate, winding it snugly around his chest and stomach. Tight against him, it was almost as effective as the Al Bhed dransymc[29] he had been lent for the journey to Macalania Temple all those weeks ago. He exhaled carefully: against all odds, it was actually making him feel slightly better.

[29] Thermals

"Right," he said, leaning in to give Auron a fleeting kiss. "On we go."

The blanket was no miracle cure, but Braska certainly noticed a difference as they continued; he wondered once or twice whether the æons might have decided to dial down the intensity for some reason. It was a good thing too; the fiends' attacks were just as relentless as before. Braska found himself alternating between white magic and summoning, mostly letting the æons take the lead in determining when he should call them; Jecht made heavy use of his time spells in an effort to give himself and his companions a greater advantage. As for Auron, he let loose, venting his worries with powerful but sometimes imprecise swordstrokes as he did his best to simply hurt the fiends as much as he could. They did plenty of damage to him in return, but Braska was always there to heal his wounds and help him back to his feet.

They passed more grave markers as they walked; the sight of them made Auron feel still more uneasy. He remembered the elderly Ronso's words: guardians went missing on the mountain, and no traces of them could be found. But maybe, Auron reasoned, it was just that these guardians had died protecting their summoners. That was what guardians were supposed to do, after all. The mountain was riddled with dangerous fiends, and so guardians died while facing them.

Such thoughts had no success in making him feel more settled. With each step, he felt as if he was bringing all three of

them closer to a death sentence. Jecht's accusations that he was deluding himself echoed in his mind, enraging and worrying him at once. He knew Jecht had always been sceptical about his plan, but hearing it said out loud made it worse. He was adamant that he would prove him wrong; he hadn't yet worked out how, but as long as Zanarkand still lay ahead of him, there was still hope. There had to be.

The path widened, and the visibility improved; Braska looked out over the edge of the mountain. His headache seemed more bearable than it had earlier in the day, and his thoughts kept turning to the promise he had made back at the Calm Lands travel agency: he had a final sphere to take for Yuna. Not for his little Yuna, though; for when she was grown. She would have a last image of him to look forward to as she grew up.

"I need to take a sphere," he announced to the others. "For Yuna – I said I'd do it up here."

"We'll get out of your way, sir," said Auron, before heading up the snowy bank.

"Takin' one here?" said Jecht. "Why?"

Braska looked down at the ground. "I promised her the last one I sent from the Calm Lands wouldn't be the final time she ever heard from me. This is for when she's older." He wiped his eyes; they were already starting to moisten. "I didn't want to say goodbye so abruptly."

"Right, yeah," said Jecht; he understood. He'd tried to do

the same back in the woods, after all, not that he had really succeeded in telling Tidus what he had wanted to say.

"Tell her about the good times, will ya?" he said. "It ain't all been bad. She'll wanna know you had fun."

Braska managed a wobbly smile. "Yes," he said. "Bless you, Jecht – you're right. Of course she will. I'll do that."

"And tell her me and Auron say hi," Jecht added.

"Of course," Braska murmured.

He waited until Jecht had headed up the bank in Auron's wake, and then cleared his throat and wiped his face again, willing himself not to start crying properly. He had been able to put on a brave face when the temples had authorised Yuna's visits, after all; even though she was getting bigger and learning more every day, she was still his little girl, and he had to be strong for her. It wouldn't do for her last sight of her father to show him looking miserable and defeated.

Waiting a few more moments until he was as composed as he could ever be, he retrieved the sphere recorder and carefully positioned it so it would capture his image. Then, just to give his mood a final boost, he reached for the æons; pain blossomed briefly in his head, but the short contact was enough to make him feel more stable. He leant forward to switch on the device.

"Hello, Yuna," he said. "I hope you are well."

It felt odd to be addressing her so formally, but he had no idea when and in what circumstances she would eventually see

the recording. "I wonder how old you are," he mused, "now that you're watching his sphere. You must be very beautiful – like your mother. I wish I could see you."

Even despite the æons' help, his eyes were threatening to water again; in search of a distraction, he turned to look at where Jecht and Auron stood on the ridge behind him, and remembered Jecht's words. "By the way," he added, forcing levity into his voice, "Jecht and Auron send their regards. So far, our journey has been very entertaining." It was no lie – as Jecht had said, they had had plenty of fun. He had found himself laughing, and at times he had even forgotten his sorrow. That was worth mentioning, even if Yuna might not understand its significance when she eventually played the sphere back.

"Of course," he said, "it is a hard journey, but I have no regrets. This is the path I have chosen."

He had already been idly thinking about his previous sphere for Yuna, and as he spoke those words, he remembered what the clerk had said at the Calm Lands travel agency, about Yuna being prepared for the summoner's pilgrimage herself. As he had said at the time, he was adamant that she would not have to follow in his footsteps, even if summoners' children often did. He had defied what was expected of him, after all, and his life with Girl, short as it was, had been so much more fulfilling than anything the temples might have forced him into. He was a firm believer that everyone should choose their own fate; it seemed an important message to leave Yuna with

as his final words.

"Yuna," he began carefully, "when you are older, you will have to find your own path."

Up on the ridge, Auron stood looking in the other direction. He could see down the side of the mountain, where the snowy slopes gradually descended towards oblivion; it only increased his feeling of dread. He was having odd and disturbing thoughts; the water was starting to lap at the edges of his mind again, distorting everything with eerie darkness.

He didn't think he would lose control completely, as he had in the Calm Lands; at least, he fervently hoped it wouldn't happen. Breathing slowly and carefully, he reminded himself where he was and what he had undertaken to do: he was on Mount Gagazet. He was taking Braska to Zanarkand, so Braska could receive the Final Æon and fight Sin. He was searching with all his might for a way to complete the journey without requiring Braska's sacrifice.

Behind him, he heard Jecht approaching. "Go away," he growled.

"Fine," Jecht muttered, walking off in the other direction. Auron clearly still wasn't in his right mind, but if he didn't want help, Jecht had no desire to labour the point. He didn't fancy getting into another meaningless argument; they were wearing.

Back down on the path, Braska was concluding his sphere. "Yuna," he said earnestly, "I will always be with you." That was

one of the reasons why he didn't fear death: he and Girl would both live on in their beautiful, remarkable daughter. She would be a better person than he had ever been; he was sure of that.

He switched off the sphere recorder before his tears started to flow again – then he let himself cry for a while, no longer making the effort to hold it back. The tears came fast, but unusually, it didn't take long until he felt he had no more crying to do.

Wiping his stinging eyes, he buried one of the sphere halves and then headed slowly onto the ridge to fetch his guardians. He trudged towards where Auron stood, put one arm around him, and then leant his head against Auron's shoulder.

Auron turned to look at him. "All right, sir?" he said hoarsely.

"It could be worse," Braska conceded. He studied Auron's face for a second, before adding, "Oh, Auron – you look as miserable as I am."

"It's just … a hard journey," Auron mumbled.

"That's certainly true," said Braska. "And I'm so fortunate to have had you with me, my dear Auron."

He adjusted his position, reached out to tuck some of Auron's hair gently behind his ear, and then kissed him softly on the mouth; Auron remained largely motionless. Undeterred, Braska pressed more kisses to his lips, until he could feel Auron returning the gesture. His chest throbbed with joy: Auron

was so good to him. No other person could have been a truer companion. He wanted Auron to know how much he valued and cherished him.

"None of this could have happened without you," he whispered. "I owe you so much."

Auron broke away from Braska's embrace. "We should keep going," he said. "Get as far as we can before we're all completely exhausted."

Braska nodded. "Yes, of course."

They headed back to the path and began facing the fiends again. Auron was glad of the distraction; Braska's kisses had made him feel even more destabilised. He found he could barely look at the summoner without feeling as if his heart was about to burst. Everything seemed distant and false; slicing through fiends was the one thing that kept him anchored to reality. Even Braska's hand against his own no longer really registered.

Jecht could tell Auron was deteriorating again, but declined to comment. Auron's fighting still got the job done even though he lacked his usual precision. If Auron had asked Jecht for more sexual favours, he probably would have obliged, but Auron hadn't mentioned the subject for a while, so Jecht kept his distance.

They came to a stop for the day through mutual consent: Braska was getting tired enough to struggle with healing everyone's injuries, and even Jecht was starting to complain that

he was sore and drained. Auron had mostly been quiet and withdrawn since Braska had taken his sphere; he remained so as he assembled the tent with Jecht and fetched the evening's rations for everyone.

As evening drew in, Braska began to feel the cold again. "I hope it's warmer in the tent," he remarked, receiving no answer from either of his guardians.

Having got ready for bed and settled into his bedroll, he found that he was barely any warmer at all. Now that the sun had gone down, the temperature was dropping quickly. Braska had kept his robe on, along with the Ronso blanket, Auron's spare socks, and his makeshift mittens, but none of it was enough to stop him shivering. He was so cold that he was finding it difficult to get to sleep, which was highly unusual.

"Auron?" he murmured after a while.

Auron, who had gone to bed at the same time and had, for different reasons, also made no progress in falling asleep, turned towards him. "Sir?" he said.

"I'm so cold," said Braska.

Auron hummed sympathetically.

"I wonder if …" Braska began. "No, I shouldn't want to make you feel uncomfortable."

"What is it?" said Auron.

"It doesn't matter," Braska told him.

"I'm your guardian, sir," said Auron, staring up at the canvas above his head. "If there's something you need me to do

for you, it's my duty."

"I suppose so," said Braska. "Well, then, I … I only wondered if we might, um, lie together tonight. I'm sure it would make me a little warmer; I just don't think I'll sleep if it goes on like this."

"Oh," said Auron. "That's fine."

He shuffled over towards Braska and slipped his arms around him, pressing their bodies together to keep the heat in. It was just because of the climate, he thought to himself; Braska needed warmth, and this was the best way to provide it. It meant nothing beyond that. Through the fabric of the two bedrolls, he could sense the distinct outline of Braska's body snug against his own; he could feel every place where the two of them fitted together, and even the unmistakable shape of Braska's soft dick pressing against his thigh. He clenched his teeth, swallowing a half-formed whimper.

"Oh yes," Braska murmured, "that's lovely. I'm warmer already." He adjusted his position a little, reaching out to lazily stroke Auron's face, and met his lips with a soft, contented kiss.

"You should try to get some sleep, sir," said Auron, somehow succeeding in not letting his voice shake.

"Indeed I should," said Braska. "Thank you, Auron." He twisted to face away from Auron, still maintaining their close contact as he let his body mould itself into the space left by his dear friend.

When Jecht came into the tent to fetch Auron for his watch, he found them in the same position: Auron's face was buried in Braska's hair, but he looked up when Jecht approached and carefully extricated himself from the summoner's embrace, standing and putting on his clothes while deliberately avoiding making eye contact.

Not to be deterred, Jecht followed him back outside.

"What," said Auron flatly.

Jecht gestured back towards the tent. "Are you kidding? What the hell was that?"

"Don't, Jecht," said Auron. "He was cold – said he couldn't sleep. He asked me to keep him warm. That's all there is to it."

"Dude, are you listening to yourself?" Jecht exclaimed. "You don't seriously think he ain't into you? What about that full-on makeout session you guys were havin' earlier, huh? You gonna tell me that's a guardian's duty or whatever?"

"Please," said Auron, sitting down and burying his face in his hands. "I don't – I can't talk about this right now. I'm barely holding on, Jecht – I can't deal with you haranguing me about all this. I don't know what he wants from me – if I think about it, I'll drive myself mad."

"I mean, you could ask him," said Jecht, "or at least, give him a hint that you're fucking in love with him and he oughta be more careful about just … using you like that."

"You think he's *using* me?" said Auron.

"Yeah," said Jecht. "Yeah, I do." He took a deep breath; he hadn't expected to get so riled up about it, but the way Braska treated Auron was undoubtedly infuriating, and it was still more so when Auron apparently didn't realise why it was a problem.

He cast his eyes over Auron, and settled on the prominent bulge at his crotch that had appeared as the result of his long and close embrace with Braska and had so far shown no signs of receding. "Uh," he said, nodding down at it, "wasn't gonna ask, but … you want help with that?"

Auron glanced at it and sighed. "No," he said. "Just leave me alone."

"Sure," Jecht muttered, and he went back into the tent.

Braska stirred as he came in, half-asleep. "Auron?" he murmured.

"Nah, just me, pal," said Jecht. "Want me to *keep you warm*?"

"Oh, no," Braska replied. "No need …" He mumbled something inaudible before falling silent.

That just about proved it, Jecht thought as he undressed. Even if Braska didn't want to say so, it was clear that he had feelings for Auron. The thought was unexpectedly irritating: he wished the two of them would just be open with each other.

He lay down, closed his eyes, and admitted it to himself: he was jealous. He had always felt like a third wheel on the

pilgrimage, not only because of the way his companions always seemed to take his support for granted, but also because of how they behaved with each other. Auron's insistence on pining after someone who treated him with such casual cruelty was frustrating, especially when Jecht, not Braska, was the one who had more often ended up having to take care of him over the past few days. It wasn't that he had feelings for Auron, at least nothing beyond raw, primitive lust, but it came back to the simple fact that he just wanted to be appreciated, as was only natural. He wondered whether the others would even care if he walked away from the pilgrimage.

He would prove it to them, he thought as he drifted off to sleep. He would show them just how indispensable he was. And they would thank him eventually – he was sure of it.

Chapter 42

The Right Thing To Do

Auron was even more silent and unresponsive the next morning; Jecht found it somewhat surprising that Braska didn't try to probe him about his mental state, but the summoner was too afflicted by his headache to pay anyone but himself much attention. The æons seemed to have redoubled their efforts to cause him pain, finding an uncomfortable equilibrium where Braska was able to walk and cast magic, but found that his head started hurting too much if he tried thinking about anything else. He knew Auron was beside him as always, and he gratefully reached for his hand and clung to him; any more complex reaction to his presence would have been impossible. Braska was all the more glad that he had only a few days left to live: death would bring him release from this interminable pain. He had once thought the same about his mental anguish; now it was his physical state that made him eager for the end, but the conclusion was the same in both cases. He

was ready to die, but he had known that for a long time. He didn't need the æons to convince him.

The fiends and the cold weather were just as unpleasant as the previous day. A good night's sleep had allowed Braska to regain his magical power despite his declining physical state, and Jecht had got enough rest to do the same. Auron had barely slept, and was still exhausted, but managed to drive his sword into the fiends when it was required. He had trained in combat for so many years that he was able to do so even when he felt weak and lethargic. It was one of two important tasks he knew he could fulfil as they continued up the mountain, the other being taking Braska in his arms and soothing his headache when he required it.

They continued along the trail as it wound its way up towards the summit, slower and slower as the fiends assailed them and the snow fell harder, obscuring their vision of what lay ahead. But at last, after hours of this gradual progress, the path twisted once more and the mouth of a cave gradually came into view ahead of them.

"Is this right?" Braska mumbled, squinting up at the stony roof that was about to cover their heads.

"Yeah," Auron replied. "Caves near the top – there's a path through."

They passed into the enclosed area and took a few more steps before Braska sank eagerly to the ground, pulling Auron down with him. Now that they were sheltered from the snow,

he was hopeful that things would improve. Auron helped him remove his headdress, and his hands were soon in Braska's hair, rubbing his head carefully and helping him gain a little clarity.

"This will be better," said Braska. "Feels warmer already."

"Should be no snow on the north face," Auron told him.

"Oh, wonderful," said Braska; those words alone were enough to make him feel more present. He was so relieved that a few tears leaked from his eyes. Wiping them away with a finger, he returned Auron's soft kisses with gratitude and relief.

He struggled to his feet and began to take in the surroundings. The headache had prevented him from noticing before, but now that he was feeling a bit better, he had started to realise that there was something unusual about the cave. The air throbbed with magic, so much of it that the sensation was almost overwhelming.

Jecht was standing a few feet away, his face illuminated by an eerie glow from the wall in front of him. Braska approached. "You can feel the magic," he guessed.

"Yeah," said Jecht, turning to face him. "What is this? All these people –"

Braska followed his gaze to the wall, and was so surprised by what he saw that he took a step backwards. "Oh, goodness," he whispered. "Fayth."

"They're fayth?" said Jecht.

"Yes," said Braska. "So many of them …"

Their bodies twisted in on each other, glowing with the light of pyreflies to form a sheer wall that led so far above his head that he couldn't tell where it ended. The fayth's magic was so potent that Braska could see it; it resembled a bright blue liquid, not too different from what they had found in the pool at Macalania, which trickled from each motionless body and gathered to form a coiled column, reaching high into the sky. These fayth had been here for a long time, he could tell: hundreds of years at least.

"This is a summoning," he said breathlessly. "Someone is using these fayth to summon. Who could have so much power?"

"Freaky," said Jecht. He had found himself oddly drawn to the wall of fayth ever since the three of them had entered the cave, despite not knowing what it was initially; he had been able to sense the magic, and had moved forward to study the strange, sharp contortions of the ghostly, distorted bodies that it emanated from.

"Auron," Braska called. "Come and see this."

Auron stood and slowly made his way towards the wall of fayth; he looked at it and said nothing. The sight of it filled him with dread; there was something deeply disturbing about it. He felt Braska's arms slip around him from behind, his hands meeting over his cuirass; Braska's chin came to rest on his shoulder.

"What do you think?" Braska murmured into Auron's ear.

"I don't like it, sir," said Auron.

Braska kissed his cheek. "I never thought such a thing could exist," he said. "I wonder what they're summoning."

Keen to get away from his companions' display of intimacy, and still captivated by the fayth, Jecht moved forward for a closer look. It was mesmerising: he felt connected to it, somehow. He reached out carefully, placing one finger over the curve of a distorted, barely human arm, and then leant forward to touch it. The stone was warm: that was all he registered before he blacked out.

He awoke on the dock by his houseboat.

Getting to his feet, he looked around cautiously. It was definitely his home; he was back in Zanarkand at last. But his own reaction surprised him: he ought to have been overjoyed. This was what he had wanted since first arriving in Spira, and yet now he felt cheated. He had been ripped away from the pilgrimage right before its dénouement. He had wanted to play his part in bringing peace to Spira, and to convince the others of his worth and his importance to the pilgrimage – now it suddenly seemed as if he would be unable to do that. Now the most meaningful thing he would be able to do was win the blitzball league; that didn't seem to cut it anymore.

Everything was very quiet. As Jecht slowly approached the boat, looking for signs of life, he couldn't help noticing that Zanarkand seemed odd. There was something off about it; it was somehow insubstantial. And yet it was exactly the same Zanarkand he had left forty or so days earlier. It had always been like this; it was just that spending that time in Spira had made it obvious. He thought back to the conclusion he had come to a few times during the latter part of the pilgrimage: Spira seemed much more vivid than Zanarkand. In comparison – and the thought sent a shiver down his spine – Zanarkand didn't feel real.

At least he would get to see Tidus, he realised. Perhaps that would make this abrupt return feel more satisfying: he would be able to start treating the boy right at last. He would lift him up in his arms despite how big he was getting, and he would tell him he loved him – it would be the first time. He increased his pace as he headed for the central room; he could hear rustling sounds, and he knew Tidus would be in there. A lump was forming in his throat; he was going to have to accept the fact that this would be an emotional reunion, he thought. Perhaps that would be the kind of person he was from now on.

He entered the room – and stopped dead. There was a child awaiting him there, but it wasn't Tidus. It was a dark-skinned child, dressed in a strange purple robe, the hood drawn low over its face.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked hoarsely.

"Who am I?" said the child. "Who are *you* – that is the more interesting question."

"What?" said Jecht. "I'm – I'm the – how did you get in my house, anyway? The marina's meant to have security. I'm gonna call the cops."

"You are the one who travelled," said the child. "You travelled from Zanarkand to Spira. How did you do it? He made a barrier; nobody has ever been able to breach it. Until you. Perhaps you are the one we are waiting for: the one the legends tell of. Perhaps –" The child fell silent suddenly, seeming to consider some new information. "Yes, indeed. This man and his son. They can end our dream, just as it was written."

"What are you sayin' about my kid?" Jecht demanded. "Where is he, anyway? If you did anything to him, you're gonna be sorry."

"Jecht," said the child ethereally. "The long-awaited. That is who you are. We made you, and you will end us."

"Eh?" said Jecht.

"You and your son will be Spira's salvation," said the child. "All you must do is play your part. You must take the role our æons have prepared for you. This is your destiny."

"My –" Jecht felt himself gasp suddenly. "Wait. This is about that prophecy, right? You're sayin' it's true?"

"It comes from truth," said the child, "like all stories do."

"So what do I gotta do?" said Jecht.

"Follow the path that is laid for you," was the reply. "Entrust yourself to your summoner's strength; *become* his strength. He must complete his pilgrimage. You want your life to have meaning, don't you? You want to break free from the dream?"

"The dream," Jecht muttered. "The – wait, the dream! This is a dream, ain't it?" He looked around desperately. "I ain't really back – that's why everything's so –" He sagged. "But … but it's always like this."

"It is," the child agreed. "So what must that mean?"

"That it's always …" Jecht's chest was tight. "A dream," he whispered. "It's always a dream. My city …"

"Zanarkand was destroyed one thousand years ago," said the child. "Every man, woman, and child in Spira knows that. But since the great machina war, our brethren have been used for this everlasting summoning. They have been dreaming this city, an eternal, sleepless Zanarkand. Every building, every person –"

"No!" Jecht interrupted. "This is crazy! You ain't telling me none of this is real? My whole life – my son – my wife –" His cheeks felt wet. "You can't be serious?"

"All of you are dreams," said the child softly, "summoned by the Gagazet fayth."

"Shut up," Jecht sobbed. "Shut the fuck up."

"I'm sorry," said the child, but Jecht barely registered it; he had fallen to his knees.

He stayed on the ground for a long time, huddled into himself as he cried noisily. At least Braska and Auron weren't here to see it, he thought briefly – but it wasn't as if that mattered. Nothing mattered when he had just been told his whole life had never existed. Nothing he had done had any meaning at all. He was hardly going to be able to convince anyone to respect him when he had never even been real in the first place.

Eventually, his sobs gave way to sniffs, and he raised his head, registering with a jolt that his houseboat had vanished. He now floated in a starry, boundless void. The child was still there, suspended in front of him, apparently unbothered by their surroundings.

"What did you do?" Jecht hissed. "Make it come back!"

"You want to return to the dream?" said the child. "But you know, now – you know none of it is real. And still you want to go back there? I don't understand."

"My son's there!" Jecht protested, and then it hit him again: Tidus wasn't even a real person, and never had been. He would never be able to make him into a blitzball star, at least not in any way that truly mattered.

"They're all dreams," said the child. "You were, too – but now you have touched Sin. You're more than a dream now. You can do the right thing."

"The right thing?!" Jecht echoed.

"Spira needs you," said the child. "If you go back to meet your fate, the pilgrimage will succeed. And we will be able to

rest."

"And if I don't go back?" said Jecht.

"You will return to your life," the child confirmed, "knowing that nothing around you is real. You will grow old carrying that burden with you, never forgetting. And we will have to wait to find another who can do what you could have – perhaps another thousand years."

Jecht clasped both hands to the back of his neck, bowing his head in frustration. He thought he knew which he would choose, but having to turn down one of the two options was too awful.

And then, suddenly, Braska's face rippled into his vision, translucent and fuzzy. "Jecht!" he called desperately, his voice distorted as if it was underwater. "Please, wake up!"

Auron followed. "Come on, Jecht," he said quietly. "Stop it – this isn't funny."

They were both gone in seconds. Jecht exhaled slowly, and then drew himself up to face his interlocutor. That settled it: Auron and Braska were waiting for him, and he had a job to do.

"All right," he said. "Send me back to Spira. I'm ready."

"As you wish," said the child, and everything went dark again, until moments later, Jecht found himself lying on his back in the mountain cave, looking up at Auron's pale and tired face.

"Jecht!" said Auron. "You're – thank the – what happened?"

"I –" Jecht started, and then he broke off, unsure how to continue. He had no idea how the others would react if he told them his whole city was a dream. Learning he wasn't a real person would surely make them even less likely to care about him. And adding his own troubles to those that Auron and Braska were already experiencing would make things unbearably heavy for all three of them. It was far better to keep it to himself, he decided.

"I can't believe you thought I was faking it," he said, concentrating on keeping his tone light. "Thanks a lot."

Auron frowned. "I – you heard that? I didn't think you were *faking it*. I didn't mean it like that – I was just worried."

"Yeah?" said Jecht.

"Braska tried casting Life on you so many times I thought he was going to pass out," said Auron.

"Oh," said Jecht, looking around for the summoner and finding him sitting against one of the other walls with his eyes closed. "Right, yeah." Auron had been worried about Braska, he thought, not about him. That made more sense.

He got to his feet, and said, "I'll go tell him I'm OK," not sparing another glance in Auron's direction as he made his way towards the summoner.

"Hey," he said; Braska's eyes opened, and as he registered Jecht in front of him, he sat up, suddenly alert. "Jecht!" he

gasped. "Oh, goodness – I'm so glad you're all right. What happened?"

"Dunno," Jecht lied, scrambling onto the ground next to Braska and trying not to flinch away from the tight embrace that he was greeted with.

"I'm sorry," said Braska, his voice muffled in Jecht's neck. "I know you don't like it when I – but – oh, Jecht, I feared the worst."

"Sorry I scared ya," said Jecht.

"I'm just glad to have you back with us," Braska insisted. He let go of Jecht, but moved to rest his head on his shoulder. Neither spoke for a while. Jecht idly watched Auron in the distance; he had sat down too and was staring up at the wall of fayth with a defeated expression.

"Auron was worried too, you know," Braska murmured after a long time.

Jecht snorted quietly.

"No, really, Jecht," said Braska. "He cares about you. I know things aren't always smooth between you and him, but you've become close, haven't you?"

"Uh," said Jecht, "I mean, I guess, if you …"

Braska reached for his hand. "I've been thinking," he said, "about when I'm gone. It'll be difficult for him – I think he's already starting to worry about it. He doesn't have many friends, you see, especially after what happened."

"Yeah," said Jecht.

"But," said Braska, "you'll be there for him, won't you? After I've … passed on? I hate to think of him being alone."

"Uh –" Jecht began.

Misinterpreting Jecht's hesitation, Braska squeezed his hand more tightly and added, "Don't think I'm saying you shouldn't go back to your Zanarkand. I don't mean to suggest that for a moment – of course you should. But just until you find a way to get there. It really would reassure me to know he has someone."

"Yeah," said Jecht. "Sure. I'll … be there."

"Oh, thank you, Jecht," said Braska fervently. "That's such a relief – a real weight off my mind."

"Might not make it back to Zanarkand anyway," Jecht mumbled.

Braska raised his head and turned to stare right into Jecht's eyes. "Oh no, Jecht," he said. "You mustn't say that – you *mustn't*. Never let go of your hope; there is nothing more precious. I don't want to hear you talking like that again. Do you understand?"

Jecht nodded, disconcerted by Braska's sudden intensity. "Right, yeah. Sorry. I … won't say it."

"Good," said Braska. "Hope is important, Jecht, so important."

He stood up, wincing, and went to inspect the wall of fayth. Instinctively raising a hand to touch it, he remembered what had happened to Jecht and contented himself with

looking closely at the details instead. There was a sourness to the magic filling the air; the fayth seemed troubled.

"I wonder what they could be summoning," he murmured as Jecht drew behind him. "It almost seems as if they don't want to …"

It was Zanarkand – Jecht knew. His Zanarkand was what these fayth were doomed to conjure, trapped in this mountain as long as they existed. He and his city had never been real. It was too awful to say out loud.

"I don't think this is right," said Braska, and immediately his head was ablaze with pain. He cried out, stumbling, dropping his staff as he pressed both hands to his head; Auron leapt to his feet with a shout of "Sir!", taking hold of Braska by the shoulders to stop him falling.

Braska had squeezed his eyes shut, but moments later, the new pain was gone, leaving behind only the dull ache from before. "I'm all right," he said shakily, straightening himself up. "It's over."

"What happened?" Auron demanded, still clinging onto him.

Braska shook his head. "I don't know. I'm fine now, Auron. It's probably the same thing as whatever just happened to Jecht. We should keep going before it gets to you too."

Auron moved back to take his hand, and they resumed the journey. As they did so, Braska turned his attention to the æons.

It was you, wasn't it? he asked them.

It was us.

Why? Braska thought. A warning?

A warning, they confirmed. *You must not question the summoning, Braska. The time to end it has not yet come.*

But so many fayth, he thought before another, smaller pinprick of pain assaulted him. This time, he managed to stifle his gasp.

Fine, he thought. I can see there's no point in trying to ask. But I don't understand why you insist on hurting me – surely you need me to be strong so I can fight Sin.

You will be strong, Braska, they told him. *Strong and obedient.*

He grimaced, declining to communicate anything more. He had come to understand that as long as he didn't try talking to the fayth directly, they rarely seemed able to say much to him. Unless he sought them out specifically, the only usual sign of their presence was his perpetual headache, and now that they were sheltered from the cold weather, that was something he could mostly endure – not that he had much choice.

The fiends in the caves turned out to be just as deadly as those outside. Jecht found himself unexpectedly grateful for the challenge: the fact that he was able to contribute to seeing off the fiends was a distraction from his awful discovery, and it was moreover proof that he could have an impact on Spira.

Even if he had been born a dream, and lived his life in a place that turned out not to exist, at least he still had the potential to do something meaningful. If he had spoken to Auron about it, Auron would probably have told him that was what really mattered – that he was made real by the fact that his actions had real consequences. It would have been comforting to hear it. But for the last few days, Auron hadn't been in a fit state to discuss such matters, and Jecht knew he would stay that way until long after the Final Summoning. Even if Jecht was around to support him, as Braska had requested, it would hardly do much to assuage the pain of losing the man he loved.

Soon, they reached a large gap in the stone floor, which made it impossible to proceed. Another path led away to the side, but it didn't seem to be going in the right direction to get them to the summit. "Any bright ideas, Auron?" Braska asked.

"There are meant to be trials here," said Auron. "Maybe this is one of them."

"Only one path, right?" said Jecht, finding himself irritated by his companions' hesitation. "So we gotta go that way, don't we? Not like there's a choice."

They continued. "Yes, maybe this is it," Braska murmured. "I sense magic – do you, Jecht?"

"Yeah, I guess," Jecht replied.

After a few more twists and turns, they arrived at the shore of a large pool of water; there was clearly no way forward except by swimming through. Braska stood there, trying to work

out how the pool and the increasingly potent magic in the air were connected. He was certain now that this was a test. Concentrating on it with all his might, he failed to notice that Auron had slipped from his grip and was hanging back.

"I think someone's supposed to swim through," he announced at last. "There's something magical at the other end. If one of us interacts with that, it may open a path elsewhere in the cave."

"Right," said Jecht unenthusiastically, looking down at the dark water. "Guess I'm goin', then."

"It may not be safe," said Braska. "There are probably fiends in there."

"So I'll fight 'em," said Jecht. "What's new?"

"On your own?" Braska pointed out.

"You can't swim, right?" said Jecht.

"I can't," Braska confirmed, "but Auron could go with you –"

They both turned back towards him, finding him pressed against the wall a few paces away. He had sunk into a sitting position, and was shaking violently, his head buried in his hands; seeing the water had upset him again. A few days ago, he might have been able to face it and remain somewhat composed, but his recent deterioration had undone all the progress he had made earlier in the journey. At this point, the sight of bodies of water like this took him straight back to his ordeal.

"Yeah, I'll go on my own," said Jecht. "It's fine, seriously."

Braska sighed. "I really don't think you should go in there alone. We've seen how dangerous the fiends are here. I think we should wait until Auron's feeling better, and then he'll be able to go in with you."

"Wait until he's –" Jecht exclaimed. "Dude, are you crazy? He's –" He lowered his voice to an urgent whisper. "He's scared of the water, right? How's he ever gonna *feel better* if he's gotta go in there? That'd be impossible."

"We'll just have to wait," said Braska again. "It's for the sake of the pilgrimage, and he's my guardian – he'll have to come around to it eventually."

"Braska, he's having a fucking panic attack," said Jecht. "Ain't like he can just choose to get over it. If you think he's ever gonna be ready to get in there, we're gonna be waiting forever." He crouched down and dropped into the water before Braska could protest, adding, "You go look after him, right? I'll just be a sec."

Swimming brought Jecht some comfort, even though the water was full of dangerous fiends as Braska had anticipated, and he was still more on edge after seeing Auron struggling so much again, to say nothing of Braska's frustratingly obtuse attitude. Braska was cruel to Auron sometimes; there was no other way of putting it. Auron always insisted Braska's poor mental health was a sufficient excuse, but Jecht wasn't buying it.

Seeing off the fiends to his satisfaction, he reached the

other end of the pool and scrambled onto dry land, shaking the water off. He had ended up at one end of a narrow path; at the other, he could see a glowing orb slowly rotating, surrounded by layers of strange cartilaginous material that were similarly spinning around it. The magical aura that he and Braska had detected earlier was more potent. Jecht's ability to understand such things was still undeveloped in comparison with Braska's, but he could nonetheless tell what he was supposed to do: this was a test of his aim. He would have to throw something at the contraption, getting his timing right to pass through the gaps in the outer layers, and strike the orb at the centre.

It was a strange test; Jecht couldn't see what relevance it had to the pilgrimage. It hardly assessed the strength of summoners and their guardians; all it seemed to require was a precise aim. For a professional blitzballer, it was hardly going to pose any trouble as long as Jecht could find something he might be able to throw.

He recalled the blitzball he had been given by the Al Bhed Psyches; it was still in his pocket, deflated and tightly folded. Unzipping the pocket to retrieve it, Jecht took it out and found the stopper, blowing into the ball until it was fully inflated; then he got into position and cast the ball towards the orb.

It hit the orb right in the centre: no surprise at all. Jecht retrieved the ball as it rolled away, deflated it again, and headed back to the water.

He arrived at the other side to find the others sitting on the ground together in the same spot that Auron had retreated to before; while Jecht had been gone, Braska had enveloped Auron in his arms, and he continued to hold him tightly as he looked up at Jecht. "We heard something moving back there," he said, "didn't we, Auron?"

"Yeah, should all be ready to go," said Jecht when Auron made no response. "It was a piece of cake. Dunno what the point of it was."

"Well, let's not complain," said Braska. "And the fiends didn't give you any trouble?"

Jecht shook his head. "Nah, all good."

