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THEY had been given their own rooms at the Calm Lands travel agency: nothing but the greatest possible luxury for a summoner who was about to call and defeat Sin. The innkeeper had clearly been trying not to appear visibly disturbed by the state Braska was in: the summoner had been weeping, intermittently, ever since they left Zanarkand five days previously. Auron's own gentle enquiries had been rebuffed. Braska was adamant that he didn't want to discuss whatever he had witnessed in Zanarkand; Auron could only imagine the horrors that the ritual to create the Final Aeon might have entailed.

Auron wondered whether being alone might allow him to

sleep better: he hadn't had much success in the matter over the last week or so. Earlier in the pilgrimage, he'd always succeeded in getting the rest he needed; at some point during their northward crossing of the Calm Lands, that ability had begun to escape him, and now, once again, he found himself too unsettled to come anywhere close to sleeping. He was alert, uncomfortably so, and when a darkened, stooped figure appeared in his doorway, he recognised it instantly.

Braska stood there clothed only in his long nightshirt, trembling as he clutched at the doorframe. "I'm sorry," he said hoarsely; "I thought I would cope on my own, but –"

"It's all right," said Auron, withdrawing from under his blanket. "Come here."

Braska stepped forward; Auron had thought he might sit on the bed, but he lay down beside him, so close that Auron could feel his breath against his face. Some time alone had not made Braska any less upset: he was still crying as he settled into the bed beside Auron, pulling the blanket shakily over himself. Auron held him close to comfort him, running his hand over Braska's shoulder, and then his hair, and then brushing it softly against his face, wiping away his tears as more of them continued to flow.

"I'm sorry," Braska sobbed, "I'm sorry, Auron –"

"It's not your fault," said Auron quietly; he knew Braska was overcome by guilt about Jecht's sacrifice. "Jecht chose to become your fayth," he reminded Braska. "It wasn't your do-

ing.”

Braska shook his head, burying it deeper into the pillow. “Jecht?” he said weakly. “No, that’s – that’s not what I meant – I mean, his fate was terrible, but you’re right: he chose his path. I meant –” He suddenly seemed too upset to speak at all, and raised a hand to his face to hide his anguish before using it to take hold of Auron’s.

He threaded his fingers through Auron’s, lowering their hands so they filled the space between their chests. “I,” he said between sobs, “I meant you. What I’m doing to you.”

Auron dropped his gaze immediately; the urge to physically retreat was strong, but Braska was holding onto his hand so firmly. “Don’t worry about it,” he mumbled.

“No, Auron,” said Braska. “Jecht told me. You – you love me. You’re in love with me, and I was so *stupid* not to see it – I –”

“You don’t have to concern yourself with that,” said Auron; he could feel his cheeks burning. “It’s an infatuation – that’s all. I knew it wouldn’t make a difference to the pilgrimage.”

Braska shook his head mournfully. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe – maybe it would have?”

Auron looked back towards him; now Braska was the one lowering his eyes, seeming embarrassed as he continued to caress the hand that he held in his own.

“You see,” said Braska slowly, his sobs giving way to the occasional hiccough, “I was so sure that there was nobody left

who cared about me – Yuna, of course, but I’m her father; she hardly had any choice but to love me. But if I had known that somebody would see my death as something other than a reason to celebrate – and that that person would be you –”

Auron raised his free hand to cover his face; he felt as if he was going to cry, or vomit, or scream in agony. If he had been honest with Braska and told him months ago about his feelings, Braska might have reconsidered his determination to die; if Braska had known that somebody cherished him and needed him – even though he might not have reciprocated, he could still have taken solace in Auron’s devotion. That might have been the proof that he didn’t need to follow the summoner’s path, the proof that Auron had spent the whole journey searching for.

“It’s too late now, isn’t it?” said Auron, his voice cracking. “Now that Jecht has made his sacrifice – you’ll see it through –”

“I must,” Braska confirmed, and Auron found himself letting out a terrible wail, at last too distraught to show any restraint. It was Braska’s turn to reach out towards him: he cupped his chin with his free hand, stroking Auron’s cheek with his thumb, his own tears flowing faster again as he observed Auron’s distress. “I’m sorry, Auron,” he whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Desperately, Auron drew Braska in closer, holding him tightly so Braska’s face was pressed against his neck; the continued tears began to soak into his collarbone, and it took

him a moment to understand that Braska's lips were there as well, pressing quiet kisses to his skin. The realisation made his heart quicken; uncertain of how he should respond, he held Braska closer still, and then began to kiss the top of his head in return, letting his lips rest against Braska's soft hair.

