

# Kaleidoscope

By: Shivani/Grazhir

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**Pairings:** Seymour/Tidus

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**Spoilers:** FF X, FF X-2

**Warnings:** AU, slash

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**Summary:** A redux version of Final Fantasy X, but with added slash. Tidus is certainly more than a dream, and comes to find out there's a certain price to be paid for that. Enter Seymour, Guado Maester of Yevon.

**Notes:** I've always found it a bit much to swallow that a dream of the Fayth could become real enough to not only go on a pilgrimage, but become a Final Aeon, and then scamper off to the Farplane. So, I've decided that Jecht being touched by Sin made him really real, and in turn, the same for Tidus. In other words, Tidus isn't going to disappear at the end of this particular retelling of FF X.

Now, since the story is the exact same up to a certain point, I don't see the point in retelling that. If you've never played the game there is a [game script](#) over at GameFAQs by Shotgunnova, which I have used to some extent in writing this. However, it's not like I'm going to be annotating every time I use quotations from the script, since it all belongs to Square anyway, though I strongly admire anyone dedicated enough to actually type out the script as they play through.

I'm also going to be very blunt about including spoilers, so if you have started the game but not finished it, I suppose you might learn more than you would prefer. I'm not even going to pretend I can keep these people IC. Maybe I will, but that'll be chance, not dedicated effort.

Also, I've borrowed a very popular concept from Harry Potter fanfics and twisted it enough to suit my liking.

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## 1 : FIRST GLANCE

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### Luca

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Seymour waited patiently as the grand maester spoke a welcome and an introduction. They had, between them, planned many things since the death of his father.

“People of Spira, I thank you for your generous welcome. Rise, Maester Seymour. And all of you as well. I present to you . . . the son of Maester Jyscal Guado, who departed for the Farplane a fortnight past. As some of you already know, he has been officially ordained a maester of Yevon.”

Seymour rose and stepped forward, letting his gaze sweep over the assembled people, then said, “I am Seymour Guado. I am honored to receive the title of maester. In life, my father Jyscal worked to foster friendship between man and Guado. I vow to carry on his legacy, and to fulfill my duties as maester to the best of my abilities.”

Internally he was scoffing over the supposed need for any introduction to label him as Guado. Any fool with eyes to see could tell he was not fully human, though he admitted to himself that he had gained the best attributes of both races in his birth.

His father had married a human woman for power, as an entry into the circles of governance in Spira. A Yevonite woman of good name became his bride and she birthed him a son, for all the good that resulted of it. Jyscal had promptly ignored the both of them, content with his more empowered role of leadership in the world, and the lessening of animosity toward his people as a whole.

Not once had the man defended them, having left them to be ridiculed for simply existing within the insular Guado community. They didn't so much mind being on a more even footing with humans, but recoiled at the idea of breeding with them, or suffering their presence on a daily basis within their sanctuary.

In time those suffocating attitudes had lessened, but by then Seymour's mother had already sacrificed herself to give her son a way to fight back, and that sacrifice was evident in the torture of her coming whenever she was summoned. Seymour might have given up as a summoner, but he had other, more interesting plans in mind. A summoner's journey was over far too soon, after all.

He shook himself mentally, mildly annoyed that he had tranced out briefly, and swept his gaze over the crowd again as he straightened up from performing the traditional Yevon prayer. And then he spotted her, the daughter of High Summoner Braska, a summoner herself.

“Let us go,” murmured Mika.

“A moment,” he murmured back, then sensed as the grand maester followed the line of his gaze.

A moment later the elderly man nodded and said, “Very well, but do not dally overlong.” And with that Mika moved away, his contingent of guards and followers moving with him.

Seymour gestured slightly to his own, then stepped down the gangplank and onto the dock to begin a stately progression toward Summoner Yuna and her guardians. Her eyes widened as she must have realized his intent, or at least his goal, and performed the prayer herself as he drifted to a stop a few steps in front of her.

“Lord Seymour,” she said breathlessly.

“Lady Yuna,” he replied, having already planned in his head the flowery and flattering speech he intended to spout. He was brought up short by a scent that set his body aflame, and his mind was immediately taken back to an old journal he had once stumbled over and read.

He had scoffed at the time, considering it to be the insane ramblings of a half-Guado with a penchant for perversity, but now he was not so sure. Someone among the summoner’s party was going to become very important to him, and he suspected it was not Lady Yuna.

That journal had gone on endlessly about the man’s belief that the melding of human and Guado produced a creature that required a mate. Not just a wife or husband that could easily be ignored, but a mate that stood for life itself, or death if not obtained.

He gave himself another mental shake, ruthlessly pushing aside the desire coursing through his body, and said, “It is a delight to meet you and see you looking so well, Lady Yuna. These are your guardians, I trust?”

She nodded quickly and replied, “If it pleases you, I will introduce them, but I know you must be very busy.”

He gave her a half smile. “By all means, do. I am always happy to meet those so dedicated to the protection and welfare of Spira.”

Yuna complied, though he tuned out most of what she said while nodding in all the right places. But when she finished he frowned faintly; there was one present she had not yet accounted for, a man with sun-kissed hair and skin, and eyes like the bluest ocean.

She must have noticed for she added, “And this is Tidus, presently traveling with us in search of some of his friends. He washed up on the beach at Besaid after a Sin attack.”

Seymour eyed the young man for a moment, taking in his peculiar style of clothing, flicked his gaze to the one with gravity-defying orange hair briefly, then said, “A blitz player, I presume? Should we expect you to be playing today alongside your friend here?”

Tidus looked unaccountably nervous for a moment before he nodded. “Yeah. Wakka is nice enough to let me play for the Aurochs.”

Another perusal of the young man brought his attention to the jewelry he wore. “Such an interesting symbol,” Seymour said smoothly, his memory easily supplying him with where he had last seen it. The flush he received in response spoke of more than something like embarrassment, and it made him raise a brow.

Seymour turned back to the party at large and smiled again. “You are correct, Lady Yuna, my time is unfortunately short. Yevon’s blessings on you and your guardians,” he said and performed the prayer again, receiving it in return from all but Tidus, who continued to look uncomfortable and out of place.

He gestured to his guards again and moved along the dock, past the summoner’s party. As he swept by that same scent threatened to overwhelm him; his head turned sharply to the side, his gaze meeting with that of a startled Tidus, and then he was beyond them, headed toward the stadium.

The walk afforded him time to ponder his recent encounter with the bizarre. Life was supposed to be simple. He would woo the chosen summoner—she had been picked mainly because of her father’s accomplishments—and stand at her side throughout much of her pilgrimage, eventually becoming the one most dear and the one to personally help her defeat Sin. Well, and become Sin. After all, the spiral of death must go on. It was inevitable, was it not?

