

JECHT had done his best to bring them both to Spira, but he was losing the little control he had over Sin. Auron could tell from the way the journey was becoming less smooth, too fast to hold on comfortably, and Sin's scales had begun to resist his grip. Tidus, as a mortal being, had entered a strange state of suspended animation as soon as they had left Zanarkand; he would be himself again once Sin released him. His fingers still clung on despite his lack of consciousness, but with every jolt the contact they made was less secure.

Auron watched as Tidus began to slide into the water. He would be fine; he would survive, just as Jecht had when Sin had brought him here ten years earlier. Both father and son were practically amphibious. They were currently near the ruins of Baaj: the tide would wash Tidus onto some small piece of dry land and he would wake, and be able to look after himself the way he had looked after himself the past ten years.

The loss of Tidus made Sin still more violent, as Auron had anticipated. He held on as tightly as he could, trying to soothe the creature's thrashing by pressing his cheek against its scales. "Jecht," he murmured. "Jecht, I know you're in there. It's me. Listen to me. Fight it – you can do this." It was about the most he'd said in one go since he was last in Spira, and fittingly, it was the same sort of emotional dross he thought he'd left behind at his death. But Jecht had always responded well to that type of thing.

He had to hold on until Sin could get him to dry land; he

wasn't half the swimmer Jecht and Tidus were, especially not in these clothes (which he still wore as a concession to some lingering sentimentality), and there was no guarantee he would be able to make it to land if he was left in the middle of the ocean. He wouldn't drown, of course, but he would drift to the bottom of the sea, he supposed, and possibly remain trapped there for an eternity. The stakes were high, and seemed yet higher the more he thought about them.

At last, more dry land came in sight, a larger mass of it than at Baaj, and as they approached the shallower waters, Auron let go.

He heard Jecht's voice in his head as he collapsed into the sand. *Don't be long.*

Auron picked himself up, brushed the wet sand off his robe, and waited for the dizziness from his tumultuous landing to pass. Now that he was stationary and no longer in danger of becoming trapped in aquatic limbo, he was finally able to reflect on the fact that he was back in Spira. He had never quite known whether he would make it, and he wasn't entirely sure how to react now that he had. He had known all along that the worst thing would be the fact that everybody would know him: as the guardian of a High Summoner, there was no doubt that his absence had transformed him into a celebrity.

There had been a time when, as a young monk, he had enjoyed the reputation that he was beginning to acquire; he had liked those occasions when he had walked into a shop in Bev-

elle and been hesitantly recognised. That had all come to an abrupt end shortly before Braska's pilgrimage began, for reasons entirely of his own making. And now, knowing that his fame was rooted in Yevon's lies – he expected it to be awful. People would actually think he was a hero; they would think he had done something good for Spira, and he would have to stand there and listen to them say so, again and again, for as long as he remained cursed to walk this earth. His appearance had changed, but he was under no illusion: everyone would recognise him. His name would have been invoked in the temples; his deeds would have been taught to children in the village schools. That was the fate of anyone unfortunate enough to become a legendary guardian.

That knowledge was what held him back, pretending to be disorientated longer than he really was, before he slowly stood and made his way to the nearby trading post.

He let himself into the hut and cleared his throat in greeting. There was a young man sitting at the table, poring over a map of some kind; he looked up, and Auron immediately noticed the eyepatch that cut across his face. It seemed the two of them had something in common. The uncovered eye was green, and Auron could vaguely make out the spiral shape of the pupil – he faced an adolescent Al Bhed.

“Who're you?” said the boy.

Auron found himself laughing out loud; the noise of it echoed unpleasantly off the walls of the hut as the Al Bhed

boy sat there scowling. It was unbelievable; he had been so worried about recognition, being fawned over by the first person he met in Spira, but he had never imagined that that person might have reasons not to be entirely conversant with Yevon celebrity. It was almost as if he was still in Zanarkand, where nobody knew him and few people had seemed to have time to even look at him, despite his unusual appearance.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, once he had stopped laughing. “I was stranded while travelling. Would you be able to tell me where we are?”

“Bikanel,” said the youth. “South.”

“Ah.” That was a pity. Auron had suspected as much, as soon as he saw that the boy was an Al Bhed and put that together with their desert surroundings. Still, it was a minor inconvenience, and he had hoped to be wrong; he would need to find a ship sailing to mainland Spira, and he had no idea how easy or difficult that might be. “I’m looking for someone with a knowledge of recent history,” he said. “I need to find out what’s happened since the last Calm started.” It was odd talking about the Calm and knowing he would be understood, after spending ten years in a city with no such frame of reference.

