

“AURON,” said Braska, “I was thinking of going to the Night of Departed Souls this year. Will you be there?”

It was an unexpected question. The Night of Departed Souls was a Yevonite festival – the kind of thing Braska had already scorned long before he and Auron met. More to the point, he had barely left his house at all over the last two years or so, other than to make increasingly desperate attempts to retrieve his daughter from the care of the temples and, more recently, to pursue his training as a summoner.

“Yeah,” said Auron, “but I’ll be on duty. I didn’t think you’d want to go.”

“I thought,” said Braska, “seeing as I start my pilgrimage in the spring, it might be fitting. There are pre-Yevonite elements in the rituals, you know – my parents used to say –” He broke off and gestured distractedly. “Maybe I’ll see you there?”

Auron hummed in agreement. “I’m supposed to be guarding during the parade. We might pass each other. You’ll still go, then – even if you have to be alone?”

“Yes, I think so,” said Braska. “I ought to, I think. I’m sure it’ll be all right.”

The thought that it might not be all right occurred to Auron several times over the following days, and on the night of the ceremony, he found himself on Braska’s doorstep, clutching his helmet in his hand.

“I got my shift swapped,” he explained in answer to Braska’s puzzled expression. “Just came off – I didn’t have

time to change.”

“Oh, you can wear something of mine,” said Braska. He beckoned Auron in, retreated a few paces down the hallway, and then said, “Thank you.”

“It’s all right,” said Auron.

Braska nodded. “I was going to go alone, you know,” he said, leading the way towards his bedroom. “I really thought I could – but I am relieved to see you all the same, Auron.” He headed towards his wardrobe. “Let’s see ... I’m sure most of my clothes are too small for you.” He eventually located a tunic and matching pair of light trousers, both embroidered with intricate patterns in red thread. “These might do.”

The clothes were designed to be loose-fitting, but they wouldn’t be inappropriately tight on Auron’s frame. Left in the bedroom alone to change, he carefully removed his uniform and laid it in a corner. It had a slight smell of sweat, which he hoped wouldn’t linger in Braska’s house. He put on the trousers and tunic; they were indeed too short in the arms and legs, but it was nothing that couldn’t be passed off as one of the more esoteric fashions.

He looked himself over in the mirror and wondered. It was a good sign that Braska felt strong enough to attend an event like this. The theme of the occasion would certainly remind him of his wife, which Auron was sure would destabilise him. But he was up and about and in relatively good humour, which hadn’t always been the case over the last two years. By the

time Braska started his pilgrimage, it would need to be.

He left the bedroom and went to find Braska. "That's lovely," said the latter. "You look splendid."

Auron felt himself smile. "I left my uniform in the bedroom," he said. "I'll pick it up later?"

"Of course," said Braska.

He had changed too, swapping his simple turban for a more opulent one festooned with a collection of small gems, which caught the light and sparkled with a bright blue colour, not too dissimilar to Braska's eyes. His one long earring was visible, not tucked in for once, brushing against the shoulder of his robe, which was decorated with the same red patterns as the clothes he had lent to Auron.

"We match," Auron couldn't help saying.

Braska smiled. "I suppose we do. Do you mind?"

"Of course not," said Auron.

They walked out towards the main marketplace; Auron watched Braska carefully, trying to assess his fitness, as he had often found himself doing recently. They still had a few months before the pilgrimage would start, but Auron had begun to insist that if Braska was taking the matter seriously, he needed to ensure he was in good shape. His months of grieving had been detrimental to his stamina. Braska always swore his summoner's training sessions didn't tire him out too much, but Auron suspected he wouldn't be honest about it if they did.

"Maybe we shouldn't try to get the best view," said Braska.

The maesters would be in pride of place after all, and the senior warrior monks – some were people who had been family friends of Braska’s in his youth, and whom he had avoided for a long time. Auron was the one who was now on friendly terms with some of them, although they might disapprove if they were to see him in Braska’s company. But their friendship was widely known by this point, as much as it was seen as a black mark against Auron’s character. As far as any of those men knew, though, it was the only one, and so his generally impeccable standing in the warrior monk corps was under no threat.

“Wherever you’re comfortable,” said Auron.

They found a place on the early part of the parade route, which was busy enough despite its distance from the centre of the action. Most of the people around were ordinary citizens, who wouldn’t have recognised either of the men now in their midst, while those closer to the heart of Yevon would undoubtedly have noticed the heretic Al Bhed lover and the rising star of the warrior monks, both somewhat famous in Bevelle for very different reasons.

“Can you see?” said Auron, scanning the crowd.

“I’ll make do,” said Braska.