Besides, he had years of anger to unleash on a people who had treated him and his mother like dirt until Jyscal had managed to bring about a new understanding, and Seymour himself had demonstrated his power. And yet, he was presently tripping over a belief from a crumbling old relic of the past, something he had discarded like many a broken dream. Was it possible? He certainly had *never* expected for his body to betray him in such a complete and abrupt fashion, and he wasn’t even certain which of them was causing it.

Seymour flitted up the stadium steps and made for the balcony box set aside for dignitaries—in this case, the maesters, celebrating Maester Mika’s fiftieth year in service to Yevon. ‘If only they knew,’ he thought as he seated himself with a nod to Mika. It would be a short while before the tournament actually began, giving him unwanted time to wrestle with his thoughts.

Eventually that time arrived, and Mika rose to open the tournament. Seymour, however, was distracted by one of his people whispering in his ear. Once the grand maester retook his seat amidst the cheers of the onlookers Seymour leaned to the side and murmured, “Lady Yuna has been kidnapped by the Al Bhed.”

Mika glanced his way, his expression unreadable for the moment. “And? Should her guardians not be capable of protecting her, that is all the more reason she should come to accept you.

And if they fail, I have little doubt you can track her down and bring justice to her kidnappers. Gratitude is . . . powerful, is it not?"

"So be it." Seymour nodded and turned his gaze back on the blitz sphere. He was half asleep by the time the final match was about to begin, between the Luca Goers and the generally ill-fated Besaid Aurochs. That they had even made the finals was a miracle.

He sat up a bit straighter when he realized that the captain of the Aurochs had been replaced by Tidus. For some reason he seemed to be fascinated by the young man, though he would prefer to believe it had nothing to do with the possibility of a mate. He had plans, plans that could not be casually tossed away for a half-baked theory regarding the consequences of interracial breeding.

He resisted the urge to massage his forehead; a headache was developing from thinking too much and arguing with himself. Seymour ignored the announcers as he watched the players, absently admiring the strategy employed by the blond replacement. Tidus was keeping the ball well away from the other team, working diligently to get his team set up.

The first half passed quickly. An easy thing, perhaps, watching the young man speed through the water like he was born to it and play with a passion that rivaled those playing for the Goers. It wasn't until part way through the second half that anyone scored, and at that it was Tidus, using a blitz technique that nobody seemed to recognize.

Shortly after that a time-out was called and the blond disappeared to be replaced with the captain—Wakka, if the chanting of the crowd meant anything. Seymour lost interest at that point, his mind moving on to what would happen once the game was over. Mika was giving him a look out of the corner of his eye and Seymour gave him a faint nod to signify understanding and readiness.

The crowd went wild as the buzzer sounded and the announcers seemed quite stunned as well given that the Aurochs won their first tournament ever, and against the favorites for years running. As Tidus reappeared in the sphere to congratulate his teammates Seymour gestured, a gesture that was seen and acknowledged by many Guado. And then, the fiends came.

Chaos was probably a good term for what happened next, in Seymour's opinion anyway, but that was rather the point. The guards surrounded the maesters in order that they might be protected, but Seymour could still see that the Guado in the stands, who had at his behest instigated the current pandemonium, had all melted away from the scene of the crime, just as they were supposed to.

Seymour rose to his feet as he noticed that the players had exited the blitz sphere and were attacking the fiends in the stands. One such incident that caught his eye involved a garuda, Tidus, and a man Seymour well recognized as Sir Auron, one of High Summoner Braska's guardians. How peculiar.

He acted then, to bring an end to the violent confusion encompassing the stadium, and summoned Anima.

It wasn't until the next morning, as he traversed the docks that he might gain his ship, that he saw any of the group. His Guado, ever loyal, said nothing as he motioned them into hiding so he could eavesdrop on the obviously private conversation.

He was in time to hear Auron say, "Jecht asked me to."

"Is he alive?" Along with the sound of the young man's voice came that now familiar scent, curling around Seymour like incense.

"It depends on what you mean by 'alive'. He is no longer human. But then . . . I felt something of Jecht there in that shell, couldn't you? You must have felt him when you came in contact with Sin," Auron's voice continued.

"It can't be. . . ."

"It is. Sin is Jecht."

Seymour shook his head slightly and turned away as Tidus exploded in denial. As he continued on toward his ship he could at least be sure that Sir Auron was not the cause of his unrest. Still, it meant his increasing fascination with the young man had a reason behind it.

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## Mushroom Rock Road

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They disembarked with little trouble. Not far to the south was the gateway between this place and the Mi'ihen Highroad, where the Crusaders grouped briefly before heading onward toward the command center high up on one of the cliffs that overlooked the ocean, or to the beach itself.

Seymour found Mushroom Rock to be both depressing and strangely appealing, but he supposed that was of little importance in the long run. A rapid series of commands sent his people scurrying about their assigned duties, which left him and his personal guard to make the short but annoying journey to the command center.

In fact, it was mildly trying, despite being a master black mage with Guado at his side willing to do anything to keep him alive. Much as he wished to deny it, his health had been failing him in the short time since Luca, and he felt like his life was slipping away one slow drop of blood at a time. That being the case, he was relieved to finally reach his destination.

Crusaders all over Spira were gathering up what sinspawn they could lay hands on, bringing them in for the operation to come. And the Al Bhed were working tirelessly over their machina weapons. Seymour knew it wouldn't work; it was common knowledge among those in charge, but it gave the common people the hope they they could make that difference.

'And,' he thought with a chuckle, 'it will send more of them to their deaths.' A sharp stabbing pain brought him up short, making him glad he was alone in the tent. Death indeed—more like his own if he wasn't careful, and much, much sooner than he had planned for.

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He was returning from an inspection of the troops bivouacked down in the open area of the Old Road when he saw his prey clustered near the gateway to Mushroom Rock Road. He approached, his guardians flanking him, and said, "So we meet again, Lady Yuna." That he nearly staggered being in the presence of his alleged mate was not a weakness he showed.

"Y-yes?"

"You look troubled. Is there anything I can do?" he asked, his eyes straying briefly to Tidus before seeing where Yuna was looking. "I see."

A crusader interrupted. "Maester Seymour. You will be needed shortly at the command center."

Of course, but that did not quite suit his plans. "Hold. I have a request."

"Yes, Your Grace?"

"I need to have Summoner Yuna and her guardians let through to the command center."

"But, Maester Seymour, sir."

"Do not worry. I will take full responsibility," he assured the nervous young man.

"Very well. They may pass."