"Braska," said Auron uncertainly, his voice muffled but audible; he had found himself unable to use the terms *sir* and *my lord* since Jecht's departure. "I know it's too late now, but please, tell me – what am I to you? Just a friend, or –" He hated himself for having to ask it, for the whiny, childish tone he could hear in his own words. But he needed to know. He couldn't tell which answer would give him solace, and which would destroy him; all he was sure of was that he had to know Braska's feelings before watching him walk off to sacrifice himself.

Braska shook his head, and then raised it slowly, his sorrowful eyes looking into Auron's once more. "I'm not sure," he murmured. "I think – maybe –"

He leant forward and kissed Auron again, on the mouth. Auron tensed for a moment: the feeling of it was so unexpected – it was something he had dared imagine countless times, but had been sure would never really happen. To be experiencing it in reality at last, matching his private fantasies so closely, took a few seconds to get used to. But once the initial surprise had passed, he relaxed into the kiss, feeling Braska's tear-logged eyelashes flutter against his face, reaching out to

cup the back of his head gently with one hand.

Drawing away, Braska exhaled slowly. “Yes,” he said. “I think – I never believed I might feel that way, but now –”

Auron heard another groan of despair escape from his own throat: he was barely aware of producing the sound, or even his capacity to do so. Braska had feelings for him, and knowing it was in some ways a comfort; but in others it was crippling. He buried his face in his hands; he had never felt this awful in his life.

“Auron,” said Braska, gently tugging Auron’s hands away from his face, and then he leant forward to kiss him again. Overcome by despair, Auron let Braska lead, lying almost still until he regained enough strength to kiss back, and to reach out to Braska’s head again and thread his fingers through his hair, stroking Braska’s back with his other hand. Braska adjusted the position of his head, kissing Auron’s neck now, moving his lips in a slow trail, down the right side and now the left; Auron tipped his head back to give Braska more room, a bigger canvas to adorn with his sweet, thrilling kisses, and he looked up at the ceiling, and heard his own breathing turn rapid and shallow.

“Braska,” he stuttered out, and then he forced himself to regain some propriety, firmly gripping Braska’s shoulder and manoeuvring him so he remained at a distance. “Braska. We should stop this. You’re making me –” He gave a significant nod towards his own crotch.

“Is that such a crime?” Braska said softly.

“It’s not appropriate,” Auron protested. “Not when – when you’re going to die tomorrow –”

It was the first time he had succeeded in saying it out loud. He heard himself let out a strange, dry sob, and closed his eyes.

Braska’s voice drifted through the darkness. “Auron, look at me. Before I go, I want to give you what you want.”

The words might have provoked a more significant reaction in Auron once; as it was, he felt his erection grow a little, but held himself still otherwise, opening his eyes and forcing himself to look at Braska’s face, still the most handsome face he had ever seen even when it was red and tearstained. “What I want,” he said slowly, “is for you to live.”

“I’m sorry,” Braska murmured. “We both know it’s too late. But I can give you this –”

Auron shook his head.

“I want it too,” said Braska, with gentle insistence.

It was barely imaginable, and Auron almost wanted to ask Braska to repeat himself; Braska’s previous revelations had been startling enough, and this one not only astonished him but filled him simultaneously with a desperate desire. He reached out to Braska’s hair again, winding his fingers through it and wishing he would never have to let go. “Are you sure?” he said breathlessly.

Braska nodded. “Yes, Auron,” he said; his voice was stronger every time he spoke. “I realise now. I want our

last moments to be special; I want to honour all the care and love you've shown me on this journey." He drew closer, and murmured into Auron's ear: "I want you inside me."

