

D YING was instant, and yet getting used to being dead was interminably slow. His body grimly fought it: dead bones deserved rest, after all, and yet his had to keep working, keep moving every day with no repose. They ached with each motion, a constant request to be relieved of their duty. Over time, he grew used to it: he learnt how and when to block out the pain; he came to walk more slowly, to cling onto something discreetly when he could to give himself a moment's pause. There was no pride left to swallow.

In those first years, he often found himself wishing for his own death, before remembering that he had already been through it and that even that death had rejected him. The Farplane had spat him back into the land of the living to act as some parody of a man, reanimated by pyreflies that killed his spirit as much as they sustained his body. He was tired, so tired; during those first years, he spent whole days lying on whichever bed he had reserved in some hostel, drifting in and out of precarious sleep and never feeling rested for it. Too exhausted and too distraught to stand, he lay there, listening as other guests made their way to their rooms, banging the doors behind them in a way that made his ears sting, laughing raucously as they climbed the stairs, each heavy footstep sending an unwelcome thud through his head.

He stopped taking care of his appearance: it was already ruined, after all. Shaving required more concentration and more initiative than he possessed, most days; for the first time, he let

himself grow a horrible, bristly beard, shot through with the same new grey that was in his hair. It gave him an additional ugliness, one that he deserved but was still ashamed to bear, and on the rare days when he did have the energy to shave, he made his best efforts at removing it, his clumsy hands nicking his skin with the razor. He was amazed that a dead man could bleed, and that he could grow this new hair at all: even after death, his body seemed determined to force out new growth, mimicking life on the outside while he crumbled within.

He visited the boy, because it was the one duty he had: at least it provided some routine. He was cold and awkward around the child, never knowing what to say, rarely having the strength to gather his thoughts enough to act in what might be an appropriate way. Sometimes the boy said something, made a movement or pulled a face that was just like Jecht, and it made his heart stop. He never mentioned Jecht out loud; it would have been too painful. As for Braska – he never even dared *think* his name, in those first years.

It was those visits that gave him the first sign that this misery would not be eternal. Not for some time, certainly not until long after the boy's mother had died – but eventually, he gained the presence of mind to realise that Tidus was growing. Trousers that had once brushed the floor now skimmed his ankles; shirts had to be thrown away because he could no longer fit into them. To know that time still passed even in this dream world, that no suffering would last forever: that was enough,

somehow, to suggest there might be an end to this.

On the third anniversary of the Final Summoning, he was well enough to mark the occasion. The first had passed during one of his worst phases, a whole stretch of days when he had been unable to leave his bed; on the second, he was up and able to push through his fatigue, but still studiously avoided thinking about the date. On the third, he still couldn't quite bring himself to remember exactly what had happened, but he made his way slowly to the dock where Sin had first left him in Zanarkand, lowered himself laboriously into a sitting position, and murmured the Hymn of the Fayth under his breath. It meant nothing to him now, and he would certainly never deign to sing it if he returned to Spira, but in this private moment it was a way of remembering his homeland and acknowledging that it was still out there, and more real than this exhausting simulacrum of a place.

Now that he was managing to spend more time away from his bed, he became acutely aware of people looking at him. Normally, as soon as he shot them a displeased glance, they turned away in embarrassment, but he wished they wouldn't stare in the first place; the feeling of hundreds of eyes on him as soon as he stepped outside only increased his weariness, and made him paranoid to boot. It was the scars that made everyone stare at him, he initially thought: the one that disfigured the right side of his face with careless precision was the worst offender, providing only raw flesh where onlookers would ex-

pect an eye. Over time, though, he realised that the way in which he wore his hair also seemed to be a magnet for curious strangers: it was unnatural for Zanarkand men to be long-haired. After this discovery, he locked himself into a bathroom in his hostel with the intention of cutting his hair short, and was able to make a passable attempt at cropping it close to his head. Yet as soon as he'd done it, it felt wrong: all he had done was expose himself more closely to the attention of strangers when what he had really wanted was to divert it. So he let the hair grow back, more wild than it had been before, until most of what was at the back could be gathered into a ponytail again; and he kept it trimmed to that length from that point on, a compromise between what felt familiar and the kind of style that seemed unremarkable in Zanarkand, at least from the front.

The scars still drew attention nonetheless; every time he spoke to someone, he saw their gaze flit from his eye, down to his neck, and then self-consciously across to the uninjured side of his face as if they were trying not to offend him. Nobody asked how he had sustained such wounds, apart from small children – it was one of the first things Tidus enquired about when he finally deigned to talk to him – but the tension in that embarrassed interest was enough to make him feel uncomfortable. He experimented with covering the wounds with bandages for a while, but that gained him no less attention. Eventually, it was while cluelessly shopping for clothes for Tidus

that he alighted on a solution that would at least cover his neck: in one of the less fashionable outlets he came upon a large, singularly unflattering collar that could be secured to one's clothes by means of heavy leather straps, and he began wearing it habitually from then on. The collar also hid the results of his lacklustre attempts at shaving, although nobody in Zanarkand seemed to think his stubble improper in the way that Spirans would have.

