

Jecht came to in a field of flowers, and felt realer than he had in years.

“Braska!” he called.

There was a rush of wind, and Braska himself stepped forward out of the darkness, eyes widening with surprise as he took note of who was standing in front of him. “Jecht!” he exclaimed, hanging back a little, perhaps not quite believing what he saw. “Does this mean – a new High Summoner? So soon?”¹

Jecht nodded, and couldn’t keep himself from laughing with sheer delight. “Yeah. But it’s better than that. Sin’s gone for good, Braska. They broke the cycle.”

“An eternal Calm,” Braska murmured. He stepped closer to Jecht. “But how?”

“We’ll tell you later,” said Jecht. “There’s a couple more people coming first, I think. You know one of ’em.”

“Will the new High Summoner –” Braska began.

Jecht shook his head. “Nah. There was no Final Summoning – the High Summoner’s still alive. We’ll explain after they get here, right? Just wait, you’re gonna want to see this –”

He could feel somebody else coming: there was a sort of buzzing in the air from the gathering pyreflies. Soon enough,

¹Canon implies that spirits on the Farplane have some idea of what’s going on in Spira, but I think it’s much more fun to have Braska be oblivious about what’s been happening.

those pyreflies became visible, swirling with increasing speed until they coalesced into the shape of a familiar human, who fell forward onto the ground in a much less graceful arrival than Jecht's had been.

The red-robed figure stayed on all fours, heaving to catch his breath, and Jecht looked towards Braska with satisfaction. Braska's face paled as his eyes fixed on the new arrival. "Auron ..." he gasped.

Auron slowly raised his head at the sound of his master's voice, and then got to his feet; and as he did so, Braska hurried forward to meet him with an embrace.

Jecht watched their hug from where he stood – it wasn't for him to get involved – but he soon found himself being drawn in by a beckoning arm or two, and joined their tight knot, holding onto the others with a firmness that served to prove they were really reunited. Somebody was laughing, and at least one person was crying, and Jecht realised that he himself was probably doing both. He waited for the grip on his shoulders to loosen, and ducked out again, letting the others continue their embrace as it grew less celebratory and more tender.

They were still gazing wordlessly into each other's eyes by the time Jecht felt the pyreflies approaching for a second time. "He's coming," he announced, and Auron seemed to realise where he was and break away from Braska with a little embarrassment, resuming his usual inscrutable expression.

Tidus' arrival was different again: this time, the pyreflies

seemed to come together at some distance from where they stood, with the result that Tidus approached them by air at some speed. He soared past Braska and Auron, and met Jecht's outstretched hand in a high-five before landing on the ground on all fours.

Jecht kept his hand extended so Tidus could use it to pull himself to his feet, but he ignored the help and stood straight away of his own accord, looking uncertainly into his father's eyes. "Dad ..." he mumbled.

Jecht felt as sheepish as Tidus looked. "Uh ... I guess we got some stuff to discuss, don't we?" he said. "How about we go have a chat?"

"Sure," said Tidus, and the two of them walked into the void.



"Was that Jecht's son?" Braska murmured.

Ten years, and Auron was still caught off guard by the sound of his voice, speaking not in the confident tones he had used with strangers, but soft and unembellished, the way he spoke to Auron when nobody else was listening.

"Yeah," he breathed.

Braska turned to look at him, and he felt the piercing gaze rove over his face, and tried not to shy away when it settled on the scar over his right eye.

“May I see you?” said Braska.

If one person could be permitted to view Auron’s shame, it was he. Slowly, he unbuckled his collar and let it fall to the ground. Braska reached forward to remove his glasses, lifting the frames off his ears with exquisite gentleness, whereupon he continued to stare at the ravaged face before him, lifting a finger to feel the mangled skin.

“Auron –”

It was all too much – too similar to the gentle touches of ten years ago, the lowered voice when Jecht wasn’t listening – Auron had tolerated it back then, because Braska was his master and he was going to his death, and he had craved comfort even if it broke Auron’s heart to provide it. But now –

He lifted a hand to Braska’s arm and lowered it from his face. “Don’t,” he said, and then, in an effort to explain, “your wife –”

A resigned expression suddenly crossed Braska’s face. “Yes. She is no longer here.”

Auron frowned.

“When I arrived, she was waiting,” Braska explained. “She held on for me. But the Al Bhed have different customs. This wasn’t the right place for her – staying here was making her unhappy. We discussed it, and came to a decision: it was best to let her go. I spent just a short time with her, and then we said our goodbyes.”

“I’m sorry,” said Auron.

Braska shook his head. "It was inevitable. Besides," – he looked back at Auron, seeming hesitant – "I didn't think I would be alone. Forgive me, but – I thought I felt you coming. Once or twice, not long after I arrived – I thought I could sense you – although I must have been mistaken."

"No," said Auron. "You were right." He would have had to explain sooner or later, although his uncertainty about how Braska would react had made him hope it wouldn't have been quite as early. But it was unavoidable. "I died," he said. "After the Final Summoning – I was so enraged. I was desperate for an explanation, something to justify why you had to do that." He turned away from Braska: it was too much to see his face as he recalled this. "I went back up to Zanarkand to confront her. Yunalesca. I wanted to hear how she could possibly explain what happened – I thought I was going to go back down to Bevelle and let them all know the truth. But as she spoke, I grew angrier and angrier; I lost control, and I attacked her. And of course, she struck me down straight away."