Braska stood, whispering encouragement to Auron to do so as well, and they all headed back to the main path. Sure enough, a new set of stairs had appeared in the rock, covering the hole that had blocked their progress earlier. Jecht studied the steps, impressed: there was no trace of the cave's previous state. While he had gained a little familiarity with magic, he had no idea how it could cause such significant changes to structures that seemed immutable. If he had to be stuck in Spira for good, he thought, at least he might be able to learn a bit more about how magic worked.

After a little more progress, they found themselves at the edge of a second pool. "Oh no," Auron whispered, sagging against Braska. "More of this – I can't …"

"You'll have to go in again, Jecht," said Braska. "Are you

certain you can do it on your own?"

"Yeah, I said it's no problem," said Jecht, getting into the water quickly before Braska could start insisting he take Auron with him again. He made it through the fiends taking relatively little damage, and found that at the other end, this time, there was no dry land but merely a set of three coloured lights set into the wall.

Inflating his ball again, he tossed it at one of them experimentally, discovering that the impact turned the light off for a few seconds, after which it slowly flickered back. He considered; this was going to be a lot more difficult than the previous challenge. The goal seemed to be to turn off all three of the lights at once: that would be easy enough if he was part of a group, but they were spaced too far apart for him to be able to hit all three simultaneously on his own.

The best technique, he realised, was actually the Jecht Shot. That would allow him to bounce the ball off one of the lights and smack it back towards another immediately; in doing so, he would be able to propel himself out of the water and hit the third light himself. He looked at the lights carefully, considering the angles. It would be difficult – he would have to be precise in his approach, and turning off the third light would need him to stretch.

He eyed the arrangement for a few more seconds and then went for it, slamming the ball quickly against the wall and then letting it ricochet off the first of the lights before corkscrew-

ing out of the water to head it into the second as fast as he could. At the same time, he reached out with one hand to slap the third light, but found that he had misjudged his approach slightly and come up short. The ball had done its job, though, and so Jecht instinctively reached further, lunging upwards in an attempt to put enough pressure on the light to trip it.

He succeeded, but he had stretched more than he should have; pain shot through his shoulder and he curled in on himself with a groan. He had a vague memory of injuring himself there during a match, many years ago; no doubt that had left it susceptible to sprains. Treading water, he massaged the shoulder until it was no longer completely excruciating to move his arm – then he scooped his ball out of the water, deflated it, and began to swim awkwardly back towards the shore, letting out the occasional grunt.

The return journey was slower and more arduous with his injury; less agile, Jecht found it more difficult to evade the fiends, and by the time he got back, he had been poisoned. Concentrating on not succumbing to the nausea, he hauled himself ashore ungracefully.

"Are you all right?" said Braska, hurrying forward to meet him.

"Poisoned," Jecht gasped.

Braska cast a quick spell to cure him; Jecht felt better immediately, but his shoulder was still painful. Explaining the injury to Braska as concisely as he could, he sighed with relief

as Braska cast more magic to heal it.

"Oh man," he said. "What'd we do without magic, huh?"

"Feeling all right now?" Braska asked him.

"Good as new," said Jecht. "Thanks, dude – I owe you one."

"It's the least I can do," said Braska. "I knew you shouldn't have gone alone."

"Well, what else was I gonna do?" said Jecht. "Teach you to swim in ten minutes?"

Braska sighed and shot a meaningful glance towards Auron; Jecht followed his gaze. Fortunately, he had stationed himself far away enough from the water to be unaware of what the others were discussing. Jecht looked him over: he was still trembling with fear.

"Come on, man," said Jecht quietly. "Look at him – he wouldn't last a second in there."

"He knows how to swim," said Braska.

"Yeah," said Jecht, "but –"

"I know he was having some trouble with water before," said Braska, "but I thought he was getting better."

Jecht shrugged. "These things come and go, I guess."

"Hm," said Braska. "You know, he told me he was all right before – back in Bevelle. I wanted to be absolutely sure of it before we began the pilgrimage. He said he was ready to go, and I thought he'd be glad to be away from there. I certainly wouldn't have brought the start of the journey forward if I'd thought he still needed time to recover."

"I guess he didn't know," said Jecht. "The drowning thing was just a couple months ago, right? Guess it can take a while to come on."

"He told you what they did to him, then?" said Braska.

"Bits of it," Jecht clarified. "Still dunno why they wanted him dead."

"He didn't do anything wrong," said Braska vehemently, before sighing. "I'm just glad I decided to take a second guardian. It's a good thing I didn't end up having to rely on him at times like this."

"Yeah, you got me to pick up the slack when Auron has a breakdown, right?" said Jecht.

Braska blinked at him. "Well, quite."

Jecht rolled his eyes and began moving away from the water; Braska's attitude towards both Auron and himself was making him feel worse again.

"Time to move on, buddy," he said as he approached Auron, doing his best to sound as if there was nothing wrong.

Auron didn't meet Jecht's eyes, but he hauled himself to his feet, clutching his stomach as if he was in great pain, and started to shuffle forward. Braska hurried past Jecht to draw next to Auron, putting an arm around him before glancing back in Jecht's direction with a defiant expression.

As they continued, Auron gradually started to feel better; he remained exhausted and low-spirited, but there were no more pools of water in the rest of the cave, and so the more

acute elements of his distress gradually faded. A few more battles with challenging fiends also served as useful distraction, even if his swordwork remained unusually unsophisticated. Outside battle, Braska remained close to him, at first giving him frequent kisses and asking repeatedly if he was all right; when Auron eventually found himself able to respond with more than monosyllables, Braska ceased the questions, confident that everything was fine.

At last, they emerged from the north end of the cave, finding themselves on a broad plateau surrounded by sharp rocks. Braska looked around in relief; it was much warmer than on the south face.

"You were right about the snow, Auron," he said. "Thank goodness for that."

"Yeah," said Auron.

Braska began to wonder if he should try removing the blanket that was still wrapped around him under his robes – but as he considered how feasible it would be to do so without undressing, his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a disturbance in the air.

"A fiend!" Auron called, finding the wherewithal to draw his sword. "It's a big one – be ready!"

Soon enough, an enormous beast had manifested itself in front of them, its huge wings flapping lazily as it pawed at the ground with large clawed feet. Braska looked up at it; it was bigger than anything they had fought so far, and it seemed dif-

ferent, as well. This fiend was so large that it seemed unlikely merely to be the spirit of some unfortunate soul – the fact that it had appeared specifically at the top of the mountain perhaps also suggested this was a premeditated encounter. The air was suddenly alive with the aura of magic. Braska was sure that this fiend had been sent deliberately to challenge them; not by the Yevonites in Bevelle, but by some unknown force from their destination. As he stared at it, he became surer of what this was about. It was a test of his strength as a summoner: a test of the bond he had formed with his æons.

"Stand back," he said to his guardians. "This is meant for me."

"Sir?" Auron said.

"This fiend was sent here," said Braska, more certain of it with every word he spoke. "This isn't just any fight – this is a challenge. I have to summon." He could feel the æons inside him, clamouring to be released and show their power.

He let himself forget about his guardians, and raised his arms to call Bahamut. The æon drifted down from the sky, settling into position between Braska and the fiend; Braska closed his eyes and concentrated on sending the order to attack.

Bahamut was his first and most familiar æon, but in conjunction with that, his weakest; it didn't take long before a few strikes from the fiend meant Braska stood alone once more. Bahamut had done some damage, though, and he called Shiva with renewed determination, gritting his teeth as his headache

started to mount again. Hurrying forward to catch the æon's shining mantle in his arms, he let himself show that he was captivated but not overcome by her beauty. Growing accustomed to her presence had taught him that that was how she preferred to be treated: she liked men to admit that they found her alluring, but not to make fools of themselves because of it.

Shiva lasted longer against the fiend, and it was noticeably weakened by the time she finally fell. As the icy cloak in Braska's arms faded into pyreflies, he assessed his progress: it was going to be a close fight, but Ixion and Ifrit were stronger than Shiva was.

By the time both had done their best against the attacker, Braska could tell the battle was almost over. The fiend had become slow and imprecise, lumbering around and lashing out at the æons, its raw power ensuring it was still able to do them damage even when its attacks had become unfocused. As Ifrit fell, the fiend shrank back too. Braska could tell it was close to going down, but he now knew he needed to make a decision. The four æons hadn't quite been strong enough to defeat the fiend; he could call in his guardians and work with them to rid it of the last of its strength, but that would mean admitting he wasn't proficient enough in summoning to take the fiend down with his æons alone, which would surely harm his chances with the Final Æon. Alternatively – he could call Valefor.

He hadn't summoned her since Luca, where she had turned

on him. The other æons had assured him he would gain her trust, but he was aware of her continued absence every time he sought them. Unlike the others, she seemed entirely unreachable. But, he thought, maybe the familiarity he had gained with the other æons might be enough to convince her to work with him. She would just need to attack once; with her power, that would be enough to finish off the fiend. Surely he could ask her to lend him her strength for just one assault.

He raised his staff, carefully, and called her. She swooped down from the sky in a flurry of stony feathers; concentrating as hard as he could, Braska willed her to attack.

Hovering between him and the fiend, Valefor hesitated – then, slowly, she turned to face Braska, spreading her wings as she looked down at him. His heart sank: he could tell that she felt utter disdain for him. He realised, now, how presumptuous he had been to call her and expect her to do his bidding.

I'm sorry, he thought. I shan't disturb you again. Please, just this once – please lend me your strength –

She continued to stare at him. He wondered what would happen if she attacked; perhaps his guardians would rush in to defend him. Perhaps they would merely seek to save themselves. When wild, unmastered æons killed their summoners, he found himself thinking, would the summoner's death cause the æons to fade, or would they somehow continue to live, and seek to destroy others? Such things had surely happened before.

Behind Valefor, the fiend stirred; Braska let out a fearful gasp. With both ready to attack him, he thought, there would be no chance he could survive. Valefor beat her enormous wings, circling into the air; he closed his eyes as she swooped back down. And then, suddenly, he heard fiend and æon clash with a rustle of feathers and otherworldly scales. Opening his eyes cautiously, he was just in time to see the fiend dissolve into an enormous cloud of pyreflies.

Triumphant, Valefor turned towards him again. *Have no fear, Braska,* she said. *I am yours. You have my power.*

Thank you, he thought as she spiralled into the sky.

No longer fearing for his life, Braska became aware of how bad his headache was; he sank to his knees, panting, as his guardians approached him.

"Well done, sir," said Auron quietly, placing a hand on Braska's shoulder.

Braska reached for it keenly. "I did it," he said. "May the fayth bless us – I did it."

His face was moist with sweat; he took out his handkerchief and dabbed at it before getting clumsily to his feet, taking hold of Auron to steady himself.

As Jecht watched, he found himself surprised by how pleased he was. It was a relief to see Braska handle his æons so well, especially after being told that he had an important role to play in the final stages of the pilgrimage. Maybe together they really could save Spira, he thought, in whatever

sense lay behind the mysterious child's cryptic words. If this was to be the way he would make something of himself, then Braska's prowess could be nothing but a good sign.

He stepped forward. "That was awesome, dude. That last one was from Besaid, right? Keepin' it for special occasions, are ya?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Braska. "You were impressed, then?"

"Are you kidding?" said Jecht. "You took down that massive fiend just by summoning – didn't think you had it in ya, but … man. You know what, Braska, you're gonna smash the Final Summoning."

"Really?" said Braska, and then he let go of Auron and rushed forward to embrace Jecht instead.

Jecht patted him on the shoulder awkwardly, wishing he would let go. "You think so too, right, Auron?" he said, hoping that would encourage Braska to do so.

"Yeah," said Auron listlessly, "of course."

Braska barely heard him; he was too enthused by Jecht's comments. Jecht didn't praise others easily, he knew. He kept an arm around Jecht's shoulders as they began to walk on, permitting himself a small smile; it even felt as if his headache was easing. When he sought out the æons within himself, he could tell now that Valefor was among them. It was an immense relief; he felt cautiously confident about winning over the Final Æon's fayth at Zanarkand.

Auron hung back. Watching Braska succeed in his most ambitious summoning yet had had as significant an effect on him as it had on Jecht. For the first time in days, he could clearly picture the events of the pilgrimage's final stages: Braska would go to Zanarkand. He would receive the Final Æon, and return with it to the Calm Lands, and summon it to fight Sin. And then he would die.

It was clear now: Auron had been staking all his hope on Zanarkand, but by the time they got there, it would be too late. Braska would already be communing with the fayth – and besides, Auron thought, what else was there but ruins? Believing that Zanarkand was the answer had just been a way of denying that he had run out of time. The weeks they had spent on the pilgrimage would never have been enough for him to come up with a solution. If he wanted to find another way, he would have to dedicate months to it, even years.

He somehow felt calm, numb, and defeated all at once. The struggles and trauma of crossing the Calm Lands and climbing the mountain seemed to have come to an end; but his resolve had gone with them. If they kept going, Braska was going to die, and acknowledging it made Auron feel as if his own life was ending in tandem.

The journey continued; Auron was barely aware of it. They must have made some progress, he realised, because what seemed like moments later they had passed the summit of the mountain and reached another plateau, and Braska had

turned back to look at him.

"I don't think I'll make it any further," he said. "We can camp here, can't we? It doesn't seem as if there are any fiends."

"You're right," Auron heard himself say. "That's fine – we've made enough progress for today. We'll be in Zanarkand tomorrow." He wondered how he had been able to speak the city's name without breaking down.

Jecht and Auron put up the tent; Braska went inside for a nap. While Auron sat down on the ground, Jecht tried his best not to pay too much attention to the ruined buildings that had started to appear on each side of the mountain pass. He could feel his chest tightening; he was already starting to recognise some of the landmarks. They were the same as in his Zanarkand, but faded and crumbling. This Zanarkand had been abandoned for a long time.

Feeling very unsettled, he went to sit with Auron. "Hey," he muttered, trying to forget about what he had seen.

"Don't," said Auron. "Not in the mood."

"I was just saying hi," said Jecht.

Auron grunted.

"You wanna … talk?" Jecht tried. He didn't really want to hear about Auron's problems again; he wasn't particularly keen on discussing his own, either. But talking about *something* might help them both, he thought.

Auron turned to face him. "No," he said. "No, I don't. Leave me alone, please."

"We could fuck," Jecht suggested. "Wouldn't even have to say anything."

Auron shook his head irritably.

They sat in silence for a long time; eventually, somewhat refreshed after his sleep, Braska emerged from the tent to join them. "That was just what I needed," he said. "I'm feeling much better. Maybe we should try making a bit more progress today after all."

"The sun will set soon," said Auron, not looking at him. "Better to stay here, where we know we can camp. Might not be any more suitable places further down." Perhaps in the morning they could simply turn around and walk the other way, he found himself thinking.

"I never thought I'd hear you say that, Auron," said Braska. "You're usually keen to hurry us on."

"He's right, though," said Jecht quickly; he wasn't eager to get closer to the ruins. "Leave it till tomorrow, yeah? We know this is a good spot. Don't wanna waste it."

"It certainly is that," Braska mused, glancing towards the vista of Zanarkand. "Have you had a look at those buildings, Jecht?"

"Yeah," Jecht mumbled.

"And?"

Jecht met his gaze reluctantly. "Yeah. It's … the same. Just like my Zanarkand, but … like it's been abandoned for a thousand years, or whatever."

"Well, that's good, isn't it?" said Braska. "That shows there's a connection between the two."

"I guess," said Jecht, shrugging.

"It does!" Braska insisted. "I'm sure you'll find something useful down there."

"Maybe," said Jecht. He stood up, hoping to change the subject. "Look, if we're not goin' any further tonight, how about some dinner?"

Braska lit a campfire and they located the evening's rations; it was a quiet meal, punctuated by a few attempts at starting conversation on Braska's part that largely went nowhere. After they finished eating, they were surprised by the sudden appearance of a familiar face on the path: Maechen had emerged from around a corner, looking no more out of place on the unpopulated mountain slopes than he did anywhere else in Spira. Somehow remembering their manners, Braska and Auron scrambled to their feet.

"Goodness me," said Braska. "How in all the fayth's names did you get here?"

Maechen blinked at him a few times before answering. "There is no road in Spira I have not trodden," he said.

"I'm sure," said Braska, "but you can't have climbed that mountain all by yourself. The fiends posed us quite the challenge; you wouldn't have lasted a moment."

"There were no particular difficulties that I recall," said Maechen. "But then again, I am not quite sure how I …" He

trailed off. "Well, it is certainly fortunate that we meet here, is it not? The summit of Gagazet, overlooking the holy city of Zanarkand. Perhaps you would like to hear about this place." He approached Jecht, looking down at him where he was still seated. "Sir Wakka? Might you have any questions for me?"

"Nah, I'm good," said Jecht.

"Don't you want to ask him about Zanarkand?" said Braska.

Jecht shook his head firmly. "I said I'm good."

"Pity," said Maechen. "And what about you, Sir Chappu? You have always struck me as a most dedicated scholar. Perhaps I might tell you some of the tales of this place?"

There was no point, Auron thought; the only thing that would help was getting out of there. "No," he said. "Thank you."

"Oh," said Maechen. "Well, I suppose I shall be on my way –"

"I have a question," Braska interrupted, and Maechen turned to look at him with an expression of mild confusion. "Earlier today, I did battle with a fiend – a large one. It wasn't quite the same as the ordinary kind; I could sense that it had been sent deliberately to test me. From Zanarkand. Is there … would that have been the fayth's doing, or … is there somebody down there – do you think?"

"A puzzling hypothesis," said Maechen. "It has been many years since I came closer to that city than where we now

stand – many long years indeed. But there were tales told, once, about the one who had made Zanarkand her home; so they said."

"A woman?" said Braska. "A human woman, then?"

Maechen frowned. "The story is very old," he said. "I should think that if she was once a human woman, she cannot be one today."

"So is this some sort of malevolent force?" Braska asked. "Do you think we should be prepared to fight?"

"Perhaps ..." said Maechen.

"Come on!" said Braska. "This is important. I'm supposed to be getting the Final Æon – bringing the Calm to Spira – if there are any obstacles we should be prepared for, my guardians and I need to know, for everyone's sake. Tell me!"

"Hey, Braska, cool it," said Jecht, getting to his feet at last and turning towards Maechen. "Look, gramps," he said, "you better go back wherever you came from before the fiends come out again, huh? Me and Braska'll sort this one out."

"Oh, if you insist," said Maechen, and he ambled off around the corner again.

"Jecht," said Braska indignantly, "he was about to tell us –"

"Was he, though?" said Jecht. "Didn't seem like he could really remember whatever it was anyway. And why would it make a difference? If there's something bad down there, we'll fight it, right? Just like we always have. Me and Auron will protect you, same as ever, won't we?"

They both looked at Auron; he nodded.

"So there's no point," Jecht went on, "doin' all this *thinking*. No point trying to work everythin' out in advance, cos you never know what's gonna happen. Could be something down there that tells us everything we thought was true was a lie, then what're you gonna do? You just wasted all that time on plannin' it and it didn't do no good at all. So better to just take it all as it comes, I think. Cos you don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow."

There was a silence, and then Auron muttered, "That's incredibly irresponsible."

Jecht scoffed. "Come on, Auron. Don't tell me everything always went the way you planned."

"You know it hasn't," said Auron, "but –"

"Yeah, so no point wasting time on it, is there?" said Jecht. "Let's just get in there tomorrow, see what kinda fiends need beating up, get the Final Æon, and do whatever we gotta do to make this thing a success. All right?"

"I just don't want any of us to get hurt," said Braska.

"Yeah, but nothing we can do about that now, right?" Jecht protested. "I'm fed up of all this *what if* stuff. I just want something real for once. None of this fake bullshit. OK?"

Braska shook his head, perplexed by Jecht's outburst. "We should get some rest," he said. "I think we all need it. Which of you is on first watch?"

"Me," said Auron.

"Oh," said Braska, slightly disappointed. "Well, let's turn in, then, Jecht."

He followed Jecht into the tent, not before reaching for Auron and giving him a goodnight kiss on the lips. Auron waited until they were gone, then sat down by the campfire again, pulling off his gauntlet.

If the pilgrimage continued, Braska would die. The thought was starker still now that Auron was alone. It ran through his head ceaselessly, drowning out everything else; if a fiend had approached, he probably wouldn't even have noticed. Braska was going to die. He was going to die.

He looked up at the stars in the cloudless sky above him. Braska would die, and yet those stars would keep shining. The Calm would come; everyone would be happy. Nothing would stop; in fact, new industries would grow and develop, buoyed by the lack of threat from Sin. Spira would be a place of celebration. Children would grow up unafraid, and their parents would be around to see it. Life would be how it should be, for a few glorious years.

But Braska would be gone. He would be dead. There would be no more glimpses of his blue eyes, his subtle, rare smile, his resolute and purposeful movements. No more passionate arguments, and no more quiet, close embraces. No more blasts of fire and lightning from his staff. No more ripples of warm, intimate healing magic from his hands. No more of those wonderful kisses – just nothing. A void where

Braska had once been. Echoes of his name, spoken by people who would become strangers. Yuna's fleeting memories, soon muddled and lost as she grew. Spheres with partial records of unplaceable moments. Statues, perhaps, one day, and entries in dusty record books.

He was going to die. He would be no more. The very man Auron had spent so long trying to save – begging him to accept the idea of regaining some happiness in the months after Girl died, imploring him not to turn down the summoner's path, and then, finally, looking for ways to divert that course once it started – he would die.

Auron closed his eyes; he pressed a hand to his chest, and took a sharp, ragged breath.

Some time later, Jecht awoke. It was earlier than he needed to wake for the watch; turning over in his bedroll, he did his best to go to sleep again. But the distant sounds he could hear were too difficult to put out of his mind – they, he realised, were what had woken him.

It was the sound of someone crying. He was used to it from living with Tidus; there had been times before when he had been woken at night by the same sort of thing, and had prodded his wife until she had gone to see what the matter

was. He still found the sound viscerally disturbing. Now that he had worked out where it was coming from, it was going to be impossible to get back to sleep until he had put a stop to it.

He quietly pulled on his shorts and armour, and went outside, finding Auron in a sobbing mess by the campfire just as he had expected. It was almost impossible to look at; absolutely disgusting, as far as Jecht was concerned. Auron's face was red and soaked with tears; even his robe and trousers were wet. He had clearly been in this state for a long time. He shook erratically as he moaned to himself, not even noticing when Jecht slowly knelt down in front of him.

Jecht wondered what he could possibly say to make Auron feel better. He looked at the ground for a while, too disturbed by the sight of Auron's face to focus on it, and then muttered, "Get a grip. You want him seeing you like this?"

Slowly, Auron opened his eyes and registered Jecht's presence; his crying gradually became less intense as he forced himself to get into a fit state to speak. As soon as he tried, though, he found himself unable to get a single word out, and dissolved into tears again.

"Fuck's sake," Jecht hissed.

After a few gasping breaths, Auron succeeded in speaking. "It's," he stammered, "it's not your turn for the watch yet."

"Yeah, I woke up," said Jecht. "Thought I heard my kid out here. Come on, Auron, get a hold of yourself –"

"Get a –" Auron echoed. "You really think – Jecht, he's go-

ing to –" His words gave way to sobs again; he couldn't bring himself to say it.

"What, you finally realised?" said Jecht. "Why'd it take you so long? You really thought you were gonna be the first person in a thousand years to –"

"Shut up," Auron groaned, extending an arm to push weakly against Jecht's chest in protest. "Shut up, please. I can't – I can't bear it."

"Look," said Jecht. "You chose to come on this pilgrimage. You knew what was gonna happen. And you know he wants to die. You *know* that, Auron."

"If he," said Auron, "if he – dies –" He broke off and sobbed for a few more seconds before continuing. "I wouldn't know what to do. If he dies, I … I don't think I'll be able to live anymore. I can't imagine being here without him – he's the only person I've ever –"

"Yeah, I know," said Jecht.

"He was the only one who cared," Auron went on, finding it a little easier to speak. "Back in Bevelle, after what happened – he's the only one who helped me. The only person who doesn't *hate* me."

Jecht almost protested at that – he certainly didn't hate Auron; in fact, most of the time, he would even go so far as to say he liked him. But then it hit him again: he wasn't a real person. He didn't count.

"You'll be a legendary guardian, right?" he said, forcing himself not to think about it. "Everyone's gonna love you then, yeah?"

"I don't care about that," Auron insisted. "I don't want to be famous – not anymore. I just want him to live. I wouldn't mind if none of them ever spoke to me again. I just want him to survive."

He rubbed his eyes, hiccoughed, and then said, "We have to ask him to turn back."

"We?" said Jecht. "Uh, no way. I ain't gettin' involved in this."

"Please, Jecht," said Auron, his eyes brimming with tears again. "It's the only way we'll stop him now. If it's just me asking, it won't make a difference – he's used to it from before the pilgrimage – but if you ask him too, maybe –"

"I ain't gonna do that," said Jecht. "I already decided I'm gonna support him. I want to help him bring the Calm – it's the right thing to do, you know. For Spira."

Auron stared at him for a moment, and then suddenly resumed his inconsolable sobbing.

"Shit, man," Jecht hissed. "Come on."

It had no effect; Auron was still distraught.

Jecht sighed; this was making him feel extremely uncomfortable. "Fine," he said at last. "I'll ask him. But just once, all right?"

"You," Auron stuttered, slowly raising his head, "you will?"

"Yeah," said Jecht. "Just for you, dude. I ain't gonna insist on it, but I'll say it, I promise. OK?"

"Thank you," Auron whispered, "thank you …" He reached for the nearer of Jecht's hands and grasped it in his own.

Jecht shook him off, scowling; the gesture was uncannily reminiscent of Braska's weaker moments. "Look," he said, "you go get some sleep."

"It's not time yet," said Auron, wiping his face with the back of his hand. "Doubt I'll sleep, anyway."

"Yeah, but I'm already up," said Jecht. "And it ain't like you'd be much good against fiends in that state. Go on."

Auron sniffed. "Right. OK."

He made his way into the tent; his eyes filled with tears again as soon as he saw Braska's sleeping form, but he took a deep breath, undressed, and clambered into his bedroll. He hadn't stopped crying, but he at least managed to continue doing so quietly enough not to wake Braska up. It was an unusual experience: he hadn't cried in years, not since he was a child, and never as much as this. But nothing in his life had ever been so painful.

Chapter **43**

The Truth Revealed

Braska could feel the æons as soon as he woke up, without even reaching for them. His head burned with pain; their voices drifted through it, offering him a strange salve even as he knew they were the ones making him hurt.

This is the day, Braska, they told him. *Today you will know your Final Æon.*

A fifth voice had joined them: Valefor's. Her high and childish tone was unmistakable; it was jarring, as it had always been, to hear her speak with such gravity. It was a good sign that she had deigned to join the others just in time for the end, he supposed.

He dressed and went to join his guardians outside, closing his eyes in the hope it would lessen his headache.

Jecht's gaze flitted between his companions; he couldn't decide which of them made him more uncomfortable to look at. Braska was clearly in a lot of pain, but Auron looked as if he

would burst into tears again at any moment. If that happened, Jecht thought, he didn't know what he would do. Spending the early hours of the morning keeping watch had meant he had nothing to do but ruminate again and again over the fact that his city – his life, everything he had once cared about, *Tidus* – had never existed. The previous day, it hadn't really sunk in; now he felt unusually fragile. It wouldn't take much for him to start crying himself, and that was certainly something he didn't want the others to see. And if Auron broke down again, Jecht would have no chance.

They got ready for the day ahead and returned to the path as it sloped down to the ruined city. Braska took Auron's hand as usual, too bothered by his headache to notice his guardian's ongoing distress. The route was eerily devoid of fiends; Braska was relieved to see it. He wasn't sure whether he would have been well enough to fight. It was impossible to imagine gaining the Final Æon in this state either, but he had faith that the æons would ease his suffering when the time came. They were telling him as much, their voices filling his head incessantly: *Go forth, Braska. We support you. Soon you will be ready.*

If you support me, he thought, why are you hurting me so much?

Soon, Braska, soon, they said.

He groaned a little at the typically uninformative response.

The sound was enough to remind Auron that he was supposed to be looking after him. "Do you want to rest?" he mur-

mured.

It hadn't been long since they set off, but Braska nodded. "I think we'll have to. Sorry."

They tumbled into a heap at the roadside; Jecht continued to keep his distance. With Braska's headdress removed, Auron began to work his fingers over his head in the usual way. If they couldn't persuade Braska to turn back, he suddenly thought, he would have just a few more short days of this. His breath caught; a single tear immediately pooled at the corner of one eye and dripped down into Braska's hair. Auron quickly took the damp strands between his fingers, trying to suppress the evidence.

"I hope there aren't any fiends in the ruins," said Braska. "I really don't think I can fight."

"You won't have to," Auron promised him. "Save your strength."

"I'm sorry," said Braska again.

Feeling a little better thanks to Auron's caresses, he looked up at him and added, "You don't look well, either. You look as if you barely slept, you poor thing."

"Yeah," Auron admitted.

"I was talking to Jecht yesterday," said Braska. "We thought you might still be affected by what they did to you."

Auron sighed. "I … yeah. Maybe."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Braska suggested.

Auron's throat felt tight. He shook his head. The ordeal in Bevelle wasn't even the main thing upsetting him anyway, but he couldn't admit to Braska now that he had been trying to find a way to save him all along – especially when his time had run out. "I'd rather … try to forget," he croaked.

Braska moved in to kiss him, pressing his lips against Auron's slowly and softly as if to draw out some of his misery. "Poor Auron," he murmured afterwards. "Not long now until they see the error of their ways."

Auron buried his face in Braska's shoulder, blotting his nascent tears against the summoner's robe; Braska stroked and kissed his hair in much the same way that Auron had recently been doing to him. After a while, Auron raised his head and cleared his throat.

"We should keep going," he said unsteadily, "if you're ready."

"I suppose I am," said Braska. "What about you?"

Auron nodded; he just hoped that if they continued to advance, Jecht would make good on his promise to ask Braska to stop.

They stood; Braska could feel the æons communicating with him immediately. *Forget him,* they said. *Pay him no heed.*

I can't forget him, he thought stubbornly. He is my dearest friend – he is all I have that binds me to this life.

And that is why you must forget, they told him. *Let go of the mortal world. Embrace your sacrifice.*

Yes, he thought. I promise you, it is what I desire most. There is no question of that.

Then leave him behind, they said.

Defiantly, he sent them a single word in reply: No.

His disobedience angered them: Auron's help had made the pain much more bearable, but suddenly that progress had been undone and it was just as bad as when he had woken. Gasping quietly, he closed his eyes for a few seconds, relying on Auron's strong grip to continue guiding him along the path.

It was clear to Auron that Braska was still in a bad way. He wondered what would happen if Braska became too ill to continue walking towards Zanarkand. He supposed he would need to carry him in his arms, as he had briefly done on Besaid, and wondered what Braska might do if he insisted on turning around and taking him away from the Final Æon instead. He could carry Braska all the way back to Bevelle, he thought, if that was what it took. But it would be a terrible betrayal, and Braska would surely return as soon as he could. The only way to keep him away long enough to find an answer was convincing him to turn back of his own free will, and that was where it was crucial for Jecht to intervene.

Before too long, they found themselves among the ruins. Jecht could feel his heart pounding; everything reminded him of his home, and it was horribly disconcerting to see it in such a state. He was just glad that Braska was too unwell to start asking him about it again.

With their entrance to the ruins came a return to form in terms of fiends: one of the large, ferocious monsters of a sort they had been accustomed to fighting in the mountain caves soon materialised. Jecht lifted his sword, eager to use the fight as a means of regulating his emotions, but Auron shook his head. "Run," he said.

"But –" Jecht began.

"Don't argue," said Auron. "We're not fighting. Run – sir, you go first."

Braska did so, hurrying past the fiend as fast as he could; the others followed. After a while, the coast seemed clear; the fiend had seemed not to pursue them very far. Braska sank to the ground, whimpering with pain as Auron quickly moved to sit beside him and hold him close.

"I'm sorry, my lord," he said, "but Jecht and I can't start fighting those things without you. It's too dangerous."

"Aw, come on," said Jecht. "Could've had a go at it."

"No, we couldn't," Auron insisted. "Not just the two of us. Braska's not well enough to fight, and those flans are tough enough even with his help. This isn't the time for bravado. We run again next time – understood? Unless there's something you want to say?"

Jecht scowled.

"Come on," Auron pleaded.

"Well, ain't like I'm gonna be able to fight 'em on my own if you guys run off," said Jecht.

Auron blinked at him for a moment, and then turned to Braska, who had raised a hand to his forehead. "I'm sorry, sir," he said again, "but it's the only way forward. If you don't think you can run, then …."

Braska wondered briefly whether he might ask Auron to carry him: the thought of being safe in Auron's arms, relying on him entirely for his protection, was immensely comforting. But even as he thought so, he felt the æons' retribution; new pain flooded into his head, and he leant forward, groaning.

Fine, he thought as soon as he felt well enough to do so. I'll barely be able to go on if you insist on doing this to me – you leave me with no choice.

He shuffled out of Auron's grip, noting miserably that as soon as he did so his head felt noticeably better, and said, "I can run."

"Oh," said Auron. "Really?"

Resisting the urge to reach out and take Auron's hand again, Braska nodded carefully. "I'll manage. Just as you said – it's better than the alternative."

They stood; Auron offered Braska his hand, but Braska declined, leaning in to press a swift kiss to his guardian's lips instead to assure Auron he had done nothing to offend him, and flinching at the brief spark of pain the contact brought. The æons were making their message very clear now. It was undeniable that they were concentrating on separating the two of them, and Braska was by this point unable to resist any longer.

He just hoped Auron wouldn't be hurt by it. If not for the æons, he thought, he would hold Auron close in his arms and not let go for a very long time.

More fiends materialised as they continued; each time, Braska ran as fast as he could manage, leaving his guardians to follow behind. It was still tiring and painful, but undoubtedly less so than trying to fight would have been. As they drew closer to the largest of the ruins, he caught sight of an enormous cloud of pyreflies drifting gradually from one side of the building to the other, and stopped in his tracks, captivated by its indescribable beauty.

His guardians looked at it too, both feeling much more ill at ease. For Jecht, it was yet another reminder of the incorporeality of his own Zanarkand: these pyreflies were what the city was truly made of, and it sickened him to confront it. As for Auron, the pyreflies made him think of the divine mysteries of Yevon. Seeing them just a short time ago would have brought him comfort; he would have trusted in the arcane spirituality of the scene as assurance that Yevon would provide. All he felt by this point was regret and despair. His faith had abandoned and shamed him so thoroughly: he could see that now.

Not long afterwards, they came to the tallest of the ruins; Jecht could barely look at it. It was the stadium where he had played his championship matches. He felt as if he was going to be sick.

