

As Kimahri observed it, nobody was in the best of spirits when the party exited the odd microclimate of the Thunder Plains and entered Macalania Forest. Rikku's reaction to the lightning, coupled with Yuna's admission that she would be taking Maester Seymour up on his offer of marriage, had hardly done much to keep anyone happy. Tidus seemed particularly affected by Yuna's decision, although he was trying not to show it, still slicing into fiends with his usual enthusiasm – it was only when he thought nobody was looking that he let the expression of bold determination slip off his face and replaced it with one of glum sobriety.

Kimahri often *was* looking, though: he had to stay alert. People tended not to notice when he was watching them, which suited him well enough.

Yuna seemed the most cheerful, probably consciously trying to make up for the revelation she had sprung on them all

as they travelled through the Thunder Plains. When everyone had taken a few steps into the forest, she turned to Kimahri, and said, “Remember when we came through here before?”

Kimahri nodded. Ten years ago, she meant: the first stage in the journey they had made out of Bevelle. He had been unsure of how to keep her entertained, what to say to her, even of how to behave around her. He had experience with children – the Ronso raised their young collectively – but had never spent a huge amount of time around humans. Yuna had been subdued, too: the fact that her father was dead was beginning to sink in.

“Has it changed much?” Tidus enquired, his usual chirpiness only slightly dulled.

Yuna looked around. “It’s still just the same. I don’t think this place will ever change. Oh, and the butterflies – remember, Kimahri?”

A small swarm of turquoise butterflies flapped their wings peacefully at the side of the path, seeming undisturbed by the passage of fourteen battle-hardened feet only metres away from them. Kimahri knew exactly what Yuna was referring to: it would have been difficult for him to forget. It was, after all, the first time he had seen her smile properly on that journey, and realised that even though humans were different and unfamiliar, they could be beautiful too. “Kimahri remember,” he confirmed.

“What?” said Tidus, clearly keen not to be left out of the

conversation. “What happened?”

Yuna shook her head. “Oh, nothing, really. We were walking through a part of the woods that was full of red and blue butterflies, and suddenly, they all just settled on Kimahri, and –” She looked up at him and giggled. “You looked so pretty.”

She had smiled and laughed back then, for the first time, and he had looked down at her and understood why she was worth protecting: why a dying man had preserved his last breath to pass on the order for her to be removed from the machinations of Bevelle, and taken to a place where she would be looked after with no malice and no ulterior motives. And he had still been grieving his own expulsion from the tribe, and was worried and lost; but at that moment, he had smiled too, and had relaxed for the first time.

“Why’d they do that?” Tidus asked, his voice shaking Kimahri out of the recollection.

“Perhaps never seen Ronso,” he suggested. “Drawn to fur.”

“Huh, yeah,” said Tidus, “like how those monkeys back in Djose were trying to climb all over Auron –”

Auron acknowledged the remark with a twitch of his eyebrows. “I hope it wasn’t an inconvenience,” he said to Kimahri.

Tidus wouldn’t have realised it, and perhaps neither would Yuna, but Kimahri understood that the butterflies weren’t really what Auron was talking about. The two of them hadn’t spoken much about what had happened ten years ago, even on occasions when they had found themselves alone together:

it had been a long time, but Kimahri was still embarrassed by his banishment, and suspected that Auron was still more so about his own troubles. “No inconvenience,” he assured him, before looking back towards Yuna with a grin, not that any of his human companions would have been able to parse the expression. “Except shoopuf.”

“Ha!” Tidus exclaimed. “Yeah, you told me about that! Hard to believe Yuna was a bad kid.”

“Not *bad*, exactly,” Lulu corrected him, stepping up behind Kimahri. “She was lively. Used to the big city, I suppose. I’m sure island life was quite an adjustment.”

“Yes,” said Yuna, “but I did like it, Lulu!” She glanced between Lulu and Kimahri, swinging her staff a little in an unconscious gesture of insistence. “I’d have told you if I didn’t like it!”

Lulu chuckled. “Yes, you would have.” Kimahri flicked his tail in agreement.

“So how’d that kid turn into Lady Yuna, huh?” Tidus asked. “Besaid’s favourite summoner, beloved by all she meets?”

Yuna shot him a look of mild exasperation as Lulu replied. “Lessons in manners. Which you would have thought she would have been given in Bevelle.”

“Don’t count on it,” Auron muttered.

