

I Will Survive

by ovely

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WHEN Yuna was almost two, her mother received the first communication she had had from her family in four years. It turned out that her brother Cid, the uncle Yuna had never met, had had second thoughts about his decision to cut his sister off, prompted by the fact that his own wife was now with child. Yuna's mother already had a nephew, who had been born not long after she and her new husband were expelled from Home: she had only happened to hear of the fact through the grapevine of the dispersed Al Bhed community in Bevelle, some months late, when she herself was close to giving birth.

This time, though, it would be a girl, and that seemed to

have been what inspired Cid's attempt to reconcile with her: the thought that their respective daughters might be playmates was apparently too tempting to resist. She put off replying for some time – she was determined to give Cid a taste of the same disrespect that he had shown her – but she eventually decided this was unnecessarily petty in the face of his good-faith attempt to repair their relationship, and wrote back with studied kindness. After a couple of years of sporadic correspondence, the last tensions between them appeared to have vanished, and she had agreed to make a brief visit to her people, leaving her controversial husband and their daughter in Bevelle, but promising them it would only be a short trip.

A day before she was due to leave, she caught a sickness from a travelling machina trader, and while it wasn't too serious, the thought of travelling by sea in her condition was unappealing; moreover, she worried about passing the illness to her young niece, who was barely two years old. She stayed away, and sent her profuse apologies to Cid; Cid, more short-tempered than ever now that he was the father of not one but two young children, decided uncharitably that his sister was merely searching for an excuse to abandon the visit, and made no reply – and so Yuna's mother found herself ignored by her family once again.



Living in Bevelle wasn't always pleasant: Braska and his wife had moved there by default after the Al Bhed expelled them, it being where he had grown up, but the hypocrisy in the city was stifling. There was a substantial Al Bhed population there, as there was in most of the busier parts of Spira, and they were essential to the way Bevelle functioned: the place was replete with machina, most of them hidden from public view. The priests wouldn't touch any of it, and so it was the Al Bhed who were contracted, at shockingly low rates, to maintain the equipment. Despite the importance of their role, they were given a wide berth in public: ignored by traders, barred from official functions, banned from the temples (except when going in on business, which tended by necessity to happen at night).

Braska, now a disgraced ex-priest, hardly had a better time, but at least people tended to look him in the eye while speaking to him. His grievances with the city were on a more general level: now that the scales had fallen from his eyes, he found it impossible to ignore the distasteful snobbery with which the senior members of the clergy went about their business. Almost everything they did was offensive to him. Yet he and his family continued to live in Bevelle, keeping to themselves as a result of both choice and obligation, and becoming increasingly suspicious of anyone who attempted a friendly interaction with them beyond a few trusted associates, others who had been wronged by Yevon.

The final straw came when Yuna was seven years old:

the news arrived that a man, clearly suffering from some grave mental affliction, had been imprisoned and eventually executed for the crime of claiming to be from the holy city of Zanarkand. Braska had never met the man, but he almost wept when he heard the story: it was the final confirmation that the maesters were unforgivably ruthless, that they would put blind obedience to the teachings above the most basic humanity. It was time to leave, Braska and his wife decided, and they took Yuna and their few belongings with them and travelled as far from Bevelle as they could, by chocobo and then by boat, until they came upon the isle of Besaid. There seemed to be nothing else beyond it, so it was decided: Besaid would be their new home.



It had been a reckless decision, almost as reckless as the decision they had made to marry, nearly ten years ago; and Besaid was hardly a utopia, for all that it was sunny and peaceful. The Al Bhed were distrusted here, in a somehow more fundamental way than in Bevelle: it was just pure fear of the unknown that motivated the islanders' spite. That, Braska thought, would be easier for him to contend with as a former missionary, and he spent many of their first days on Besaid patiently talking through his new neighbours' prejudices with

them, calmly laying out the facts and reassuring them that his wife meant them no harm. After several weeks of this, some of them began to show her some kindness, although it was still mostly hesitant and lacklustre. She was given the opportunity to work on the boats, though, and eventually came to be on civil terms with the fishermen, even if some of the villagers remained outwardly rude.

Yuna took to Besaid much better, still too young to notice how her mother was being treated. The villagers had no choice but to love her, despite her heritage: her joyful, innocent spirit won their hearts, and she became firm friends with the other children in no time. It began to seem as if she was spending more time with them than with her own parents: on some days, Braska would wake to find her bed abandoned and know she was already out playing with her friends. He was never worried, at that time – it was a relief that she had settled in so well.

As for Braska himself, who had been the chief instigator of their plan to move to Besaid, he was determined not to regret his decision. The climate and the relaxed pace of life suited him, and if he had no real friends and the animosity towards his wife persisted, these were surely temporary issues. He found work at the temple: nothing was open to him beyond the menial duties of an acolyte, but it gave him solace to think that he was helping one of Spira's more disadvantaged communities. He wrote to the few friends they had left behind in Bevelle,

always polite about Besaid, extolling its beautiful wildlife and neglecting to say a huge amount about the people.

Sin attacked when Yuna was nine. The pleasantly red sky of the early evening turned grey, and the villagers duly began to panic; fortunately, the local Crusader chapter dealt with the incident admirably, and Braska was on hand to heal injuries and provide comfort for those who needed it. There was little damage, compared with past experiences; the villagers still spoke in hushed tones of an attack almost ten years earlier, which had resulted in numerous casualties and widespread destruction. Braska nonetheless felt aggrieved by the fact that even this minor incident had had some effect – in Bevelle, there was not only the guardian wyrm, but additionally all sorts of defence machina that ensured Sin would never be more than the smallest inconvenience to the priests in the citadel. Here, it was up to the brave people of Besaid to defend themselves, and were it not for the Crusaders, most of whom were locals who had spent time away to gain a little military training, things could have been much worse.

When Yuna was ten, Besaid received its best news in two hundred years: there was a new High Summoner. Lady Ifiol from Djosé had made it to Zanarkand: her one guardian seemed to have perished somewhere on the journey, but she had nonetheless been able to receive the Final Aeon and had gone on to defeat Sin, in, according to witnesses, a thrilling five-hour battle. A plinth was promptly set up for

her statue in the Besaid temple, and Braska dutifully cleaned the dust off it every day, awaiting the statue's delivery. For years afterwards, during the occasional visits of officials from Bevelle, he would politely ask when the statue was due to arrive, and they would inform him it was being worked on.

The Calm made the villagers more relaxed, and more ambitious: they began to build some more permanent housing behind the temple, and Braska and his family were one of the first households to take advantage of it, moving out of their one-room hut and into a little dwelling that allowed the soon to be teenage Yuna a modicum of privacy. It seemed that the islanders' hostility towards Yuna's mother lessened slightly, too, and Braska began to hope that Besaid could become the idyll he had rashly assumed it was when he arrived.



