

Love Conquers All

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I ZEEL had already disappointed her father at the age of twelve when she chose to become a warrior monk. At the time, he was still bitter about losing Izeel's mother: not to Sin, but to a man who had come from across the Moonflow and convinced her to spend increasingly frequent evenings with him until she ended up leaving for good one night, with nothing remaining of her but a brief and unsentimental letter. Izeel had wanted to spend as little time as possible in the company of her dour father then, and had joined the monks more as a way of getting out of the house than anything; he had complained that it was an unladylike profession, and moreover one ill-suited to the daughter of a high-ranking priest, but he had still allowed her to enlist, fearing that she too might leave Bevelle entirely if he refused.

And now, ten years later, Izeel had disappointed her father again: in her turn, she had fallen in love with a man. In itself,

that was no bad thing; her father had been making pointed suggestions about a number of Izeel's friends among the warrior monks for some time. But the man she had fallen in love with was an Al Bhed.

She had known her father would disapprove; she had expected him to be angry, but to ultimately let her make her own decision, as he had done ten years ago; but this time, he was firm.

"I cannot allow you to be seen with that man," he said. "The shame of having my daughter go off with an Al Bhed – I would be ruined. Our family's reputation is already damaged, after what your mother did."

"Ten years ago," she pointed out.

"Yevon remembers," said her father. "You know how this city works – you know how fragile the Yevonite hierarchy is, and our place in it especially. I can't stop you seeing this ruffian, but if you care about our status, you must do it in secret."

Izeel rarely got on well with her father, but she loved him nonetheless – perhaps more out of duty than anything, but it was still love. She knew how much the family's social standing meant to him; it had meant a lot to her, too, until she had made friends among the monks and discovered that many of them were from much lower social classes than her own. And then, of course, she had met Bissa of the Al Bhed, who had come from something outside that system entirely, and shown her that it was possible to love someone who hadn't been chosen

by one's parents.

She would have been happy to give up her status for his sake; she knew it would have to happen if they were to marry. They would probably need to leave Bevelle, where interracial marriage was frowned upon, and she had already decided she was prepared for that. But her father, she knew, would be both alone and disgraced if she were to make such a move. And, unmistakably, she did love him; so she continued seeing Bissa in secret, not telling any of her friends about the relationship, and not mentioning it again to her father, who was clearly quite content not to bring it up either.



A few months later, Wen Kinoc, one of Izeel's contemporaries among the warrior monks, was married. It was an arranged marriage, the sort that most young people of Izeel's acquaintance expected; the bride, whom she hadn't met before, nonetheless seemed happy enough, even if it was only because she was becoming part of one of Bevelle's most distinguished families.

For the same reason, the ceremony was a specific sort of Bevelle society wedding, which meant there were very precise rules around what to do and who to sit with. Izeel found herself seated fairly near the front, among a handful of Kinoc's

friends with whom she had some passing acquaintance. Had she been open about her relationship with Bissa, she would have undoubtedly found herself relegated to the back row; and had she attempted to attend in his company, they would probably have been turned away altogether.

Looking around at the other guests, though, Izeel decided that having to sit at the back might have been preferable. Kinoc's non-military friends, although still in their twenties, were much like her own father: humourless and obsessed with propriety. With the condescending attitude towards women that prevailed among Yevonite traditionalists, they mostly acted as if Izeel was too uneducated to understand their conversation. At the back, by contrast, she spotted her fellow monk Auron, who had no connection with any of the high-ranking families, but was Kinoc's best friend and, it was said, the most skilled warrior monk of their generation. Undoubtedly, if his background had been different, he would have been Kinoc's best man; as it was, he was unable to take any special role in the ceremony.

Auron and Izeel were good friends; they had known each other since Izeel first joined the monks. Once the official part of the wedding was over, she found herself drifting towards him, and after a few drinks, they decided to join in with some of the formal dances.

"You're good at dancing," she told Auron, as he led her confidently through a waltz.

“Are you surprised?” he said.

“Where did you learn?” Izeel asked. “My father made me take lessons for a while – Kinoc was there, actually.”

“I knew I might need it, with everyone starting to marry,” Auron explained. “I’ve been practising on my own on off-duty days. It’s not so hard.”

Izeel buried her face in Auron’s shoulder to hide her smile; the thought of him in his room at the barracks, practising dancing by himself, was oddly sweet. Auron was like that: when he didn’t know something, he put in the most extraordinary effort to make sure that he not only filled the gap in his knowledge, but became a true expert. That dedication was one of the reasons why his combat skills had become so renowned.

