

BRASKA had never been a particularly emotional man. He had, after all, been chosen to go to Bikanel for his even temper and measured speech. But now, thinking of that very place was enough to make the tears spring to his eyes.

It had been four whole months since she died. He had stopped crying in front of Yuna after the first two weeks, and she had followed suit not long afterwards. From that point on, he had sent her to bed after supper, cleared away the plates, and then retired almost as soon himself, because the concept of doing anything productive in the evenings had become unthinkable. Then, faced with the bed that was too large for one, lit softly by the dusk light that still filtered in through the window, he would invariably weep again. It was as if that short walk from kitchen to bedroom turned back time and forced him to relive that moment every single night: the moment they had delivered the news to him.

Priests from the temple where Braska had long since been banned from practising came to visit from time to time, quite clearly in an entirely professional capacity. It wouldn't do to have a child growing up within the precincts of Bevelle who was at all neglected, and it was their duty to ensure that Yuna was surviving under the care of a man who was both financially disadvantaged and emotionally unstable. If not for her, they would not have visited and he would have lacked the money even to feed himself. Still, he appreciated the occasions as a chance to escape his thoughts for a few moments and catch

up on mundane temple gossip. His visitors always had the tact to avoid mentioning the fact that he looked a mess, and to hand over some small sum of gil with as little embarrassment to the both of them as possible.

The lady next door, Eneis, had begun to help, first just with kind words that had made Braska's eyes well up again, and then with visits, and distractions for Yuna while her father caught a moment to grieve privately. He could take the chance to walk into the city and become another face in another crowd, where nobody would have the time or the inclination to even want to know his story; or he could simply stand in the tiny yard and feel the fresh air against his face. It was a reminder not to be alone in his sorrow.

There were days he might have thought of as bad days, had they not been so frequent that there was nothing unusual about them. On one such evening, he stood wringing a used teabag into the kitchen sink, looking out into the yard through the open window. The early evening light made even the cheap bricks of these houses seem pretty. He could see over his fence to the adjoining house where Eneis lived and the window onto a kitchen that was the mirror image of his.

A dark shape moved behind it, and the window opened to reveal Eneis; she must have spotted him. "How are you doing, dear?" she called out.

He looked down, and squeezed the teabag tighter: the last trails of cold tea trickled over his fingers, staining them brown,

and the world withered for a moment.

Eneis changed tack. "How's Yuna?"

The question ought to have been easier to answer than the previous one, and he stuttered out an "I've just put her to bed," but the sound of his own feeble voice shocked him: was he this fragile, just as soon as the child was in a different room? With her, he could be strong; without her, even such mundane statements were enough to set him off. His eyes stung, and he blinked down at the teabag again as Eneis looked on.

"You look like you could do with some company," she said. "I'll just be a minute."

She was already on the doorstep by the time he made it there to let her in. "Let's have a seat," she said, stepping over the threshold as confidently as if it were her own house; he was grateful not to have to take the lead. They sat at opposite ends of the one settee, still close enough for her to raise a hand to his knee and stroke it with her thumb in what was meant as a soothing gesture. He dabbed at his eyes with a handkerchief of Al Bhed silk, the sort he wouldn't dare take out of his sleeve if he went out in public simply for the attention it would attract.

"You're doing all right for gil?" she enquired, and he nodded noncommittally; he knew she was almost as hard-up as he was.

"Why don't you go for a walk?" Eneis suggested. "I can stay and watch Yuna."

"I don't want to make you –" he protested.

“It’ll be no trouble. Go and get some air.”

He went for a long walk that night, not wanting to stop in one place for too long because it would mean the sound of his footsteps no longer drowned his thoughts. He walked right into the city, which was near deserted at the time of evening prayer, and then started heading out along the Highbridge: the pedestrian precincts of Bevelle were all the same, and he craved variety.

He submitted himself to the usual checks at the city boundary. The warrior monk on duty, a surly-looking young man,¹ looked over his priest’s ID, raised his head to check the real thing against the artist’s impression, and must have noticed the redness around Braska’s eyes, because the frown that Braska had uncharitably assumed to be permanent fell from his face, and he said, “Is something the matter?”

“Nothing a good walk won’t sort out,” Braska informed him, his voice only slightly hoarse, and with the frown restored, the monk waved him out of the gatehouse.

He walked down to the docks. Few people from Bevelle came here; they feared getting too close to the water. Braska had been no different in his youth, but his missionary work had put a necessary end to those superstitions; the Al Bhed treated the sea as one of their own, and he had gradually come to recognise that theirs was a far healthier attitude. He squat-

¹... Auron wasn’t even meant to be in this, my finger slipped.

ted down and swung his legs over the side of the dock, sitting there looking out at the water that twinkled with the sparse light of dusk. The sun had set now, and it would not be long before the sky and the sea both turned black.