Braska wrote letters to his few friends back in Bevelle, hoping to convince them to pay him a visit; he thought it might provide the family with a morale boost to hear how awful things still undoubtedly were there firsthand. There was nobody he tried to convince more than his dear friend Auron, once one of the most celebrated members of Bevelle's warrior monk corps until he was expelled from their ranks for a crime that Braska fervently believed to be underserving of any pun-

ishment. Formerly pious and loyal, Auron had become anxious and impulsive after this betrayal, although as far as Braska could tell from his intermittent letters, he had managed to become slightly less uptight in the days since.

Auron was the one person in Bevelle that Braska had been truly sad to leave behind; he was pleased to learn from their correspondence that Auron too had taken his leave of the city and made a home for himself in a village on the other side of Macalania. To begin with, the letters said, Auron had helped defend the village against Sin, but since the Calm arrived, he had mostly been fighting off the few fiends that had the ill-advised courage to enter the area. Auron never said as much – he wouldn't – but Braska suspected he was lonely.

He consented to visit a couple of years into the Calm. Braska was thrilled to read the news: it was a particularly trying time at home, with Yuna starting to test his patience in all the ways that a child on the brink of her teens could, and the continued unpleasantness towards his wife causing friction; a visit from a beloved friend would remind the family of why they had chosen to make the move here. He eagerly made space for Auron to sleep in their cluttered little house, and waited out the weeks until his arrival with a lightness in his spirit that had been increasingly rare in the last few years.

Auron's visit had just the effect that Braska had hoped for. Yuna spent most of the week out with her friends, as usual, but for her parents it was a breath of fresh air to talk to someone

who understood some of their problems. Auron had changed in the past five years: he had become more openly cynical, surer in his defiance. He had gained a sense of humour quite different from the boyish delight he had sometimes expressed before his punishment; and, although he was only just thirty, a few grey hairs were beginning to appear at his temple.

To Braska, Auron was as magnificent as ever: the strong sense of justice and the determination that had first captured Braska's attention were still there, if sometimes a little obscured by the sardonic personality Auron seemed to have acquired. Despite five years apart, and everything that had happened in that time, it was easy to be unguarded in his presence. Auron knew both of them well, having spent a few weeks at their home in Bevelle recuperating after his punishment, but it was Braska he was closer to: they had become friends at the time that Auron's supposed crimes first came to light, when Braska had realised this young man needed support as he joined the long list of those unfairly scorned by Yevon.

Braska and Auron spent most evenings of the latter's visit strolling on the beach: it was a beautiful landscape, and still better when there was nobody else around. During those walks, Braska spoke to Auron about things he dared not mention even to his own family: his ongoing unease at their failure to integrate into the community, Yuna's increasingly wayward nature, the fact that he had sometimes caught

himself resenting his wife just because her being Al Bhed was the reason they remained unwelcome. In turn, Auron confessed that as Braska had suspected, he was lonely in his village outside Macalania; he had never quite managed to befriend any of his neighbours, and now that they were in the middle of a Calm, he was little use to any of them in a military capacity either.

To Braska, the solution was obvious: Auron, he exclaimed, should move to Besaid for good, and then both of them would have the benefit of firm companionship. Untainted by any direct association with the Al Bhed, Auron would surely have more success in being accepted by the islanders. He could join the local Crusader chapter – with his experience, he could command them, and prepare them for Sin’s inevitable return. As for his own family, the presence of an old friend could surely be nothing but beneficial.

Auron was hesitant; Braska, not wanting to seem too insistent, turned to gentle questioning: what did Auron really want? What would make him happy? The sun had almost completely set now, and it was difficult for him to interpret the complex emotion behind Auron’s dark eyes; it was no less confusing when Auron smiled ruefully and informed Braska that what he wanted was impossible to acquire. Braska had to ask why, of course, and in the pause before Auron’s answer he could have speculated about a thousand reasons, but he would never have dreamt that Auron would give the answer he did:

quietly, almost apologetically, he said, "You're married."

He immediately looked shocked by his own openness, and turned away abruptly as if he was about to leave; Braska, still trying to understand what this meant, how their friendship would be affected by such a simple admission, grabbed him by the hand to stop him running away. It was imperative that he reassure Auron as soon as he could, make it clear to him that he was not at fault and that Braska could never blame him for the direction that his heart had decided to incline itself towards, as embarrassing and complicated as it was for both of them. He told Auron so right there, still clinging onto Auron's hand to ensure he had no choice but to listen, explaining to him that he understood, he had experienced similar feelings for others before meeting his wife – this had no bearing on Braska's invitation, he insisted. If Auron wanted to join them on Besaid, for the reasons previously discussed, he should do so; Braska was certain that the firmness of their friendship was sufficient to prevent any awkwardness coming between them; he could not emphasise how very sure of it he was. Auron listened, nodded, and told Braska he would come to a decision in the morning, before the boat he was due to leave on departed.

It was only when they were in their beds that Braska began to wonder whether he should have confided in Auron quite as much as he did. For the first time, he had been open about the strain his marriage was under: and giving voice to it had made him realise quite how bad things were. He had found

himself thinking on a few occasions that their move to Besaid had possibly been too rash, and as much as he hated to admit it, that had almost always led to similar thoughts about the marriage. They had made the decision to wed almost on a whim, deciding it would be the proof for both suspicious families that their union would work: now, almost fifteen years later, all Braska could think about was how young they had been at the time. There was a reason that they had had no more children after Yuna – these days, they were hardly ever intimate, usually both too discouraged after a day of unpleasant interactions and suspicious looks when the villagers thought their backs were turned. Navigating Yuna’s uneasy entry into adolescence was no help: her mother was too lenient, Braska always thought, and he disliked the fact that she spoke Al Bhed to Yuna at home when she seemed to be wanting to hide something from him. He could only understand about half of what she was saying on those occasions. Yuna replied in the common tongue anyway – she hadn’t willingly spoken her mother’s language since she was three.

He knew, too, that she thought him too strict a parent in return: she was always criticising the ways he tried to rein Yuna in. They had never properly argued, but stern words had been exchanged a few times by this point. It was normal, Braska told himself as he lay in their bed that night, staring at her sleeping form. Couples often had these problems, and Auron’s confession was irrelevant, a whole different issue that all of

them would be able to deal with maturely.

She lay at arm's length from him: years ago, he might have shuffled across the bed to press his body against hers. That was something neither of them had done for a long time; he remained where he was, and tried not to think about Auron, and some time later succeeded in drifting into uneasy sleep.