Seymour turned to Yuna and said, "It is done."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

He performed the prayer of Yevon and continued on as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. When he reached the turn-off to the cliff access he paused and surveyed the large gathering of troops preparing themselves to head to the beach below the command center.

"All hail Maester Seymour!" shouted a crusader.

Seymour paused again, until all attention was focused on him, then said in ringing tones, “Brave Crusaders of Spira, protectors of all Spira. Believe in the path you have chosen, let faith be your strength! I, Seymour Guado, maester of Yevon, will bear witness to your deeds today.”

“Sir!”

Seymour nodded and glanced around, arrested briefly by the party clustered together a short distance behind him, then approached. He raised one brow and said, “Ah, Sir Auron. It is an honor. I would be most interested in hearing what you’ve been doing these past ten years.”

“I’ve got nothing to say about it,” Auron responded curtly, then walked away.

“I . . . see. Sir Auron must be a great asset as a guardian,” Seymour said to Yuna.

“Your Grace!”

“Please, there’s no need for formalities,” he said smoothly. His plans might rapidly be falling apart, but he could afford to be gracious, and if what he thought was happening was, he needed the trust of these people.

“Excuse me . . . Maester Seymour?” said the one he remembered as Wakka. “Why is your Lordship . . . presently . . . present here . . . sir?”

Resisting the urge to sigh he responded, “Please, speak as you normally would.”

“Isn’t this operation against the teachings of Yevon? Aren’t you gonna stop them?”

“It’s true. . . . I should. However. . . . Both the Crusaders and the Al Bhed truly wish peace for Spira. This Operation Mi’ihen was born from that wish they share. Although it may be sacrilege to Yevon, their intentions are pure. And I, Seymour Guado—the person, not the maester of Yevon. . . . As a denizen of Spira, I wish them well in their endeavor.”

“But, using machina. . . . That’s bad, isn’t it?”

Seymour quite nearly smirked. “Pretend you didn’t see them.”

“Beg your pardon, but that’s not something a maester should say!”

At that he did smirk. “Then, pretend I didn’t say it.”

“You’re kidding!”

Seymour cast an intense glance at Tidus, then walked away with his guardians in tow. He rested briefly once on the upper level, then emerged from his tent looking perfectly composed.

The operation was soon to begin, but he had a few things he wished to do before that point, if it was possible.

That Tidus was nearby was making him feel less ill, though he supposed it could merely be wishful thinking on his part. He still did not want to believe that old man, but either way, even if those ramblings were falsehoods, there was no point in passing up such an opportunity, no matter which way his plans fell out.

He found them within the command center itself rather than in the outlying artillery base. With them was Maester Kinoc, looking entirely too interested in Sir Auron. At any rate, preparations were almost complete.

“Lord Kinoc. . . .”

Kinoc appeared to be mildly startled. “Oh, yes. Proceed.”

“That Kinoc, a maester?” Auron murmured.

“I heard that, Auron. A lot has happened in the last ten years. What were you doing, and where?”

“Fulfilling a promise I made to a friend. I still am.”

“Just tell me one thing: Have you seen Zanarkand?”

Auron made a show of clearing his throat, the only reply he would give.

Yuna, looking very uncertain, said, “I kinda . . . think we don’t belong here.”

Seymour took that as a signal to advance his own plans. “Lady Yuna, perhaps you and your guardians will walk with me until the preparations are complete?”

She glanced around for a second, then nodded, allowing him to lead the group away, and closer to the tents set up against the cliff wall. “I trust your journey along the Mi’ihen Highroad went well.”

“Yes, well. . . .”

“Aside from that chocobo eater,” Tidus said unexpectedly.

Seymour raised a brow, inwardly pleased that the young man would speak up. “You must all be somewhat weary. As it is, you will not be able to continue on to Djose until after the operation, so please, allow me to offer you refreshments.” He waved one elegant, long-fingered hand at one of the tents.

As the group filtered in he moved to subtly block Auron's passage.

"What?"

"What I have to say is not something the others should yet hear," Seymour replied, well aware from the intensity of the scent in his nostrils that Tidus was lurking just the other side of the doorway. "We both know you know more about this entire situation than we tend to let on, wouldn't you say?"

"Your point?"

"My point, Sir Auron, is that there is something of particular interest to me, and I need your trust to explore it. If that means revealing more than I would wish, so be it."

Auron gave him a sharp look, his entire body appearing to stiffen without actually doing so. He shifted abruptly after that, ending up closer to the entrance to the tent.

"Would it help," Seymour murmured, "if I told you I know the truth of Sin? The same truth I know you have more than an inkling of? The others do not. Not even the son of Jecht knows the whole truth."

Tidus appeared as if by magic, his expression uncharacteristically closed.

Auron's hand shot up in warning, to silence Tidus. "This, from a maester of Yevon?"

"This from a denizen of Spira," Seymour stated quietly, "one who bridges the spheres of human and Guado. This from one who recognizes within the greater good of Spira what is in his own best interests, and yours."

Auron snorted softly and turned his gaze on Tidus. "Get something to eat for now and rest."

"But—"

Auron just stared until Tidus ducked back inside, then nodded at Seymour.

"My personal tent should do," he said, then turned and led the way. Once inside he waved Auron to a seat—it was ignored—and took one himself. "We both know," he began, "that the summoner's pilgrimage always ends in sacrifice. Jecht and Braska were that sacrifice the last time, for barely a decade of peace. And, of course, a sacrifice for Lady Yuna, growing up without either parent."

"Get to the point."

Seymour exhaled in mild irritation. "You know the truth of the pilgrimage. You know should Lady Yuna complete it that she will die, along with one of you. In fact, it is very rare that any

guardians survive, for one reason or another. However, given who my father was, and who I have become, I have access to the truth of the journey, and its origins.

“I know you’re aware of what sacrifice is called for, and I know you’re aware of why Sin always returns. And”—he paused to inhale deeply—“we Guado are keen to the scent of the Farplane. You, Sir Auron, no more survived that journey than your companions. You are an Unsent.”

Auron grunted and shifted his weight.

“Like Maester Mika, actually,” Seymour tossed out casually.

Auron chose to take a seat, finally, though he did not relax. “Again, get to the point.”

“You could never be a politician,” he said with a deliberate sigh and shake of his head. “As you wish. A long time ago I came across a book,” he began, then gave the twice-over guardian a summary of what he had learned from it. “As it is, I fear those words are true, and if that is the case, all that I have been charged to do, the plans that revolve around me, are quickly being ripped to shreds.

