

AURON had taken it upon himself to have dinner with Tidus once a week. Given that he was going to have to watch over the boy for who knew how long, the experience would no doubt be less unpleasant if they got to know each other, and weekly meals seemed one of the most painless ways of facilitating that. It was working, slowly: Tidus had begun to reply to Auron's awkward questions about life in Zanarkand, first monosyllabically and then with a little less reticence, and eventually had begun to initiate conversation himself. The topics weren't usually things Auron wanted to discuss – *where are you from – what happened to your face – what's wrong with Mom* – but it was a start.

His other priority, aside from working on developing a relationship with Jecht's son, was regaining his skill with the sword. Becoming an unsest had left him with an unshakable fatigue that made strenuous activity of any kind a much more difficult task than it had been in life; but, he had resolved, he would simply have to continue practising until he was able to handle it. Having only one working eye presented a different problem. Judging distances and coordinating his movements had suddenly become extremely hard. He had never been one for agility and accuracy in combat – power and resilience were where his skills lay – but since his disfigurement, he found himself even more lacking in those abilities.

He worked on it, slowly. It was a frustrating process, and it irritated him to see how slow and ineffectual he had become,

but he occasionally detected progress: the length of time he could spend training before having to stop was gradually increasing, and he was regaining his strength. He worked on his accuracy to the best of his abilities, but decided the most effective practice would be against moving targets.

On an idle evening on the houseboat, he gathered up a number of stray blitzballs into a box. There seemed to be at least one in every room: he couldn't fathom why Jecht would have needed so many – or perhaps they belonged to the boy. They could be used in his training, he decided, although he would need someone to throw them for him.

The idea came to him to recruit Tidus over dinner. They had had some success making conversation, but that had dried up now, and Tidus had almost finished his food. “Do you want to help me with something?” said Auron.

Tidus frowned, and Auron realised he should be expecting him to refuse, but he eventually said, “OK.”

“Follow me,” said Auron, and led him onto the deck where he had left the box of balls. “When I say go, you throw one of these, all right? Against the wall. Try to get it past me.”

Tidus nodded, and took the first ball. Auron positioned himself in front of the wall in question, drawing his sword. He wondered fleetingly whether it was a good idea for a young child to be in such close proximity to a weapon, but Jecht had probably done worse to the boy, from what he had heard. “Go,” he said.

Tidus lobbed the ball with a more powerful throw than a child should have been capable of: Auron realised he ought to have expected it. The ball flew straight past him and bounced off the wall.

He shifted his stance and tried to focus. “Go,” he said again.

Another miss, but it was closer. After the third “Go,” he managed to get his sword to make contact with the ball, and felt reinvigorated, but the fourth was wide again.

“Go,” he repeated, trying to ignore the ache that was beginning to steal over him from the mere effort of holding up his sword, and focusing to muster the concentration for what should have been a basic exercise. “Go.” Another near miss. “Go.”

He was trembling with fatigue now, and just about restraining himself from letting out an unseemly grunt each time he lunged for the ball, but he remained focused on his stance. “Go.”

He missed the shot by inches, and on the next “Go,” managed to spear the ball right in the middle, feeling a burst of triumph that overrode the pain for a moment. “Go,” he called again, hoping to replicate his success even though he felt as if he might soon pass out. Another miss. “Go.”

Nothing came. “There’s no more,” said Tidus.

Panting, Auron tried to focus through his lightheadedness. “What do you mean?” he gasped out.

Tidus tilted the empty box towards him. “All gone.”

So he had succeeded in making contact with two out of ten balls. In the past, it would have been at least seven – perhaps six on a very bad day, if he was distracted or under the weather – and now, he could only manage two. Pitiful, compared with the days before; such a marked decline that he suspected he would never regain his former skills. The realisation was too much: he felt his knees give out at last, and sank onto the deck with clenched fists.

“Tidus,” he said, trying to keep his voice calm, “perhaps it’s time you went to bed.”

The objection came instantly, as he should have expected. “But it’s still ten minutes until bedtime!” Tidus whined. “Mom always said –”

The high pitch of the boy’s raised voice felt like a bullet in Auron’s head, which was already throbbing unbearably. “Tidus,” he growled, losing his patience. “*Bed.*”

Tidus burst into tears instantly, and Auron cursed himself: of course this would happen. He could always be relied on to make things worse. He got to his feet shakily, made his way slowly towards the boy, and placed his aching arms around him in an awkward embrace.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I didn’t mean to shout. I – I’m just tired, and I don’t feel well –” One was probably not supposed to admit these things to a child, but Tidus deserved to know why Auron had been so short with him.

“Maybe you’re the one who should go to bed,” said Tidus,

sniffing.

Auron would have laughed if his head had been hurting any less. “That’s a very good idea.”

He felt Tidus beginning to wriggle out of his grip, and released him.

