

Everybody's got somebody to lean on

by ovely

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THE path that aspiring warrior monks of Yevon followed was as straight as the trajectory of a bullet from a machina weapon, and as sure as the blow of a fully trained swordsman. Auron passed out of the initiate at the age of fifteen, like most of his contemporaries, and joined the travelling corps, ready for days of journeying in miserable conditions to fight off fiends in some far-flung part of Spira. It was a rite of passage for the junior warrior monks. Some took up the cushy positions in Bevelle right away, but there were rumours that they were the ones who would never amount to anything. Auron, everyone was always very clear, would certainly amount to something – but he had to endure the same long voyages to

rural outposts as most of his peers did, at least to begin with. Nonetheless, it didn't last long: he was promoted, at the conspicuously early age of seventeen, to a position in one of the Bevelle squads.

The squads' duty was to guard the city – not within the walls of the citadel, where fiends couldn't enter and Evrae warded off Sin, but on the outskirts: in the residential districts and at the docks. As junior positions in the corps went, it certainly wasn't bad: one was able to live a stable life at the barracks in Bevelle without having to spend five days of every week on the road, squeezing into unsuitable boarding houses at night and fending off the unfamiliar local fiends during the day. The climate was bearable, unlike the harsh winds of Macalania and the relentless sun of the southern islands, and the job was more exciting than duties within the city, which mostly involved escorting priests from one temple to another and defending against supposed assassins who never seemed to materialise. Once a monk joined one of the squads, they would be quite likely to remain there for the rest of their years of service, unless they became one of the few who were promoted to officers' positions. Some, knowing they were stationed in Bevelle for good, even took partners and had children.

Indeed, several of Auron's friends from his days in the initiate, still members of the travelling corps, were starting to express their desire to settle down in that way as soon as they

could manage it. He himself had no interest: he wasn't concerned with the idea of marriage, and was much more dedicated to his study of the blade. Swordsmen were becoming increasingly rare in the squads as a result of the loosening of restrictions concerning machina weapons, but it was the path he had chosen, the one he had favoured most in training as a boy and decided to specialise in, and he prided himself on his mastery of it. Moreover, he knew he was being observed by the officers: his expedited promotion to the squads had confirmed that. Somebody high up in the corps seemed to have taken an interest in him, and he was determined to show them that interest was merited, whether through his fighting skills or his comradely interactions with the other monks.

It was easy to make friends in the squads, after all, when everyone knew they would be attached to theirs for most if not all of their time in the corps. Loyalties formed quickly, and were strong. Soon, Auron's squadmates were much closer friends than the boys he had completed his training with. Around a year after his enlistment in Squad Thirty-Six, Auron found himself accompanying two of the squad's other members to one of Bevelle's less salubrious establishments to provide support while they had the squad number tattooed onto their bodies. They almost convinced him to undergo the same thing, but he ended up not being quite drunk enough to agree to it. Instead, he sat in the little shop with his friends, laughing as they grimaced at the sting of the needle, and agreeing that, although

he had let them down in not getting the same number written indelibly on himself, they were a family.

There was one person who was always the exception, coming and going every few months: the healer. Each squad had one assigned, normally a teenager who knew some white magic spells and perhaps intended to train properly as a priest or nun later on. They would wait at the trading post or in whatever other designated safe space was available, and the monks would visit them as necessary to have any battle wounds seen to, but there was little interaction beyond what was necessary. The monks and the healers never had much in common: the healers were spiritual types, never seeming totally connected with reality, and the monks, Auron no exception, were always concerned with the practical, and occasionally so blunt as to be tactless.

Auron had been in the squad for a couple of years, and seen healers leave and be replaced at least five times, when one arrived who seemed different from the rest.

The squad commander, Harzan, introduced them all to the new healer that morning. "This is Braska," he said briskly, giving the new healer's arm a friendly shove. "And this is the miserable lot you'll be working with –" and he pointed to each of the monks in turn, introducing them.

Braska had blue eyes that seemed to twinkle in a way that was only slightly mischievous, and mostly friendly: when Auron looked back on their first meeting later, that was the main

thing that stood out to him. “I’m sorry,” Braska said to them all, “I’m terrible with names. Please don’t be offended if I don’t remember.”

The other thing that was difficult to ignore, of course, was that Braska was about twice the age of the healers who usually showed up: Auron estimated him at around thirty, and hence a good ten years older than Auron himself. Nobody else seemed to be surprised, but he had already marked himself out as a very unusual person to hold the position.

Auron spent most of the morning seeing off shelled fiends with his usual partner in combat, Lutria, who had a vicious sword arm on her. Lutria was reckless, though, and paid little heed to defence, with the result that when they reached the end of the first wave of fiends, she had sustained several fairly serious injuries. By the time the last of them had been taken care of, she was clearly in no state to face the next onslaught.

“Time to visit the new healer?” Auron suggested, and then, seeing how badly hurt she was, he changed his mind. “No, you stay here. I’ll fetch him.”

He found the healer at the trading post, seeing to another of their squadmates with a polite smile, which seemed to transform into an expression of genuine friendliness as he dismissed the other monk and turned to Auron. “Oh, hello,” he said. “Auron, isn’t it?”

Auron found himself caught off-guard by Braska’s cordial expression. “Yes,” he said, collecting himself. “Could you come

and see to my partner? She's taken quite a lot of hits this morning."

"Of course," Braska said, and he stood, casting a careful eye over Auron. "But you're injured too, aren't you? Let me –"

He waved a hand over Auron, and Auron felt the glow of powerful white magic, stronger than anything he had experienced from a squad healer before. It stood to reason, when Braska was older, but that merely made Auron more curious to know why a mage who was already so skilful had taken up this position.

"Yes, that does help," he said, realising that his legs no longer ached where the fiends had struck them. "Thank you."

Braska smiled at him again, and said, "Where are we heading?"

He led him out to Lutria: she was crouched on the ground, grimacing, and when Braska bent towards her and said, "Hello," she replied, "Can we skip the pleasantries? I'm in quite a lot of pain."

"Certainly," said Braska, still smiling, as Auron tried not to feel embarrassed by Lutria's bluntness. He could be direct himself – the whole squad tended to be short with healers, given that their skills were often required with some urgency – but this situation was different, for reasons he couldn't put his finger on.

Braska didn't seem offended, though, and healed her with the same unusually powerful magic he'd used on Auron – Au-

ron tried not to stare – before straightening up and saying, “Feeling better?”

“Yeah,” said Lutria, resuming a fighting stance.

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Braska. He looked at Auron again. “See you later.”

“What are you staring at?” said Lutria, as Braska walked off.

“Nothing,” said Auron, turning back towards her. “He’s got some strong magic for a squad healer, hasn’t he?”

“Huh? I guess,” Lutria replied. “Needed to be strong for that.” She rubbed her neck. “Don’t know why they didn’t go for you.”

He looked towards her, thoughts of Braska forgotten. “I know when to dodge,” he said, with a grin, and found himself having to put that knowledge into practice as she swiped at him.



Over the following months, Auron got to know Braska far better than he had ever known any other healer. A number of the others had been closer to him in age, but the differences in temperament between monks and mages had never made them particularly appealing companions, until now. Braska too had a personality quite different from Auron’s, but on this occasion

that didn't seem to be a detriment to the development of their friendship.

At some point – Auron was never quite sure when or how it became routine – they started to take their lunches together, using the brief break from duties to discuss a vast array of subjects. Braska seemed to know everything about Spira, both its present and past, and Auron spent many of his lunches fascinated by some new information about the way the people of the southern islands lived, or how the temple at Djose had been constructed, or exactly which machina were permitted at the temples: he suspected from this last topic that Braska wasn't as pious as he seemed, for all that he was a healer. Despite the breadth of their conversations, though, Auron was never quite able to learn much about Braska himself. Braska always seemed keen to keep discussion of his personal life at arm's length, changing the subject quite abruptly whenever anything that might approach the matter came up. Auron still wished he could learn more about who Braska was and why he had ended up a squad healer, but he respected Braska's obvious desire to keep the information private. It wasn't as if the other things they talked about were dull, and despite Braska's far greater knowledge of almost all of them, their conversations always felt much more like proper discussions than lectures.

The squad's work went on. Some of the older members retired or, in rarer cases, were promoted to more sedentary officers' positions; Auron found himself becoming de facto deputy,

which wasn't a formal role by any means but seemed to increase his standing among the monks still further. There were rumours that the person who had taken interest in his progression was one of the maesters; he tried his best not to spend too much time thinking about it, believing it pointless to dwell on speculation. His fellow squad members were as down to earth as ever, and did nothing more than rib him about his continued ascension through the ranks; Braska seemed not to be aware of it at all, and Auron was happy enough with that.

It was only on the cusp of another promotion for Auron, several months down the line, that Braska appeared to finally pick up on it. On that day, the jocular remarks from the other squad members were so numerous that they were impossible to ignore: a whole squad of monks sporadically slapping Auron on the back and being unusually obsequious towards him as he collected his lunch was certainly enough to attract Braska's attention.

"What was all that in aid of?" he asked, once they had sat down to their meal.

Auron smiled wryly. "Restructuring," he explained. "I'm being made an officer."

"Oh," said Braska. "Congratulations. So you'll be in a new position? How soon?"

"Tomorrow," said Auron. "There's a ceremony for it tonight. It's all happened quite quickly – a vacancy came up."

"Well," said Braska, "that's wonderful. I'm sure you'll be ex-

cellent.” He seemed briefly as if he was about to say something else, and then turned to his food, uncharacteristically reticent. Auron wondered whether he should say something else to fill the unusual silence, but was distracted soon enough by some more good-natured mockery from the squad.

The ceremony was long and tedious: Auron wasn't the only person being promoted that night. He'd been at these before, but promotions among the ordinary ranks tended to be dealt with at the beginning, and on previous occasions he had always managed to slip off before the really intense part of the ritual started. This time, he had to sit through the ordinary promotions, then the officers' retirements: Harzan, the leader of Squad Thirty-Six, was among them, so Auron did his best to pay attention and show his appreciation for the outgoing squad commander. After that, there were prayers to Yevon, then the maesters were welcomed – they were excused from the early part of the ceremony – then the Hymn of the Fayth was sung, then Grand Maester Mika gave a sermon: Auron found himself wishing Braska was there to explain some of the more convoluted theological references. After that there were more prayers, and then the promotions began, starting with those senior officers who were being made still more senior, and then moving gradually down the hierarchy, through the middle-ranking officers moving to senior positions, the middle-ranking ones staying in middle-ranked positions, then the junior ones becoming middle-ranked, the junior ones staying in

slightly less junior positions – and then, a couple of men who looked just a few years older than Auron and who were being made junior officers, having passed through the direct entry scheme that the temples offered to selected noble families. Finally, it was the turn of the ordinary monks being promoted to officers, a class of which Auron was the only member. Stirring himself from his seat, where he had almost fallen asleep, he ascended to the dais, knelt before Grand Maester Mika, cleansed himself in the holy water as instructed, repeated a sacred oath that he had already heard countless times that evening, and stumbled back to his seat as a newly appointed officer of the warrior monks of Yevon, ready to take Harzan's place as the commander of Squad Thirty-Six.

The next morning, he returned to the squad and issued the orders in the way he had been taught; when the monks were all paired off and dispatched to the front, only Braska was left, looking at Auron with an expression that seemed to convey pride and perhaps even relief. Auron couldn't help beaming back at him.

"Congratulations," said Braska. "I didn't realise – I don't know how the promotion patterns work. I thought yesterday might have been the last time we would work together. That would have been a shame."

All Auron could do was grin.

"You're," said Braska, "forgive me – you're terribly young for an officer, aren't you? I don't suppose you can be much

more than twenty-five –”

“Twenty,” Auron confirmed. “Yes. The youngest squad commander in living memory, I’m told.” He ducked his head; he wasn’t usually this self-effacing, but there was something about Braska that demanded it.

“Remarkable,” said Braska, still smiling. “I suppose I ought to be calling you sir now.”

“That is the custom,” said Auron.

“Forgive me if it slips my mind,” said Braska. “I’m not sure whether I’ll be able to get used to it.”

“That’s OK,” said Auron, truthfully.