Auron suppressed a gasp: he didn't understand how it was possible to be so aroused and yet so distraught simultaneously. He pulled Braska in tightly, feeling Braska's bare legs against his own. They pressed together from head to toe: only two layers of light fabric, summoner's silk and guardian's cotton, separated Auron's cock from Braska's. He could feel them twitching against each other, both swollen and ready.

Braska had taken to kissing Auron's neck again, pressing and sucking with more fervour than before: through the deepening haze of arousal Auron wondered if it would leave marks, before concluding that if it did, all the better. Auron had always been Braska's, even before he pledged to become his guardian, and he had no fear of others knowing it. He would take that over the trappings of legendary guardianship: he knew from the history books that there would be some kind of ceremony, he would be asked to give a speech about Braska's sacrifice; and if he had to stand in front of all the holy men and give that speech with a neck adorned with purple bruises, he would do so proudly. Let them all see how devoted to each other the summoner and his guardian had been.

"Auron," Braska hissed, "touch me – *please* –"

Auron had never been one to refuse orders from Braska, particularly not when the thought of fulfilling them was so

exhilarating. With both hands, he lifted Braska's nightshirt to bunch it around his chest, and then he began to caress Braska's glorious pale cock, leaning to kiss the shaft, and then to kiss Braska's stomach and thighs and groin, all while Braska writhed so beautifully against him. He felt Braska reach out to loose his hair from the bun he put it in to sleep, letting Auron's hair fall free over his shoulders, and then running his hands through it with fervour.

"You're so gorgeous," Braska murmured; and finally, he passed a hand down, grappled impatiently with Auron's underclothes, and then reached for his cock, tugging it reverently as Auron tried to maintain control over the movements of his own hand on Braska.

Auron raised his head gradually, pressing a line of kisses to Braska's stomach and then his chest, then up the centre of his throat and finally meeting Braska's mouth, swallowing the sound of Braska's moan of pleasure. Braska, in turn, began to scatter kisses haphazardly over Auron's face, his grip on Auron's cock intermittently slackening, his strokes becoming erratic. "Inside me," he said again, his eyelashes tickling Auron's cheeks. "Won't you –"

"Yes," Auron breathed, and he turned his head for a moment so he could moisten a finger in his mouth. Once it was wet with saliva, he reached down, behind where his other hand continued to work at Braska's cock, and found the hole, rubbing his finger carefully around the rim, while Braska gasped

and writhed under him.

“Is that good?” Auron whispered. “Do you like that?”

As Braska nodded, biting his lip, Auron slowly found his way inside. Braska let out a little yelp, and closed his eyes; Auron leant forward to gently kiss each eyelid, and asked, “Is this OK?”

Braska nodded again, his eyebrows drawing a tight frown, and as Auron curled his finger forward, Braska dissolved into a long, thrilling moan.

Auron reached out impatiently with more fingers, thrusting them inside Braska as Braska twisted and groaned under his touch; he soothed him with further kisses, pressing them eagerly to his face while Braska continued to stroke Auron’s cock, his hand clumsily working its way down the shaft. Auron took hold of Braska’s hand with his own, moving it away; he readjusted his position, and then brought his cock to the hole, entering Braska as he whimpered desperately.

“Is this good?” Auron murmured breathlessly into his ear.

Braska was flinching with each of Auron’s thrusts, his eyes screwed shut, but he nodded. “Yes – yes, Auron, it’s – yes.”

Their lips met; with the rhythm of Auron’s movements, they drew apart again, but Auron kept his mouth close to Braska’s skin. “I love you,” he whispered against it, and then as he moved back and forth, he began to repeat himself, matching the pace of his movements below: “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

His hand glided roughly over Braska's stiff cock; he worked his way over it in the same rhythm. Braska was quivering and humming with pleasure, seizing and then releasing handfuls of Auron's hair; he was clearly close to the edge. Auron too was almost there: the world was narrowing around him, and all he was aware of was the need to maintain this connection between himself and Braska, the most wonderful man he had ever known. He had a dim awareness of his repeated declarations of love becoming incoherent; all he could focus on was the tension building up inside him as he came closer to release – and then, suddenly, it felt like time stopped and then began to move again, and he relished the thrill that spread through his body as he gave in, his bliss transporting him elsewhere.

