

BRASKA apologised a lot. He had done so even in happier times, when he said something about Yevon or the Al Bhed that he belatedly realised Auron might find shocking; it had hardly been unusual. Auron had shrugged off the apologies; he knew Braska hadn't really meant them. Braska was apologising for hurting Auron's feelings, not for his own beliefs, and as much as Auron initially found those beliefs strange and disturbing, he soon came to understand that they had their own logic. Braska's life had been very different from Auron's, and his beliefs were a product of that life. He seemed willing to be Auron's friend despite their differences of opinion, and, Auron supposed, he should extend Braska the same courtesy.

Then, long months later, that terrible day had arrived. Many things about Braska had changed when he heard the news of his wife's death: he had become frail, fearful, resentful of Sin for taking her, and resentful of himself for not having been the one to be taken instead. The nature of his apologies had changed too, even if they remained frequent. He apologised for being sad, for being weak, for needing Auron's support – Auron had tried to insist it was unnecessary. He had never minded having to help Braska, and he told Braska that as often as the latter said sorry, trying to ignore the creeping knowledge of why he had so much more time for Braska than for any other friend. Because it was around that same time that he had started to realise Braska was not quite a friend in the usual way. It was excruciating

to admit, especially while Braska was in the throes of grief; it would do no good to be open about it. All Auron could do was support him, and try his best to make him happy even though it always seemed so futile.

When Braska chose the summoner's path, it took a while before he apologised for it. He was so sure that giving himself in service of Spira's protection was the best way to end his torment. Auron watched as Braska became invigorated, gaining a gleam in his eye that hadn't been there since before her death. He should be grateful, he had supposed, and yet it sickened him to think that this shred of hope came from the fact that Braska looked forward to the end of his life. He should have seen his intended guardianship as an honour, one of the finest ways of serving Yevon; and it might have been, if the summoner was someone who actually believed in the teachings. Or if it was someone who didn't make Auron feel that singular feeling every time their eyes met. That was probably more relevant, as much as Auron – rational, logical Auron – wished it wasn't.

Months in, he had confronted Braska at last, fed up with the perverse delight he took in raising the subject of his own death. Auron had tried to plead with him to try living for its own sake, to make the effort to rediscover the joy that had left him – but Braska was so sure as always, so stubborn, the same stubbornness that Auron had always found so arresting. At last they had argued, and Auron had told Braska exactly what he thought – not about how he felt about him, but about

Braska's foolish determination to take the pilgrimage. That was when Braska had apologised at last. Not to say he had been wrong and would think again, but merely to regret that he had caused Auron this inconvenience. Auron could renounce his vow of guardianship, he suggested, if the thought of accompanying Braska to Zanarkand was really that unappealing. But that would be no solution, Auron knew. Braska would merely go up there with another guardian, a worse guardian, one who would be less capable than Auron of protecting him and of potentially finding a way the cycle might be broken. And Braska would leave Bevelle and get killed by some fiend, and he would be gone without even coming close to bringing the Calm.

If Braska was so determined to go to Zanarkand, Auron knew he had to be the one to accompany him. He had to train him, to make sure after months and years of grieving that he had the constitution to walk leagues every day and to call his magic against every fiend they encountered. They hiked together for practice; they underwent odd, hybrid sparring sessions in the warrior monks' training rooms, sneaking in at unusual times so none of Auron's comrades would make a fuss about a heretic Al Bhed lover using their facilities. Braska apologised every time he had to stop and rest, every time one of his spells failed to hit its mark, every time he ran out of magical power and could conjure nothing more than brief, weak sparks at his fingertips. Auron insisted Braska was growing stronger – he was – but Braska was fixated on his own weakness, his new

and horrible belief that his efforts were worth nothing even as he was sure he was supposed to follow the summoner's journey to Zanarkand. He apologised, again and again, and Auron tried to ignore it, because every apology was a reminder of Braska's hopelessness. Auron worked instead on finding that hope for himself: the hope that he might uncover some way to prevent the summoner's sacrifice. The alternative was too awful to imagine.

When they had met Jecht, Braska apologised to him too; his eagerness to meet the man who had supposedly come from Zanarkand had meant he neglected to introduce himself before trying to ascertain whether Jecht would consent to accompanying them. But Braska's minor lapse in etiquette was nothing compared with Jecht's demeanour, which was so coarse that Auron couldn't help speaking up, questioning his suitability for the duties of a guardian. It had no effect, naturally: once Braska got an idea into his head, as fanciful as it might be, he was determined to see it through. Auron had maintained that Jecht was unworthy of guarding Braska: the man might have been more athletic than most civilians, but he hadn't undergone Auron's proper military training. He didn't appear to know anything about fiends or the significance of the pilgrimage. Most alarmingly, he didn't seem to understand that guardians were supposed to value the protection of the summoner above all other matters. To Auron, that had started to come easily. Braska really was more important than anything

else in his life: even more important than Yevon, even though thinking such things was blasphemy of the highest order. And, yes, he was jealous of Jecht after his last-minute recruitment – jealous that it would no longer be just him and Braska on the long walk, in the tent at night, seeing to each other’s battle wounds, and those other thoughts that made him close his eyes and turn away.

Jecht had soon become irritated by Braska’s constant apologies. The summoner was no more sparing with them on the journey than he had been in training, saying sorry every time his comparative lack of stamina held them up, every time his grief came back to him and they found themselves waiting longer than they had expected at an inn or a travel agency while Braska could do little more than lie in his bed and wait for the tears to stop. Jecht barely ever apologised, and even though he had already decided Braska was a weak man, his continual apologising made him seem even weaker.

They had been about halfway into the journey when Jecht finally snapped; Auron wondered now whether Jecht’s slow realisation that their destination wasn’t the Zanarkand he knew had played a part in it. Jecht had told Braska there was no point saying sorry so often – that it made him sound insincere even when he was trying to be heartfelt. Auron might have backed Jecht up if he had been addressing anybody else. He had warmed to Jecht a little since they released him from the prison, but criticising Braska was still a step too far, and not

just because Jecht was supposed to be his guardian. Not just because the teachings said that guardians had to obey their summoners; Auron had stopped thinking about the teachings very much by that point anyway.

Braska, trying to be accommodating, had done his best to satisfy Jecht's request. Apologising was so instinctive to him that he had often forgotten about it, especially when he was struggling. But when Jecht stepped forward and nominated himself to become the fayth of the Final Aeon, Braska had managed to turn his apology into thanks just in time. He had thanked Jecht not just for himself, but for all Spira; everybody, Yevonite and Al Bhed, human and Guado and Ronso, would be grateful to Jecht for his sacrifice, even if they never discovered the true horrors of what it entailed.

And now Jecht was long gone, and Auron didn't know whether to love or hate him for what he had done. Jecht had made Braska's path to death so simple: Sin would come the next morning, Braska had said, and he would take his staff and perform the same Final Summoning that Spira had known for a thousand years. Auron was the one who had complicated things – for himself, if not yet for Braska. He had been supposed to be a good Yevonite guardian: to lead Braska to his sacrifice. But, in all that time, he had never fully accepted the idea that Braska might die. And even now, with all his aborted plans to save him, there was perhaps one thing he could still say that might make Braska reconsider. If he could finally be

open about how he had felt all along, Braska would understand the pain he was about to cause his devoted friend – and that, if nothing else, might at last persuade him that ending things this way was hardly the simple solution he had always believed it to be.

He went to find Braska, kneeling in quiet thanks, and he stooped down beside him and met his eyes, still brilliant blue even in the evening darkness. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I have to tell you something.”