“If I do not act out of self interest I will die, long before those plans ever come to fruition. Granted, you yourself have proven that an Unsent can accomplish much, but I find that I am, against all previous reason, beginning to believe there ought to be another way.”

“Then you’ve decided one of the group is your . . . mate?” Auron ventured.

Seymour nodded. “And no, it is not your Lady Yuna. Even were it, I never had any intention other than assisting her on her pilgrimage. I have wanted her to succeed since she began her journey, though my reasons behind that are changing.”

“Who?”

“Why, your young friend. The son of Jecht. Somehow I do not think I could spirit him away without retribution. Something tells me that he is too well liked for the others to simply ignore it, despite his youthful excitability and lack of understanding.”

“You still do not reveal what you know,” Auron stated flatly.

“True. Forgive me, but, you are no priest of Yevon to listen to my confession of past misdeeds. In the short time I have known your young charge, however shallow that knowledge may be, I have been forced to recognize that there might be something more to be gained from life than to sink even more deeply into vengeful plans long in the making.

“Something for something, Sir Auron. From you, cooperation. And if that young man is agreeable, perhaps enough information from me, traitorous as it may be toward Yevon, for a

way to defeat Sin without any more deaths, and no further summoners and guardians called to sacrifice.”

“And if he isn’t?”

“Well, that’s the question, is it not? If he isn’t, I suppose I shall simply have to convince the Lady Yuna to use me as her sacrifice, should I live so long, and I will have my vengeance.” It pained him deeply to be so blunt. Still, Auron must understand that Seymour could reveal his deception, and he could, should he be inclined, attempt to send the guardian against his will.

Auron grunted and stood up. “Then talk to him. But know this: Yuna and her guardians will not accept the truth about the treachery of *Yevon*”—the word was spoken as a curse—“without seeing it for themselves. I expect that you will refrain from speaking of these matters to them until the appropriate time.”

Seymour rose as well and nodded, producing a half smile. “Then we understand each other.”

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2 : CONFIRMATION

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## Mushroom Rock Road

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Outside Seymour glanced at his men and said, “Pelun, find out how much time is left and report back. I will return here shortly.” The Guado bowed and raced off, so Seymour walked with Auron back to the refreshment tent. They were but a few steps away when Tidus emerged, his face a mask of frustrated curiosity. Seymour felt like laughing at the sight of it; for once such openness was cause for amusement rather than irritation toward those unable to effectively mask their emotions.

After sparing a quick glance for him, Tidus looked to Auron for answers. That man merely adjusted his sunglasses.

Tidus jerked his head back to him when Seymour cleared his throat softly and said, “I wonder, Sir Tidus, if you would consent to speak with me for a short time.”

“Me? But—” Tidus looked back to Auron and received only a nod in response. “Um, okay. I mean, Lord Seymour.”

“Please,” he said, and half turned, “follow me.”

Tidus shot another look at Auron before stepping closer, and Seymour led the young man back to his own tent. Pelun was waiting for him.

“My lord, Maester Kinoc says ten to fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you, Pelun. If we are not out by then, please see to reminding me.”

“Yes, Lord Seymour,” said the Guado, then held the tent flap open for them.

Inside he said, “Feel free to sit if you wish.” The youth was again unknowingly alluring, and it took quite a bit of Seymour’s control to withstand the temptations his body was urging him toward exploiting.

Tidus looked around curiously as he dropped into one of the chairs, then looked back to him and flashed a nervous smile. “So, um. . . .”

Seymour took a seat. “It goes against my nature to be so indelicate, but I must ask you, Sir Tidus, if you have noticed anything . . . peculiar or odd when you are around me.”

The young man flushed crimson, rendered momentarily speechless. “Uh, you don’t need to use sir, Lord Seymour,” he said evasively. “I’m not really used to that anyway.”

He nodded and responded, “And you may dispense with my titles as well, at least for the moment,” then waited patiently for an answer to his blunt question.

Tidus fidgeted and cast his gaze around the room for a minute before saying, “Well, okay, yeah. I, uh. . . . I feel. . . . Ah, this sounds so stupid, even in my head.”

“I will not laugh, you have my promise.”

Tidus fiddled with his hair and rolled his eyes, looking every bit like a normal, largely untroubled teenager in that moment. “You, um, smell nice. When I’m around you I feel . . . drawn to you.” He averted his gaze and studied the fabric of the tent wall.

Seymour arched a brow. Perhaps that book wasn’t a waste of paper after all. Well, assuming it still existed, which he very well knew it didn’t given that he had destroyed it himself in a fit of pique. “So, you feel it, too,” he commented mildly.

Ocean blue eyes slid over to gaze at him.

“It is a little known fact that the union of human and Guado will produce a special kind of child. I admit, I did not believe it when I read an accounting of another like me, from over a century ago, but given the evidence. . . . Well, let us say I am strongly inclined to change my mind.”

Tidus coughed and said, “About?”

“That a half-breed such as myself has but a single mate, and that mate can be recognized thanks to things like scent. To me you are intoxicating, Tidus. To be near you is a certain kind of bliss. And that your countenance is fair to me only adds to the effect.” A little flattery never hurt, and he spoke no untruths in any case.

Tidus flushed again and glanced off to the side for a moment.

Seeing that the young man couldn’t manage much in the way of braving the perils of verbal coherency Seymour said, “I would like to get to know you better, though I admit that minutes before the start of Operation Mi’ihen is hardly an appropriate time.”

Tidus nodded. “I . . . don’t object, but—”

Seymour tilted his head to the side. “What is it?”

“I felt different after Luca, on the Mi’ihen Highroad. I felt . . . weak, and sort of drained. I didn’t like it. Is that. . . ?”

“Another thing we share.” He smiled when Tidus looked faintly relieved. “That accounting said something about confirmation, that until that happens both parties are at risk. However, I am unsure if you would be willing to indulge me.”

“What do you mean?”

Seymour produced a smile he knew was sirenic to most who witnessed it, somewhat pleased that Tidus had not chosen to question his mention of risk. “Why, much like in any fairy tale, Tidus, confirmation demands a kiss.”

Surprisingly, the young man did not blush anew, but instead stood up and nodded. “All right.”

Whatever the reason for Tidus’s newfound surety, Seymour was not about to let the opportunity pass. So he rose and closed the distance between them, and raised one hand to stroke the young man’s cheek. “Then let us find out,” he murmured before tilting and lowering his head.

His eyes slipped shut the moment their lips touched, a pleasant shock of sensation shooting down his spine and settling in like the background hum of well-tuned machina. When Tidus parted his lips in invitation, Seymour was quick to accept, deepening the kiss into a languorous exploration of the young man’s mouth, an extended moment of indulgence in the young man’s very taste.

