

WAKKA was usually the one who sorted the accommodation, but it was obvious without even asking that he'd make a fuss about having to deal with an Al Bhed, so Lulu stepped up to save everyone the trouble. "Let's see," she said to herself, taking note of the size of their group: Yuna really did have a lot of guardians. "Two rooms, please." Once the payment had been made and the keys distributed, she passed them around.

"Wakka," she said, "you're in with us." *Us* meant herself and Yuna, and he seemed relieved by it: sharing a room with the great Sir Auron perhaps seemed improper to him. Maybe particularly when that same Sir Auron had just proclaimed himself comfortable with spending the night in an Al Bhed-run establishment.

Auron himself took his keys without a word, barely meeting Lulu's eye before shuffling off to the room he was to share with Tidus and Kimahri. He hadn't been lying when he said he was tired, she realised. This much fighting had to be tough on older people like him, and there had been a good number of those shelled fiends that only he could take care of, so they'd needed him for most of the battles. Although, she realised, Sir Auron hadn't seemed particularly old on the sphere broadcasts ten years ago, after Lord Braska's victory – quite young, on the contrary, probably around the same age that Lulu was now herself. That would put him in his mid-thirties at most. But –

The discrepancy puzzled her. She would ask Wakka about

it, not that he would have anything intelligent to say in response, but he would remember those sphere broadcasts too, and might at least be able to confirm that part of the story. The rest she would have to work out for herself.

By the time Kimahri and Tidus entered their room, Auron had already made his claim to one of the beds, and was sitting on it unbuckling his collar. Tidus set his own belongings down on one of the remaining beds and then decided it would be better to take a walk than to sit there with the two of them. He still hadn't succeeded in getting a word out of Kimahri: he'd initially been wondering if his fellow guardian could even speak at all, but then he'd seen him exchanging a few words with Yuna when they thought Tidus wasn't looking. As for Auron – well, if push came to shove, he supposed he'd admit to being fond of the guy, but he was still slightly miffed at all the stuff Auron had said to him in Luca, and by the look of him, he was now in one of those moods where he would be doing a lot of staring off into the distance and snarling at anyone who tried to talk to him. Tidus had experienced that enough times in Zanarkand to know it was best to leave him alone.

“I'm going out for a stroll,” he announced, and neither of his roommates responded: no surprise there.

After Tidus' departure, Kimahri watched as Auron removed his glasses and set them down beside his bed. With the collar gone too, Kimahri could see the beginning of a second scar on his neck that extended towards his breastplate.

Kimahri knew it went on further, probably right down to his stomach: he could still remember the long, deep wound, a shining red slash on Auron's torso. Seeing Auron again put him in mind of how he had looked that day: a crawling, bloodied man, more dead than alive, speaking with just enough lucidity for Kimahri to understand that it was Yuna he referred to. Seconds later, Auron had collapsed on the ground in front of him, and Kimahri had hauled him over his shoulder and taken him to the nearest travel agency, attempting to ignore the unpleasant sensation of blood soaking into his fur. Then, cleaned up and trying to forget the horror of the dying man's appearance, he had set off in search of Braska's daughter.

He didn't know if Auron remembered it. He had been barely conscious when he encountered Kimahri, and totally unconscious shortly afterwards. Kimahri watched him as he sat on his bed, a hand pressed to his forehead. He did look extremely tired; it probably wasn't wise to disturb him. Then again, if he hadn't yet realised where he had met Kimahri before, it seemed important that he be informed. Such a reunion was no mere coincidence, Kimahri reflected: it had to be a blessing of Yevon, and surely a good omen for Yuna's pilgrimage.

"Remember Kimahri?" he said, therefore.

Auron lifted his head slowly and turned to face him, his one eye half-closed with fatigue. "From, er ... Gagazet?" he

replied.

He was trying to be polite, Kimahri realised. “No,” he said. “Calm Lands.”

“Sorry,” said Auron, “I don’t ...”

“Auron was wounded,” said Kimahri. “Asked Kimahri to watch Yuna. Take her to Besaid.”

He watched as Auron’s eye slowly widened in understanding. “Oh. That was you.” He was silent for a moment. “I thought – I wasn’t even sure if there was anyone there. I wondered if I was hallucinating.”

“Kimahri carried Auron to travel agency,” Kimahri explained. “Left Auron with Rin. Then found Yuna.”

“Oh,” said Auron again. “You took her from Bevelle?”

Kimahri nodded, not managing to stop his tail giving a little flick of irritation. He’d *said* that, or certainly implied it, at any rate. He didn’t want to have to continue explaining; talking this much already felt like a betrayal of his own principles, the ones he had established on the long walk down from Gagazet ten years ago.

