

THE meat was burnt. Jecht could smell it as soon as he returned from his workout: it was the smell of innumerable post-season barbecues he'd attended in Zanarkand. That smell had always accompanied the relaxing heat of a summer's evening, the thump of someone's awful music on the stereo, the kids' shrieks as they hurtled around the garden. There'd been one shortly after Tidus turned five; he'd fallen over on the patio and cut his knee, and Jecht had had to take him home. It had annoyed him back then, having to abandon his teammates so he could take care of the crying kid, but –

Whatever.

Jecht sat beside Auron, adopting the same cross-legged stance. (It had been unfamiliar to him at first, but, he'd realised, it was as good a way to sit as any.) Auron passed him a skewer, and Jecht looked down at it – his suspicions had been right. Even though the sun had mostly set, he could tell it was ash-black.

Auron had begun chewing on his own portion. Had he managed to cook that one more successfully, Jecht wondered? He stole a closer look. Charcoal fell between Auron's fingers and littered the ground; each bite he took was a horrible crunch, as if he was chewing gravel. And yet Auron seemed not to be at all put out that what he was eating was, if Jecht remembered school science correctly, pure carbon.

Maybe it didn't work that way in Spira. Stranger things had happened. Jecht took an experimental bite of his food; and

almost immediately, he found himself spitting the stuff right back out again. Vile.

“What’s up?” said Auron. (This was a consequence of several weeks’ forced companionship; earlier Aurons would have merely rolled their eyes at him, ignored him entirely, or, at the very beginning of the pilgrimage, just stood up and walked away.)

“Fuck, man,” Jecht wheezed, rubbing a finger over his lips in an attempt to relieve them of the remaining ash. “This is burnt.”

Auron looked down at the meat he held in his own hands. “It’s not too bad,” he said. “Is it?”

“It’s *black*,” said Jecht plaintively. “You tryin’ to poison us?”

Auron shrugged. “I’m not used to the fauna in this area. Thought it might be more prudent to cook it a bit longer.”

“Look,” said Jecht, “if it has black flakes fallin’ off it, you’ve cooked it *too* long. Did no one ever teach you that?”

“Nobody taught me cooking at all,” Auron explained defensively. “We were always served food at the barracks. I just had to learn the basics before the journey started.”

“You didn’t learn shit, pal,” said Jecht, looking down at his food.

Auron folded his arms. “Oh, *sorry*.”

Jecht (who, a few weeks ago, would have provoked Auron further, as far as a fist fight at the very least) grinned at him,

and said, “Hey, can’t be helped. You got any more of the raw stuff? I’ll show you how it’s done.”