He still fought alongside the other monks; Harzan had done the same when he was commander. Most of Auron’s time on the front lines continued to be spent partnered with Lutria as the only other sword wielder in the squad. The biggest differences concerned the time he spent off duty: much of it was now spent strategising, working with other squad commanders to divide their duties and plan the company’s upcoming priorities. Other than that, he had more spacious quarters in the barracks now, shared with fewer men and with tolerance for some personal effects; he had access to the officers’ training area, which always tended to be in better shape than the ordinary monks’ rooms. There was a rumour that the food served to officers was better, although that never seemed to be backed up by the evidence. He was sometimes called upon to lead the prayers, and experienced

the feeling of having the entire company at his command for a few moments.

At the front, Auron continued to maintain a good relationship with his squad: although he belonged to a different rank now, they all knew him too well to let that create any distance between them. He still took his lunches with Braska, discussing the same wide range of topics as before and feeling much more able to contribute when the topic turned to military strategy.

Braska's refusal to talk about his personal life eventually came to a necessary end on a day of particularly intense fighting. With several members of the squad out of action, Auron found himself having to stave off an onslaught of fiends by himself; Braska had left his usual post and was providing support to those who were still standing. By the time he made his way to Auron, Auron was attempting to deal with a large flan, the type of fiend that was always very slow to take down with only a sword. Landing a hit that seemed to do next to no damage, he found himself hit with a strong jet of water in retaliation, and almost lost his balance.

"Allow me," said a calm voice behind him, and as he gathered his wits he became aware of a brief burst of lightning flashing past him and striking the flan right between the eyes. For a moment, it seemed to have had no effect; but the fiend started to convulse faster and faster until it suddenly exploded into pyreflies, which drifted lazily into the air. Auron stood,

stunned, as Braska moved to stand beside him.

Braska looked at Auron, who was suddenly aware of the fact that his face was still dripping wet, and shrugged, with a guilty smile. "Sorry," he said. "Not supposed to do that. But I couldn't help noticing, you've no mages in the squad ..."

"You," said Auron dumbly, "you know black magic too. As well as white. You're a red mage."

"Actually, more of a black mage," said Braska. "That's where my affinity lies – but I'm not meant to use those spells in this position, of course." He suddenly frowned. "Please don't tell the officers."

"I'm an officer," Auron pointed out.

"Yes," said Braska, who seemed more worried by the moment. "I just thought, flans aren't particularly receptive to physical attacks, so –"

"No, it's no problem," said Auron. "Just a surprise, to see a healer –" He cut himself off, suddenly brimming with questions. "You're a black mage? Why are you working for us? I mean, why are you a healer?" He was fairly certain that most of the healers who passed through wouldn't have known black magic if they had been struck by it.

"Few job opportunities for someone like me," said Braska.

Auron shook his head, incredulous. "You're an enigma," he said. "Do you realise that?"

"Oh, not really," said Braska airily.

“You are,” Auron insisted; he was determined to get to the bottom of the matter at last. He’d known Braska long enough, he decided: he deserved to have at least some information on his background.

“There’s nothing secret about it,” said Braska. “I used to be a priest – I think they always found me a bit troublesome. I tended to ask questions, when I was in training, ones they didn’t want to answer, and as soon as I qualified, they packed me off as a missionary.” He shrugged. “That worked well enough, for a few years, until I did something they considered irredeemable, and then I was expelled from the priesthood.”

Auron frowned, wondering what Braska could possibly have done that merited such a reaction. He didn’t seem like a blasphemer – someone who might question the usual doctrines, perhaps, but that was hardly rare. By his temperament, he certainly wasn’t the sort of person who would harm another; there were enough of those in the corps for Auron to be sure of that. Braska, he now knew, had the magical abilities to cause harm if he wanted to, but he was far too mild-mannered for it. Auron was grateful that Braska had finally deemed him enough of a confidant to tell him a bit about his past, but now that he had heard these few details, he was desperately curious to know more. It would hardly be right to ask, though.

“It’s nothing sinister,” said Braska, who had clearly noticed Auron’s predicament. He smiled wistfully. “My crime was – I

fell in love. With the type of person the temples deemed unsuitable.”

That certainly wasn't what Auron had expected to hear. As he stood there looking at Braska's faraway expression, he dared let himself wonder for the first time whether Braska might be another like himself.

Auron had known for a very long time that he was unusual; that he seemed to be different from all the other men of his acquaintance. He had worried, for a while, that he was incapable of having the thoughts that sent other boys to their beds with that strange mix of pleasure and shame. As he grew, he realised that he certainly had those desires, but that they were inclined in a quite different direction. When conversations in the barracks had turned to girls, he had always found it easy to pretend that his lack of interest was due to his dedication to his work; everyone had readily believed it, and indeed, he was mostly happy to concentrate on fulfilling his duties.

Nobody ever spoke about men who desired other men. Yevon's teachings explicitly forbade it, although they spoke against many things that had gradually become part of daily life in Bevelle in the hundreds of years since they were written. Nobody doubted the efficacy of certain machina these days, and there were rituals where corners could be cut quite profitably. But the temples and their followers still maintained an evident distaste for homosexuality. Auron had nonetheless managed to experiment a little during his days

in the travelling corps, when it had been easier to escape the watchful eye of the temples. Since his return to Bevelle and enlistment in the squad, such opportunities had been rarer, and he had certainly never mentioned his sexuality to any of his squadmates, as close as he was with all of them.

He had been looking at Braska for a long time now, and Braska had been looking back, with that same gentle smile. Braska could be trusted. He was so unlike Auron and the other monks of his acquaintance, but at the same time there was something about his presence that was somehow right. And if he, too, shared this secret: that meant they had an understanding. There was something about the two of them that bound them together.

Braska spoke, at last. "I was asked to choose between her and my position," he said. "It was the easiest decision of my life."

"Oh?" Auron managed, realising what a ridiculous conclusion he had come to.

"I haven't regretted it once," said Braska. "She's a thousand times more important to me than the temples."

Auron responded with what he hoped was a polite nod.

"She's an Al Bhed, you see," Braska added, somewhat hesitantly.

An sudden feeling of alarm instinctively came over Auron, but he succeeded in not letting it show on his face. For a priest of Yevon to love an Al Bhed: that was indisputably heretical.

But, he reflected, if he took exception to it himself, he would be a hypocrite: he knew better than most that love couldn't be dictated by the temples. If Braska had chosen this woman over his standing in the church, he must have valued her above anything else in his life, and Auron knew that such things had nothing to do with the boundaries that the teachings tried to impose.

"I see," said Auron. "I understand."

Braska still seemed unsure. "You –"

Auron nodded. "It's more complex than the temples say," he said. "Isn't it?"

The smile returned, and Braska relaxed visibly. "I knew you would," he said, almost to himself. "You're a good man, Auron. A better man than I am. You'll have to meet her sometime. And our daughter, too."

After that day, Braska seemed to open up a little about his wife and daughter; as long as none of the other monks were within earshot, he shared anecdotes about them with Auron over lunch, in which his admiration and love for them both were evident. Braska's daughter, Yuna, was only three, but he insisted that she already showed a talent for the healing arts. His wife worked with machina – that came as no surprise – and did a good trade with a number of the priests, all of it under the table, of course. Over the following months, Braska extended a few more vague invitations to Auron to come and visit them, but no definite plans were ever made, and Auron was usually

busy at the barracks anyway.

Things continued that way until one morning when Auron arrived for his duties and became aware of a sudden change in the squad personnel.

2

A teenage boy, dressed in the robes of a junior priest and clutching a staff that looked far too heavy for him to lift, accosted Auron as he was preparing to issue the orders, and introduced himself as a white mage in service at one of the temples of Bevelle.

Auron stared at him for a moment. “You’re a healer?” he said eventually, perplexed.

The boy gave him an unimpressed look, and said slowly, “That’s right.”

Auron gathered himself: just because he had been expecting Braska, that didn’t mean he should be acting like an idiot. “Very good,” he said. “Let me introduce you to the men.” As

he did so, he couldn't help wondering what was going on. If Braska was indisposed, wouldn't he have given Auron some warning? Perhaps he had been seconded to another squad last-minute? Or maybe this was just for today, and Braska would be back to explain next time.

But there was no sign of Braska all week: the boy came back every day, and Auron thought of asking him what was going on, but it seemed impolite and desperate. He probably knew nothing about the man he had replaced. Auron tried to convince himself this was normal – the healer was never a proper member of a squad, and before Braska, they had come and gone much more frequently – but each morning when the boy arrived he felt renewed disappointment, and, he had to admit, a little resentment that Braska had never informed him of his departure. He had thought they were friends, after all.

The rota took Squad Thirty-Six off active service for the weekend. Auron might normally have used the time to rest, but he felt on edge after a week of uncertainty about Braska's whereabouts; his mind continued to concoct increasingly far-fetched explanations for his absence. He headed to the officers' training hall for some distraction, venting his frustration by means of some vigorous swordwork.

After a long morning of strenuous practice, he was taking a break to catch his breath and wipe away some of the sweat when he noticed the middle-ranked officer who was his immediate superior making his way along the covered walkway at

the side of the hall. Immediately, his thoughts turned back to Braska. If anyone knew where he was, it would surely be Sontar: the man was responsible for the deployment of personnel in the squad, and must have made the arrangements for the appointment of the new healer. Auron quickly sprang up to intercept him, bowing respectfully as he made his greeting.

“Good morning, Auron,” Sontar replied. “Training hard, I see – aren’t you off today?”

“Just working on my technique,” Auron told him. “I thought I’d take the opportunity.”

Sontar nodded in approval. “And how’s Thirty-Six getting on? Keeping them busy?”

“They’re doing well,” he said. “Sir, if you don’t mind –” He looked around the room at the few other monks currently using the facilities. “I have something to ask you. It’s, er, a private matter.”

“Hm,” said Sontar. “Very well. Come to my office.”

He led Auron there, and Auron looked around the room with interest. If he himself was promoted again, he would no doubt be stationed in an office like this, a tiny room full of dusty old files in a corridor packed with more of the same. It was odd to think that further promotion would decrease his time on the battlefield: most officers beyond the junior ranks tended to deal almost exclusively with administrative duties. He squeezed onto the stool in front of Sontar’s desk as Sontar said, without ceremony, “Go on, then.”

"It's our squad's usual healer," Auron explained. "I was surprised to find he's been replaced this week. He's valuable to us, and I wondered if he had been redeployed, or whether something might have happened."

"Oh, yes," Sontar replied. "The notorious Braska. You're concerned about him?"

"I suppose so," said Auron carefully.

"I wouldn't waste your energy, quite frankly," said Sontar. "He's taken an indefinite leave of absence."

Auron blinked back at him. "Why?"

"Bereavement," said Sontar. "His wife. Sin," he added, when it became evident that there was no response forthcoming.

Auron craned his neck and stared up at the ceiling. He had lost people to Sin before – everyone had – friends, family, comrades in arms. But to lose one's *wife*. To be still in the prime of one's life, the parent of a young child, and to lose the very other half of one's soul. Auron had never loved anyone anywhere near enough to imagine what a partnership of that kind could be like, and for that reason, he knew that Braska's grief would be deeper than he could ever begin to understand.

He had to get a message to Braska somehow – not that it would be any real comfort, but he had to let Braska know that he was thinking of him. Slowly, he looked back at Sontar, and then asked, "Would you have his address, sir? I'd like to send a card, on behalf of the squad."

Sontar frowned. “A card? To Braska? You know his history, don’t you?”

Righteous indignation surged through Auron’s mind on Braska’s behalf; outwardly, he managed to remain calm. “Regardless of the offences he has committed,” he said, “I think it would be polite.”

“Was it politeness that got you to your station, Auron?” said Sontar, displaying what Auron considered to be an egregious lack of it himself. Sontar was normally quite personable: he clearly had strong opinions about Braska.

“I’m sure it was a factor, sir,” he replied impassively.

“I have the healers’ addresses on file,” said Sontar, gesturing to a pile of papers within Auron’s reach. “You can look him up, if you insist.”

Auron began to leaf through the papers; Sontar’s rather haphazard penmanship and the fact that Auron had never received much instruction in reading himself made it a laborious task, but he wasn’t about to ask for any help seeing as Sontar clearly found the whole endeavour so distasteful. Eventually, he found a sheet where he recognised the letters spelling Braska’s name, and deciphered the address written underneath, copying it out onto a new scrap of paper that Sontar handed to him with some reluctance.

