

IT was the first time he'd been in a temple in ten years; and yet, in all that time in Zanarkand, not once had he missed the experience.

Of course, there was a fourth High Summoner statue now, and he couldn't help but stand in its shade and stare. It was all wrong; he didn't know what he'd expected, but the cold stone and the enormous size made Braska seem like a different person, and that was without reckoning for the expression they had given him, as if someone had picked out entirely the wrong moment from a corrupted sphere recording and combined it with a great deal of extrapolation. He didn't look like that. That wasn't him.

Perhaps the other statues were as bad, and the guardians of those High Summoners might have been equally put out if they had been the ones standing here. But all those people had been dead for hundreds of years – the accuracy of their depictions was irrelevant. Braska was different – his sacrifice was within living memory, they ought to have shown him some respect –

There was a rustle beside him. Yuna was there, looking up at the stone face too. She had the right, he reminded himself.

"It's not a very good likeness," he said.

She nodded.

He hoped this soulless image would not be her abiding memory of her father. "Do you remember him?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. "I would never forget."

“Nor will I,” he murmured, and stared up at that enormous carved visage again, trying to replace it in his mind’s eye with recollections of the man he knew: a good, earnest man. A man with human concerns and failings, a man made of real flesh, who knew love and pain and all life’s banalities as well as anyone, who laughed and wept and took care of his guardians as they took care of him. A dear friend – the dearest.

Yuna must have sensed something in his expression, because she withdrew, pressed her hands together, and called to the others. “Everyone! It’s time for the Trials.”

The rest of them gathered around her like sightseers obeying their tour guide, and he was dimly aware of her sharing a few words of encouragement before the pack of them moved towards the stairs.

“Hey, Auron –” Tidus began, and was cut off sharply: Yuna had dug her staff into his ribs.

“He’ll come when he’s ready,” she said, and she and her four guardians headed on.

The boy had no doubt spared him a quizzical look. He ignored the interruption, and willed himself to maintain concentration on the statue.

They will break the cycle, he thought. I will see that they do.



Sir Auron had a habit of appearing at your shoulder when you least expected it; he had a talent for stealth that would have been remarkable even in a man half his size. Yuna didn't notice he had joined the rest of them in the cloister until he muttered, "How's progress?"

She looked at Tidus grappling with the spheres, and said, "I think he's almost got it."

He nodded. She studied him. To say he was hard to read would have been an understatement. Nonetheless, at this moment, he radiated sorrow; that much was impossible not to notice.

"Sir Auron," she said. "Are you –" No, she thought. No point in even asking. "I wish you'd talk about it," she said instead.

After the customary pause, he replied. "You don't need to concern yourself with my problems. You have enough to deal with."

"My guardians' troubles are my own," she insisted. "If I can help in any way –"

"Yuna," he growled, and she must have flinched, because he added, in a much gentler tone, "I didn't mean to worry you."

Her half-formed reply was cut off by a yell of triumph from Tidus, who held a sphere aloft. "Got it!" he exclaimed.

Yuna watched as Sir Auron strode forward. "Good," he said. "Now the next one. No time to waste."

He was acting as he always did; she didn't know whether to be relieved or troubled by it. Perhaps one day he would honour them all by opening up a little.