The scar over his right eye was harder to conceal, but that was the least of his problems regarding that particular injury. The sudden loss of half his vision took some getting used to. He found himself suddenly questioning his perception of the space around him, continually misjudging distances with the result that he frequently failed to take hold of an object or stumbled over something. Being in Zanarkand, where there was always such movement and haste, made it worse: in the first months in particular, on the occasions where he did gather the energy to walk about on the city highways, he was continually jostled by passersby. It was hardly good for his fatigue.

Zanarkand was so bright, too: its citizens seemed to demand lights even when the sun was shining, and even at night, when the businesses were closed and people who had any decency were surely asleep. They were powered by strange machina, smaller and yet more complex than anything he had seen in Spira; and they shone with a whiteness that was deeply unpleasant. It hurt his eyes – his eye – to look at

them for too long. After a full day in the city, he would find his vision beginning to blur, not restoring itself again until he had come as close to a full night's sleep as he was able.

It took him a few years to find a solution that would cover more of his scarring and alleviate the intensity of the light at the same time: the dark glasses that he eventually picked up in some sketchy emporium of dubiously useful fashion accessories were more of a help than he could have anticipated. His right eye was hidden from prying strangers; his left was given some relief from the constant artificial lights of Zanarkand.

The years went on, and he was still no keener to return to Spira than he had been the day he left it. He entertained the possibility of never having to engage in combat again. It had been his livelihood, once, and then, much more meaningfully, his duty to a dear friend; now, he was sure that any attempt at fighting would be slow and clumsy, marred by his fatigue and his impaired vision. He found himself returning to it nonetheless: the habit was too ingrained to break. Swordsmanship had been his most treasured skill, once; people had observed his swordwork and pronounced, quite confidently, that he would be maester one day. Now, he had no such ability. He persisted regardless. To begin with, he fought like an addled old man, uncoordinated and useless. Just a few minutes' practice was enough for him to feel exhausted and to ache all over; the first few times he tried, he was forced to retreat to his bed with some of the medicines that in Zanarkand served as a very poor

equivalent of white magic. Gradually, though, he built up his tolerance. The lean muscle he had once had began to return, a strange sight beside his ruined face. He began to learn how to compensate for his visual impairment; he even started to feel a little less despair, and slowly understood that the exercise was doing good for his mind.

On the fifth anniversary, he took up his position on the dock, and was joined by Sin-as-Jecht, its monstrous body lazily floating in the water nearby as if it was some enormous cruise ship. He looked towards it wearily, and immediately heard Jecht's voice in his head, its tone unmistakable even after five years: *Hey, Auron. How ya been?*

Awful, he thought, knowing Jecht would hear his thoughts without his even speaking them aloud. Five years, Jecht, and I still feel terrible. I want this to end – I want to pass on.

But you can't.

Evidently, he replied.

There was no reply for several seconds, and then Jecht's voice, sounding almost nonchalant, rang through his head again: *How's he doin'?*

He knew who Jecht meant, of course: Tidus. He told him, voicing his thoughts in his mind, about how the boy was growing into a young man: how he had made it onto the district's junior blitzball team, and was already one of their top players; and above all, how kind and thoughtful he was, how he possessed a gentleness that had always eluded his father.

You're gonna bring him with you, right? said Jecht, his voice choked with emotion that Auron knew it was best not to acknowledge. *When the time comes – bring him back to Spira and end this?*

Jecht, thought Auron. I can't. I can barely make it from one day to the next – you can't ask me to do that.¹

Think about it, Jecht replied, and Sin's vast bulk sank under the water until it seemed as if it had never been there at all.

He thought about it, for five more years; as Tidus continued to grow, taller and stronger and kinder. Auron's sorrow remained, sometimes so sharp that it wounded him, but more often, as time went on, he found ways to lessen the pain of pretended life. This was no longer his story, and he had no right to mourn; this was the story of a boy with the sun in his smile, who had no idea that he lived in a false world, far away from the savage injustices of reality. Auron had no right to take that security away from him, he thought; but he had no right to condemn Jecht and Spira either. The years passed; he learnt to suppress his grief; and, finally, while Zanarkand crumbled around him, he found himself standing outside a blitzball stadium.

¹*AURON: Ten years ago ... I honoured Jecht's last words, and travelled to Zanarkand. I planned to stay there, watching over you. But when Sin attacked Zanarkand that day, I changed my mind. Outside the dream world, life can be harsh – even cruel. But it is life. He wanted you to have a shot at life. I saw it in Sin's eyes. That's why I brought you here, to Spira.*