

As soon as they arrived at the travel agency, Jecht had muttered some ill-formed excuse and slipped away. Now, five hours later, there was still no sign of him.

They had both long since gone to their beds, and really should have been sleeping, but Braska was worried about Jecht, and Auron, Braska supposed, was angry with him. He could hear the younger man tossing and turning, and sneaked the occasional glance in his direction to see him staring at the ceiling with displeasure, his arms folded.

In the end, light from the corridor flooded in, and Jecht stood – *swayed* – in the doorway.

Braska was about to speak, offer his thanks to Yevon for Jecht’s safe return, but Auron sat bolt upright and snarled, “What sort of time do you call this?”

Jecht smiled, with a confidence that Braska knew would aggravate Auron even further, and said, “Hey, calm down. I been out gettin’ information.”

“Such as?” Auron countered.

Jecht turned to Braska. “There’s a fiend out there called a Basilisk. Turns you into stone. We got enough Softs?”

“Not many, at the moment,” Braska confirmed, and he saw Auron’s gaze turn on him, still cold and unforgiving, doubtless angered to see him treating their companion with civility when he had been such an inconvenience to both of them. “We’ll stock up in the morning. Thank you, Jecht.”

“I ain’t done,” said Jecht good-naturedly. “If we get thirty of ’em, we can take ’em to a guy who’ll graft ’em onto our armour. Then chances are the stone thing won’t work in the first place. Sounds like a good deal if you ask me.”

“Where did you learn all this?” asked Auron in an accusatory tone. Braska suppressed a groan – this whole journey would be so much more bearable if he hadn’t picked two guardians who always insisted on fighting. Well, to be fair, Jecht seemed to have mellowed these days: it was just Auron who still raised his hackles at every attempt at good will from the other.

Jecht grinned. “I have my methods. Let’s just say nobody can resist me. The great Jecht is quite a catch.”

Auron narrowed his eyes, clearly uncomprehending; Jecht stepped closer to him and lowered his voice. “I been sleepin’ with ’em, Auron. Men, women, whoever I reckoned might have somethin’ useful to say. They were all very keen to tell me after I –”

“Enough,” Auron snarled. “Do you think this is the proper behaviour of a summoner’s guardian? Especially when our reputation is already compromised?”

“Oh, is there somethin’ in Yevon’s teachings that says we all have to be giant prudes? That explains a lot about you –”

“Oh, do shut up,” said Auron. “Aren’t you married? Don’t you have the slightest duty to your wife, or would it be naive of me to assume that someone like you –”

“Yeah, we’re consentin’ adults,” Jecht interrupted testily, “and we have an agreement, thanks for askin’. Healthy to get a bit of variety once in a while – sometimes she even brings another guy back to the boat and we all –”

With a noise of frustration, Auron sprung up from his bed, shoved Jecht aside, and walked out into the corridor, slamming the door behind him.

Jecht shook his head. “Damn. What’s up with that guy?”

Braska sighed, rubbing a hand over his forehead in an attempt to alleviate his mounting headache. “Don’t be too hard on Auron,” he said. “He’s young – he’s less comfortable in his own skin than you are. There are things he hasn’t come to terms with about himself yet.”

Jecht nodded, and then considered, idly scratching the back of his neck. “Wait,” he said after a moment. “You mean – Auron’s gay?”

Braska frowned.

“He’s into guys?” Jecht clarified.

It was a rare moment of perspicacity from his companion, but nonetheless, Braska considered denying it; this was Auron’s secret to keep. He had long since resolved that trying to conceal things on the pilgrimage was a fool’s errand, though, so he nodded. “Yes.”

“And,” said Jecht, unusually serious, “does, uh, Yevon say anythin’ about that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, back in Zanarkand, some people were kinda off about it – don’t get me wrong, most of ’em were cool, just – it wasn’t traditional, I guess. There were a few people who liked makin’ a fuss – fuckers. But I thought here, you guys are much more conservative, maybe people aren’t as tolerant –”

Braska nodded thoughtfully. “I see. I suppose it’s more that people don’t discuss it. I’m not sure most people even know it’s possible for two men to love each other. Auron doesn’t exactly make it obvious that he’s inclined that way. I suppose when nobody knows what Yevon’s views are, it’s safer to hide it.”

“Figures,” said Jecht. “Must suck for him, though.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Well, I guess that clears a few things up,” Jecht added. “Kinda explains why he’s so tetchy. Partly. I’d say I’ll try bein’ nicer to him, but can’t make any promises.”

Braska smiled. “The effort is appreciated.”

Jecht cast a glance at Auron’s unoccupied bed, crossed the room to his own, and lay down. “Hey, Braska,” he said, his voice muffled by the blanket. “You’re straight, aren’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re not into men, right?”

“Indeed,” said Braska. “I suppose that makes me the only one of the three of us.” He couldn’t help letting out a brief chuckle. “It must be more common than I thought, to be – what did you call it? Gay?”

“Yeah, but we don’t call it gay when – never mind. Night.”

“Goodnight,” Braska echoed, but he still couldn’t sleep: earlier he had worried on account of Jecht’s absence, but now that concern was transferred to Auron. He hoped for the younger man’s sake that he had merely booked another room to spend the night in; but their money was tight, and he doubted Auron would permit himself such a luxury. Jecht too, he noticed, didn’t seem to be sleeping: he seemed lost in thought, his brow furrowed as his gaze drifted between Auron’s and Braska’s beds. Braska had no notion of what might be on his guardian’s mind. He closed his eyes, trying to lose himself in comforting memories, but found himself hindered by his headache and his thoughts of poor, lost Auron.



He found Auron in the morning, hunched over a mug of fragrant tea in the tiny breakfast area, and dropped into the seat next to him.

“Did you sleep at all?” Braska enquired. Auron made no answer – he was taciturn at the best of times – but the dark shadows under his eyes were response enough.

Braska placed a hand on Auron’s arm and pretended not to notice the flinch it elicited. “We’re staying here another night,” he said. “We could all do with the rest.”

Auron protested, as Braska knew he would. “We don’t have the gil to spare, my lord,” he muttered. “I know you want to be on your way – don’t delay the journey on my account.”

“It’s not just you,” Braska insisted. “None of us slept well last night. We’ll be no good fighting fiends all day. Better to take another day than try going out there and end up getting wounded.”

Auron nodded with clear reluctance, and turned to look at him. “Are you all right, my lord?”

“Me?” said Braska, puzzled. Perhaps it shouldn’t have been such a surprise that Auron had asked – the lack of sleep was probably as visible on his face as on that of his companion. “I’m tired, and my head hurts,” he admitted. “But that’s all.”

“Can I get you anything? Would a potion help?”

Braska had to stifle a laugh; Auron really was the model guardian. He was sure the man felt at least as out of sorts as he did – especially as he appeared to have had nowhere to even attempt sleeping – and yet, of course, he was putting Braska’s needs above his own. Jecht would do no such thing – Jecht *had* done no such thing, ten minutes earlier, when he’d loudly informed Braska that he felt “like shit” and refused to vacate their room in time for breakfast. “Don’t worry,” he said gently. “I can take care of myself. You take the day off.” He wondered, fleetingly, whether Auron even knew how to do such a thing.

“But –”

He stood up, giving Auron’s arm a final squeeze. “Look

after yourself,” he said, and walked away, hoping that his guardian would one day learn to make peace with things he had no control over.