When he woke in the morning, he was desperate to know whether Auron had decided to stay on Besaid; but he delicately avoided bringing it up over breakfast, waiting for Auron to raise the matter himself. Auron seemed not to want to meet his eye; the three of them made pleasant conversation about the latest sanctions on machina imposed in Bevelle while Yuna slept in. Braska's wife rose from the breakfast table and headed off to her day's work; only then did Auron confirm, hesitantly, that he would leave on that day's sailing as planned, but would return to his village only long enough to get his affairs in order, and then would be back on Besaid as soon as he could.

Braska was delighted; Auron's presence that week had been a blessing for both him and his wife, and to know it would now be extended indefinitely gave him such happiness. He wondered whether life on Besaid was finally about to take a turn for the better.



Auron was back three weeks later; Braska met him at the beach to help carry his few belongings into the village. He embraced Auron warmly as soon as the latter stepped off the dock; he was determined that there would be no awkwardness between them. It only occurred to him much later that he had not shared such an embrace with his own wife in years.

Auron took up residence in a hut in the village, the size being quite adequate for just one person, and tried to settle into the community more successfully than Braska had. He cut his hair shorter in an attempt to cope better with the hot climate, and took to wearing shaded glasses to shield his eyes from the relentless sun – things that had never particularly bothered Braska, who enjoyed warm weather. Not long after moving in, Auron joined the local Crusader chapter, as Braska had suggested, and was made commander almost as soon as he first drew his sword. He found himself busier there than he had anticipated: within a month the news arrived from Kilika that Sin had made an attack. The Calm was officially over.

Spira returned to its usual fearful, pessimistic state. The islanders of Besaid accepted the news of Sin's return with measured resignation: they had known the Calm would end soon. Life on the island continued much as it had: the plan for an additional phase of new housing behind the temple was quietly retracted, but other than that, things were broadly the same, barring the occasional worried look towards the sky.

Yuna entered her teens and continued to frustrate her par-

ents by refusing to do most things they asked of her and demanding that she be allowed to do various others. Braska wondered if the problem was their parenting; he thought back to his own youth, trying to remember whether he had been so callous towards his own mother and father. He had had his moments, certainly, but was sure he had never behaved as objectionably as Yuna did sometimes. At least the two of them mostly managed to appear united in the face of her unreasonable conduct, only quarrelling about it once she had stormed out of the house, as she so often did.

He had perhaps overestimated the beneficial effect that Auron's presence would have on his marriage, but one advantage was that he had an excuse to get out of the house a few evenings a week. Once Auron's duties with the Crusaders were over, Braska would walk over to the hut where he had taken up residence, and the two of them would have some cold drinks and play a few card games while they discussed the latest news from Bevelle, which was always bad. No mention was ever made of Auron's desires, nor of Braska's ongoing concerns about his marriage; but, gradually, Braska found himself noticing how strong his own affection for Auron was. Auron would be so easy for him to love; but the thought of betraying his wife made him feel horrible, even if things were less than brilliant between them.

When Yuna was fourteen, Auron and the other Crusaders of Besaid were sent to the front lines for an operation near the

Moonflow; most of the group returned unharmed, but they brought the unwelcome news that one of their number had been killed in the attack. This was especially impactful among Yuna's circle: the young man, Chappu, was the brother of one of her good friends and the steady boyfriend of another. When the news came out that Chappu had been fighting with a machina weapon at the time of his death, his brother, Wakka, went on an astonishing tirade about the Al Bhed and how it was all their fault for being irredeemable heathens; Yuna, conscious of her own heritage and the fact that Wakka had never been particularly pleasant to her mother, took offence at this, and ended up having a shouting match with him in the middle of the village square. That would be the last time either of them spoke to the other. When Braska heard about the incident, he was amazed to hear how steadfastly Yuna had defended her mother's race; judging by her appalling behaviour at home recently, she had no particular affection for either of her parents.

Chappu's death was a shock to the entire community, but Braska had other concerns: he had spent the entirety of the Crusaders' absence worrying about Auron. That alone made it clear to him that there was something in Auron's feelings that he returned. As much as he had no desire to hurt his wife, he longed for the true companionship that she had not given him for years, and he was so relieved to see Auron come back unharmed that he was finally unable to restrain himself. For the

first time, in the privacy of Auron's hut, he gave in, and reached out to him and kissed him, threading his fingers through Auron's soft hair, holding him tenderly. After that, their evenings together were bookended with such kisses and gentle touches, never going any further: Braska tried to convince himself that what he was doing was less abhorrent by dint of the fact that the two of them always remained clothed. It had been so long since he had kissed someone.

Auron struggled to take an objective view on the matter. He knew it was wrong to betray Braska's wife, who he knew well and was fond of; but getting to share these moments with Braska, knowing Braska cared for him so deeply – that was the fulfilment of several years' hopeless desires, and it would be useless to pretend to respond to the way Braska held him and kissed him with anything but the greatest enthusiasm. Braska assured him, moreover, that Auron was not to blame for the instability of his marriage: that was Braska's own fault, and this was unconnected. Desperately in love, Auron let himself believe it.

2

SHORTLY after she turned sixteen, Yuna approached her parents one evening with the news that she was going to train as a summoner. Both of them were outraged, and immediately forbade it, but she insisted it was a vocation. She had been discussing it with her friends, in secret, since as long ago as the end of the Calm; but divulging that information to her mother and father did nothing to appease them. She had even been meeting one of the senior priests at the temple to talk it through, and he was supportive of her plans: Braska found this especially difficult to hear, being in the temple's employ himself and having never been aware of any such meetings. This was news that nothing could have prepared him for.

Yuna argued with them both so fiercely that she ended up in tears; declaring that she was an adult now and could make her own decisions, she fled from the house; and in her absence, the argument continued. Her mother accused Braska of promoting Yevonite superstitions to her, of failing to convince her of the true corruption that governed Bevelle. In turn, he pointed out that he had needed to keep his head down while working at the temple for the last nine years, a job he had taken merely to ensure they had some financial security; in all that time he had never been permitted to perform duties above those of an acolyte, his earlier transgressions blocking him from ever regaining anything but the lowest status within the priesthood. Transgressions, he pointed out, that had occurred for the sake of the woman who was now speaking to him with such poisonous words and so little affection. She ignored this last remark, instead reminding him that he was the one who had decided to make the move to Besaid, in a moment she now recognised as dangerously impulsive. If they had stayed in Bevelle, he could have continued working as an unaffiliated healer, and stayed away from direct contact with the temples. She had had the opportunity to veto the move, he countered; and, besides, that act had been no more rash than the decision they had jointly made to elope nine years earlier. And it had gone so well for them both, he added with a sarcasm that was quite unlike him; they were so happy, weren't they, a perfect little family –

Looking back on it, he would never remember whether she was the one to tell him to get out, or whether he announced that he couldn't bear to spend another moment in her company. Either way, he found himself heading into the village, his fists clenched, his throat raw from shouting, tears welling up in his eyes. He wouldn't be able to face her again until the next morning at the earliest. He would have to find somewhere else to spend the night: the temple was a possibility, but the thought of going in there so soon after Yuna's revelation made him feel sick; there was only one other place available.