An old man emerged from the building, making his slow

way towards Braska. "Journeyer of the long road," he intoned, "name yourself."

Braska stepped forward with trepidation. "I am Braska," he said, "of Bevelle. I seek the Final Æon."

"Show me your eyes," the old man demanded, reaching out to take hold of Braska's chin with a surprisingly strong grip; Braska stifled a gasp of discomfort.

The man stared at him for a long time. "Good," he announced at last. "You have travelled the long road indeed. Go to her now, with your guardians – she will give you what you desire."

"To her?" Braska exclaimed. "So there is someone – who is she?"

"The one who will free you of your pain," the old man said, letting go of Braska's chin and walking off. As he did so, scattered pyreflies began to swirl around his feet; a few seconds later, his form had become transparent, and then he disappeared entirely.

Auron stared at the space he had left, aghast. "Unsent," he muttered eventually. "Sir, that man was unsent! Something's wrong! I think we should wait here and talk this over before we go any further –" He attempted to cast a meaningful glance towards Jecht.

Go on, Braska, said the æons. *Hurry forward. The Final Æon awaits.*

Braska paused, torn between Auron and the æons. His guardian was right: remaining in Spira as an unsent was a grave offence to Yevon, and the mere fact that their holiest city was guarded by one would most probably have caused many of the Yevonite laity to renounce their religion without a second thought. But the æons were right too. He was so close now; close to the end that he longed for.

"It's all right," he murmured before starting to move forward again. "Don't worry, Auron."

Auron turned back to gaze once more at the place where the old man had vanished. "This isn't right," he said desperately. "It's not right." He reached towards Braska, intending to pull him back before he progressed much further and try pleading with him to be cautious again. As he did so, Jecht punched him in the arm, hard; Auron cried out in surprise.

"Shut the fuck up," Jecht whispered. "Just keep it together, OK?"

"What?" said Auron, rubbing his arm.

"If you start fuckin' crying again," said Jecht, "I'm gonna make you regret it."

"What – well – when are you going to talk to him?" Auron stammered back. "You said you'd ask him to turn back. You promised."

"Yeah, I …" Jecht tried. It wasn't that he didn't want to help Auron, but fulfilling the duty he now knew he had was more important, and that required Braska to complete the pilgrim-

age no matter how much Auron wished he wouldn't. "Just ain't found the right time yet," he said. "I'm gettin' there, honest."

"You'd better be," said Auron. "We haven't got long left."

"I'll do it soon, I swear," said Jecht, hurrying to join Braska before Auron could insist on it any more.

"Look," said Braska softly as Jecht came to a stop beside him. The path in front of them was still clouded with pyreflies, and through the multicoloured shimmers in the air it was possible to discern the shapes of more people.

"More unsent guys?" Jecht guessed.

Braska shook his head while Auron drew level with them. "No," he said, almost reaching for Auron before remembering the æons would punish him. "There are so many pyreflies that this place is like a gigantic sphere. It's not so different from the Farplane, except instead of *our* thoughts creating the visions, it's the thoughts of those who came before us. The pyreflies gather their memories, and display them to those who follow."

"Man," said Jecht. "This place is so damn creepy."

Ahead of them, a ghostly man and woman were arguing, clinging to each other's shoulders as they did so.

"I can't lose both of you," the man said. "Please let me do this. You're stronger than I am – you can bear it."

"We agreed that I would be the one," said the woman. "When we realised that was what it would take, we said I would do it."

"But," he begged, "after everything – I'll lose my mind if you leave me here alone, I swear –"

She broke away from his grip, turning to address someone else. "Lady Yocun! If it might benefit the future of Spira …"

The vision faded. "Aw, that's so weird," Jecht grumbled. "Let's keep runnin', go on."

"Those were Lady Yocun's guardians," Auron stammered out. "What were they talking about? What was she about to do?"

The æons were urging Braska to continue. "Never mind," he said firmly. "Jecht's right – we need to keep going."

"Jecht," Auron moaned, but the others had begun to run again, and he found himself obliged to catch up. There seemed to be no more fiends, but moving at speed allowed them to ignore many of the disconcerting visions that had begun to spring up around them. Auron couldn't help noticing a few, finding each more disturbing: first, an old man dressed in green who was clearly Lord Ohalland, holding a large, spiked ball that had been excised from official depictions of the summoner – then, later, a distraught young boy with bright blue hair who was evidently the half-human, half-Guado child that the elderly Ronso had described to him.

He reached out to grab Jecht by the wrist, and hissed, "We need to make him stop – *now*. None of this is right."

"Get off of me, will ya?" said Jecht, shaking him away. He couldn't help noticing that Auron's eyes were glistening. "OK,

whatever. Hey, Braska!"

Braska hesitated.

"You don't have to do this," said Jecht, somewhat awkwardly.

Braska felt a flicker of irritation; Jecht knew he was committed to his fate, he thought. Trying to stop the inevitable now would just cause unnecessary complications. "Thank you for your concern," he said dismissively.

"Fine," said Jecht, relieved that Braska hadn't even given him the opportunity to try convincing him. "I said my piece."

"Well, I haven't!" Auron exclaimed; for the moment, he was too desperate to take Jecht to task for his lacklustre attempt at changing Braska's mind. "My lord, let us go back!" It was time to admit it at last. "I don't want to see you die!" he begged.

Braska frowned; he had thought Auron had accepted his decision months earlier. Perhaps, he decided, the heat of the moment and Auron's recent struggles were making him lose his resolve. The æons were urging him to forget about it and move on, but he pushed them aside and forced himself to respond to Auron as kindly as he could. "You knew this was to happen, my friend," he said.

"Yes," said Auron, "but –" It was no use holding it back, he thought; if admitting to Braska that he had been concealing the truth from him for so long was what it would take to show

him how serious this was, that was what he had to do. "I," he stammered, "I cannot accept it."

Forget him, the æons insisted, and this time Braska found their advice more compelling; this was the last thing he needed when he was so close to gaining the Final Æon and ending his pain for good. He suppressed a sigh of irritation, forcing himself to remain calm. "Auron, I am honoured that you care for me so," he said, remembering the similar discussions he and Auron had had months earlier, and his perpetual insistence that his sacrifice would result in the best outcome for everyone. "But I have come to kill grief itself," he went on, thinking back to the promise the æons had made the first time they spoke to him. "I will defeat Sin, and lift the veil of sorrow covering Spira; please understand, Auron."

He gave in to the æons and began to hurry forward again, relieved to leave behind the sight of Auron's distressed expression. The æons were still hastening him onwards, and he knew they would make his headache unbearable again if he thought about deviating from his path. It wasn't as if he planned to do so anyway, he reminded himself. His goal was the same as theirs.

When Braska was out of earshot, Auron turned to Jecht at last, and snarled, "What kind of pathetic attempt at dissuading him was that?"

"Look," Jecht began, but then he noticed something: now that Auron was angry, he no longer seemed to be on the verge

of tears. Perhaps, he suddenly thought, if he made sure to behave as obnoxiously as he could, Auron would become enraged instead of upset. That would be much easier to deal with, and vastly decrease the chance that he might be overcome by emotion himself.

"Ain't like you did any better," he sneered, before putting on a high, quavery voice. *"Oh, Lord Braska, I don't wanna see you die!* Fuckin' embarrassing."

"What?!" Auron exclaimed. "Are you – how could you? Don't you have any sense of –"

He cut himself off as Braska turned around and called sternly, "What's the holdup?"

"Nothing, sir," Auron replied automatically. "Sorry." He cast an appalled look at Jecht before hurrying forward.

Jecht followed, forcing a smirk onto his face; he was being cruel to Auron, undoubtedly, but he was convinced it was better for both himself and his fellow guardian if it could prevent them both from crying. All he had to do now was behave the same way until Auron's anger displaced his distress entirely.

They ran on, entering a section of the building that had suffered less damage, and soon coming to one of the large spheres that were used to record summoners' progress. Braska leant forward to touch it eagerly, taking vitriolic pleasure from the knowledge that doing so would send a signal to the Yevonite authorities. They would know he had come this far, and was so close to defeating Sin, despite all the tricks they had tried to

hinder and prevent his progress.

"Are the Trials ahead?" Jecht drawled.

"Probably," said Braska absently.

"Here, too, huh?" said Jecht. "Gimme a break. I was expecting, you know …" He tried to remember the sort of vacuous things he had said when they first left Bevelle. "Parades. And fireworks!"

"You can ask for them after I defeat Sin," Braska replied, still too distracted by the urgency of moving on to pay much attention to Jecht's remarks.

They soon came to what was evidently the Cloister of Trials: it was even more machina-driven than the one that Braska and Auron had worked through before gaining Braska's first æon. The floor consisted of an orderly quilt of square tiles, each pulsating with an eerie glow; behind them, a screen was set into the back wall, more sophisticated-looking than the type that carried the sphere broadcasts elsewhere in Spira.

Braska had come to a stop in front of a tile that was bordered by a green glow; cautiously, he stepped onto it, and the screen at the back lit up with a multicoloured pattern.

"Right, guys," said Jecht, pushing Braska aside. "Let the great Jecht handle this. I'll get it done in, like, five minutes, just you wait."

"Did you have things like this in your Zanarkand?" Braska asked him.

Trying not to react to the use of the past tense, Jecht disguised his discomfort with a snort. "Nah, but I'll work it out. Got more brains than you dumbasses."

He swaggered onto the tiles, privately celebrating at the sight of Auron's appalled expression, and started experimenting with the switches that he could now see were embedded into a few of them. Not long afterwards, he had succeeded in creating a glowing pattern that matched the one displayed on the screen, and several pedestals like those he had seen in the previous temples revealed themselves at the sides of the room.

"What did I tell ya?" he said. "Piece of cake."

Braska nodded his encouragement for Jecht to continue; Auron stood with his arms folded, still looking severely displeased. It soon became clear that there were more such puzzles to complete in the next, larger room: pushing back each of the pedestals that had been unmasked by succeeding at the first one resulted in a new pattern being displayed on a second screen. Undeterred, Jecht moved on and began working at them; the other two followed him listlessly into the second room to watch.

These puzzles were more complex than the first, and Jecht found himself pausing a few times to decide on the best course of action. On one such occasion, Auron pointed at one of the tiles. "That one," he said. "Although we really should –"

"Yeah?" said Jecht; Auron was probably right, he decided. "Think you know better than me, huh?"

"Come on, Jecht," said Auron. "It's got to be that one."

Glowering at him, Jecht walked towards the tile, then moved to the side and stood on one of the nearby switches instead of the one Auron had indicated. It was the wrong tile; the pattern that he had begun to reveal on the floor faded entirely, leaving him back at the start.

"Gee, thanks," he said. "Last time I take advice from a dumb son of a bitch like you."

"What?" said Auron. "Jecht – that wasn't the one I was pointing at, and you know it! Why are you being so difficult? Can't we just –"

"Auron," Braska murmured, "please don't start arguments."

"But –" Auron protested, before cutting himself off and looking at the ground, his fists clenched.

Jecht continued the task; each time he completed one of the puzzles, a symbol appeared at the edge of the cavity in the middle of the floor. When the last one was finished, there turned out to be just two final spheres that had to be placed into certain slots in the smaller room; that was straightforward enough. Once the second sphere was in place, Braska suddenly heard the æons' voices.

She sends another test, they said. *Be ready.*

"There's a fiend," he said, grasping both his guardians' arms to prevent them going back into the second room. "A big one, I think. Are you prepared?"

"Bring it on," said Jecht.

Braska was right; the fiend that had materialised on a platform in the hole in the floor was enormous, with long spindly legs that somehow extended into the ground itself. It was impossible to reach it without standing on the six symbols that surrounded the platform, but it soon became clear that the fiend had a habit of lunging forward to swipe at any of its adversaries who had the misfortune to be standing in front of it. Because of that, it was necessary to constantly jump from one symbol to the next as soon as the fiend changed direction, which wasted valuable time that could have been used for attacking.

Getting behind the fiend wasn't enough to avoid its aggression, either: it turned out to be equally capable of attacking with its tail, and, what was more, to possess the unexpected ability to plant mines on the ground around the platform, which, after a short period of warning, would explode and wound anyone unfortunate enough to be in the vicinity so gravely that he would be knocked unconscious. Braska found himself concentrating on healing magic, finding to his relief that the æons had lessened his headache just enough to make casting spells possible. He could see that this fiend had been sent to test him, just like the one at the top of the mountain; but while that one had measured his ability to summon and command his æons, this one was to test the bonds he had forged with his guardians.

Auron, red-faced, was hacking away at the fiend again and

again, seemingly with no regard for his own safety; one of the mines the fiend was in the habit of dropping lay at his feet, and he had made no effort to move away. Glancing at him, Jecht wondered if his own taunting had succeeded in driving Auron completely mad with rage. He had barely taken a moment to congratulate himself before Braska called, "Toss him a remedy, won't you?"

"Oh, did it make him sick?" Jecht replied, finding one in his pocket and throwing it in Auron's direction. As it made contact with him, Auron blinked, shook his head, and stepped away from the mine just in time.

"Berserk, we call it," Braska explained between spells. "People forget everything except the need to attack."

"Right," said Jecht, mildly disappointed that Auron's all-consuming anger hadn't been his doing.

After a few more near misses, they saw the fiend off, all so worn out that they fell to their knees as soon as it was defeated. Having taken a few seconds to recover, Braska leant forward to cast some final white magic on his guardians, keeping a careful eye on the platform on which the fiend had stood. The æons were telling him it was the way forward: he would use it as a lift, and it would take him down to the chamber of the fayth.

"Well," he said, "looks as if this is it."

"The Final Æon," said Auron quietly.

"Yes," said Braska.

"You don't have to," Auron murmured, but Jecht jostled against him and said loudly, "Well, go get 'em, Braska! Show that fayth who's boss!"

"Thank you," Braska whispered, moving forward to stand on the platform. He closed his eyes as it began to descend: the æons' voices were so loud in his head that their words seemed more real than those of his guardians.

Up above, Jecht turned to face Auron, and said, "Looks like the great Jecht saved you guys in that one. You wouldn't have lasted a second without me."

Auron stared at him for a moment, and then exploded. "What in all the fayth's and æons' names is wrong with you?" he yelled, pushing roughly against Jecht's shoulder. "Why are you behaving so awfully? I thought you'd changed, Jecht! I thought you were going to try stopping him – thought you cared about all this – and now you've gone back to acting like the sun shines out of your own –" He shoved against Jecht's shoulder again with a grunt of frustration.

"What, you wanna fight me?" Jecht teased him. "Thought I'd *changed*, huh? Thought I was gettin' all sensitive and caring like you guys? Fuck that. I'm still the best. Only thing I care about is havin' a good time and showin' everyone how great I am."

He wondered if he'd laid it on too thick, but Auron was too incensed to realise. "I can't believe it," he hissed. "Can't believe I was so stupid. I trusted you, Jecht – I thought we were – I

should never have let you –"

Auron cut himself off, but Jecht could guess what he was referring to. "What, shouldn't have let me suck you off?" he shot back. "Shouldn't have let me fuck you? Regretting not saving yourself for Braska now, huh? As if he was ever gonna do anything with ya –"

At that, Auron launched himself towards Jecht, pinning him against the wall. "You say another word," he muttered, "and I swear, I will slit your damn throat, you utterly disreputable, odious reprobate –"

He was interrupted by the sound of the platform in the centre of the room rising, and turned back to glance at it; what he saw was so surprising that he let go of Jecht immediately. Braska stood on the platform, looking highly ill at ease.

"What's wrong?" said Auron.

"There's –" Braska tried, before taking a deep breath and starting again. "There's no fayth. No Final Æon."

"Huh?" said Jecht, breaking character. "Whaddaya mean, no Final Æon?"

Braska gulped. "I very sincerely hope that I'm mistaken," he said breathlessly. "Will you come down with me?"

If there really was nothing there, Auron thought, then perhaps he had a chance after all. "Of course," he said.

There was enough room on the platform for the three to stand apart from each other, but Braska found himself taking both Auron's hands and burying his head into Auron's shoul-

der. He could tell it displeased the æons – his headache was getting worse again – but he needed it.

When the lift had reached the lower level, Braska forced himself to let go of Auron and shakily led the way to the larger chamber where he should have found the fayth. "This is the statue," he said, gesturing at the carved stone under their feet. "But it's … empty. There's no magic here at all."

"So we keep going, right?" said Jecht, nodding towards the doorway ahead of them, which was cloaked in a strange blue glow somewhat reminiscient of the substance that had coated the Gagazet fayth. "Ain't gonna get any answers otherwise."

"I suppose so," said Braska; as he spoke, he felt the æons' approval. "Yes – you're right, Jecht. Come."

He walked through the door, leaving his guardians to follow; Auron carefully avoided meeting Jecht's gaze. The next room was larger still, and high-ceilinged like a temple of Yevon; a long set of stairs led to a doorway set high into the back wall. As they looked up at it, a figure appeared at the top of the stairs, and began to descend gracefully towards them. Auron and Braska gasped in unison: it was someone they both recognised instantly.

All their lives, they had seen her likeness in countless images: most often, as part of the statuary that adorned every temple in Spira. Lady Yunalesca was the first person known to have defeated Sin, a thousand years ago; among Yevonites, she was revered more than anyone else. Braska and his wife had

even named their daughter after her, despite his already being thoroughly disillusioned by Yevon; Yunalesca's service in bringing the first, lengthy Calm meant that she was typically respected even by the Al Bhed. And here she was standing before them, in flagrant disregard not only of Yevon's precepts, but of the entire cycle of life and death.

"She's unsent too," Auron murmured in disbelief. "It can't be."

"Welcome, summoner," Yunalesca purred as she made her way down the stairs and came to a stop before Braska. "Accept my congratulations. You have completed the long and difficult journey to Zanarkand, and now you will gain what you desire."

Now that she was right in front of him, Braska didn't know where to look; Yunalesca's clothing left little to be desired, and it would have been disingenuous to pretend she wasn't unusually beautiful. Jecht, similarly affected, took the opposite approach, casting his eyes over her body eagerly: it was certainly a more successful distraction from his worries than anything else had been so far.

"Lady Yunalesca," Braska managed at last. "Forgive my reticence. I merely did not expect to find you here."

"Indeed," said Yunalesca, "the knowledge of what awaits summoners in these ruins has been lost to the generations. But still, some brave men and women continue to make the journey. Many fail – but *you*, summoner, have succeeded. Be pleased with yourself; be proud. I shall soon grant you what

you desire."

"The Final Æon," said Braska.

"The Final Æon," she confirmed, "yes. And with the æon, you will be able to rest at last. You can be free."

She came closer to Braska and reached out with a slender hand, laying it against his face. He tried not to flinch: her touch was cold, but as solid as that of a living person.

"The ultimate liberation," she murmured. "Your death; eternal rest. That is what you deeply crave, is it not?"

Braska nodded slowly. "Yes. I have wanted it for a long time. I … I long most fervently for my life to end."

Behind him, Auron made a strangled noise, as if he was choking; Braska turned to look at him briefly, instinctively, but then forced himself to focus on Yunalesca again too quickly for either to interpret the expression on the other's face.

"Good," said Yunalesca. "Then, summoner, you must choose the one to become your fayth."

"I'm sorry?" said Braska.

"Choose," she said again. "You have brought two fine guardians with you; now you must decide which is to give you his power."

Braska frowned, still not understanding; but before long, his æons' voices made it clear. *Now is the time,* they urged him. *Name him, and he will be transformed. He is the salvation we were promised. He will end Spira's suffering at last.*

"You want …" Braska murmured. "You want me to ask him to *join* the fayth? But – the Final Æon –"

"No æon lasts forever, now," said Yunalesca. "Still less one who is called on to wield such great power. The Final Æon is consumed by its summoning, and so a new fayth must be born for each High Summoner who wishes to tame Sin. Only the strongest power suffices, born of the strongest bond; the pilgrimage forges those bonds between summoners and their guardians, so that guardians can fulfil their destiny."

The word made Jecht flinch; he opened his mouth to speak, but Auron cut across him, tense and angry. "That can't be right!" he bellowed. "Guardians don't – the pilgrimage can't just be for that! Guardians *protect* their summoners – they defend them from fiends. They help them in the temples. They don't – they're not just meaningless lives to be thrown away."

"But they're not exactly being thrown away," said Braska slowly, "if they're giving themselves to the fight against Sin. If they're being used to awaken a new fayth, and if that fayth can grant the summoner the Final Æon … that can hardly be meaningless. Can it?"

"Meaningless?" said Yunalesca. "Nothing could be further from the truth. Your guardian's sacrifice will be Spira's salvation. And so, summoner, you must choose."

"I –" Braska gasped. The thought of actually having to speak and condemn Auron to this was too objectionable, even though he could hear the æons urging him on. *Choose him.*

Name him.

"Hey, lady," said Jecht, "why don't ya give us some time to talk it over, huh?"

Yunalesca made no reaction, but Braska nodded. "Yes," he said. "I think that would be best. Would you allow us a moment?"

"If I must," said Yunalesca, "then so be it. But do not delay too long – Spira's safety is at stake. When you have chosen, bring him to me at once. I shall be waiting." She let go of Braska and receded up the steps.

Chapter **44**

A Meaningful Life

Nobody spoke for a while after Yunalesca departed; the revelation of what the fayth of the Final Æon really was had stunned all three of them into silence. The æons were still loud in Braska's head, but he knew he couldn't simply order Auron to sacrifice himself. He would have to wait until Auron consented to it of his own accord, he decided. He continued standing there, not daring to look back at his guardians, but merely hoping that Auron would soon speak and put an end to this agony for them all.

But Auron had no such intention. He had always known that guardians were supposed to be prepared to die for their summoner; he had said as much to Jecht, more than once, in increasingly successful efforts to convince him of the importance of their duties. But he had never really imagined having to do it himself, having always trusted that his strength and his sharp mind would ensure his survival. He had known it wasn't un-

common for summoners to lose guardians en route, but those guardians were ordinary people, ill-equipped for the realities of the pilgrimage, and Spira's finest young warrior monk had never thought those people much like himself.

And besides, this new directive was something else entirely. Auron wasn't being asked to fight his way to death, or even to lose his way in the Calm Lands or freeze on Mount Gagazet. He was being asked to go willingly, to consent and nominate himself and step forward, physically fit if not entirely mentally stable, and allow his life to end. He couldn't do that; Braska could, and already had. But it was a step too far for Auron, and the more he thought about it, the more he wondered: if he refused to be sacrificed, what would be next for Braska? Without a fayth for the Final Æon, wouldn't Braska have to turn around and go back after all? And – as much as he might resent Auron for it, initially – wouldn't that mean both their lives could be spared, and Auron could have what he had desired all along?

"It is not too late," he said, finally breaking the silence. "Let us turn back!"

Braska suppressed a groan; he wished Auron wouldn't insist on making this even more difficult. "If I turn back," he said, "who will defeat Sin? Would you have some other summoner and *his* guardians go through this?"

"But, my lord," Auron begged him. This couldn't be the true way to defeat Sin, he thought; turning back would give

him more time to piece together the clues, and then he would be able to find the real solution. "There must be another way!" he said.

"This is the only way we got now!" Jecht countered, and the others turned to look at him in surprise; they had all but forgotten he was there. "Fine," he went on. "Make me the fayth. I been doing some thinking." The others had never even considered that he could be the one to volunteer, but it was clear to him that this was what that conversation during his brief return to Zanarkand had been about. This was the fate that had been intended for him all along. And it made sense: his life in Zanarkand had never meant anything. Becoming Braska's fayth would finally allow him to do some real good. He would be able to save Spira, and trade his false existence away, in exchange for a Calm.

"My dream is back in the other Zanarkand," he went on. "I wanted to make that runt into a star blitz player – show him the view from the top, you know. But now I know there's no way home for me." It still wasn't right to tell the others the whole truth, he decided; it would only make the situation even more unbearable for all of them. "I'm never gonna see him again," he said instead. "My dream's never gonna come true. So make *me* the fayth. I'll fight Sin with you, Braska – then, maybe my life will have meaning. You know."

Auron could feel his faint hope receding as quickly as it had arisen. It was typical of Jecht, he thought, to act so im-

pulsively – to do what he thought was right and noble, no matter how irrational it might be. "Don't do this, Jecht!" he pleaded, too despondent to allow his memories of Jecht's earlier behaviour to hold him back. "If you live, there may be another way – we'll think of something, I know!"

"Believe me, I thought this through," said Jecht. "Besides, I ain't gettin' any younger, so I might as well make myself useful."

Braska approached him carefully; he had been as blindsided by Jecht's declaration as Auron was. But the æons seemed to be happy about it; their jubilation was deafening. If Auron was going to let him down, he thought, then he had no choice but to rely on his other guardian.

"Jecht," he murmured, moving close to him.

"What?" said Jecht. "You're not gonna try to stop me too?"

Braska certainly wasn't; he just wanted Jecht to know he had never wanted this. "Sorry," he said, and then immediately thought better of it: he knew Jecht didn't like it when he apologised. "I mean," he corrected himself, "thank you."

"Braska still has to fight Sin, Auron," said Jecht, clasping Braska briefly by the shoulders to emphasise his sincerity. "Guard him well; make sure he gets there."

Auron couldn't gather his thoughts together to form a response; all he could think about was the fact that this was deeply wrong. He had been so close to preventing the Final Summoning – even if they wouldn't have succeeded in bring-

ing the Calm, at least Braska would have lived. Now Jecht had taken that away from him – and now he would lose both of them.

"Well, let's go," said Jecht to Braska, but Auron was determined to say something, anything, in the hope that it might make them think again. "Lord Braska!" he called as they turned to head up the stairs. "Jecht!"

"What do you want now?" Jecht groaned.

"Sin always comes back," Auron insisted, wondering if reminding them how short the Calm could be might make them both see sense. "It comes back after the Calm, every time. The cycle will continue, and your deaths will mean nothing!"

"But there's always a chance it won't come back this time," Braska pointed out, still irritated by Auron's insistence on hindering his progress. "It's worth trying."

"I understand what you're saying, Auron," said Jecht. But he knew this was what he was meant to do. The ghostly child had told him he could put an end to the fayth's dreaming; surely that meant breaking Spira out of its spiral of death. He didn't know how yet, but he knew this was his fate.

"I'll find a way to break the cycle," he announced.

Auron hesitated, surprised by Jecht's sudden confidence; he had never alluded to anything of the kind before. "You have a plan?" he asked.

"Jecht?" said Braska, equally curious.

"Trust me," said Jecht, "I'll think of something." He had no idea *what* he would think of, for now, but perhaps the fayth would guide him. The absurdity of it made him laugh out loud as he headed up the steps – it was the first time he had ever thought of himself as a religious man.

Braska followed, keen to leave his anguished guardian behind; before too long, they had both headed through the door after Yunalesca. With that, Auron was alone; and, he realised, that would soon be how things were for the rest of his life. The thought was so unwelcome that he felt as if someone had physically struck him; his knees gave out, and he tumbled onto the ground.

On the other side of the door, Braska sighed. "I know you won't want me to apologise," he said, "but I really am sorry, Jecht. I never intended to ask you to do this. It should have been – Auron should have …" He trailed off. "The æons – they speak to me. They've been telling me there's something unusual about him. I'm sure they meant him to be the one who did it. Perhaps that really would have been our best chance at an eternal Calm – but I suppose we'll never know."

Jecht frowned at him. "But that kid – the fayth – it told me it had to be me. Said I had some kinda special task I was meant to do. Dunno what else it'd be, if not this."

"Really?" Braska murmured.

"Yeah," said Jecht. "Look … are you sure the æons were talkin' about Auron? Did they ever say his name or anything?

You sure it wasn't meant to be me?"

"I'm sure," Braska said, but he felt unexpectedly doubtful. Jecht was right: now he thought about it, he couldn't remember that the æons *had* ever said Auron's name. He had always been *your guardian*, and never anything more specific than that. And that, Braska realised with dawning horror, explained why the æons had always tried to force him apart from Auron at the same time. He had always thought it a strange contradiction that they were insisting on Auron's importance while simultaneously urging Braska to forget him; but it was becoming increasingly clear that they had been referring to two different people. That also explained their delight when Jecht had suggested becoming the fayth himself.

Is it true? he asked them. Is he the one you were after all along?

Yes, they answered with joy. *He has shown himself willing. Now our salvation is in sight.*

"Oh no," Braska mumbled, mortified by his mistake. He wondered if he would have treated his guardians differently on the journey if he had known. He certainly wouldn't have stopped himself seeking comfort in Auron's embrace, but perhaps, he thought, he might have tried to pay more attention to Jecht.

Forcing himself not to apologise yet again, he said instead, "You're right. They've confirmed it – it was you all along. I've been a fool – I never thought to ask."

"Let's get on and do this then, right?" said Jecht.

Braska nodded. "Let's. I just wish Auron …" He sighed. "He always knew what I intended. He told me he'd accepted it – I'm sure it upset him to hear he'd be losing you as well, but he really shouldn't have dragged it out like that. It made it worse for all of us."

"Braska," said Jecht.

"Hm?"

"Man," said Jecht, "I dunno how to say this. But you oughta know. It's … it's about Auron. Braska – he's in love with you."

Braska blinked; Jecht watched as his expression shifted, from blank, to confused, to deeply sorrowful.

"Oh," he said. "Oh – poor Auron. I should –"

He looked back towards the door they had come through. But the æons' presence in his head had become powerful again, and he knew why: their only goal was for him to continue. His own ambition was the same. He was so close to getting what he wanted: release from the anguish that had dogged him for so long.

"Let's go on," he said.

"You sure?" said Jecht.

Braska nodded. "Yes. Please."

His mind was muddled as the two of them headed out to where Yunalesca awaited, torn between the æons' influence and Jecht's news. Auron was in love with him: he had never imagined it. He had fallen in love with a man who was deter-

mined to go to his death. Braska would die, and leave Auron behind to grieve: he knew what that pain felt like. It had been three years, and it still wounded him every day.

"So you have chosen," said Yunalesca.

"He chose himself," Braska replied, finding himself surprisingly defiant.

She smirked. "And a very fine choice indeed. In my day, there was a different method for creating a new fayth – what a shame that we won't need to use it today. But I suppose we wouldn't want your friend downstairs to feel left out."

"Let's just get on with it, OK?" Jecht complained.

Yunalesca pointed at the ground in front of her. "Kneel," she commanded.

Jecht rolled his eyes, but walked forward and dropped to his knees, forcing himself not to flinch as Yunalesca placed one hand on his head.

"Now," she said, addressing Braska again, "I shall test the bond you have formed with your guardian. If it is strong, then he will make an excellent fayth. But you must not interfere. Do you understand?"

Braska nodded. "Yes."

He watched as the process began. Yunalesca glowed with supernatural light; nobody could ever have mistaken her for an ordinary living person in this state. It seemed for a moment, nonetheless, as if nothing was happening. But then he noticed

the stone slowly forming around Jecht's lower legs; and as it took shape, Jecht began to wail.

It was a sound Braska had never heard before; Jecht had never drawn much attention to himself when he was injured in battle, and his reactions to even the most serious wounds had rarely gone further than a few grunts. From the noise he was making now, Braska could tell he was in unbearable pain.

He stepped forward, instinctively wanting to soothe Jecht's anguish with white magic, but Yunalesca waved him away with her free hand. "Stay back!" she commanded him, raising her voice to be heard over Jecht. "You must not interrupt!"

Braska watched in horror as the stony growths around Jecht's legs gradually moved upwards: Yunalesca was encasing his entire body in rock. Jecht was in so much pain that he had begun to shake violently, and would surely have collapsed if not for the stones holding him in place as they continued to multiply, gradually larger fragments gathering around his waist until the shape of his body was entirely disguised.

Jecht's screams were deafening; from time to time, it seemed as if he was trying to speak, but none of the noises coming from his mouth was coherent. The message that he was in terrible agony was clear enough nonetheless. As the stones crawled up his neck and began to attach to his jaw, the sound of his moans started to become muffled; oddly enough, that was what forced Braska into action. Now that he was no

longer immobilised by the sheer volume of Jecht's cries, he found it a little easier to think, and he could think only one thing: that no matter what Yunalesca had ordered, Jecht was suffering, and he needed to help him.

He surged forward again, ignoring Yunalesca's shouts of warning. Giving Jecht some reprieve from this torture was more important, he thought, and as the stones crept over Jecht's face, choking his wails for good, Braska made contact with what was left of the back of his head, and focused on pouring in as much white magic as he was able.

As he did so, the stone slab that now almost entirely surrounded Jecht's body began to transform. The stones had been dark and unremarkable before, but now, bright colours began to spread over their surface, starting at Jecht's head and dripping down like paint. Braska found that he was forced to draw back as the final stones settled into place at the top of Jecht's head, but by that time, the whole slab had become vividly coloured – just like the fayth statues in each of Spira's temples. An outline of some monstrous form of Jecht followed the contours of the stone, immortalising his image.

"Good," said Yunalesca, who looked mostly human again. "Your magic was the final ingredient. A most serviceable fayth – your bond is strong indeed."

"You tricked me," said Braska shakily. "You told me I wasn't to touch him –"

"And how else could I have tested your mutual devotion?"

she countered. "What could be a better indication of your affection for your guardian than your readiness to disobey your own religion's most revered figure?"

"It's not my religion," said Braska. "I'm not a Yevonite." He clenched his fists: it felt childish to be having this argument after what had just happened to Jecht.

"But you follow the teachings, clearly," she replied, "or you would not have taken the pilgrimage."

"Some of the teachings," Braska protested. "I believe in the –" He forced himself to look down at the transformed Jecht as he said it. "In the power of the Final Summoning."

"And very wise you are to do that," said Yunalesca. "Now, summoner, you know what you must do. Pray to him, and receive his æon."

Braska knelt, not wanting to look at her anymore. Almost as soon as he had got to his knees, Jecht appeared before him, ghostly and translucent but otherwise the same as he had been in life. Braska could feel tears gathering in his eyes.

"Oh, Jecht," he murmured. "You were in so much pain. I wish I hadn't waited so long to –"

"It's OK," said Jecht. "It's over now."

"How does it feel?" Braska couldn't help asking.

"Bein' a fayth?" said Jecht. "It's … uh, hard to describe. Feels like I know a lot of stuff I didn't know before." He scratched at his neck. "Let's just get on with it, all right? You wanna get away from this bitch, don't ya?"

Braska nodded tearfully. "Thank you, Jecht."

He took Jecht's hand, closing his eyes; soon, he was reliving his own memories, as he had done each time he communed with the fayth. Jecht seemed to have selected those that related to Braska's family: he saw himself as a young boy, walking through the sunlit cloisters of Bevelle on his way home from lessons. His parents had provided everything he needed; they had ensured he received the best and the most interesting education; they had told him of the old traditions of their people from before Yevon's dominance, and always encouraged him to think critically about their faith.