In other circumstances, the act of going against his superior’s advice might have been more of a warning sign to Auron; he was dedicated to his career, after all, and had always made

sure to stay in line where he possibly could. On this occasion, he was too distracted by his worries to care very much about it. Writing out the address, he wondered idly why this had had such an impact on him. Sin struck often enough to make this kind of thing commonplace – but it was somehow different when Braska was the one affected. Auron pictured Braska's smile in his mind, that light, almost mischievous grin, and realised: he had to make sure that Braska would smile like that again one day.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, barely registering Sontar's look of disapproval before he stood up and left the office.



To Braska, he wrote, wishing again that he had had more training in reading and writing during his time in the initiate. There were rumours that the more senior officers received some instruction, although this was evidently deemed not to be a priority for those who still spent most of their time in the field.

My sincerest condolences, he added, *and those of Squad Thirty-Six, on your wife's passing.*

He sighed. Of course on his wife's passing, why else would he have been writing? And the more he looked at it, the less sure he was about his choice of vocabulary. Death by Sin's attacks was brutal and terrifying; she would hardly have slipped

away quietly in the way that *passing* implied. He was almost tempted to go back to the shop and get another card to start afresh with, but he doubted that he would be able to make much improvement on a second attempt.

If I can do anything to help, he wrote, *do let me know*.

He signed his name and looked down at the whole wretched message. The idea that he might be able to do something to help was ludicrous, of course. And how was Braska supposed to *let him know* – walk into the barracks and call for him? It was a stupid thing to have written, but it was done now, and there was nothing to do but address the envelope and hope Braska might get in touch.

Retrieving the scrap of paper with the address, he read through it again. The house was in a district not too far away, only just outside the citadel. The name of the street was familiar, too: he could picture the place. It certainly wouldn't take much to head over there in person.

That settled it. The card was an embarrassment, and he'd always been better at speaking than writing anyway. He creased it up, shoved it into one of the public waste bins, and made his way to Braska's house.



Auron knocked on the door; there was no answer. Perhaps Braska was out, he thought, staying with a relative. Or

maybe he was just too grief-stricken to come to the door – in which case, he probably ought to be left alone. He was about to turn away and resolve to come back when Braska had had more time to mourn, until he remembered Braska's daughter: she would only be three or four, and if her father was unable to answer the door to a visitor, who was to say he could properly take care of her at the moment? He had to make sure that somebody had taken responsibility for her, even if Braska's own wellbeing wasn't really his business.

He tried the handle, and the door opened. Stepping inside, he took note of his surroundings: the house was cramped and dark, in a way that might have been cosy in other circumstances. Shelves filled with tools and what appeared to be small service machina lined the hallway; the girl's scribbles were tacked onto them here and there.

"Braska?" he called tentatively, running his thumb over one of the drawings without really looking at it.

There was a silence, and then a quiet "Hello?" in reply.

He followed the source of the sound into a room further down the hall; it seemed pitch-dark until his eyes adjusted. The curtains were drawn, and Braska lay on the divan almost motionless, as if wounded from battle.

"Where's your daughter?" Auron demanded.

Braska looked up at him. "She's being looked after," he said, his voice weak and shaking.

Auron was glad to hear she was safe, but the state Braska

was in prevented him from feeling much relief. He knelt down beside him, trying not to grimace as his knees hit the hard wooden floor. "I'm," he said quietly, "I'm so very sorry."

Braska turned away from him and shielded his face with an arm. Auron could hear the small sounds that made it obvious he was weeping. He felt unusually uncomfortable: he had seen people crying like this before – he had assisted the bereaved in the aftermath of Sin's attacks, and there had been plenty of unpleasant occasions in the barracks over the years, when a monk had received bad news about their family – but somehow something was different on this occasion. Maybe it was because Braska was older than him, or because he was technically Auron's subordinate – maybe it was just because of who he was, and the fact that when Auron pictured Braska in his mind's eye, he could see him smiling and laughing, not lying broken in a darkened room. It was almost difficult to believe this was the same person.

"It's been nearly an entire week," Braska choked out, "and I still can't –"

"I know," said Auron desperately. "I know, I know." He reached out to caress Braska's shoulder, instinctively providing the physical comfort he knew Braska needed, and worked up and down with his hand as Braska shuddered under his touch.

"Can I get you anything?" Auron murmured, when Braska had mostly stilled. "Have you eaten?"

Braska took a few deep breaths before responding. "Not

since breakfast.”

“I’ll fetch something,” said Auron. “Your kitchen –”

“That way,” said Braska, with a vague gesture. “Thank you.” He closed his eyes and turned away again.

Auron left the room and headed in the indicated direction, trying to gather his thoughts now that he was no longer faced with the sight of Braska’s tear-stained face. It was monstrously unfair, he reflected. Braska was a good and kind man; he had thrown away his standing in the church to be with his wife, who must have been his one source of comfort after that; and now she had suddenly been ripped away from him. Sin was a terrible blight on Spira, and it had been far too long since any summoner had managed to tame it.

At least, now that Auron was here, he could lend a hand to Braska where he needed it. Practical assistance of this type was something he could do. It had always been that way, after Sin’s attacks: he could offer a few formulaic words of condolence to those who had lost loved ones, but anything more substantial than that was best left to the healers and priests. The monks took care of the practical matters, the need to determine what should be rebuilt first, financial reparations and dispatching any remaining Sinspawn.

He located the kitchen, and set about opening the cupboards, searching for a snack of some kind that he might be able to bring to Braska: some bread or fruit would do well. All he could find, though, was packets of unprepared ingredients:

rice, vegetables, some sauces and a substance that seemed to be meat. Braska's kitchen was due to be restocked – it was obvious now that Auron realised he probably hadn't left the house at all in the last few days – and there seemed to be nothing at all that was ready to eat.

Unfortunately, this was a situation where Auron had little experience. He had lived in the barracks almost all his life: first in dormitories with the other boys and young men, and now, as an officer, in more private quarters. One thing that had never changed was the eating arrangements: all the warrior monks ate in the same canteen, and domestic staff were contracted to prepare the food. Auron had never had cause to cook for himself, and, as a result, he had reached the age of twenty-two without learning the first thing about how to do it.

He returned to where Braska lay, and explained the issue. Braska listened, let out a strange sob that in happier circumstances might have been a laugh, and then pulled himself slowly into a sitting position. "I'll help," he said.

"You don't need to," Auron replied hastily. "Just tell me how I can put something together."

"No," said Braska, "that won't work. I need to see what you're doing, at least. It's all right," he said, as Auron opened his mouth to protest again. "I could do with the distraction." He stood, bent and slow like an old man, and followed Auron into the hallway, almost crumpling when he caught sight of his wife's tools, but he steadied himself against the wall and

headed into the kitchen.

Auron followed him in, standing awkwardly as Braska lowered himself into a chair. "You'll need to get some water on the boil," he said as he did so. "Strike a match – they're in that drawer, behind you –"

Following Braska's instructions was hardly a chore: Auron was used to taking orders from people he liked a lot less. Under Braska's direction, he set the rice on the hob to cook, sautéed the fish, and then began to chop a leek, slicing pieces off it somewhat haphazardly. Most of his experience using knives was in combat, where the goal was never to be elegant.

"Not like that," said Braska, standing, "you'll cut yourself. Here –" He took hold of the knife and showed Auron the correct technique, using his knuckles to hold the leek in place. Then he placed it back in Auron's hand, adjusting the positions of his fingers to demonstrate how he should be holding it, and out of nowhere Auron felt a frisson, a sudden desire for that touch to be prolonged –

No, he thought. Not this – not now. He knew that his feelings for Braska were in some way deeper than friendship – he had never quite admitted it to himself, but the events of the past week had made it impossible to deny. But quite apart from that, Braska's wife had just died, by Yevon, and here was Auron thinking thoughts that were highly inappropriate at the best of times. It was unfair on Braska, who deserved more respect and dignity than to be viewed through the prism of whatever feral

lust had suddenly taken hold of Auron's mind. "Sit down," he managed to say. "I told you, you don't need to exert yourself."

Braska nodded and returned to his chair, while Auron added the leeks to the pan where the fish was cooking. "How long will it take?" he asked, looking anywhere but at Braska.

"Ten minutes," Braska informed him.

"I'd like to use the bathroom," said Auron.

Braska explained where he would find it, and he headed up there as quickly as he could. Once he had firmly closed the door, he cursed under his breath: he was already half-hard. Since that brief touch, his mind had helpfully supplied him with a series of increasingly explicit images, and as much as he was enjoying it, this was very much neither the time nor the place. Ignoring the urge to pull down his uniform trousers and lay both hands on himself, he made for the sink instead and splashed cold water onto his face, trying to turn his thoughts towards something more sterile and settling on a mental gallery of the desperately boring wives of his superiors, all sour and humourless and categorically unattractive. Once his erection had receded, he sat on the toilet, closed his eyes, and murmured an invocation to Yevon, one that all the boys had been taught many years ago as a ward against impure thoughts. It had rarely worked before, but he needed all the help he could get.

He descended the stairs sheepishly, forgetting his embarrassment as soon as he caught sight of Braska again: the few

minutes to himself had allowed the brave face Braska was putting on to slip, and he was bent over the table with his head in his hands. Auron quietly placed the meal in front of him and took a seat opposite, much too concerned now to experience the merest flicker of the arousal that he had felt just a few moments earlier.

Eventually, Braska raised his head and began to pick at his food, working his way slowly through the dish. "Thank you," he mumbled after a couple of mouthfuls. "I'm sorry that you have to see this."

"It's not a problem," said Auron immediately. "I don't mind helping. Is anyone else visiting you?"

Braska shook his head. "Only the officials who came to collect Yuna. We don't have many friends, you see." He gestured towards a small half-assembled machina on the table.

Auron understood: although the people of Bevelle would happily trade with an Al Bhed if it suited them, they would hardly have wanted to associate with Braska and his wife on a more casual level. He really had made an enormous sacrifice for her sake: not just his career, but any social connections he may have once had as well. "Family?" he said cautiously, already anticipating the answer.

Braska shook his head. "They don't speak to me."

It was as Auron had expected: now that Braska's wife was gone, he really was completely alone. "I'll come back," he said. "I have duties at the barracks some evenings, but when I'm free,

I'll come and keep you company."

"That's very kind," said Braska, wiping new tears from his face with the back of his hand.

"I don't want you to be on your own," Auron explained.

He managed to find the time for a visit once every two or three days, after that. On each occasion, he cooked a meal for both of them, gradually expanding his repertoire under Braska's direction, and then they often played a few games of chess or cards so as to keep Braska busy until night fell. Sometimes, they merely sat silently in the living room while Braska made some progress with reading a novel and Auron struggled through a couple of articles in the newspaper. Over the course of Auron's visits, Braska's tearfulness soon gave way to a quiet melancholy: he remained uncharacteristically slow and subdued.

It was on one such evening, a week or two into this routine, that Auron found himself looking at Braska more closely.

3

BRASKA had a naturally slight figure, especially compared with the monks, whose frequent physical training meant they were all noticeably muscled. As Auron observed him, though, he found himself wondering: had Braska's cheekbones always stood out quite that much? Had his wrists always been quite that thin? He looked incredibly fragile. The more Auron looked, the more sure he was that he would have to confront him.

"Braska," he said, "have you been eating?"

There was a silence. Auron looked into Braska's eyes, and Braska gazed back with the listless expression that had become common on his face recently.

"Why do you ask?" he eventually replied.

"When did you last eat?" Auron said, forcing his voice to remain steady.

Braska paused again, and then said, "Breakfast."

"And that consisted of –" Auron prompted him.

"Toast," said Braska.

"Just toast."

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Just," – Braska lowered his head, visibly embarrassed – "one. One slice."

They continued to stare at each other for a while, until Auron said desperately, "Braska. You have to eat."

"Hm," Braska murmured, breaking eye contact.

"What are you doing to yourself?" Auron said.

Braska remained silent, skimming his fingertips over his arms nervously. "It's not worth holding on," he said at last. "Not worth the effort."

"How can you –"

"I'm a failure," he said. "I've never amounted to anything – I was supposed to be a missionary, and if anything, I made relations worse – and she was the only one who didn't mind. And with her gone –" He paused to rub his eyes. "There's nobody left who cares. There's no good impact I can have on this world by being in it."