And in that moment he found himself willing to betray every plan fashioned from hatred and Yevon alike, if only to drown in the implicit offer before him. It was like the promised bliss of the Farplane, that along with the soft moan wrested from his all too willing companion. The moment was shattered when someone outside the tent flap cleared their throat a touch loudly.

Seymour pulled away reluctantly, even more desirous of and determined to sway Tidus to his bed than previous encounters had impelled him. “Confirmation?” he said huskily.

Tidus nodded, his eyes not quite in focus. “Yes,” he breathed, then blinked a few times and looked sharply toward the door.

“They are discreet, do not fear. Their loyalty to me is legend. However, I believe that is my cue to become a maester of Yevon again for the nonce. Shall we?” He moved back a step, letting Tidus exit ahead of him, then joined him outside.

“It is time, Lord Seymour,” Pelun said.

Seymour nodded and straightened up to his full height. “So be it. Sir Tidus, if you would please inform your companions? I know that Maester Kinoc will not mind if you would like to observe. Just be sure that you are all prepared to defend yourselves if necessary.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Tidus ducked away a second later.

Seymour felt a great deal like growling and loping after the young man. Instead he glided off toward Kinoc and drifted to a stop near him.

Kinoc looked over, then signaled one of the guards. "Inform the Al Bhed that we will begin the operation at once. They must be ready the moment Sin appears."

As Kinoc then signaled a different guard, Seymour heard the approach of several people, and scented when Tidus came to stand slightly behind him and to the side. Lady Yuna stopped to the other.

"Will Sin come?" she asked quietly.

A nearby guard chose to respond, saying, "Sin always returns for its spawn. To make sure, we're going to encourage them to call out to it." He nodded at the cage not far away which all the captured spawn had been herded into.

"You won't have to. It'll come," said Auron gruffly.

The guards at the cage began to coerce the sinspawn by shocking them, causing them to unleash a barrage of torturous shrieks that echoed around the area. The men continued to prod them every few seconds, most seeming to take a certain sort of pleasure in it, when suddenly the spawn within began to merge and mutate, eventually breaking the cage wide open and spilling the transformed creature onto the ground.

Seymour remained still as Yuna and her guardians raced forward to confront it, feeling a great deal of disgust for the warrior monks and crusaders stationed as guards for the command center, all of whom fled in terror. And he remained outwardly impassive as they beat the sinspawn amalgamation into submission, his attention divided between watching Tidus in action and keeping an eye on the bay for any sign of Sin's arrival.

Which it did, in all its unholy glory.

He could hear the voice of Lucil, captain of the DJose Chocobo Knights, yell from below, "Let's go!" A second later a cannoneer yelled, "Fire!" From three sides cannons fired on Sin, knocking its spawn off into the water, many of which sped toward the shore to meet the knights and other troops stationed below.

"Look out!" Auron shouted, causing Seymour to step back quickly as a barrier sprang into existence around Sin and was then shot toward the beach. He knew many people and spawn alike died in those few blinding moments, and even the people at their level were knocked to the ground, a great number of them into unconsciousness.

When his vision cleared and he regained secure footing, Seymour noticed with a mild sense of dread that the amalgamation was moving; apparently submission was not its strong point. With an unheard sigh he readied his staff and prepared to fight it himself. He was not about to

die on some mostly barren rock, especially when those pledged to the defense of Spira had been so cowardly as to run away.

He was joined almost immediately by Auron, and shortly thereafter by Yuna. “Stand back, Lady Yuna, and provide support,” he ordered.

“Y-yes,” she said shakily.

They had just managed to kill it for real, pyreflies swarming upward in a dizzying display, when the largest Al Bhed cannon, positioned offshore, finally went into action and fired on Sin. The resulting beam deformed Sin’s shield, and Seymour could nearly *feel* the hope of those conscious surge as the cannon poured even more power into the attack.

However, to his complete lack of surprise, Sin responded with a blast of its own and destroyed the only weapon that had even made a dent in its defenses. It was, as expected, a foregone conclusion. For some reason Sin decided it had taken enough lives and began to retreat, though Seymour supposed it might have had something to do with both the defeated sinspawn and Tidus himself.

Speaking of which, Seymour could not see where the young man had gotten himself off to. That is to say, until he heard a familiar voice rise up from the beach, then saw, as he stepped fully to the edge of the ledge, Tidus racing headlong toward the sea.

Yuna chose that moment to be helpful. “Everyone, stand back! I’ll summon!” she cried, flinging her arms out like a plea.

Seymour felt a great deal like belting her one to knock some sense into her. Instead he said calmly, “You won’t hurt it. Your powers are still . . . too weak.”

“But I must do something!”

“You can’t!” he said harshly as Tidus splashed into the water, seemingly intent on a futile attempt to chase Sin. “Foolish boy,” he whispered.

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It was Auron who spoke first to Tidus after his return from the sea. They were not far away, and the young man seemed to be a bit dazed and confused. Several moments later Auron turned away to approach his little gathering instead.

“A swift retreat. Satisfied?” Auron asked of Kinoc.

“What do you mean?”

“Those who turned from Yevon died, while the faithful live on,” Auron said with a certain amount of cynicism.

“The past ten years have changed you, I see.”

Auron snorted and wheeled, walking away swiftly, and Seymour, not particularly wishing to listen to anything further Kinoc had to say, especially about Auron, chose that moment to stride across the sand to Yuna and her companions. She looked weary and depressed after having sent the multitude of dead left in Sin’s wake.

“You do not look so well,” he said to her candidly. “But now, more than ever, you must be the people’s strength, their confidence. Anyone else would be expected to show their sorrow. But you . . . are a summoner. You are Spira’s hope. Until Sin is defeated, you must not relent. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” she replied softly.

“Take strength from your guardians, and allow them to be your support. Until next we meet, Lady Yuna, farewell.” He performed Yevon’s prayer out of duty before heading farther on a short distance, then paused as though a thought had struck him. It was no coincidence that Tidus was the only outsider within hearing range.

“Pelun, remember to inform Tromell that he will need to make the necessary arrangements for when Summoner Yuna’s party arrives in Guadosalam. We would be shockingly remiss if we were to neglect to offer our hospitality.”

As he shot a sidelong look at Tidus he heard Pelun reply, “Of course, Lord Seymour.”

“Excellent. Let us not delay further, then. It is a fair distance to cover and there are many preparations to be made.” Just before he slid his eyes back ahead he saw Tidus smile shyly.

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## Guadosalam

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“It is so good to have you home again, Lord Seymour,” Tromell said as he stepped into Seymour’s private rooms.