Then the scenes shifted, skipping forward to adulthood; now Braska was about to become a father himself. He recalled pressing his hands carefully, reverently, to Girl's growing belly; then, later, lifting tiny Yuna in his arms, and kissing her perfect forehead. The miracle of life was so much more beautiful than anything Yevon had ever promised him. He saw his early days of parenting with Girl, each taking Yuna by one hand as they walked proudly through Bevelle together, ignoring the looks of confusion and disgust from passersby. Tucking Yuna into bed at night, reading her stories, always teaching her to be curious and happy; healing her playground scrapes with the smallest touch of white magic from a single finger.

And then the darkness came, as he had expected. Yuna was taken away, and he fought as hard as he could to have her back;

and on those infrequent occasions when they let her see him, he forced himself to hold back his tears, and to make himself as happy as possible as he gave her all the attention he could spare. She was quiet for a while after Girl's death, but spending time with Braska lifted her spirits; he made sure to make those days she spent in his company as good as they could be. Watching the ships together at the docks, buying her the finest pastries from the traders' stalls, playing her games with her; right up to that final morning, when Jecht joined them to show off his blitzball techniques, and they said goodbye on the bridge.

The memories came to an end; Jecht let go of Braska's hand, cleared his throat, and said, "Huh. Well, I guess that's what it's like to be a good dad."

"No, no," Braska protested, wiping his eyes. "I was a terrible father. I couldn't be there for her – after her mother … I was too weak."

Jecht shook his head. "Nah. How can you say that, when – look at all that stuff you did with her. And you took those spheres for her every night – you –" He broke off and sniffed loudly. "You fuckin' told her you loved her. That's more than I ever did."

"Oh, Jecht," Braska sobbed.

"I gotta make it up to him," said Jecht, while Braska reached for his handkerchief. "Even if he ain't – there's gotta be somethin' I can do." He heaved out a long, shuddering sigh. "Look. Let's get on with it, yeah? Else we're both gonna be too – ugh.

Come on." He reached forward to take Braska's hand again.

Now it was Braska's turn to see Jecht's memories. He found himself in a world of bright lights and loud sounds: Jecht's Zanarkand was so different from Spira that he could barely imagine how Jecht must have felt when he found himself in Bevelle. Everything was fast and busy, and there were so many complex machina that Braska was sure the priests of Yevon would drop dead from shock if they were to see it. He watched the young Jecht as he grew, seeming to spend more time in the water than out of it; he saw him argue with his parents, and spend more and more time away from their home, mixing with other youths who seemed determined to lead him astray. He watched as Jecht indulged in a series of vices that the people of Spira would never have heard of. But at the same time, Jecht was still dedicating himself to his blitzball training, skiving school not only to spend time with his miscreant older friends but also to put in long hours at the sphere. His efforts paid off: he joined the junior league, and then was scouted for one of the lower-ranked clubs at a precociously early age, and then, not too long afterwards, signed a contract with the Abes, one of Zanarkand's most prestigious teams.

It didn't seem to slow him down; if anything, his schedule became more intense. He had drifted away from the bad influences of his younger years, now prioritising making connections with the right people; but those connections were usually

cruel and fleeting. Braska observed the way Jecht used people, and the way he was used by others; it was behaviour that he found hard to reconcile with the man he knew. He found himself watching as Jecht became caught up in Zanarkand's cutthroat celebrity world, and as he began to draw attention to himself in ways that didn't always involve blitzball. A dizzying number of sexual encounters left Braska wondering how Jecht ever found time to train, but alongside them he gradually realised that there was one woman who reappeared more than anyone else, and who seemed plainer and quieter than most of the rich, powerful people Jecht slept with. It was only when he saw that she was becoming visibly pregnant that Braska realised she was Jecht's wife.

From there, he saw how Jecht's life in Zanarkand became steadily more challenging. Younger players were rising through the ranks, starting to make names for themselves in the Abes, and he was forced to step up his clandestine training regime to ensure he remained the best; at the same time, his attempts to connect with his son fell flat. Jecht wasn't equipped to deal with such an emotional child, and resentment gradually festered between them as the boy grew older, complicated further by the irregular bouts of depression Jecht's wife was experiencing. He watched as Jecht turned to alcohol for solace, and as the media began to become aware of it.

And then Jecht came to Spira; it was a good thing he had

spent most of those first days drunk, Braska reflected, because the shock of encountering such a different society would surely have been deeply disturbing if he was sober. He saw the three of them in the prison in Bevelle, meeting for the first time; the sight of Auron was a sudden, unpleasant reminder of what Jecht had revealed to him earlier.

He saw the pilgrimage from another angle, watching as Auron and Jecht traded blows and then, eventually, grew closer. He saw for the first time how worried Auron had been about him; he saw Auron struggling, earlier than Braska had ever realised he might be finding things difficult. He watched Auron confess to Jecht that he was looking for a way to save him – and, later in the journey, that he loved him. It had been right there, all the way through the pilgrimage, and Braska had never seen it. He had never bothered to look.

And then, he saw Auron again, sitting on a travel agency bed with his trousers pulled down to his ankles. Jecht was leaning in, reaching out towards him – and for the first time, Braska was adamant that he wanted this to stop. Seeing Jecht's sexual encounters with strangers was one thing, but none of those people had any significance to Braska, except Jecht, who was fully aware he was watching. But seeing Auron's most private moments, without his consent, felt like a terrible violation of his privacy.

He tried to let go of Jecht's hand, desperate to break the connection, but another hand took hold of his, cold and firm.

"Do not give up," Yunalesca hissed into his ear. "You are so close to the Final Æon – you will soon have what you desire!"

Braska struggled, trying to wrench his hand away, but her grip was too strong. He was forced to keep watching – he saw another encounter between Auron and Jecht at the Calm Lands travel agency, and a third outside their own tent – and then, at the summit of Mount Gagazet, he saw Auron one last time, crying noisily and messily as Jecht did a poor job of trying to console him. This was the grief he had driven Auron to. This was what he had done.

The connection ended; Braska felt a rush of energy flood into him. The fayth-Jecht in front of him was saying nothing, but he heard his voice in his head: *You got me, Braska. Ready to do as you say.*

He couldn't respond; he couldn't think. His head was in agony, but that hardly seemed important.

"Good," said Yunalesca. "Yes, very good. It will be a most thrilling battle with Sin. Go forth, summoner, and free yourself from the misery of life. And you –" She turned towards Jecht. "Go down and bid farewell to your friend. I see you were close."

She had seen Jecht's memories too, Braska realised; he felt sick.

He began to walk back towards where Auron waited, amazed that he was still able to move. Jecht was beside him, a familiar if transformed presence; once they had headed back into the short corridor that led towards the staircase, Jecht

spoke.

"You know," he said, "it never meant anything between me and him. It was just – I was just tryin' to take his mind off of everything. Think it worked, some of the time."

Braska just about managed to nod.

"He was only ever interested in you," Jecht added. "Just wanted to find a way to save you – wanted you to have a reason to live –"

"Jecht," Braska found himself saying. "Why are you telling me this now? Don't you think this is hard enough?"

"Well, you got feelings for him too, right?" said Jecht.

"What?" Braska muttered.

"Braska, come on," said Jecht, coming to a stop and turning to face him. "You been – you know, kissin' him all the time, holdin' his hand – you gotta admit you like him – yeah?"

"But," said Braska, "but that was –"

He broke off. He had done those things simply because he had needed comfort on the pilgrimage, he thought. He had started just by taking hold of Auron when he needed support, and everything had proceeded naturally from there. And he had always been the one to instigate it, he realised. Even though Auron had those feelings for him, it had always been Braska who had progressed their intimacy to the next stage.

It didn't mean he felt any particular way about Auron, he insisted to himself. He couldn't imagine himself behaving like that with anyone else – but that, he thought, was because Au-

ron had been his only true friend for such a long time, and Jecht had always made it clear that he was uncomfortable with physical contact himself.

And there was Girl to consider, he thought. He could never have feelings for another person, because Girl was gone.

"My wife –" he mumbled.

"Oh, come on," said Jecht loudly. "Braska, you can't keep – fuck's sake, she's been dead three years –"

"And I'll be dead in three days, Jecht!" Braska cut in. "So what exactly are you trying to achieve by just making me feel even more miserable? What do you expect me to do, now that you've gone and –" He gestured towards the few pyreflies escaping from Jecht's body, lost for words.

"Hey, don't say this is my fault!" said Jecht. "Hell, if you wanted to know earlier, you should've just fuckin' paid attention – you saw how obvious it's been the whole time! If you just stopped fixating on how suicidal you are and actually bothered to care about other people, you might've realised, instead of just – just leading him on! Cos if you're gonna say you're not interested in him, you gotta admit you were just takin' advantage of him, every time you held his hand and fuckin' made out with him –"

"But I didn't know," Braska argued. "And I – I was kind to him, Jecht. I took him in after he escaped the Via Purifico – you know that. I looked after him. I always told him how much he meant to me."

"Yeah, he meant so much that you wanted to go off and die, and leave him behind without anyone else that cared about him," Jecht snarled. "Real *kind*, that is. You didn't even try to let him help you. He wanted you to live, and you never even gave him the chance."

"I can't just decide to be happy, Jecht," said Braska. "I'd barely be able to function, if it wasn't for the – the damn æons –" Pain suddenly cascaded through his head, and he stumbled to the side, reaching for the wall to steady himself. "I'm fed up with this," he said, through gritted teeth. "I just want to go down to the Calm Lands and get this over with. It's all I can do now."

"You fuckin' coward," said Jecht.

Glaring at him, Braska marched forward, heading through the archway and emerging at the top of the stairs. Auron waited below, looking pale and dishevelled; Braska felt his chest tighten at the sight of him.

"I heard shouting," said Auron. "Is – is everything –"

"It's fine," said Jecht, who had followed Braska through the archway. "Don't worry about it."

"Jecht," Auron gasped, thinking for a moment that the man he saw at the top of the stairs was still made of flesh and blood – but then he noticed his unearthly shimmer, and the sparse pyreflies circling around his body.

"You did it," he said.

Jecht nodded. "Yeah. I'm a fayth now."

"Did it hurt?" Auron mumbled.

"Eh, it wasn't too bad," said Jecht. He walked down the stairs; Braska followed, but kept his distance. He still felt confused and angry; he suspected he was going to say something cruel to Auron if he tried to speak, and that would do nobody any good. He turned to face the wall instead, blocking out the sound of the others saying their goodbyes by letting the æons' excited voices fill his head.

"Auron," said Jecht, approaching him. "All that stuff I said earlier – you know, about the parades, and – the things I said when Braska was down here looking for the fayth –" He sighed. "I didn't mean it. I just … didn't think I could take it if I saw you cryin' again. I … didn't wanna start cryin' either. Thought if I just got you riled up instead, it'd be better."

"Yeah," said Auron. "Maybe it was." He tried to smile. "I was thinking about it, and – I was sure there was something going on. I knew you were a better person than that."

"Thanks for believing in me," said Jecht.

"Are you going to accompany us," Auron asked, "back down the mountain?"

Jecht shook his head. "Nah. Gotta stay up here, be ready for the summoning. She just sent me down to say goodbye. Guess she has a heart after all." He snorted.

"So this is it," said Auron.

"Yeah," said Jecht, turning away to look at Braska where he still stood facing the wall. "Look – I meant what I said about

Braska, ya know? You gotta make sure he makes it down there now I'm gone. It's just you now, Auron. I know this ain't what you wanted, but – Braska's gonna be the next High Summoner."

"Yeah," said Auron quietly. "I know. I'm still his guardian – I'll get him there."

"Thanks, dude," said Jecht. "Hey. Can I ask you one last favour?" He hesitated. "Nah … never mind."

"Out with it," said Auron. He couldn't let Jecht down now, after what Jecht had done for Spira.

"OK," said Jecht. "Listen good – take care of my son." He turned to look at Auron. "My son, in Zanarkand. He's such a crybaby – he needs someone there to hold his hand, see? Take care of him, will you?"

"But how am I supposed to go to Zanarkand?" Auron murmured.

"Hey, you said it yourself," Jecht pointed out. "There must be a way to get there, right? You'll find it."

Auron nodded. "All right," he said, "I will. I give you my word: I'll take care of your son. I'll guard him with my life." Making the promise formally somehow made him feel more confident – just in the same way that he had always insisted on addressing Braska by summoners' usual titles. Doing things according to the rules brought him some solace, especially when everything else seemed to be falling apart.

"Thanks, Auron," said Jecht, and he moved forward to hug him – a gesture he had never offered another man in life, but Spira had changed him.

"You were always such a stiff," he muttered, "but that's what I liked about you."

"I …" said Auron. "I liked you too, Jecht. Took me a while, but … I'm glad we had you with us."

"Aw, cut it out," said Jecht, breaking their embrace and swiping at Auron's shoulder. He stepped back, took a deep breath, and added, "Well … I'm done here, I guess. I'll see you guys in a couple days – ready to … uh, kick some Sin ass, or whatever. Good luck." He gave an awkward sort of salute, and began heading back up the stairs.

"Goodbye, Jecht," Auron murmured; Braska, still facing the wall, said nothing.

"Sir?" Auron said when Jecht was gone.

For a moment, Braska continued to make no reaction; then he turned to face Auron. His cheeks were wet with tears; he had been weeping silently for some time, but now, at the sight of Auron, he found himself starting to sob, and he raised a hand to his mouth to try and muffle the sounds of distress that were starting to emerge from it.

"Oh, sir," said Auron again, starting to move towards him; but Braska held out his other hand to stop him. "No," he said weakly, "no, Auron, please. Let's just get out of here. Let's keep going."

"Of course," said Auron obediently.

He expected Braska to take his hand as they walked, but Braska stayed away, moving slowly and hesitantly. With his vision blurred by the tears that kept flowing, he was finding it hard to see the ground in front of him; taking hold of Auron would have helped, but he forced himself not to, even though he yearned for his dear friend's calming presence by his side. He still didn't know whether Jecht had been right when he suggested that meant he had romantic feelings for Auron; he couldn't bear to think about it.

They continued through the dark and quiet Cloister of Trials; Auron was beginning to wonder how they would make it out of the ruins with Braska so distraught. Maybe he would need to carry him after all, he thought, watching Braska's faltering, clumsy steps. After a short time, however, he noticed an oddly colourful panel set into the ground; he was certain it hadn't been there earlier.

"Look," he said, pointing at it.

Braska wiped his eyes and stared down at the panel; it was clearly a machina device, but at the same time, it gave off a strong magical aura. "Teleportation," he choked out, after considering it for a moment. "If we stand on it, it'll take us –" He assessed the magic carefully. "Back down to the Ronso settlement, I think, if we let it."

"Well, that's good," said Auron. "Do you want me to go first, then?"

Braska shook his head; the thought of being without Auron for a single moment was unbearable. "Together?" he whispered.

"Of course," said Auron. They stepped onto the panel; there was hardly room for the two to stand next to each other. Braska found himself so close to Auron that he couldn't prevent himself from clinging to him, despite having resolved to stay away.

Within moments, there was a chill in the air: they were indeed back at the Ronso settlement, standing on an identical pad that also seemed not to have been present when they passed through before.

"That was disconcerting," said Auron. "Useful, I suppose, but –"

The sound of his voice, sounding almost as if nothing was wrong, somehow made Braska feel even more terrible. He wailed in despair, nuzzling into Auron's robe; it was no longer possible to restrain himself. Pressing his wet eyes against Auron, he wished he would never have to leave his embrace.

"Sir," said Auron, tightening his grip around Braska. "I'm sorry this is so hard. I'll be here – until the –" He sighed. "Until the end. And it won't be long now – not long until this is over." That was it, then, he thought as he said it. He was going to lead Braska to his death, and even if it wasn't what he had ever wanted, at least Braska would be at peace at last.

Their presence was attracting the attention of a few Ronso

who stood nearby; one made his way in their direction. His fine dress made it clear that he was one of the tribe's senior figures; in fact, he was Kelk's deputy. He stood still for a moment, solemnly observing the distressed summoner and his guardian.

"Summoner and guardian have returned," he intoned. "Ronso brought news of summoner and guardians, when they climbed mountain. But one guardian not return with you."

Auron nodded. "Yes, he –"

"We lost him," Braska croaked, raising his head to address the Ronso. "On the mountain – he fell – froze to death – we couldn't get to him –"

"Sacred Mount Gagazet is dangerous," said the Ronso, seeming unsurprised by the news. "Many guardians die, many summoners die. But now, summoner and guardian return from Zanarkand. Will summoner fight Sin?"

"Yes," Braska sobbed. "Yes – I have the Final Æon. I'll defeat Sin, and bring the Calm for everyone – I promise."

"Then summoner and guardian stay with Ronso tonight," said the Ronso. "In gratitude for Calm."

"That's very kind," said Auron. The Ronso were an even more private people than the Guado; he was well aware that they didn't offer their hospitality lightly.

The Ronso inclined his head. "You will dine with us."

"I'll be a terrible guest," Braska stuttered. "I'm sorry – forgive me –"

"Ronso understand," said the Ronso.

He led them to a long outdoor table where it turned out the Ronso dined communally; at any other time, both visitors might have found it mildly interesting, not having previously had any insight into even these most fundamental aspects of Ronso culture. Braska and Auron found a space to sit on the narrow bench; Braska forced himself to move apart from Auron once he was sitting down, and looked down at the table, watching his tears splash onto its surface. He wondered whether he would stop crying at all in the short time he had left.

The food was served; Braska immediately knew that he couldn't eat any of it. Mercifully, the Ronso were keeping to themselves and not trying to engage their human guests in conversation; nobody seemed to have noticed that Braska hadn't touched his food, apart from Auron.

"Please try to have something, my lord," he whispered. "I know this isn't the time to be thinking about etiquette, but they've done us a great honour by inviting us – we don't want to seem ungrateful. And you need to keep your strength up."

Braska shook his head, his vision clouding with tears again. "I'm sorry, Auron," he said. "I – I just can't."

"OK," said Auron, knowing there was nothing else he could try. "Don't worry." He finished off his own portion, and then reached over to swap their dishes, leaving his empty one in front of Braska and making a start on Braska's food himself.

His kindness made Braska feel even more disconsolate.

Even now, Auron was looking out for him – even after the way Braska had treated him during the pilgrimage. Jecht was right: he had been cruel to him, and he had led him on and taken advantage of him, and never bothered to work out how Auron actually felt. He had acted inexcusably, he thought, and still Auron was prepared to stay by his side and help him, and even to love him. He didn't deserve it.

One of the Ronso came by to take away the empty dishes, and then said, "I show summoner and guardian to lodgings. Does summoner wish to stay with guardian, or separate?"

Braska glanced tearfully in Auron's direction, hoping he would make the decision; Auron shrugged. "Whatever you prefer, sir," he said gently. "If you want me to stay with you, I can – just say."

"No," said Braska. "It's all right – I'll leave you in peace. I'll manage."

Auron frowned briefly; he hadn't expected that, but it wasn't his place to argue. "As you wish, my lord," he said. "I hope you sleep well."

He followed the Ronso to the room that had been made up for him; everything inside seemed very large. Bidding his escort a perfunctory thank you, he removed his robe and collapsed onto the bed with a sigh. He was exhausted; quite apart from his lack of sleep, it had been a particularly draining day. The implications of Jecht's sacrifice hadn't fully sunk in, and he wasn't sure whether he wanted them to.

After forcing himself to stand and finish undressing, Auron put on his nightclothes, gathered his hair into a bun, and lay down again, hoping he would finally be able to sleep. A few minutes passed; it was clear he would have no such luck. His mind was still too disturbed to allow it, even though he seemed in some way to have made peace with what lay in store. He was so tired and unhappy that everything ached, especially when he tossed and turned, and he felt a little sick after having had to eat Braska's dinner as well as his own; none of that was conducive to sleeping, either. Jecht's words echoed in his mind: it was entirely his responsibility to ensure Braska made it into the Calm Lands for his battle with Sin. If he spent the next day even more sleep-deprived, he would struggle to do that successfully.

He got up slowly and began to search through the supplies, eventually finding what he was looking for: somewhere on the journey they had picked up another sachet of the Al Bhed sleeping powder he had given Braska before. There was more in this one: enough, Auron reckoned, to knock him out until the morning. Pouring it into an empty cup that he had similarly acquired somewhere without really meaning to, he took the cup to the tap that protruded from the wall. There was no basin underneath it, just a small drain set into the floor – an odd Ronso custom – so Auron carefully placed the cup under the tap and filled it before making his way back to the bed. There, he gulped the mixture down, and just about had time

to recline before sleep suddenly came over him; the empty cup slipped out of his hand and clattered onto the tiled floor, but Auron was already too deep in sleep to be disturbed by the sound.

Chapter **45**

Until The End

As soon as Braska was alone, he began to cry more violently again. He struggled into his nightshirt and lay face down on the cold bed, muffling his loud sobs in the blanket. He was crying so much that it felt hard to breathe – but if he suffocated, he found himself thinking, it would be a way out at least.

He balled his hands into fists and pounded against his head, relishing the way it made the headache worse. He deserved this suffering, he reminded himself, driving his fists into the same sore spots repeatedly. It was an appropriate punishment for everything he had done to Auron, and everything that was still to come. He could feel the æons in his head, filling him with light, but it meant nothing. There was nothing they could do to convince him that any hope remained.

It had to end, he decided. It had to end at once. The thought of staying alive for even another day or two to make it to the Final Summoning was unbearable, and he hardly deserved the

glory of being remembered as High Summoner. There were surely means he could use to end his life before the morning: he might just about have enough magical energy to cast a spell on himself that would do the required damage, and if not, he would need to find some way of hanging himself, or he could simply crawl outside to freeze to death in the snow. It would be over soon, he thought, and then he would be free of pain at last. He had said goodbye to Yuna already; it made no difference to her whether his death was the result of the Final Summoning or some more cowardly, more fitting way out.

But he hadn't said farewell to Auron, he realised. He would need to go and explain first. Auron had never wanted him to die – he knew that now – but Braska would have to make him understand that this time, it really was the end.

He stood up, still crying so hard that it took all his effort to remain standing. Slipping out and heading into the snow, pale and ghostly in his nightshirt, he came upon one of the Ronso guards.

"My guardian," he sobbed. "Where is he? I need to tell him –"

The Ronso solemnly raised her spear towards one of the dwellings.

"Thank you," Braska whimpered, and he went inside.

He could just about make out Auron's sleeping form in the darkness. "Auron," he said, "wake up, please, Auron –"

He perched on the bed and gave Auron a little shake. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm so sorry, Auron, but –"

Auron continued to make no response. For a moment, Braska wondered if something was wrong; but after watching him for a few more seconds, he could tell that Auron was merely very deeply asleep.

He clambered onto the bed, moved his mouth over Auron's ear, and said as loudly as he dared, "Auron, please wake up; I just can't bear this anymore." But still, Auron failed to stir. Braska reached towards him, tugging at him more firmly; that was equally ineffective.

"Auron," he sobbed. "Auron." He lay down beside him, moved in close to his face, and kissed him desperately; pressing his lips against Auron's mouth, then his cheeks and his jaw, he found that his breathing was starting to stabilise. The desperate need to end his life was becoming less urgent. Being with Auron was making him calmer, even though his guardian was still fast asleep. If he hadn't insisted that they spend the night apart, he realised, he probably wouldn't have started having these thoughts at all.

He needed Auron: it was as simple as that. He wouldn't get through these final hours without him. He squirmed towards Auron's body, closing the slight distance between them and pressing against him, enclosing him in a tight embrace. Even if Auron was asleep, it helped to be so close to him and feel the gentle heat from his body; to run his hands over Auron's

skin, tracing the contours of muscle beneath. And there was no need to feel guilty about what he was doing, he reasoned; Auron didn't know this was happening, so it didn't matter.

Bullshit, said Jecht's voice in his head, distinctly audible over the other æons' constant murmuring.

"Leave me alone," Braska moaned.

Jecht said no more; Braska tried to stop thinking about him, and did his best to concentrate fully on Auron instead. He passed a hand behind Auron's head, unlacing his hair from its bun and letting it cascade over his shoulders; he took the tresses between his fingers, raising them to his lips to kiss them. His crying had slowed to quiet, irregular hiccoughs; he was beginning to feel ready to sleep. His last thoughts before he drifted off were of his dear guardian.

The sun was rising; Braska awoke. It took him a moment to realise where he was; gradually recalling that he was in the Ronso settlement, little more than a day away from fighting Sin, he found that his eyes were filling with tears again.

Running his fingers through Auron's hair, he moved in to kiss his lips. Auron was still deeply asleep, lying in the same position as when Braska had first found him; Braska wondered if he had awoken at all during the night. It seemed unlikely:

surely Auron would have been surprised to see Braska there with him, he thought, and would have woken him to ask what was wrong, as any good, loyal guardian would. At least Auron was resting well, Braska concluded. He needed it.

He stroked Auron's face tenderly, savouring the feeling of spending this quiet moment in his arms. If all of life was like this, Braska thought, perhaps it would have been bearable. But in reality, life was harsh and cruel. He had seen enough of it; that was certain.

Forcing himself to withdraw from Auron's embrace, he wiped his eyes and reluctantly made his way back to his own quarters. Auron would no doubt be waking up shortly, and it would be simpler if he wasn't there for it.

By the time Auron did awake, Braska was long gone. It seemed to Auron as if the whole night had passed in a single instant; he now realised that he had probably exceeded the recommended dosage of the Al Bhed powder. But there was no denying that he was feeling somewhat more alert than he had over the past few days. Now it would be easier to keep his wits about him as he led Braska down into the Calm Lands.

Sitting up, he realised his hair had somehow escaped its bun during the night and become tangled; he found his comb and made it look presentable, and gave his face a perfunctory shave with a slightly shaking hand. He dressed, took a parcel of rations that had probably been meant for Jecht, and ate the contents without trying to think about it too much before

gathering up the supplies and going outside to find Braska.

Braska was crying quietly to himself on one of the few benches; Auron went to sit beside him, letting him collapse into his embrace.

"Did you sleep well?" Braska stuttered, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah," said Auron. "I took some of that Al Bhed powder – needed it." His voice was a little hoarse; he cleared his throat, but it seemed to have no effect.

"Oh," said Braska, realising why Auron had been so unresponsive. With the help of the powder, Auron would have been entirely unaware he had spent the night beside him. He tried to convince himself that it was for the best, and just ended up sobbing again.

"Sir," said Auron, rubbing his back, "it'll be all right. It's going to be over soon."

"But that's not what you want," Braska moaned. "You never wanted –"

He fell silent as someone approached. The identity of the Ronso hurrying towards them was unmistakable: they had both seen him in Bevelle on numerous occasions, mostly state ceremonies. It was Kelk, the leader of the tribe and their representative in dealings with humans. Rumour had it that he had been sent to Bevelle to be educated when he was still a cub, and had learnt the local customs as a means of strengthening the Ronso's hand at the negotiating table.

"Forgive my intrusion," said Kelk, looking a little unsure in the face of Braska's distress. "You are the summoner who recently returned from Zanarkand, are you not?"

Braska nodded, reluctantly sitting up and moving away from Auron. "I am, sir," he gulped.

"Then I must speak to you and your guardian most urgently," said Kelk, "in private. Please, follow me."

Auron and Braska exchanged a puzzled glance, but they stood and slowly followed Kelk to one of the outhouses.

"You must forgive my insistence on delaying you," said Kelk when all three had sat down, "but I lately returned from an audience with Lord Kinoc. I think the man meant to put my mind at rest, but I must say he did not succeed." He placed his large paws on his knees, leant forward, and added, "I'm sure this will sound like sacrilege to you – but I am convinced that the Bevelle clergy are hiding something from their people. Something, I believe, that has to do with Zanarkand."

"Have you spoken to Mimme?" said Auron.

"That drunken old fool?" said Kelk. "I most certainly have not. And why should such a thing be necessary, when I can ask two men who have recently seen Zanarkand with their own eyes? I know it may seem blasphemous, and I know you will be reluctant to trust a Ronso over your own, but I smell corruption. Every time I visit Bevelle I grow more convinced that something is amiss. And – for the good of Spira – I must ask you to let me know if you have seen something untoward. The

might of the Ronso is behind me. If Bevelle is hiding something from the rest of us, they will suffer the consequences."

The two of them sat there, not daring to respond. Kelk's suspicions were correct, of course. The Ronso were a righteous people; they valued honour and integrity. If they found out that Lady Yunalesca still dwelt in Zanarkand as an unsent, and that she took guardians and made them into fayth for the Final Summoning, they would be shocked to the core. And if there was any chance the priests in Bevelle knew – Auron just about stopped himself letting out a bitter laugh. Of course they knew. Just as the Guado clearly knew the truth about the pilgrimage, so would the maesters. They would have kept records going back to Lord Gandof's day in their private libraries, permitting access only to those they deemed worthy. And now that Kinoc was rising through the ranks, they would have told him too, and given him the task of fobbing off Kelk Ronso when they thought he might be starting to suspect.

Braska's attention had turned to his æons: he could tell that they were strongly urging him not to reveal anything.

But if we say nothing, he thought, more summoners and guardians will have to confront this terrible sorrow. If we alert the Ronso, perhaps the people of Spira will be able to work together to find another way, like Auron said. Mightn't they?

No, they said. *Not yet – it is not the right time.*

It was a dissatisfying response; Braska searched his mind for Jecht specifically. Jecht, he thought. Tell me this: are the

æons correct? Must we keep this a secret?

You wanna start a civil war? said Jecht.

I don't know, Braska thought. If that's what it takes – maybe?

But he immediately felt horrified by his own words. He had always wanted peace; that was why he had embraced his role as envoy to the Al Bhed, even though he had never been that good at it. He wanted Spira to be free of strife; he was determined to bring the Calm, after all.

"I don't know what you could be referring to, sir," he croaked at last. "Everything was as expected."

"Is that so?" said Kelk. "Forgive me, but you are clearly disturbed, lord summoner."

"He's about to die," said Auron, more viciously than he intended, before inclining his head and adding, "sir."

Kelk nodded back. "Of course – my apologies. But, sir guardian, you bade me speak to old Mimme, did you not? What can that have been about, if there is truly nothing out of the ordinary in Zanarkand?"

Auron glanced at Braska, wondering if he would continue to claim there was no cause for concern, but he seemed to be crying too much to speak. He thought for a moment, and then murmured, "Are you sure we shouldn't tell him?"

Braska gazed at him with red, reproachful eyes.

"So there is something!" Kelk declaimed. "For the sake of Spira, you must tell me – I insist."

Auron made a show of hesitating for a few moments; then he sighed, and muttered, "Machina."

"Machina?" Kelk echoed.

"Yes," said Auron. "Bevelle's full of it. I mean, I'm sure you know that, but … there's even more than you think. I don't suppose you've ever visited the Cloister of Trials in Bahamut's high temple?"

"Of course I haven't," said Kelk gruffly.

"It's packed with machina," said Auron. "The forbidden sort. Sir, we've been all over Spira, and we've seen places where the people are so pious they refuse to even have a sphere screen installed, but they don't know what things are really like in Bevelle. Even the warrior monks are mostly gun wielders these days. It's because of modernisers like Wen Kinoc – they're abandoning the teachings."

Kelk's brow set into a deep furrow, and then at last he said, "And Mimme is privy to this?"

"He suspects," Auron bluffed, "based on the demeanour of the summoners who've been passing through over the years."

"I see," said Kelk. "This is very worrying. We Ronso know that machina contravene the teachings; we take pride in eschewing them. I know from my dealings with the Guado that they do the same. I was aware that the clergy in Bevelle made some use of machina, but I had no idea how pervasive they had become." He drew himself up, and turned towards Braska. "When your Calm comes, lord summoner, I shall take a delega-

tion of Ronso to Bevelle, according to tradition. But with the strength of my people behind me, I shall seek an audience with the maesters, and ask them to answer for this disregard of the teachings. Did you confront them at all, when you found out?"

Auron thought back; they had both been surprised by the extent of the machina in that first Cloister of Trials, but Braska obviously hadn't been worried by it, and while Auron had been slightly disturbed, his priority was making sure Braska was all right after his encounter with the fayth. It hadn't seemed important afterwards. A summoner and guardian from outside Bevelle might have found it more alarming, but few of those who started in the provinces ever made it as far as the city.

"We wanted to get on with the pilgrimage," he said truthfully. "It seemed right."

Kelk nodded. "I see. Then I shall take this matter to the maesters in honour of your Calm. That is, if …" He cast his eyes over Braska, who certainly didn't seem to be in a fit state to perform the Final Summoning.

"I *will* bring the Calm," Braska stammered, recognising the source of Kelk's hesitation.

"He will," Auron added. He reached over to take Braska's hand.

Looking at each of them in turn, Kelk inclined his head again. "Very well," he said. "Then may Yevon's blessings be with you."

They made their way out of the building and back onto

the mountain pass; Auron put an arm around Braska as they advanced, and this time, Braska didn't try to refuse the support. He couldn't tell whether it was making a difference to his headache anymore: his head was a jumble of the æons' loud, indistinct conversation. He sobbed noisily as they progressed; fortunately, few new fiends had spawned since he and his guardians had walked the same path in the other direction.

Auron was glad to see it too: he didn't feel up to fighting. Despite being more able to think clearly after his full night's sleep, he felt shaky and weak; his voice had remained unusually hoarse throughout the conversation with Kelk.

When Braska's crying seemed to have lessened, Auron said, "Why didn't you want to tell him? Kelk – tell him what goes on in Zanarkand?"

"He'd have been angry," Braska sniffed. "He'd have done more than just requested an audience with the maesters. We can't start a war, Auron."

Auron shrugged. "Maybe we should have. How are things ever going to change otherwise?"

"I don't want innocent people to die," Braska protested.

"How is it any different from Sin killing them?" said Auron. "And from guardians having to sacrifice themselves in Zanarkand without even knowing – aren't people dying anyway?"

"Yes," said Braska, "yes, but ..." He found himself too overcome by tears to speak for a moment, but eventually added,

"The æons advised me not to tell him."

"Oh," said Auron. "Right. The æons."

"What do you mean by that?" said Braska, detecting the bitterness in his voice.

Auron ran his free hand through his hair, and then attempted to explain. "I don't like how you're relying on them. You're supposed to be their master, and they're not even – they're not even real. They're just spirits. I don't like it – it's disturbing."

"I'd never have got this far without their help," Braska pointed out.