The boy smirked. “You been travelling that long, huh?”

“Something like that,” said Auron.

“There’s a couple of elders in the next hut,” said the youth. “Just head east and it’s on the other side of the hill. You need

help getting there?”

Did he look so ancient that he needed to be escorted half a mile? “I’m fine,” he grunted.

The boy smiled. “Glad to hear it.”



He located the hut that the boy had spoken of and strode in; there was no door to knock on, and therefore no point wasting time trying to find a way of being polite. A man and a woman sat inside, working on some sort of tapestry under the weak light of a small machina.

“Lyh fa ramb oui?” the woman asked.

He had neglected to consider the potential language barrier, but his hesitation and his appearance must have made the woman realise he was no Al Bhed, because she repeated in the common tongue, “Can we help you?”

She too seemed not to have recognised him. The Al Bhed who lived on Bikanel would have had no opportunity to see the archival sphere recordings, or the artists’ impressions of the High Summoner and his guardians that would have adorned all the newssheets when the Calm came and been printed in Yevon’s tracts for years afterwards. The schoolbooks belonging to this couple’s grandchildren would make no mention of him. All they would have heard would be his name, and that could be concealed easily enough.

“I was told you might give me information,” he said. “I’ve spent a long time away from Spira. I need to find out what I’ve missed.”

The two Al Bhed exchanged a glance: he could tell they were sceptical. Leaving Spira was known to be impossible; there was nothing beyond it. But they seemed to tacitly agree to humour him, because the male Al Bhed gave a small nod, and said, “What do you need to know?”

He had two priorities: first, he needed to be sure that Yuna was safe. Not that he knew what he would do if she wasn’t; but that would at least give him some closure regarding that particular story, beyond the image of his own foolish self bleeding to death in the Calm Lands. Then there was the more complex issue of – well, of destroying the entire tradition around which Spiran society was constructed. Jecht was nothing if not ambitious. Auron would have to foist himself and Tidus on some poor summoner to get them to Spira’s Zanarkand, and then he would try to figure out the rest of it once that part was dealt with.

He decided to deal with the simpler matter first. “Do you know of anything happening on Besaid Island in the last ten years?” he asked. “Any unusual events, tragedies? Sin?”

“Besaid? Nothing more notable than the continued failure of their blitzball team,” said the man. “There certainly haven’t been any incidents with Sin. We’re not long out of a Calm – I suppose you want us to thank Yevon for that.”

“Hardly,” he said. “If you thank anyone, it should be the High Summoner who actually brought that Calm.”

Both the Al Bhed looked surprised by that. Auron had probably impressed them – they would have assumed him a Yevonite, as he was not an Al Bhed, so by elimination – but he had not meant it with any bravado. It was simply what he sincerely believed.

So there was no reason to believe Yuna would not be safe. He wouldn’t be totally reassured unless he could meet her, but visiting Besaid would delay him considerably, and she would certainly not remember him from their handful of brief meetings more than ten years ago, so he would have to make do with this inconclusive evidence. He turned to the more urgent matter. “You Al Bhed keep tabs on summoners. Are there many out at the moment?”

The two Al Bhed seemed to ponder the question. “The usual pack of chancers from Bevelle,” the woman supplied after a moment. “One from Kilika – we’ve been keeping an eye on her. And, oh – there are rumours of a summoner about to finish training in Besaid. That’ll interest you, I’m sure.” She looked at him smugly.

Surely a coincidence. “The name?” he asked.

“Of the girl from Besaid? I don’t know,” said the woman. “She may not even pass her training. We won’t be properly interested in her unless she does.”

They knew the gender of this apprentice summoner,

though, at least. But that meant nothing in itself. Nor, he tried to convince himself, did the use of the word “girl” – that didn’t necessarily mean this person was young. It probably wasn’t Yuna, he told himself. She had probably had more sense than to choose the same path as her father. Probably.

“You don’t have any more information about her?” he asked through gritted teeth. “Age, appearance?”

The woman frowned. “Young, brown hair. Oh, and she’s the last High Summoner’s daughter.”

Auron nearly leapt out of his seat.

“I see,” he said instead, through gritted teeth. It seemed he would be able to kill two birds with one stone. That particular piece of the puzzle had worked out very neatly; perhaps the fayth were looking out for him after all.

“I need to get to the mainland,” he went on. “Are there any ships sailing in the next day or so?”

“Not for another week,” said the Al Bhed man, and Auron was just about able to restrain himself from drumming on the table in frustration. He didn’t like the idea of making this last any longer than it had to. Jecht would lose still more of his control over Sin, and perhaps it would attack again, and more lives would be lost; the sooner he and Tidus could reach Zanarkand, the better.