When he regained his senses, Auron realised that his hand was sticky with Braska's come; he did his best to wipe it onto the sheet. He was relieved to know that he had managed to see Braska through, and suspected it had been caused by what he had been doing inside him rather than his attempts to pleasure Braska's cock with his hand, which had grown increasingly clumsy and erratic in the face of such distraction. But Braska seemed to be satisfied, and that was what mattered. Now he was kissing Auron's face again, slowly and gently, and perhaps for the first time of the entire pilgrimage, Auron felt relaxed. It was possibly the best orgasm he had ever had – certainly the best first time. To do that with somebody he truly loved was

such a powerful experience.

“That was perfect,” he murmured, between kisses. “You’re –”

And then he suddenly remembered how they had reached this point in the first place: every detail of the tragic knowledge that had gradually receded from his mind while they were engaged in the act returned at once. Immediately, Auron was overcome with agony, and he physically trembled as the awful truth came back to him once again: Braska was going to die, tomorrow, and Auron could have stopped it.

“You’re perfect,” he finished, turning away from the sight of Braska as his voice cracked. He couldn’t look at him; he could only lie there, wrung out with misery as Braska gently stroked his face and hair, murmuring repeated consolations that Auron was unable to process. Eventually, Auron turned again, nestling into Braska’s embrace; he held Braska’s head close, and felt Braska’s new, hot tears drip into his own face.

The next thing Auron knew, it was almost daylight: still tangled in Braska’s arms, he slowly adjusted his position as memories of the previous evening pieced themselves together in his mind, thrilling and distressing in equal measure. Braska was sleeping peacefully, looking happier than he had in weeks; a few kisses did nothing to disturb him from his slumber, and Auron found himself drifting off again as well, his breathing slowing to fall in time with Braska’s.

He woke again. It was brighter, and the only thing he was

clutching was his own pillow. Slowly, he sat up, taking in the silence, and raked a hand slowly through his unbound hair. It was too still, too silent; he wondered if Braska might have found it so hard to say goodbye that he had already gone.

He was soon proved wrong: Braska entered the room, quietly closing the door behind him, and sat carefully on the bed. He was fully dressed, even carrying his staff; there was no trace of tears on his face. In fact, he seemed composed and serene, noticeably more confident than he had usually been on the pilgrimage.

Braska reached for Auron's hand, and said, "It's time."

There were many things Auron could have said in response, and several questions that it was his duty to ask as a guardian. He should have been checking that Braska had slept and breakfasted well, that he felt strong enough for the task ahead of him: these were the kinds of things he had been going over daily ever since they first left Bevelle. But none of those things came to his lips: he couldn't bring himself to say any of them. There was only one thing he could say now, and it was the same words that he had already repeated countless times the previous night.

"I love you," he whispered.

At once, Braska's face fell; he pulled Auron in towards him, wrapping his arms around Auron's shoulders. Auron felt himself shaking with grief, anchored by Braska's uncharacteristically firm grasp: it had often been the other way around over

the course of the journey, when Braska had been exhausted by the mental effort of claiming an aeon or casting his strongest spells. Auron had had to be strong then, and had fulfilled that role with no trouble; now, the idea of maintaining his composure was absolutely untenable.

Braska pressed a few quiet kisses to his head, and then said, "I'll see you outside," and gently let go.

By the time Auron could bring himself to look up, he was alone. In a daze, he rose and dressed, hauling himself to the bathroom for a miserable shower. He caught sight of himself in the mirror; in Braska's fervour he had left no fewer than five marks on Auron's neck. Auron lightly touched them, and found them tender. The marks would outlive the person who had left them there.

He gathered his belongings and attempted to pay the innkeeper for their stay; she categorically refused his money on account of Braska's upcoming victory. Auron noticed her eyes drift towards his neck, and decided there and then that if she asked, he would tell the truth; but she said nothing, and so he left her without even pretending to be polite, and joined Braska where he was keeping quiet watch over the fields.

The rest was a blur. Braska steered Auron towards the plain where the battle would take place, his hand on Auron's back as if the roles of summoner and guardian had been reversed, and left him in a sheltered nook with kisses and reassurances that Auron barely registered. As Sin drew near and Braska

called the Final Aeon, Auron turned away, covering his face with both hands; that was how he remained until a party from the Bevelle citadel found him. Eventually, they coaxed him out of his huddled position and into their chocobo-drawn cart, and by nightfall, he was lying in a bed in a sumptuous room somewhere in the Grand Maester's apartments, dosed up on potions and entirely alone.