"You don't know that," Auron insisted. "And this –" He gestured at Braska. "This headache you've had for weeks. It's their fault, isn't it?"

Braska sniffed. "Yes – but –"

"So how can you say they're helping you?" Auron demanded. "And you're just doing what they say without questioning it –"

"Can you blame me?" Braska replied, his voice cracking with desperation. "Can you blame me, Auron, when all the decisions I've made of my own accord have just brought us more misery? When everything I've done since – since she died – has just been one wrong turn after another?"

"That's not true, sir," said Auron, but Braska was crying too much to register it. Auron turned to kiss him on the cheek

instead, wanting to make it clear that he wasn't angry with him; Braska's only response was to sob even more loudly.

"Do you want to rest?" Auron suggested.

Braska nodded, still too distraught to speak; they sat down in the snow, and Auron helped Braska remove his headdress. Braska buried his face in Auron's neck; Auron gently stroked and kissed his hair in an attempt to comfort him.

He looked down at his own trembling hand, glad he had taken the Al Bhed powder; another sleepless night would no doubt have left him as distraught as Braska was, and it was important that at least one of them had his wits about him for the rest of the descent. It was as Jecht had said: Auron was Braska's only guardian now. He needed to stay as composed as he was able.

And he was managing so far: even coming up with the story for Kelk about the machina hadn't been too difficult. He had been aware, while telling it, that he sounded much like his old self, the apparently unshakeable hoarseness of his voice notwithstanding: he had reminded himself of the person he had been before his trial in Bevelle, somehow simultaneously an earnest people-pleaser and a skilled tactician. It had felt false: he knew he would never be that man again, but at least he could still assume that personality when it was required.

After a while, Braska raised his head, gently laid a hand against Auron's cuirass, and murmured, "Please, Auron – no kisses."

Auron's face immediately turned a deep red. "Sorry," he stammered. "I won't –"

"It's not your fault," said Braska quickly. "I didn't mean – it's not because of you. It's just that I – I don't deserve it."

"Sir," said Auron.

"I *don't*," Braska insisted, and he looked so distressed that all Auron could do was hold him close in his arms, carefully making sure to keep his face at a distance.

After some more time, they stood and continued their slow, faltering journey. Much of the day went on in the same way; at the rare appearances of fiends, Braska managed to pull himself together enough to keep Auron healed while Auron saw the attackers off with his sword, impeded only slightly by the ongoing tremor in his limbs. Jecht's absence, on the other hand, was more disorientating than Auron had expected, both during battle and outside it. The state Braska was in wouldn't have been so hard to bear if Jecht had been there to make a few of his usual irreverent remarks; even the occasional opportunity to exchange a glance with him would have helped.

Desperate to distract himself from thoughts of what was to come, Auron found his mind turning to what they had seen in Zanarkand. Yunalesca was unsent: just those three words signalled the greatest offence against Yevon he had ever come across. It was true that revealing such a thing to the Ronso, or indeed to any of the devout peoples of greater Spira, would have had extremely grave consequences.

As Braska had told Jecht, seemingly a lifetime ago, the unsent were somewhat misnamed: it wasn't merely the lack of a sending that kept them from passing on to the Farplane. Many people died without being sent, and their fate was to become fiends, mindless creatures with no goal other than to hurt those who still lived, until they could be struck down and finally be given the chance to rest. The unsent, instead, were bound to the living world by some strong attachment; often, Auron had been taught in his youth, by a duty that they believed themselves required to fulfil.

In Yunalesca's case, he supposed, that duty was to see the destruction of Sin: but all she could do was bring temporary Calms by making fayth of those guardians who accompanied their summoners to Zanarkand, and hope that someday humanity would atone enough for one of those Calms to last forever. Without her, there was no means for each summoner to call the Final Æon, and hence no way of granting Spira that temporary respite. But her overlong stay among the living was twisting her; she was turning into something monstrous. That, Auron had been taught, was the great paradox of the unsent: while they strove to complete their task, their very existence was an abomination to the laws of nature, and so everything they did that had an impact on the world of the living corrupted them until they became vengeful, losing their grip on humanity. It was only by resolving merely to observe and comment on what went around them that they could retain a sound mind

and clear purpose, even if their inability to act meant that purpose had to remain meaningless.

It was a horrible way to exist, he concluded. And yet Yunalesca's failure to bring an eternal Calm meant she had persisted for a thousand years, gradually changing into something unnatural and obscene. The more Auron thought about it, the more it seemed to be proof that the Final Summoning was an unsatisfactory method of defeating Sin. It killed not only summoners, but their guardians too; and it relied on the actions of someone who desperately needed to go to the Farplane. If she stayed in Zanarkand much longer, Auron realised, she would drift even further from humanity and become actively dangerous.

It needed to be stopped; he knew that now. And, he thought, perhaps he was the one who could do it. The æons had told Braska he was special, after all. Whatever he was supposed to have been able to achieve, it clearly wasn't anything to do with Braska's Final Summoning, as much as he had wanted it to be – so maybe it was related to this. He had gathered all the information he could during the pilgrimage, and in a matter of days, he would be the only person alive who had accompanied a summoner to Zanarkand and survived the ensuing Final Summoning. He would have more of a chance of getting to the bottom of this than anyone.

It gave him a strange, bittersweet hope. He still didn't like to think about how things would be when Braska was gone;

it was hard to see how he would manage at all. But at least there would be something for him to work towards. He would just need to bring himself to spend enough time in Bevelle to ensure everyone became aware of his new status as legendary guardian; that would mean his favour was restored, as Braska had always insisted. Auron had truthfully told him he didn't care about that anymore, but at least, he now realised, it meant he would have allies in his new quest. With the support of the people of Bevelle, he would be able to put together the final pieces of the puzzle. He could go back to see Yunalesca and hope she would still have enough human compassion to work with him on finding a way to destroy Sin for good. It would do little to mend his heart, but it would give him something to focus on for a while.

They walked slowly on, resting intermittently at the times when Braska's headache got too bad for him to progress. It was just the same routine as it had been over the past few days, except that the distance they covered between rest breaks had steadily shrunk. Braska was leaning on his staff and on Auron, whimpering with every step he took; the transition from Mount Gagazet to the warmer climes of the Calm Lands had no effect.

"Where do you think we should aim for, my lord?" Auron asked as they started to cross the plains.

"Just keep going, I think," Braska sniffed. "It's – it'll happen tomorrow. We just need to head towards the centre."

Auron grunted in response; he'd hoped for something more concrete. Braska was struggling to walk, and it would have helped to know how far they had left to travel so he could think about when they might be able to make camp. He wondered if there was anything else that could be done to ease their progress. Braska was clearly in pain, but his distress was slowing him down as well. If he could be persuaded to talk about what had happened in Zanarkand, Auron decided, it might make things easier.

"You shouldn't blame yourself for what happened to Jecht," he tried.

Braska turned to face him tearfully. "Jecht?" he murmured.

"Yes," said Auron. "I know it was – we didn't want him to leave us like that. But he chose to sacrifice himself. It was something to do with that fairytale he always used to talk about, I think – he always had all those stupid ideas about fate." It felt wrong to be criticising Jecht after what he had done. "I just mean," he added quickly, "I know you're upset about it, but you shouldn't tell yourself it was your fault."

"I …" Braska sighed. "To tell the truth, I haven't dared think about it."

"Oh," said Auron. "But – I thought that's why you –" He looked Braska over. "I thought that's what was making you so upset."

Braska shook his head. Maybe it should have been, he thought. Jecht had willingly gone to his death; for that, Braska

owed him an unfathomable debt. That ought to have mattered more than anything else, and yet his deepest regrets lay elsewhere.

"Did you see something that disturbed you in Zanarkand?" Auron went on. "I was thinking about Yunalesca – she must be barely human by this point. Did she … do something?" There was no response from Braska, so he continued. "Or is it the Final Summoning? Because if you're having second thoughts – you know I'll support you if –"

"I'm not," Braska interrupted him, just about managing to speak through his increasing sobs. "I'm sorry, Auron, but I'm not. I know that's what you wanted – but I can't. I'm sorry."

Auron held Braska gently as he stumbled into his arms. "I know," he admitted. "Forgive me. I couldn't help asking."

He waited until Braska seemed to have calmed down a little, and said, "What is it, then? Tell me what's upsetting you – we can talk about it. That'll help, won't it?" A long time ago, he had spent many excruciating evenings sitting by Braska's side while Braska talked about how miserable he felt. Braska normally wanted to discuss this sort of thing at great length.

Blinking up at Auron's face, Braska briefly wondered whether he might try explaining the source of his misery. But he was deeply ashamed by it: what Jecht had told him and shown him in Zanarkand had made him disgusted with himself. He had mistreated Auron, he thought; he had called him his best friend, but had never even tried to consider how

Auron felt. And moreover, if they began talking about it, the question of his own feelings about Auron would inevitably come up – and he still didn't know the answer. The more he tried to think about it, the louder the æons were in his head, encouraging him to move on to the Final Summoning; they made it impossible for him to think at all.

"Go away," he moaned, and Auron immediately looked horrified.

"No," Braska gasped, clinging to Auron's robe. "No, not you, Auron – I'm sorry. I didn't mean you – I would never – I need you. Please don't go anywhere; I *need* you."

"It's all right," said Auron, almost moving in to kiss him before he remembered Braska had asked him not to. He caressed his face carefully instead. This was hopeless, he thought.

"Maybe we should just stop for today," he said. "You can barely walk, sir. I think we just both need rest."

Braska nodded. "Yes," he mumbled. "Sorry."

"You don't need to apologise," said Auron; speaking those words made him think of Jecht, and he suppressed a sigh. "Sit down," he said, "and I'll put the tent up."

He slowly let Braska collapse onto the ground and began assembling the tent, savouring the chance to do something practical even though the persistent shaking in his limbs made it more difficult than usual. When the tent was complete, he went back to sit with Braska, who was, of course, still crying.

Auron drew him in with one arm. "You'll have something to eat, won't you?" he suggested.

Braska shook his head.

"It's been over a day since you last ate," Auron pointed out. "You need to have something, sir – it'll make you feel better."

He went to retrieve the rations, wondering if the sight and smell of them might somehow win Braska over, but it seemed unlikely; they were a few days old by this point. Auron didn't even feel much like eating himself.

"I saw some wild deer nearby earlier," he said, returning to Braska's side and holding him close again. "Maybe I'll see if I can get one of them and we can cook some of its meat. You'll have some, won't you? It'll be fresh. Please, sir."

Braska groaned, but he knew Auron was trying to take care of him. "I'll try," he stammered.

"Good," said Auron, almost turning to kiss him on the forehead before stopping himself. "It doesn't seem like there'll be any fiends, but if you see anything, you shout, OK? I won't be far away."

Braska nodded, and Auron headed towards the spot nearby where the deer were roaming. Concealing himself behind a rock, he settled in and waited for one of the animals to come close enough for him to throw his knife to wound it. Like when he had been putting the tent up, he felt better for the chance to do something physical, despite not being in the best condition.

It was good to spend time apart from Braska too, he supposed. They had been by each other's side almost constantly for nearly six weeks, but he needed to get used to the fact that soon that would be impossible. He would need to dedicate himself to his new task, and use Braska's memory as a source of inspiration, not of sorrow.

The thought was a step too far; Auron found himself letting out a loud wail of grief. He collapsed against the rock, striking at it haphazardly with his bare hand; it hurt, but not as much as the thought of being without Braska. Auron had been trying to ignore it, but he didn't know how he was going to cope – especially now that Jecht wouldn't be there either. His fellow guardian had never been good at sympathy, but at least he would have understood what Auron was about to go through. Now that Jecht was gone, there was nobody else in Spira who would know the peculiar curse of being a legendary guardian.

Whimpering, he forced himself to concentrate on the deer. They had moved further away, startled by his outburst; it took a while for one to begin drawing closer to the rock again, but when it did, Auron pulled himself together as convincingly as he was able and launched his knife towards the deer with a swift throw. It bleated in terror and sank to the ground; Auron stood and dashed out, withdrawing his knife from the deer's side and plunging it into its neck. The animal writhed for a few moments, and then lay still. Auron wiped away some of

the blood and then slung the carcass over his shoulder.

"I heard …" said Braska once he returned. "Are you … are you OK?"

"Am I *OK*?" Auron repeated.

"Sorry," Braska gulped.

Auron turned away from him, leaving the deer carcass at a distance while he gathered some wood for a campfire. Once it was ready, Braska used his magic to light the flame, and then Auron set about trimming and skinning the best cuts of meat, routinely sneaking glances in Braska's direction as he did so. Braska's face was still streaked with tears, but there was nothing else Auron would have preferred to look at. They had travelled the length of Spira on the pilgrimage, and yet over all those hundreds of miles there had been nobody nearly as handsome as Braska was; he was certain of that. And if the next day would be Braska's last, Auron needed to keep looking so that he might preserve his memory.

He found himself concentrating more and more on Braska, and less on what he was doing; eventually, he ended up misjudging the position of his trembling hands and accidentally driving his knife into a finger. He yowled in pain; Braska quickly scrambled to his feet and hurried in Auron's direction to heal him.

"Thank you," Auron whispered, looking into Braska's eyes; his face was so close. He dearly wished he could kiss him. They gazed at each other for a moment – time seemed to stop – but

then Braska blinked, new tears gathered in his eyes, and he drew back and returned to where he had been sitting on the other side of the campfire.

Auron cooked each piece of meat over the flame, offering the first to Braska; Braska took it and did his best to eat. It felt as if the need to chew was making his headache worse, and he felt characteristically full after just a few small bites, but he persevered. Auron had hunted the animal especially so he would have something nicer to eat, he knew; he continued to dedicate himself unfailingly to Braska's service, even though Braska was increasingly sure he had never deserved it.

After finishing his small portion, he watched as Auron ate the rest, and addressed the æons, hoping he could persuade them to give him a moment's peace. Why won't you leave me alone? he asked them. You know I intend to perform the Final Summoning tomorrow. You don't need to make me suffer even more. I just want it not to hurt for a while – I just want to be able to think.

There is no need for thinking now, they told him. *Just be ready, Braska. Soon the time will come.*

I know, he insisted, gritting his teeth; his headache was rapidly growing more severe.

You have no need of him now, said the æons. *He has brought you to the Calm Lands; tomorrow, Sin will come to you. He has served his purpose. Forget him.*

No, Braska replied, raising a shaking hand to his forehead.

I can't – I won't. He deserves better than this. I've already hurt him so much – I can't just dispense with him as if I never cared –

You must, they said, and just as Braska's headache became so unbearable that he was close to crying out loud, another voice surfaced in his head, drowning out the incessant chorus. *Guys,* it bellowed, *shut up!*

There was silence in response; the headache was fading.

Jecht? he thought cautiously.

You got one last night with him, Braska, said Jecht. *Those other guys ain't gonna bother you. You do what you gotta do – make it count.*

But how? Braska thought. What am I supposed to do?

Hell if I know! Jecht exclaimed. *But you wanted the chance to think, right? You wanted to be with him without them getting in your way? That's what you got now. So use it.*

He said no more. Braska sighed, fidgeted a little, and then realised: for the first time in days, his headache was completely gone. Everything around him seemed more real, no longer cloaked in the film of pain that had become normal. He ran his fingers thoughtfully through the grass beside him; he glanced at Auron, who was busying himself with moving the rest of the deer carcass into the fire. He didn't know what he could possibly say to him, but perhaps, he thought, if they could spend some time in each other's arms, he might be able to articulate

how he felt. He needed to apologise to Auron properly, either way.

"I can stay up to keep watch," said Auron once the carcass had been dealt with. "You need to rest before the – before tomorrow."

"You can't stay awake all night," said Braska.

Auron shrugged. "I've barely been sleeping anyway – except last night when I had that powder. Won't make much difference."

"You poor thing," Braska murmured, reaching for Auron's hand. "Why didn't you tell me? I know you said there were a few nights where you hadn't slept well – but I didn't realise it was as frequent as that –"

"I didn't want to worry you," said Auron. "You had enough going on."

"Oh, but so did you," said Braska tearfully. He sobbed for a few seconds, squeezing Auron's hand, and then forced himself to speak. "There don't seem to be any fiends around at all. Don't you think it would be safe without either of us keeping watch, just this once? We could both try getting some sleep – and if we don't manage it, maybe we can … talk things over."

Auron's chest felt tight; the thought of spending Braska's last night alive in the tent with him was too unbearable. "I don't think it's a good idea," he insisted gently. "We should have someone on watch. I really don't mind staying up."

"But not all night," Braska said again. He sighed; he wanted to argue, but it would do no good if they were set upon by fiends while unprepared. If Auron thought it was a risk, then it surely was.

"I'll take the first watch," he said. "That way around's easier, isn't it, if I'm not used to it? I remember you saying that to Jec—" His voice cracked, and he took a deep breath. "To Jecht. At least that way you can try to get some sleep – you need it too."

"All right," said Auron. "Thank you. I'll try." He stood up, stumbling a little as he did so. "Let me know straight away if there's anything dangerous."

"I will," said Braska. "Sleep well – I mean – I hope you manage –"

"Thank you, sir," said Auron quietly, before heading into the tent.

Alone, Braska found himself crying more vigorously again.

Fuck's sake, said Jecht. *Just go in there and talk to him.*

But what can I say? Braska thought. How can I possibly make this better for either of us? I've ruined everything, Jecht – you know I have!

He heard Jecht sigh but say nothing more. At least he was about to die, Braska thought. He might have failed to do so without causing more pain and misery, but at least he would get what he craved.

Chapter **46**

The Final Summoning

When Braska went to fetch Auron to take over the watch, he found him lying in his bedroll with his eyes wide open. "Have you slept at all?" he asked.

"A bit, I think," said Auron, scrambling out of the bedroll and throwing on his dayclothes. He tried to avoid looking at Braska as he did so; it was too easy to remember the night they had spent in each other's arms halfway up Mount Gagazet.

He went to sit outside without saying anything else, and attempted to block out the sound of Braska's sobs from inside the tent. They faded after a while, but the silence was worse somehow.

About halfway through Auron's watch, it started to rain. The campfire fizzled out. He sat there for some time, gradually becoming wetter without finding the motivation to do anything about it; eventually, he convinced himself to go back into the tent and fetch something to cover himself with. Braska

was fast asleep when he went in; Auron didn't know how he had managed it, but he was glad he was able to get some rest. He hesitated by his bedroll, so desperate to lean in and take one of these last opportunities to embrace him and kiss him – but he forced himself to move away, take the Ronso blanket, and leave the tent.

He draped the blanket over himself and waited for the morning to come. The Calm Lands were always dry; the rain was a sign that Sin was on its way. The Final Summoning would happen in mere hours. Auron had expected himself to break down again, like he had at the summit of Gagazet, but all he found himself doing was sitting there in the rain, staring into the darkness, too exhausted and morose to think.

Morning came; Braska emerged from the tent, dry-eyed at last. Being without his headache had taken a while to get used to, as had the æons' absence. But having slept, he felt oddly confident. Soon he would perform the Final Summoning, and he knew it would be a success, especially backed by whatever special power the æons had insisted was in Jecht's possession. He would bring the Calm, just as he had always planned, and it would be a lesson to everyone in Bevelle. He could feel Jecht's strength within him, his raw physical power the perfect counterpart to Braska's own magical energy. There was just one crushing regret, the same one that made his heart twinge every time he glanced at Auron, but Auron would benefit from the Calm as well, he kept telling himself.

"You should have some breakfast," Auron found himself saying. "Keep your strength up for the F—"

He choked; he couldn't say it. He felt as if he was going to faint; he pressed a hand to his face.

"Auron," said Braska gently, stooping towards him.

Auron waved him off; he had to say the words, he thought, even though it was so excruciating. He had to accept what was to come. "The Final Summoning," he managed at last, his jaw tight.

"Auron," said Braska again. "I'm so sorry –"

"Don't," Auron hissed. "You're going to do it, aren't you? So let's just – let's get on with it. Don't make it harder, please."

Braska retrieved the rations; they were, of course, even further past their best than they had been the previous night, but he forced himself to eat what he could, if only for Auron's sake. Auron picked at another of the ration parcels, wondering if he finally understood how Braska felt about eating. He already felt sick, and the food was making it worse.

They took their razors out and shaved in silence; Auron's hands were still shaking, and it didn't take long before he slipped, nicking his chin with his blade. Braska leant over to heal the cut, just as he had the previous evening; their eyes met, and they said nothing.

"We should go," Braska murmured at last. "Let me help you with the tent –"

"It's fine," said Auron quickly. He stood and dismantled it, stuffing it into its bag as fast as he could. It was a mess, but he couldn't bring himself to care. The thought that he might need to use the tent again after the Final Summoning seemed improbable; the thought that anything at all might happen in a world without Braska was difficult to grasp.

They resumed the journey, keeping an awkward distance from each other. Braska no longer needed Auron's support to walk; on the contrary, he felt as if he was gaining confidence with each step. It was Auron who was starting to falter now, and Braska longed to draw close and put an arm around him; but it would be unfair to him, as it had been all along.

"I need to tell you something," he said instead. He still didn't know how he could begin to broach the topic of how they felt about each other, but there were other things Auron deserved to be aware of. "I was mistaken. I thought the æons were telling me you were important, but – they didn't mean you at all. They meant Jecht."

Auron merely blinked in response. So there was nothing special about him after all, he thought. That explained why he hadn't been able to save Braska. The plan he had devised for after the Final Summoning seemed ludicrous now. He was foolish to have thought he could ever make a difference.

"I still don't know what they were referring to," Braska went on. "But perhaps his being the Final Æon will be important, somehow. Perhaps even an eternal Calm ..."

"You really think so?" Auron muttered, turning to note Braska's questioning, hopeful look. "You have more faith in the teachings than I do."

"Maybe not an eternal Calm, then," said Braska, "but *something*."

"Something," Auron muttered contemptuously. It was the same word Jecht had spoken before turning and heading back up the steps in Zanarkand. Auron could still hear his laughter echoing in his mind. Part of him hated Jecht: if he hadn't agreed to become Braska's fayth, they would never have ended up here. Part of him missed Jecht so much that he wanted to crumple and keel over.

They walked on; the rain was getting heavier. The few traders' stalls they passed were deserted; the traders knew what was going to happen, Braska realised. They understood that it was best to get out of the way.

A little later, Jecht's voice suddenly rang out in his head. *This is the place. It's gonna happen here.*

Braska hadn't expected it; he stopped abruptly in his tracks, almost toppling over but managing to right himself with the help of his staff.

"What is it?" said Auron.

Braska took a deep breath. "This is it," he said. "It's time."

"Did the æons tell you that?" Auron muttered, unmistakable jealousy in his voice.

"Jecht's æon," said Braska.

Auron looked at the ground. "Oh."

Braska gazed at him for a while. "There's nothing you can do in this fight, Auron," he said, as gently as he could. "Promise me you'll find shelter. I don't want you to get hurt."

"It's a bit late for that," said Auron bitterly.

Braska wanted to do nothing but reach for him and embrace him, but he restrained himself: this was to be the last time they spoke, and he had business to take care of. He dug into his robes and found what he was looking for: the sphere he had taken on Mount Gagazet. He handed it to Auron; Auron almost dropped it, but managed to hold on, staring down at the sphere in confusion.

"For Yuna," Braska explained. "This is the sphere I took for her on the mountain. I told her I'd ask you to give it to her in a few years, when she's older; you'll do that, won't you?"

Auron couldn't picture himself doing anything ever again, but he nodded and muttered, "Yeah."

"And you'll take her to Besaid for me," said Braska. "And support her – they'll want her to take the pilgrimage, if the Calm doesn't last, but she must do what she thinks is right –"

"Yeah," said Auron again, just as listlessly. "I … gave you my word."

"I know," said Braska. "Thank you." He hesitated; it felt wrong to be passing on a gift for Yuna without giving Auron anything for himself. After a moment, he reached under his headdress, unhooked his long, beaded earring, and held it out.

"And this is for you," he said. "Something to remember me by."

Auron glanced at the earring, then met Braska's gaze at last, and said, "I couldn't forget. Even if I tried." He wished he could – it would be comforting to know his pain might be soothed someday – but he was certain that time would never come.

He made no move to take the earring; Braska leant forward, took hold of the part of Auron's robe that hung off his left shoulder, and poked the end of the earring through the leather pauldron that covered it. Twisting the metal between his fingers to keep it in place, he stepped back, and then steeled himself.

"Auron," he murmured, "Jecht told me. About how you feel – about me."

"Damn him," Auron whispered, turning away in embarrassment.

"No, Auron," said Braska quickly. He took hold of Auron by both shoulders, forcing him to face him again. "Please," he said, "don't be ashamed. Love is a wonderful thing. It is the greatest honour – and to be loved by you was truly a far greater one than I ever deserved."

"Is that really what you think," Auron mumbled, "of something so – so carnal and vile – I slept in that tent with you every night, and I never had the decency to –"

"No," said Braska again. "Don't say those things about

yourself – please. You've done nothing wrong. I'm the one who – I should have realised how I –"

He stopped; he would start crying if he said any more, he knew. It would interfere with the summoning, and it would be cruel to ask for Auron's support now.

"I should have been kinder to you," he said, when he felt ready to speak again.

"You were always kind," Auron murmured.

"Auron," said Braska, "please don't let this hang over you. You have so much ahead of you; when you go back to Bevelle, they'll give you the honour you deserve –"

"I don't *care* about that," said Auron.

"This isn't the end," Braska insisted, clutching Auron's shoulders more tightly. "Believe me, please. I know I didn't manage it, after Sin took her, but you can. You're stronger than me – you can fight this sorrow, Auron, I promise. You can *live*."

Auron shook his head. "I don't," he stuttered, "I don't think I can –"

"You *can*," said Braska again. "I believe in you, Auron. You are the most remarkable, magnificent man I know – the best guardian I could have asked for. Hope – my dear, my wonderful Auron, you must have hope –"

It was impossible to tell which of them leant in first; but before either was conscious of it, their lips were pressed together. The kiss was slower and deeper than any they had yet shared.

Braska's hands found their way into Auron's hair, working their way gently through his ponytail; Auron had taken hold of both sides of Braska's face, stroking his thumbs gently across Braska's jaw. Each could feel the other's heartbeat, the delicate fluttering of eyelashes against his cheeks; each could hear the other's tiny sighs of passion and desperation and sorrow. The rain around them seemed to vanish into insignificance; all there was, for a moment, was the two of them.

It was Braska, eventually, who drew his hands away; he took hold of Auron by both wrists, gently lowering them from his face.

"Forgive me," Auron mumbled.

"Find shelter," Braska implored him. "Please – there's not much time left."

Auron cast him a final anguished look, and then began to hurry across the plains as Braska had bidden him. Braska watched him leave; he closed his eyes, sighed deeply, and then turned his attention to what he had to do.

Well, Jecht, he thought. I suppose this is it.

You and me, huh, Braska? said Jecht.

"You and me," said Braska aloud, carefully raising his staff.

Once Auron was out of Braska's sight, he found himself slowing. His legs felt like lead; he was too distressed to think

about how he might protect himself. There was no point anyway, he thought; he had no reason to live now. He had had those ideas about persuading the people of Bevelle to join forces with him and going back to see Yunalesca, but that now seemed unreasonably hubristic, especially knowing there had never been anything special about him. It was better to let Sin take him.

His shaking legs gave out at last; he collapsed onto his knees, and his hands hit the wet, muddy grass. At least, he thought, if there was a Farplane, he would be reunited with Braska there. He just hoped Braska wouldn't be too disappointed by his guardian's failure to obey his last command.

He pressed his head against the ground; he could hear himself moaning, low and loud like an animal, a horrible guttural sound that he couldn't stop. Gradually, though, he became aware of another sound: a woman's voice, calling his name.

"Sir Auron!" she shouted. "Sir!"

Slowly, Auron raised his head and focused on the stranger, gradually discerning that she was standing by a large tent.

"Over here!" she called. "Quick!"

He got to his feet, somehow, and started making his way towards her.

"Quickly!" said the woman again. "He's about to nail us in!"

The phrase made no sense to Auron, but he found himself obeying, increasing his pace to a jog. Before too long, he had

reached the tent; she had already retreated inside, and reached out with one arm to pull him in after her.

"Look at you, you're covered in mud," she said. "Hold on."

He stood dumbly while she fetched a sponge and dabbed it with some awkwardness over his face and bare arm. There was a man with her, busy poking nails through the thick canvas, securely attaching the flap that served as an entrance to the surrounding walls. He seemed uninterested in Auron.

"You remember us, don't you?" said the woman. She was young, Auron slowly realised, younger than he was. "We sold you some potions a few days ago. I'm Clera – this is my brother, Ruther. Remember?"

Auron nodded. "Yes," he said. "Of course. Thank you." He did have some memory of it, now that she said so; there had been a pair of traders in this part of the Calm Lands who would have resembled the two people now standing before him. Clera had been friendly, and had had a good chat with Jecht; Auron, not being himself at the time, had found it difficult to get involved.

"I saw you just in time," she said. "You wouldn't have lasted long out there, sir – what were you thinking? Ruther was about to nail up the flap."

"Will that be enough?" said Auron.

"These tents are sturdy," said Ruther, speaking for the first time. "It's an old technique – our great-grandparents did the same in Lady Yocun's time. We'll be fine."

"Passed down through the generations," said Clera. "Now, we'll have some tea, shall we? Sit down, Sir Auron, please."

She busied herself nervously with the water tank and the heating machina. Auron took a seat at the small round table, avoiding Ruther's suspicious gaze. The rain had continued to grow heavier; it was drumming on the thick canvas roof of the tent.

Clera brought over the tea, took a seat herself, and said, "Well – the first Calm in nearly a century. It's something, isn't it? May Yevon bless Lord Braska. You must be proud of him, Sir Auron."

Auron carefully set his cup of tea on the table and blinked down at it. He was regretting having listened to Clera and following her into the tent; he wished he had stayed out there on the muddy plains and drowned. He couldn't even die properly, he thought. He had let Braska down again.

"And you'll be a legendary guardian, sir," Clera went on. "I expect they'll be keen to have you back in Bevelle. They'll put on parades in your honour, probably, and –"

"Stop it," Auron choked out. "Just shut up! You have no idea –" He registered their expressions: Clera suddenly looked afraid, while Ruther's frown had become more pronounced. He had moved towards his sister as if to protect her. Auron wondered if they believed he was going to lash out at them; he felt awful for having given them that impression. They had saved his life, after all.

"I'm sorry," he said, feeling as if the words were dragging themselves painfully out of his mouth. "Thank you for doing this. You're very kind."

Ruther's expression remained unchanged. Nobody said anything for a long time; the only sound was of the relentless rain against the roof. Auron forced himself to drink some tea; it was still too hot, and it burnt his tongue, so he set the cup back on the table and closed his stinging eyes.

And then he heard a familiar sound: the sound of Jecht groaning as if he had been struck by a fiend, but magnified so it resonated across the plains. The noise made Auron flinch in horror; his sudden movement jolted the table, and before he knew what was happening, his cup of tea was on its side, the contents spilling everywhere.

"Watch out," said Clera, jumping up to fetch a cloth. "Don't burn yourself," she added as she moved in to soak up the spill. Auron retreated instinctively to let her wipe the table; some of the tea had already dripped off the edge, onto his trousers, leaving a little scalded patch on his thigh.

"Sorry," he murmured; as he did so, the sound of Jecht's groan interrupted them again. Auron took a sharp breath; he felt as if he was going to be sick.

"I'm not feeling well," he managed to say; he reached for the edge of the table to steady himself, finding it hard to cling to with his trembling fingers. "Do you mind if – could I lie down somewhere?"

"I suppose so," said Clera cautiously, but then she looked at him and seemed to become more sympathetic. "Oh, you don't look well at all, sir," she added. "You can lie on one of the mats – come with me."

He followed her to the part of the tent that was set up for sleeping, laid his sword aside, and then let himself collapse onto a blanket, drawing his knees towards his chest. He buried his face into the cushion it lay on, pressing his hands over his ears as tightly as he could; he just wanted to block it all out.

Clera returned to the table, taking her seat again to finish her own cup of tea. "Poor thing," she said. "Having a hard time, I think."

"He threatened you," said Ruther.

"Oh, he didn't *threaten* me," Clera replied. "He's just jumpy. Didn't they say Lady Yocun's guardian went a bit strange after the Final Summoning? Maybe they see something in Zanarkand that frightens them."

"He was already strange when we met him before," Ruther grumbled. "I suppose Sir Jecht died on the mountain – shame he wasn't the one who survived. He seemed much more normal."

"You're terrible," said Clera, but she was grinning. "Look on the bright side – it'll be good for business, won't it, if everyone finds out Sir Auron was here during the Final Summoning? Not many people can say they've had a legendary guardian stay with them."

"You'd better be right," said Ruther.

Mercifully spared from hearing their conversation, Auron lay on the mat for a long time. He had mostly succeeded in blocking out the sounds of the battle outside; for that reason, it took him a while to realise when they stopped. But eventually, carefully lowering his hands from his ears, he realised that the noises had given way to silence: not only had the awful sound of Jecht's voice ceased, but the rain had ended as well.

He stood, grabbed his sword, and hurried to the tent entrance, ripping the flap open as fast as he could. The nails scored holes in the canvas, and Ruther said something that Auron paid no attention to; he was already away, charging out onto the flooded plains.

He ran in the direction he believed he had come from, registering neither the sound of his boots squelching through the wet grass nor the bright blue shade that had returned to the sky. There was just one thing he was looking for – and, not too long afterwards, he found it: a small, motionless, red-robed body, lying in the shallow water.

Sprinting to Braska's side, Auron dropped to his knees beside him. Braska's eyes were closed; his face was flecked with mud. Auron seized him by the wrist, tugging his arm out of the water; his skin was cold, but there was a faint pulse.

"Braska," he said, leaning over his face. "Braska – please –"

Braska's eyes opened a fraction, and his expression shifted to the smallest of smiles. "Did you see Jecht?" he whispered,

so quietly that Auron had to lean in further to understand him. "He did so well."

"Don't talk, sir," Auron pleaded. "Save your strength – it's all right, I'll find someone to heal you – you'll make it –"

He knew none of it was true. He could tell Braska was fading. There were just moments left.

"Darling," Braska murmured, his eyes closed again. "Together at last –"

"No," said Auron. He scrabbled at the neck of Braska's robe, trying to widen the opening, as if being able to place a hand on Braska's chest would allow him to pour in some of his own energy. He wished he had learnt white magic, despite knowing it wouldn't have made any difference. This was too enormous for magic or potions. There was nothing that could reverse the gradual slowing of a person's heart.

