

IT seemed as if the entire Spiran population was in Luca that afternoon, but Wakka found his gaze drawn to a particular person anyway: a person who stood apart from the crowd with uncharacteristic reticence, his auburn hair gently moving in the sea wind. Luzzu looked tired, Wakka thought; barely any better than when he'd last seen him in Djose, right after the disaster of Operation Mi'ihen. That had to have been several weeks ago – Wakka had somewhat lost track of time on the pilgrimage, particularly when it began to divert from the route they had planned.

He approached him, weaving through the crowd with ease, ignoring the odd plea for a few moments' chat with a legendary guardian. Luzzu seemed not to notice until Wakka was right in front of him, despite the fact that Wakka was at least a head taller than most of the other people standing around.

“Luzzu!” Wakka said. “Hey – how've you been keeping?”

“I'm doing all right,” said Luzzu, after a moment's pause.

“You been back to Besaid?” said Wakka.

Luzzu nodded. “I took your advice. This is the first time I've been off the island since – but I couldn't miss Lady Yuna's speech.”

“Aw, it don't mean much,” said Wakka. “Tellin' the people what they want to hear, that kinda thing.”

Luzzu reacted with a smile that was more of a grimace. He was unusually quiet, Wakka thought; this wasn't the Luzzu he knew. It crossed his mind that Luzzu might be unwell – he

certainly looked pale and unhappy – but maybe it was something else. Perhaps he was still angry with Wakka for the way he'd spoken about Chappu, and for what he'd done before the operation; that had been the last time they'd spoken at length, after all.

"You're not still mad at me, ya?" he said cautiously. "Cos I *am* sorry. I'm not gonna say I didn't mean what I said about Chappu – but I really shouldn't have hit you. You're a good guy, Luzzu."

Slowly, Luzzu shook his head. "I know, Wakka. I'm not angry."

"You sure?" Wakka prompted him. "You seem kind of ... like you don't wanna talk to me."

"It's not that," said Luzzu. "I'm just tired. It's been hard, these last few weeks – I've been having trouble sleeping."

"Oh, right," said Wakka. "Quite a bit of trouble, huh?"

Luzzu sighed. "Yes. I'm barely sleeping at all, to tell the truth. There's a lot on my mind."

"I'm sure," said Wakka. "Keeps you from going to sleep, I guess."

"No," said Luzzu. "It's not that – I can get to sleep easily enough, but when I do –" He paused. "It comes back to me, Wakka. Gatta – Chappu too –"

"Nightmares?" said Wakka.

Luzzu confirmed with a strained nod. "Every time I try to sleep; and so *vivid*. I can't bear it – seeing them dying again

and again –”

It was so unlike Luzzu to be like this, Wakka reflected. He had been selected to command the local Crusaders for his courage and determination; his ability to inspire the men in the most dire of circumstances. He had thought Luzzu’s discomfort after Operation Mi’ihen would be fleeting – merely the result of shock – but he could now see that it was much more persistent than that.

He wanted, he suddenly realised, to take care of him. He wanted Luzzu to be all right. It was a protective instinct that felt mostly unfamiliar: with Tidus, he had had more of a relationship of jokey camaraderie, once he had finally trained himself to look at him and not see Chappu. It came closest to the way he had felt about Yuna on the pilgrimage, but his desire to keep her from harm had been different, mostly motivated by the fact that she was not only very dear to him but also a young woman lacking in physical strength. This was different.

“You gotta be exhausted, ya?” he said. “Comin’ all this way with all that hanging over you.”

Luzzu nodded, not meeting Wakka’s eyes. “I hate it,” he said slowly. “Seeing their deaths, again and again – I try to forget, but then I start thinking, is that an insult to their memories? Don’t they deserve to have someone remember how brave they were? They were just boys, both of them –”

“You need to rest,” said Wakka decisively, ignoring the awful question. Luzzu’s voice was beginning to hitch, his eyes

were starting to shine with half-formed tears: Wakka knew he would hate to break down in public, even when he was as distraught as this. “Let’s get out of the crowd,” he suggested. “I got a room booked – you can lie down for a while.”

He led the way to the small room he had booked at a nearby hostel. Rikku had insisted that she, Lulu and Yuna treat themselves to a suite in one of the fancier hotels, declaring that a girls’ spa session would be the perfect way to decompress after Yuna’s speech was over; Lulu had agreed, and Yuna had been too busy trying to put on a brave face and liaising with the authorities on various matters to even have the chance to decide whether that was what she really wanted. As for the guys – apart from Wakka, there was only Kimahri left, and although he’d joined them for the ceremony, he had mostly gone back to doing his own thing now that the pilgrimage was over. So Wakka had reserved a small room for himself, giving the girls some respectful distance, and resigned himself to spending a couple of evenings alone.

Except now, here was Luzzu, unusually quiet and grave. Wakka sneaked a few glances at him as they made their way out of the square; once again, he found himself overwhelmed by that odd urge to protect him. Luzzu didn’t deserve this anguish, he thought; he had made some decisions that Wakka disagreed with, but he was a good and honest man, and a fine Crusader. He deserved to be happy.

They arrived at the hostel, and made their way to Wakka’s

room: with two men standing next to the single bed, it was almost full. Wakka encouraged Luzzu to lie down, waving off his lacklustre protests, taking his hand as if to confirm his sincerity.

“I’m afraid to sleep,” Luzzu admitted, his voice shot through with obvious fatigue, and Wakka perched on the side of the bed and squeezed his hand tighter.

“I’m here,” he said. “You got nothing to worry about.”

Not long afterwards, Luzzu drifted into fitful sleep, tossing and turning, a frown deepening between his tightly closed eyes. Wakka watched, and assisted: lending a quiet caress here and there, gently pushing Luzzu’s hair back when it fell over his forehead, embracing him when he quietly moaned and shuddered. It was a type of assistance he had never provided before, and had it not been Luzzu, he would most probably not have been able to supply it on this occasion either. But there was something unconscious that guided him, this urge to let Luzzu rest with as little distress as possible, to sleep through the night without being too haunted by his experiences.

Luzzu was trembling in his sleep, breathing raggedly through his mouth; Wakka could tell that his suffering had become more intense. He held him closer, gripping him as softly and urgently as he could with both hands; and when Luzzu began to shout out loud, with ferocious incoherence, Wakka let his instincts continue to direct him. He pressed his own mouth against Luzzu’s, swallowing his cries with a

kiss, fighting back against the terror as strongly as it fought with Luzzu. He needed to draw it out, and let him have some peace – that was his only thought as he kissed Luzzu furiously, muting his anguished wails.

Eyelashes fluttered against his face; he drew back far enough to see that Luzzu had snapped awake, his eyes wide with fear. “You’re OK,” he insisted, and he leant in to kiss him again, to show him he really meant it. Luzzu’s mouth was rigid for a second, before it softened, his lips meeting Wakka’s willingly.

“I’m here,” Wakka murmured against Luzzu’s mouth, running one hand gently through his hair. “I got you. You’re safe – sleep.”

“Yes,” Luzzu breathed; moments later, his lips slackened, and his head sank back into the pillow.

Reluctantly, Wakka raised his own head to see the proof of what he had suspected: Luzzu was asleep again, still frowning, still twitching, but apparently less disturbed than he had been moments earlier. Relief flooded through Wakka – he knew there would be more to weather, but it was already so reassuring to see that he had been able to help, if only a little. He knew, now, what he must do now that the pilgrimage was over and Yevon no longer held sway: his thoughts over the past minutes had come together with startling simplicity. To be a companion to Luzzu – to care for him and cherish him – that was his duty now. It was clear as day.