The evening wore on, and as the crowd thinned, they both decided to leave, heading home in what was initially the same direction. The most junior warrior monks were all quartered together at the barracks, although once a monk reached the age of seventeen, he or she was allowed to live off the premises; Izeel had moved back in with her father at that point, as the family home wasn’t far away. Auron, who had nowhere else to go, continued to live at the barracks, although successive promotions had meant he now had his own room instead of having to share a dormitory.

They held hands as they walked, sharing what now seemed a very natural intimacy after several hours of drinks and dancing. “Did you enjoy yourself?” Auron asked.

“I enjoyed the dancing,” said Izeel. “The ceremony was rather boring, wasn’t it? All that ritual. You can’t have liked it either, having to sit at the back. I’m sure Kinoc would have wanted you up there with him.”

She felt Auron’s hand stiffen a little in her own, and then he said mildly, “Well, it wouldn’t be right for me to play a part. I’m lucky to have been invited.”

“But you’re his best friend,” she said. “Don’t you think it’s a shame that we have to follow all those traditions?” It was the sort of question that she found herself asking more and more these days, a result of spending time in Bissa’s company: the way the Al Bhed thought about these things was quite different from the Yevonite one.

“The traditions are there for a reason,” Auron insisted. “Yevon provides as we deserve.”

Izeel wanted to argue, but they had reached the junction that would take them in different directions, so she said instead, “Goodnight, Auron. I had a nice evening with you.”

Auron tugged her hand gently upwards, and then bent forward, pressing his lips against it in a gallant kiss. “Sleep well,” he said. “See you at the next training session.”

She gave him a little wave goodbye as he turned around, and then headed home.



A few days later, Izeel's father turned to her over breakfast, and said, "Your friend: Auron. Is he betrothed to anyone?"

The question took her by surprise, not least for its bluntness. "I don't think so," she said. "I didn't know you knew him."

"I've been hearing his name here and there," he said. "They say he's fantastically skilled in combat. The greatest sword-fighter since Lord Mi'ihen, supposedly."

"He is very good at it," she agreed.

"And I hear the two of you are quite close," he went on.

"We're good friends."

"Or more?" he asked, raising a single bushy eyebrow.

"What do you mean by that?" said Izeel.

Her father took a long sip of his tea before continuing. "At Wen Rezi's son's wedding earlier this week – you spent the entire evening dancing with him, I'm told. And you left together, hand in hand."

"We're friends," said Izeel again. "We've known each other a long time, and he's much nicer than the other young men Kinoc insists on inviting to these things."

"Then it sounds like he would make an excellent husband for you," her father said.

Izeel was too stunned to protest; her father continued to speak. "It's about time for you to be betrothed," he explained, "and I do want you to marry a man you'll get on with. Other fathers would simply have their daughters pair up with who-

ever might increase their status, but we both know that sort of marriage doesn't always work out, after your mother –"

He faltered, and that was enough for Izeel to get a word in. "Wait a minute –" she began.

Her father raised a hand to silence her. "Let me finish," he said. "I know your friend Auron isn't one of our people, but I'm not opposed to your marrying him. In fact, it would increase his own standing significantly – he'd be brought into a good family. So there would be quite clear benefits for him as well. You could be happy together, I'm sure."

"Hold on!" Izeel protested. "Don't you remember Bissa? I know we don't talk about him much, but I'm still committed to him. I don't want to marry someone else." Even Auron, she thought.

"You insist on pursuing your relationship with the Al Bhed?" her father asked. "I was hoping you might have abandoned that. So what do you hope to do, remain unmarried as long as you're seeing that man? What if it goes on for years?"

"I hope it does," said Izeel fervently. "Yes – I won't marry anyone but him, and if you won't let me marry him, then I won't marry at all. I understand that you're concerned about our status, but I've already agreed to compromise with you. I'm in love with Bissa, Father – Auron's a good friend, and he'll make a wonderful husband for somebody, but I'm not interested."

"Izeel," said her father – addressing her by name was al-

ways a sign that he was beginning to lose his temper. “Barely anyone in this city marries someone they really love. We all have to learn to make do. Perhaps Auron will allow you to continue seeing your Al Bhed – there’s little shame in being a cuckold, as long as everyone’s discreet about it.”

“Absolutely not,” said Izeel. “That would be incredibly unfair – he thinks he’s gaining a wife, and it turns out she’s seeing someone else? I can’t do that to Auron. He deserves someone who can love him.”

Her father shrugged. “He’ll have married into our family. That should be a privilege in itself.”

“No,” said Izeel firmly. “I refuse.”

“That’s immaterial,” her father retorted. “Your marriage is a contract to be negotiated between me and your future husband. I’m allowing you a concession by choosing a man you seem to get on with. I will present this offer to Auron, Izeel, and if he accepts, you will be required to marry him.”