“Yes,” he said absently. Then he looked at his elderly advisor and said, “Tromell, you know you are the only person I truly trust, but I would hear your pledge again.”

Tromell immediately went into a 45° bow. “Lord Seymour, I hereby pledge my loyalty and life to you, the leader of the Guado, and vow to do all within my power to support you, even unto my last breath.”

Seymour nodded. “Have a seat, Tromell. The unmistakable sincerity in your voice makes me feel a certain amount of relief. You know what kind of a man my father was, but you served

him loyally, and I can respect that. You were also the only Guado to ever express his beliefs, against popular opinion, even if you did it quietly. You were the only one to ever show me or my mother kindness. However. . . . Do you remember, that book I found so long ago? The one I destroyed?”

“My lord? Yes.”

Seymour chuckled softly. “So many plans, my old friend. It’s like some summoner has been diligently sending them. Assuming I am not insane, and assuming that things fall out in line with my present course of action, you will be able to cast aside the plans you have heretofore been striving toward on my behalf.”

Tromell let out a soft gasp and repeated, “My lord?”

“That book, Tromell. It seems it wasn’t just scribbles on paper after all.”

The elderly Guado continued to look surprised, but beneath that was a cast of relief. “You have found the one?”

“I believe so, and no, it is not Lady Yuna. Besides, I find myself none too keen at present to die in the fashion I had planned.”

“What of Yevon? Of Mika?”

Seymour snorted. “That old man is so steeped in lies and deception that I rather doubt he would see what we’re up to under his nose, even if it is treachery and traitorous actions toward the acknowledged power of Spira.” On seeing the slight frown on his advisor’s face he decided to speak more plainly.

“Assuming that I can sway the one to my side, I plan to reveal the truth behind Yevon to Lady Yuna and her guardians. If not, I may anyway. Still, should the one deny me, I expect we’ll both die. I could still return, assuming you were to protect me in my time of weakness, and continue on with the original plans, as it were.”

“Do you have confirmation?”

“Yes. And such a sweet one at that.” Seymour smiled lazily. “Which reminds me. I trust Pelun had a chance to speak with you before you came to see me?”

“Yes, Lord Seymour. I have given the staff their orders.”

“Splendid. It is possible that I may be leaving again soon, this time with the summoner party. Even if I do not follow through on asking Lady Yuna to marry me, journeying with her will give the people a definite sense of hope regardless, and rumors will spread, will ye, nill ye. Mika can make what he wants of it.

“By the way, one of Lady Yuna’s guardians, Sir Auron. . . . He is an Unsent. I know you would pick up on that yourself, but this way you simply know a little sooner.”

“He is surely not the one.”

He laughed and shook his head. “No. A young man, though, yes. Surprisingly, the son of Sir Jecht. And he appeared to be, at the time, quite amenable to my advances. I plan to get him alone again once Lady Yuna arrives.”

“You must have braved the dragon, Sir Auron, in order to get that far,” observed Tromell.

“Yes, I did. Such a difficult man to talk to. He has no appreciation for subtlety, I vow. Now, what news have you for me?”

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“My lord, forgive this intrusion, but word has reached us that Lady Yuna’s party approaches.”

Seymour nodded at the page and looked to his adviser. “Tromell, please go meet them and offer our hospitality. Inform me of their arrival once you have shown them to the buffet.”

“As you wish, Lord Seymour.”

Tromell bowed and left, so Seymour addressed the page. “Go double-check that the food and drink has been set out, and then that all the rooms are in readiness. You know with whom to speak should something be amiss.”

The page bowed and scurried off quickly, leaving Seymour to his feelings of increasing anticipation. Thankfully, since he had kissed Tidus he no longer felt like his life was slipping away. That pleasant remembrance kept him unaware of the passage of time until Tromell clearing his throat brought him back to awareness.

“They await you.”

“Thank you, Tromell. I will be right down.” Seymour spent a minute or so checking his appearance before rising and making his way to the reception room via his private staircase.

He arrived in time to overhear his adviser saying, “Truly, a loss for us all. But now a new leader, Lord Seymour, has come before us. Lord Seymour is the child of a Guado and a human. He will be the tie that binds our two races together. But that is not all, I think. Lord Seymour. . . . He will surely become the shining star that lights the way for all the peoples of Spira.”

Seymour stepped into the doorway fully and said, “That is enough, Tromell. Must I always endure such praise?” He gazed at his guests and said, “Welcome! Please, make yourselves at

home. After you have partaken of this delightful array and satisfied the hunger you are surely feeling, there is something I would like to show you all.”

Auron looked on the verge of an impatient objection, but seemed to settle for slouching against the wall next to the room’s main door. The others, however, were all too happy to load up waiting plates with a variety of foods and take seats at the table.

Tidus somehow managed to make it seem like a coincidence that he sat down next to Seymour himself, though he wasted no time in applying himself to his selection.

“I would imagine that you have been traveling since DJose Temple, Lady Yuna. Please, allow me to host you and your companions for the night. It would be most unwise to brave the Thunder Plains without a good night’s rest.”

She looked over and smiled. “That’s very kind of you, Lord Seymour. Are you sure it’s no trouble? We can stay at the inn.”

He shook his head slowly. “I assure you.” Seymour paused for a moment, noticing that the number of guardians had mysteriously increased by one. He waited until everyone was comfortably eating and chatting amongst themselves, then leaned over to murmur to Tidus, “I see your number has increased. May I know the lady’s name?”

The blond jerked slightly and reached for a napkin to wipe his mouth before whispering, “Her name is Rikku, and please? Please don’t make mention that she’s Al Bhed, Lord Seymour? Wakka has a problem with them and he hasn’t realized yet that she is one.”

“Oh?” He shot a look at Tromell, then turned back to Tidus. “I will refrain from bringing that up, then. Though, if that is the case, I would imagine that he is also unaware of the nature of Lady Yuna’s mother.”

Tidus flashed him a grateful smile and nodded. “Rikku’s a good girl, and she really helped me out when I first, uh, arrived. I was found in a ruined temple by her and the crew of the salvage ship she was on.”

Now that sounded interesting. “A ruined temple?”

“Yeah, I have no idea how I got there, not really, just that it had to do with . . . Sin. A lot of it was underwater. Almost like an island in the middle of nowhere. It’s funny, though. I kinda feel like I was on one of the upper levels or something, because I couldn’t see anything that resembled an entrance to a Cloister of Trials. Looking back on it, I mean.”

Seymour began to wonder at that point just where his mother’s Fayth was located. Yunalesca had complied, she had transformed his mother, but after Seymour had the services of the resulting Aeon, the Unsent had banished the Fayth’s statue to parts unknown. He had been

left to stumble out of Zanarkand on his own, across Mt Gagazet, and back along the dangerous way to Guadosalam with no help except for that of his Aeons.