2

ON the first day, Auron couldn't bring himself to get out of bed; on the second, he was strongly advised to attend the meetings at which the celebration of the new Calm was being planned, and so he forced himself to do so, and tried his best to take an active role, finding his voice to make suggestions that became a little less faltering over the course of the day's work. The maesters welcomed him as the guest of honour, and the priests bustled about trying to serve him tea and coffee, and although it was very different from his prior experiences in Bevelle, the atmosphere was familiar enough to aid him a little in suppressing his pain. With the help of one of the priests, he even wrote a short speech that would serve as his

address to the ceremony, a tribute to Braska that was heartfelt but nonetheless entirely acceptable to Yevon.

On the morning of the third day, he was taking a moment to himself in the small guest bedroom when one of the priests from the meetings knocked and then entered straight away, a lavish robe draped over his arms.

“We’re planning the costumes,” the priest explained. “There was talk of what you should wear, and we decided – perhaps this would be appropriate.”

Auron stepped forward and took hold of the robe. Layers upon layers, no doubt the richest cloth in Spira: he would suffocate in it. He lifted the part that hung over the priest’s arms, raising it so he could take note of the shape: a high, starched collar. It was no surprise.

“I wore this robe on the pilgrimage,” he said softly, gesturing at his own attire. “It would be fitting for me to keep it on for the ceremony, don’t you think?”

The priest seemed visibly embarrassed. “But, sir,” he stammered, and waved a hand in front of his own neck, clearly alluding to the purple marks that still decorated Auron’s.

Auron affected ignorance until the priest was forced to continue, evidently quite uncomfortable. “I know the fiends in some regions have different, ah, techniques,” he eventually said, “but the people of Bevelle won’t be aware of that. They might, ah, see that, and draw inappropriate conclusions –”

For the first time since Braska’s death, Auron felt the urge

to grin; he suppressed it. This priest was so pure, so convinced that a legendary guardian would be incapable of indulging in unwholesome behaviour, that he had rejected the entire possibility out of hand. Of all things, it was Auron's reputation that he was worried about.

"I'll explain," said Auron. "During the speech. Just so nobody has the wrong idea."

"Oh, OK, sir," said the priest, looking a little more relieved.

That afternoon, the ceremony began; Auron was led to his seat on the dais with the maesters. Each time one of them spoke Braska's name with such obsequiousness, the syllables formed in a way that made it clear they were discussing a stranger, it sent a painful jolt through his stomach. The best way to cope, he realised, was to block all this out. He caught the eye of one of the high priests across the dais; the priest whispered something to his neighbour, still looking at Auron while he gestured at his own neck, and the other man nodded seriously and looked towards Auron as well, making some earnest response. Auron tore his gaze away; he tipped his head back and looked up at the blue, cloudless sky. Somewhere out there, Sin was biding its time.

When it was his turn to stand there in front of the crowd and make his address to them, his mind was far away; hundreds of expectant eyes had already been on him for several seconds when he realised he had missed his cue. He stood, gripping the arms of his chair to steady himself, and loped for-

ward, with not a single word of the speech he had prepared in his head. Clinging desperately onto the podium with both hands, he began: “Braska –”

He paused. The silence was deathly. He tried again, searching for words. “Braska was –”

It was too overwhelming. Everyone looked so joyful, so expectant, not at all put out by his hesitation – and all he could do was grip the podium in front of him while everything around him came to a stop.

There was a hand on his shoulder, supporting him just in time before he stumbled; he let the owner of that hand lead him off the dais with a dim awareness that somebody else had stepped up to the podium to announce a change of schedule. He was accompanied indoors, along a corridor, into a room; there, his guide steered him into a seat and carefully stepped back.

Auron looked down at the ground, trying to regain his senses. After a few moments, he raised his head to look at the man who had brought him in. Another priest, he realised; it was no surprise. This one at least seemed friendly; he nodded at Auron and enquired, “Not used to public speaking?”