“Sorry,” said Auron. “I’m exhausted – can’t think straight. This condition –” He stopped. “You saw – the state I was in.”

Kimahri nodded again. Yes, Auron had been on the brink of death, and whatever advanced healing the Al Bhed at the travel agency had been able to perform, it would surely not have been enough. And yet here he was, scarred and disfigured, but walking and fighting along with the rest of them.

Auron reclined on his bed, a hand thrown over his face again, and Kimahri watched, and tried to understand. He had almost died – Kimahri had been sure he *had* died, until he had seen him in Luca – and now, Auron seemed to be hinting something to him, linking that incident to his exhaustion now. It was almost as if he was having to put effort into the very act of remaining alive. Or, Kimahri realised, perhaps not alive, but merely remaining on Spira, taking the form of a living person, when –

He approached Auron slowly; he appeared to be sleeping, so it was possible to get a closer look at him. He seemed as solid and present as anyone: weren't unseints supposed to be spirits? But then, Kimahri realised, so were fiends, in a way, and they certainly took physical form: the injuries they had all sustained from fighting them were proof enough of that.

Dread was building within him. If Auron really was unseint, his presence here was a violation of the teachings. The unseint were to be moved on as soon as they were discovered: he ought to be finding Yuna right now, explaining the situation to her and getting her to put Auron out of his misery. It would be doing him a service, after all: the strain of clinging to the mortal realm ten years after his death was clearly considerable.

But that made Kimahri wonder why he *was* still here – why he hadn't given in to the pyreflies, and turned into a fiend, or gone evil or whatever was supposed to happen to unseints. Something must be keeping him here: some unfulfilled task,

some matter of great importance. Surely something connected to the pilgrimage, to Yuna, or to Tidus, or both – Kimahri had no idea. But, he realised, if Auron was to be trusted, he should be allowed to carry out whatever the duty was.

That was the real question, then: whether Kimahri should trust Auron. Trust didn't often come easily to him. He had been suspicious of Tidus when he arrived, and settled that, in a manner of speaking, with a fight – but Tidus was a strange heathen, talking about all manner of odd things with an enthusiasm that the pilgrimage ought to have dulled. Auron had his secrets, clearly – the biggest being the fact that he was almost certainly an unsent – but so did Kimahri. Auron was a legendary guardian, a man of Yevon. And, above all, Kimahri had seen Auron at his most vulnerable – indeed, he had carried him over his shoulder as he lay dying. That had somehow created a bond between them, the same bond that had spurred Kimahri to mention the event to Auron, to make him understand what they had in common. He realised, as he considered all these things, that he did trust him – more even than he trusted Lulu and Wakka.

He retreated to his own bed to think on it, and sat there, his tail twitching from side to side, watching Auron's chest gently rise and fall as he slept. It was odd, he reflected, that unseints breathed as if they were alive – but that at least made it easier to forget he was defying Yevon merely by allowing Auron to remain here.

Some time later, Auron awoke, and sat up slowly. “Did you work it out?” he said.

“Yes,” said Kimahri.

Auron acknowledged the response with a nod, and began to strap on his collar. Kimahri watched as he attached it to his breastplate, before reaching for his gauntlet, buckling it on with the same weary familiarity.

“Still tired?” Kimahri asked.

Auron chuckled. “Not enough to lose my wits.” He stood, and levelled his gaze at Kimahri. “I’m always tired,” he said matter-of-factly. “A delightful side-effect of my being dead.”

His bluntness was almost obscene. Kimahri said nothing; he watched as Auron made his way towards the door to leave.

But Auron turned towards him again. “Kimahri,” he said, more quietly. “Thank you.”

“Kimahri failed,” he protested. “Tried to take Auron to Rin, to heal – but failed.”

Auron shook his head. “I was beyond help. I mean what you did for Yuna. It was Braska’s wish. I am indebted to you.”

“Kimahri was glad to do it,” said Kimahri. “Yuna helped Kimahri. Besaid is Kimahri’s home.”

“And thank you for your understanding regarding my ... situation,” Auron continued. “Some people would have had me sent immediately if they’d realised. But I’m not ready yet. There are still things I have to do.”

“Kimahri hopes you can,” said Kimahri politely.

Auron laughed, a low, bitter laugh that barely altered the expression on his face. “Yes. I hope so too,” he said.

As he walked out, Kimahri wondered whether he had done the right thing. Auron was a good man: he felt sure of that. But Kimahri could tell that the fact he was unspent wasn't the only secret he was keeping.