“Night-night,” said Tidus, suddenly shy, and he scampered back indoors.

Auron followed at a slower pace, leaning on his sword as he staggered towards the living room of the houseboat. He sank onto the nearest settee, stifling a groan. He shouldn’t have pushed himself so hard, he reflected – he had forgotten that here in Zanarkand, there was no such thing as a potion to provide instant relief after the trials of battle. In Spira, everyone had always pushed themselves to the limit, knowing there would always be healing items, or, still better, the cool touch of a white magic spell, a cherished friend’s hand carefully laid against one’s face –

He did not want to think about that.

There were bottles in the bathroom that contained medicines of some kind, he knew, but their strange names left no clue as to what they might be good for, and perhaps they would have no effect on a dead man anyway. He limped into the kitchen instead to retrieve some ice from the freezer, recoiling at the blast of unnaturally cold air that emanated from it when he opened the door, and scooping a water glass into the opened bag of ice that sat in the top drawer until it

was as full as he could manage. He returned to the settee in the living room, lying there with the cold glass pressed to his forehead, thinking desperately about how hopeless he had become in combat and how he would most likely never be able to fight the way he once had.

There was a rustling in the doorway, and he looked up to see Jecht's wife, clad in her usual dressing gown, her hair lank and greasy. She looked down at him with a bark of humourless laughter.

"Feel like shit too, huh?" she said.

It displeased him to hear it. The teachings of Yevon stipulated that profanity was sacrilege: still more so when it came from the mouth of a woman. But, he realised, Zanarkand was different, and he had turned his back on the teachings anyway. She spoke with the same words and the same cadence as Jecht: perhaps that was what he really took exception to.

"There's painkillers in the bathroom," she informed him.

"Yeah," he muttered. "I don't know which ones they are."

She rolled her eyes. "You really are something else."

He watched as she walked out of the room, perhaps driven away by his ignorance, and considered trying to sleep, although the headache seemed too intense to allow it. Moments later, though, she returned, a packet of tablets in one hand and a glass of water in the other. He watched as she set the water down on the table and slowly set about extracting two of the tablets from their cases.

“It’s an analgesic,” she explained as she did so, not looking at him. “I was training to be a nurse, before I met Jecht. But I gave it up. No need to work when you’re married to a blitz star.”

She held the tablets out to him. “Take these. Swallow them.” Once he had placed them in his mouth, she thrust the glass of water into his hand. He took a sip, tried to swallow, and found himself choking slightly.

“What the hell,” she said. “Don’t drink it lying down, it’ll go the wrong way. You gotta sit up.”

Auron heaved himself into a sitting position, and drank some more of the water, wincing as he swallowed the tablets. His throat felt rough after the first attempt, and he was unused to having to do this – there was no need for it in Spira – but he managed to get them down.

“I don’t think it’s done anything,” he murmured after a moment.

Jecht’s wife looked at him with an expression of disbelief. “Yeah,” she said, “you need to give it time. Half an hour or so before they get into your bloodstream.” She shook her head in exasperation. “Honestly, what is wrong with you?”

He hoped she didn’t expect a response. White magic was instant; this seemed an extremely poor substitute. He lay back down and closed his eye, hoping she would take the hint and leave him in peace.

“You’re deranged,” she muttered, and then he heard the sound of her footsteps receding.

Left alone, he fell back into his thoughts. How could he have ended up like this? The most promising young warrior monk in all Spira, now lying sick and scarred in this odd, machina-infested place, barely able to fight, not even succeeding in taking care of the boy who had been left in his charge. And unspent, to boot. And he was supposed to see Tidus through to adulthood like this. He couldn’t do it: he was determined, but not that determined. It was easier to give up.

As the thought passed through his mind, he suddenly felt lighter: as if he was no longer present. The pain receded. He noticed, eventually, a colourful glimmer rise from one foot, and realised he had lost the will to continue. It was time for him to fade away. Jecht’s son would remain in this place, angry and unenlightened, and the spiral of death would continue, and he would be able to rest, finally –

He was almost there; he could almost see them smiling out at him, Braska’s serene expression as he welcomed Auron to his eternal repose – his face was clear in Auron’s mind.

“You can still do it,” said Braska. “It’s not time yet. Hold on.”

And there was Jecht, ready to greet him –

“What are you doing?” Jecht growled. “Fight it, man! Get a hold of yourself, damn it!”



Their faces vanished, and he gasped, and snapped back to where he lay in Jecht's houseboat: the pyreflies were gone, and the headache was back, but his despair was lessened. They were right, he realised. With Braska and Jecht gone, it was all up to him now. He was the one who could set the plan in motion, the plan that would put an end to Spira's suffering. That would be worth doing, even if he had to remain this way. His own struggle was nothing, if it meant he could end the torment of his beloved homeland.