“This is ridiculous,” said Izeel, and she stood up, angry not only on her own behalf but on behalf of Bissa and Auron too, unwittingly both wronged by this plan. “You’re just trying to stop me seeing Bissa. This isn’t how marriage should work – no wonder Mother left you.”

She stormed out of the house without waiting for his reaction, heading straight for the barracks. It was imperative, she realised, that she speak to Auron before her father presented him with the offer. He needed to know in advance, and to have

time to realise that blindly accepting would be in nobody's interest.

She found him in a group of other monks, all practising close combat: with all of them wearing the regulation uniform, complete with helmets that sat low over the eyes, it might have been hard to pick Auron out had Izeel not distinguished him by his movements and the fact that he was one of the taller men present. Strong and confident, he dispatched the others with ease, never faltering even as the rest of them stumbled and allowed brief lapses of judgement to ensure their opponents got the better of them. Izeel kept her gaze focused on Auron as he fought, watching his moves and conceding that there was a kind of beauty in their precision.

A whistle blew, signalling the end of the session; Auron removed his helmet and tugged his long hair out of its bun, letting it fall over his shoulders. He had evidently spotted Izeel; he grinned and gave her a wave, and then bounded towards her despite being visibly short of breath after the intense exercise.

Izeel kept watching as he approached; she had never needed to think about it before, but Auron was undoubtedly a good-looking man. She remembered how he had looked as a teenager, and sometimes forgot that he had matured since then, no longer inhabiting his body in that awkward, gangly way that growing boys did, but with a new and dignified confidence. As he took out a handkerchief to wipe his sweat away, and then retied his hair into its usual ponytail, she

admitted to herself that the sight before her was hardly unappealing. Had it not been for Bissa, she supposed, she would probably have agreed to the marriage – perhaps even looked forward to it.

“Didn’t expect to see you today,” said Auron. “Don’t tell me we’re on? I said I’d help out with another session – they’re a man down.”

“We’re not on,” Izeel confirmed. “Can I talk to you? It’s important.”

Auron nodded. “Of course. You want to go somewhere more private?”

They went outside to get away from the other combatants, and after walking for a few minutes, wordlessly agreed on a bench that looked out over a deserted children’s playground. Izeel was about to remark on how strange it was that such a facility would exist within the barracks, but Auron spoke first. “This brings back memories,” he said, setting his helmet down on the bench beside him. “I used to come here a lot as a child, before we met.”

Izeel frowned. “You already lived here?”

“Since I was five,” Auron said. “I thought I’d told you before?”

She shook her head.

“I wasn’t born in Bevelle,” he explained. “My family was from a village near Luca – they were all killed by Sin when I was very small. The Crusaders came to clean up the village,

and they brought me and the other survivors to Bevelle. Apparently they decided I was well-suited to combat, because I was sent to live here.” He looked out over the playground. “I was too young to train properly at first, so I just wandered around the place. But someone gave me a practice sword when I was seven, and it all went on from there.” He smiled with a little embarrassment. “But what did you want to talk about?”

Izeel hesitated, trying to make sense of this new information about Auron. She had already known he wasn’t from Bevelle, or had perhaps worked it out for herself from the fact that he never mentioned his family, and from his appearance, taller and darker-haired in comparison with most local men. If Auron had lived at the barracks for so long – a full eighteen years – that would at least partly explain his remarkable prowess in combat, and his impressive dedication to Yevon’s teachings. He had known little else in his life.

“Auron,” she said, pushing the thought aside, “have you ever been in love?”

He genuinely considered the question; most men, she knew, would have laughed or scoffed or teased her, but Auron was different. “No,” he concluded in the end. “There’s not much point, is there? Falling in love with someone before it’s even certain that you can marry. Bevelle isn’t the sort of place for that.”

“It isn’t,” Izeel agreed.

“Have you?” Auron asked her, his voice quiet and intense.

“Been in love?”

She ignored the question. “So you’ll just wait for some old man to offer you his daughter’s hand, and then decide whether to accept, and see how things go from there?”

“I suppose so,” said Auron. “That’s how it’s done, isn’t it? Besides, I need to marry well if I want to go any further in my career. I just have to hope the marriage they offer me is one that will work.”

“What do you mean?” Izeel asked. “Go further in your career ...”

Auron nodded ruefully. “You probably haven’t heard,” he said. “I’ve reached the highest rank someone of my class is allowed to hold, but I’m too good for it – it’s starting to bore me.” There was no arrogance in his tone; he was simply being honest and speaking directly, as he always did. “Apparently there was an attempt to promote me a few months ago, but the traditionalists on the council denied it: only people from high-class Bevelle families have ever taken those roles, and they want it to stay that way. So all I can hope for is a marriage offer from one of those families. Until then, I have to stay at my current rank.”

“But that’s unfair!” Izeel protested. “You’re a good fighter, and a good leader – that’s all that should matter, isn’t it?”