As soon as Auron drew back the canvas flap that acted as a door to his hut, Braska began to sob openly for the first time in sixteen years. Auron did not kiss him; he gently led him inside, made him some tea, invited him to sit down, carefully placed a reassuring arm around his waist. He listened while Braska incoherently explained the evening's events, starting with Yuna's announcement, moving on to the argument, and finishing with how much he despised himself for having been so cruel to his own wife – not to mention how he had deceived her for the last two years. Throughout the tearful monologue, Auron made no contribution beyond a few gentle encouragements to continue, the occasional hum of sympathy, and, when Braska drained his teacup, an enquiry as to whether he wanted a refill. Then, when Braska had said everything he had to say and given himself over to crying again, Auron suggested that he make the effort to sleep for now and try to process the situ-

ation in the morning, when his head might be clearer.

Auron insisted that Braska should take his bed, and that he himself would sleep on the floor; it made Braska feel even more terrible, but Auron was adamant about it. Braska climbed, trembling, into the bed, and tried to ignore the scent of Auron on the sheets, and wept into the pillow until the night claimed him.

When Braska awoke in the morning, his eyes still stung, but they were dry. Auron had been right: he felt more rational now, less clouded by rage and regret. He would return home, he decided, and apologise to his wife, and in good time they would have a serious and civil talk with Yuna about her decision. Auron made more tea and a light breakfast, and Braska expressed his profuse gratitude and his hope that Auron's back didn't ache too much after spending the night on the floor, and Auron assured him that it didn't and gulped down a quick potion as soon as Braska's back was turned.

Braska made his way trepidatiously back to his own house; Yuna was still absent, having also spent the night with a friend. That afforded her parents time for a serious discussion of their relationship, once they had got over the awkwardness of Braska's return, helped by the fact that each of them was glad to see the other safe and well after they had parted on such bad terms. They recognised that life on Besaid had not been good for their marriage; that isolating themselves from the world had turned out particularly detrimental. Nine years

after leaving Bevelle, though, they still had no real desire to return there. They would write to friends in Luca, they decided, and see if it might be possible to move to that city instead; out of all the settlements in Spira, it was probably the one best suited to their own attitudes. Meanwhile, they would work on rebuilding the trust they had lost between themselves.

When Yuna returned, the negotiation of her destiny began. It turned out she had not been indoctrinated by Yevon, as Braska had feared; despite the general piety of the islanders, Yuna seemed to have maintained a healthy scepticism. Her desire to become a summoner really was of her own making: she was simply determined to help the people of Spira, Yevonite and Al Bhed alike, as much as she could. It was the first conversation Yuna had had with her parents in which she really seemed like an adult, and the first in a long time that had not resulted in somebody shouting at somebody else, and when it was over, they found themselves unable to deny the strength of her conviction. That wasn't to say that they would allow her to proceed with her plan without their oversight: they had to make sure she was fully trained and that her eventual guardians would be adequate for her protection on the pilgrimage. She rolled her eyes, but accepted the compromise as maturely as she was able.



It would take about a year for Yuna to train as a summoner, Braska learnt; in some cases it was longer, but she already had a handle on the healing arts, so it was just summoning and sending that needed to be covered. A special instructor was dispatched from the mainland for this purpose: apparently, the great men of Yevon had been impressed to hear of this summoner who was so young and so determined to fulfil her vocation despite her parents' wishes – especially when those parents were a disgraced former priest and an Al Bhed heathen. They had no complaints, being glad to hear that Yuna was being trained so expertly.

Braska was trying to improve things with his wife, taking care to spend time with her and give her the attention she deserved, but his involvement with Auron continued. He had been determined to stop, and to resume their relationship on strictly friendly terms; but on his first visit to Auron after that awful night, he had been overcome by love and had kissed him fervently, as if nothing had changed. Auron carefully refrained from instigating anything for a few weeks after that, wondering if Braska might change his mind and resolve to focus entirely on his wife – but after a while it seemed clear that Braska's feelings for him were just as strong as before, so he gave up on any notion of restraint.

The time approached for Yuna to pray to the fayth of Besaid and, if all went to plan, begin her pilgrimage; she therefore started to make the preparations necessary for the jour-

ney, including the selection of guardians. To complement her own skills, she would be travelling with a black mage and a physical attacker, and selected her friends Lulu and Luzzu for this purpose; both were honoured to be asked to accompany her, and accepted immediately. Lulu had been a guardian on two aborted pilgrimages already, while Luzzu was a Crusader, and so they both seemed particularly appropriate for the task. Braska, though, was uncomfortable with the fact that both Yuna's guardians were so young, only a few years older than she was; he proposed himself and Auron as guardians, but Yuna refused, stating that she would be mortified to have to undertake the pilgrimage in the company of her own father. There were a few more arguments about that, and eventually, after several weeks, they reached a compromise: Auron would replace Luzzu, while Lulu would be the third member of the group as originally planned. Auron was more than willing to undertake the pilgrimage; it would be a worthy test of his combat skills, and there were few things Braska could ask of him that he would refuse to do.

Yuna turned seventeen, went to the temple, and emerged with both Lulu and the aeon in tow; meanwhile, Auron and Braska were saying their goodbyes, lying stripped to the waist in Auron's bed, more intimate than they had ever previously allowed themselves to be. Braska was distressed to have to watch both Yuna and Auron leave on such a dangerous journey, but at least Auron's absence might mean he could prop-

erly work on salvaging things with his wife; he hadn't made much progress over the past year, but he had often been distracted.

They bade farewell officially at the beach the next day, both Auron and Yuna exchanging embraces with the latter's parents, and Lulu following up with respectful handshakes. During Braska and Auron's quick hug, they both tried to ignore the memory of the previous afternoon, when, illuminated by bright Besaid sun, they had covered every inch of each other's chests with tender kisses.



The pilgrimage began uneventfully; Auron had little in common with either of his companions, and not a great deal to say to them as a result. Yuna received the aeon of Kilika without much trouble, only requiring a little support from Auron as she stumbled out of the fayth's chamber; they moved on swiftly to Luca, and just as swiftly away from it, at Yuna's insistence. Lulu later explained to Auron, when Yuna was resting, that the blitzball tournament they happened to coincide with was being attended by Besaid's own team, the Aurochs, and that the captain of that team was the same friend who had had a terrible fallout with Yuna three years ago. Auron wasn't interested in petty friendship drama, and almost

said as much, but he nodded sympathetically, pretending not to notice that Lulu herself seemed quite disappointed not to be able to stay to watch the Aurochs' matches.