It made him wonder just where the statues of other Fayth rested, empty of the souls used for the Final Aeon. Zaon's had not crumbled even after a thousand years, so it stood to reason that the others must exist . . . somewhere.

"Perhaps there will come a time when you can revisit that place," he said quietly.

Tidus shrugged and had another forkful of food.

"It looks like your friends are nearly finished eating. Soon I can show you all something wondrous. I think . . . you will appreciate it more than the others, except, perhaps, Sir Auron."

The blond turned a wide-eyed gaze on him.

"Trust me," Seymour said lazily, then reached out to take a ripe fruit in his grasp. He bit into it, purposely ignoring the line of juice that escaped and trickled down his chin until he had swallowed that first bite. One long finger wiped the liquid away, to in turn be cleaned by his tongue.

Tidus licked his lips and turned away quickly, suddenly very interested in the remainder of his meal. Seymour stifled a chuckle and finished his fruit, then rinsed his hands in one of the finger bowls set out and dried them on a cloth.

After rising to his feet he moved a short distance away from the table and said, "If you would all please step this way?" Once they had gathered nearby he reached up to set a sphere to swaying back and forth in a lulling rhythm. And before anyone could question the action the light seemed to be sucked from the room as stars burst into being within the resulting darkness.

He concentrated for a moment, then smiled as the space around them shifted abruptly to reveal a city flush with light despite it being night, with people, phantoms, walking past on the street they found themselves standing on.

"What you are seeing is a reconstruction created from the thoughts of the dead who wander the Farplane," he said into the stunned silence.

"Zanarkand!" Tidus said, wonder and longing clear in his voice.

"Correct. The great and wondrous machina city, Zanarkand, as it looked one thousand years ago. She once lived here."

Yuna forsook the sight to look at Seymour with a puzzled expression. "She who?"

Seymour concentrated a second time, the scene shifting in response; the city melted away in favor of a single room. There, on a bed, was a beautiful lady who even in repose radiated a sense of power and nobility.

Yuna gasped. “Lady Yunalesca!”

“Yes. She was the first person to defeat Sin and save the world from its ravages. And you have inherited her name.”

“It was my father who named me,” Yuna responded.

To Seymour’s eyes, she did not look especially pleased with the comparison. “Lord Braska was entrusting you with a great task. He wanted you to face Sin, as Lady Yunalesca did. However, Lady Yunalesca did not save the world alone. To defeat the undefeatable Sin . . . it took an unbreakable bond between her and. . . .”

A second figure appeared through a misty doorway as he trailed off, and approached the ancient summoner. The scene ended abruptly as the translucent figures embraced.

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### 3: SPHERE

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## Guadosalam

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His guests looked slightly tired after the memory was over, and Tidus looked almost bereft. “I invite you all to explore our town,” Seymour said. “It is not overlarge, but there is a shop, and also, of course, the Farplane should you wish to visit it. Whenever you are ready to retire for the evening, simply ask any servant here and they will be happy to show you to your rooms.”

Tidus made for a chair and sat back down as Yuna moved closer to the door. The other guardians clustered around her and Auron, while Rikku drifted over to Tidus instead.

“You’re staying here?” she asked.

“Yeah. There’s nothing I really need to buy or want.”

“Not going to the Farplane, then?”

Tidus shook his head. “What about you?”

Rikku shrugged. “I’ll hit the shop to see if there’s anything I could use, but not the Farplane.”

Tidus gave her a curious look. “How come?”

They were interrupted when Wakka called over, “You two coming along, ya?”

“Just a second!” Rikku called back, then looked at Tidus. “You don’t really see the dead there, more like your memories of them. People think of their relatives, and the pyreflies react to them. They take on the form of the dead person—an illusion, nothing else. Memories are nice, but that’s all they are.”

Seymour watched as she turned toward the door; she missed how Tidus’s jaw tightened in reaction to her words, but she did nod when he said, “I’ll be fine here.”

Once they were gone Seymour turned to his adviser and said quietly, “Given that there is an Al Bhed in the party. . . . Tromell, send some people to Bevelle, quietly but with all haste. I want to know if there’s anything going on that we should be concerned about that Mika might not have bothered to inform me of. He is aware that the Al Bhed tried to kidnap Lady Yuna in Luca, and I would not be surprised if he has also heard about the attempt during the Moonflow crossing.

“Assuming I am welcome in the summoner’s party, I will leave the usual sort of sign in Macalania Forest to let the riders know where to find me so they may report without delay.

You, Tromell, will remain here in Guadosalam to keep things running smoothly in my absence.”

“Immediately, Lord Seymour.” Tromell bowed and headed out.

“So, you know about that, huh?” Tidus said softly.

Seymour turned to his mate in mild surprise; he had not been aware the young man’s hearing was that keen. “Yes. Perhaps you will have a drink with me in my chambers? I would rather not discuss that here. Or, for that matter, anything to do with our earlier discussion.”

Tidus flushed slightly and got to his feet. “All right, Your Grace.”

They were settled in his private sitting room with a drink each before he said, “So, what did you think of that sphere? And please, again, dispense with the formalities here.”

Tidus let out a sigh. “It made me feel homesick.” And with that a sort of floodgate opened and the blond started talking, revealing information about his life, in Zanarkand, and his present confusion. “I almost felt angry,” he said once he wound down, “when Rikku said that about memories. I know she can’t understand, but. . . .”

“You can take comfort that she did not intend to cause you pain.”

Tidus nodded and had another sip of his drink. “What is this stuff, anyway?”

Seymour chuckled. “It is a blend of fruit juices particular to Guadosalam. Some of them grow only here. There is a fermented variety, but it is considered very bad form for anyone on a pilgrimage to indulge.”

Tidus snorted and changed the subject. “So, about the Al Bhed? What do you think might happen?”

He got the distinct impression that Tidus really appreciated being treated as an adult despite his almost childlike ignorance of the world around him. Then again, if the blond truly was from a Zanarkand of a millennium ago, that only made sense, and said nothing about his intelligence.

“Maester Mika is aware of what they’re doing. He may have decided since Luca that Yevon needs to teach the Al Bhed a lesson. And, while the Al Bhed might believe that their new home is known only to them, Bevelle is not that ignorant. If I were to ask directly Mika would become suspicious of my motives, so I have sent spies instead.”

“You know, for a maester of Yevon, you sure are . . . I dunno, not exactly devout.”