“But your daughter!” Auron exclaimed, unable to prevent himself from raising his voice.

Braska shook his head. “They’re taking better care of her in the temple than I ever did. Better for her if I – if I’m out of the picture.”

“No,” said Auron. “No, this is nonsense. I can’t sit here and listen to this, I –” He returned with startling clarity to the practicalities. “You have to eat something. I’ll make something.” He stood, tense with anger and worry, almost knocking over the side table as he got to his feet.

Braska looked up at him. “I’m not hungry. I don’t feel well.”

“It’ll help,” said Auron, and marched off into the kitchen with his fists clenched.

Once there, he put some water on the boil for rice, and set about chopping a few vegetables, narrowly avoiding slicing into his own fingers with rage. Braska had totally the wrong idea – as if his own death was supposed to make anything better. The suggestion that nobody cared about him was totally wrong; in Braska’s grief he clearly hadn’t recognised Auron’s own concern. Auron was almost offended by it, but that reaction made him feel guilty, and that guilt was compounded by the shame he already felt about the desires that had awoken in him on his first visit to Braska’s house and that he had since tried to suppress.

He tossed the vegetables in to boil with the rice and stood

there fuming. It was easier to be angry than to admit to how worried he was. The steam rose up from the pan and he leant over it, letting it moisten and cleanse his face, feeling his cheeks become hot and damp.

He rubbed his face on his sleeve and went in to see Braska. Braska had fallen asleep: it was no surprise when he must have been so lacking in energy. Auron cleared his throat, and Braska slowly opened his eyes and looked at him, his expression unchanging.

“Food’s nearly ready,” said Auron. “Come into the kitchen.”

“I don’t think I can eat,” Braska mumbled, pressing a hand against his middle. “Stomach hurts.”

“Then have a potion first,” said Auron impatiently. “I’ll get you one. Come and sit down.”

He turned away, not wishing to hear further protest, and headed to the bathroom for a potion. Returning to the kitchen, he found it unoccupied, and set the potion down on the table before going back into the living room.

“Braska,” he said. “Please.”

Braska made no reply, looking away from Auron as he slowly rubbed his stomach.

Auron crossed the room, laid an arm over Braska’s shoulders, and murmured, “Come on.” He was surprised to find that Braska was quite willing to get up with this encouragement: he hauled himself into a standing position, and with Auron’s

arm now secure around Braska's back, they made their way into the kitchen.

Once Braska had sat at the table, Auron drained the pan and tipped its contents onto a plate. The result didn't look especially appetising: he'd left it on the boil too long, and he still wasn't a particularly proficient cook in any case. He set the plate in front of Braska and took a seat opposite.

Braska set the lid back on the empty potion bottle, and said, "You're not having any?"

"I ate before I came out," Auron replied. "But I'll have some if you like."

Braska nodded. "That would help, I think."

Auron rose to get himself a second plate, and scraped some of the food off Braska's onto his own. Not a huge amount: he'd hardly made very much, knowing that Braska wasn't going to eat a full portion. He sat back down with it and began eating, keeping an eye on Braska as he did so.

Braska took a few mouthfuls, then set his spoon down and clutched his stomach again. "The potion didn't do much," he said.

Auron eyed him. "Eating will."

Having finished his share, he watched as Braska worked through some more of his own, kneading into his stomach with his free hand; it seemed to take hours. After about a third of the food was consumed, Braska laid his spoon down for a second time. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't have any more."

"That's better than nothing," said Auron briskly, suppressing a less forgiving remark. He stood to clear the plates away. "You should go to bed if you don't feel well. I'll come back and see you in the morning."

"In the morning?" said Braska. "Aren't you going to the front?"

"Yeah," Auron replied as he scraped the rest of Braska's food into the bin. "I'll come before I start. Need to make sure you eat something first."

"Auron," said Braska. "You don't have to –"

Auron turned to face him. "It's not up for debate," he said. "I'll see you first thing tomorrow."

He made the time to visit Braska twice a day after that, five or six times more often than he had previously been seeing him. All it took was getting up earlier, going to bed later, and sometimes striking deals with the other junior officers to ensure his duties at the barracks could be rescheduled. He might have found it exhausting, had he had the time or inclination to consider that it might be; Braska's wellbeing was a much greater concern. Every morning and every evening, Auron prepared a meal for both of them and watched as Braska struggled through his: he never managed more than half of it. Still, at least he was eating something, which Auron suspected he wouldn't have been doing otherwise. Braska's mood began to fluctuate: sometimes he seemed almost his usual self in many ways; at other times he was lethargic and uncommunicative.

Auron tried his best to remain outwardly positive, hiding his worries during his visits and his time with the squad, only letting himself think about the matter when he finally arrived back at the room he shared at the barracks each evening, by which time he was too tired to be troubled by anything for long before falling asleep.

The worst of it came a week or two into this new schedule. Braska didn't seem notably bad in the morning, but on Auron's second visit he came to the door stooped and red-eyed, and he mumbled a lacklustre greeting that Auron could barely hear.

"Bad day?" said Auron.

Braska blinked, and tears rose to his eyes; he wiped them away with the back of his hand. "Yes," he said, and without another word he led Auron into the living room.

Auron sat down in the armchair, opposite where Braska had crumpled onto the divan, and waited for him to elaborate.

"The temple sent someone," Braska mumbled. "To see if I was fit to have Yuna back, and –" He gulped down a sob. "He said they'd keep her at least another month."

"Another month," Auron echoed. "Oh. I'm sorry." Privately, he concluded that the temple officers had made the right decision: Braska could still barely care for himself, as evidenced by Auron's continued visits.

Braska buried his face in his hands, weeping openly, and after hesitating for a moment, Auron moved across the room to sit next to him. He put an arm around Braska, and Braska

immediately leant into him, letting himself slide down so his head was against Auron's chest, Auron's other arm propping him up. Auron held Braska as he cried, stroking his hair for want of being able to think of something to say that might comfort him.

He waited until Braska seemed slightly calmer, and then said gently, "I'll make some dinner."

Braska made a noise that was probably the start of a protest, but Auron refused to listen, standing and making his way into the kitchen. He started to prepare the ingredients he had brought with him: fresh vegetables and salad leaves he had picked up at the market on the way. It had been a good decision: Braska probably wouldn't be able to handle more than a light meal tonight.

"Food's ready," he said, returning to the living room, and as he had half expected, Braska made no move to rise, merely looking up at Auron with a trepidatious expression.

Auron crossed the room to help him up, led him into the kitchen, and let him sit. Braska was passive and pliant in his grasp: it was the worst Auron had seen him since he had begun paying his daily visits. If any sustaining flame had been flickering inside Braska before, buffeted by the smallest breeze, it now seemed to have been snuffed out entirely.

Auron ate a few mouthfuls of his own dinner, not daring to look in Braska's direction for the first minute or so. Eventually, he steeled himself and lifted his head; Braska was look-

ing down at his plate, his hand trembling where it held the spoon, which rattled gently against the china, piled high with untouched salad leaves.

“Please,” said Auron, his voice quaking with desperation. “Just have some.”

Braska shook his head. “I can’t,” he whispered.

“Braska,” Auron begged. He had no idea what else he could do. If Braska was refusing to eat, there seemed to be no solution. It wasn’t as if there was anyone he could tell about this, anyone who cared about Braska enough to help, or who might be able to advise Auron – any kind of facility he might be able to take Braska to to get this sorted out, any white magic that might take away this strange sickness of the mind.

“It’s OK, Auron,” said Braska softly. “You don’t have to keep doing this. Let me just slip away quietly. Don’t worry about your duty to the squad – this kind of thing shouldn’t be your concern. Nobody will mind if I just fade away – there’s nobody left who cares.”

Auron couldn’t bear to hear him say it; dropping his spoon, he buried his head in his hands despondently. How was he supposed to help Braska when Braska had so completely given up on himself? “You’re wrong,” he muttered, and found that he was becoming angry, lowering his hands from his face and balling them into fists as he looked back at Braska. How dare he write himself off like that; how dare he assume that nobody cared about him enough for it to be worth staying alive? Did he

really think Auron's visits were the result of nothing more than obligation? "You're wrong," he said again; he was speaking unnecessarily loudly now, but any chance of remaining calm was long gone. "People care about you. I know they do."

Braska shook his head. "You don't have to pretend. No point wasting your time on me."

"No!" Auron cried. "Just stop it – just shut up! How can you say these things, when I'm here every day – twice a day – you think I'm just doing that out of duty? I care about you, Braska – *I* care about you! Although when you're acting like this, I don't know why I even bother!"

He had risen to his feet, and said at least one thing he shouldn't have, he knew, but he had been too enraged to prevent it. He stood there, looking down at Braska, who looked surprised, perhaps even regretful – and he watched as Braska's expression hardened and retreated back into passivity.

"Then don't bother," said Braska, with a slow shrug.

"Fine," Auron growled, and he stormed out of the kitchen, through the front door, and into the street. He had to get away from Braska before he said something even more damaging, or worse, lashed out at him physically – he could feel himself losing control. A good swing at something with his sword would help, but he had left it at the barracks and there was nothing worth attacking anyway. He bent over instead, crippled by despair. Braska was suicidal, and all Auron could do was watch him waste away, keep visiting him with less and less effect un-

til he became too weak to stand, too weak to move, and eventually, to live – and then, what would Auron do? What would he say? What would happen to Braska’s little girl? What would happen to Auron, with the knowledge that all his attention to Braska had failed to prevent this, and with that absence creeping in at every moment of his life, too meaningful to ignore?

He groaned with frustration, clutching a gatepost to keep himself from falling to his knees. He still had the feeling that he had said something wrong – that he could have pulled Braska out of this if he had known what to do, instead of fumbling his way through the whole affair without a clue about how he could fix things if they didn’t start improving. He was so desperate that he was beginning to feel lightheaded, and there was a tightness in his chest when he drew breath. I’ve killed him, he thought. By Yevon, I’ve killed him.

And then, his head spinning and his legs beginning to give out, he heard it: Braska’s voice. Barely more than a whisper, but still Auron heard it through the pain, reaching him as clear as the temple bell: “Auron.”

He turned, stood, and saw Braska standing at his open doorway, his face streaked with tears again.

“Please don’t leave me,” Braska whimpered. “Don’t go. I need you.”

Auron made his way directly towards him, barely even conscious of his own actions. His purpose was suddenly, blindingly clear. Whatever Braska required, he would provide it.

Braska needed him.

He wiped the tears from Braska's face with his thumb, and murmured, "I'm here. I won't leave you."

After that, his duties were so simple. Braska needed to be put to bed: coaxed like a child into washing his face, handed his nightshirt to change into, supported with a firm hand as he crawled under his blanket. All the while, Auron kept repeating his promise not to leave, caressing Braska gently as a reminder that he was there and would continue to support him. When Braska lay down in his bed, mumbling an entreaty to Auron to stay with him even as he slept, Auron quietly sat down next to him in the space his wife would have filled, keeping a hand on Braska's shoulder as Braska gave in to fitful sleep.

Auron must have fallen asleep quickly as well; the next thing he knew, the dawn light was filtering in through the blinds that he had neglected to close. He was still in a half-sitting position, with Braska's head resting against his chest; Auron's own had slumped forward to meet it, Braska's hair tickling his nostrils. As Auron drew his head up, he felt a sudden ache in his neck: it had certainly not been the most comfortable way to sleep. He raised one hand towards his neck to massage it, keeping the other where it had landed during the night, tight around Braska's arm.

Not long afterwards, Braska stirred, and then opened his eyes, turning to face Auron in alarm. "Oh, goodness," he said. "Auron, I forgot you were – I'm sorry –"

"It's OK," Auron mumbled, half-asleep again.

"No," said Braska, "you'll be late. You're on duty today, aren't you?" He was scrambling into a sitting position, rearranging the folds of his nightshirt self-consciously.

"I'll stay," said Auron. "If you want. This is more important."

Braska shook his head. "I'm feeling better today," he said. "The worst is over, I promise."

"I'll make breakfast," Auron told him, "and decide after that." That, at least, would give him some measure of how Braska was really feeling.