Auron wrote letters to Braska as they travelled, sending them whenever he came across a means of doing so. Under the guise of keeping Braska updated on his daughter's safety, he painstakingly expressed how much he missed him, filling entire sheets of paper with carefully composed expressions of his love and devotion. He had never been one for lyricism, but there was something about Braska that made it unusually easy. At each travel agency they visited, in each town they passed through, he found himself looking at the men he saw there and trying to find something of Braska in their faces; he often succeeded, but none of these men ever bore those features as well as Braska himself. Auron was quite sure he was the handsomest man in all Spira, and told him so each time he wrote.

At DJose, there was a reply waiting: Braska knew Yuna would need to pass through the town to receive the thunder aeon, and so he sent a letter ahead. Auron sat down to read it at the travel agency reception, losing himself in the pages of Braska's exquisite missive, a thrilling paean to Auron that made his face turn quite red. Once he had composed himself, he read the rest of the letter, in which Braska informed him of recent discussions with his wife. Eager to clear the air with her, and unable to keep his love for Auron hidden any longer, he had ended up confessing everything to her shortly after the

pilgrimage began; she had been surprised and upset, of course, and had told him she needed time to think, but eventually she had conceded that the problems in their marriage were by no means all of Braska's making, and that if this liaison with Auron was what made him happy, she could hardly forbid him that happiness. The Al Bhed were more open about this type of thing, Braska reminded Auron in his letter; there had been several unconventional relationships that he had discovered among them during his time with them as a missionary, and on each occasion he had tried his very best to suppress the Yevonite instinct that told him such things were wrong and unholy.

Braska was working on sorting things out with his wife; they were taking the first steps towards regaining some kind of intimacy. That was all done on the understanding that as long as Auron was happy with it, Braska's wife would equally be content for the two men to pursue their own relationship. When Auron returned – not if, Braska had written, *when* – they would be able to resume their activities without guilt, and what was more, they might be able to take things further at last.

Auron was buoyed all day by the letter, and carried out his duties in a haze of strange delight; the phrasing Braska had used kept recurring to him as he sliced through fiends and disinterestedly aided Lulu in planning the route. The thought never occurred to him that if he did return to Besaid, it would quite probably be in the event of Yuna's death, whether or

not that resulted from a successful Final Summoning. Nothing could dispel his joy, and when they stopped to camp for the night, he took the letter out again and read it by the light that filtered into the tent from the small fire that Lulu had lit to warm herself while she took her turn keeping watch.

In his ongoing elation, he had neglected to be discreet, and Yuna was soon standing over him asking about the letter; she had noticed her father's handwriting and assumed the letter was some list of arbitrary things he had decided to forbid her from doing on the pilgrimage. Auron made various attempts at poor excuses, but she remained interested, and he was too slow to stop her when she eventually reached down and plucked the sheets of the letter out of his hand.

He watched miserably as she read it: those beautiful, private words that Braska had intended only for him were being exposed, twisted into something base and crude. Yuna's expression shifted from surprise to disbelief to revulsion; when she reached the end of the letter, she threw it aside, flatly declared that both her father and Auron were disgusting, and stomped over to her bedroll to sleep. Auron considered getting up to gather the leaves of the letter, but decided that would add insult to injury, so he waited until it was his turn to get up and take watch, and quietly collected up the sheets of paper, not meeting the questioning gaze of Lulu, who had just come in to sleep following her own shift.

The next morning, it became clear that Yuna had decided

on her response: she was now firmly refusing to address Auron directly. When he spoke to her, she made no reply; when it was absolutely necessary for her to convey information to him, she passed it to Lulu instead, speaking about Auron in the third person. It was astonishingly immature of her, and he hoped she would drop it and give him the chance to explain himself, or apologise, or whatever she wanted, before too long; but she kept it up all day, and would in fact continue not to speak to him until they reached Zanarkand several weeks later. Lulu found the situation confusing and irritating, and attempted to ask Auron what was going on, but he merely told her that Yuna was the one making things difficult, not him. He should be glad, he realised, that she hadn't dismissed him from her service: as a summoner, she certainly had the right to fire her guardians. If that had happened, he would have had to crawl back to Besaid and admit to Braska that he had left Yuna in Lulu's sole company, the two of them dangerously vulnerable to any fiend with more than a smattering of magic defence.

Even at the Moonflow, where a group of Al Bhed unexpectedly attempted to intercept the pilgrimage by plucking Yuna right out of her seat on board the shoopuf, and Auron was obliged to dive in and rescue her – even after they both emerged from the water gasping and dripping wet, she refused to thank or even acknowledge him. Lulu gently suggested to Yuna, when Auron was otherwise engaged, that it might be time to iron out whatever grievance this was, and she

emphatically refused.



On the other side of the Moonflow, they came upon a young Al Bhed girl who seemed overly keen to make their acquaintance; once it had been established that neither guardian bore any particular antipathy towards her race, the girl explained that she was in fact Yuna's cousin, Rikku, who had – the story got a bit mangled from this point – abandoned her compatriots, who were trying for some reason to kidnap summoners, and decided to join their pilgrimage instead. Nobody had any desire to turn away someone so enthusiastic, so Rikku tagged along with them from that point onwards, proving her worth by stealing all sorts of useful items from fiends. Strangely, Auron found himself getting on well with the girl: her dismissive attitude towards Yevon was refreshing after five years living among the devout islanders of Besaid. She also, quite unashamedly, mentioned several times that she found Yuna's ongoing refusal to speak to Auron hilarious, and privately, he could see where she was coming from.

Now that Auron was travelling with not two but three younger women, strangers who passed them began making remarks to him about how fortunate he supposedly was. To begin with, he dismissed these men, who very often seemed to

be priests, with an unamused smile, sometimes accompanied by a grunt; as they approached Bevelle, he was getting anxious enough to become more combative. He managed to refrain from informing these strangers that he had no interest in women – as devout Yevonites, they would undoubtedly be offended by the idea that such people existed – but nonetheless, he ended up accusing a number of them of perversion, and, on the way back through Macalania Forest after Yuna received her fourth aeon, he actually drew his sword, and had to be held back by Lulu and Rikku as the man ran away in terror.

While Yuna stood at a distance, deliberately looking elsewhere, the other two women encouraged Auron to sit with them and explain why he was so agitated; he wasn't even sure himself, but eventually realised it was the fact that the next aeon was in Bevelle that was upsetting him. Years away from the place had made him forget its good and even its passable qualities, and it now existed in his mind only as the place where he had been condemned and humiliated, banished from his position as a warrior monk. He realised that he couldn't bear the thought of even entering the city, and so he made camp outside its walls over the course of the day, waiting for the others to return after Yuna's visit to the temple. While he waited, he penned a long and disconsolate letter to Braska, making no mention of Yuna's continued grudge against him, but merely apologising for his failure to extend his protection of her to this section of the journey.

