

THE fiends in the jungle bore a strange kind of poison: one that Braska hadn't come across in his healer's training. Auron didn't seem to recognise it either, although it wasn't long before he was too overcome by the poison's effects to communicate very much either way. He slumped onto the ground, his head cloaked in a cloud of strange yellow gas, and mumbled something incomprehensible.

Jecht located one of the general antidotes they had picked up, and Braska tried his strongest Esuna, but while their efforts succeeded in keeping Auron conscious, the gas still hung thickly around his head, and he remained confused and sluggish. Eventually, Braska decided that the best thing was to backtrack to the nearby travel agency: their staff would know about the local fiends. There was no point trying to push on with Auron out of action: Braska and Jecht would struggle in combat without his guidance.

They made their way slowly back to the travel agency; Auron could just about walk, but he leant heavily on Braska while doing so, and was having trouble remaining lucid enough to speak. After requesting a room and bundling Auron carefully into one of the beds, Braska returned to the reception desk to ask about the poison.

"It's common in this region," said the receptionist. "Shouldn't be too serious; it'll clear up in a few days, especially with the antidote." She handed over a small bottle. "Give him the whole thing now, then let him rest as long as he needs.

Make sure he keeps warm.”

“Thank you ever so much,” said Braska. He took the potion in to Auron, distractedly considering the bottle: it was a different sort of liquid from any he had seen before, no doubt a local remedy. When he reached Auron’s side, he found him still just about conscious, and helped him sit up and take the potion; the cloud of yellow gas immediately vanished, but Auron seemed much the same, and was soon lying down again, his eyes closed.



Auron slept for two whole days. It was how the potion was supposed to work, Braska was told; the sudden disappearance of the gas had been a good sign, and now they just had to wait for his inevitable recovery. Despite that, he couldn’t help worrying. While Jecht went out to hone his swordsmanship with the less challenging of the nearby fiends, Braska found himself reluctant to stray too far from Auron’s side. He could have been using the time to work on his magic – or his summoning, which was much more in need of practice – but he couldn’t bring himself to leave the travel agency. It was unusual to see Auron in this state; he never normally stayed down for long.

Remembering the receptionist’s words about making sure Auron stayed warm, he fetched him a second blanket, and

then – it seemed just about justifiable – clambered into the bed beside him to provide some heat from his own body. He was glad Jecht wasn't there to see it; he would undoubtedly make some insinuation that Braska, admittedly, would find it hard to refute. Braska couldn't deny that he had been looking for excuses to be close to Auron as the pilgrimage had gone on. Healing his battle wounds meant only momentary contact, and while his concern for his guardian's health sometimes motivated a more lingering touch, it was still never quite enough. He had found himself looking at Auron while the latter slept at numerous travel agencies and camping spots, watching as dark hair cascaded over his pillow, waiting for those sweet brown eyes to open and turn their enchanting gaze on him – wondering how difficult it would be to start the sort of conversation that might eventually turn in a certain direction, and reveal the nature of his intentions. Very difficult, it seemed.

He wrapped an arm over Auron's shoulder and leant in until their heads were pressed together. There would be no point casting magic on him at this stage, but he hoped merely being by Auron's side would help.



Braska didn't stay there long that first time, but while Auron remained unconscious, he found himself making increas-

ingly frequent visits to his bed. Climbing in with him once had made it much easier to do so again. By the time Jecht walked in on them, several hours later, Braska had even become comfortable enough not to feel the slightest embarrassment. He blinked at Jecht defiantly, and Jecht merely shrugged and walked away again. Braska supposed it was a victory of some kind, although he was too preoccupied by Auron's health to be glad that Jecht wasn't making a big deal of it.

It was during one of these periods that Auron finally awoke; he stirred in Braska's arms, looked up, and murmured, "Braska?"

Braska was sure he had never heard anything lovelier. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Weak," said Auron, after a moment.

"I'm not surprised," said Braska. "That was a nasty poison – I'm just glad they had an antidote for us." He stroked Auron's hand. "Do you need anything? Are you warm enough?"

Auron shook his head slowly. "This is ... good," he mumbled.

"Good," Braska echoed, feeling something swell in his chest.



"You know," said Jecht over breakfast, "you could just tell him you love him."

Braska considered it, just briefly; then he sighed.

“What?” said Jecht.

“Well ...” He gestured vaguely. “It wouldn’t be becoming.”

“Ain’t like you gotta be afraid of rejection,” said Jecht. “I seen the way he looks at you. Dude’s crazy about you, Braska.”

“Really?” said Braska halfheartedly. It felt pointless to say it; nothing about what Jecht had said was surprising, even though he hadn’t quite realised it until he heard him speak. “You wouldn’t mind?” he added.

