

AURON had been in Zanarkand for around three years before he finally felt ready to imagine pursuing a relationship with someone else. It was a bitter coincidence, of course: the same span of time it had taken Braska to go from losing his wife to the Final Summoning, adamant that nothing could change his course. He had marched resolutely towards his death; Auron had used the same time to steadily force away the reality of his own. Three years had convinced Braska he would never love again, while Auron now thought he might – not *love*, now that he was a dead man. But distract himself, at least, and enjoy some pleasant time in another’s company.

Like everything, it worked differently in Zanarkand. Relationships were formed slowly and casually; with no Sin, there was no urgent need to find a partner and have plenty of children for the mere sake of preserving Yevon’s good people. And of course, the most significant difference for Auron concerned the type of lover he was allowed to pursue. In Spira, his few brief affairs had been illicit without question; in Zanarkand, there were whole establishments where men like him went to court each other. Men spoke aloud of their boyfriends and husbands; they kissed other men in public. Jecht had spoken once or twice of Zanarkand’s tolerance, and of the fact that it might be better suited to Auron, in some ways, than Spira was. Even forewarned, he found it difficult to believe it when he saw it. Witnessing such openness gave him a strange kind of nausea that was born entirely of relief and longing and amazement.

Being dead and being in Zanarkand made his existence so hard to bear, but this aspect of it was so welcome after twenty-five years living under the bigoted eye of Yevon.

He still had no idea whether anyone would be interested, to begin with. In life, he had been considered handsome: constant attention from young women had been proof of that, and there had been a small but steady trickle of men like himself who had fortunately found discreet ways of making themselves known. He wondered whether being old and disfigured would turn people away – but curiously, it seemed to make no difference. It was a more mature crowd that he attracted now, for the most part: men in their forties and fifties who assumed him to be the same. There was no need to correct them: he certainly felt that age. He had seen enough terrible things to have gained more life experience than any fifty-year-old in Zanarkand, even in half as much time. They would have found the truth much less believable.

There were a few relationships. The longest lasted – that same time again – three years, starting when Tidus was twelve and ending just after he turned fifteen. Auron had become used to using the boy's age to count the years rather than his own: turning thirty and thirty-one meant little in the circumstances. The men he spent longer with ended up meeting Tidus, anyway; Auron made sure to drop in on him once a week or so, and it was sometimes more convenient to do so on the way to some other engagement, when he already had company. In one case,

the fact that he was looking after the son of the famous Jecht was the reason things ended: his partner of the time found it too strange being only a hair's breadth from such celebrity.

But in most cases they ended at Auron's instigation. When he sensed that his partner was becoming too attached, he knew it was time to bow out. It wasn't fair to ask these men to love him when he was lying about his age, and when he would never be able to explain how he had found his way to Zanarkand – not to mention the thorny issue of what he really was. As much as he tried, he could never bring himself to love any of them either, not properly. Whether it was because of his condition, or simply because he couldn't help comparing them with the men he had known before his death and finding them lacking, he could never tell. But no matter what kind of man he found, tall or short, modest or brash, simple or thoughtful, he never managed to love them the way he had loved Braska, or even Jecht.

It was still Braska he thought of when he was alone; Braska who appeared in his dreams, and whose name formed on his lips when he woke, his eye moist with confused tears on those bad days, the days when he reached for the telephone Tidus had taught him to use and groggily cancelled his few appointments. His thoughts of Jecht were less painful, but equally unstoppable: they surfaced at entirely unpredictable moments, sometimes provoked by an innocent figure of speech or mannerism on Tidus' part that took him back to those last few

weeks in Spira. It took him years to admit it, just as it had taken almost the entire pilgrimage to admit that Jecht was his friend. But he had loved Jecht too, in a way. Not as he had loved Braska: not the same tightness in his chest at the sight of Braska's blue eyes, his gentle hands, the murmur of his familiar voice, and thoughts of him again and again, chasing Auron into each unpleasant night's sleep.

He had hated Jecht when he first arrived in Zanarkand, an echo of when Jecht himself had appeared in Spira. It seemed as if every disagreeable thing about the city – and there were many – had been put there deliberately by Jecht to make Auron suffer. Overshadowing it all was the knowledge that if Jecht hadn't stepped forward and become the fayth of Braska's Final Aeon, there would surely have been no Final Summoning. If not for Jecht, he could still have been in Spira by Braska's side, both alive and well. But over time, as he grew accustomed to Zanarkand, he found that his thoughts slowly changed. Jecht's legacy there was exaggerated and chaotic, befitting the celebrity everyone believed they had known – but Auron had come to know a different man, one who had a conscience that he had tried with increasing difficulty to hide. He had become a good person in Spira, or perhaps had been one all along. He had helped others, and towards the end, he had even shown his own vulnerability. In those last weeks, there had been nights where he and Auron sat outside the tent while Braska slept, just talking to each other. Those

nights had been pleasant, despite the fate that awaited them with increasing certainty. Jecht had been the only person in Spira who understood what Auron was going through; at the end, just before they arrived at the ruins, Auron had even begun to think that if Braska insisted on seeing the pilgrimage to its end, Jecht's presence would be some small comfort afterwards.

He had loved Jecht; several years into his exile, he was finally able to admit that. His love for both of them had filled his heart, and he would never succeed in seeing another man the same way: that was the simple truth. Perhaps it was because of what he had become, but the reason was of no consequence. It was merely clear that there was no man in Zanarkand who could replace either of them.

Tidus, having grown a little and worked out the precise direction of Auron's inclinations, went through a phase of suggesting places and situations in which he would be able to meet a partner. It was unexpectedly touching. Auron even played along a few times, although the resulting liaisons never lasted more than a night. He didn't mind. The boy's kindness was a strange mirror of his father's; Auron knew by now not to try telling him as much. Tidus asked whether he was lonely, sometimes, and Auron couldn't bring himself to lie, so he merely promised it didn't matter. One day his loneliness would end, as all things did. He merely hoped he might be able to play some part in avenging the men he had loved first.