A tear dripped from his face, plunged through the gap between his legs, and fell to meet the sea below, its smallness erasing it from Braska's vision long before it got there. He stared down at where it had fallen. He too could pitch forward in the same way, simply relax his limbs and let himself smack into the water; it would flow straight into his lungs and drown him inside and out, and he would be at peace, spared this awful torment. The thought of it made his head swim, and he pressed his hands to his ears, trying in vain to regain control of senses that he had not properly mastered in four months. He closed his eyes, but it seemed that might make him fall even if he did not mean to, so he opened them again and fixed his gaze on a shape on the horizon.

The shape was getting bigger. He stared at it, trying to understand what it could be, until he realised that he had judged it wrongly – it only appeared to be growing; in fact it was coming closer. As it did so, he became aware that he was looking straight at the very creature itself, Spira's scourge and now his own personal nemesis: Sin.

His mind went at once to Yuna. His priority, as always, was to keep her safe; falling into the water had never seemed a more idiotic proposal. As long as he had Yuna, he had a pur-

pose, and a reason for persisting. And right now, that purpose was to make sure she was safe. He hauled his legs back over the edge of the dock and unsteadily headed back towards the city gate.

“Good evening,” said the warrior monk placidly, waving him through as he walked into the gatehouse.

“Sin is close,” he replied, the urgency of the situation allowing him to maintain composure. “Approaching Bevelle. Is the city guarded?”

The monk stood, suddenly alert. “I’ll sound the alarm,” he said. “Evrae will protect us, but we’ll put out a stay-at-home order in case. The fallout can be nasty.” He pressed a button on a crude piece of machina – the kind of thing the Al Bhed would have been using about five hundred years earlier, if Braska’s knowledge of their history served him correctly – and a shrill chime started up outside: not the slow, calm toll of the liturgical bells, but the shriek of a warning alarm.

Braska watched as the monk stepped around him to close both doors. “You’ll have to stay here until it’s over, I’m afraid,” he said as he did so. “How close was Sin, exactly? It shouldn’t be too long.”

“Just coming over the horizon when I was down there,” said Braska. “Quite fast, I thought. I – you won’t let me get home?”

“You’d be a walking target on the Highbridge,” the monk pointed out.

Braska gritted his teeth. Yuna would be safe, he knew, and

Eneis was there with her, but there was something especially terrible about being apart from her while the very creature that had killed her mother made its assault on the city. And their separation had all been because of his own weakness.

The monk was peering through the small window in the door that faced into the city. “Strange night for me,” he remarked gruffly. “My last shift at the gate, and it goes like this. I’ve just been promoted –”

He was cut off by a tremor below their feet, and a long, high-pitched cry coming from outside. “There she is,” he said appreciatively.

Braska, meanwhile, had backed against the wall, eyes squeezed shut. The thought that this was his first encounter with Sin since it had taken his wife from him, and that he wasn’t even able to be with Yuna for it, had hit him hard: his eyes were moistening again, and his breath was coming in short, ragged gasps. The monk would think it was just ordinary fear making him like this – he would think Braska a cowardly civilian, not a former missionary priest who had been sent to reconcile with a hostile population and achieved considerable success; not that any of that mattered now.

“You should sit down if you’re feeling faint,” said the monk, barely sparing a glance towards him.

Faint wasn’t the right word for it, but Braska sank to the ground anyway, clutching his head with both hands, and watched as the monk went about his business, setting his

helmet on the table and letting a sleek black ponytail fall down over his shoulder briefly before he pushed it back with a scowl. He stood by the door, keeping careful watch.

The ground shook again; the monk stumbled briefly, and Braska cried out. It was too soon, and he could do nothing; he *had* done nothing, and he hated it all. He was sobbing freely now, fat tears running down his face as he thought desperately of Yuna.

The monk knelt in front of him; a pair of serious brown eyes stared into Braska's own. "It'll be over soon," the monk said, still gruff but not unkind. "Not used to this?"

Braska shook his head. "I am," he gulped. "Sin got my wife. Four months ago."

The monk's expression softened, and he said, "I'm sorry."

