
Don't you think we tried to stop her?

IT wasn't until she'd been living in Besaid Temple for a few years that Yuna realised the fourth plinth had been there only about as long as she had. "Yes, indeed," said the temple summoner when she asked him about it, bending his neck and exposing the sparse white hairs on his head. "The images of the High Summoners were repositioned when we heard the news of your father's victory – may Yevon bless him. We built a base for his statue as soon as we could, in the hope that it would arrive quickly from Bevelle; and, well, you can see how much notice they take of us." He tapped his staff meaningfully against the flat, featureless stone.

In time, that temple summoner retired, and a new one took over his position, a younger man from the mainland called Gressa who was less willing to speak ill of Bevelle. "Lord Braska's statue will arrive soon," he told Yuna more than once. "I have colleagues in the citadel taking care of it."

Whether those colleagues were lying to him or had simply never existed in the first place was never made clear to Yuna; but in the end, she had to wait until her first visit to the mainland in seven years before she could actually come face to face with her father's image. Wakka, at the age of nineteen, had just been made captain of Besaid's blitzball team, and was taking his men to compete in the annual league in Luca; a small delegation of islanders customarily accompanied the players to provide support, and because it was Wakka's first year as captain, he had put in a special request that his friends be included. Normally, that would have meant Chappu and Lulu, and Yuna, and maybe even Luzzu, but Chappu was on the team anyway, Luzzu was away at his military training, and Lulu was on pilgrimage with Lady Ginnem. That meant Yuna was the only one of the blitzballers' entourage aged under fifty; fortunately, Wakka was happy enough for her to spend the trip with the team instead of with the other spectators, as long as she didn't disrupt them during practice.

They stopped for a brief layover at Kilika, as there were a few hours to waste before the ferry connection to the mainland. Wakka insisted that the team visit the temple to pray for a good showing in the tournament, and while their older companions waited in the town and made their tour of the sparse shopping opportunities, Yuna followed the guys through the forest and up the long flight of stone steps to the temple.

"Better be on your guard, Yuna," said Chappu cheerfully as

they began the trek. “Fiends are stronger here, ya.”

“I’ll be all right,” she told him, and she was; it was the blitzball players who bore the brunt of the fiends’ attacks, not least because they all insisted on leaping in front of Yuna to defend her every time one of the creatures came remotely close. They made a good go at it, using their balls and pocketknives and whatever else they had to hand, but the fiends were noticeably stronger than the ones that lurked in the undergrowth on Besaid Island, and Yuna found herself having to assist her companions with her healing spells a few times – all except poor Botta, the newest and youngest member of the team, who was allergic to white magic and consequently had to wrap his injuries with bandages, a poor substitute.

Yuna’s magic wasn’t particularly developed yet; she had started taking instruction from Lady Ginnem some time ago, but then Ginnem had suddenly announced her intention to journey as a summoner, and Yuna’s lessons had fallen by the wayside. She had enough white magic in her to heal a scrape, though, and as she cast it on the blitzballers she felt a reassuring sense of purpose. Growing up on Besaid, she had always felt so removed from wider Spiran society; it was an idyllic place to live, there was no doubt about that, but she still had memories of her early childhood in Bevelle. There, people had had duties that meant something. People were really trying to do good things for Spira – none more so than Braska, who had made the ultimate and holiest sacrifice.

Yuna couldn't help thinking of her father as she climbed the steps to the temple. He would have been here on his pilgrimage, she realised, not long before he visited Besaid and decreed that the island was the place for his daughter to be brought up. She wondered how he had felt as he walked up the steps himself: nervous, no doubt, at the thought of communing with the fayth and being tested. Or maybe, she reasoned, he hadn't been fazed; he had gone on to become High Summoner, after all. There must have been something out of the ordinary about him.

They all headed into the temple, and that was when Yuna saw it for the first time: her father's statue. At least three times actual size and standing on an enormous pedestal, it was crafted entirely from dark stone; it looked as if someone had done their best to paint it in a few places to give the correct impression of the deep red robes Braska had chosen to wear as a summoner, although the paint did little to lighten the natural blackness of the rock. But the worst thing of all about the statue was the expression on Braska's face: it was one that Yuna had never seen on him in life, and it looked wrong. It was passive and bland: it was the face of a High Summoner, without a doubt, but not the face of her father.

Still, the statue captivated her, and she couldn't help drawing close to it, kneeling in prayer as she reflected on Braska's sacrifice. It was a strange mixture of gratitude and envy that she felt as she crouched there. Braska had had the chance to

demonstrate his love for Spira, and to save it.