“It’s Yevon’s decree,” said Auron solemnly.

“Aren’t you angry about it at all?”

He shook his head. "We all have to obey the teachings. Besides, Kinoc says I'm becoming well known for my combat skills, even among the priests; sooner or later somebody's going to make me an offer, he says. I just have to hope it'll be a good match."

Izeel was so frustrated that she wanted to strike at something; it was unfair that Auron had to consent to a loveless marriage for the sake of his career, and still more unfair that he didn't seem to see anything wrong with that. He had probably never known of arranged marriages that had gone awry; he didn't have the experience she had, having witnessed her parents' relationship fall apart. But then, she remembered, he didn't have parents at all, and she suddenly felt bad for thinking he had it easier than she did.

"My father's going to offer you my hand," she admitted, not looking at him.

Auron leapt to his feet. "Really?" he gasped. "Then that's perfect!" Before Izeel could stop him, he sat down again, and made an uncharacteristically clumsy grab for her right hand, taking it in both his own; she could feel him trembling a little with excitement as he pressed his palms against it. "I'm delighted," he said. "I hoped for a wife I might learn to get along with, but I never imagined it might be you – we're already such good friends. This is such an honour."

He brought her hand towards his face, clearly preparing to give it the same sort of chivalrous kiss he had on the night of

Wen Kinoc's wedding – and Izeel snatched it away, and shrank back from him until she was at the very edge of the bench, and then decided to stand so she could be sure of keeping her distance. “Stop it,” she said loudly. “Don't come near me! How can you consent to this, when we don't love each other? What makes you think this will work?”

“We don't love each other *yet*,” Auron said eagerly, “but we have time. Love grows – isn't that what they say? We've known each other a long time, and we're not tired of each other yet. You're sharp, and you're pretty, and you can fight – I like you a lot. I can love you. Let me have a chance at it. I'll be the best husband you could ask for.”

Izeel shook her head in horror. “No,” she said. “I don't want to marry you. We're good friends – I don't want it to be any more than that.”

“Why not?” Auron implored her.

“I just don't!” she snapped. “I shouldn't need to explain. I don't love you, Auron, and you don't love me, and we shouldn't get married and promise to spend the rest of our lives together and lie in bed together and have children together if we *don't love each other*. It's as simple as that.”

“You know what this means for my career,” he pleaded.

“I can't believe you're saying that,” said Izeel. “This isn't just your career – this is our lives. Our happiness. Everything. I don't want to marry you, and that's it.”

And she turned away and fled, trying to ignore the thought

that this was the first time in ten years of friendship that she and Auron had had more than the smallest of disagreements.



Their next training session was a few days later; Izeel was determined to avoid Auron, and found herself paired with Wen Kinoc, who was notorious for his lack of combat skills, having made it as far as he had only because he was from one of Bevelle's most privileged families. While Izeel blocked his clumsy and predictable blows and half-listened to his complaints about his new wife, she attempted to angle herself so she couldn't see Auron, and mostly failed, resigning herself to having to watch his fluid movements and wishing Kinoc could dedicate himself to his training a tenth as much as Auron did.

The session finished; she exchanged unenthusiastic good-byes with Kinoc and attempted to leave, but before she could safely make an exit, Auron dashed across the hall and cornered her.

"I don't want to talk to you," she said, trying to step around him and leave; he mirrored her movement, and raised a hand, the beginning of an attempt to hold her in place.

"Don't touch me!" she hissed, and he dropped his arm immediately, looking mortified.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and even though Izeel had been determined to leave without speaking to him, there was a sincerity in his tone that made her pause for a moment.

“Izeel,” he said quietly, and that was enough to persuade her to look him in the eyes. “I am – I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have said those things to you. I really value our friendship, and I got too excited, and I didn’t even think about how you might feel about it. Please forgive me. Or if there’s anything I can do to make it up to you, tell me, and I’ll do it, I promise –”

“Auron,” she said, and he stopped speaking immediately. “Thank you. I’m glad you respect my point of view.”

“I do,” he said, in less of a rush than before, “although I admit I still don’t really understand. Yevonite marriages are always arranged – do you think there’s a better option? I don’t mean to say you don’t have the right to turn me down, but isn’t this the best offer you’ll get?”

She could tell he was genuinely confused by her refusal; she would have been the same, she reflected, before she met Bissa. Learning about the Al Bhed ways had taught her that people could genuinely fall in love first and marry later: it was an idea that seemed never to have occurred to anyone from Bevelle. Of course Auron would struggle to understand, she thought: marrying for love was a foreign concept to him.

“There’s a reason,” she said, “but you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

Auron smiled a little. “I can keep a secret,” he said.

"I'm in love with someone else," she admitted.