“That’s a pity,” he said. “I need to be on that ship when it does go. I don’t have much gil, but I can work to pay for my passage – and board and lodging, if you need. I’ll do whatever



work you give me – I really do have to get to the mainland as soon as possible.”

“Well, that’s an offer we can’t refuse,” said the woman. “As it happens, a number of our huts need fairly urgent maintenance. Come with me and I’ll show you what you can do.”

He followed her out of the hut. If the Yevonites were to hear of this – a legendary guardian doing menial work for the Al Bhed without even a proper salary – they would be outraged. It cheered him to think of it.



They had set Auron the task of mending the seam on the roof of one of the huts; a number of the nails that held together two layers of canvas had rusted and broken, and he was to remove them and hammer in new ones. It was difficult, finicky work, and he had warned them that he would be slow at it, but had been assured that didn’t matter. The challenge was increased further by the climate; he had never been particularly comfortable in hot weather. At some point in the past he might have imagined being dead would be enough to prevent someone from sweating, but with this many years’ experience, he knew full well that the unspent were as susceptible to bodily weakness as any living being; the sweat was creating an unpleasant sheen over his face and arms.

He considered removing his collar and breastplate, but the thought of putting more of his scars on full display was too unpleasant.

“Oh, they’re cruel,” said a voice from below him. He looked down towards the ground; it was the youth who had been at the trading post when he first arrived here. “Making you do that, when –” The boy gestured towards his own eyepatch. “Really doesn’t help with the precision stuff, huh?”

Auron grunted in assent.

“I’m Gippal,” said the boy, apparently unfazed by Auron’s lack of response. “Don’t think I got your name before.”

Auron pondered. The older Al Bhed would certainly recognise his name, and he could do without the fuss that might cause in the short time before he could take his leave of them. But at least they would not be as cloying in their response as the Yevonites. Besides, this boy was probably young enough for it to mean nothing to him; he would have been a mere child when Braska’s Calm began. And moreover, Auron was neither sufficiently imaginative nor committed enough to come up with a false name for himself.

“Auron,” he said.

Gippal nodded up at him without a hint of recognition. “You know,” he said, “it’s the first time I’ve met someone else who –” He pointed at his eyepatch again.

“Likewise,” said Auron. There had seemed to be no disabilities or disfigurements in Zanarkand, except among some of the

older blitzball players. There was no Sin there, and few fiends: little threat all told.

Gippal smiled. "I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours," he said. "Machina accident. I was twelve – the thing went rogue, just lashed at me with its arm and took it right out. Hurt like fuck."

"That's nice," Auron replied. He didn't particularly want to elaborate on the source of his own injury. What was he supposed to say, anyway: *I was killed by a thousand-year-old unsent, trying to avenge two men who had willingly sacrificed themselves?* Gippal was looking at him expectantly, so he said, "I'd rather not talk about it."

"Ah," said Gippal, with a sombre nod. "Too soon?"

"Ten years," he said.

"Guess it's different when you're old," said Gippal.

Auron turned back to his work, picked up the hammer, and swung it straight into his finger, entirely missing the nail he was holding in place. He swore under his breath.

"You OK?" said Gippal.

"Fine," he growled. It annoyed him a little that the boy seemed to be taking an interest in him, even showing concern for him. The living had no need to do so; it was a waste of their time to care about a dead man.



While Auron pursued his work on the roof in the remaining days before the ship was to sail, Gippal continued to pay him the occasional visit. Sometimes, he brought a little food, and Auron was secretly grateful for the chance to take a brief break and eat; he didn't feel he had the right to help himself to much at mealtimes, having inconvenienced the elders already by being forced to spend his nights on a futon in their hut.

He was beginning to realise that he didn't mind the boy's company. He reminded Auron of Tidus; they were about the same age, and had a similar kind of attitude, honest and upbeat, making them the sort of people that even someone as naturally reserved as Auron couldn't help warming to. That, and the food Gippal brought was delicious: a welcome change after ten years of the processed excuses for meals that everyone swore by in Zanarkand.

"You speak common Spiran extremely well," Auron remarked, as they sat eating one day. So did the elders, but Gippal did so without even the merest trace of a non-native accent.

"Most of us can these days," Gippal explained. "Apparently, the Yevonites sent some missionary twenty years ago. I can't see the poor guy having had much luck with the teachings, but the one thing he did do was convince everyone it would be useful for their kids to learn the common language. Pretty much everyone my age can speak it, although not all of us are fluent."