He observed Braska over breakfast: he was eating, not a lot, and clutched at his stomach with his free hand, but it was an improvement on last night and no worse than the previous morning. It was enough to convince Auron that nothing terrible would happen if he left Braska for a few hours. He set off hastily, with a promise to return in the evening, and stopped off at the barracks for a quick change of clothes: sleeping in his off-duty uniform had given him a strange, stale feeling. His neck and back still ached after having slept sitting up, and he wasn't as quick to get ready as he might have been; arriving at the city border, he found that he was late, and that his deputy had already issued orders to the squad in his absence. He slotted into one of the teams discreetly and joined the fighting – the fiends were particularly relentless that day and there was little chance to talk. It suited him: he wasn't in the best mood,

and he didn't fancy having to explain why.

At lunchtime, the relief squad took over, and he found himself face-to-face with Lutria over the meal, despite his best efforts to avoid having to talk to any of the members of his own squad.

"Not like you to be late," she said, blunt as always. "What's up?"

He shook his head. "Personal things. Won't happen again."

"Come on, Auron," she said. "You're so secretive these days."

"I am not," he protested half-heartedly.

She snorted. "You bloody well are. Used to tell each other everything, didn't we? What's needling you?"

Her questioning exacerbated his general irritation. He was still stiff and achy, having asked the healer for a Cure spell for his back that had had little effect – the so-called mage was just a boy, barely even able to deal with battle wounds. He was worried, of course, about Braska, hoping that he wouldn't deteriorate over the course of the day, counting the minutes until he was off duty and would be able to go back and check on him.

"Well, it's not like that anymore," he retorted, unable to remain polite. "In case you'd forgotten, I'm the squad commander. You ought to be showing me some respect."

"Yevon," Lutria muttered. "Fine," she said, at a normal volume. "I'll make sure to do that, *sir*."

He expected her to walk off, but she stayed, eating her lunch mutinously without sparing him a glance, which was worse somehow. The silence at least afforded him the opportunity to worry about Braska without interruption, and by the time she stood up and stalked off he barely noticed.

A few hours later he was on his way back to Braska's house, in no better a mood. A fiend had delivered a nasty wound to his sword arm during the afternoon's fighting, and he'd had to go and see the healer again; the boy had cast a spell so useless that it had barely sealed the wound, and Auron had lost his patience with him, saying things so callous that tears had sprung to the boy's eyes. He suspected there would be another replacement the next day.

If Auron hadn't been expected at Braska's house, he would have taken a potion or two and then gone to the training hall and smashed his sword into something until he couldn't feel his limbs anymore: that was his usual technique for relieving tension. As it was, he had no choice but to visit Braska despite his bad temper.

Braska opened the door with a weak smile; Auron was more surprised by the strong smell of food that wafted towards him. "You're cooking," he said, dumbly, as Braska let him in.

Braska shrugged. "Thought I should start. And I imagined we'd be glad of some variety, after days of your limited repertoire."

He was smiling, but Auron couldn't bring himself to do the

same; he merely nodded miserably.

“Oh, Auron,” said Braska, his face falling. “It was a joke.”

“I know,” said Auron. “Sorry. Just – a hard day at the front today.” It was nothing compared with Braska’s situation, and he felt guilty for even mentioning it, but he felt too worn out to censor himself.

“Sit down,” said Braska, ushering him into one of the kitchen chairs. He stood there looking down at him contemplatively. “Are you feeling all right? Would some magic help?”

“Don’t trouble yourself,” Auron said.

Braska shook his head. “No, let me. I’ll get out of practice otherwise.” He extended a hand to Auron’s forehead: he had forgotten how refreshing its cool touch felt against his skin.

“Just a Cure spell,” Braska mumbled, leaning in. “Help you relax.”

Auron felt the hand tense a little, and not a moment later he experienced the familiar feeling of the magic washing over him: a mere few weeks without Braska at the front had made him forget the intensity of it. The healers they had brought in to replace him were such poor substitutes. He tried to concentrate on this thought to maintain some dignity, instead of collapsing into the spell and making his reaction obvious. It was hard not to do so, though, when the magic managed to dispel the pain that had begun that morning in his neck and slowly spread to his head, back and shoulders over the course

of the day. He leant back instead of forward, grateful for the hard chair to keep him in an upright position.

“Better?” said Braska.

Auron found his voice. “Yes, so much better. Thank you.”

“It’s the least I can do,” Braska assured him, turning back towards the stove to serve the dinner. Auron looked down at the steaming plate set in front of him: the food looked much more appealing than anything he had managed to make over the past few weeks. He dug in, trying not to dwell on the far smaller size of the portion that Braska had given himself.

Braska slowly consumed a few mouthfuls, and then set down his spoon. Auron could feel his gaze on him; he kept his own eyes lowered and concentrated on his food.

“I’m sorry about last night,” Braska said eventually, and Auron reluctantly lifted his head.

“I’m the one who should be apologising,” he said.

“Maybe,” said Braska, and then he shrugged. “Perhaps not. You said things I needed to hear.”

“Things that are true,” Auron insisted. “I’m not just coming here out of duty. I meant it when I said that.”

“I’m trying to convince myself,” Braska replied, “that I’m worth the effort.” His smile wavered, and he rubbed his face on his sleeve.

Auron laid a hand on Braska’s arm, and said simply, “You are.”

Braska brought his other hand to rest on Auron's, gently stroking it with his thumb for a moment, and then drew back, seeming embarrassed. "You'll come back tomorrow, won't you?" he asked.

"Of course," said Auron.



The next day, Braska seemed still more like his usual self when he answered the door to Auron: the sudden turnaround in his mood was almost alarming. "Auron," he said enthusiastically, ushering Auron into the living room. "I've been thinking. I've worked out what I need to do."

"Oh?" Auron replied as they took seats opposite each other. "I'm ... glad to hear it?"

"Yes, yes," said Braska; he was restless, buzzing with nervous energy, nearly knocking over an empty mug on the table beside where he sat. "I've realised what it is – my path. I'm going to become a summoner."

He was smiling, waiting enthusiastically for Auron's reaction, and Auron felt as if somebody had struck his chest with the hilt of his own sword. Somewhere inside his mind, he was falling backwards; he had taken one wrong step and was heading into the chasm, dark and endlessly deep –

He steadied himself. "A summoner."

“Yes,” said Braska eagerly.

“You mean,” – there were temple summoners, who took a single aeon and were content to live out their days performing sendings, but he already knew that wasn’t what Braska was getting at – “you’re going to journey.”

Braska nodded. “I’ve realised: this is the path Yevon has ordained for me.”

“You’re going to sacrifice yourself.”

Braska nodded again, although his smile seemed less sure.

“But –” What about me, Auron thought, and he felt so ashamed of himself for letting that be the most important thing in his mind. “What about your daughter?” he said.

“I’m doing it for her sake,” said Braska, leaning forward conspiratorially. “I don’t want any more of this destruction. Little girls shouldn’t have to grow up in constant fear of Sin. If I can give her a few years of peace – that will be the best thing I can do for her, as her father. She’ll understand.”

“No,” said Auron, finding himself growing more furious by the second. “That’s not why you want to do this. You’re doing it because you want to die. You want to throw away your life, and you think there’s something about doing it in the service of Yevon that’s supposed to make it more noble –”

“The temples would call that blasphemy,” said Braska softly.

“I don’t care,” said Auron, choosing not to think about what that might say about his own priorities. “You’re still grieving –

you're not thinking straight. You're not doing this for the right reasons."

Braska drew back with a sigh. "I can assure you that I am. But I know I can't convince someone as stubborn as you." He grinned minutely as he said it: it was clearly meant as a little dig, a nod to their knowledge of each other. Auron certainly didn't smile back: it was about the last thing he felt capable of doing. He was closer to grabbing Braska and punching some sense into him – were it not for Braska's much more slender figure and the fact that he was quite clearly untrained in physical combat, he might have actually done it.

"I'll wait," Braska went on. "Until you realise I'm not just doing this out of grief. I won't even speak of it until then. How long should I give you?"

Auron blinked, trying to understand. "You mean –"

"I won't talk about becoming a summoner again," Braska said, "until enough time has passed for you to be satisfied that I'm doing it for the right reasons. How long do you need – two months? Three?"

However much time Braska could give him, it would never be long enough; but he was expecting some concrete number as an answer. Double his original estimate seemed as sensible a stopgap as any, so Auron said, "Six."

Braska frowned momentarily, but soon resumed a calm expression. "Right. That's fine. I'll wait six months before I do anything about it. You won't hear anything more from me.

And – I’m sorry to have caused you distress.”

Unsure of how to respond to the apology, Auron merely shook his head. Distress didn’t seem an accurate term, although the more he thought about it, the more he realised just how upset he was at the thought of Braska taking the summoner’s pilgrimage. He tried to put the thought out of his mind as he followed Braska into the kitchen, as Braska cooked, and as they ate dinner in companionable silence.

“I’ve decided to resume my duties,” Braska remarked as soon as Auron had finished his food. “At the front – I can’t mope around here forever. I’m going to go to the barracks before the shifts start tomorrow and ask to be reinstated.”

“Are you sure you’re ready?” Auron asked.

Braska nodded. “It’ll help me take my mind off things, anyway. Does no good to be alone with my thoughts all day.”

“And you’ll come back to Thirty-Six?”

Braska seemed momentarily surprised by the question, but then he said, “If there’s room for me. I suppose it depends where the vacancies are.”

As soon as he could excuse himself, Auron all but ran back to the barracks, ready to convince Sontar of the current squad healer’s ineffectiveness.

4

BRASKA was back in the squad the next morning, a little more subdued than most of the monks would remember him, but Auron was immensely reassured to have his squad under the care of a healer who actually knew what he was doing – he told himself unconvincingly that that was the only thing he was relieved about. The squad soon fell back into their usual pattern of mostly ignoring Braska, which Auron had never quite understood: there was something about him, in Auron’s view, that made him difficult not to take notice of. Nonetheless, everyone seemed happy enough with the resumption of the previous arrangements, Braska and Auron began to spend their lunch breaks together and talk about inconsequen-

tial matters once again, and Braska slowly started to eat larger portions until there was nothing at all abnormal about his diet. His daughter was returned to him soon afterwards, and Auron ceased his visits now that Braska was over the worst: he saw him often enough at the front.

There were moments, of course, when Braska became caught up in his grief, and Auron found him with a faraway look in his eyes and either let him have a moment alone or gave him a brief reassuring touch on the arm or shoulder as the occasion saw fit; but as time passed, those times became rarer, and if the other members of the squad had noticed them in the first place they never remarked on it. Soon, in many ways, things were almost indistinguishable from the way they had been before, with only two differences.

The first of these was Auron's knowledge that he definitely had feelings for Braska that went beyond friendship. It was something he had coped with before: embarrassing crushes on older men in the company, swordwork instructors, one or two of the priests who had used to officiate at prayers. These things passed after a while: he would just have to be careful not to humiliate himself.

The second difference was in the way Braska performed his healing magic: for a reason that Auron found difficult to discern, he seemed to have become more tactile. Spells for which he had previously just waved a hand now seemed to necessitate actual physical contact for a moment or two. Sometimes,

once the magic had done its work, there would be a little caress of the area where the wound had been, or a brief rub to the back. Auron tried steadfastly to ignore the change, but as it happened more and more often, he came to realise that Braska hadn't started behaving this way with any other members of the squad – and, more importantly, that these moments were beginning not to be restricted to times when Braska healed him. Even at lunch, when they collected their portions, Braska was always closer than he had been, sometimes close enough to be almost leaning against him, and he never seemed concerned by it; when they said goodbye and returned to their separate duties, Braska would sometimes give Auron a quick touch to the wrist, and Auron would feel the imprint of his fingers there like a flame.

They knew each other far better than when Braska had worked with the squad before, of course; they had seen each other much more vulnerable than any situation on the battlefield might have induced. They were undoubtedly closer to each other now than to anyone. Auron told himself that that was all these moments signified – Braska was the kind of person who enjoyed being physically near his companions when he knew and trusted them. He kept any other thoughts firmly sealed at the back of his mind, only letting himself acknowledge them in the evenings when he was alone and indulging in some bodily relief, imagining that Braska might land those brief touches a little lower, a little longer, and taking the ut-

most care not to let Braska's name fall from his lips when he found himself close to the edge.