"I see," said Auron, and strangely, his smile broadened into a large grin.

"What are you so happy about?" Izeel asked.

He shook his head, still grinning. "I thought it was me," he said. "I thought there was something about *me* that meant you didn't want to marry me, but if it's someone else ..."

"I think that's the first time I've ever known you to doubt yourself," said Izeel.

"Well," said Auron, "when a girl turns you down ..."

She scowled goodnaturedly, privately relieved that their former easy friendship had returned. "I didn't realise you had so much experience," she said.

Auron laughed, and then suddenly became serious again, and said, "So, the man you love – why can't you marry him? He's not already married, is he?"

"No," she said. "Nothing like that. No, my father would never allow it – he's unsuitable."

"Why?" Auron asked. "It can't be about class, if he'd allow you to marry someone like me."

She considered whether to reply – Auron was a devout follower of the teachings, and Izeel was unsure how he would react if she just stated outright that she had fallen in love with an Al Bhed. But he was a good person, and he always tried hard to understand, even if Yevon was all he had ever known.

Perhaps, she thought, it would work better if Auron were to meet Bissa in person. Learning about her situation in the abstract might startle him into a negative reaction, but if they could actually meet, he would have no choice but to be polite, and he would see as well that she and Bissa loved each other.

“Come and meet him,” she said.



She took Auron to the market where Bissa did business; Al Bhed were banned from the main trading centre, where warrior monks and higher-ranking Yevonites normally did their shopping, but there were several smaller venues that had become infamous for the availability of semi-legal machina at low prices. It was in one of these establishments that Bissa typically maintained a table. Izeel was accustomed to visiting him after her training sessions finished, when the crowds were light; she had never brought anyone else with her before, of course.

Bissa seemed hesitant when they approached, but Izeel stepped forward to kiss him. “It’s all right,” she explained. “Auron’s a good friend of mine – I wanted him to meet you.”

Auron, wide-eyed and a little lost for words, nonetheless shook Bissa’s hand politely.

“I guess you haven’t seen these kinds of machina before,” said Bissa, pointing them out to Auron. “This one’s for slicing vegetables – fifteen times faster than a knife.”

Auron nodded, clearly still ill at ease, but after Bissa had talked him through the rest of the machina and demonstrated the functions of a few of them, he seemed to relax a bit and start joining in with the conversation. “I thought you’d have an accent,” he blurted out eventually.

Izeel elbowed him in the ribs; he yelped and took a step backwards. “What?” he said. “Al Bhed have their own language, don’t they? Why is that rude?”

Bissa chuckled. “You’re right, we normally use our own language when it’s just us. Some of us are brought up bilingually these days, though; makes it easier for us to trade with Yevonites, see.” He reached for Izeel’s hand over the machina table, and grinned at Auron. “I like you – you’re a straight talker. I can see why you guys get on.”

“Um,” said Auron, “thanks. And the two of you seem very happy together. Anyone who makes Izeel smile like that is a friend of mine.”

Izeel squirmed in embarrassment as Bissa drew her in closer to kiss her on the cheek, simultaneously giving Auron a friendly slap on the shoulder with his free hand. Bissa was right, she thought: Auron never minced his words. In a city as obsessed with ritual and etiquette as Bevelle, it was a rare and refreshing aspect of his character.

They left Bissa behind, not before Auron had promised to visit him again and try some of his machina; once they had left the market and begun the walk back to their own district, Izeel said, "So, you see. Unsuitable."

Auron frowned. "I'd never spoken to an Al Bhed for that long before. They're just like us."

"Not according to Yevon," said Izeel.

"That must be really hard for you," said Auron sincerely.

Izeel hummed in agreement. "Thanks for understanding," she said, and she took hold of his arm and threaded hers through the gap formed by his elbow, making them look like any other couple out for a stroll.

"You should marry him," said Auron after a while. "Never mind what your father says – you love him, don't you? It'd stop him trying to marry you off to other men, at least."

"You think?" she said.

"Definitely," said Auron. "There was a priest who married an Al Bhed; about five years ago, I think? I remember Kinoc taking about it. It was some kind of big scandal – I wasn't interested, but he was discussing it with his civilian friends for months."

"I don't know why you're friends with him," Izeel couldn't help saying.

"He knows the right people," said Auron distractedly. "I'm just trying to remember that priest's name – it's on the tip of my tongue. Breena? Blanna? That's not it ..."

He muttered a few more names to himself as they progressed, but evidently failed to find the right one, because when it was time to part ways he shook his head and shrugged. “Never mind,” he said, and turned his attention back to Izeel. “Thank you,” he added. “You and Bissa seem very happy together. It was an honour to meet him.” He kissed her on both cheeks, and before she could react, turned to stride back to the barracks.