The parade began. First came the ceremonial division of the warrior monks – a group known and resented for the relative safety of its duties. They had recently had their weapons changed from swords to guns; Auron was no expert

on firearms himself, but he could tell that a number of those marching didn't know how to hold them properly. It was immaterial: the guns would never be fired, just as the swords that preceded them had never been used either.

A group of dancers followed. Many of them held long poles, twisting around them as if they were summoning aeons or sending the dead. It seemed almost sacrilegious – although, Auron supposed, it was a festival of the dead, so perhaps invoking the summoner's dance was appropriate for once.

Braska leant towards him, and whispered, "This seems in poor taste."

Auron turned to look at him.

"I just mean –" Braska started.

"No," said Auron, "I was thinking the same thing." He turned back towards the parade. "I'm sure there's a reason behind it."

There was a break in the parade then, but a few warrior monks continued to patrol the edges of the road, making sure none of the spectators strayed out of their designated area. Auron spotted the comrade he had swapped his shift with, and raised his eyebrows to acknowledge him. He glanced at Braska again. "How are you finding it?"

"Busy," said Braska.

"Yes," said Auron. "I mean, standing out here for so long – you wouldn't be used to –"

“I’m all right,” said Braska firmly. “I shall have to be for the pilgrimage, shan’t I? You shouldn’t worry, Auron.”

“If you need to sit down,” said Auron, “we can find a café, or –”

“There’s no need for that,” Braska insisted.

Auron supposed he should obey. Braska was to be the summoner; he would be the guardian; and the teachings were very clear about the nature of that relationship. Guardians were required to do what their summoners asked at all times, and to address them respectfully, and even though the two of them were friends, Auron would certainly do as the teachings told him. In some ways, there was nothing he wanted more; in others, it would be a struggle, given that Braska was so cavalier about his health these days. There had already been arguments, and Auron knew there would be more. He couldn’t be blamed for caring about Braska, particularly when Braska hardly seemed to care about himself anymore.

He forced his thoughts to their present situation again as the next phase of the parade began – and Auron suddenly realised why Braska had been so keen to see it. This part traditionally focused on the aeons of Bevelle. Each year, the principal summoner of each temple was asked to call forth their aeon and walk it across the city. There had been questions about the appropriateness of the exercise in years gone by, he knew: the teachings said that the aeons were only to be summoned in situations of grave danger. But there were many things in the

teachings that had come to be seen as less necessary to obey in more recent years.

The aeons of Bevelle marched past in all their different forms. Titan, an enormous humanoid, shaking the ground with every step it took; Cait Sith, a tiny feline spirit darting about so fast that it was hard to see; Garuda, a great flying beast. And behind them, a huge black dragon: “Bahamut,” Braska whispered.

It would be his first aeon. They had checked the relevant lore and decided that the aeon of Bevelle’s most significant temple was the one that it would suit Braska best to take – a strange irony when he was so reviled by the principal figures of Yevon. It would still be a few months before he made the attempt, and then there would be some more time to get his affairs in order before the pilgrimage started. But it would be Bahamut’s fayth who determined whether Braska was worthy of becoming a summoner and embarking on that journey.

Braska had closed his eyes; his breathing was audible. Auron moved closer to him, and then, as he had half suspected, Braska buckled a little, before opening his eyes and self-consciously drawing himself up again.

“I think,” he murmured, “maybe I do need to sit down for a while.”

“Yes, we’ll find –” Auron began, but he was cut off by a loud scream from a nearby street. “Help! Fiends!”

The crowd immediately erupted into chaos. Auron found

himself grabbing Braska by the wrist to ensure the two of them weren't separated; most people were running away from the source of the commotion, while those who were keener to prove themselves in battle, or merely curious about what was going on, had decided to go the other way. It was difficult not to be washed in one direction or the other.

"People are hurt!" someone else shouted, somehow audible above the general sounds of panic. "We need white magic!"

"I should help them," said Braska.

"And I should help with the fighting," said Auron. "Are you sure you're –"

"I can't leave injured people to suffer, Auron," said Braska. "But what about you – you didn't bring your sword –"

"It'll be better than nothing," said Auron. He rolled up the sleeves of his tunic. "You should go home – I'll come by later."

"No," said Braska, "I'm going to help them, Auron. It's important."

There wasn't time to argue. "Just take care," Auron implored, before hurrying towards the street where the fiends seemed to have been spotted.

He gasped when he came upon the sight: there were a lot of them. These fiends couldn't have made it past Bevelle's defences by themselves: they had been introduced deliberately, on a night when everyone was occupied by the festivities. But there was little time to think about why this had happened –

he needed to help the warrior monks and brave civilians who were already trying to push the fiends back.