Yuna had once said something offhand about becoming a summoner, years ago; she had received such sharp looks and pointed questions in response to what she believed an innocuous remark that she had been careful not to mention anything else of the kind since. But that didn't mean the thought had left her: it had been buried, of course, by more immediate concerns, but she had always hoped to give herself to something bigger than Besaid. Being here, in front of her father's statue, made that desire more acute. It would be difficult to explain, she knew, but the idea of becoming a summoner had always felt right – always familiar.

“Need a moment, ya?” said Wakka behind her.

“Please,” said Yuna, and she stayed on her knees, praying and reflecting, until the shuffles and coughs of the blitzballers behind her became too frequent to ignore.

Two days later, the Aurochs were knocked out in the first round of the tournament; Yuna had cheered as loudly as she could while the rest of the delegation from the island sat in stony silence around her, but to no avail. A five-nil defeat was difficult to be very positive about, and Wakka spent most of the journey home refusing anyone else's company as he stared moodily over the prow of each of the two ferries that took them back to Besaid. The rest of the team took to playing a few impromptu, strangely sombre games of landball on the deck; Yuna eventually succeeded in getting Wakka to let her within

three feet of him, and stood at his side, half listening while he grumbled about the match.

“It’s like training, though,” she suggested as they looked out over the sea together. “It’s good to practise against people you don’t know, isn’t it? That way you’ll be better next time.”

“But next time’s not for a whole year,” Wakka complained.

“More time to improve, then,” she said.

Wakka groaned, but then he extended an arm and pulled Yuna close. “Ah, I can’t be mad at you,” he said, squeezing her tightly against him. “You always know how to cheer me up, ya?”

It felt good to hear him say that, but once again, Yuna experienced the same odd regret that had struck her at the temple. Cheering Wakka up was a pleasure; cheering up the Aurochs and the people of Besaid was an honour; but fulfilling everyone in Spira’s greatest desire would be a thousand times more gratifying. Even, yes, if she had to die to do it.

On returning to the island, Yuna knew exactly who to seek out for advice. Kimahri had frequented the village when she was younger, but as soon as it had become clear that she was going to have no trouble making human friends, he had begun to spend most of his time away from the islanders: it was the Ronso way, he told her. That hadn’t stopped Yuna making regular visits to the cliffside where he usually sat, keeping quiet watch over the beach. Their long and thoughtful conversations had taught her many things about the Ronso. Over

time, Kimahri had also elucidated the circumstances in which he had brought Yuna to Besaid: when he had first told her that a man facing death had requested it, she had assumed that man was her father, but he had eventually explained that the man was Braska's guardian.

"Kimahri," she said to him on this occasion, looking down at the fishermen as they brought in their catch, "I want to become a summoner."

"Want," he replied, "or need?"

He was right, as always. "Yes," she admitted. "I've felt this way since before I can remember. But you brought me here so I could be away from that, didn't you? Wasn't that what my father wanted?"

"Yuna knows what is best for Yuna," said Kimahri. "High Summoner gone, now. Spira changes."

"Nobody will let me," she said.

"Then Yuna must convince," said Kimahri.

It was true, she reflected; that was part of her duty. As a summoner, she would have to inspire loyalty from her guardians, a loyalty so steadfast that they would protect her with their lives, and that would mean showing everyone that this really was her destiny.

"Kimahri let," he added. "Kimahri will guard Yuna."

"You guard me already, Kimahri," said Yuna.

He bowed his head. "Then Kimahri continue."

To have his support was gratifying, but Yuna knew she would need more guardians: a black mage, at least, and perhaps a physical fighter as well. It would be wrong to ask anyone but her friends, and yet she knew they would be the least likely to allow her to take the pilgrimage; but, she decided, she would need to present her case and convince them. She thought about how she would manage it, letting herself consider the question over days and weeks; it wasn't the sort of thing that should be rushed. A few times, Wakka asked her why she had developed this tendency to go so quiet and distant now and then, and on each occasion she brushed him off. Chappu might have asked the same, if he hadn't started behaving similarly himself; Lady Ginnem's pilgrimage had continued for a long while now, and the longer he went without any letters from Lulu, the more worried and withdrawn he became.

"I haven't heard from her for a whole week," he admitted one day, his voice unusually low and tight. "That's the most it's been so far."

"Where was she when you last heard?" Wakka asked.

"Bevelle," said Chappu.