The others returned early the next morning; Auron wondered whether Lulu and Rikku had had to convince Yuna to come back for him, but, Rikku told him later, she had apparently been quite willing. The pilgrimage was almost at its end now: only the Calm Lands and Mount Gagazet to go before they reached Zanarkand.

The Calm Lands were even more extensive than Auron had anticipated, though; it took them almost a week to cross on foot. For the most part, the area was deserted, apart from fiends, and they had to rely on the tent; there was a travel agency in the middle, though, and it was a blessed relief to be able to speak to some other humans. Somehow, Braska had succeeded in getting a letter sent here for Auron to read; he had obviously done so since receiving Auron's remorseful correspondence from outside Bevelle, as while the letter was brief, it consisted mostly of reassurances that Auron had not neglected his duty.

He was sure to keep the letter away from Yuna this time. It was just as wonderful to read as Braska's last, but there was an underlying desperation this time: Braska was aware that the end of the journey approached. Before signing off, he begged Auron to take care, and reminded him that Yuna's fate was of her own making; whatever happened to her, he was still confident that Auron himself would be able to return unharmed. He knew there would be a time of mourning ahead, he wrote, but Auron's safe return would bring him some solace under

any circumstances.

Auron had privately hoped all along, for Braska's sake, that Yuna might abandon her pilgrimage: that, he had realised, was what would make Braska happiest. But Yuna was more obstinate than both her parents put together, and by this point, he was certain she would see it through to the end.

3

WHEN they reached Zanarkand and were met by the horrible news that one of Yuna's guardians would have to die, Rikku was the first to react, commencing an emphatic protest that would continue intermittently until the Final Summoning itself. Lulu, good Yevonite that she was, instead offered herself up as the Final Aeon; and Yuna, with shining eyes and an expression that was remarkably similar to how Braska's had been on that night a year earlier when he had burst into Auron's hut in the village in floods of tears, turned to Auron and, speaking to him for the first time in weeks, asked exactly the same question her father had: "Auron, what should I do?"

On that occasion, Auron had given Braska his bed and let

him sleep; this time, he was at a loss. He was torn between his old loyalties to Yevon, his lingering belief in selected passages of the teachings, his knowledge that much of the Yevonite order was founded on despicable hypocrisy; his unyielding devotion to Braska; the fatherly fondness he had developed for Lulu and Rikku, and his duty to Yuna as her guardian. Having abandoned an attempt to weigh up those various factors, he admitted his ignorance, and she took one step towards him and then all but fell into his arms; he held her close as she sobbed into his robe, finding himself too shocked by their sudden reconciliation to offer any further response other than tentatively patting the back of her head with his gloved hand.

Rikku and Lulu were still at a stalemate, and Auron eventually gained the wherewithal to suggest that Yuna try to find out more from the Lady Yunalesca; she consented, and the four of them headed in the direction she seemed to have gone. Outside, Yunalesca informed them that the situation was even worse than they had feared: the Final Aeon would become Sin, and the cycle would continue indefinitely; the chance of an eternal Calm was nonexistent. To Auron, it was more proof of Yevon's duplicity: he was now in firm agreement with Rikku, and the two of them implored Yuna to step away and renounce her pilgrimage. But Yuna and Lulu were still unconvinced, and, Yuna reasoned, a Calm of a few years was better than no Calm at all; and so, despite their companions' ongoing objections, the two of them resolved to sacrifice themselves.

Auron and Rikku waited inside while the ritual to create the Final Aeon was completed; this time, it was Rikku's turn to throw herself into Auron's arms and cry, much more loudly and angrily than Yuna had done. Yuna eventually returned, looking haggard; she apologised repeatedly for several minutes until Auron succeeded in persuading her to stop, and they turned to make the journey back to the Calm Lands.

After a miserable few days' trek, the time for the Final Summoning arrived. Yuna took both her guardians aside separately to say goodbye; when she spoke to Auron, all she could do was apologise for her behaviour, as much as he entreated her not to. She had been so shocked by the contents of her father's letter, she told him, that she had failed to notice the genuine love with which he addressed Auron; the only way she had been able to process the surprise while still pursuing her pilgrimage had been to try to block it out altogether, but every time she looked at Auron she was reminded of it. Eventually, thinking over her father's words, she had come to the conclusion that if this was what made both Braska and Auron happy, and if her mother was amenable, she could hardly be opposed to it herself. She told Auron this while clinging onto him tightly and burying her face against his chest; he could hardly make out what she was saying. Finally, she drew back, stretched up to gently kiss Auron on the forehead, and told him not to blame himself for her fate; and then she was gone.

They waited out the Final Summoning, taking shelter in a

crevasse. Rikku had started sobbing again; the sound of it irritated Auron, but he did his best to console her, absently patting her on the arm. She was still crying when the noises above them stopped and they hurried out to inspect the scene; Yuna's still body lay on the ground, her limbs spread like a fayth statue. Auron took off his outer robe and bundled her into it, hoisting her over his shoulder; they would need to take the body to a temple, he informed Rikku dispassionately, and have Yuna sent. Bevelle was the closest; they headed for Macalania.

After several days' journey during which neither of them could bear to mention the increasingly foul smell that accompanied them, they arrived at Macalania Temple and persuaded the resident summoner to ensure Yuna would make it to the Farplane. Auron declined to mention that he even knew the identity of the now thoroughly decomposed corpse he had brought in, let alone that it was the High Summoner; the news of the new Calm was beginning to spread. It was known in the Bevelle area now, and would no doubt reach Besaid in a few days. Every time Auron pictured Braska finding out, he experienced a horrible twist in his stomach. He needed to be there, he thought, to support him; simultaneously, somehow, he also needed to be very far away.

Leaving the temple, Auron was accosted by a delegation from Bevelle. He was now a legendary guardian, their leader announced, and he should come to the city at once and receive his due reward. Moreover, a commission that happened

to have recently been set up to examine historic prosecutions had decided that his conviction of nearly eleven years ago had been on untenable grounds, and he was owed several years' worth of damages. When Auron enquired about Rikku, with a politeness even he was surprised by, the answer was given that Al Bhed were exempt from the criteria for legendary guardianship. Less politely, Auron told the man he could insert that legendary guardianship into his posterior, and he took Rikku by the hand and marched up the road to the travel agency.

He slept, as he had on that memorable occasion advised Braska to do, and found in the morning that his mind was made up: he could not go back to Besaid. It was heartbreaking to make the decision: thinking of Braska made him want to cry out in despair, and yet he was unable to prevent himself doing so with every passing second. But having to face Braska would undo him entirely: he could not return, not until he had found a way of putting an end to this misery. He urged Rikku to go in his place and tell Yuna's parents how courageously their daughter had faced her death; perhaps that would lessen their suffering just a little.