All these priests were totally clueless, Auron reflected; he managed a slow nod. “My apologies,” he said hoarsely.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” the priest said. “They’ll all be kept entertained until you’re ready. It’s hot out there, isn’t it? Would you like some water?” Without waiting for a response,

he opened what appeared to be a small, chilled cupboard, and took out a bottle, thrusting it into Auron's hands.

Auron fumbled at the cap and took a swig; the water was much too cold. He tried his best to drink it nonetheless, while the priest carefully lifted a leaf of paper from a nearby table and laid it reverently in Auron's lap. "In case you need a reminder," he said.

He looked down and recognised his own handwriting, larger and messier than usual: it was the speech he had written only a day earlier. It seemed entirely foreign now: he could hardly imagine himself writing such things. He took it, though, and pretended to study it, turning the paper over in his hands. He was certain of one thing: this was not an address he could make to the people.

There was a dim noise out in the corridor, and suddenly Wen Kinoc swept in, looking unfamiliar in ceremonial robes. "Thank you, that's all we need from you," Kinoc said to the priest, and after a moment's confusion, the other man nodded and left the room. Kinoc had always been good at giving the impression he had authority over others, even when that was entirely unmerited.

He approached Auron, beaming, and said, "Legendary guardian. If it was going to be anyone – I wouldn't say I *never* doubted, but I'm not all that surprised."

Auron attempted a nod in response.

"Oh, Auron," said Kinoc. "Look at you."

Kinoc had always been tactile; he pulled Auron into a tight hug, and Auron tried not to flinch as Kinoc pressed into the sensitive skin on his throat.

“Your neck looks sore,” said Kinoc conversationally, when he had drawn away. “Is it?”

“A little,” Auron replied.

Kinoc grimaced sympathetically. “A fiend?”

“The Calm Lands,” said Auron.

“Ah,” said Kinoc, nodding sagely as if he understood. Drawing up a chair, he sat facing Auron, studied him for a moment, and then said, “Now. I know you’ve no issue with public speaking. What happened out there – was it the heat?”

Auron shook his head. It was inconceivable that nobody had realised his faltering might have been caused by grief, so soon after the Final Summoning; least of all Kinoc, who knew him well, he had thought. “Kinoc,” he said, “you do know how I felt about him, don’t you? About Braska?”

Kinoc twisted uncomfortably in his seat. “I have my suspicions. But that’s hardly appropriate –”

“But,” said Auron hopelessly, “he’s *gone*.”

“So you should honour his sacrifice,” Kinoc pointed out. “Go out there and tell them what a dutiful Yevonite he was. You owe it to him, don’t you? If you must mourn, save it for afterwards – but praise him first. It’s what they’re expecting.”

It was ludicrous, being asked to somehow delay his sorrow; but Auron could see the logic in Kinoc’s instruction. If he

spoke to the people now, that would be his duty fulfilled; afterwards, he would be away from the spotlight for a little while, and he would be able to grieve without restraint. Then, once his head was a little clearer, he might be able to devise some sort of plan that would expose the Final Summoning for what it really was.

He responded, finally, with a slow nod. “Fine, I will. You’re right – they should hear about him. Thank you, Kinoc.”

“Ready to go back in?” said Kinoc, smiling again.

Slowly, Auron hauled himself out of his seat, and found himself taking Kinoc’s outstretched arm to lean on, like an invalid. He willed himself to get through the ceremony; that was all it would take. Just a few more minutes of this terrible public discomfort.

Kinoc withdrew as they approached the dais, and Auron clambered onto it and sank back into his chair, trying to ignore the priests’ eyes on him. A singer who was somewhat well-known and regularly toured the bars in Luca had apparently been spotted in the crowd and convinced to come onstage to give an impromptu solo performance of the Hymn of the Fayth; she was just belting out a final, elaborate *kutamae* as Auron took his seat. One of the junior priests bustled over to him in the meantime, looking slightly irritated, and said, “After this, are you ready?”

Auron nodded wearily.

Not long afterwards, he was approaching the podium for

the second time, taking slow, deliberate steps with the accompaniment of rapturous applause from the crowd. He arrived, set both forearms against the podium to stabilise himself, and began. In the split second between opening his mouth and starting to speak, he made his decision: he would tell the truth. If Kinoc wanted him to praise Braska, then so be it.

