

ZUKE had anticipated spending the rest of his days quietly, atoning for his failures as a monk of Yevon. But barely had two years passed before Sin was destroyed and Yevon crumbled, and he was forced out into the bright world again.

He attended the party on the invitation of his sister. It was a costume-and-mask event, she told him: the perfect way to get over his inhibitions about rejoining society. He could disguise himself and nobody would know who he was. But the thought of dressing up in some finery was somehow even more embarrassing than the fact he had been forced out of his ascetic existence at all, so he just went as himself.

“Can I get you a drink, sir?” a young voice mumbled behind him.

He turned, took in the elaborate costume, and said, “Goodness me – you’re a chocobo.”

“That’s correct, sir,” said the chocobo.

Zuke looked more closely. The chocobo, of course, was really a human; but one wearing such an accurate chocobo costume that one might have thought it really was a bird for a few moments.

“How could you have got me a drink,” he said, “when you haven’t any hands?”

“That’s what I told them,” said the chocobo mournfully. “Well, I can sort of get my hands out of this, but I can’t use them for much.”

Zuke watched as the chocobo's chest bulged strangely for a moment, and then a pair of hands emerged, each displayed at an awkward angle, waving about with feeble enthusiasm.

"Oh dear," he said sympathetically. "That won't do at all. No, I think you should keep those away – you wouldn't want to ruin the ensemble. It is a splendid costume."

"Do you think so?" said the chocobo, noticeably cheered.

"I certainly do," Zuke assured him. "It's marvellous."

"Thank you," said the chocobo graciously, and then, before Zuke had fully realised it, he was drawn into a conversation about the exact mechanics of the species, just how effectively they were built for their duties – proof, in his interlocutor's opinion, that there really was some sort of higher power, even if that idea was rapidly going out of fashion – and a whole host of other details about chocobos that, in all his long years, he had never paused to consider.

"You really do know an awful lot," he said.

"Just about chocobos," said the chocobo, who, Zuke could now tell, was still quite a young boy. "I hope I haven't talked too much – it's just that they're so fascinating, you see –"

"Oh, that's quite all right," Zuke assured him. Indeed, it was: most of the discussion at the party was about how the authorities might establish some new sort of belief system now that the old order had been dismantled, and he had long since decided that having to listen to that sort of talk over and over

again was both upsetting and irritating. Really, this sort of conversation was a welcome change.