They were off duty the next day, and Izeel planned to indulge in a few extra hours in bed, but there was a knock at the door just after her father had left for his work at the temple, so she found herself standing on the doorstep in her nightdress, still not completely awake.

“Braska,” said her visitor cheerfully; it was Auron, who was entirely unembarrassed by seeing Izeel in a state of undress, having spent five years living in the barracks with her in their younger days. “That’s the priest’s name – Kinoc reminded me.”

“What?” said Izeel.

“The priest who married an Al Bhed woman,” said Auron. “Kinoc even gave me his address – only the fayth know why he had it. I thought we could visit and ask for some advice. Don’t worry, I didn’t mention your name to Kinoc – he has no idea why I’m interested.”

“When have you spoken to Kinoc since last night?” Izeel asked suspiciously. “Shouldn’t he be at home with his wife?”

Auron frowned. “Good point – he’s been spending a lot of time in the barracks this week, actually.” He shrugged. “So do you want to visit Father Braska, or not?”

Once Izeel had put some proper clothes on and eaten a quick breakfast, they made their way to the address that Kinoc had supplied. It was in a part of the city unfamiliar to both of them, far from both the machina markets and the grand districts where the priests tended to live.

“Your father might know him, I suppose,” said Auron.

Izeel shook her head. “Never mentioned him. I’ve never heard of someone called Braska practising in any of the temples.”

They reached the house, and after a brief, whispered debate about who would knock, Auron conceded defeat and reached out to rap twice against the door.

It was answered, eventually, by a tired-looking man in his early thirties, who looked at them both in confusion. “Yes?” he said.

“Are you Father Braska?” Auron asked.

“I’m Braska,” said the man. “Can I help you?”

“We were after some advice, if you’ve time to spare,” said Auron. “You see, my friend and I have reached the age where we’re expected to marry –”

“You do realise,” Braska interrupted, “that I don’t practise anymore? I had my licence revoked five years ago. If you’re after spiritual counselling, try a temple.”

“That’s not what we need,” Izeel explained. “We actually wondered, with your experience – well, you see, my father’s a high-ranking priest, and he expects me to marry a Yevonite, of course. But I’m in love with an Al Bhed.”

Braska’s reaction wasn’t as she had expected; he stepped back a little, and his eyes suddenly seemed to glisten, as if he was beginning to cry; he reached out towards the doorframe to steady himself.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” said Izeel hurriedly.

“No, no,” said Braska. “It’s all right – I’m all right. It’s just: it hasn’t been long, you see –” He sniffed, waved a hand apologetically, and then said, “You’d better come in. Excuse the mess.”

Izeel and Auron carefully stepped inside; Braska’s description of his home had been appropriate. It was a small house, with more furniture than it really needed, and cloths and tapestries of all kinds draped over them; beyond that, there were numerous machina on the floor, some intact and some in pieces, with a few children’s toys interspersed here and there.

“Excuse me for a moment,” said Braska, and he trudged off towards another part of the house, leaving the two of them to take seats on a settee and stare at the chaotic decor some more.

“When you marry Bissa,” Auron whispered, “this is what your house will be like.”

Izeel stifled a giggle, and slapped him lightly on the arm. “Don’t,” she hissed. “He’s a bit ... strange, isn’t he? Maybe we should make our excuses?”

But before long, Braska returned with a teapot and three small bowls, setting them on the table and carefully pouring out the tea before he moved a stack of papers off a high-backed chair on the other side and sat down in its place.

“I’m sorry about all this,” he said. “Things haven’t been easy recently – I don’t know how much you’ve heard about me.”

“Only that you married an Al Bhed,” said Auron. “I haven’t heard anything since then.”

“Ah,” said Braska, nodding. “I suppose the Yevonites prefer to pretend I don’t exist these days. Well – there have been developments.”

Izeel was suddenly reminded of her own father, and the way he had acted in the wake of her mother’s departure, even though Braska must have been at least fifteen years younger. “She left you,” she said boldly.

Braska looked down at his bowl of tea. “Very astute,” he remarked. “But not quite right. She didn’t leave, not by choice; Sin took her.”

Izeel suddenly felt extremely embarrassed; she pressed a hand to her mouth while Auron offered condolences on behalf

of both of them. When she was able to speak again, she murmured, “How long?”

“Three months ago,” said Braska, just as quietly. “It’s been a struggle ... adjusting.”

“I’m sorry,” said Auron, “we shouldn’t be intruding on you like this. It was a stupid idea – my friend had your address, and I got carried away. We should leave you in peace – shouldn’t we, Izeel?”

She began to nod, but Braska reached out and gestured for them both to stay seated. “No, I know why you’re here,” he said. “It’s not often that someone from Bevelle falls in love with an Al Bhed. I’ll gladly talk to you about it – just excuse me if I –” He looked up at the ceiling and blinked several times.