"So they're crossing the Calm Lands, right?" said Wakka. "Takes a while, ya. Nothin' to worry about, anyway."

"Do you think she'll write from Mount Gagazet?" Chappu asked Yuna later, when Wakka was out of earshot. "I dunno though, maybe the Ronso don't do post like we do."

"I don't know either, Chappu," Yuna admitted. "But I'm

sure she'll write as soon as she can."

And in the end, indeed, she did: a typically brief and sparse letter, made even more so by its contents. *We made an awful mistake. Lady Ginnem is gone. The Al Bhed picked me up, and they're bringing me home.*

Wakka, who had always bought into the popular distrust of the Al Bhed, ranted and raved for a while, but he was really just glad that Lulu would soon be returning, so it didn't last long. Four days later, transported by fast machina ship, Lulu was back on the island, clearly distressed by whatever had happened to Lady Ginnem, but trying valiantly to maintain the same poise she usually showed.

"I wish you'd talk about it, Lulu," said Yuna, brushing through Lulu's long hair one night when the boys were elsewhere. "I do want to help you."

"There's no need for you to worry," said Lulu evasively.

"What was it like, being on pilgrimage?" Yuna asked her.

"Well," said Lulu, "it was tough. But a great honour, seeing so much of Spira, and meeting all the people who put their faith in Lady Ginnem. They were all very kind to us."

The few anecdotes she told over the subsequent weeks did little to lessen Yuna's determination: Lulu always spoke of the aeons as if they were frightening things, but Yuna understood, as she knew Ginnem had, that it was only their great power that made them seem that way. In reality, as Yuna was aware, the aeons were nothing to fear. Her father had been keen to

teach her that, and had taken her into the fields to watch him summoning his first aeon, shortly before he had left Bevelle on his pilgrimage; she had even placed her little hand on its scaly wing, and Braska had smiled, a rare smile in those days.

More time passed; Yuna kept wondering how she might tell her friends about her plan. With increasing numbers of reports that Sin was attacking settlements on the mainland, people were starting to get restless, knowing it was only a matter of time before the creature found its way to Besaid. The islanders were even beginning to talk about ways of preventing its advance, and when the Crusaders set up a recruiting station near the temple and instructed Luzzu to talk persuasively to any young man who happened to catch his eye, Wakka and Chappu had a long and serious discussion about their own futures. At first, swayed by their lack of experience and the fact that they both much preferred playing blitzball to active combat, they both declined, and it seemed that was the end of it; but not long afterwards, Chappu announced that he was enlisting after all.

The news seemed to make Lulu even more solemn: she had always been a guarded person, but this had intensified after Lady Ginnem's pilgrimage, and did so again after Chappu departed for his training and first mission. She had begun to dress entirely in black, and had grown out her fringe to hide half her face, which everyone seemed to think was merely a fashion she had picked up on the mainland, but Yuna wondered

whether it was the trauma of the pilgrimage that had caused it, as if Lulu were trying to make herself inconspicuous – to hide herself from the world. It made the way forward still clearer to Yuna: if she were to give herself to Spira, nobody would need to develop such anxieties. If she were to bring the Calm, nobody would need to join the Crusaders, and there would be no more failed pilgrimages, and Lulu would smile again.

Eventually, she became bold enough to consult Father Gressa in the temple about it. He had been giving her some occasional instruction in white magic since Ginnem had gone away, and it seemed natural enough to ask him about sending and summoning at the end of one of their lessons. At first, he misunderstood, thinking she was interested in training as a temple summoner herself, and he began telling her about all the minor temples on the mainland where she might enter service; when she finally managed to explain that she intended to journey, he frowned and became more reticent to answer, but in the end, he consented to her request, and agreed to begin teaching her the summoner's arts.

The next day, though, Wakka came to find her in the temple, his face tight with suppressed anger. "Me and Lulu wanna talk to you," he said, before turning around and marching outside without even checking that Yuna was following.

But she did follow, hurrying after him to the place where Lulu stood, looking as inscrutable as she always did these days.

"Yuna," said Wakka, unable to restrain himself now that

they were outside, “what were you thinking?”

“Father Gressa told us about your plans,” Lulu explained, not meeting Yuna’s gaze. “I must say, I was shocked.”

“Yeah!” Wakka added. “Are you totally crazy? You know most summoners fail, right? You just gonna throw your life away like that?”

Yuna’s father had once told her that everyone was always very keen to hear about people going off on pilgrimage, until that person was someone they knew. Once that was the case, they instead made all sorts of excuses: they wanted *someone* to go, of course, but never anyone they cared about.