Rikku went to Besaid as Auron had suggested, picking up a fast machina route and getting there not very long at all after

the news of the Calm had spread. It was this news that had finally prompted the people of Besaid to accept Yuna's parents; not failing to be moved by their grief, and grateful that they had raised a child so keen to follow Yevon's teachings and sacrifice herself for everyone's good, they had begun to support them in their mourning by making sure they were kept well fed and well looked after, visiting them at their house according to an unspoken rota that they had somehow instinctively, collectively formed. Braska wished they would leave them both in peace for a second, just so they could have some time to grieve together, but he was too dazed to think about how he might word it in a way that wasn't unconscionably rude.

As soon as Rikku set foot on the island, everyone correctly assumed she was there to visit the only other Al Bhed most of them had ever met, and they pointed her in the direction of Braska's house, unsure of whether to dislike her for her race or welcome her for her presumed connection to Yuna's pilgrimage. She arrived there at a time when it happened that they had no visitors, and were resting, too weary after a string of engagements with well-meaning neighbours to have the energy for anything else. Rikku walked straight in, following the Al Bhed custom; she came upon Braska and his wife sleeping in each other's arms, and shuffled around nervously until they woke. When they did so, she introduced herself as the niece they had never met; she recounted the courage with which Yuna had gone to her death; and, deciding to keep the truth of

the Final Summoning from them until they had had some time to mourn, she explained that Lulu had died on the pilgrimage, but Auron had survived, although he would not be returning to Besaid. At that, Braska, who, like Yuna's mother, had begun crying again as soon as Rikku first told them who she was, became overwhelmed by despair; burying himself in his wife's embrace, he gave in to howls of desperation, barely registering the murmured reassurances of both women and the soft kisses that were pressed into his hair.

Rikku, somewhat self-consciously, moved into Yuna's old bedroom, and helped her aunt and uncle cope, dealing with the overzealous visitors until the latter drained away, unable to deal with the presence of not just one but two Al Bhed. She left Yuna's parents to grieve when they needed the space for it, not trying to interfere with their evidently close relationship, and spent time in the village, patiently demonstrating to the islanders that the Al Bhed and their machina had some uses. Only several months later, when Braska had begun to smile again, did she tell them what the Final Summoning really meant, and by that time, their first reaction was anger, not distress. That night, the three of them made a promise to each other: from now on, their goal would be to find a way of defeating Sin for good. Finally, years later than they had intended, Yuna's parents left Besaid with Rikku in tow, headed for Luca, where they planned to begin by conducting a thorough search of the public archives.



Auron, meanwhile, took a different approach: he wandered Spira, losing track of time and space but always careful to glean what information he could about Sin and the aeons. He spent months with the Ronso, learning their customs and even picking up some of their incredibly complex language: he came to understand what Mount Gagazet meant to them, and spent days within its chambers, studying the strange gathering of fayth set into the rock. He journeyed to Bikanel, where he eventually succeeded in gaining the confidence of the Al Bhed, and investigated what machina were and why they had become understood to be so offensive to Yevon. After that, he headed to Guadosalam and endeavoured to understand the Guado, who were in disarray after their leader, a maester of Yevon, had apparently descended into insanity and eventually ended his own life; they were the most suspicious of all, but, with a patience that had eluded Auron as a younger man, he stayed with them until they explained their way of life, and he was even shown their sphere archive, which provided him with a lot more evidence of the nature of the Final Summoning. Having taken his leave of the Guado, finally, he resumed his journeying, eventually meeting a travelling historian whose mind was somewhat confused, but who, it turned out in the end, was an unsent who had been alive at the time of the machina war between Zanarkand and

Bevelle. It was difficult to get the man to part with any useful information, but after several weeks of judicious questioning, Auron was beginning to put the pieces together. It was time, he realised, to return to the Al Bhed.

Over the years, he had thought about Braska with decreasing frequency: not for any lack of feelings, but only because it made his heart ache to do so. Those first weeks after Yuna's Final Summoning had been so difficult; he had got through them by forcibly dispelling the image of Braska from his mind, and at some point that had become a habit. Only in his more vulnerable moments did he allow himself to picture those blue eyes, and to relish the burning in his chest.



Braska's team continued to work through the archives, unknowingly leaving the practical side of the research to Auron as they made careful notes on anything that seemed relevant, first in Luca and then, after a lot of strings had been pulled, in the temple libraries of Bevelle. Braska was the only one of the three of them who was permitted anywhere near those, and even he had to rely on a network of friends of friends, a substantial gil settlement, and a carefully constructed false identity; but he dutifully made his way through the documents while the ladies, left behind in Luca, attempted to find connections in what was reported back. After long years of fruitless

speculation, they finally reached agreement on one thing: the mechanism to create the Final Aeon had to be stopped. Their first task, therefore, was to weaken the Lady Yunalesca, and to have her sent, a thousand years later than she should have been.

Yuna's Calm had recently come to an end, and there was no shortage of summoners around Bevelle eager to prove their worth; but all of them, by necessity, were Yevonites, and so none could be trusted. It was Braska, therefore, who took it upon himself to train as a summoner, receiving instruction from a fellow disgraced priest in one of Bevelle's less salubrious neighbourhoods. Receiving the aeons was of no concern; he only needed to know how to send, and to be so confident in the technique that he could be sure of dispatching even the least willing targets to the Farplane. With the training halved, it took only a few months; meanwhile, Braska's wife and niece spent the time working on their physical combat skills, learning to wield spears and axes.

When all three of them were as prepared as they could be, they headed to Zanarkand. It was risky to do so without any aeons; the battles were tough and exhausting; but being much older than most summoners, and a far more practised mage, Braska carried his party through. On entry to the ruined city, they were accosted by the unsent priest who acted as gatekeeper: Rikku had forgotten this would happen, and now, with nobody among them who had really undertaken

the summoner's pilgrimage, it seemed he would deny them passage. They were forced to fight him, therefore, and when he had been struck down, Braska found himself having to send him; it was useful practice.

The lady met them exactly where they had expected, based on Rikku's careful memories of Yuna's pilgrimage. She began her prepared speech, but soon realised that the summoner standing before her had gained entrance by duplicitous means. After that, she wasted no time in attacking, and they found themselves caught in a long and difficult battle. Blinded, put to sleep, drained again and again of magical power, they tossed remedies to each other while trying to land the occasional hit. After a few bouts, she mutated to become more monstrous, exposing them to even more damaging afflictions. Braska had used so many spells that he was feeling faint, but all three of them struggled on until the lady's final hideous form was vanquished and she returned to her human shape. With the last of his energy, Braska sent her to the Farplane; then he collapsed, exhausted, into his wife's arms.