“This is great,” said Tidus enthusiastically. “I don’t know why I didn’t ask you guys about this before. I’m gonna keep

watch with you tonight, Lulu, and get you to tell me all the bad stuff Yuna did as a kid.”

“Wakka’s on duty with Lulu tonight,” Auron pointed out. “Besides, you weren’t exactly the easiest child to raise yourself. I’m sure I could tell Yuna many more stories about you.”

“I wouldn’t say you *raised* me,” said Tidus. “More like, turned up every couple of weeks and gave me some weird piece of advice that it took me the whole time until I next saw you to understand.”

Auron shrugged. “Well, it kept you out of trouble, didn’t it?” He paused. “Or rather, that was the intention, but ...”

“What did he do?” Yuna asked, clearly unable to resist.

Tidus scowled good-naturedly.

“I’ll tell you later,” said Auron, who, Kimahri noticed, seemed to be enjoying himself. “If you like, Tidus, we’ll change the rota for tonight. Wakka can take my place with Kimahri, I’ll go with Yuna, and you can take the first shift with Lulu.”

Tidus appeared to be considering it: the desire to learn about Yuna’s childhood transgressions was obviously tempting. He was glancing at Yuna, though, and she was trying to avoid meeting his eye, suddenly shy: Kimahri bit back a growl of laughter. The two of them were clearly looking forward to getting to spend a few hours in each other’s company with nothing beyond the butterflies to disturb them.

“Nah, it’s fine,” said Tidus after a moment, “keep it the way it is.”

Auron smirked. “As you wish.”

The atmosphere in the group had changed during that conversation, Kimahri reflected as they walked on: there was none of the tense feeling that had beset them all when they entered the forest. Yuna had that effect on people, that ability to lift the spirits. It was why she made such an excellent summoner, and why everyone wished she could have chosen some other profession.



Auron sat down beside Kimahri, removing his glasses as he only seemed to do when it was just the two of them. “So, was Yuna really a bad child?” he remarked by way of greeting.

Kimahri shook his head. “Tidus?”

“Awful,” said Auron. “Absolutely intolerable. But he’s right, I never spent a great deal of time with him.”

“Yuna not bad,” said Kimahri. “Was mischievous. But Auron knew her?”

Auron frowned at him. The gaze of that one eye was piercing enough; two might have been unbearable. “Auron was friend of High Summoner,” Kimahri attempted to explain.

“Oh,” said Auron. “Braska. No, we were more like colleagues before the pilgrimage.” He looked up into the dark

sky. “Our relationship was never personal – not until we left Bevelle. I wouldn’t say we really became friends until after the journey began. But the pilgrimage has that effect; you’ll have noticed.”

Kimahri nodded.

They sat in silence for a while. The advantage of keeping watch with Auron was the man’s ability to understand that one didn’t need to be talking all the time. Lulu was the only other of their companions who didn’t always insist on it; even Yuna could sometimes be too eager for a conversation at times when Kimahri wanted to be silent, and the other three were beyond help in that respect. Not that Kimahri resented them for it: like Auron had said, the pilgrimage created a bond. All of them were friends.

“She got it from her father,” said Auron suddenly.

Kimahri peered at him in confusion.

“You said she was mischievous,” Auron clarified. “Braska – he had that streak in him, too. Of course, he was a man of – of Yevon,” – he seemed to be deliberately maintaining a neutral expression as he said it – “but his interpretation of the teachings was not always to everyone’s taste. It won him a few enemies.”

Kimahri was beginning to wonder: if Yuna had inherited her childish defiance from Braska, was Auron disappointed that she seemed to have lost much of it now? Did he disapprove of the way they had sat her down at the temple in Besaid

and taught her the proper way to behave? “Never stamped it out of Yuna,” he attempted to explain. “Yuna could always be herself. Island people traditional –”

“I know,” Auron replied calmly. “I didn’t mean to suggest nobody should have tried teaching her anything. You all did a great service in bringing her up – a service to me, personally. You know that.”

“Hmm,” said Kimahri, in agreement. *He* knew it; Lulu and Wakka didn’t. But he suspected Auron would prefer that knowledge to remain private.

“She still has her father’s spirit in her,” Auron went on. “She resembles him, in some ways – not in every way. But,” – he paused and smiled a little – “that’s not always such a bad thing.”

“Kimahri thought Auron would tell stories about Tidus,” said Kimahri. “But maybe more stories about High Summoner.”

“We’ll need more than a few hours for that,” said Auron, and laughed.

Around them, the forest glowed, softly and calmly, and the butterflies slept.