Braska pitched forward, destabilised by renewed grief, and after a moment's pause, the monk reached out to steady him, laying a hand on Braska's shoulder as he wept. The force of his sorrow was enough to make him want to collapse entirely; instead, he buried his face in the folds of the monk's tunic above his breastplate, too exhausted to feel any shame at making such intimate contact with a stranger. The monk stretched his other arm forward, and brought his hands together on Braska's shoulderblades, turning his head to the side in what was quite clearly a deliberate attempt to avoid contact between Braska's hair and his own chin. Nonetheless, Braska felt – not safe, by any means, and hardly comforted – but he felt as if he had a

companion of some sort.

The noises outside became gradually rarer, until the monk murmured, "Excuse me," gently extricated himself, and stood to look through the window again. After a brief hesitation, he opened the door, looked out at the night, and then sank into a bow of prayer. "Thank Yevon," he said softly. "It's over." He turned to the machina to disable the alarm, and then performed the prayer again, silent and reverent.

Braska rose shakily to his feet, rubbing his head to try to regain a little sense before he made the journey home. The monk, having finished his devotions, was watching him carefully.

"Are you fit to walk?" he said. "You're in – if you'll excuse me – a state."

"Please don't worry," Braska said, even as a tear rolled onto his lip and he tasted the tang of salt. He took out the Al Bhed handkerchief to wipe his face, and noticed the monk's fleeting expression of surprise. "I am accustomed to walking around the city like this," he added.

The monk's mouth twitched with sympathy, and he lowered his head in what seemed to be embarrassment. "Please take care," he said.

Braska gave a sniff of gratitude, and walked out.

He made his way through the deserted streets back to the northern quarter and his own home. Eneis had been watching Yuna for some time now – he would have to be even more grateful than usual. He leant against the stiff front door to

open it, moved forward into the hallway, and came face to face with her there.

She looked spooked: wisps of hair had escaped her tight bun, and her eyes were wide. She would have heard the alarms for Sin, of course, but most of the citizens of northern Bevelle had learnt not to be perturbed by such incidents. “What’s the matter?” he said.

“I’m so sorry, Braska,” she said. “Some of your priests visited – they left this – and they took –”

He snatched the letter she held out to him and looked down at it.

Braska, s Due to ongoing concerns regarding your current ability to raise a child, your daughter has been placed in the care of the temple for a period of six weeks commencing tonight.

There was more, but he was shaking too much to read it. The paper slipped between his trembling fingers onto the ground, and he let out a wail of frustration. His darling Yuna; he wanted to make those priests hurt badly, to make them experience a fraction of his own pain. They were long gone, so he lashed out at the wall instead, kicking it and leaving a scuff mark that would be a bastard to clean, and then driving both hands into it, sending a shock of pain through one wrist as he made contact in a way that conformed to none of the correct techniques of combat. Then he rounded on Eneis, backing her against the wall until she was pinned there, her arms spread against it like someone condemned.

“Braska –” she pleaded.

“Why didn’t you stop them?” he snarled. “Damn you –”

“Braska!” she said again, more forcefully. “Have some sense. There were four of them, with an official warrant – you think I could do anything? They were in full ceremonial dress – they had *swords*, for Yevon’s sake.”

They must have anticipated a struggle. They would have got one, if Braska had been there. He would have used all the black magic he had against them – it would have put the house in quite a state, but that was of no importance. He would willingly burn the whole place down if that was what it took to protect Yuna; but now she was gone, and setting fire to the house with himself still in it didn’t seem like the worst idea he’d ever had. It would certainly be more productive, he realised with a start, than threatening an innocent woman. He stumbled backwards. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “Yevon forgive me –”

Eneis acknowledged the apology with a brief nod. “Perhaps you should go to bed, dear,” she suggested.

She stayed with him as he got ready, waiting outside the bedroom while he undressed, and then slipping in to observe him climbing into bed. Her eyes widened a little at the bright Al Bhed silks that decorated the room, but she made no comment on them.

“You don’t need to stay,” he said, voice muffled by the blanket.

She shook her head, settling into his old armchair. “I don’t want you waking up in an empty house.”

He slept fitfully, waking a few times to make out the dark shape of Eneis asleep in the chair. His dreams were strange and troubled, as they had been consistently for the last four months. When he woke for real, with the dawn light spilling over the blanket, Eneis was reading a book on Spiran history that she had picked out of his small collection. She caught his eye and nodded a greeting; he tried his best to return it as a lump formed in his throat and he buried his head into the damp pillow.

His wrist throbbed after the ill-advised assault he had made on the wall the previous night; he could have cured it with white magic at the time, but hadn’t thought to, and now it would ache for a few days. But that pain was the least of his worries. Six whole weeks without Yuna; he simply would not cope. Only she could let him forget his utter despair, and without her, alone in this house, he would crumble.