“Of course,” said Izeel.

“Thank you, sir,” said Auron. “You’re very kind.”

“Why don’t you tell me your story?” Braska asked, taking out a handkerchief to dab at his eyes.

Izeel told him everything: how she and Bissa had met, her father’s reaction, his plan for her to marry Auron, Auron’s dedication to his career and the problem of his status. In return, Braska shared his own experiences. He had met his future wife while on a mission to the Al Bhed Home, some incredibly optimistic attempt to convert them to Yevon, and had found himself returning there more and more often, growing closer to her as he did so. She was from one of the most powerful Al Bhed families, and he from the Bevelle equivalent; they had

known that neither side would approve of their relationship, so they had eloped, and married in Luca, and then returned to Bevelle to settle. Once the story had got out, Braska had been disowned by his family and suspended from practising at the temples, none of which had come as a great surprise. After that, they and their daughter had had to survive on the little money Braska's wife had made from machina repairs.

"But it was worth it," he concluded hoarsely. "We were happy – everyone was against us, but none of it mattered. I'm sorry to say it, but if you and your Bissa make your relationship public, the same will happen to you. You'll struggle. You'll just have to decide if it's worth it."

"It is," said Izeel, more convinced than ever after hearing Braska's story. "Thank you so much, sir. This has helped a lot."

"You're going to marry him, aren't you?" said Auron.

She turned to him and nodded. "He's worth it."

Auron reached for her hand, and said, "I'll be on your side. Even if everyone else turns against you."

"And what about you, Auron?" Braska asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Me?" said Auron, letting go of Izeel's hand in surprise. "Sir?"

"Izeel's father is going to offer you her hand in marriage," said Braska, "and you'll turn him down. Is that right?"

Auron nodded.

“And what do you think will happen after that?” said Braska.

“She’ll marry Bissa,” said Auron.

Braska shook his head. “To you, I meant, Auron. Do you think another priest is going to come along and offer you *his* daughter’s hand, just to be humiliated like you’re about to humiliate Izeel’s father?”

“But I won’t do that,” said Auron. “I’ll accept next time.”

“And how do they know?” said Braska. “Yevonites don’t like being disobeyed. Once you turn down her hand, that’s the end of the line for you. You need their help to advance in your career – you won’t get it. They’ll treat you like the dirt they think you are.”

“He’s not dirt,” Izeel couldn’t help saying.

“He’s not one of *our people*,” said Braska. “I grew up in that world, just like you, Izeel – I know how they feel about people who aren’t like us. They’re giving Auron one chance, because he’s skilled in combat – so skilled that even I had started hearing stories about him.” He turned to Auron with a sad smile. “But don’t think you’ll win any favours after that. They’ll sweep you under the carpet, like they did with me. You’ll never be anything more than a low-ranking warrior monk, if they even let you continue being one of those. If you turn down this offer, it’s the end for your career, I guarantee it.”

Auron was speechless; his fists were clenched with rage.

Izeel reached out to give him a reassuring pat on the arm, but he jerked it away before she could touch him, and she quickly returned her hand to her lap.

“And what are *you* going to do, sir?” he asked eventually, through gritted teeth. “Now that your wife’s dead?”

Izeel was about to apologise for Auron’s tone; she could tell he was extremely angry, and speaking even more bluntly than usual because of it – but Braska cut in before she could speak, seeming unconcerned. “A good question,” he said sincerely. “But one I can answer: I’m going to become a summoner. My way forward is quite clear.”

Auron nodded tightly.

“We should leave,” said Izeel, and she ushered Auron out of the room before turning towards Braska. “Thank you so much,” she said, reaching out to shake his hand. “That was really useful. I’m certain that I’ll marry Bissa now – I know it’s worth it.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Braska. “I sincerely wish you both all the happiness in Spira. I can’t pretend it won’t be hard for you, but love conquers all. And –” He looked down at the table, seeming almost guilty. “I hope Auron’s all right as well.”

“Yes,” said Izeel, her smile faltering, and she headed outside to join Auron on the doorstep.

“Stupid man,” Auron muttered, once Izeel had closed the door behind her. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“He does,” she said softly, “and you know it.”

Auron shook his head vehemently. “I don’t want to talk,” he said. “I’m going to make my own way home. See you.”

She watched as he left, dread mounting inside her. Auron was dedicated to his career above anything else, she knew; she hadn’t seen him this upset in years. She was beginning to wonder if Auron would even be able to turn down her father’s offer, knowing what would happen to him afterwards: he cared about her wishes, of course, but he had always been very clear that his career took priority over all other aspects of his life. Even with Kinoc, his supposed best friend, he had ended up in several fistfights over the years about which of them would end up as maester. If Auron agreed to marry Izeel, she would have no choice but to go along with it; and they both knew it was far from a worst-case scenario. They got on well; they found each other moderately attractive; if there was no choice but to make it work, they surely would. But it would be a betrayal that would alter their relationship forever, to say nothing of how things might end up with Bissa.