The months went on in the same way, and Auron learnt to make peace with his desires. One spring lunchtime, Braska sat down opposite Auron, placing his food on the table in front of him, and said, "I don't suppose you know what day it is."

"Um," said Auron, between mouthfuls of fish. "The third?"

"I thought you might forget," said Braska, carefully loading his own fish onto his spoon. "It's six months to the day since I told you I was planning to become a summoner."

The fish had suddenly become entirely flavourless in Auron's mouth; he recalled that day more clearly than he cared to. "Oh," he said.

"And my intention hasn't changed," said Braska. "I went to see the high priest this morning – I begin training next week."

"Oh," said Auron again, fighting the urge to spit the fish into his hand, and somehow managing to swallow it instead.

"When the time comes," Braska continued, "I wondered if you would consider being my guardian."

Auron said nothing this time.

"It would be a great honour," said Braska. "There's nobody I trust more in Bevelle." And he had the audacity to smile.

That was the final straw: Auron was abruptly overtaken by the desire to slap that smile right off Braska's face. Instead, he got to his feet sharply, abandoning the rest of his lunch and ignoring Braska's puzzled attempts at calling him back, heading

outside where he would be able to vent his sudden, shameful fury with a few swordstrokes.



He attempted to avoid Braska over the next few days: Braska had clearly noticed this, and was taking his lunch elsewhere so as to avoid conflict. It became difficult to maintain this mutual evasion of each other when, a few days later, Auron took a blow to the arm during a fight.

“I’ll fetch Braska,” said Lutria, once the offending fiend was taken care of.

“No need,” Auron replied. “A potion will do.”

She cast a sceptical look towards the wound on his arm, which he was attempting, fairly unsuccessfully, to staunch using the material the fiend had ripped away from his surcoat. “Really? It looks pretty bad. You’d need at least three to –”

“I’ll have three then,” he said.

“I’ll just get Braska.”

“No!” he said as she made to leave, and she turned back, looking incredulous. “Don’t,” he added. “I – it’s an order. I order you not to.” He could hear a tremor in his voice as he said it: it was from the pain of the wound, he told himself, nothing more.

Lutria handed over the potions one by one, waiting for Auron to gulp each of them down before passing the next. “Fine,”

she said as she did so. "If you're having some kind of spat, it's not my place –"

"Not a spat," Auron mumbled between mouthfuls, watching as the wound rapidly sealed itself. Lutria had been right: after two potions, it wasn't quite healed, but the third sufficed for his skin to close over completely. It was a waste of resources, certainly: potions weren't always easy to come by, and it was better to save them for situations where there was no access to a healer. But Auron still couldn't yet face Braska, and the knowledge that his face was adorned with the smile of a man who was still determined to pursue his own death.

He was scheduled to be off duty for the next couple of days, and was relieved to know he wouldn't run into Braska in that time: it made him able to fight without distraction, or at least with less distraction than usual. He headed to the officers' training hall to engage in some intense swordwork practice, losing himself in the forms he had known for years. He was so engrossed in the act that it took him a few seconds to realise that Sontar had entered the hall and was waiting outside his space, clearly keen to talk to him.

"Ah, Auron," said Sontar, smiling inscrutably. "Just the man. Would you have time for a quick word?"

"Of course, sir," Auron said, sheathing his sword and following Sontar into his office, where he took a seat among the piles of paperwork that seemed to have increased over the last few months.

“Your healer was in to see me earlier,” said Sontar dismissively.

Auron gave a curt nod, trying not to betray anything with his expression.

“He was telling me about his plans to become a summoner,” Sontar went on. “He said you aren’t happy about it.”

“He asked me to be his guardian,” said Auron helplessly.

“And you think you’re not up to the job?”

“It’s not that,” said Auron.

“Well, I’m glad we’re in agreement there,” said Sontar. “I know you of all people would manage the journey. So –” He paused. “You don’t want him to go at all?”

“It’s a waste,” said Auron. “Of a life.”

“On the contrary,” Sontar replied. “The call to become a summoner is the highest honour Yevon can bestow. I was doubtful that someone like him would really experience that vocation, but his commitment seems genuine. If he can give his life for us – there’ll be many a man in these very barracks taking back everything he once said about our friend Braska.”

“His life isn’t worth less than any other,” said Auron angrily. “Just because he didn’t do what the temples expected of him –”

“The highest honour,” Sontar repeated, cutting across him. “Especially for someone of his status.”

Auron clenched his fists under the table. This conversation was going nowhere: Sontar saw Braska as nothing more than a willing soul, ready to sacrifice itself in Yevon’s service – and,

of course, he *was*, but things were more complex than that, for reasons Auron knew he wouldn't be able to articulate.

"Are you struggling with your faith?" said Sontar, more gently.

The question blindsided him: he couldn't even contemplate it for a moment. The idea that he might not be fully devoted to Yevon was absurd. Nobody had ever asked him such a thing before: his rapid ascension through the ranks of the monks had always made it quite clear that he was not only wholeheartedly committed to his position, but gifted directly with the inspiration of Yevon in a way that eluded many of his contemporaries. "I don't think so," he said, and immediately wished he had given a less non-committal answer.

Sontar shook his head. "You're overworked," he said. "I'm going to sign you off for a while – how long will you need? Two days?"

"I don't need time off," said Auron instinctively.

"Three days?" said Sontar. "Four? A week?"

Auron sighed. "Three days will be ample."

"Good," said Sontar, making a note of it. "Take the time to rest. Speak to Yevon – he will guide you. Clear a path for him in your heart."

"Yes," said Auron, too distracted to pay attention to Sontar's guidance. "May I go now, sir?"

Sontar nodded, and Auron stood and made his way out.

On the way to his quarters, he was still reeling – he had never been signed off from duties before. It felt like a personal failure, having to admit that he was fallible. He still felt shocked after being asked about the stability of his faith: nothing gave him reason to believe that his relationship with Yevon had changed at all since his first initiation into the church.

Except, he reflected, the way he had reacted to Braska's announcement of his intentions, and to his request that Auron be his guardian. A man of Yevon ought to celebrate the fact that anyone was experiencing that vocation, but twice now, Auron had done quite the opposite: he had positively recoiled, knowing that it was Braska. Maybe that meant he was deluding himself about his true priorities.



Auron woke up the next morning and found he had succumbed to a cold, reluctantly conceding that Sontar's diagnosis of overwork may not have been unfounded. Despite a gradually worsening headache and a seemingly constant need to blow his nose, he made his way to a quiet spot in the barracks and settled in for some silent contemplation. Once there, he tried his best to open his mind and commune directly with Yevon, directing as much concentration as he could into his search for guidance.

He kept thinking about Braska, picturing him as a journeying summoner. Braska had made up his mind, and begun his training; if Auron refused to accompany his pilgrimage, he would be forced to take somebody else as guardian instead. Perhaps one of the other warrior monks, none of whom appeared to care for him particularly. Or maybe he would hire a contractor, a Crusader or self-taught swordsman looking for a few quick gil.

None of these people would really care about Braska's safety; none of them would be as skilled a fighter as Auron was, either. He tried to picture the end of the pilgrimage, imagining for a stupid moment that Braska might make it all the way with his progress entirely unhindered. Would Auron really rather it was some incompetent faceless individual kneeling over Braska as he took his last breath? No, he thought, blowing his nose for the umpteenth time. If that end had to come, and someone had to be there, he wanted it to be him.

Auron spent the next two days resting, hoping to get over the worst of the cold before he was due to go back to the squad. Having concluded what he had about Braska's pilgrimage, he felt spiritually renewed: he had a new perspective on Yevon, on his own duty to Spira, and on how he needed to proceed from this point.



He returned to the squad with a mixture of confidence and apprehension.

“Good to see you back, sir,” said Lutria affectionately. “What’re our orders?”

He dispatched them all with ease, sending them off in pairs until they had all headed to their positions and Auron found himself face to face with Braska.

Braska nodded at him, seeming unsure. Then he spoke. “I’m glad to see you. I was worried that you might have left us.”

“I was ill, that’s all,” said Auron, grateful that his lingering cough could act as evidence.

“Nothing serious, I hope?” Braska asked him.

“Just a cold,” said Auron.

“That’s good,” said Braska, and paused. “Auron. I’m sorry I hurt your feelings last week.”

“I,” said Auron, “I’m sorry I got angry. You know I can be short-tempered sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” Braska echoed, smirking.

Auron let himself relax into a smile. “Most of the time.”

They stood there for a moment, sharing a familiarity that Auron had almost forgotten, until Braska said, “I realise it upsets you when I talk about my intentions. I won’t bring it up in future.”

“No,” said Auron. “I’ve been thinking about it: I understand now. There’s nothing that will discourage you from this, is

there?"

"I'm afraid not," said Braska.

"Then, if you'll still have me," Auron replied hesitantly, "I'd be honoured to be your guardian."

He watched as Braska broke into a beatific smile. "Oh, that's wonderful, Auron," said Braska. "Wonderful, wonderful. I'm – I mean, are you sure? Really?"

Auron nodded; if there had been any lingering doubt, Braska's delight had dispelled it. "Yes," he said. "I realise how much this means to you now. I couldn't stand by and let someone else do it." He wondered if he had admitted too much.

"Thank you," Braska said breathlessly, "thank you so much," and he rushed forward to embrace Auron, his healer's robes engulfing him in a rush of potion-scented musk.

They returned to the routine of having lunch together as if nothing had happened between them, and Auron had to admit that it was easier fighting when one wasn't trying to avoid one's assigned healer. A week or so later, after Auron had repeatedly assured Braska that he didn't mind hearing about his plans to become a summoner, Braska invited Auron to spend the evening with him.

"We're off duty tomorrow, aren't we?" he explained. "I've got a few bottles of something nice – to celebrate starting my training. Come over after I've put Yuna to bed?"

That was how Auron found himself heading to Braska's house for the first time in months, and in what were, for Braska at least, much happier circumstances. Braska welcomed him with a warm embrace – he'd evidently started on the wine already – and steered him to the divan in the living room, where they sat down together.

Auron listened while Braska told him animatedly about the training he had started. They were having him cast spells with a staff, which he resented; he'd always felt a greater affinity to magic when he cast with his hands, he explained. But the temples deemed that sort of thing improper, and he would need a staff to call the aeons, so he was having to go over a lot of basic magical training in order to get used to it.

"Maybe I was naive," he said, "but I thought they'd be training me to do sendings, not going over spells I've practically been able to cast in my sleep for the last fifteen years."

"I suppose there has to be a reason why the training takes so long," Auron pointed out between sips of wine: it wasn't a kind of alcohol he was particularly experienced with, but he'd been able to tell from his first mouthful that this was much more expensive than anything he had ever tasted.

The wine was making him feel quite drunk, strangely enough: he must have had more than he thought. Normally, alcohol had a negligible effect on him: it was a running joke in the squad that Auron was often the only one to remain sober on a night out, and had historically been the person who

had had to deal with the fallout from his comrades' drunken decisions. There must have been something about this wine that was particularly potent, unless his condition was merely a result of the situation that he found himself in.

Braska was also clearly affected: he had become even more tactile than usual, running one hand slowly over Auron's back, the other sometimes on the stem of his wine glass and at other times coming to rest on Auron's knee. If Auron had been sober, he would have attempted to maintain a respectful distance; as it was, tempted by long-suppressed desires, he let himself lean into Braska's touch minutely, and when he extended an arm himself to tentatively arrange it around Braska's back, Braska gave a little blink of surprise, and then smiled, and adjusted Auron's arm with his hand so it was against him more snugly.

"You know what," he said jubilantly, "when I'm a summoner and you're my guardian, you'll have to call me sir!"

"As if you've ever addressed me that way," Auron replied, nudging his shoulder affectionately.

"I have, haven't I?" Braska asked him. "Once, surely?"

"Never," said Auron, and Braska began to laugh loudly and didn't seem to be stopping, which made Auron laugh as well, until they were both leaning against the wall, still holding onto each other, the laughter dying away into quiet contentment.

The fog brought on by the wine made it difficult to think of much to say after that. Braska fell asleep soon afterwards,

Auron's arm still trapped behind his back; with nothing else he could do, Auron found himself drifting off as well.

When he woke, he felt a bit more in control of himself, and gently extracted his arm from between Braska and the wall, watching Braska's eyes slowly flutter open at the disturbance.

"It's late," Auron murmured. "We're falling asleep – I should go back to the barracks."