"And you died," said Braska.

Auron looked back at him. "Yes. Not immediately, but – yes."

"So," said Braska, "these last ten years, you were –"

"Unsent," Auron confirmed.

"But why?"

"I had made promises," said Auron. "I told you I would look after Yuna – I said the same to Jecht about his son. And I

promised myself that the cycle would be broken – I could not rest until Sin was gone for good.”

“You looked after Yuna, these ten years ...” said Braska slowly.

Auron shook his head. “I had her sent to Besaid, as you asked, but I couldn’t go there myself – I had to see to Jecht’s son too, and he was in Zanarkand. The other Zanarkand, I mean. I watched over him there, and then, when we returned to Spira, we were able to find Yuna, and –” The rest of the story could wait: too many surprises for Braska to deal with right now. “You would be so proud of her,” he said instead. “She is a wonderful young woman.”

“And then,” said Braska, “you defeated Sin.”

“I merely guided my companions,” Auron corrected him. “It wasn’t my place to lead, not as an unsent.”

“And Jecht’s son was involved in this,” Braska murmured.

“Yes. He was instrumental.”

Braska was silent for a moment, and then said. “Yuna. She is the High Summoner. And she still lives.”

Auron nodded.

Braska closed his eyes briefly, covered his mouth with a hand, then lowered it, and said, “Auron. You are remarkable.”

“It wasn’t my doing,” said Auron.

“You *are*,” said Braska, more insistently. He lifted the same hand towards Auron, letting it come to rest in his ponytail, which he began to caress, his fingers slowly working through

the strands, prodding lightly against Auron's shoulder. He was too close, and Auron's twice-dead chest felt tight.

"Braska," he managed to say. "Please don't." He laid his own hand over Braska's, trying to ignore the warmth of his skin, and lowered it until Braska was no longer making contact with him. "You know – this means something to me."

"And to me," said Braska, softly, gently.

Auron shook his head. "No. Not in the same way. It would be better if – I would be more content if we were friends, without any of this. It is too much for me. I'm not a boy anymore." He looked into Braska's eyes, silently pleading that he might understand.

"Auron," said Braska, "ten years ago – I was confused. I couldn't see beyond the Final Summoning – I couldn't begin to think about how I really felt. When I came here, I had the chance to reflect, and – I realised."

"How can you be sure?" Auron said.

Braska smiled. "I've had ten years, Auron. That was more than enough for me to understand that I could have those feelings for a man – especially a man like you. Please believe me."

Auron turned away: he couldn't bear to look at Braska's face now, at the eager, kind expression that shone forth from it with more beauty than any Moonflow could ever hope to possess. He gestured at his own, at the scar that still repulsed him every time he had the misfortune to look in a mirror, and

said, "Even with this?" He could feel the cheek bisected by that scar becoming moist; years, too, since that had happened.

"Yes," said Braska. "Of course."

"Then –" Auron still couldn't bring himself to face Braska, especially now that the tears had mounted to a steady trickle – "then say it."

"Oh, Auron," said Braska. "Look at me."

Auron looked, and felt his stomach clench at the sight of Braska's smile: a smile that had touched him since the very first time he saw it. He had wondered, sometimes, how other people could look upon that expression without throwing themselves at the summoner's feet. It was a smile that even ten years hadn't allowed Auron to put behind him: one he had dreamt of countless times, before waking with dread at the thought he would have to fight his sorrow another day.

"Auron," said Braska again. "I do. I love you."

He reached out with both arms this time, and Auron let himself be drawn in, eventually finding the wherewithal to cling onto Braska's back himself, feeling Braska's head nuzzle into his neck, and finally letting go: not in the way he had let the pyreflies take him at the final sending, still maintaining a warrior's poise as he bade farewell to his six mentees, but properly and thoroughly, as any ordinary man might. Braska's hands wove slowly through Auron's hair, and he suddenly felt as if the last ten years, his false life, had never taken place: he felt young again. He felt young and whole and unburdened,

and as the pyreflies swirled around him he leant back in elation and then kissed Braska firmly on the lips; Braska's hands stilled in surprise, but then gripped Auron tighter, more urgently, and they leant into each other eagerly, each tasting the joy of love from an old friend, until they broke apart and Auron found himself gazing into Braska's face through two undamaged and functioning eyes.

"A pity," said Braska, grinning. "I liked the grey hair. Made you look distinguished."

Auron laughed, in the voice of a young man once again. "Braska," he said, lost for words, and leant in for a second kiss.



Jecht and Tidus had returned in the meantime, clearly unnoticed; they stood at the edge of the field, momentarily stunned.

"Wait ..." Tidus murmured, his voice somewhat croaky after all the crying he had been doing. "Is Auron ... are they ..."

"Let's leave them to it, yeah?" said Jecht, resisting the urge to leap into the air and whoop with glee. "Wanna go play some blitz?"

"OK," said Tidus, and they stepped into the void once more.