When all three of them were well enough to make the descent, they did so, reflecting on what they had done: there would be no more Final Aeons. From this time onward, either there would never be a Calm again, or the next Calm to be brought would be eternal. The thought terrified them – there was still so much to lose – but at the same time, it gave them the motivation to continue.

Braska took weeks to fully recover after the fight: now in his fifties, he was really too old for active combat. On returning from the battle, he took a fever that made him sweat more than the climate in Besaid ever had; in its throes, he barely knew where he was. While the ladies brought him sweet tea and medicines, and held his trembling hand, his mind concocted all sorts of nonsensical images, of great machina cities falling, the Al Bhed Home under attack, plagues and pestilence sweeping across Spira: and through it all, there was one constant, the face of the most remarkable and wonderful man he had ever known, the sweet dark eyes of his dear Auron. In moments of semi-lucidity, he called out for him, and while Rikku frowned in confusion, Braska's wife was overcome by sorrow, and she leant forward to soothe her husband's agitation with a kiss to his sweat-moistened forehead.

Once Braska had recovered, they returned to the archives to corroborate what they now suspected to be the necessary final stage in the plan. Months more of work, and the last remaining doubts were dispelled: they needed to get inside Sin. Rikku exploited the Al Bhed communication networks to get in touch with her father, and not mentioning that she was in the company of Cid's estranged sister, persuaded him to lend the group the use of his airship. He promised to pilot it to Luca at once.



It had been years since Auron's previous stay with the Al Bhed, and when he returned to them, their command structure had changed such that he was no longer entirely in the right people's confidence; with renewed patience, he set about convincing them once again that he could be trusted. Only after a few months of this did he reveal his plan to them: Sin needed to be penetrated and the aeon inside destroyed. The Al Bhed were sympathetic to the idea, wanting to put an end to the Final Summoning; but none of them were so bold as to be willing to accompany him, as much as he tried to persuade them. It was no matter, he decided; he would go alone. Lulu's powers would surely be formidable now that she was a fayth, but he would use all his strength to defeat the aeon she had become.

By the time he came to ask them to use an airship to transport him to Sin, he found he would have to wait. Air travel being an only recently rediscovered technology, the Al Bhed still had only one craft in working order; an attempt at restoring a second had been abandoned after Sin attacked the construction site not long after the end of Yuna's Calm. The one airship they maintained had just been hired out, apparently, by a family in Luca.

Auron had been patient for years, but at this point, he could bear it no more. He was so close to destroying Sin, and a practical roadblock like this was somehow more enraging than he had anticipated. He would go to Luca himself, he decided, and convince this family that whatever their need for the airship

was, his was more important. He had waited enough.



Cid's reunion with his sister was awkward but tender; when he was informed of the plan to destroy Sin, he warmed considerably towards both her and Braska, who was making a concerted effort not to get on his bad side. In fact, what Cid was most shocked by was the fact that his own daughter had somehow grown into a mature and thoughtful young woman, albeit one who still considered him outdated and embarrassing.

The final preparations were made on board the *Fahrenheit*, docked at Luca: first, they would need to attack Sin itself; then, with Sin weakened, they would enter the creature and take out the Final Aeon. They were about to take to the skies when the news was brought to them of a commotion outside: an intruder was trying to gain entry to the airship. A devout Yevonite, perhaps, attempting to cause trouble in the face of egregious machina; they dismissed the interruption, telling the crew to dispatch him and prepare for takeoff. But the man, apparently, was insistent: the report was brought to them that he was shouting incomprehensible things about Sin, drawing quite a crowd as he continued to attempt to intercept them.

Braska, too kind for his own good, went out to see if he could placate the stranger or direct him to one of the facilities

maintained in Luca for the mentally disturbed. Walking out to the gate, he failed to recognise the figure in front of him at first: now mostly grey-haired and divested of the distinctive robe he had once worn ever since he used it to wrap Yuna's body, Auron was an unfamiliar sight. But drawing closer, Braska suddenly realised which particular pair of dark eyes he was looking at, and his feet carried him forward as fast as they could until he was in Auron's arms for the first time in nearly ten years, weeping freely as his hands roved over every inch of Auron's face, kissing him with such hunger, telling him over and over again how he loved him so much and had missed him so terribly; and Auron returned every gesture, clinging to Braska tightly as he murmured his own expressions of earnest love.

Braska wanted this moment to be eternal, but he forced himself to take Auron by the hand and lead him to where the ladies sat planning their strategy; both leapt up in shocked delight to see him. Auron embraced each of them in turn, reluctantly letting go of Braska's hand to do so; and then, once he had done so, he returned to Braska immediately, unable to keep from holding onto him, grabbing his hand once again and threading his own fingers between Braska's. They were both so desperate to prolong that contact, to deepen it and to get to know each other in ways they had always prevented themselves from exploring before; while Rikku looked on, her eyes round with surprise, Braska's wife quietly gave them her blessing.

In one of the airship's storage rooms, by no means adapted for such purposes, Braska and Auron reacquainted themselves with one another after their long separation. First, gentle kisses, soft touches, murmurs of eternal devotion; then, with increasing fervour, they removed each other's clothes and stared in delight at what was revealed; there were more kisses, more touches in places that neither of them had dared dream about touching on those first occasions when they had been intimate, back in Auron's hut in Besaid village all those years ago. After long minutes of exquisite foreplay, Braska lay on his stomach and let Auron penetrate him, Auron repeating to Braska that he loved him with every thrust, until, both having shared the most wonderful of all experiences, Auron let himself collapse onto Braska's quivering body. Braska was perfect, Auron whispered as the last pleasures of orgasm ebbed away: absolutely perfect.



Lulu looked exactly the same as she had at twenty-two. Auron and Rikku could barely meet her eye; the fate of their fellow guardian was so distressing to think about, but she urged them with her typical composure to put an end to her suffering. When she transformed, becoming a giant beast swathed in heavy ropes and chains, it took the four of them a moment

to gather themselves before they surrounded her and began to fight. Trying to ignore the very human screams of pain that the creature emitted in response to each blow, they worked at her for hours, cutting away each of her shackles in turn until she was liberated by defeat.

There were no aeons remaining to summon; all that was left was the spirit of Yu Yevon. The battle with Lulu had been exhausting, and it was so hard to keep fighting, as physically and emotionally destroyed as they all were; but they continued until the spirit was vanquished, and then Braska, barely still able to stand, nonetheless took hold of his staff and performed his last sending. Finally, he stumbled to the ground, holding tightly onto his darling wife with one hand and beloved Auron with the other; Auron drew Rikku in with his other arm, and the four of them sat there, huddled together, while all over Spira, fayth turned to stone.