"Stay," said Braska. "Will you?" He tightened his grip around Auron's shoulder. "Yuna's in her bed, and I ... I'd like it if you stayed."

"You're drunk," said Auron flatly.

Braska huffed out a quiet laugh. "Hardly. It's worn off, anyway." He adjusted his position, raising a hand to Auron's head and working it slowly through his hair.

Auron looked into Braska's eyes, so bright and kind, and then lowered his gaze.

"It wouldn't be the first time," said Braska.

"That wasn't at all the same thing," Auron protested.

"Perhaps not," Braska murmured, before pressing a soft kiss to the side of Auron's head, above where his fingers lay.

Auron felt a rush of longing flood through his chest, and managed to stifle his sigh. Braska had certainly made his intentions clear now; but, he reminded himself, it could be the wine, and the affection he had for a dear friend. "If I stayed," he said carefully, "it would mean something."

“Yes,” said Braska, resting his nose gently against Auron’s head where he had kissed it.

“Is that what you want?” said Auron.

Braska drew back, inclined his head, and smiled, suddenly seeming shy; and, no longer able to restrain himself, Auron reached out to grip Braska’s chin, running his fingers over Braska’s jaw. He pulled him in, slowly at first but then faster, and closed the distance with his own mouth, meeting Braska’s while trying not to completely lose control of himself in his eagerness. He wanted to pin Braska to the floor and show him just how devoted he was; he wanted to ravish him until he was sated, pleased and panting against the floorboards. Most of all, he wanted to confirm to Braska that he had Auron’s heart, irrefutably and eternally.

They sat there, kissing as if they would never get the chance again, Auron’s hands gripping Braska tightly by the shoulders, pushing him against the wall. When they finally broke contact, Braska’s lips were red and moist, and he murmured, “Are you always that passionate?”

“I wanted to make it clear,” said Auron hoarsely, “how much you mean to me.”

Braska leant forward, peppering Auron’s face with gentle kisses, and Auron could no longer keep himself from sighing with longing and pleasure: this was what he had wanted for so long, and what he had scarcely dared to hope might be in store after Braska’s recovery, when the two of them had slowly

grown closer. Over the last few months, he had spent more evenings than he would be happy to admit thinking about what this might be like – the feeling of Braska’s body under his, these lips against his own, these hands – he had thought about it all so much that it was almost strange that there was anything novel about it, now that it was actually happening. But it was new, and it was more wonderful than his imaginings had ever suggested. Braska was his: the thought of it made his chest feel as if it was going to burst.

“Bed,” Braska murmured, pawing at Auron’s chest where his tunic met his skin, and Auron nodded breathlessly. They stood, somehow, and ascended the stairs towards Braska’s bedroom: it might have been an act prosaic enough to dull Auron’s excitement, if it had been any less of a blur. Almost before he knew it, he was lying in Braska’s bed, stripped to his underwear – and Braska had had a hand in that, peeling Auron’s tunic back from his shoulders before wreathing them with kisses; now he lay, gazing up at Braska as the latter disrobed – he was too overcome to think of assisting him in turn. At last, Braska lay down beside him, and Auron held him in his arms once again, this time unimpeded by the encumbrance of clothes; and he was kissing Braska once more, his lips tight against Braska’s mouth, pushing him back against the headboard in his eagerness to be close to him, to join with him and not let go.

He was rock-hard, of course, straining against his underclothes; that had been the case for some time. Breaking away

from the kiss, Braska lowered his hand towards Auron's hip, nodded towards the bulge, and murmured, "May I see?"

Auron hastened to free himself from his underclothes, and as soon as he had inched them down a little on both sides his erection sprang free, pointing unobtrusively towards Braska's face. "Oh," said Braska, withdrawing a little, his hand closing into a fist against Auron's side.

Touch it, touch me, Auron thought wildly. "Something wrong?" he managed to say instead.

Braska shook his head. "No, not – I just – I don't know how that'll ever fit inside me."

It was as if someone had lit a match at Auron's foot: a wave of burning desire rippled through his entire body, and it was impossible not to draw Braska into another tight embrace; he felt so exhilarated that it was almost as if the act was already being performed. Braska wanted Auron inside him; the thought of it aroused him more than he had ever anticipated. Between the kisses he was administering to Braska's neck, he managed to marshal his thoughts enough to say, "We don't need to do it yet – I'll wait until you're ready. We can take things slowly."

Braska hummed in assent: his relief was evident in the way his body relaxed. "I won't hurt you," Auron murmured, kissing him more sweetly now, holding back the full expression of his desire as Braska writhed under him so exquisitely. "I promise."

"Will you touch me?" Braska asked, and Auron almost gasped out loud with delight. "Yes, of course," he replied, try-

ing not to be completely overcome at the thought that Braska wanted this so much.

Four hands made short work of Braska's underclothes, and soon he was totally naked: Auron stared in delight at his erection, slender and glorious. "You're so beautiful," Auron told him. "Perfect."

He reached out towards it, and began to stroke, reminding himself to be slow and gentle to start with, even though Braska's twitches and little yelps of pleasure were encouraging him to act otherwise. His own dick was already wet with pre-come, and he laid his other hand on it to give it some of the satisfaction it had been craving, tugging clumsily at the shaft as he focused what little precision he was able to muster on Braska.

Slowly, gently, he drew his thumb across Braska's scrotum, and Braska reacted instantly with a shuddering moan, his whole body quivering in delight. "Auron –" he gasped.

Auron silenced him with more kisses; once he drew back, Braska's eyes opened, and he reached out towards Auron's crotch. "Let me –"

He shook his head; he was certain that he would reach the point of orgasm as soon as Braska laid a hand on him. "Turn over," he said instead, and Braska obediently shifted so that he was facing away from Auron. After adjusting his grip on Braska's dick, Auron moved in closer so that his own was wedged firmly against Braska's back, and he began to rock gen-

tly up and down, matching his motions with the hand that now reached across Braska to take him from the front, growing steadily more excited as he worked into a rhythm with the accompaniment of Braska's soft gasps.

"Is this your first time with a man?" he muttered into Braska's ear, almost failing to get the whole sentence out in one go.

"Yes," Braska began, but the word changed into an incoherent vocalisation, and the sound of his total loss of control almost sent Auron over the edge; he rocked against him harder, faster, drawing his hand up and down Braska's dick like there was no tomorrow; he was going to make Braska come, he was going to give Braska the most amazing orgasm of his life, show him just how much he meant to him – he was – Braska was –

Auron came first, gasping out Braska's name against his neck; for a moment, he tasted all the joys in Spira, and was dimly aware of his own moans of delight, his hot breath against Braska; through the haze of orgasm he forced himself to keep working at Braska's dick until moments later Braska too passed over the edge with a final shudder, crying out in elation, softening in Auron's hand.

They lay still for a few moments, breathing together, until Braska quietly turned to face Auron, nestling into his embrace with a gentle kiss, and Auron half-reluctantly stirred from his sudden drowsiness to ask, "How was that?"

"Wonderful," said Braska, and kissed him again.

As their bodies pressed together, Auron felt the stickiness on his stomach, and he murmured, “Do you want to clean up?”

“Wait until morning,” said Braska, who sounded half-asleep already. “If you don’t mind?”

Auron hummed his assent, pressing an uncharacteristically soft kiss to Braska’s cheek, and they drifted into sleep together.

5

HE awoke at dawn, with Braska still in his arms; Auron was quite sure he had never seen anything so beautiful. As the morning light filtered in, he stroked Braska's hair and waited for him to wake, marvelling at how nearly three years of gradually increasing friendship had come to this; to something he had wanted so much that he had never dreamt it might actually happen.

Running his fingers gently across Braska's shoulders, his thoughts turned to the reason he had come here in the first place: Braska had begun his training as a summoner. Auron was to be his guardian. And with sudden clarity, he realised what his aim should be. If Braska passed his training and em-

barked on a pilgrimage, he could not die. Even if he was to obtain the Final Aeon and face Sin. Auron knew, now, that he would do anything to prevent Braska's death; if it came to it, he would find another way; he would defy the teachings as much as he had to, as long as it might let Braska survive. Now that Braska was his, he would never be able to give him up, not even for the good of all Spira.

The light slowly grew stronger, and Braska eventually awoke, shifting in Auron's embrace. "Good morning," he murmured.

"Morning," Auron replied, greeting him with a kiss.

Braska frowned, seeming distracted. "We are off duty today, aren't we?"

"Yes," said Auron, with a brief chuckle. "Although I'll be expected at the barracks in time for midday prayers."

"OK," said Braska. He reached out to caress Auron's hair briefly, and then hauled himself out of bed, slipping on his nightshirt. "I need to get Yuna ready for school," he explained. "Won't be a moment."

Auron watched as he left the room, and then closed his eyes, savouring the memory of Braska lying in bed beside him. He was half-hard again, unsurprisingly; he wondered whether it would be uncivil to touch himself here, in Braska's bed. If it would help prolong the memory of last night, it was a risk he was certainly happy to take. He reached out to his crotch, taking hold and remembering how it had felt to finally see his de-

sires fulfilled, humming into the pillow as he pictured Braska, so earnest and loving, his face flushed with arousal –

The door creaked open, and Auron stilled his motions, grateful to be covered by the blanket while Braska reached over to hand him a towel. “I thought you might want to, er, clean yourself up,” he said.

Auron took it with a murmur of thanks, and once Braska was gone again, he did his best to wipe last night’s emissions from his stomach before turning back to the act of pleasuring himself. He made short work of it, settling into a rapid back-and-forth, his other arm pressed against his mouth in case he forgot himself completely and cried out; this was leagues better than the many other times he had masturbated over the thought of Braska, now that he had experienced the real thing, and he just about had the presence of mind to gather the towel around his crotch and come into it instead of straight onto the sheet.

Braska returned again not long afterwards, his hair dripping wet and sticking up in all directions. “That’s Yuna off to school,” he remarked. “There’s a lady who takes her with her own children – she’s a great help to me.” He began to dress himself with a coyness that Auron thought rather unwarranted after the previous night’s events, keeping his nightshirt on until his underclothes were in place, then turning away modestly to fasten his tunic. Auron began to wonder whether he should be ashamed by his own continued nudity, and subconsciously

pulled the blanket up so more of him was covered.

Once Braska had finished dressing and combed his hair, he stood looking pensive for a moment, and then perched delicately on the edge of the bed, looking down at Auron with a grave expression.

"It's against the teachings, isn't it?" he said.

Auron's heart sank: it was suddenly all too clear why Braska seemed so hesitant this morning. He had been having second thoughts about everything they had done; he had realised that choosing this path, making the decision to be intimate with another man, was complicated. He could be satisfied by women too, clearly, and it would be far simpler for him to restrict his attentions to the female gender – that would ensure that there were no clashes between this and his faith.

"It is," Auron confirmed, trying to ignore a creeping sensation in his head that made it seem as if somebody had set off a smoke bomb in there, and the horrible suspicion that something so wonderful was suddenly slipping from his reach, moving further away with every passing second.

"But you," said Braska, seeming embarrassed, "you've lain with other men, haven't you? I mean, you're not – you don't, with women –" He lowered his head, flustered.

Doing his best to keep his voice steady, Auron said, "Yes, Braska. I am a homosexual."

"And you've come to terms with it?"

“I had to,” said Auron. “It’s not something I can change. We hardly abide by all the precepts in the teachings, especially not in the citadel. I realised, eventually, that there’s no point wasting time worrying about things like that, when it’s not even clear why they’re supposed to be offences against Yevon in the first place.” He cleared his throat. “But it’s different for you, I suppose.”

“How do you mean?” said Braska.

Auron shrugged, in a display of feigned nonchalance. “You have the choice. You can limit yourself: just associate with women, and you won’t have to worry about any of this. No need to make things complicated if you’ve got no reason to go against the teachings.” He sat up straighter. “Look, I should go. We won’t talk about this again – it was clearly a mistake. But – I’d rather leave now, if you don’t mind. I’d prefer to be alone.”

He looked up at Braska, not having dared meet his gaze while he spoke, and saw that he was aghast. “That’s not what I meant,” Braska said, all in a rush, and after a moment’s pause he rose, approached Auron, and leant in to kiss him, resting his hands on Auron’s bare shoulders. “That is not what I meant,” he said again, staring into Auron’s eyes with renewed intensity.