“Braska was a good man,” he said. “Not without his faults: he was stubborn and temperamental. He was too caught up in his own fate to notice when those around him were struggling. He was weak: the aeons exhausted him, and he was afraid to summon them until we were almost at the very end of the pilgrimage.”

He cleared his throat and went on. “But – I loved him. Not just as any guardian loves his summoner, because he must – I saw that happen with my comrade, J-”

He stumbled over the name: it was unexpected. Taking a deep breath, he continued. “Jecht. At the beginning of the pilgrimage, he had no special attachment to either of us, but by the end, he loved Braska enough to die for him.” They would assume Jecht had died protecting Braska from some fiend: the full explanation could wait, until Auron had worked out how he was going to begin dealing with this mess.

“But I loved Braska differently. Not just as a warrior loves his companions on the battlefield – not even as a brother. I loved him as a man loves his wife: I *loved* him. And I never thought he felt the same way, until the night before the Final

Summoning.”

He leant forward over the podium: now, he wanted nothing more than to shock these Yevonites, to force them to listen to his account of an act that they would find highly improper, and to experience the feeling of having their faith wrenched out from beneath them. It had happened to him, after all. “That night,” he said, “we consummated our love. We lay in each other’s arms in a travel agency in the Calm Lands, and – we had intercourse. And Braska was so eager; he begged me to –”

He was disturbed by a touch at his back: one of the maesters had clearly heard enough, and had reached out for the machina microphone, twisting it away from Auron’s face. “The legendary guardian is confused,” he announced gravely. “He and the High Summoner would not have engaged in such heretical acts. He is upset by Lord Braska’s death, that’s all – he doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

Auron adjusted his position so he was close to the microphone again, and announced, “It is the truth. These marks –” He jerked his head upwards, exposing his neck to the crowd. “Braska left these.”

There were a few gasps in the crowd, and Auron felt a grim satisfaction: the visual evidence had been enough to convince them of the truth. Gossip spread like wildfire in Bevelle: soon all Spira would know that the High Summoner and his guardian had partaken in such activities. They would have difficulty comprehending that the fayth would have leant their

trust to such people: it would shake their confidence in the teachings.

He barely had time to think about it any more: the maester who had interceded had taken hold of him by the shoulder, and a priest had stepped up to seize him on the other side. Between the two of them, they led him off the dais once again, quite a lot more roughly than before. He was taken back into the room where Kinoc had visited him; the two other men had a frantic, whispered conversation, and then they took hold of him once more and steered him all the way to his quarters.

They made no attempt at speaking to him – he did likewise – and they quickly departed, leaving him alone for a while. Before too long, a healer was sent in to see him. “I’m not ill,” he protested.

“Maester Mika’s orders,” the man explained. “The sight of *this* –” he gestured towards Auron’s neck – “upsets the priests too much. I’m to remove it.”

Auron tilted his head back impassively to allow the healer access; he felt white magic blossom against his throat. The healer hummed with frustration. His spells were clearly having no effect: it would have been difficult to do anything about the bruises using magic, now that they were several days old. Magic was normally good for fresh wounds only, and this case was no exception, regardless of how blasphemous it was.

After a few more fruitless attempts, the healer changed his approach; he produced a long cloth bandage instead, and began

wrapping it around Auron's neck. Auron tried not to squirm; the material was warm and itchy, and the healer was applying it more tightly than he would have liked. After sealing it with tape, the healer stepped back to inspect his handiwork; looking intensely frustrated, he caught Auron's eye briefly, and then left without saying another word.

Auron had a brief view of the corridor outside his room while the healer was on his way out: there were two fully-armoured monks standing by the door. He was being detained, then, he supposed. He was only mildly irritated, although he had had enough of this place by now, and would have left if he could. Previously, he had been unsure where he might go next; after the events of the ceremony, his troubled thoughts had coalesced into something more certain, and now his mind was made up. He would retrace his steps and head north.