Auron nodded, caught off guard by the unexpected mention of Braska. How many of the Al Bhed would even know that this failed missionary and the last High Summoner were the same person? He almost envied them their ignorance.

“You heard of the Crimson Squad?” Gippal asked him.

“Can’t say I have,” Auron replied.

“It’s an elite military force,” Gippal explained. “Sort of like the Crusaders – fighting Sin, protecting Spira, that kind of thing. I’ve been trying out for it –”

“This group is in Yevon’s service?” Auron interrupted.

“Yeah. Kind of – it’s the maester that runs it, it’s connected with the temples.”

“Then what concern is it of yours?”

Gippal frowned. “I want to fight Sin, don’t I? Even tried to join the Crusaders, but they wouldn’t let me. It’s not like – Sin affects everyone, you know? Us just as much as the Yevonites. I want to play my part.”

He couldn’t argue with that. But if only everything wasn’t connected to Yevon – there had to be something sinister behind this Crimson Squad. Why create it at all when the Crusaders already existed? Surely not just as an excuse to let the Al Bhed in; there were always enough willing volunteers among the Yevonites alone.

“Anyway, I’m through to the last selection,” Gippal went on. “The final trial’s next week – then Maester Kinoc’s gonna let us know who’s made the cut.”

“Kinoc?” Auron echoed, before he could stop himself. “He’s the maester?”

“You know him?” said Gippal.

“Yeah,” Auron admitted. “We were good friends once.” The thought of Wen Kinoc as a maester, though, was somehow unsettling. He tried not to make his displeasure too obvious.

He could feel Gippal looking at him closely. “You OK?” the boy asked.

“Just tired,” he said truthfully.

“Oh,” said Gippal, and looked up towards the hut. “You know, you don’t have to work all day. You’re not a slave, they won’t mind if you take breaks.”

“It won’t help,” he said. Being unspent brought its own kind of fatigue that nothing would shake. He had been tired for ten years, and would continue to be tired until he could fulfil his duty and slip off to the Farplane.

“Talking of work,” he added, “I should get back to it.”

“Sure thing,” said Gippal, and he slapped Auron on the back. “Don’t strain yourself too hard, old guy.”

Auron attempted to conceal his grimace.



The day of Auron’s journey to the mainland arrived; Gippal was travelling on the same boat, heading to Mushroom Rock Road for his last Crimson Squad trial.

“So what are you gonna do once we get to Luca?” the youth asked as they stood on deck.

“I need to find a –” Auron searched for an appropriate term. “An acquaintance of mine. We’re going to offer ourselves as guardians to a summoner.”

“Any summoner in particular?”

“Yes,” he said. “Her name is Yuna.”

“*Her* name?” Gippal asked with a smirk.

“She’s about your age,” said Auron, somewhat sternly. “So is my associate.”

“So, you’re trying to set them up?” said Gippal.

Auron snorted. “That hadn’t occurred to me. Thank you for the suggestion, although I can see it making things a little complicated.”

Gippal laughed out loud, the sound half drowned by the sea wind. “Glad to be of service.”

He turned and headed inside; Auron remained on deck, watching. The trepidation he had felt upon his arrival in Bikanel was returning; when he made it to Luca, there was no doubt that he would be recognised. Soon everyone in the city would know that a legendary guardian was in their midst.

The ship docked, and he made his way onto dry land, murmuring his thanks to the Al Bhed woman who had served as crew. Gippal still seemed nowhere to be seen, until Auron spotted him re-emerging onto the deck behind where the woman stood.

“Hey, Auron!” Gippal called, waving to him. “It was great to meet you!”

The woman turned to him with a frown. “Auron?” she repeated. She looked at Auron, casting a suspicious eye over his clothing, and then said to Gippal, “Dra cysa Auron fru kiyntat dra mycd High Summoner?”

The meaning was clear enough from the Yevonite terminology she had borrowed; they might as well know the truth now that he was leaving them, he decided. “Yes,” he said. “I was Lord Braska’s guardian.”

Gippal’s mouth had dropped open. “Wait – this guy is –”

The woman frowned at him. “Don’t *stare*, Gippal.” She spoke in the common language, clearly intending that Auron should understand. “He’s just a Yevonite who happened to accompany a competent enough summoner. There’s no need for anyone to idolise him.” She raised an eyebrow at Auron as if expecting him to challenge her.

“Quite,” he replied. “Thank you for your company, Gippal. All the best for your trial.”

Gippal nodded, still a little flustered, and said, “Yeah. Thanks. Hope you find your friend.”

Auron returned the nod, and walked on.