
Before The Storm

IT was when the group had been travelling through Macalania Forest for a while, and were about to make camp for the night, that Auron suddenly realised where they were. The woods were no easier to navigate than ten years ago, and the looping, branching paths had been disorientating at first, but now that he was a little more used to the scenery, he was starting to recognise it: it wasn't all that far from here that Jecht had buried that sphere.

He hung back as the others walked on, letting the implications sink in. He would certainly need to show the sphere to Tidus; to Yuna, too, as it contained her father's image. But the thought of seeing that sphere himself was what really made him hesitate – he would have to make sure he was ready to face it. He followed the others along the leafy path as the shadows lengthened, too lost in thought to get involved while they bickered about where to camp; as soon as a place was determined,

he murmured his excuses and slipped away, walking until the sound of lively conversation died and he could at last have a moment's peace.

Alone, he carefully pushed his sword into the soft ground and sat, withdrawing his left arm from the folds of his robe to massage his forehead. He was even more exhausted than usual, he noted grimly: it was impossible to deny that even thinking about this sphere was beginning to upset him. The mere memory of Jecht recording the images made his stomach clench and his chest burn; the actual sight of him, stubborn and naive as they had all been, would be almost too difficult to bear.

After that, there would be more spheres, and he would again have to be prepared for each one. Just as the unanticipated emergence of Jyscal Guado from the Farplane had alerted him to the need to actively resist against sendings, this reminder of the past would be a test of the stoicism he had carefully cultivated over the past ten years. Jecht would appear, brash and ignorant, and Auron would have to try his very best not to be outwardly moved. Braska would appear – just the thought of it made him want to cry out in frustration, but he would have to be ready to maintain the same inscrutable expression as always. The children had no business knowing his pain: this was not his story, and had not been for a long time, ever since he had charged at that woman and been struck down, paying the price for the most reckless decision of all.

He himself would appear: perhaps that would be the worst thing about it. They would all look back at him, trying to square that young man with what they saw before them, just as he himself had fruitlessly done so many times. From those brief memories, they would think they knew him.

He would just have to gird himself, he decided, and suppress the urge to react, just as he forced himself to do in the face of all the other unwelcome reminders he encountered daily in Spira. Auron removed his glasses to rub at his undamaged eye, forcing his breath out in a slow, steady stream. Facing his past was just another trial: perhaps the most unwelcome of all, but that was all it was, just another struggle to endure.

He was so tired, though, so deeply in need of the kind of rest he had not had in ten years. That young man he would soon come face to face with: he hadn't yet known true exhaustion. Anxiety and desperation, yes – Auron knew he would be able to tell which stage of the pilgrimage each sphere had captured based on the state of his younger self's hair and the size of the shadows under his eyes – but even his sleepless nights during those last weeks with Braska had never resulted in the sort of fatigue that had plagued him since his death.

He closed his eye, releasing a quiet groan. Just a few moments of indulgence, and then he would return to the others and resume the pretence that this half-life was something close to bearable.

A rustle behind disturbed him; on his right side, of course.

He turned, twisting all the way around so he could see the source of the noise. It was the girl, and he closed his eye for a second time: he was too weary for this now, whatever it was.

“Auron?” said Rikku tentatively.

He sighed, reluctantly opened his eye again, and said, “Yes?”

“Um,” she said, and then she walked right up to him, sparing a nervous glance towards the large sword that protruded from the ground, and finally sitting down next to him. Still on his right: at least that made it easier to ignore her.

She was looking at him intently; he put his glasses back on.

“Uh,” she said, “are you OK?”

He stifled another sigh. Lying would be wrong; he considered just telling her to go away, but as rude as he wanted to be, that would do no good either. “What do you want?” he said eventually.

Rikku drew her knees up towards her chest, demonstrating a flexibility that Auron himself had lacked even when he was alive. “You don’t have to keep it to yourself all the time, you know,” she said. “Yunie would want to help you.”