Jecht snorted. “Mind? I been third-wheeling ever since we left Bevelle. Ain’t gonna make any difference.”

“Oh,” said Braska. “Sorry ...”

Jecht merely grinned back, so he went in and slipped into Auron’s bed beside him, holding him close.

“I’m sorry about this,” Auron mumbled. “We must be days behind schedule by now.”

“It’s not your fault,” Braska assured him.

“If you want to leave this morning,” said Auron, “I’m sure I’ll be all right. There’s no need to wait even longer on my account.”

“Certainly not,” said Braska. “We’re not going anywhere until you’re better. We’ll hardly get very far if you’re not at your full strength.”

Auron sighed, and then, eventually, murmured, “Thank you, sir.”

They lay in silence for a while; then Braska said, “Do you like this?”

“Hm?”

He raised a hand to gesture towards where his other arm was pressed firmly against Auron. “This.”

“Yes,” said Auron quietly.

Braska pressed a fleeting, tiny kiss to the side of his head.

“I like that,” Auron added, and Braska suddenly felt overcome by longing.

“Auron,” he murmured, “may I – may I kiss you?”

“Yes,” said Auron again, and he was the one who moved to meet Braska’s lips, so suddenly that Braska couldn’t be sure it was happening until he was already absorbed in it, absorbed in Auron’s wonderful embrace, their noses touching, Auron’s soft eyelashes tickling his face.

He hadn’t exactly been forthcoming about his feelings, he thought as they moved apart. Jecht would be frustrated by his reticence, no doubt. But it was still hard to discuss such things, even if it was undeniable now that the two of them felt the same way. Auron still wasn’t well enough to have a serious conversation. And of course there was the question of what it meant for the pilgrimage. Braska had pledged to see the journey through to its end long ago; this development was inevitably going to complicate things. It was something they would need to talk about before moving on, he decided; Auron deserved clarity. Once he was better, they would have

a thorough discussion, and establish whether Braska's plans would need to change. He would ask Jecht to hold him to that.

Auron had fallen asleep again; his breathing was slow and steady. Braska let his own fall into sync with it, watching as their chests rose and fell together. Even if Auron wasn't yet in a fit state to protect him as his role dictated, he still felt thoroughly safe in his guardian's presence. Nestling his head into Auron's shoulder, he felt himself drifting into peaceful sleep.



Braska woke up, feeling unusually groggy; it took him a moment to realise that Auron was standing by the bed.

"How are you feeling?" said the latter.

"Peculiar," he said. The word seemed strange in his mouth; he had thought he would know how it felt to speak, but somehow the experience had defied his expectations.

"Hm," said Auron. "I'm not surprised. They neglected to tell us the effects of the poison were contagious – even during the recovery period."

Braska tried very hard to concentrate on what he was saying, but with each word Auron spoke, it felt as if someone was kicking him in the back of the head, quite hard. "That seems ... remiss," he managed eventually.

"Hey, can't blame 'em," said a familiar, somewhat blurry shape emerging from behind Auron. "I guess they didn't think

we needed to know. You only catch it if you – what was it she said, Auron?”

A sigh came from Auron’s direction. “If you ... share fluids,” he muttered.

Jecht guffawed. “Yeah, that was it,” he said enthusiastically, before slapping Auron on the back and wandering off.

Braska felt Auron climb into the bed beside him; he sighed contentedly. Auron’s presence was enough to make him feel a lot better; Auron’s lips against his, a moment later, were still more helpful.

“Careful,” he mumbled nonetheless. “Don’t want you to get ill again.”

“It’s all right,” said Auron, working a hand gently through Braska’s hair. “You only get it once – we’re both immune now.”

“That’s fortunate,” said Braska.

He watched as a tiny grin appeared on Auron’s face. “I have to admit,” said the latter, “the thought of spending a few more days here is more appealing than it used to be.”

“Hmm?” said Braska.

“I mean,” said Auron, “staying here with you.”

“Oh,” Braska replied. “Yes.” He could just about remember that he had promised himself they would talk about it. But Auron was right: a little more time simply lying in each other’s arms first certainly wouldn’t be unwelcome.

“Thank you,” he added.

Auron snorted. “For getting you ill?”



“For ...” He tried his best to put it into words. “For being here.”

He lacked the energy to keep his eyes open, but felt Auron’s fingertips in his hair, Auron’s nose pressed against his own. There was the same sense of utter security as before: absolute peace, even if it would just be for a short time. He heard Auron say something, low and quiet, but bringing himself to process the sounds was a step too far. Soon he was asleep again, nestled safely in his beloved guardian’s arms.