He took Braska in both arms instead, lifting his upper body away from the flooding. Braska's headdress had come off at some point during the battle; his hair was soaking wet. Auron wound his fingers through it, hugging Braska close for the last time.

"Auron," Braska whispered. "I'm ..."

He took a horrible, wheezing breath, and coughed weakly; a tiny dusting of blood landed on Auron's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he managed.

"No," said Auron again. "No, no, no –" He clung to Braska as hard as he could; he screwed his eyes tightly shut

and mumbled some half-remembered, nonsensical prayer to Yevon. Braska felt heavy and floppy in his arms; his shallow, rattling breaths were slowing to a halt. For a while, there was nothing but his pulse, slow and almost undetectable; and then Auron saw a tiny mote of multicoloured light break away from Braska's body and begin a slow, swirling journey into the sky above.

So it had ended, he thought. And still he clung to Braska's body, kissing his cold, pale neck as if his desperation would be enough to bring Braska back, or to go with him to the Farplane, or to eternal rest, or whatever really awaited the dead.

Someone seemed to be speaking; Auron wondered if he was imagining it, but the sound continued, so he raised his head. It took him a moment to realise who it was, but then he recognised the woman who stood in front of him: Perula of Bevelle.

"Congratulations," she was saying, somewhat guardedly. "My most heartfelt thanks to Lord Braska for his sacrifice. All Spira will surely give him the praise he deserves – he has brought us a time of safety and prosperity."

"What do you want?" said Auron.

"Only to play my part in this great story," she announced, "however small. I would be honoured to be the one who might send Lord Braska on to the Farplane."

"No," Auron gasped, his grip on Braska tightening instinctively. "You can't – he doesn't need –"

She leant in closer, and hissed, "Well, who else is going to do it? You don't see any other summoners around here, do you? I was so close – I would have been on Mount Gagazet tomorrow – if Braska hadn't got there first, I would have been High Summoner! And now that I can't do that, at least let me –"

"You don't need to," Auron protested. "He had accepted death – he's already – look." He gestured at the slow but now constant stream of pyreflies escaping Braska's body. "It's already happening. He doesn't need to be sent. Just let me have a few more moments – please –"

Perula drew back again. "For a High Summoner to be denied a sending," she announced, "would be a great affront to Yevon. If the maesters knew – you must stand aside, Auron. Let go of him and let me do what Yevon tells us is proper."

"No," Auron moaned. Braska's body was going to fade anyway, he knew, but a sending would make it so much more abrupt. He didn't want him to go yet; he would never want him to go, but at least if the pyreflies escaped naturally, he would have a little more time with Braska in his arms.

"Move aside, or I shall have no choice," Perula commanded; and then, when Auron made no reaction, she raised her staff and began the sending.

A new torrent of water burst out of the ground, enclosing Auron and Perula and Braska in a raging whirlpool. Through it, Auron could just about see the shape of Perula, twisting and

twirling her staff; he begged and screamed at her to stop, but she continued dancing the same steps, and the whirlpool grew higher, its waters sparkling with more and more pyreflies. The water was getting into Auron's mouth and nose; he coughed and buried his face into Braska's shoulder, but soon found that there wasn't enough substance there to protect him. Braska was already fading away, insubstantial and transparent; and in mere minutes, he had vanished entirely, leaving behind only the rapidly dissipating pyreflies. The tides receded; Auron was left soaking wet, holding nobody but himself. The awful realisation made him lose his balance; he toppled face-first into the water.

Splashing towards him, Perula took hold of him by one arm and wrenched him upwards; he felt the bite of reluctantly cast white magic around him as his coughs faded. "What are you doing, you stupid boy?" she demanded. "Trying to drown yourself? You're a legendary guardian now – so act like it, for goodness' sake."

"Leave me alone," Auron moaned.

"Sir Auron," said Perula loudly, "it would be a privilege for my guardians –" She stopped and frowned. "For my *nephews* and me to escort you back to Bevelle, where you can be honoured as you deserve."

Auron shook his head. The thought of going to Bevelle now was out of the question. His plan to go back up Mount Gagazet and speak to Yunalesca was coming back to him – but

he no longer cared about winning the Yevonites' favour first. He couldn't face the thought of being in Bevelle, and having to participate in all the many ceremonies that would mark the beginning of a new Calm – he would go straight back to Zanarkand. It was all he could do: try to put a stop to this nightmare as soon as possible.

"I'm not going to Bevelle," he said.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Perula.

"I'm *not*," Auron insisted. "Let go of me." He shook Perula off his arm, clambered to his feet, and said, "Stay away from me."

"Oh, come on," said Perula. "Where are you going to go, then? You may be a heretic, but you can't hide from Yevon. You know that. Nobody's going to hurt you – not now. All they'll do is tell you how wonderful you are." She looked disgusted by the thought.

She moved towards him again; Auron recoiled, drawing his sword. "I said stay away!" he barked. "Don't come near me, or you'll regret it!"

"Fine," said Perula. "Lie down in the water and drown, then, if that's what you want. By Yevon – you're deranged. And Braska was too – may the fayth rest his soul. Taking a queer as his guardian. I've never known anything so blasphemous."

She turned and walked away; Auron watched until she was out of sight, and then began heading north, towards the mountains. It was the only option.

He had expected his thoughts to be of Braska as he silently made his way across the plains, but they turned to his trial and punishment in Bevelle instead. He was soaked to the skin, like he had been then, and Perula's parting shot had taken him back to that day for other reasons. It had been the last time he had heard that word: when his sentence had been decided, and he had been subjected to Yevon's final judgement, it had been jeered at him by what had felt like the entire population of Bevelle. He could still picture their gleeful, mocking faces. There had been people in that crowd he knew personally.

Jecht had given him another term to describe what he was, one that was neither clinical nor pejorative: no doubt the people of Spira would have turned it into an insult if they had heard about it, but it had never travelled further than their own party. Auron was grateful to Jecht for that, even if he had never told him so: thinking of himself merely as *gay* made it seem less as if there was something wrong with him. But Jecht had clearly never understood the stigma that surrounded men who were attracted to other men in Spira: he had never realised why Auron was so reluctant to talk about it, and, especially, to reveal his desires to Braska. He had never worked out that the mere fact of Auron's having pursued sexual activities with other men was seen as reason enough to hold a public trial and send him to the Via Purifico.

It hadn't been quite that simple: Auron's blasphemy would never have been noticed if he hadn't been rising through the

ranks of the warrior monks so quickly. But his rapid ascent had turned heads; the news that a young man from outside the usual noble families had gained an officer's position and was on the cusp of winning further accolades had upset those who were used to seeing the preservation of the social order. Enquiries had been made about Auron's seemingly unblemished background, and a lead had been found in the form of a Crusader who claimed to have engaged in heretical activities with him on the island of Kilika.

Some of those in charge of determining Auron's fate had insisted he be given a second chance; thanks to their efforts, he had been offered a way to demonstrate his loyalty to Yevon, a young woman he could take as a wife. Their union would prove that Auron was ready to renounce his sinful behaviour and live the life of a good Yevonite. But he had been unable to commit to the lie. It would have hurt them both to be trapped in a loveless, false marriage. And so, having rejected his bride, he had been formally accused. He had been put on trial, and had undergone the greatest humiliation of his life, being forced to tell a crowded courtroom exactly what he had done, not only with the Crusader but on other occasions with other men, all because the court of Yevon demanded the full and absolute truth.

He had been dismissed from the corps and sent to the Via Purifico to be cleansed of his sins; it was normally a death sentence, and the priests insisted that nobody who was sent down

ever survived, because the judgement pronounced by the court in the name of Yevon was infaillible. In truth, people did manage to fight their way through and emerge alive at the other end, but they were quickly erased from the record books. Surviving had turned Auron into a nobody, on an official level. It had allowed him to go about his business without further punishment, but everyone in Bevelle knew what he was. While the laws of Yevonite justice meant he could go free, they didn't mean the events could be erased from human memory, and it was clear from the smirks on everyone's faces that they remembered his humiliation.

Kinoc had been kinder, it had seemed – but only Braska had gone out of his way to help. He had waited for Auron to emerge from the labyrinth and taken him away from the jeering crowd; he had given him a place to stay until Auron felt well enough to return to his quarters at the barracks; he had even brought the pilgrimage forward, cutting short his time to practise summoning Bahamut and even losing opportunities to spend a few final occasions with Yuna, all because he knew Auron would be keen to leave Bevelle as soon as possible. And that was after Auron had revealed his secret to him. When the summons to his trial had come, Auron knew he had to explain to Braska: he thought Braska might feel uncomfortable taking someone like Auron as his guardian, when it meant they would be spending so much time together. But Braska's only reaction had been sympathy: he knew what the Yevonites would put

Auron through. He knew what it was like to experience a kind of love the temples deemed heretical.

Braska had often been too oblivious or too sorrowful to be kind to Auron; at his worst moments, he had been irritable and self-centred and ungrateful. But with what he had done at the time of Auron's trial, he had also shown Auron the most profound kindness he had ever experienced. He had shown him that his worth didn't depend on Yevon's teachings. Auron had needed that, and the pilgrimage had given him a new purpose.

And now that purpose was irrelevant, and there was only one thing on Auron's mind: getting the answers that would help him sort out this mess. He couldn't trust anyone to help him: the people of Bevelle were too deceitful, those elsewhere too naïve. He owed it to Braska and Jecht to find a way to put an end to the cycle of death, and he would do it alone, to atone for his failure to save them.

He headed on towards the mountains without stopping. It was getting late, but Auron was barely aware of the time: that, along with so much else, was unimportant now. Alone, he was able to travel quickly. His two previous journeys through the area had ensured there were almost no fiends left to be dealt with; when they did attack, he slashed his sword at them wildly until they fell, unable to engage in anything more strategic.

When he had been travelling for some time, he came across an unusual sight: it was practically the entire adult population of the Ronso settlement on Mount Gagazet. Kelk had

instructed his guards to watch the plains for the Final Summoning; when the rain had given way to brilliant sunshine it had become obvious that the Calm had arrived. At the signal, the Ronso had begun to move. They would go to Bevelle, as Kelk had said; they would pay tribute to Braska's sacrifice, as was the custom, but then he would seek out the maesters and demand an explanation for the temples' egregious use of machina, with the full might of his tribe behind him.

Auron instinctively concealed himself behind a rock as they passed. An encounter with any other living being would mean a conversation about what had happened; he couldn't face it. Kelk would no doubt have encouraged him to join their delegation, adding a legendary guardian's worth of bargaining power to a group that already consisted of most of the Ronso in Spira, if he had sensed that Auron was at all reluctant to present himself openly at the citadel. But there was no capacity in which Auron wanted to return to Bevelle, even with the Ronso's protection.

He waited for the large crowd to move past his hiding place, and then continued his lonely journey northward, reaching Mount Gagazet at last. The colder weather suddenly reminded him of Braska, and a strangled yelp escaped his lips before he could do anything to stop it.

Doing his best to compose himself, Auron made for the place where he knew the teleportation device would be set into the ground. Standing on it, he waited for the strange sensation

of being instantly transported to the other side of the mountain. But nothing happened: he remained exactly where he was.

He was unable to sense the magic like Braska had been, and so he couldn't tell why it wasn't working: maybe someone with magical power needed to be present to make the device work, he thought, or maybe it could only be used by summoners in possession of the Final Æon, or maybe the arrival of the Calm had disabled it somehow. But whatever the reason, it was clear that he would have to walk all the way himself. The fiends might have mostly disappeared, but he would still need to waste time and energy climbing the mountain. Worst of all, he would be alone with his thoughts for another couple of days as he did so. Until he saw Yunalesca and gained some understanding of what could be done to sort out this mess, all there would be to think about was Braska's final moments, still vivid in Auron's mind as much as he had been trying to block them out.

It was too much; he suddenly found himself overcome by rage. He clenched his fists and let out a desperate growl; he groaned, and bent over, and paced around the teleportation device, lashing out at it with a kick that did nothing but make his foot hurt. "Useless piece of junk!" he yelled. "Stupid, worthless piece of *shit*!"

The noise alerted one of the few adult Ronso who were still on the mountain. Nemma Ronso had volunteered to stay and watch the children; there had been friction among some of the

teenage Ronso recently, and it had been thought best not to leave them on their own. Now, she could see, it seemed as if trouble was just as likely to come from outside.

She took hold of her lance and cautiously headed towards the intruder. Auron's appearance hardly made a good impression: his hair was matted, his robe and face were muddy, and irregular patterns of blood and bruises on his jaw and bare arm acted as the legacy of the few fiends he had fought on his way up the mountain. He was carrying plenty of potions, but hadn't seen much point in taking any.

"What brings intruder here?" said Nemma. "Why does intruder disturb peace of sacred mountain?"

"I need to get to Zanarkand," said Auron hoarsely.

"Only summoners and Ronso may climb Mount Gagazet," said Nemma.

"It's important," Auron insisted. "I have to talk to Yunalesca. I need to work out how to get rid of Sin for good." He made to move past Nemma; she thrust her lance in front of him, and he was forced to stop.

"Lady Yunalesca is dead many years," she said slowly and carefully, as if speaking to a child. "Human is confused – Calm too hard to believe, maybe. But High Summoner has brought Calm. No need to go to Zanarkand now."

"No!" Auron protested. "You don't understand – she's still – Sin's not gone, and you know it! It'll come back, like it always does, unless I find something. Please."

"Cannot allow human to pass," said Nemma firmly. "Human is troubled. Have faith in teachings of Yevon."

"I," said Auron, but her words were enough for him to explode into anger once again. "I don't care about Yevon!" he yelled, drawing clumsy, sweeping gestures in the air with both hands. "All Yevon has brought us is hatred and misery – I'm fed up with it! I don't care about the teachings – I – *fuck* the teachings! Just let me pass!"

"Stand down," said Nemma.

"I'll fight you," said Auron, drawing his sword. "I swear, I'll fight you. I'll kill you, if I have to – just you wait –"

Growling, Nemma brandished her lance. It was easy enough for her to keep Auron at a distance: his movements were erratic and ineffective. Once or twice he nearly fell over his own feet, but he was so consumed by burning rage that he failed to notice it. Staggering around in the snow, grunting and groaning with every attempt he made to land a hit, all he was doing was exhausting himself.

Nemma continued to counter, wondering how long it would take for the disturbed visitor to give up; after a few minutes of pointless sparring, one of the Ronso cubs emerged from the village.

"Nemma!" the child wailed. "Nemma must come – Biran and Kimahri fight!"

The bitterness brewing among the teenage Ronso had been mounting for a while; it was unsurprising that without the

usual level of adult surveillance, they had turned to violence. Nemma considered: it was important to stop this madman making his way up the mountain and besmirching the teachings. But the Ronso always put the affairs of their tribe first: that was a crucial part of their moral code.

"Stay away from mountain," she warned Auron as she backed away. "Fayth will be angry. Never forgive."

Her advice meant nothing to Auron; as soon as she had departed, he fumbled to put his sword away and continued along the mountain pass. As he did so, the things he had done became clearer in his mind: he had lost his temper, messily and shamefully. He had shouted and sworn and disturbed the peace of the mountain. He had attacked an innocent bystander – he had said he would kill her, when all she was doing was protecting her tribe. That was unforgivable. Perula had been right: he was deranged.

He came to a stop, clasping his head with both hands, and moaned in anguish – but eventually, he became quiet again, straightened up, and moved on. It was all he could do. It was the only thing that would put an end to this.

By this point, night had fallen; Auron kept moving nonetheless. Doing anything else would have required him to think; that way lay more pain. But as he advanced, he could feel himself slowing down. He had been walking continuously for hours, and hadn't slept properly since his stay with the Ronso before the Final Summoning; he was

getting so exhausted that it was difficult to continue.

He dragged himself upwards, through the snow, still walking even though his body ached more with every step. More time passed; the sky lightened, dawn bringing it an eerie red tinge. Still Auron continued, intermittently breaking into a run to escape the occasional fiend that attempted to block his path. Each move he made felt harder than the last. He was too tired to think about anything except the need to advance; that was a blessing. It protected him from the true horror of what he had been through.

The snow at his feet changed to something harder; belatedly, he realised he had entered the mountain caves. Lacking the energy to gaze up at the cluster of fayth, he trudged on. But he was slowing almost to a stop; it was hard to work out where to put each foot next, and even how to raise them at all. Eventually, his final energy reserves ran out; he stumbled forward, losing consciousness, and lay sprawled on the ground, defeated by sleep at last.

Chapter **47**

Because They Had Hope

Auron didn't sleep for long, but a couple of precious hours were enough to make him feel more lucid. He drew himself up slowly, wincing; he could smell blood, and there was a sore feeling at his chin. After a moment, he realised he must have torn it open when he collapsed onto the stony ground.

He located a potion and gulped it down; it was enough to heal the fairly insubstantial injury, and to make him feel slightly better in general. It was, Auron suddenly realised, the first potion he had taken since before the Final Summoning. Since then, he hadn't paid the slightest bit of attention to looking after himself; the scrapes and bruises he had sustained while fighting the few remaining fiends during his crossing of the Calm Lands and the lower slopes of the mountain made that clear enough. Those injuries were more than just two or three hours old, and although they were minor, the potion had failed to have any effect on them.

If he had bothered to heal himself as he went, Auron thought, he wouldn't have been in this position. It was shameful, now, to look back and realise how much he had been neglecting his health; he would have to be well enough to work out a plan with Yunalesca, after all. There was little he could do about his mental and emotional state, but at least the physical side of things was easier to take care of, and because of that, it seemed foolish not to be giving it some attention and ensuring he didn't continue to deteriorate.

Auron sat on the ground, took out his comb, and began to work on his hair; it took longer than ever. It was so tangled that he almost gave up a few times, but he forced himself to continue, adjusting the angle of his approach until he could make some more progress, and then getting a little further before he encountered another knot and had to do the same thing again. At last, he gathered it into its usual ponytail, and then turned his attention to cleaning his injuries with the cloth he had used to wash himself on the journey. He wasn't carrying much water, and he decided that what he had would be better used for trying to keep himself hydrated; instead, he poured a little of the strong spirit from his jug onto the cloth, and used that.

Rubbing the alcohol over his injuries made them sting; Auron clenched his teeth and hissed, but he knew it was for a good cause. The antiseptic properties of the liquid would be useful, even if he ought to have done this much earlier. It was

another reminder of how much he and everyone who engaged in combat normally relied on white magic. He should have made an effort to learn some, he thought again – but that was something he had never needed when he had been travelling with someone as competent in magic as Braska.

The thought made grief overwhelm him for a moment. He leant forward, burying his face in his knees; he choked out a howl. Then he sighed, raised his head again, and went back to cleaning his wounds, wondering if this was how it would be forever – this lonely, aching existence, punctuated by the odd moment of debilitating misery.

Soon he had succeeded in wiping away the dried blood from his injuries; his skin was still scratched and bruised, but it looked much better than before. The last thing to deal with was his clothes, covered in mud from the floods in the Calm Lands. By this point, the mud had dried, and was easy enough to brush off. Having made his robe and trousers look as presentable as possible, Auron reached for his razor, planning to finish the whole process with a quick shave, but he froze as he brought the implement towards his face. It was another reminder of Braska, and how he had held Auron close and soothed him with white magic. He could remember the touch of Braska's finger against his jaw, doing that very thing, mere hours before he died.

He jerked his arm back, and threw the razor as hard as he could down the slope; it clattered away, bouncing against the

rock. Auron watched as it came to a stop, drew his robe around himself, and then walked on.

He forced himself to walk tall, and to hold his head confidently; it was a technique he had used enough times in the warrior monk corps when he felt insecure about his birth or the other things that made him different from his comrades. He did his very best to fill his mind with nothing but his plans for how to make things right. He would speak to Yunalesca, and work out how to put an end to the cycle of Final Summonings; and he would take Yuna to Besaid, as he had promised, and somehow go to Jecht's Zanarkand and watch over his son there. It was just three tasks – clearly defined ones, but ones that would occupy him for a good while, and perhaps by the time he had completed all of them, he would have managed to come to terms with what had happened.

The fiends were less and less frequent; it was fortunate, because this close to Zanarkand they were difficult for Auron to take out on his own. On the few occasions he had to see one off, he paused afterwards to take a potion and catch his breath, and then resumed his careful stance and continued.

After a while, though, he reached a familiar gap in the stony ground.

Dread suddenly surged in Auron's mind; he dropped to his knees, running his hands over the rock where it sharply tapered off beneath him. "No," he stammered, "no, no, damn it –" But it was clear that he was being presented with the same

obstruction that had faced the three of them on their previous journey up the mountain. He would have to complete the same trials that Jecht had undertaken then, and to do so, he would need to swim to the other side of each of the two large pools.

The realisation made the composure he had been trying to cultivate vanish in instants; he was shaking again, gasping fror breath. He drove his head into the rock face that bordered one side of the path with an anguished grunt, hoping desperately that the force of it might somehow reveal an alternative route, or at least knock him out so he didn't have to face what he was about to have to do. Clutching his throbbing forehead, he considered the possibility of turning around and going all the way back to Bevelle instead and persuading someone else to complete the trials on his behalf. But it was the same problem as before: there was nobody in Bevelle he could really trust, even if being a legendary guardian meant they would all pretend they had always supported him. Moreover, delaying his return to Zanarkand would mean even more time to think about his regrets before he became capable of doing anything meaningful. It would drive him mad – he was sure of it.

He pressed his head against the ground and closed his eyes until he felt reasonably capable of walking on. When he eventually stood, his legs felt heavy and sluggish, and his vision seemed blurred, but he kept one hand against the rock and followed the path back down to where he knew he would find the first pool to make his way across. He was a strong swimmer,

he reminded himself; he had made it out of the water before, after all. Nothing about the actual task would be difficult; he just had to make sure not to let himself become overwhelmed by panic while he was in there.

Reaching the pool, he stopped and forced himself to look out over it, blinking repeatedly as he waited for his vision to stabilise. It wouldn't be far, he told himself; Jecht hadn't taken long. He remembered how he had cowered against the cave wall while Jecht went in and dealt with whatever had been at the other end; it made him feel even worse, so he tried to put it out of his mind and concentrate on what he had to do.

Slowly and clumsily, he stripped to his underclothes, and then tied his trousers around his chest to form a kind of sheath for his sword. He wedged it in at his back, flinching at the feeling of the cold steel against his skin. Then he approached the water's edge again, trying to ignore the fact that his heart was beating so fast it made his chest hurt.

The idea of slowly lowering himself into the water made him feel as if he was going to pass out; if he didn't do it quickly, he thought, it would take an age to convince himself. He stepped back a few paces, closed his eyes, and then dashed forward and jumped into the water before he could reconsider.

For a moment, he was drifting slowly into a quiet oblivion – but that soon came to an end. Gasping and spluttering, Auron surfaced and began to tread water. His chest felt unbearably tight; his arms and legs seemed resistant to any control he tried

to exert over them. Water was flooding into his mouth; he belatedly realised he needed to close it, and his sporadic whimpers and groans became muffled as if to imply things were becoming more tolerable. It seemed a cruel irony: the longer he spent in the water, the more Auron was convinced that he had to get out of it immediately.

Somehow, some part of him managed to remember his objective: he needed to keep going. He positioned himself so as to face forwards, towards the rest of the water rather than the nearby shore; that way, his desperate swimming to land would get him where he needed to be. Then he took off, propelling himself through the pool using whatever clumsy strokes he could conjure up, his mind filled with the need to get to the other side as soon as possible.

Fiends swiped and gnawed at his ankles; he pulled his sword out of its makeshift sheath and brandished it haphazardly until they gave up on him. He was finding it difficult to see the way forward, his vision still blurred by panic and apparently getting worse, but he thrashed his way through the seemingly interminable water and eventually his hands connected with the ridge that marked the beginning of dry land. Blindly, he hauled himself up, and lay there face-first for a good while, feeling too weak and sore to move.

At last, Auron succeeded in getting to his feet. Briefly overcome by dizziness, he wobbled slightly as he did so, but a few staggering steps sufficed for him to right himself. His lower

legs were scratched and bleeding after the fiends' assault, and the rocky ground was sharp, painful against his bare feet; ludicrously, that made him miss Jecht. Jecht would have been able to tell him what to do to pass this trial, he realised. It would have been prudent to ask him about it; it was one of many things he wished he could have said to him before he gave away his life.

He let a brief moan escape before clamping a hand against his mouth and forcing his attention to his task. Once he had slowly limped the length of the path, the same glowing, rotating orb that Jecht had had to immobilise came in sight, far too high up to be within reach of Auron's sword. It was easy enough to guess that he was supposed to hit it with something, even if that was much easier said than done.

Looking around for something he might be able to throw in the orb's direction, he finally caught sight of a few pebbles lying at the edge of the path. He limped forward, scooped some into his hands, and then began to throw them towards the light. Several merely bounced off its outer casing, but eventually one happened to make its way through both layers of protection, and connected; the light went out.

Auron almost collapsed in relief, but he knew his struggles weren't over: first, and most worryingly, he would need to swim back to the other side. This time, he couldn't muster the strength to run at it like he had before; he dropped to his knees, crawled towards the shore, and let himself make an ungainly

fall into the water.

The swim back to the other side was just as excruciating as the previous one, but the part of Auron that remained lucid supposed he should be glad it was no worse. He was just about capable of swimming in the right direction, following his instinct rather than anything more concrete. The fiends converged on him again and recommenced their assault on his legs; he barely even noticed.

Pulling himself ashore at last, he lay there as he had before, groaning quietly. He had survived the first trial; he should have felt relieved, but all he could think about was the fact that the second one still remained. He was shaking too much to stand at first, but he managed to crawl over to where he had left his belongings and eventually succeeded in unstopping a potion bottle; drinking it healed the injuries from the fiends and even made his trembling slightly less pronounced, but it did nothing for the tight, painful knot in his stomach.

He stood nonetheless, untying his trousers from around his torso, and gathered up his belongings. It wasn't worth dressing properly when there was a repeat of this torture still to come; Auron merely threw on his robe, pulling the sleeves over both arms but leaving it open at the front, and put on his boots without bothering to fasten them.

He hobbled onwards, joining the new path with one hand against the wall to support himself like before. His hair hung around his face, wet and smelly and tangled; combing it, and

doing all those other things he had done to improve his appearance and restore some fortitude to himself, now seemed to have been completely useless. There was no point pretending to be confident, he thought as he slowly advanced, grimacing at the unrelenting ache in his stomach. It had been naïve and stupid to try, when he had failed in the most important task he had ever had. Even if he managed to ensure that Sin was banished forever, it wouldn't be good enough: it wouldn't bring Braska back.

He sagged against the wall; his vision clouded with tears. "Forgive me," he croaked, not really knowing who he was addressing. "Forgive me."

The moment passed; eventually, Auron found himself capable of walking on, and did so if only in an attempt to distract himself from his sorrow.

He soon found himself at the second pool. It was physically painful to look at; Auron felt as if he was going to be sick. He pressed a hand against his mouth and looked down at the water for a while, hoping it would become more bearable, but all that happened was that his breathing got faster, making him feel increasingly dizzy and agitated.

He turned away from the water and endeavoured to breathe slowly and deeply, as Jecht had shown him. It wasn't a complete success, but it allowed him to feel slightly more in control of his body, and less as if he was about to collapse. Eventually, he removed his robe and boots and attached his

sword to himself like before; he shuffled towards the edge of the water, and tossed himself in with a groan.

As before, the promise of land at the other side was Auron's biggest motivator for making his way through the water. When he somehow reached the end of the pool, though, he was alarmed to find that there was no such opportunity for respite. He could see more lights that he assumed would have to be turned off in the same way as the first one – but they were under the water. He would need to dive down to complete the trial.

The realisation was another setback – enough, at last, to push him over the edge. He had found it hard enough to rely on rational thought before, but now his base instincts took over. Everything came down to violence: that was why Auron had been so suited to the warrior monks, even as a small child. He wanted to lash out and destroy: to put an end to everything that made him hurt.

Tugging his sword out from behind his back, he let himself sink towards the lights and began his assault. He sliced at them with the blade of his sword; he kicked them with his bare feet, and headbutted them, and drove his elbows and knees against them in a flurry of rage. Whirling erratically in one direction and another, he moved wildly between the lights and struck them in any way he could. After repeated assaults with his blade, he succeeded in breaking the surface of each one, and continued the attack, launching himself against the jagged

shards he had left behind with no regard for the fact that they were cutting into his skin.

He reached into the broken lights and pulled out the strange filaments and wires within them: more ancient and arcane machina of the kind he had already seen in Zanarkand, although Auron wasn't in a state to realise it. Tossing them into the water behind him, he succeeded in hollowing out each of the lights completely. Parts of them had continued to display a weak, residual glow; with Auron's ongoing acts of destruction, they eventually faded to darkness. As the last of the three lights did so, there was a loud sound in the distance: destroying the lights had indeed had the same effect as turning them out by more conventional means. The pathway had opened up.

Auron, slowly registering the sound, should have been relieved. But he knew he would need to make his way back through the pool to the other side, and it was hard to believe that he had the strength and wits to do so. He was still shaking, disturbing the surface of the water with little ripples; he still felt as if he was going to be sick. He was thrashing about with increasing clumsiness just to ensure he stayed afloat; he could no longer tell which direction would take him back to shore.

His panic was increasing again. His chest felt so tight that he was sure his heart wouldn't last the journey back. The water was slowly turning red with his blood, and it was just like before, he thought, when they had all abandoned him to his

fate, and left him to be judged by Yevon. His thoughts were spiralling, fracturing in different directions: distorted recollections of all the people who had been important in his life came briefly to the surface as he gasped for air. All his comrades and rivals in Bevelle; Jecht drifted by, looking smug; and there was Braska, his dear, beloved Braska.

He fixated on that final image, trying to make Braska seem as real as possible in his mind. Just as his presence had helped Auron maintain his composure on Kilika, when he had found himself struggling to proceed at the sight of the water, so the thought of him could be his salvation now. Braska had helped him when he had escaped the Via Purifico, after all; he had been there when Auron emerged, and he had healed his wounds and stayed by his side. Auron let himself imagine that his current plight could end in the same way. He thought of Braska waiting for him at the other end of the pool; he imagined his gentle, patient expression. *Come on, Auron,* he would say. *It's all right. You'll make it.*

The thoughts of Braska succeeded in calming Auron down a little; it was enough for him to angle himself towards the shore, and to start moving, making sure to keep believing Braska would be there to meet him. Braska would reach out to help Auron drag himself ashore; he would pass a hand over his injuries and soothe them with white magic, and he would hold Auron in his arms until he felt calm. As he worked his way through the water, Auron told himself again and again

that he would find such things at the other side, and that the nightmare would come to its end.

At last, he met land, and clawed his way ashore; he twisted to lie on his back, and lay there with his eyes closed, panting and coughing, awaiting what he had promised himself. Any moment now, he would feel it. Braska would stroke his hair and press a careful hand to his forehead; he would kiss him gently, softly. They would be in each other's arms again.

But nothing came; the cave was still and quiet. At last, Auron dared remember: it had only been his imagination. Braska would never be there to comfort him, because he was gone. He was dead, and Auron had watched him die.

Suddenly gagging and retching, clawing at his neck, he was overcome by the need to vomit, and managed to sit up just in time to expel everything onto the ground instead of on himself. He hadn't eaten since before the Final Summoning, an indeterminate number of days ago; what came up was mostly liquid. His throat felt harsh and raw.

The swimming was over, at least; Auron supposed he should be glad. He reached for his belongings and took a potion, watching numbly as his fresh wounds faded; then he wrung the water out of his trousers as thoroughly as he could, and then put all his cold, damp clothes back on, fastening his belt carefully over his robe as if nothing had happened.

He shuffled on. The acute panic was gone now that he was leaving the water behind, but everything still ached. The po-

tion he had taken seemed to have had little effect on anything more substantial than minor battle injuries; he felt fragile and oddly feverish.

After Girl's death, Auron remembered, Braska had seemed to become a much weaker man all of a sudden, constantly complaining of aches and pains, succumbing to every illness that passed through Bevelle. At the time, Auron had failed to understand why it happened – now, it made sense. This was what grief did to a person, this all-out assault that started with one's emotions but went so much deeper. For the first time, merely staying fit and healthy seemed as if it would take enormous effort – too much to be truly feasible.

In time, he emerged from the caves. The sky was red; Auron had no idea of how many days had passed, and couldn't tell whether it signalled dawn or dusk. He stilled for a moment as he remembered the fiend that had been sent to test Braska on the previous journey; if such a monster appeared now, he would have no chance of surviving. But the air remained still, uncomfortably quiet. There was no need for such fiends to challenge anyone during a Calm, after all.

He continued towards the summit. The sky was lightening: dawn, then. It was just one of many cruel ironies, Auron reflected. All over Spira, people would be waking up and giving thanks for the Calm, still new and exciting in its first days. For once, they would be unafraid; they would have slept without dread, without the perpetual worry that the day that had

just ended would be their last. And here he was, a legendary guardian hiding from his accolade, making his faltering way across a mountain sacred to a faith he had renounced, a hair's breadth from delirium thanks to grief and regret and exhaustion; he, alone out of everyone in Spira, was convinced that this transient state of peace and tranquillity was not the way things should be, and that he needed to put everything right if it was the last thing he did.

The cinders of their campfire were still visible at the summit. Auron remembered how he had finally broken down and wept during his watch; he remembered Jecht's well-meaning but ineffectual attempts at comforting him, and the sight of Braska's face, peaceful in sleep, as he returned to the tent. He found himself immobilised for a second, and turned away to permit himself a quiet sigh and a slow blink. Closing his eyes seemed painful and sweet at once; he forced them open again and continued.

The walk down to the city was long but uneventful; when he arrived at the ruins, Auron realised the area was still teeming with fiends. On their previous visit, the three of them had run from every encounter, which meant that unlike on the mountain, there were still just as many to contend with as before. He would have to run right through the ruins again, he realised; he wasn't sure whether he was in a fit state to sprint all the way to the building that housed the Cloister of Trials, but he knew defeating the fiends was out of the question, and

running was the only alternative.

He began to move, drawing his sword just in case any of the fiends managed to get close. His progress was faster than it had been last time – then, they had had to go at Braska's speed, and the summoner had been afflicted by his headache and lacked Auron and Jecht's superior fitness at the best of times. Pelting through the ruins, Auron made it to the end without giving himself the time to think; at last, he crossed the threshold of the building, just about managing to stay standing after the sprint.