“Yuna has enough problems of her own,” he told her.

“OK, so what difference would one more make?”

He shook his head in exasperation. “That’s illogical.”

“Then you can tell *me*,” said Rikku, apparently undeterred.

“Why do you care?” Auron asked.

She shrugged. “Cos ... you’re sad. So I wanna make you feel better.” His continued silence evidently provoked her into further explanation. “You helped me on the Thunder Plains, right?”

He couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow at that. “Did I?”

“Well, I didn’t think so at first,” said Rikku. “You were being such an old grouch, it was making me really mad. But then I realised: if I was mad, I forgot to be scared of the thunder. So it did help, in the end.” She gazed at him thoughtfully. “I guess you probably didn’t do it on purpose.”

“That would be correct,” said Auron, with a little embarrassment.

“Either way,” she said, “I’m in your debt, I guess.”

He studied her; she seemed sincere. She was even making an effort to be still and patient, just sweeping one foot back and forth a few inches along the forest floor.

“Rikku,” he said quietly.

“Hm?”

“Did Yuna tell you I was her father’s guardian?” he asked.

“Hey,” she said with indignation, “I may be an Al Bhed, but I do know history.”

Auron looked at the ground. History: that was what Braska’s pilgrimage had become. Only ten years ago, but already copied into schoolbooks and carved in stone, refashioned to fit the model Yevonite narrative. To children like

Rikku, it must have seemed as if it had never happened at all. “There are spheres,” he said, dismissing the thought.

“From Yuna’s dad’s pilgrimage?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “In these woods, some of them. I – here’s how you can help me. Will you promise me something?”

She looked intrigued to have been allowed into his confidence, cocking her head to one side as she replied, more quietly than usual, “Sure.”

He turned his own head away, looking at the dark, twisted shapes of the trees. “Some of those spheres – I’ll be in them. The way I was, ten years ago. I’ve changed since then.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Do you promise that when you see those pictures, you won’t ask? How I became –” He gestured at himself. Not just how his appearance had changed, he meant, although that had been traumatic enough, turning into an old man overnight – but what coming to terms with the Final Summoning had done to him on the inside. He tried to reformulate the request. “You won’t say anything to me about it?”

She nodded, her spiralled eyes round with intensity.

“And,” – this was so embarrassing to ask, so humiliating, but he had revealed enough of his worries by now that this could hardly make him more vulnerable – “if you have to make some remark about it, or laugh at me, will you save it until I’m somewhere else? So there’s no chance I’ll notice?”

“I don’t think I’d *laugh* at you,” said Rikku.

“You’d be surprised,” he said. He knew they would laugh, all of them, seeing his younger self: the way he had been so single-minded, so focused on protecting Braska and so stubbornly hostile towards Jecht; so sure, to begin with, that he would be able to shape the pilgrimage into what he wanted, as unattainable as that desire had been. Seeing that, and seeing what he had since become – they were bound to laugh. But none of them knew the full story; none of them would understand the feelings and the experiences that had made him behave that way, and the horrors of the pilgrimage’s late stages: the agony of watching Jecht walk calmly to his death and then, only a few days later, clutching Braska’s body in the Calm Lands as it gradually turned cold, and the hot, uncontrollable anger that had seen him march all the way back to Zanarkand, only to be immediately condemned with the merest, most casual gesture.

“Promise me,” he said again.

Rikku nodded seriously. “I promise,” she said.

Auron gave a brusque nod back, and then looked away. It was so shameful, having to reveal these worries to another. Particularly to Rikku – even if his earlier judgement of her as childish and irritating now seemed as if it may have been too harsh, the thought that he had exposed his vulnerability to her was hardly conducive to relieving his distress.

“Please leave me alone,” he muttered, removing his glasses again so he could rub at his face. He barely noticed as she

hurriedly stood up; there was a light, hesitant touch on his shoulder that he registered with several seconds' delay, and then she was gone.



