

“AURON.”

The name, his own name, drifts out into the night from somewhere behind him. He turns, and there is Braska, sitting on the low divan, gazing at him, his eyelids drooping with near-sleep.

He nods a little in response.

“Sit with me,” Braska says.

Auron takes a step forward, remembers Jecht, glances around, and decides the coast is clear. He sits down carefully next to Braska, wondering exactly how much space he is supposed to leave between them; but as soon as he does so, Braska slips an arm around his back, and tugs him closer.

Auron tries to concentrate on sitting as still as he possibly can; on keeping his breathing steady and slow.

“Auron,” Braska murmurs again. “What will you do? When Sin is vanquished?”

He can’t focus, can’t possibly be expected to answer, when Braska’s hand is gently rubbing against his spine. “I don’t know, my lord,” he stammers out at last, and immediately cringes at the sound of his voice, high and unsteady, a reminder that he is ten years Braska’s junior, and so much less at ease with himself than either of his companions.

Braska sighs a little; Auron feels hot breath against his ear. “You should think of the future, Auron,” he says. “Allow yourself to dream.”

“I do allow it,” Auron admits – but his dreams, his wishes, pertain to the present, or to a different future from the one that they are heading towards. A pilgrimage without Jecht – no pilgrimage at all. The two of them, safe and happy in Bevelle, with no Sin and perhaps even a little time for each other.

“Then what do you dream of?” says Braska.

Auron searches for a way to frame the answer. “Safety,” he says. “Mundanity. A little respite from Sin.”

“You will have those things,” Braska says firmly.

But the knowledge of what Auron will *not* have is what keeps his heart from lightening.

Braska’s hand lifts off Auron’s back, and he feels himself let out a breath – but the same hand soon comes to rest in his hair, working its way up and down, through his ponytail – and Auron’s breath catches again.

“And what do you dream of, my lord?” he manages to ask.

“Ah, now that is different,” says Braska. “For me, there is no point in dreaming.”

“But if we find a way –”

“Auron,” Braska murmurs, and Auron can barely keep himself from shuddering at the sound of his own name drawn so sweetly from his companion’s lips, blurred with tender sleep. Braska’s face is so close: his eyes shine with that icy blue that Auron has long since committed to memory; he is near enough for Auron to make out the first hints of stubble on his chin –

He hesitates. Should he, can he, do this? Is it at all proper for a guardian to be so close to his summoner? But didn't both of them give up any pretence at being devout, long ago?

Auron slowly reaches out and places a hesitant hand on Braska's knee.

Braska shifts a little under his touch, and for a moment Auron is worried that he has taken a step too far, but then Braska's own free hand comes to rest on top of his, and his thumb rubs against Auron's wrist, and Auron feels his jaw clench.

"I am resigned to my own sacrifice," says Braska, his voice barely more than a whisper. "It would cheer me to know that you, too, were able to accept it –"

"No," Auron chokes out, suddenly overtaken by grief. "I'm sorry – I can't. I can't imagine a world without you – living my life without you –"

"But even if I were to survive," says Braska, his hand still gently working through Auron's hair, "I could not give you what you desire."

"That doesn't matter," Auron says.

"Without me, you will be able to move on."

"No," says Auron desperately: it doesn't work like that; it can't – can it?

Braska's hand, the one on Auron's hair, has been making its slow way upwards, and now rests above the ribbon that gathers his ponytail, right on the nape of his neck. Auron leans

into the light pressure of Braska's fingers, and slowly raises his own free hand to rest against Braska's jaw.

Braska does not pull away. He stays where he is, those bright blue eyes meeting Auron's gaze steadily, while Auron slowly caresses the side of his companion's face, his hand trembling as he does so. He has never been so close to Braska, and never so aware that he is about to lose him.