There was no sign of the unsent priest who had greeted them on their last visit; Auron didn't know what he would have done if the man had appeared and tried to stop him progressing. Gazing at his sword as he stood there catching his breath, he wondered whether he would just have run it straight through the old priest's stomach. He was unsent, after all; it wouldn't have done any lasting damage, just disturbed the pyreflies that formed his body until they eventually knitted themselves back into shape.

He tapped his fingers idly against his blade, wondering if he would have been capable of committing such an act of violence. It was entirely possible; he seemed to have made a habit of losing control of himself recently. He was glad not to have to find out, nonetheless; he sank to the ground, deciding to sit there for a while and regain strength after running through the ruins.

Auron found himself taking out his comb and working it through his tangled hair again. Before, it had helped him feel calmer; now, he was uncertain it would make much difference on that front, but he was aware that soon he would face Yunalesca, and he ought to make an effort to be somewhat presentable. His task was the same, even if the journey through the mountain caves had brought him more despair. He would still need to speak to her and beg her to help him put an end to the cycle of Final Summonings before she lost the final shreds of her humanity; he would need to look as if he had his wits about him.

He tugged the comb impatiently through his hair, forcing it through the knots even though it made his scalp sting with pain. It made little difference when everything seemed to be aching anyway. After seeing to his hair, he tied it back and hauled himself to his feet. It was the final part of his journey, he reminded himself in an effort to spur himself on: soon he would be getting the answers he needed.

The air was still thick with pyreflies; Auron had forgotten about the visions that had presented themselves at this point in the earlier journey, and he was equally disturbed to encounter them a second time. On this occasion, he felt too tired to keep running, so he was forced to witness more of each eerie memory. Slowly, he realised that the spectres appearing before him weren't exactly the same as those he had seen the previous time. Some were connected: instead of seeing Lady

Yocun's guardians arguing about the forthcoming sacrifice, he watched as one of them turned to address the summoner and proclaimed that she was happy to give her life.

If he had seen that last time, Auron thought, he would have realised what was going on much earlier. Perhaps, he reasoned, he would have been able to warn the others that a guardian's life would need to be exchanged, and they would have had time to think about it and form a more considered plan. But maybe even hearing what he had now heard wouldn't have been enough for him to piece it together. He had already been exhausted and distraught. Even if he had worked out what was about to happen, he might not have succeeded in convincing Braska and Jecht to listen to him anyway.

It seemed wrong to be thinking that way about those who had given their lives. They had done so much more than Auron had. As the thought occurred to him, he found himself overwhelmed by one of those sudden waves of grief that had now become familiar. He doubled over, clutching himself with shaking hands; he let out another desperate, inhuman howl. For a moment, he felt as if he was about to slump forward onto the ground; and then it passed as quickly as it had taken hold of him. He straightened up, suddenly feeling numb again, and kept walking.

The images of two women stood in front of him, dressed in clothing that resembled nothing worn anywhere in Spira; it was one of the older visions.

"I've changed my mind," the older of the two women said. "I don't want you to become that monster."

"We decided," said the other.

The first woman shook her head; her eyes shone with determination. "No," she said. "That was before this journey – I didn't understand then. I didn't know you. I can't ask you to cause such destruction."

"But the temple," the younger woman said. "They're counting on us."

"Hang the temple," her friend insisted. "Let's turn back – let's do what we want, at last. We can hide from them; we can live our lives, I promise."

The other woman said nothing for a moment; then she reached firmly for her companion's hand, and together, they turned to face the exit. Then they began to walk; they passed right through where Auron was standing. He flinched as they did so, expecting to feel something like a cold breeze, but oddly, there was no physical sensation.

"What," he muttered out loud, trying to make sense of the vision. The older woman had clearly been a summoner, and the younger her guardian; but they had spoken of a monster, causing great destruction. In Spira, there was only one thing that could refer to.

He shook his head, pressing a hand to his pounding chest. They must have meant the Final Æon, he told himself. It was certainly a destructive force. There was no way they could be

referring to any more than that – no way the fayth of each Final Æon could continue their existence beyond the Final Summoning. That was too cruel to imagine.

He tried to forget the scene and hurried on, drawing closer to the Cloister of Trials and doing his best to ignore the other fragmentary images that appeared. Almost at the threshold of the cloister, he came upon a final vision: one that stopped him in his tracks. The summoner who stood before him was a familiar figure: his statue was in every temple. It was the man who was praised as Spira's first High Summoner, the first person to tame Sin since Yunalesca herself: the venerable Lord Gandof. And he was holding another man close, clutching his waist tenderly.

"Tarsim," he murmured. "My dear Tarsim, this may be our last chance to go back. Are you entirely sure that you wish to make this sacrifice?"

"I might ask the same of you, sweet Gandof," Tarsim replied. His hands caressed Gandof's shoulders, skimming the base of his neck.

"Indeed," said Gandof. "But in death, I shall know rest; it is a far kinder fate than what lies ahead for you."

"I have pledged this," said Tarsim. "We shall be the first to tame Sin since Lord Zaon and his Yunalesca – it is worth one man's suffering. I can but hope that another comes soon to take my place."

"It is a hope I share," Gandof murmured.

"Until then," Tarsim went on, "I shall do my utmost to keep the beast subdued as long as I can. This respite will be as generous as I can make it. Once Sin begins killing again, may the people of Spira know that it is not an act of my own will."

"Of course," Gandof murmured. "Your name will live, Tarsim. The people will ever be thankful for your sacrifice. When Sin returns, they will know your spirit no longer guides it."

Tarsim nodded. "Then let us go on," he said.

Despite his final words, they stayed where they were. Tarsim moved a hand to stroke Gandof's face; Gandof leant in, smiling into his fingertips. And then his guardian closed the distance between them, and they shared a long, tender kiss.

Auron let out an incoherent shout. The spectres disappeared; his knees hit the ground. "No!" he cried, thumping his bare fist against the tiles. "How could – *no*!"

Gandof had been like him, and Yevon had covered it up. They had taught that homosexuality was wrong, and that men of his ilk should be dishonoured and punished – and all along, one of their most revered figures had loved another man.

But that wasn't even the worst of it, Auron knew. That vision had confirmed the horrible suspicion that the earlier one had set in motion: becoming the Final Æon wasn't the end for the poor guardians who found themselves worthy of Yunalesca's attention. They somehow became part of Sin itself. The Calm was brought because whichever person inhabited Sin was initially able to tame its destructive instincts; but as

time went on, they would find it increasingly difficult to maintain control. After a few years, Sin would begin killing again, and the spirit trapped inside would only be able to watch in horror, gradually losing lucidity.

The whole process of the Final Summoning ensured that Sin would come back; Sin's rebirth was already guaranteed each time a guardian stepped forward to be sacrificed. The people of Spira hoped and prayed for an eternal Calm, but such a thing would never be possible. And every time, summoners and guardians gladly gave their lives, thinking the outcome might be different. It was a cycle of death, spiralling endlessly.

Auron scrambled dizzily to his feet, grasping the hilt of his sword so tightly that his hand ached. His plan had changed. Before, he had hoped to speak to Yunalesca and negotiate with her, and try to find some other way to stop Sin. Now all he wanted was revenge. She had condemned Jecht to this awful fate: she had made him into the most destructive force in Spira, when he had thought he was doing the right thing. She needed to be hurt, Auron thought. She needed to suffer.

He dashed through the Cloister of Trials; fortunately, there was no need to complete the two puzzles again, and no fiend stood guard at the lift this time. He descended impatiently, and hurried forward into the room where they had first encountered Yunalesca; she was nowhere to be seen, so he continued up the stairs, through the short corridor, and out to where Jecht had met his fate.

Everything was very still and silent; the sky shone with stars, even though Auron had been sure it was still daytime. It wasn't important. He needed to confront the person who had killed his friends and caused him such misery; that was all that mattered.

"Yunalesca!" he bellowed, picking his way through the fragments of multicoloured stone that lay strewn across the ground. "Where are you? Show yourself!"

There was no response. He brandished his sword wildly in front of him. "Come out here, you coward!" he yelled. "Come out and face me!"

And then, at last, she appeared; her long, silver hair floated in the still air behind her, swaying gently even though there was no breeze. The sight was mesmerising; Auron froze. He had meant to run forward and let her taste his blade, but her presence was too bewitching to allow it.

"What do you want, guardian?" she asked. "Your Braska has brought the Calm. Everyone in Spira is thankful for his service. They are keen to honour you, too – why have you turned away from them? Why have you returned here?"

"I want –" Auron began through gritted teeth. "I want an explanation. I don't *understand*. You make guardians … you make them into Sin, don't you? Tell me it's not true – tell me I've got it wrong."

"Oh, it is true," said Yunalesca. "They give themselves eternally to Spira; they become one with Sin. It is the most noble

thing a person can do. Summoners and their guardians give their lives, and at last they are liberated. Their death frees them of their pain, and so is Spira saved."

"Saved?!" Auron echoed. "Saved for – for a handful of years, until they can't hold it back anymore, and Sin just starts killing again? What good is that supposed to do? This whole thing doesn't get rid of Sin at all – it just makes sure it'll keep coming back!"

"Precisely," said Yunalesca. "Beautiful, isn't it? A perfect circle. We cannot abolish sorrow, but with the endless cycle of Sin's death and rebirth, we can forget it, for a while. That is what keeps the people of Spira in their faith. That is why everyone follows the teachings, and pledges their obedience to great Yevon."

"No!" Auron shouted. "Where is the sense in all this? Braska believed in Yevon's teachings, and died for them!" He had believed in the power of the Final Summoning, at least; that had never wavered. "Jecht believed in Braska," he added, "and gave his life for him!"

"They died," she said, "because they had hope."

Hearing that word felt like a physical assault. Braska had murmured it to Auron so many times, not only on the pilgrimage but during their long preparations; it had been a comfort to them both, reminding them there was a chance of bringing an eternal Calm. Every time Auron had heard it, he had recalled not only that, but also his pledge to save Braska from his fate.

And none of it had worked, because none of it had ever been possible.

He charged forward at last; Yunalesca's words had destroyed his last restraint. Yelling wildly, he made to strike her with his sword, to cause her some kind of pain, any kind of pain, to try and make her understand just a little of how he felt. But before he could land the blow, she raised her hand – a bolt of energy surged forth from a single finger and slammed into him like something hard and solid – he was sent flying back, and crumpled to the ground.

Chapter **48**

Three Promises

Something was scratching at Auron's head; if Jecht was trying to wake him to take over the watch, he thought, he didn't seem to be putting much effort in. He swatted lazily at the source of the disturbance, then opened his eyes – one eye, it turned out. The other had seemed not to follow.

As Auron's awareness of the world around him increased, he gradually realised that something hurt, badly. He was in excruciating pain. He blinked down at himself, and then he saw it: dark, shining blood coated the right side of his chest, soaking into his robe. His cuirass had been ripped open; a strip of torn leather protruded from the pool of thick blood.

The small monkey that had been scratching at his head skittered away; it was the least of Auron's problems. He couldn't stand, but he managed to find a potion in his robes, and unstopped the bottle and drank it.

The potion dulled his pain; it made it easier to work out

what was going on. He drew himself up and looked down at the blood; it was difficult to tell where the wound was. He could tell the potion hadn't done much for it; it had been one of the ordinary kind, though, and a higher-strength blend might be more effective.

Auron made for his pack to find one. As he did so, he instinctively raised a hand to rub his unresponsive right eye, but his only reward was a sudden return of the intense pain that had afflicted him moments ago. He drew his hand back and brought it into his reduced field of vision; the fingers of his gauntlet were stained with more blood.

Deciding not to think about what that could mean, he continued his search for the potion and found it at last. Drinking this one, he could tell that it was doing something to knit his wounds; but it wasn't enough to heal them completely. He had been cut too deep and had left it too long. The new skin that had formed around the injuries was brittle and fragile; even breathing made it feel as if it was about to break again. But he had plenty of potions, Auron thought; if anything happened, he could simply take another and grant himself a similarly temporary solution. He would just need to get somewhere where there was some degree of civilisation, and then there would be healers who would be able to apply white magic and bandages to his wounds, and after that it would merely be a matter of waiting as his body slowly mended itself.

He stood carefully, gathered his belongings, and began

to move forward, walking slowly so as not to disturb his precariously healed injuries more than necessary. By this point, the memory of exactly what had happened before he lost consciousness had come back to him. Everything Yunalesca had said had enraged him more: her casual insistence that Sin was perpetual, and that it was supposedly so obvious that the thought of an eternal Calm was just a naïve fantasy. Her belief that following the teachings was somehow more important than wanting to bring Spira out of its misery – Auron had thought Yunalesca bound to the world of the living because she wanted to get rid of Sin for good, but he now realised he couldn't have been more mistaken. She wanted the opposite: she wanted to ensure the cycle continued forever.

And then she had had the audacity to use the word *hope*, his and Braska's watchword since long before the pilgrimage had started. She couldn't have known the significance of the term, but hearing it had been the final straw. That was when Auron's anger had overwhelmed him; he had lashed out, finally losing the last shred of self-control. He remembered how she had rebuffed him with just the smallest, most effortless gesture. Whatever strange energy had shot forth from her fingertips was the legacy of a thousand years spent unsent, gradually becoming more monster than human. The blood now soaking Auron's robe was proof of that transformation.

He continued through the ruined dome, reflecting dully on what he had learnt before their disastrous meeting, the final

ghoulish piece of the puzzle. Each High Summoner's guardian became one of the fayth; the fayth produced the Final Æon; and then the Final Æon joined with Sin. Now that he knew that, some of the discoveries he had made earlier on the journey seemed to make more sense. The fact that Sin behaved differently each time it returned hinted that there was something about it that was altered – as if the spirit guiding it was entirely replaced. And there was the old book he had seen in the library at Luca, the one with the drawings of Sin over the years, showing how its form distinctly changed each time it returned.

He remembered the captions under the drawings: *Lady Yunalesca's Sin, Lord Gandof's Sin, Lord Ohalland's Sin.* Now their odd formulation made more sense: the images weren't of the Sin each High Summoner had defeated, but of the Sin they had *created*, each distinct from the one before. And the first image, the one where the caption had been burnt away, depicted the original form that Sin had taken until Yunalesca tamed it. Nobody else had defeated Sin before she had; there was no answer to be found there. But on the other hand, somebody must have been responsible for its birth. The person whose name was burnt away from the page had brought Sin into being, and had caused Spira's suffering. If their identity were known, Auron thought, all Spira would unite in hatred against them.

He kept walking, not daring to increase his pace lest his wound open again. It was clear now that the whole thing was

one long slash, starting somewhere around the malfunctioning eye and ending at the bottom of his ribcage. The damage seemed less severe on his neck, perhaps simply because of the position he had assumed when he leapt forward to strike her. The potions would probably heal that part of the wound entirely; it was the rest that was worrying, not least because of the impairment to his vision – he hoped that might be resolved once he found himself in a position to wash the blood off.

The best thing to do was continue, Auron reminded himself. Hesitating would do far more harm than good; regretting the naïveté and the carelessness that had seen him try to attack Spira's most revered figure would achieve nothing. He just needed to keep going, one step at a time. His robe was stiff and heavy with blood; the smell of it was distractingly strong.

The teleporter in the corridor was glowing; Auron couldn't remember whether it had done so when he last passed by. It was probable that fiends would still be roaming the path through the city; it seemed unwise not to try using the teleporter when even trying to run from them was now inadvisable. Slowly, he stepped onto it, and found himself transported within instants. It hadn't taken him all the way to the Ronso settlement this time, but he had ended up at the summit of the mountain, which was certainly better than nothing.

He fell to his knees before managing to go any further; whatever magic the teleporter relied on had done his wound

no favours. The new, weak skin that had formed around the injury had failed to hold out, and blood was trickling onto his chest again. Running would surely have achieved the same result, Auron thought, and if he had chosen that route the fiends would have converged on him as soon as he stumbled: this was the better alternative. He had made one good decision, he thought; he had to have made one. Not everything he had done could have been so ill-advised.

Groaning with pain, he reached for another potion; soon, the wound was tenuously closed again and Auron was just about in a fit state to stand. He walked on. He would just need to get to the Ronso settlement, he told himself. Through the mountain caves and then down the snowy slopes until he found their dwellings, and then he would be able to entrust himself to their care. He couldn't remember whether the Ronso tended to train white mages from among their clan or to rely on medicinal items like the Al Bhed did, but either way, they would have healers who could help him.

For the first time on the journey, he was feeling encumbered by everything he was carrying. He was weak; walking with the tent and everything else on his back was a struggle. He wondered if he really needed it all. Several days had passed since the Final Summoning and he hadn't used the tent once; day and night had ceased to have much meaning. The need to eat and sleep according to any kind of routine seemed to be the preserve of a sort of person he no longer was.

It would be prudent to leave behind all but the most important items, he decided. Sitting down on the rocky mountain pass, he closed his functioning eye for a moment; he felt lightheaded. Lying down and sleeping on the stony ground was extremely tempting – but he forced his eye open and pulled his pack over his lap to investigate what he was carrying.

They had acquired all sorts of bizarre items over the course of the journey: odd rewards for defeating fiends, strange regional medicines, even the occasional souvenir that Jecht had picked up at the traders' stalls. There were bundles of spare clothes and toiletries that belonged to dead men. None of it was essential for his progress, Auron decided. There were only two things he needed: the first was the significant stock of potions they had built up in the final stages.

The second essential item was the spheres. Jecht had left him his whole collection; Braska had given him the final sphere he had taken for Yuna. He had promised that he would pass on the spheres to their children – he couldn't let them down after what they had done.

He sat there gazing at the spheres for a while, wondering how their surfaces had become so smeared with blood, before laying all the non-essential items aside. The result lightened his load considerably. Arranging the strongest potions in the pockets of his robe for easy access, he got to his feet and leant against the wall to catch his breath, wondering if he should be worried that merely standing up made him feel exhausted.

He shuffled on, keeping a hand against the cave wall. Just through the caves, he reminded himself, down the mountain slopes, and then the Ronso would be able to assist him. He took another potion, and his body felt a little stronger, his mind sharper. He began to wonder if he should attempt to clean the blood from around his right eye; that might allow him to open it and see out of it, he concluded.

Detouring from the main path, Auron headed towards one of the pools of water he had had to swim through before. The idea of approaching it no longer worried him; it no longer made him feel anything at all. He dropped to his knees by the water's edge and looked at his reflection in its surface.

The sight of it made him want to turn away at once; exhaustion kept him rooted to the spot. The right side of his face was grotesque, stained with dark blood that had trickled into his hair and made it stiff and matted. There was so much of it that it was impossible to discern even the shape of an eyelid. Blood from the long, deep wound was everywhere, on his neck, his chest, all over his robe, soaking into the stubble that was beginning to appear on his chin. Auron could barely believe he had even had that much blood to lose in the first place. Between that and the fact he had had nothing to eat since the morning of the Final Summoning, it was no wonder that he felt so lightheaded even with the help of the potions.

He had jettisoned his washcloth further up the path along with everything else, so he leant forward to dip the fingers of

his bare hand into the water before rubbing them over his face in an attempt to remove some of the blood from around his eye. It was difficult work: the blood had dried long ago, and now came away from his skin in tiny flakes.

He concentrated on the area surrounding the eye, fervently hoping the curve of the wound led elsewhere – but the closer he drew his fingers towards his eyelid, the sorer the area felt. With most of the blood cleaned away, it was unmistakable. The gash began on his forehead, just above his eyebrow; it was already deep. Then it snaked down through the eyebrow, right onto the lid.

The eye underneath might not have been damaged, Auron thought wildly, and he placed a finger on the lid, right next to the wound, and did his best to draw it open.

Pain immediately seared through the eye. Auron had only managed to wrench it open for a moment, but that was enough to give him a glimpse of what was underneath: more blood mixed with a thick, gelatinous substance that was beginning to ooze onto his cheek. He let go and pitched forward, whining in agony. No white magic would heal this.

He fumbled for a potion, tugging the stopper from the bottle with shaking hands, and within moments the pain had receded. The sticky fluid coated his cheek, but the potion had prevented any more of it from escaping, and had resealed the cut in his eyelid. He drew himself up, whimpering, and then stood and continued his slow progress, haunted by what he

had seen. He had lost an eye: that was unmistakable. He had become disfigured, his failure written on his face for all to see and stare at.

It would be easier to stop: to lie down and let himself bleed out, slip into unconsciousness. He had planned to do something similar after Braska bade him farewell, after all, and at that time he hadn't even been injured. But that had been only a momentary reaction: fundamentally, he was different from Braska. The darkness in Braska's mind had allowed him to resign himself to his own death long ago, but never having had the same affliction, Auron's natural human instinct had always pushed him to keep himself alive. The Ronso would help him, he knew – it would just take a few more hours of walking. They would heal him, and his disfigurement would persist as a marker of his shame, just as he deserved.

At last, he emerged from the caves, onto the snowy mountain slopes; he wondered if the cold temperature might do his wound good by slowing the flow of the blood that was still trying to seep out, held back by the brittle veneer of skin the potions had put in place. No longer able to cling to a cave wall, he shuffled forward, concentrating on remaining upright. A few times, he stumbled and almost lost his balance, just about managing to right himself in time. He was beset by a constant dizziness now, which the potions seemed to do very little to alleviate. Seeing out of only one eye hardly helped matters.

Eventually, he encountered an uneven patch of ground that

he failed to react to in time; he fell forward, crying out as he slammed face-first into the snow. His robe twisted around his body; some of the items he was carrying dropped onto the ground and tumbled away, down the slope and into oblivion.

Auron somehow succeeded in drawing himself onto his hands and knees; he reached for a potion, and found to his relief that his medicinal supply was mostly intact. Having consumed the contents of the bottle and regained a little more of his capacity to think, he realised what he was missing: the spheres. He checked his belongings and confirmed it. Braska's sphere for Yuna, and all of Jecht's: they were gone. He had failed again.

He clenched his fists; cold tears leaked from his undamaged eye. Pressing his forehead briefly to the ground, he wondered whether he really should give up. But yet again, his instinct for survival won out, and he drew himself to his feet and staggered on, whimpering not because of pain but because of how useless he had become.

At last, he came to the Ronso settlement, tumbling onto his knees in the snow in relief. "Help me," he called, his voice weak and rasping. "Please – someone."

There was no response. Auron dragged himself in the direction of the buildings; now that he had reached his destination, he lacked the strength to stand. "Please help," he called again. "I need help – I'm dying –"

It was true, he realised as he said it. If nobody found

him, he would die; it was undeniable. He trembled against the ground, terrified by the thought now that he had said the word out loud – then he forced himself to continue his search before he could dwell on it. He crawled into a building; it appeared to be a house. The inhabitants were nowhere to be seen.

He dragged himself out and into another house, then a third, leaving a trail of blood that marked out the buildings he visited. All of them were deserted; he was beginning to realise it was true of the whole settlement. It had already been depleted when he passed by on his way up the mountain, he remembered with some difficulty. All the Ronso must have gone now, to give their thanks for the Calm and to confront Wen Kinoc about something he could no longer recall.

The fourth building he entered was an equally deserted shop; he made for their potion supplies, drinking a few bottles and then shoving the rest into the pockets of his robe alongside the stock he already owned. With any luck, it would be enough to see him into the Calm Lands; he hoped he might find someone there. It was his only option now. Feeling a little stronger after taking some of the potions, he stood and took his sword in one hand, leaning on it as he slowly advanced. Breathing deeply, he moved on.

He made his way out of the settlement and back onto the mountain pass. He had to keep moving, he reminded himself: he had made promises, anyway. He had told Braska that he

would take Yuna to Besaid, and had assured Jecht he would look after his son too. After losing the spheres, he owed them both that, at least.

And there was the third promise: the one he had made to himself. He had thought Yunalesca might give him some assistance in finding a way to get rid of Sin for good – nothing had been further from the truth, but that didn't mean he was any less determined to put an end to Spira's cycle of death. He wasn't in a state to do anything about it himself – he might never be in such a state again – but at least he could tell somebody else, he thought. If he could just stay alive long enough to find someone, and let them know the whole awful truth of Zanarkand and the Final Summoning and Sin's rebirth – that would mean word could spread, and someone more fortunate than he was might be able to do something about it.

Walking was a struggle, even using his sword as a crutch. It wasn't long before he was on his knees again, gulping down yet another potion to reseal the wound as new blood began to spill out and soak his chest in the way that was now familiar. He put the sword back into its holster on his back and resigned himself to crawling once more. The pain was excruciating, hardly alleviated by potions now; it was so all-consuming that, somewhat paradoxically, it was difficult to acknowledge at all. He was simply aware of his own gasps and whines as he made his slow way on, to the bottom of the snowy incline of Mount Gagazet and onto the grass that signalled he was about

to reach the Calm Lands. From Zanarkand, the journey would have already taken several days; the sky had indeed gone dark at least once since he emerged from the mountain caves, but he had been too distracted to register that it had a connection with the passing of time. Moving on was all he had the capacity to think about.

He would find someone in the Calm Lands, he told himself. They would be able to help him, and if it was too late for that, he would at least explain to them that Spira's hope was false, and beg them to take things forward in his stead. He wormed his way across the grass, trying his best to plot a straight course. He would surely encounter someone. The grass was dry and verdant; no trace remained of the flooding. It was as if the Final Summoning had already passed into history.

His slow progress continued; he was starting to feel strangely cold, colder than he had been on the mountain despite the difference in climate. He could feel his heartbeat, fast and light, fluttering against his torn cuirass. The sky darkened and lightened, seemingly at random; Auron found himself wondering, at times, why he was dragging himself along the grass like this. Each time he recovered enough lucidity to realise he had been struggling to remember his purpose, he dug out a potion and raised his head to drink it; more flimsy, temporary skin grew over his wound and he felt his heartbeat become slower and steadier.

He took to focusing on the three promises he had made:

to Braska, to Jecht, to himself. He curled the thumb and little finger of his bare left hand inwards, leaving the other three fingers to protrude into the grass – one to represent each of them – and forced himself to go over them continually, using the fingers as a reminder. Take Yuna to Besaid; watch over Jecht's son; stop Sin for good. When he found himself forgetting one of them, or confusing two, telling himself he was to take Jecht's son to Besaid or watch over Sin – that was a sign that he needed to take another potion to restore his bloodflow and steady his mind. And so his progress went, slow and dull and agonising. No saviour appeared to help him and relieve him of his burden; the Calm Lands were sparsely populated at the best of times, and now that Sin had been defeated, the traders had closed their stalls and gone to join the celebrations in Bevelle, free to travel without fear at last. Panic and confusion washed over him intermittently; at times, he found himself crying out in terror, calling for his mother like a little boy, until he remembered she was long dead, taken by Sin like everyone he had ever loved.

He began to drift in and out of consciousness, blacking out for minutes, then hours at a time before coming to and reaching for another potion to sustain himself. The skin over his wound broke and was mended again and again; blood smeared onto the grass. He crawled on, forgetting what he was trying to do, where he was, who he was, but knowing he had to keep going until he could find somebody. He rubbed his cold,

sweating, bloody face against the ground, seeking solace in the earth and its permanence, while the sun and moons chased each other around the sky like summoners in fruitless pursuit of Sin.

There was a man, he knew; he had loved him. He looked up and saw something blue; it reminded him of that man, of the headdress he used to wear. And he spoke the words that now had no meaning, but which he had repeated to himself enough times over the course of his crawl across the plains to remember. "Braska," he whispered. "His daughter. To Besaid – my word."

Then everything became darkness again, and there was no more.

Kimahri Ronso looked down at the man before him, small and twisted on the grass. This was the latest and most disturbing of all the unpleasant events that he had experienced over the last week. When the majority of the adult Ronso had left the mountain to make their journey to Bevelle, the tensions that had been brewing among their teenage clanmates had come to a head, and Kimahri and his rival Biran had fought at last, each determined to prove he was worthy of assuming a leading role in the tribe once elected to adulthood.

Kimahri, the smaller, had lost the fight; Biran had broken his horn clean in half. The pain had been one thing, but the shame quite another. A young male Ronso's horn was his greatest pride, the symbol of his strength and determination, the foremost mark that showed he was different from Spira's human population but just as capable of serving Yevon according to his tribe's honourable and ancient traditions. Without his horn, Kimahri was a disgrace. Nemma Ronso's intervention in the fight had been too late; the damage was already done, and Kimahri had thought it best to leave the mountain at once, despite her pleas that he stay and talk.

He had realised how foolish it was to walk down the mountain and into the Calm Lands alone as soon as he took a moment to think about it: he knew the area was full of fiends, and even the older and more battle-hardened Ronso travelled in groups or at least hired mercenaries from among the off-duty Crusaders. But on this point, at least, the odds had been in his favour; so soon after Braska and his guardians had crossed the plains, the fiend population was minimal. By keeping a watchful eye and breaking into a run as soon as he spotted a hint of trouble, and spending the nights snatching a few hours' sleep in one of the Calm Lands' crevasses, he had made it across without a scratch. It was on arriving in Bevelle that his trouble resumed: like most young Ronso, Kimahri had never set foot in the city before.

The news of the Calm had been beginning to spread, and

impromptu celebrations were starting in the streets, although it had been decreed that the main ceremony to mark Lord Braska's triumph would be delayed for a few days to allow those living in the further parts of Spira to come and pay their respects. Kimahri had found everyone's exuberance frightening. Having resolved he could no longer stay with the Ronso, he had sensibly concluded that he would have to live among humans, but not knowing that the buoyant mood in Bevelle was a departure from the norm, he didn't know if he would be able to tolerate it for the rest of his life. He had spent a few nights in a boarding house in the city, and had then admitted that the whole atmosphere was too overwhelming, backtracking and finding himself at Rin's travel agency just outside Bevelle's north entrance.

Rin had let Kimahri stay a little longer, taking pity on the confused and lonely young Ronso, but Kimahri's meagre funds had been running out, and Rin had gently but firmly informed him that he would need to move on if he was unable to pay for his board and lodging. So, reluctant to return to loud and busy Bevelle, Kimahri had retraced more of his steps, wandering hesitantly back into the Calm Lands and debating with himself whether he should accept that he was ill-equipped to deal with the outside world and return to the Ronso settlement.

That was when he found Auron. The potions had drawn out but not prevented his decline: his wound was deep, and he had lost enough blood for his body to begin shutting down.

As his blood supply thinned and failed, he had found it increasingly difficult to maintain the knowledge of who he was and what was happening. Passing on his cryptic message had consumed the last of his strength.

He lay there now, motionless and soaked in blood, the left side of his body mostly unscathed but still deathly pale, almost grey. Kimahri would have been certain the poor man was dead if not for the fact he had just heard him speak. If there was any chance he might be alive, he needed urgent help. Kimahri bent to scoop him into his arms; the smell of blood was overpowering. He turned and headed back to Rin's agency; it was the closest place he knew of.

Rin had returned to his branch outside Bevelle not long after Braska and his guardians had passed through, and had remained there since; first in the company of his staff, and now, since hearing the news of the Calm and the celebrations that were to happen in the city, alone. The people he employed had been eager to witness the parades and fireworks, even though, being good Al Bhed, they fundamentally disapproved of the summoner's pilgrimage; and Rin hadn't wanted to deprive them of the opportunity to see the once-in-a-lifetime event. He had been quite happy to take care of the agency himself; the fact that the new High Summoner had been a personal friend of his had made the thought of going to join in with the celebrations too uninviting.

The agency never drew in huge numbers of guests – it was

much less successful than the Mi'ihen Highroad branch – but the flow of travellers had slowed to a complete stop over the past few days as everyone put aside their business and headed into the city. Kimahri had been Rin's only guest until Rin had politely reminded him that he was accustomed to charging a fee for his services, and then he had found himself with no guests at all. He had taken to sitting at the reception desk and watching the rolling coverage of Braska's defeat of Sin on the sphere, idly wondering if he might be able to turn the fact he had known the High Summoner to his advantage. It was an awful shame that Braska had turned down the summoner's path, he was sure of that, and the Yevonite festivities were utterly crass, but he knew he couldn't be blamed for wanting to make a gil or two out of it, if the opportunity arose.

When the door opened and Kimahri appeared, it took Rin a moment to notice the lifeless body in his arms – but then the sight of it made him jump to his feet in alarm. "Goodness me," he said. "Where did you –"

"Need healer," said Kimahri.

Approaching him, Rin shook his head. "Not a healer," he said. "This man needs an Al Bhed doctor – a surgeon, if we can find one. Magic and potions won't be enough to help him. I shall do what I can first, and then we must look for a doctor. This way, please."

He led the way to the nearest of the bedrooms; Kimahri hesitated for a moment, unnerved by Rin's dismissal of Yevonite

medicine. He had been taught that the Al Bhed's scientific techniques were dangerous and sacrilegious, as had all young Ronso; in fact, he had been advised to stay away from their race entirely. But the patience and gentle, businesslike courtesy that Rin had shown during their previous encounter had been enough for Kimahri to warm to him more than he had managed with any of the Yevonite humans he had met in Bevelle. He followed Rin into the bedroom, and laid Auron carefully on the bed, glancing down at the streaks of blood staining his own fur.

"Drec ec – this is quite the wound," Rin mused, reminding himself to speak in the common language for Kimahri's benefit. "I shall try my very best. Please wait."

He hurried away and was soon back with his medicinal supplies, all of which looked very different from those that Kimahri was used to. As the two of them carefully removed Auron's blood-soaked clothes, Rin realised that the man looked familiar: he had seen him on the sphere. The coverage of Braska's triumph had included archival footage of him and his guardians: there had been very little material involving Jecht, but there was enough of Auron to make him recognisable even in this state. The proud, serious young man from the recordings of formal Yevonite ceremonies had become this mangled, motionless body. Rin wondered how it had happened; the most obvious answer was the Final Summoning, but that had been over a week ago.

"Did you see what happened?" he asked Kimahri.

Kimahri shook his head.

"You know this is Braska's guardian, don't you?" said Rin. "Lord Braska: the new High Summoner."

Still saying nothing, Kimahri nonetheless thought back to the few words Auron had said to him. Braska: that was the name he had spoken first. Now his message made a little more sense.

Rin rummaged in his supplies, trying to work out what sort of first aid would be best to tide them over until he could find a doctor. "He will need to be conscious for a moment so I can administer the medicine," he told Kimahri. "His heart may have stopped, but I have a machine that can restart it, at least briefly."

"Sacrilege," Kimahri growled.

"Oh, ruhacdmo,"[30] said Rin. "Would you rather he died? The man is a legendary guardian. I have no knowledge of Yevonite xiylgano,[31] I'm afraid, so if you want him to have a chance at living, I'm sorry to say you have no choice." Kimahri said nothing more, so he took that as consent. "He is likely to be confused when he regains consciousness," he added. "I may need your help restraining him."