He led Tidus and Yuna to the first sphere the next morning, with the others following behind; as he had expected, that first sight of himself was mortifying. The younger Auron stood there on the Highbridge, stiff-backed and adorned with an indelible frown, the mere way he spoke to Jecht revealing not only the extent of his disdain for him, but also the totally unsubstantiated sense of moral superiority he had felt at that time. It was so awfully, crushingly embarrassing; but he stood still, being careful not to look at any of the others, merely lowering his head just a little so less of his face was discernible behind his collar, and discreetly massaging his chest with his gloved hand in an attempt to alleviate the burning sensation the sight of Braska walking next to him had provoked. Braska – just Braska's patient, gentle expression – that was enough to make him feel absolutely miserable.

As his own image walked towards the recording machina, he heard Tidus gleefully exclaim, "Hey, two-eyed Auron!", and he suppressed a groan; that, he knew, would not be the last of the boy's remarks, and while they were intended good-naturedly, each of them would be painful to hear.

What he didn't expect, though, was Rikku's intervention: she jabbed Tidus in the side, and he let out a yelp. "Concentrate," she instructed him.

"Huh?" he said, as the sphere footage settled on Braska at greater length.

Auron didn't catch the rest of their whispered, urgent conversation; he was concentrating too hard on maintaining a neutral expression as he watched Braska's image. His dear friend looked so young – tired and sad, but young – it made Auron realise that he would now have been the same age himself as Braska was in the sphere, had he aged and lived in a normal way. Thirty-five years of experience, and he was still powerless to change the way things worked in this terrible place; all he could do now was try to nudge things in the right direction, and hope that it might have some beneficial effect sooner rather than later.

He watched glumly as the scene shifted to Macalania Lake, and more proof of his own youthful naivety was advanced; then the sphere shut off. Auron attempted to regain his awareness of what was happening in the present; he heard Tidus make some vaguely familiar remark about Jecht, and then, as his senses sharpened, he noticed the boy had turned to look towards him, his features twisting into a grin again, no doubt about to return the conversation to the subject of the younger Auron's own behaviour.

"I think there's more," said Rikku, before Tidus could speak

again, and Auron found himself looking down at the sphere once more, along with everyone else. She was right: the final part of the footage began, and everyone fell silent as they watched the images of the same woods they were standing in now, listening to Jecht's uncharacteristically heartfelt message.

Tidus, unsurprisingly, was much more interested in Jecht than in anyone else after that addendum, and Auron managed to hold himself together enough to respond to his questions, only faltering once or twice.

"So he gave up going home?" Tidus asked, understandably still confused by Jecht's apparently sudden change in attitude. He hadn't witnessed it, of course, the way Jecht had developed over the course of the journey: his realisation that Braska was willing to go so far as to die, his decision to give up drinking, his gradual acknowledgement that being a professional blitzballer didn't make him superior to everyone around him. To Tidus, it must have seemed so abrupt; but Auron remembered that slow evolution. He remembered his own long-delayed resolution to admit that Jecht was a true friend, only a few days before Jecht walked calmly to his death.

"That was his decision," he muttered, suddenly desperate to be alone again, but forcing himself to stay where he was and see the conversation through to its end. It was important, he had realised, to tell Tidus something that the boy seemed genuinely not to know: that his father had loved him. It was

difficult to say it, reminding him as it did of that conversation he and Jecht had had in these very woods, ten years ago; but he passed on the information as emotionlessly as he could, responding calmly to Tidus' predictable exclamations, until he seemed convinced by it. Finally, Auron had the opportunity to take a moment to himself; he mumbled a few parting words and walked away.

With some distance from his present-day companions, it was impossible for his mind not to be drawn back to what the sphere had shown him. It was too much, once again; he had made his peace with the agony of seeing those youthful faces, but to look back from them and cast an eye over the people he accompanied now, and see their ill-informed attempts to understand – that still hurt. The spheres told so little of the story; even if he revealed his secret and tried to make them see what that pilgrimage had been – what it had done – even that would never be enough to justify who he was now, and what he had committed himself to.

