

“WHY do we have to take him?” Auron hissed.

Braska regarded him calmly. “I need more than *one* guardian, Auron. I know you’re strong –”

“I’d give my life for you,” said Auron, too sincere to be at all embarrassed by such an admission. “You know that. That man – that raving drunkard – you think he could – you think he’s worthy of protecting your honour? He’ll bring us into disrepute –”

“We are already in disrepute,” Braska reminded him. “Besides, it will be good to have someone who is –” He paused, studying Auron’s face carefully. “Not *quite* as devoted.”

“You are more loyal to Yevon than I am,” Auron pointed out.

Braska frowned. “No, not to Yevon. A guardian at a greater distance from his summoner – it will be an asset, I think.”

“You think it will be an *asset*,” said Auron. “An *asset* that only one of your guardians will be willing to protect you with his life –”

“That I will have a guardian who is not so – emotionally involved.”

“What,” said Auron, his voice low and intense, “you think I will neglect my duties? Because I dare have feelings – because my foolish heart was stubborn enough to bind itself to yours?”

“It will be difficult for you,” Braska replied. “To lead me knowingly to my death. Don’t – there’s no need to pretend that’s not the case, Auron. This doesn’t mean I think any less

of your abilities – or your commitment. Quite the opposite. But – it will pain me to see you hurt.”

“I –” said Auron. “Knowing that you are taking the pilgrimage – I am already –” He could say no more.

It wasn't the first time he had lost his composure since they began preparing for the journey, and Braska, as always, had no notion of what he should do; nobody had taught him how to deal with this. After a moment's hesitation, he withdrew and left Auron to grieve alone. It seemed kinder, somehow, than remaining, acting as a physical reminder of the loss his companion was about to face; he could think of it that way, and convince himself it was not cowardice.