With some uncertainty, Kimahri moved closer to the bed.

[30] Honestly

[31] Quackery

Rin readied his small defibrillator, and then brought it to Auron's chest. After pressing the button to operate it, he reached for Auron's wrist, and satisfied with the faint pulse he detected there, he extracted a tuft of phoenix down from a pocket and scattered it over him. Immediately, Auron's undamaged eye opened; he sat up, gurgling and gasping for breath. Held in place by Kimahri's firm paw, he was unable to do anything but open and close his mouth a few times as if trying to speak, staring into Rin's eyes with an expression of terror.

"There's no need to panic, Sir Auron," said Rin pleasantly. "You're doing very well. Here, drink this – there's a good fellow."

He managed to empty most of a bottle of Al Bhed potion into Auron's mouth while Auron was still conscious – he swallowed the potion reflexively, but the action brought him to the limit of his strength. His eye closed; he lay down again, motionless once more.

Rin sighed with relief. "That will certainly help, until we can find a doctor," he said. "We must just hope its effects last long enough. We should see to his wound."

He took the lead in cleaning and bandaging the long, deep gash, issuing Kimahri a few instructions that the Ronso did his best to follow. Once they had finished, he advised Kimahri to use the agency's showering facilities and headed into Bevelle in search of an Al Bhed doctor. Kimahri gladly took Rin's ad-

vice – Rin had specifically noted that he would not charge for the use of the showers on this occasion – and stooped into one of the human-sized shower cubicles to scrub Auron's blood out of his fur. When he was dry, he returned to Auron's side for lack of anywhere else to go, and sat beside the bed mulling over the message Auron had passed on to him.

Rin returned some time later, shaking his head. "Not a doctor to be had," he said, "not even a white mage. The parades have started – all the businesses are closed." He looked down at Auron's lifeless body; it was a dreadful irony. If the people of Bevelle had known that the High Summoner's guardian was in mortal danger, they would be falling over themselves to help him, even the Al Bhed. He had walked through the city trying not to grimace at the banners and bunting that had been put up everywhere, averting his gaze from the enormous drawings of Braska's face plastered over the temple porches.

"We shall have to hope the potion was enough for him to last the night," he said, rather doubtfully. "I shall try again in the morning."

"Does Lord Braska have daughter?" Kimahri asked him.

Rin frowned at the unexpected question. "He does," he said quietly. "Little Yuna – she can't be more than eight or nine years old. And an orphan now, the poor child. Braska," he muttered, "fro? Fro tet oui ajan pameaja drec du pa y kuut

etay?"[32]

"Where is she?" said Kimahri.

"In Bevelle, no doubt," said Rin. "Why?"

"Guardian left message," Kimahri explained. "When Kimahri found guardian – he spoke. Said to take Lord Braska's daughter to Besaid." He frowned a little. "Where is Besaid?"

"Let me show you," said Rin, and he went to fetch a map and pointed out the location of the southern islands.

"Long way," said Kimahri.

"Yes," said Rin. "Well, Kimahri: if Sir Auron bade you take Yuna there, then you must. Go into Bevelle and find her: the city is certainly no place for her."

Kimahri's tail twitched. "Rin should go. Rin will know what to do. Better than Kimahri does."

"Oh, no," said Rin, grinning slightly despite everything. "I have my business to look after. You were the one Sir Auron instructed, Kimahri. You were looking for something to occupy yourself with, weren't you? Well, it looks as if this is it. Perhaps on the journey to Besaid you will discover what you should do next."

"Kimahri not understand humans," Kimahri admitted. "Not know how to talk to children."

[32] Braska, why? Why did you ever believe this to be a good idea?

"You have nothing to worry about," Rin assured him. "You wish to find your place in the world, do you not? We Al Bhed have a saying: *uhmo druca fru dno femm palusa*. Only those who try will become."

"Heathen language," Kimahri muttered.

"Perhaps," said Rin, "but one in which we are allowed to speak freely. And that liberty is the greatest gift of all. Braska wanted his daughter to be happy – even though he … well. You will be doing him a great service."

Kimahri said nothing for a moment, but at last he nodded. "Then Kimahri go."

"Good luck," said Rin.

Once Kimahri was gone, Rin turned his attention to Auron's torn and bloodstained clothing. In the now fairly unlikely event that he would recover, he would need something to wear; if he died, Rin would at least be able to sell the clothes back to the Yevonites and hopefully turn a handsome profit. Either way, it would be better if the clothes were in a good state. He bundled the robe and trousers into the laundry machina, and meanwhile set about scrubbing the blood and dirt off the boots and cuirass, carefully stitching the panels of the latter back together. As he did so, he wondered if there might be any other means of profiting from the day's events. Regardless of Auron's fate, the fact that he had passed by the agency shortly after the Final Summoning ought to draw the crowds. Perhaps he would leave the bedroom untouched, he thought, and invite

Yevonite visitors to come and view the bloodstained sheets. It would certainly increase footfall; it ought to bring in a tidy sum. Maybe, he decided, he would make enough over the next three or four years to close down this branch, which had never been the most successful venture anyway, and turn his attention to buying out one of the other agencies elsewhere. He had had his eyes on the one in the Thunder Plains for some time. The Bilghen Memorial Travel Agency, he thought: it would be a fine name, giving due honour to the man who had made the plains safe to cross. The Yevonites had done their best for years to ensure his name was forgotten, but the Al Bhed would always remember their ancestors.

With the cuirass mended to his satisfaction, he took the clothes outside to dry and ate a quick dinner before checking on Auron. There seemed to have been no change, so he retired to his bed for the night. And after that night had passed, when the sun rose and morning came once more, Rin dressed and went back to the bedroom where Auron lay, planning to see if anything had developed before he went to attempt to find a doctor again – but all he found was a deep crimson stain on the bedsheet. Auron was gone. He had stood and walked away.

"Bnyeca pa du Yevon,"[33] Rin whispered, for the first time in his life.

[33]Praise be to Yevon.

Chapter **49**

Back To Life

Rin would normally have switched off the sphere screen at reception when he went to bed, but he had been uncharacteristically shaken by everything that had happened, and had forgotten to perform some of his usual routine tasks. So, at around the same time that he entered Auron's bedroom to find him gone, the sphere began its cheerful broadcast of the day's programming, sharing the news of the joyful mood that had taken hold of Bevelle with the deserted room.

"Good morning, Spira," said the announcer, "and it certainly is a good one! You join us the morning after the first official celebrations of Lord High Summoner Braska's Calm. The people of Bevelle were singing and dancing into the night – I daresay they're still at it! But here, we return to our coverage of Lord Braska's glorious victory over Sin. And I'm delighted to say we have a number of special guests this morning, who will be offering their precious reminiscences of Lord Braska

and his guardians."

A crude map of Spira filled the screen. "But first, the news and weather," the announcer continued. "The outlook is fine across Spira today, with no rain or storms expected outside the Thunder Plains. Moonflow crossings have resumed after yesterday's holiday, and are operating as normal with two shoopufs on shift. If you are leaving Bevelle and heading south, rest assured that the frequency of the crossing has been increased to take account of the heavier traffic, and operation times have been extended. Travellers are reminded, however, that fiends do continue to prowl even during a Calm, and are advised to take the necessary precautions. Stay safe!"

The image shifted to a shot of the citadel in Bevelle. "In political news," said the announcer more sombrely, "before the court adjourned for yesterday's celebrations, the bill to restrict the authorisation of summoners was taken to a third reading, and soundly defeated. Lady Torroll of Kilika hailed the move as a victory for all provincial summoners, who will continue to be allowed to take their pilgrimages without requiring prior consent from Bevelle."

An image of Auron appeared on the screen, his face largely obscured by a warrior monk's regulation helmet. "And finally," said the announcer, "before we move onto this morning's feature, a plea. Again we ask: where are Lord Braska's guardians? Numerous eyewitnesses claim to have seen them both in the days since the Final Summoning. But still, neither man has

presented himself to the authorities. Sir Auron, Sir Jecht: your mysterious disappearance has us all transfixed! Rest assured that even though we have had to begin the celebrations without you, you will receive the honour you deserve when you return to us. Please, if you're watching this, come forward – there's no need to be modest. We are so keen to reward you for your service. And to the rest of you out there: if you have any information on Sir Jecht or Sir Auron, do pass it on to a member of your local Crusader chapter or to your nearest temple."

The picture of Auron faded, transitioning into live coverage of a small studio. "And now," said the announcer, "we are delighted to welcome this morning's special guests. First: Lord Wen Kinoc, who needs no introduction, but who is additionally with us in his capacity as trusted personal friend of Sir Auron. Second, Lady Perula of Bevelle, a close confidante of Lord High Summoner Braska." Perula's polite smile almost dropped from her face in reaction to the description, but she succeeded in maintaining her composure. "And our third guest, all the way from Mount Gagazet: the leader of the Ronso tribe, Lord Kelk Ronso, one of the last to speak to Lord Braska before he performed that most wonderful Final Summoning. What an honour to have the three of you with us this morning."

"I'm sure I speak for us all when I say I wouldn't have missed it," said Kinoc. "I'm delighted that you're dedicating so much coverage to Lord Braska's victory. This sort of thing

only happens once in a lifetime."

"Perhaps we should turn to you first, then, Lord Kinoc," said the announcer. "Did you know Lord Braska in Bevelle, before he took the pilgrimage?"

"Oh, a little," said Kinoc. "Enough to exchange a friendly greeting. He was a very pious man – awfully pious. Devoted to Yevon, of course. There couldn't have been a more deserving High Summoner."

"Rumour has it that Lord Braska once associated with the Al Bhed," said the announcer. "But I'm sure you'll want to put our viewers' minds at rest."

"I certainly do," said Kinoc. "Lord Braska was once sent as an envoy to the Al Bhed, some years ago. I think that must be where the rumour came from. But he only ever collaborated with them on Yevonite business. I've heard those rumours too, and there isn't a grain of truth in them."

"Lady Perula," said the announcer, "you were on the pilgrimage at the same time as Lord Braska. Can you share any memories of him from the road?"

"Well, we didn't cross paths an awful lot," said Perula. "He seemed to find the æons dreadfully hard. But one never knows what the fayth truly want from us."

"And what about Lord Braska's guardians?" the announcer prompted her. "How did they support him on the difficult journey?"

"Oh, very well indeed," said Perula.

"Can you tell us what sort of people they are?"

"Sir Jacht is a … a kind and gentle man," said Perula unconvincingly. "And Sir Auron … well …"

"You were one of the last people to see Sir Auron before he disappeared, isn't that right?" said the announcer.

"I was," said Perula, managing to recover her poise. "It was at the same time that I had the great honour of sending Lord Braska. Sir Auron was by his side until the very end: he was most devoted. He seemed rather upset, in fact. It seemed as if he didn't want the Calm to come at all."

"Surely you're not suggesting that a legendary guardian could think such blasphemous things," said the announcer eagerly.

Perula shrugged. "I'm just telling you what I remember. The people of Spira want to hear the details, don't they? Do you know, I think that might be why Sir Auron hasn't shown his face since. I think he's mourning. Perhaps Sir Jacht is too."

"It's *Jecht*," said Kinoc, as the recording sphere swivelled quickly to focus on him. "I'm sorry to interrupt. But with respect, Lady Perula, I have known Auron – *Sir* Auron, excuse me – for many years. We practically grew up together; he's a very dear friend of mine. And I am certain Sir Auron would never do anything so unbecoming as to mourn the loss of a High Summoner. He knows as well as all of us that the Calm is Yevon's greatest gift. Better, in fact: Sin took his entire family when he was a mere child. I've no doubt that was why he was

keen to play his part in the pilgrimage."

"Seeing as you know Sir Auron so well, Lord Kinoc," said the announcer, "maybe you can tell us why he hasn't shown his face since the Final Summoning?"

"I can only speculate," said Kinoc, "but Sir Auron is a modest man, and faultlessly devoted to Yevon. I daresay he is giving private thanks for Lord Braska's triumph. In fact, I wonder if he and Sir Jecht absented themselves from the celebrations to ensure the focus was entirely on Lord Braska." He shook his head and laughed. "Very humble, as ever, Auron. But you deserve your honour too. Don't stay away too long, now."

"You don't think anything has happened to Sir Auron and Sir Jecht, then?" asked the announcer.

"Well, Lord Kelk can confirm that he saw both of them accompanying Lord Braska to the Calm Lands to fight Sin," said Kinoc. "Can't you?"

Kelk spoke for the first time. "Yes," he said, slowly and gravely. "Just as you and I were recently discussing, Lord Kinoc. Lord Braska passed through our settlement on his way down Mount Gagazet, accompanied by both his guardians."

"And it's not as if anything could have happened to them since," Kinoc was quick to point out.

"What was the mood like?" said the announcer. "Were they excited by the thought that they were about to defeat Sin?"

"They –" Kelk sent a brief glance offscreen, in Kinoc's direction, and then nodded. "Yes. They were … happy to be bringing the Calm to Spira. All three of them."

"And talking of happiness," the announcer chirped, "I hear you have some good news to share with us, Lord Kelk."

Kelk did his best to smile. "Indeed. Lord Kinoc has informed me that the structures of Yevon are evolving to take account of the important role played in spiritual affairs by non-humans. Lord Jyscal Guado and I are to be made maesters during the next ceremony. It is a great honour, and we are in your debt."

"Is that why you brought such a large delegation of Ronso to Bevelle with you?" the announcer asked.

"No, I was given this happy news just yesterday," Kelk explained. "I brought so many of my tribe merely as a way of paying our highest respects to Lord Braska. He has truly done Spira the greatest service. We were touched by his kindness when he passed over our sacred mountain."

"Praise be to Yevon," the announcer concurred. "And I'm sure the people of Spira will join me in wishing you good fortune in your new role. Will you be taking on any particular duties?"

"We haven't discussed it yet," said Kinoc, "but Grand Maester Mika is most keen to give Lord Kelk responsibility for law and justice. We think he'd be excellent at it; he's dedicated to pursuing the truth."

Kelk was struggling to maintain a neutral expression, but the announcer failed to notice and continued to focus on Kinoc instead. "Now, Lord Kinoc," he said, "I'm sorry to bring up yet more ugly rumours, but –"

"Oh, it can't be helped," said Kinoc. "People talk, especially when they don't have the full story. I'll be happy to address anything else; it's best to clear things up and make sure everyone understands exactly what happened."

"Well, indeed," said the announcer. "And you are well placed to speak to this one, sir, as it concerns Sir Auron. I'm sorry to say this, but there's talk that he was tried by the high court of Yevon and sent down recently. Please do explain – I'm sure someone like that could never have become a legendary guardian."

"You're quite right," said Kinoc. "Yes, I was expecting to have to talk about this. Auron was put on trial, it's true – it was based on some flawed evidence presented to us by a man of ill repute. Jealous, I expect. The people of Spira will be glad to hear he has since been arrested and charged." He paused and took out his handkerchief, wiping a little sweat from his face. "Fortunately this all came out just before Auron – *Sir* Auron, I *do* apologise – just before he was due to be condemned. We were planning to make a public apology, but he was already away on the pilgrimage before we could arrange anything. I can't deny that he went on trial – I know a lot of the inhabitants of Bevelle saw it with their own eyes. But we were at least

able to intervene before he was supposed to be sent to the Via Purifico. It's quite clear that he never made it that far, thank all the fayth: as we all know, nobody has ever survived that place. And although I can personally attest to Sir Auron's excellent swordsmanship, I fear he wouldn't have made it out either. But of course, Yevon's truth prevailed in the end, as it always does. And I hope that now we are to have Lord Kelk as one of our maesters, we shall be able to avoid any trouble of that nature in future."

"Were you upset that your good friend was accused of heretical behaviour?" said the announcer.

"Very upset indeed," said Kinoc enthusiastically. "But I trusted Yevon's judgement. I was most relieved when it turned out to have been a false alarm: now I know that neither Yevon's judgement, nor my own, is lacking." He shook his head and smiled. "I'm terribly sorry for all the trouble, Auron. Do come back to Bevelle – we miss you. *I* miss you."

"And on that heartfelt note," said the announcer, "we must end our interview there. Many thanks to my guests: Lord Wen Kinoc, Lady Perula, Lord Kelk Ronso. Now it's over to Jimma in Luca with the blitzball scores."

Several hours earlier, Auron had undergone a profoundly unsettling experience. He had lost consciousness for the fi-

nal time after encountering Kimahri on the edge of the Calm Lands; he had been artificially resuscitated by Rin not long afterwards, and had spent a few seconds in a state of confusion and stress, trying to work out where he was and what was happening as Rin forced the Al Bhed potion down his throat. After he slipped back into unconsciousness, the potion had kept him alive for a few hours, but even its more potent properties hadn't been enough to sustain him through the night.

And so, just as the sun was beginning to rise, he died. But still the promises he had repeated to himself during his infelicitous crossing of the Calm Lands were sharp in his mind, and now they went so far as to interfere with the very end of his life. He had spent the whole pilgrimage denying the reality of death, after all, and now that extended even to his own. His body turned to pyreflies like that of anyone who had died. But those pyreflies didn't begin to drift away into the air, as Braska's had; nor did they become cold and unresponsive, awaiting either a sending or their slow transformation into a fiend. The life force inside Auron's body simply refused to leave them. And so he returned unnaturally to the world of the living, remade in the image of the man he believed himself to be: the weary, jaded man who had renounced his faith and failed in his most important quest. An old man, and an unsent.

He awoke, becoming aware of the bandages that covered his neck and chest as well as half his head. They itched; he wondered whether he might do better to remove them. Slip-

ping a finger underneath, where they met the bottom of his ribcage, he tugged at them to reveal what they were covering.

The scar looked as if it had been there twenty years; Auron blinked down at it, slowly registering the incongruence. Carefully, he unwrapped the remaining bandages, working upwards towards his head. It was the same story: while the bandages themselves were stained with blood, all they revealed was the same long scar, clearly the marker of a horrific injury he had suffered once, but smooth and faded as if it had happened in the distant past.

He stood, aching with exhaustion, and went to look at himself in the mirror. The scar began just above his right eyebrow; it snaked down over the eyelid, still closed and unresponsive, and onto his cheek, fading at his jaw. Then it started again at his collarbone, curving over his chest towards his stomach.

But that wasn't the most alarming thing about his appearance. His skin had changed elsewhere too, becoming rough and marked as if it belonged to an old man. Wrinkles adorned his face. And his hair, while no longer matted with blood, was streaked with grey instead – wide, coarse patches of it running right from his temples to where it ended at his waist.

He stood there silently, trying to process it. This new appearance reflected how he felt on the inside, he supposed. It was appropriate, if upsetting. If the thought of returning to Bevelle had been unappealing before, it was now intolerable. To have others see this would be nothing short of awful, even

if they would undoubtedly pretend it was immaterial, now that he was a sacred, blameless legendary guardian.

They wouldn't even know he was dead. There was that to contend with as well. Auron looked down at his hands, flexing his fingers: there was no obvious sign that he was unsent. He still looked and felt as if he was made of living flesh, even if it was untrue. He suspected he would still bleed, and still need to eat and drink and sleep like anyone else – the last of those especially. He was overwhelmingly, stiflingly tired.

"Hey," said a voice behind him. "You done lookin' at yourself?"

Auron turned around at once, almost losing his balance given that he was still unused to his impaired vision. And there was Jecht: ghostly and transparent, but achingly familiar, sitting on the edge of the bed as if he had been there all along.

He couldn't help glancing at the space between Jecht and the doorway. Perhaps, he thought briefly, this was a rare perk of being unsent: perhaps he could communicate with those who were no longer living. And that might mean Jecht wasn't the only person who could appear – maybe, if he willed it, he would see –

"Just me," said Jecht, more quietly. "Sorry." He gave Auron a halfhearted grin. "Man, you look rough."

"Jecht –" said Auron.

"Even your voice has changed," Jecht remarked. "Sounds kinda sexy."

"Jecht," said Auron again. "I'm – I'm dead. I died. But I'm still here –" The three promises he had made to himself came back to him. He had made them the sole reason to keep crawling across the Calm Lands – but he had never imagined they would be enough to bring him back from the dead.

Jecht raised a hand to scratch his neck. "Yeah," he said, "look, we need to have a talk. Hey. You still afraid of the ocean?"

Auron considered, and then shook his head. What had happened in Bevelle now seemed very distant and unimportant; most of what had happened over the course of his entire life seemed the same way. A different man had had those experiences. The anxieties of the living were irrelevant now.

"Come see me at the docks, OK?" said Jecht. "The west docks, in Bevelle? I … uh, I can't stay away too long. But we can have a good chat there, you know. You'll come, right?"

"To Bevelle?" said Auron.

"You don't gotta worry about anyone seeing ya," said Jecht. "Sun's only just come up. Everyone was up late partying, see, cos of the … well, cos of what happened. Come see me, yeah?"

"All right," said Auron.

"Cool," said Jecht. "I'll see you there – west docks. Oh, by the way: Rin washed your clothes for you. Hung 'em up outside. I think you dropped your sword somewhere in the Calm Lands, though."

"Right," Auron muttered, as Jecht faded away. "Thanks."

He headed outside, taking the bandages he had removed from his body with him; his sudden departure would seem strange enough either way, but if he left them behind, Rin would surely put the pieces together. He wondered if it even mattered: Rin wasn't a Yevonite, and maybe wouldn't be bothered that Auron was unsent. Then he reconsidered. It wasn't just the teachings that he was offending against; it was the most fundamental laws of life and death. Of course Rin would be quick to report him to the authorities if he knew, he thought.

Rin had indeed hung Auron's clothes outside, and even left his boots and cuirass there. He pulled it all on slowly; his arms ached, as did everything else. It didn't seem to be the result of any particular injury, but rather due to a deep, unshakable fatigue. He was beginning to suspect that it was an effect of his condition.

He pulled the robe over his right shoulder, fastened his belt, and then stared down at his bare left arm. It was the arm of an old man, the skin dry and uneven – a loathsome reminder of what he had become. The thought of walking around with it on full view was deeply unwelcome.

Then he remembered: the reason why he had worn the robe in the first place, and kept his arm out of the sleeve, was because it was supposedly the custom of the warrior monks of ancient Zanarkand, the way they had demonstrated their strength and pride. He was disinclined to believe the story now: it was surely just another of the many lies that came out

of Bevelle. But the other part of the tale had been that when those monks were disgraced and dishonoured, they had tucked their once bare arms away, keeping them close to their bodies and forcing themselves to perform most activities one-handed. It was a sign of their shame – a punishment they inflicted on themselves as a reminder that they no longer deserved glory.

There was nothing more appropriate, Auron thought as he pulled the robe over his left shoulder, drawing his arm in against his ribs. He had lost an eye, and so he could lose an arm as well, at least functionally speaking. It was a suitable punishment for him, just as it had apparently been for the warrior monks of a thousand years ago or more.

He walked stiffly into the city, grimacing at the ongoing fatigue that suffused his body. Jecht had been right, at least: there were no signs of life other than the remains of balloons and confetti from the previous few days' excesses. The city was as quiet and still as the ruins of Zanarkand had been. He rounded the citadel, and passed the barracks where he had grown up, and the narrow roads leading to the Al Bhed district, and the minor temples, and then he arrived at the docks. Looking out over the sea, feeling no terror or panic at all, he failed to discern any sign of Jecht's presence – and then, at last, he saw it on the horizon, unusually calm and immobile. Sin.

"Oh, Jecht," he murmured.

Jecht's voice echoed in his head. *Ah. So you heard.*

"Did you know?" said Auron. "Before the Final Summon-

ing?"

Yeah, said Jecht. *That bitch told me after I left you guys. Seemed to think it was funny.*

"I'm sorry, Jecht," said Auron. "If I'd known – I'm really sorry –"

Yeah, give it a rest, all right? Jecht interrupted. *I get it already.* There was a long pause, and then he added, *So … unsent, huh? How's that workin' out for ya?*

Auron sighed. "It's awful," he said. "I'm not supposed to be here. Every minute I spend here just reminds me how wrong this is. I'm so tired, Jecht. I'm exhausted."

You came back for a reason, though, right? said Jecht.

"You know what happens to the unsent, don't you?" said Auron. "They can't do anything meaningful without losing their senses. If I'm not careful, I'll turn into a monster. I won't be human anymore."

But something brought you back, Jecht insisted. *That's what you guys said: unsents got some special thing that stops 'em going to the Farplane, ain't they? So what is it for you?*

"It's …" Auron blinked. "I made promises," he admitted. "I said I'd take Yuna to Besaid once it was over. And you know I swore to look after your son."

And that was enough? said Jecht. *You couldn't die properly, just cos of that?*

"I keep my promises, Jecht," said Auron. "Or at least, I had every intention to. I suppose that's what's keeping me here.

Not that I …" He groaned quietly. The thought of travelling to Besaid again was anything but appealing, and he didn't even know how he would get to Jecht's Zanarkand.

You know that Ronso guy's taking care of Yuna, right? said Jecht.

Auron frowned. "What? Who?"

I guess you don't remember, said Jecht. *Just before you collapsed in the Calm Lands – I mean, yeah, you were pretty out of it. You asked some Ronso kid to go look for her – he's the one that took you to Rin's. Kimahri, that was his name. He went to find Yuna in Bevelle last night; they're on their way through the woods right now.*

"Oh, thank the …" Auron began, and then trailed off. "That's … I'm pleased to hear that. Thank you, Jecht."

So I guess you're just here so you can go look after my brat, huh? said Jecht.

"I guess so," said Auron.

Jecht snorted. *Nice try, Auron. I'm touched and all, but I know that wouldn't be enough to bring you back from the dead.*

"I promised," Auron protested.

Yeah, I know, said Jecht. *But that ain't the only thing, is it? You made a promise to yourself too, right?*

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Auron. He had known as soon as he realised he was unsent that his vow to end the cycle of death was a lost cause. An old, dead man would never be able to put an end to a thousand years of suf-

fering. It was embarrassing to admit that he had ever thought himself capable of it.

You promised you'd stop Sin, Jecht insisted. *No point tryin' to hide it. That's what you really came back for.*

Auron said nothing for a moment; then, slowly and deliberately, he thought to himself, Are you reading my mind?

Jecht laughed. *OK, you got me.*

"Jecht," Auron whined, and then he abruptly fell silent: this was just like the bickering the two of them had done on the pilgrimage, but the circumstances were so different that looking back on those days felt painful. They had practically been boys then, without a clue about how awful things would turn out to be – now they were Sin and a dead man. It made him feel even more exhausted.

Look, this is what I needed to talk to you about, said Jecht. *You know I said I'd think of something, yeah? Well, I got a plan, and it's a pretty great one.*

"Jecht, stop it," said Auron. "I don't know what you want me to do, but I told you – if I try changing things, I'll turn into a monster. I know I wanted to get rid of Sin, but that was before – before I died. I know that's part of why I came back, but I just can't do that now – I can't face it. I'm so tired."

Just listen, Jecht insisted. *This could be our last chance – if we don't do it while I'm Sin, it might be too late. The fayth explained it to me, Auron: I'm different. I ain't like other people – I'm not real.*

"What?" Auron muttered.

Zanarkand, Jecht explained. *My Zanarkand. It … never existed. You remember all those fayth on the mountain, yeah? They're dreaming it. It's just an … an illusion, and they're all trapped there, just dreaming like that for a thousand years. So now that I'm Sin, I –*

"Wait," said Auron, raising his free hand to his head; he felt dizzy. "Slow down – I don't understand. You're not real? You never existed? Jecht, I …"

Hey, get a hold of yourself! Jecht implored him. *You don't get to be messed up by this, Auron – it's my problem, not yours. Just let me explain, will ya?*

Auron waved his hand irritably. "Fine. Go ahead. Excuse me for having the audacity to care about you."

Ha, whatever, said Jecht. *Point is, if you figure out a way to get inside this thing and get to me, you can stop Sin for good. Trust me. It'll work.*

"Get to you," Auron echoed.

Well, said Jecht. *You know.*

"You want me to kill you," said Auron dully. "You really think I could do that."

No, I don't! said Jecht. *I know you're gonna give me all that stuff about how bein' unsent means you can't do anything that'd make a difference – I get it –*

"Yes," said Auron, "but that's not why! Not the main reason, anyway. You're – you're my friend, Jecht. I couldn't make

myself do that. What kind of person do you think I am? Do you really think I'd be able to live with myself if I –" He faltered, realising the inappropriateness of his words.

Look, you don't gotta worry about it anyway, said Jecht hastily. *This is where the plan gets good, see? You know who hates me way more than you ever did?*

"I don't hate you," said Auron.

You used to, Jecht countered.

Auron grunted.

I'm talking about my kid, Auron, Jecht went on. *Seriously. He'd do it, I know he would. So all you gotta do is go to Zanarkand, train him up, then when he gets bigger, you bring him here and he can be the one that does it. See? It's perfect.*

"No, it isn't," said Auron. "Why does it – why do I even have to be involved in this? And bringing your son here – doesn't it make more sense for someone who's already in Spira –"

You trust anyone in Spira with this shit? said Jecht. *Anyway, none of 'em know what's going on, unless you count Yunalesca and a couple old guys in Bevelle. It's gotta be him, Auron. It makes sense. Works with the prophecy too. I know he's meant to come here.*

Auron sighed loudly. "That's just a story, Jecht! You don't have to do what it says – I've told you this! You have free will, don't you? So use it!"

I mean, I'm not even real, Jecht pointed out, *so free will kinda feels like a luxury, to be honest.*

Wearily, Auron shook his head.

Look, said Jecht. *It ain't just that. You know I wanted to make my kid into a blitzball star. Well, seeing as I can't do that now, I wanna do something good for him, at least. I wanna show him what it's like to … to live. To not be a dream anymore. Zanarkand – I never realised till I came here, but it's not like reality. It's not – enough. I wanna give him that chance, Auron. I want him to see it, like I did. And then he can destroy Sin. And then Spira will be saved.*

"This is ludicrous," said Auron. "I'll go to your Zanarkand – that's fine. I gave you my word, so I'll do it. But I'm not bringing him back here – especially not to kill his own father. I can't do that, Jecht. I'm so –"

Tired, yeah! Jecht interrupted him. *You said it enough times.*

"Well, I am!" Auron protested.

At least you ain't the one that's gonna start killing people in a couple years! Jecht replied. *Look, Auron – it's save Spira or don't, you know? This is what you wanted, right?*

"You can get someone else to do it," said Auron. "Someone who's actually alive. You think I'd come back here, if I found a way to leave? You think I'd go to your Zanarkand and then choose to come back, and have everyone fawn over me because

I'm a –" He was so disgusted by the phrase that he found it difficult to say. "A legendary guardian?"

I can take you to Zanarkand, said Jecht calmly. *It's how I got here in the first place. I rode Sin.*

"Fine," said Auron, not even bothering to dwell on this new revelation. "Great. I'll go there, then. But I'm not coming back. And I'm not dragging your son into this."

Just think about it, said Jecht. *Maybe you'll change your mind.*

"Yeah, maybe I'll decide I want to come back to a place where they tried to kill me because of who I am," said Auron, "and where everyone's going to ask me why I aged thirty years in one night, and then try to send me to the Farplane as soon as they find out. Maybe, if I go completely out of my mind, I'll decide it makes sense to come back here! To a place where the man I loved thought it was a good idea to go and kill himself, because he thought it would make people happy, and now that he's done it, everyone's saying what a hero he was and having parties in the streets, when before they'd have spat in his face as soon as look at him! He's gone – Jecht – he's gone. And I … I loved him."

He had never said it out loud before, and it was too late now. He should have been honest with Braska while they were both alive, he thought. Perhaps that would have made a difference.

Auron, said Jecht slowly, *why'd you never tell me about how it's so bad to be gay here? I mean, the way people see it – I was*

startin' to get it, but I never realised they … they tried to kill you just for …

"Yeah," said Auron. "You know – I'd never met anyone who didn't know how serious it is. Not until I met you."

Uh huh? said Jecht.

Auron nodded. "Even the people who didn't hate me for it, they still … they pitied me. But with you, it was just something normal. I never said so, but it … it helped. Just – pretending it didn't matter, sometimes."

Jecht was silent for a while, and then said, *You know what? I think Zanarkand might suit ya.*

Auron found himself letting out a small, hoarse laugh. "Maybe."

Only one way to find out though, right?

"Right," said Auron. "Yeah. Well –" He shrugged, and then grimaced; the motion had made him newly aware of how sore everything was. "Let's go, then," he added. "Come on."

Sure, said Jecht. *Give me a minute.*

Auron watched as Sin gradually receded from the horizon. Soon, he became aware of a gentle disturbance in the water; then, moments later, Sin resurfaced by the docks, extending its long, gnarled tail to shore. He had never seen it move with such tenderness before.

He climbed onto the tail, holding tight with his one free arm and moving his face close to the scaly surface. All this was meaningless now, he thought – nearly everything was. None

of it mattered at all, and yet at the same time, it mattered so much that it hurt. The anguish that lay in the past, the infinite possibilities of the future: Auron could feel it all, and it made him ache.

You not gonna hold on with both hands? said Jecht, interrupting Auron's reverie. *What's with that, anyway?*

Auron ignored the second question. "It's fine. Not as if I can die if anything happens."

You're gonna get wet, said Jecht.

Auron grunted in response.

Right, said Jecht. *So I'll drop you off at the marina, I guess, if I can get close enough. You won't miss my place – I think the cops are gonna be outside, and, uh ...* He sounded uncharacteristically embarrassed. *Some of the fans left flowers and that kinda thing. And then ... I dunno. Guess I'll see you in a few years. See if you want a lift back over this way.*

"I won't," said Auron. "There's no need to ask."

Well, we'll see, said Jecht. *You ready?*

"Get on with it," said Auron.

Right, yeah, said Jecht. *Say bye to Spira, then.*

And with that, Sin began to glide through the water, fast and haphazard, at times rising into the air and flying a little way before dropping back into the sea with a clumsy splash, as if it was a vehicle being handled by a new and unsure driver. Auron's limited vision was blurred with foam and salt; he pressed his head against Sin's tail to secure himself,

gritting his teeth at the unevenness of the journey. But it was worth it, he thought: he would be able to keep his promise to Jecht, and dedicate himself to a new duty, and forget the place he had left behind. Spira was a land of frightened, cowardly, naïve people, under the yoke of a false and corrupt belief. It was a place where Auron no longer belonged. He was glad to be leaving it behind, and with it, his pain and shame and sorrow. And perhaps, he thought, one day he would fulfil that promise to his satisfaction, and see Jecht's son grow into a fine young man; perhaps that would be enough to allow him to be content and rest at last, and depart the world of the living with some sense that he had found peace.