He remained standing, and fixed his gaze arbitrarily on a tree in the far distance, taking slow, deep breaths. Just a few minutes: just a short while to forget about his duties, and to feel the quiet stillness of the woods around him, to inhale the fresh forest air and pretend he needed it.

And again, he was interrupted. This time, he heard her coming from a greater distance: those light, quick footsteps could hardly belong to anyone else. Turning towards her with

the sternest stare he could muster, he hissed, "What?"

Rikku was clearly put off by his demeanour, but not quite enough to actually turn around and return to the others; she blinked up at him for a moment, and eventually said, "Just checking you're OK."

"What have I done to deserve your special attention?" he replied flatly.

"Didn't I say you helped me?" she argued.

Auron raised an eyebrow. "You did. You said you were in my debt; I assume that debt is now paid off."

"I didn't know if you'd noticed," said Rikku.

"No, I –" Auron sighed quietly, thinking back to how she had distracted Tidus. "I did notice. That was thoughtful of you."

"Well, thinking's what we do," she said.

The Al Bhed, she meant: she had developed this obfuscatory way of speaking about her race in the time she had spent on the pilgrimage. It was an open secret among all of them but Wakka, who still seemed to be completely unaware; there was a tacit understanding that things were better that way. The Al Bhed were indeed known for their skills in logic and understanding, for all that it was easy to forget sometimes in Rikku's case, with all the fuss she made and her seemingly endless reserves of energy.

"Yuna's mother was an Al Bhed," said Auron softly, speaking aloud without really meaning to.

“Yep,” said Rikku. “My auntie.”

“Of course,” he said.

He stood there lost in thought for a moment. He had only met Yuna’s mother a few times, back when he barely knew Braska at all, but the two of them had always seemed so happy together; always much more so than all those contemporaries of his who had married for the sake of cementing their status within the hierarchy of Yevon. If he had ever been uncertain about his own decision, it was that knowledge that settled it.

Exhaling softly, he looked up into the sky, and was almost immediately brought disagreeably back to the present day by the sound of Rikku rustling around among the leaves.

“Still here?” he said.

She pouted back at him.

“You’re free of your debt now, aren’t you?” Auron explained pointedly.

Rikku shrugged. “Guess so. I must just be here because I’m a nice person.”

She was returning his gaze with a determined expression; he broke the eye contact, too weary to play the game. “You can find someone else to be nice to,” he told her. “I’m sure our other companions would appreciate it more.”

“Well, I like a challenge,” she said.

The joke took him by surprise; he tensed, and then let out a snort. By the time he looked back at Rikku, she had broken

into a large grin. “See?” she said. “If you need cheering up again, I’m your girl.”

He wondered if he should thank her; he’d lacked the energy to find anything amusing over the past few days, ever since Yuna had announced her intention to marry the Guado maester. There was too much to worry about, too many divergent paths to plan for as this pilgrimage became more and more complicated – not that he should have expected any less from Braska’s daughter.

It would be right to say something to Rikku, he decided: to acknowledge the service she had done him, even if he couldn’t bring himself to thank her in so many words. He opened his mouth, ready to speak; but she was already gone, skipping away into the forest. At last, Auron could allow himself to sink wholeheartedly into his misery, just for a few minutes. He couldn’t deny, though, that it was some solace to know that someone was looking out for him, even if that person did happen to be perhaps the least matched out of the whole group to his own temperament. As much as she would never understand his grief, and the special pain of being unsend, her concern for him was more comforting than he had anticipated.

It could be worse, he concluded. His true friends were long dead – as, of course, he was himself – and those circumstances had ensured he was continually accompanied by a grief so deep that nothing would alleviate it until the three of them were reunited on the Farplane. But for now, it was some small help

to know that even among the living there were people who looked out for him. He was, perhaps, not entirely alone.