“My father –” she began.

“You ain’t your father, Yuna!” Wakka exclaimed. “You don’t know what’s gonna happen out there. Listen to Lu – she knows.”

“I just don’t understand why you didn’t tell us first,” said Lulu.

“Because I knew you’d try to stop me,” said Yuna. “Lulu – Wakka – I know you don’t want me to go. But I’ve felt this way all my life. And I’m so grateful for your friendship, but the people of Spira: they suffer so much. I can help them. Isn’t that why you play blitzball, Wakka, to bring everyone joy? And Lulu, don’t you want to be happy again?”

Lulu turned away, saying nothing, although Yuna could see that she was trembling; and Wakka, glancing at Lulu with concern, mumbled, “I just don’t get it, Yuna. I don’t get it.”

Weeks later, the news that they all dreaded arrived: Chappu had been killed in action. Lulu hid herself away for days, while Wakka insisted on continuing to train with the Aurochs as if nothing had happened, although according to the team members, he was tense and unforgiving during practice, losing his cool at the merest fumble. After a few days like this, he was at last undone by a kind word from one of his teammates, and agreed to take some time away from blitzball until he felt better. He and Lulu found solace in each other's companionship, spending their days sitting together in a silence punctuated by the occasional quiet reminiscence of Chappu.

Yuna was sad too, of course, but more than anything, she felt determined. This was the latest event in a series that unequivocally pointed the way towards what she needed to do. Learning to send was difficult, but she made it her sole focus, working at it until it became second nature.

Soon enough, Lulu and Wakka approached her with some surprising news: they had decided to take the pilgrimage themselves, as guardians. Through Father Gressa they had heard of a priest on the mainland who had felt the call later in life, inspired – if one could call it that – by the death of his daughter and her family in one of Sin's attacks.

"We felt so powerless," said Lulu, "here on the island. At least this will let us do something. All we can do is try."

"If you wait a little longer," Yuna pointed out, "you can be

my guardians.”

“Oh, not this again,” said Wakka. “Don’t make this harder for us, ya.”

“I’m not a *child*, Wakka!” said Yuna, feeling a sting in her eyes that threatened to contradict her. “Why won’t you take this seriously? I need to become a summoner – I need to defeat Sin! It’s the only thing I can do for Spira – please.”

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” said Wakka.

They both left after that, and it was the last she saw of either of them before they headed to the mainland to join Father Zuke for his pilgrimage, first thing the next morning. Yuna had let herself cry properly during the night, when she was no longer in company; she hated disagreeing with her friends, and the thought that she had parted from them in bad spirits was upsetting. A few days later, thankfully, she received a letter from Lulu; it seemed that their argument had caused no grudge.

We went with Father Zuke, Lulu had written, because we couldn’t face it having to be you. We thought if Zuke could bring the Calm, you wouldn’t need to go.

And a week or so later, another letter arrived, containing the following: *We know we can’t stop you, and we have experience now. If Father Zuke fails, we will go with you.*

And then, finally, long weeks afterwards: *Zuke has given up. We’ll be back on the island soon.*

It didn't tell her to pack her bags in so many words, but the message was clear; sure enough, Lulu and Wakka had returned to Besaid in a few days, clearly exhausted from the pilgrimage, but seemingly free of regret. Refusing Yuna's offer of white magic, Wakka nonetheless sat down with her and let her run her fingers through his gelled hair while he closed his eyes.

"I ain't gonna lie," he mumbled, "the pilgrimage is tough. And we didn't even get near the end of it. You sure you wanna do this?"

"It'll be all right," said Yuna. "With you and Lulu and Kimahri there as my guardians – it'll be a pleasure."

"I sure hope so," said Wakka.

And so, a month or so later, when Yuna was sufficiently persuaded that Wakka and Lulu had fully recovered from their last attempt, she rose, made her morning prayers, and headed to the temple atrium to give formal notification of her intent to commune with Besaid's fayth and, if she was deemed worthy, receive the temple's aeon.

She arrived to find the hall in disarray: a delegation of construction workers had travelled from Bevelle overnight, and were busy taking measurements, striding around the place without seeming to pay a single jot of attention to its sanctity. Yuna watched as the large crate they had dragged in was levered open, and, without surprise, she came face to face with a copy of the sculpture she had seen for the first time on that trip to Kilika several years earlier. Lord Braska's statue

had finally been delivered. Undoubtedly, it was a sign.