Now, perhaps, that was impossible; everything he had done at the ceremony had contributed to sabotaging that plan before he had even made it. It had been worth it, certainly, to show the Yevonites just how holy their High Summoner and legendary guardian were; but it had maybe cost him his freedom. As a backup plan, he came to the conclusion that he would need to tell somebody else. If they were going to imprison him here, or execute him, he would need to make sure that somebody knew, and that there would be an opportunity for justice to be done.

The thought that he might be killed failed to arouse much

alarm in him; at least, some part of him thought, he could be with Braska on the Farplane. A few days ago, if he had found himself in such a situation, he would have been much more worried; but things were different now. He was unable to bring himself to feel anything beyond a grim determination to expose Yevon's lies; it didn't even seem worth clawing at his neck to remove the uncomfortable bandage.

He crawled into bed and slept.

A knock at the door disturbed him; some time had clearly passed, although he had no idea whether it had been minutes or hours. He sat up groggily, coming to his senses just in time to recognise Wen Kinoc as the latter strode through the room towards his bed.

"Auron," said Kinoc, shaking his head theatrically; he glanced briefly at Auron's bandaged neck, and then looked him in the eyes. "Whatever did you say all that for? What good is that supposed to do?"

"They need to know the truth," Auron protested; the cloth rubbed uncomfortably against his throat as he spoke.

Kinoc sighed. "They don't. The truth is messy – you know that. People need simple comfort; they need to hear that a virtuous summoner defeated Sin, and that we'll have a Calm of a few years if we're lucky, and that somebody else will need to come forward and take up the mantle afterwards."

"No," said Auron, "they need to *know*. The Final Summoning – it's not what you think. The Final Summoning doesn't

defeat Sin, it *remakes* it. This whole tradition – it’s never going to make anything better. Guardians die, and they become the Final Aeon, and the Final Aeon becomes Sin –”

It was a muddled explanation, he knew, but at last, he was desperate to give it; and Kinoc, for all his flaws, was one of Auron’s oldest and closest friends. He was the one, Auron thought, who should be told; he might be able to do something about it, if Auron himself was incapacitated by whatever the Yevonite authorities decided to do to him.

Kinoc nodded. “I know.”

Auron stared back at him.

“After I got my promotion,” Kinoc said, a little sheepishly, “Maester Mika took me up to Zanarkand, and he told me how the cycle works. I was horrified at first, of course – but after he explained, I realised. This is what’s best for Spira, Auron. There’s no other way.”

Auron was still speechless: there were so many awful revelations in Kinoc’s brief confession. Only summoners made the arduous journey to Zanarkand – that was what everyone believed – and yet, apparently, the maesters and their chosen few were in the habit of flitting up there on casual jaunts. Worse still, they knew about the true nature of the Final Summoning; and worst of all, Kinoc himself had found out, and had returned to his business. An ally, Auron had thought, a friend; he had discovered how Yevon had betrayed the people of Spira for hundreds of years, and instead of revealing the truth imme-

diately, he had accepted it. He had become complicit in that betrayal.

“You knew,” Auron whispered. And then suddenly, he launched himself out of his bed, pinning the unsuspecting Kinoc against the wall, roaring at him in grief and disgust. “You *knew* – you bastard! You absolute bastard!”

Blind fury had seized him; he wanted Kinoc to hurt. He was kneeling him in the groin, punching him in the stomach, driving his head back against the wall; his hands were wrapped around Kinoc’s throat, trembling as they exerted haphazard pressure.

“Fuck,” Kinoc gasped, “you fucking psychopath. Guards!” he called. “*Guards!*”

The door opened, and the two monks from the corridor burst in, making for Auron; he let go of Kinoc, who stumbled back to massage his throat. Two mid-ranking warrior monks were no match for Auron, who had once been the most promising young officer in the corps; he eluded them both easily, and made for the exit. Kinoc’s entreaties for him to return immediately had no effect, and nor did the guards’ attempts at making chase. He was running, faster than he had ever run before, out of the building and out of the citadel, out of Bevelle by one of the minor exits. There was one destination in his mind: Zarnarkand. He would go there, as soon as he could; he would speak to that terrible woman, and try, at last, to understand. He would keep running until he got there, and then he would

reveal Yevon's crimes: that was his task now. He had loved Braska enough for this – he had loved him so much that nothing would stop him.