“So I see,” Auron replied breathlessly, stroking Braska’s cheek with his thumb and feeling his worries subside as quickly as they had emerged.

“Auron, I married an Al Bhed,” Braska went on, arranging

himself into a sitting position next to him. "I know what it's like to have to defy the teachings. I made that choice long ago, and I chose my heart." He reached for Auron's hand, clasping it firmly on the blanket. "I just thought – for you, you must have been young, and – it can't have been easy to reconcile that with your faith, particularly when everyone has such high expectations of you. The temples are hardly forgiving."

Auron shook his head. "It was clear enough. Yevon ordains everyone's path."

"Yes," said Braska, and from the way that his grip stiffened on Auron's hand, Auron could tell that he was thinking about something else: the path he believed had been ordained for him.

"I don't want you to die," he said, remembering the promise he had made to himself that very morning.

"Auron."

"I don't." Braska's hand had slackened, as if he was about to draw it away; Auron held onto it more tightly. "I've thought about this. While you're in training, I'm going to find out everything I can about the Final Summoning. We have archives at the barracks – there must be some record of how it works. And there are monks who've accompanied summoners before. There has to be some information somewhere, I'm sure of it."

"Auron," said Braska again, and to put an end to his protests, Auron twisted up and grasped him by his robe, pouring all his desperation into a kiss, until he had Braska

pinned against the headboard, supple and obedient under his touch.

“I can’t let you die,” he whispered, his forehead resting against Braska’s. “Do you see? Do you see why I can’t?”

Braska responded with the tiniest of nods. “Yes. Forgive me. We’ll – we won’t speak of it.”

It wasn’t what Auron had hoped to hear, but it was at least a compromise, of sorts. He leant back, releasing Braska from his grasp; Braska gave his face a final caress and then rose from the bed. “I’ll see you downstairs for breakfast,” he murmured, and Auron nodded.



The months that followed were the busiest and happiest of Auron’s life. He finally understood what it meant to be loved: to have one person who he could be completely open with, who trusted him in return, and who really understood him in a way nobody ever had before. He felt complete.

His duties at the barracks and Braska’s ongoing training to become a summoner meant that neither of them had a great deal of free time in which to see each other. Braska was deliberately taking things slowly with his daughter, worried that she would misunderstand what Auron meant to him so soon after her mother’s death. While on duty, they made sure not

to make it obvious that they were any more than good friends: they both knew that Yevon wouldn't take kindly to this. Eventually, though, signs that they had somehow slipped up began to emerge. One afternoon, after Braska had healed Auron on the battlefield and left him to attend to the other monks, Lutria turned to Auron and said, "You should be careful."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"You and him."

He frowned at her. "Go on."

"You're ... close," said Lutria uneasily. "Just – I don't know what I should say. Just if something happens – none of us want things to go badly for you, Auron. We're all fond of you."

"You think he's going to hurt me?" said Auron, bemused. "Braska?"

"No, not him," she replied impatiently, and then became more hesitant. "Look, I – I can't say. But the temples have eyes everywhere, you know? Just watch out."

Not long afterwards, an unexpected further wave of fiends mounted an attack, and as a result, Auron totally forgot about the cryptic warning. A few weeks later, though, a boy brought Auron the message that he was to go and see Sontar as soon as his duties ended for the day. Once the squad was dismissed, he headed for his office as instructed.

"Oh, Auron," said Sontar when he arrived, not smiling. "Thank you for coming. Do sit down."

“Sir,” said Auron, and he perched obediently on the stool in front of Sontar’s desk, trying to look as dignified as he could.

Sontar looked him up and down briefly before continuing. “Well,” he said eventually, “I’ll get to the point. You’ve been offered another promotion – I’m sure that won’t come as a surprise. It’s quite a significant position this time. A vacancy’s coming up among the senior officers, and it was thought prudent to elevate you to the role, as you show such promise. You’d outrank me, in fact, should you choose to accept it.”

“The maesters’ faith in me is humbling,” said Auron, trying to mask his surprise with a modest bow of his head.

Sontar hummed in agreement, still maintaining the same grave expression. “As this is a high position in the church, it comes with certain benefits. You’d have your own living quarters in the citadel. A little garden. Servants, even. I expect this all sounds very appealing.”

Auron nodded hesitantly.

“You would also be required,” said Sontar, “to take a wife.”

As he uttered the final word, Auron felt a horrible twist in his stomach. That was a step he couldn’t take – but it was imperative that Sontar not find out about it. He would have to find some excuse not to accept this position, concoct a sick relative in Kilika or somewhere who needed looking after. *Sir, I hate to let you down, but I don’t think I’d have the time for this kind of role – it’s my aunt, you see ... yes, I visit at least once a month ...*

"Does this still sound like an attractive proposition, Auron?" said Sontar softly.

Saying no at this point would be too obvious, so Auron swallowed, and nodded again. His mouth was dry; he pressed his lips together to moisten them, and then said, "Would I have any say in who I would be marrying?"

"Actually," Sontar replied, "you do have some choice. The lady in question would have to be a priest's daughter, but there are a few eligible girls at the moment. Would you like to see them? If any catch your eye, we could arrange an appointment."

"All right," said Auron, feigning nonchalance.

Still maintaining the same unamused expression, Sontar retrieved a sphere from one of his piles of documentation and set it down on the desk between the two of them. He flicked it on; the translucent image of a young woman of about Auron's age was suddenly projected there. Auron could just about see Sontar's face through it.

"The lovely Neniss," Sontar said, in a bored tone of voice. "Daughter of a DJose priest, but she's spent the last few years here in Bevelle. According to my notes, she's particularly fond of music. Do you have any interest in music, Auron?"

"Not especially, sir," said Auron truthfully.

Sontar nodded; Auron managed to make out the movement of his head through the projection. The image changed to another girl, not too different in appearance from the first.

“Jalla,” said Sontar. “Interested in blitzball, so she could be a suitable partner for somebody used to active service. She was in fact training to be a blitzball player in Luca until that career was deemed unsuitable for someone of her background.”

“I see,” Auron replied.

“Perhaps one for you to consider,” said Sontar, before the image changed again. “Ah, yes. Vaninta. Maybe she’ll interest you. Gifted in magic, both black and white – and a few years older than you, in fact. I hear that’s your type.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in, and then Auron realised that the sphere recording had stopped and that he was looking right at Sontar’s displeased face.

“Isn’t that right, Auron?” said Sontar quietly.

Auron looked down, up, and then back at him. “What are you insinuating?” he hissed, feeling his fists clench tightly, nails digging into his palms.

“Auron,” said Sontar. “If you have surmised that this whole rigmorole has been put in place to test you, then you would be correct. The temples have eyes everywhere, and it has hardly been difficult to put two and two together. All we are asking is that you reassure us that your commitment to Yevon is sound. I would recommend that you think carefully about what this means for your career, and make the right decision.”

“What if I refuse?” Auron growled.

Sontar’s expression remained cold. “Then we will know that you value unseemly and sinful acts above your faith, and

you will be treated accordingly.”

“Treated how?” he demanded. “Demoted? Dismissed? Imprisoned?”

“It’s not for me to say,” said Sontar, with a careful shrug. “I’m sure your punishment would include at least one of those measures, although it’s for the maesters to make the final decision, of course.”

“This is appalling,” Auron hissed, too furious to make any further attempts at politeness; he rose to his feet. “You’ve set me up, you bastard. I have no intention of marrying any of these women, and you knew that all along, you wretched –”

Sontar silenced him with a raised hand. “Auron, you’re the most promising monk of your generation, and it’s not in my interest to write you off. You may not believe me, but I had no hand in this, personally. It was collectively decided that we should deal with you this way, even though a number of us had misgivings. I’m sorry that this marriage is your only way out – but you really should consider it.” He folded his arms. “I’ll let you go away and think about it. We’ll ignore the fact that you just insulted a senior officer; I know this must be a shock to you. Come back to me with your answer tomorrow.”

Auron stood there, seething, ready to curse Sontar some more but not finding adequate words for it; he swept his arm across a pile of papers in his frustration instead, and the leaves of paper scattered and fell to the floor in disarray. Through the flurry of documents, he caught sight of Sontar’s face, still

mostly impassive; but a hint of pity was evident in his expression too. Auron hated the sight of it. He turned and marched away.

He desperately needed Braska, and that was all he could think about. He needed Braska to hold him and kiss him and tell him everything would be all right, even though he already knew that it wouldn't, regardless of his decision. Without bothering to stop off at his quarters and change into his off-duty uniform, he left the barracks and made his way to Braska's house at once.

Braska opened the door, clearly surprised to see him: they hadn't arranged to meet that evening. As soon as the door was closed, Auron took Braska in his arms and kissed him hungrily, trying to block out his worries with the sweet taste of Braska's lips.

"Auron," said Braska, gently prying himself out of Auron's tight grip, "what's wrong?"

"They want me to marry," Auron said desperately.

"A woman?" Braska said, and he must have immediately caught sight of Auron's despondent expression, because he added, "Sorry – of course. Let's sit down. Tell me what happened."

Auron followed Braska to the divan, still clinging onto him; they sat down, and he laid his head on Braska's shoulder, letting Braska put his arms around him and gently caress his back. As he did so, Auron told him what had transpired in Sontar's of-

fice, and explained the ultimatum he had been given. "They've got me trapped," he concluded. "They're making me choose between you and my career."

"Oh, Auron," said Braska. He stroked Auron's hair, threading his fingers through his ponytail, and then said, "I would understand. If you think it's best to obey –"

"What?!" Auron exclaimed. "Are you telling me I should give in to them? I thought you of all people would – didn't you abandon your own career for the same thing?"

"It's hardly the same," Braska said calmly. "I was sent to the Al Bhed as a way for the temples to get rid of me – I was always a troublemaker. There was a lot of outrage when I made my decision, of course, but they were glad to see the back of me. It's not like that at all for you. If you accept this promotion, I wouldn't be surprised if you were made maester in the next five years."

Auron groaned in frustration, nuzzling deeper into Braska's embrace. He was right: the role he had been offered was just a stone's throw from maester in terms of rank. The hard work to which Auron had dedicated almost his entire life could be honoured with the highest of all rewards. If he could bring himself to take one of these women for a wife, to father a few of her children and then keep her at arm's length for the rest of his life, he could rise to the very top. But as he felt Braska's warm hands securing him and Braska's soft lips gently kissing the top of his head, he was in no doubt about

his decision. He straightened up to meet Braska's gaze.

"There's no question of it," he said. "I won't leave you."

Braska shook his head. "You're throwing this away, just to have a few more months before you lead me up Mount Gagazet to die?"

Not to die, Auron thought. "Yes," he said firmly. "I would choose you over all of this."

"You honour me, Auron," said Braska, "but I'm not worth it."

It was excruciating to hear him say that and know he really believed it, to observe the sorrow in his eyes and know that Braska still thought he was somehow undeserving, particularly when Auron's opinion had always been the complete opposite. Auron kissed him, trying to silence him before he could say anything else about himself that was so patently untrue. "You're worth everything to me," he murmured. "Braska, I love you – I could never abandon you, not for anything."

"They'll punish you," said Braska quietly. "They'll break you. I can't let that happen to you. You're so strong, so magnificent – they'll do terrible things to you. I can't watch you go through that."

"You don't need to," Auron reassured him. "Just be there when they've finished with me."

"Of course," said Braska. "Oh, Auron, I'm so sorry."

They made gentle love that night, both lying awake afterwards worrying about what was to come. Hot dread pooled

in Auron's stomach: once he returned to Sontar with his answer, his standing among the monks would be forfeited forever. Nearly ten years had passed since he had left the initiate, more talented than almost anyone who had come through the same training before him; he had long since surpassed his contemporaries, and even many of the monks who had years of experience and age over him. And here he was, ready to throw all that away for the sake of a man who he had always known was more extraordinary than anyone else he would ever meet, and whom he had come to love more than anything. He was ready to face the challenge: he would deal with whatever punishment was meted out on him, for Braska's sake and for the sake of his own integrity. The worst was still to come, but he would see it through, and then he would turn his full attention to finding a way to circumvent the Final Summoning, and to ensuring that he and Braska could live out their days in peace together.

He looked out at the sunrise, and thought, by Yevon, I swear it.