Hand-to-hand combat wasn't Auron's speciality, but he had no choice other than to launch himself into the battle. He found himself working with a black mage who was able to target some of the fiends from a different angle; Braska's pilgrimage would be like this, Auron supposed. But Braska had white magic too, and there seemed to be nobody with healing talents in this situation. Any such people watching the parade had ended up seeing to the general public instead, like Braska had. Nor was any of the combatants carrying potions: nobody had thought they would be needed at such a solemn event as the Festival of Departed Souls.

Those fighters who became too injured to go on merely had to drop back and let others take their place. Auron pushed forward, ignoring his developing battle wounds as he fought more and more ferociously to make up for the dwindling number of comrades fighting beside him. They had taken out most of the fiends and pushed the rest back to the city boundary; the battle would be won, but it was tough for Auron and the other fighters, especially without the usual white mage units at the sidelines. The clothes Braska had lent him were torn and stained with his blood, darkening as he fought his way through the fiends.

One of the few warrior monks who had been carrying a sword at the ceremony was forced to drop out after a

nasty head injury, and Auron found himself taking the man's weapon, which allowed him to do some more damage and keep his bleeding knuckles away from the centre of the action. But it wasn't long before he himself was finding it hard to go on. His head was swimming; it was difficult to stay on his feet.

"Fall back," said a voice in his ear. "You're not looking good. They've set up a healing station in one of the shops – back towards the city centre. Get out, before you collapse."

He croaked out a thanks and did as he was told, leaving the sword behind for someone else. The fiends were almost all dealt with anyway; there had only been a few left to cut down. Whoever had issued him the order to fall back had been right to do so.

The streets were deserted now; he staggered across the city in search of the shop where he would be able to find some help, trying to listen out for some sound that might tell him where it was. Now that he was no longer fighting, he felt in still worse shape. Everything hurt: one knee was difficult to bend, which made walking lopsided and difficult. An arm felt strange, with the fingers seeming to respond unusually slowly when he tried to move them; his head was throbbing with pain, so strong that he couldn't stop himself letting out a few muffled whimpers as he advanced, slower and slower.

He turned a corner and found what must have been the shop at last: its lights were all on and he could make out what

seemed to be the outlines of people moving around inside, although trying to focus enough to recognise any detail only made his head hurt more. It was just on the other side of the street, but the journey seemed unfathomable. He was finding it more difficult to move with every step, and he soon ended up having to take a deep, rattling breath before each movement. The ground was spinning; he reached for the door handle, but he was still too far away, and the last thing he heard before he slumped to the ground was a familiar voice shouting his name.

Then there was an arm around him, and a subtle, reassuring smell; he felt himself being supported as he stood, moving forward into the building, and was ushered to a seat, eagerly letting himself sink into the upholstery. He must have blacked out briefly, because the next thing he knew was that the pain had decreased significantly, and the welcome sight of Braska's face was in front of him as he opened his eyes.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Braska looked pale. "There's no need to thank me," he said, in a strained, quiet voice. "You were badly hurt. You'd broken bones, I think, by all the fayth. Why were you alone? Walking around Bevelle in that state?"

"There were a few fiends left to see off," Auron explained, leaning forward to itch at his arm, which felt much better.

"And you'd outstayed your welcome, I suppose," said Braska. "Staying on to fight when you should have been having getting all this seen to – I don't even need to ask." He

grimaced. "Do you think you can walk?"

"I'm sure," said Auron.

"Good," said Braska. "We're going home. They don't need me here anymore – the worst is over. All these people who just wanted a Cure to calm their nerves, and then you turn up and collapse in the middle of the street – in Yevon's name, Auron. It's a good thing I happened to look out of this window." He set down an empty potion bottle he had been holding; his hand was trembling a little. "You look terrible. We need to get you out of those clothes – they're ruined."

"Yeah," said Auron. "Sorry about that."

"It's not the clothes I'm worried about," said Braska sternly. "Come on."

They walked back to his house. Auron found he was still limping slightly, but he doubted it would last long. As usual, the thorough application of white magic and potions had ensured he was fine even after sustaining several serious injuries. The only difference from a usual combat situation had been the fact that they hadn't been available in the immediate vicinity of the battle.

"There were a lot of fiends," he said.

"Evidently," Braska muttered.

"Someone introduced them deliberately, I think," Auron went on. "It was sabotage."

"Yes," said Braska. "They found the culprit – an Al Bhed. A rogue operator, of course, but they'll just use it as another

excuse to persecute them. I do wish they'd think."