Izeel hurried home, trying not to think about it.



Auron was absent from the next training session; one of the other men who still lived at the barracks told Izeel he was ill, which she found very difficult to believe, knowing him not

to have taken more than two days of sick leave over the past ten years. It seemed to be confirmed, however, when Izeel's father returned home late that night.

"I stopped by the barracks on my way back from the temple," he said. "I was planning to speak to your friend, but they told me he's not well. It's a damn nuisance, going all that way for nothing."

"You weren't going to ask him to marry me, were you?" said Izeel.

"Of course I was," said her father crossly. "You've been running around with this Al Bhed fellow far too long, Izeel. It's time to settle down with a good Yevonite – and despite his background, it really does sound as if your friend Auron is one of the best."

"I won't marry him," she said. "I've told you."

"The decision isn't yours," he replied.



Auron turned up at the house a couple of mornings later; Izeel answered the door and tried to catch his eye while he stared at the ground between them.

"Your father left a message for me at the barracks," he mumbled. "Told me to come and see him when I could."

"I heard you were ill," said Izeel. "I hope you're better?"

He looked up and met her gaze with obvious reluctance. “Mostly. Is he in, then?”

“I’ll fetch him,” she said, and went inside to alert her father to Auron’s presence before retreating to her bedroom and flinging herself face down onto the bed, burying her face into the pillow to avoid hearing anything of the two men’s conversation.

She lay like that for a good few minutes, in blissful obliviousness; but eventually the sounds drifting in became too loud to ignore. Izeel couldn’t make out the words, but it was clear that her father and Auron had both raised their voices, and were bellowing at each other with little discretion. It took her a while to work out what that might signify; but, she realised at last, surely they couldn’t have come to an agreement if they were speaking to each other like that.

She crept into the entrance hall just as her father walked back into the house, slamming the door behind him. “Well?” Izeel asked.

He shot her a murderous look. “That young man thinks he can lecture me,” he spat. “I’ve never heard anything so insulting – he’ll regret this. The court of Yevon will hear that some jumped-up peasant from the back end of nowhere has had the audacity to reject my daughter’s hand –”

Izeel had heard more than enough; she leapt forward, tore the door open, and began to sprint down the road that led towards the barracks. “Auron!” she called as loudly as she could.

“Wait!”

She caught up with him soon enough; he had stopped and turned to face her, wearing a miserable expression that nonetheless did nothing to diminish Izeel’s delight. Throwing herself at him, she flung her arms around his neck and began to kiss his face repeatedly, first thanking him over and over again, and then mixing those thanks with apologies, until she found herself dissolving into tears, burying her face against Auron’s neck. He held her, gentle and strong at once, while she sobbed noisily into his warm skin. The die was cast: they had each been set on their paths now, frightening and complex as those paths would be.

“We’ll get through it,” Auron murmured; and Izeel nodded fervently. They would.

Epilogue

AURON had taken to visiting the docks on the northern side of Bevelle when he was off duty: the atmosphere at the barracks had become unpleasant, and he preferred to spend his time elsewhere when possible. On this occasion, it was a windy morning; he looked out over the sea and let his mind wander, trying to forget the place that he would need to return to.

“Auron?” said an unfamiliar voice behind him. He turned, and eventually recognised the man whose house he had visited with Izeel several months earlier: the former priest, Braska.

“Good morning, sir,” he said automatically.

“I hear your friend is engaged to be married,” said Braska. “My congratulations to her.”

“I’ll pass those on,” said Auron, turning away to look at the sea again.

Braska moved closer, until he was standing right beside him. “And how are things going for you?” he said.

Auron didn't reply – he couldn't. All he could do was watch the waves as they folded over on themselves, tracing their eternal, unpredictable pattern.

"I'm adrift," he said at last, more to himself than to Braska, and he let the winds carry his words away.

"Auron," said Braska after a little while, "I have a proposition for you. I don't expect an answer straight away – I'd much prefer that you think it over first. Will you do that?"

"What is it?" Auron asked.

"When the two of you came to see me," Braska went on, calm in the face of Auron's terseness, "I mentioned that I was planning to train as a summoner. I still have a lot of training to complete – potentially two more years of it – but when I start my pilgrimage, I'll need a guardian."

He paused. "You understand what I'm suggesting, I'm sure. Think about it. You know where to find me." And before Auron had gathered his thoughts enough to attempt a response, he was gone.