They arrived at the house; Braska wordlessly went to fetch a loose robe for Auron to put on. Auron headed to the bathroom, showered until all the dried blood had washed off, and returned to find Braska in his reception room.

"I hope there's no lasting damage," said Braska. His face looked tight.

"Only to your clothes," said Auron.

Braska made a dismissive gesture. "I told you, I don't care about the clothes."

Taking a seat cautiously, Auron said, "You know this is going to happen on the pilgrimage. The fiends further north are more dangerous than the ones we get around here. We'll both get hurt – I'll try to make sure I take the worst of it, but –"

"You don't need to do that," said Braska, not looking at him.

"I do," Auron instead. "I'll be your guardian – it's my duty. I'm more used to this than you are, and you're fragile." Braska shook his head; he ignored it. "It won't be the last time that kind of thing happens. You must realise that."

"But you won't be left to hobble around on your own," said Braska, "hoping a white mage gets to you before things get too bad to treat."

"I might if you're incapacitated too," Auron pointed out. "I'm just saying, you shouldn't let it upset you."

Braska smacked a palm against the arm of his chair. "I'm afraid I can't choose what *upsets* me, Auron. If I could – well –

things would have gone differently over the last few years, wouldn't they?"

"Do you want me to go?" Auron suggested.

"No," said Braska quickly. He made eye contact then, and Auron could tell he was about to cry – he felt his heart sink. He was no stranger to this, although being the cause of it himself was unusual. But he had been right, he thought; both of them would no doubt experience serious injury during the pilgrimage. That was merely the risk of travelling across Spira on foot, and the teachings demanded it as part of the preparation for receiving the Final Aeon.

"Don't go," Braska added. "I –" He sniffed. "It's just that – I care about you, Auron."

"Thank you," said Auron.

"No, you don't understand," said Braska, wiping at his eyes. "I care about you – a lot. A lot more than I even thought I cared – I mean, I didn't know until I saw you in that state, just how special you are to me – the thought of you getting hurt is –"

"I care about you too, Braska," said Auron. "Very much."

"You shouldn't," said Braska, his voice wobbling.

"Don't," said Auron. "I do. I can't help it."

"But this is different," said Braska. "This feeling – I never quite realised, but it's been a long time since I felt anything like it –" He cleared his throat. "Forgive me. You don't need to hear this. It would embarrass us both."

“No, I –” Auron ran a hand over his hair, still loose after his shower. “However you feel about me – I can assure you I feel at least as strongly.”

“You have romantic feelings for me, then,” said Braska. “You would admit to that. Because if you truly see me in the same way – I told you this would be embarrassing –”

“No,” said Auron again. “I mean, yes – romantic feelings, yes.” His chest felt full of something unidentifiable, like a rich, sweet drink, or a swarm of insects.

“About me,” said Braska.

“For a long time,” said Auron.

Braska spoke again, much more softly. “How long?”

“Years,” Auron replied. “Really.”

“Before she was –”

“Before that,” said Auron.

“Oh, you poor thing,” said Braska. “You poor, stoic thing. And I’ve only just –” Tears were gathering in his eyes again; he pressed a hand to his chest. “And,” he said, “the pilgrimage?”

“You know I don’t want you to do it,” said Auron. “No matter what the teachings –” He looked up at the ceiling. “May the fayth forgive me, but – the thought of it being you ...”

“And I never knew,” said Braska. “Oh, Auron.” He stood, shaking a little, and approached Auron; for a moment, Auron thought he was going to kiss him, but he sat beside him instead, pressing his body against Auron’s, and leant his head onto Auron’s shoulder, which was somehow even better.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” he murmured.

“It didn’t seem proper,” Auron admitted. “Not before, and then you were grieving, and then the pilgrimage ...”

“We’re going to have to talk about it, aren’t we?” said Braska. “The pilgrimage. What this means. Whether we should –”

“Yeah,” said Auron.

“Tomorrow,” said Braska, “not now.” He reached for Auron’s hand. “I’m too tired; aren’t you?”

“Exhausted,” Auron confirmed.

“Will you stay beside me tonight?” Braska asked. “Not to – I don’t mean we should ... engage in anything. But just to have you there. It would be nice. Wouldn’t it?”

“It would,” said Auron.

He followed Braska to his bed, trying to come to terms with how the conversation had gone; it was so surprising that it had seemed to have had a physical effect, making him feel almost as if he had been injured again, but in a way that caused only the most wonderful consequences. They would need to have a difficult conversation in the morning, he knew. There were other factors to consider: the teachings, for one. But first, he would spend a night by Braska’s side, and they would both be permitted some happiness.