Seymour laughed softly. “Existence of an ethos does not justify it nor guarantee its correctness. Yevon has its reasons for what it does, as do the Al Bhed. Sometimes truth is in the eye of the beholder. In any case, given that your friend is Al Bhed, that could cause problems at Macalania Temple should the guards there notice.

“It is generally unheard of for an Al Bhed to be a guardian. There were some who objected to Lord Braska’s pilgrimage simply because he married an Al Bhed woman, and some even now who do not look with kindness on Lady Yuna, either.”

“That makes it sound like it’s some kind of disease. It’s stupid.”

“I agree, Tidus. At any rate, given that Tromell will have sent the best I have on the quickest of chocobos, I hold hope that I will have a report back at least by the time Lady Yuna has obtained the Aeon at Macalania. If not, it would probably be wise for the party to journey slowly to Bevelle itself so that news could arrive prior to entry.”

“You, um, plan to come along?”

Seymour refilled his glass before answering. “Yes, assuming that Lady Yuna has no objections. Sir Auron most likely will not, and I expect she will defer to his wisdom.”

Tidus looked reflective for a minute, very likely remembering Mushroom Rock. “You’re . . . easy to talk to.”

“I am happy you feel that way, especially given what we may come to mean to each other. I trust you have had no further difficulties since we last met? No sense of being drained?”

The blond shook his head. “Just restless, like I’m missing something important.”

“I dare hope that would be me,” Seymour said, and smiled when Tidus pinked. “I have certainly missed you,” he added silkily. “May I ask for your indulgence again?”

Tidus set down his glass and nodded. “Yeah.”

Seymour rose and stepped closer, then extended one hand. Tidus took it and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet, and Seymour idly wondered if the difference in their heights bothered the younger man. Deciding to worry about that later, if at all, Seymour tilted his head and lowered it, placing a gentle kiss on his mate’s lips.

Much like before, Tidus invited a deeper kiss, so Seymour slid his tongue inside. One hand drifted down to rest on Tidus’s hip while the other slid upward to cradle the back of the young man’s head. Seymour was rapidly reassessing his ideas about death and sacrifice if the Farplane was anything like this kind of bliss.

Imagine, years with a true mate and all the associated pleasure. Seymour drew Tidus more closely to him and shifted his hips, wresting a groan from the blond, then began walking backward, his mate moving with him, until he could sit back down in his chair with Tidus dragged down to straddle his lap. The change in position allowed him to break the kiss and trail across the younger man's face, Seymour's goal being the smooth column of his neck.

His attentions there brought about such deliciously appealing sounds from his mate, not to mention prompted Tidus to shift against him wantonly, so he licked his way up to the blond's ear and whispered, "I would very much be interested to know, my sweet, just how experienced you are. I would not for the world rush you, after all, not if I plan to make you mine for eternity."

"Experienced enough," breathed Tidus. "Men and women. I was . . . a blitz star."

"Is that so?" he whispered, smiling when Tidus shivered and arched his back. "And when you were with a man, who was in control?" he asked before nipping at his mate's earlobe.

"Ah, they were."

"Mmmmm." Seymour bit down briefly into the sun-kissed flesh of Tidus's neck, then murmured, "I must confess that pleases me. You hold the wicked appeal of forbidden fruit, my sweet, except that you are not. Unless, that is"—he paused long enough to bite again—"you wish to deny my pursuit of you?"

"I don't . . . think I could, and I don't want to."

A shadow caught Seymour's eye, the advance warning of someone approaching the door. It was useful at times that they were fashioned from so much coloured glass. He lifted his head and kissed Tidus again, then pulled back entirely. "We are about to be interrupted, my sweet. I expect that your friends have returned from their explorations and are wondering where you are."

Tidus groaned softly and carefully stood up, a knock sounding at the door a second later. Seymour waited until his mate was back in a chair before he called out, "Enter!"

Tromell slipped in quietly and bowed. "My lord. Lady Yuna and her guardians have returned for the evening." He shot a significant look at the back of Tidus's head.

Seymour nodded. "I will show Sir Tidus to his room once we have finished our conversation, Tromell. It should only be a few minutes."

The elderly Guado nodded and slipped back out, so Seymour focused his attention back on Tidus. "It appears that we spent much longer talking than I realized," he said mildly, then stood and approached a cabinet along one wall. He rooted around inside, removed something, then glided over to stand before his mate.

“It is a custom of ours to give gifts of courting, Tidus. I would like you to have this, if you will accept it. Should you be attacked with lightning you will be healed rather than harmed, which should be useful during your passage through the Thunder Plains.” He held out an ochre shield.

Tidus took it with a rather shy smile, then stood up and hugged him. “Thank you,” he said sincerely.

“I am glad you like it. Unfortunately, much as I would prefer to selfishly retain your company for hours yet, I must show you to your room so your friends are assured of your welfare. And besides, you too must get a good night’s sleep.”

The blond nodded a bit reluctantly, then cocked his head to one side. “Um, should. . . . I mean, are we going to . . . say anything? To them?”

“Sir Auron is already aware of my interest. While I would prefer not to make a huge deal out of this, it may be true that if I do accompany you the people of Spira may make assumptions about myself and Lady Yuna. Of course, that, in particular, is of no matter to me. If rumor brings the people hope, so be it, though I suppose. . . . Perhaps it should be made known to Lady Yuna, so she is not caught off guard.”

“Okay,” Tidus said agreeably.

Seymour nodded and proceeded to lead Tidus to his room for the night, one he would be sharing with Auron, then asked quietly, “Sir Auron, do you hold any reservations for me joining this pilgrimage? Tidus is allowing me to court him, so I would prefer to remain close by.” He arched a brow in lieu of openly stating his other reasons, assuming that Auron would get the point.

Auron shot an intense look at Tidus, who returned it calmly, then said, “I do not object, but Yuna must be asked.”

“Then I will bring her here if you will both wait a moment.” Seymour did so quickly, wanting to get it over and done with, and was shortly back inside with Yuna in tow. And, given his present frustration, he was rather blunt. “Lady Yuna, I wish to travel with you and your guardians. Will you agree to this?”

She looked quite taken aback. “I—Your Grace! Sir Auron?”

Auron glanced at her over the top rim of his glasses. “I have no objection.”

“It would be an honor,” Yuna said and performed Yevon’s prayer.

Seymour returned it and said, “The honor is mine. I will leave you all to get your rest, and will see you again at breakfast.” He started for the door, then paused as though struck by a thought

and looked over his shoulder. “It occurs to me, Lady Yuna, that the people of Spira might, without ill intention, misinterpret my inclusion. It would be unkind of me to not share the possibility.”

He paused, delicately, and was rewarded when she blushed a flattering rose pink. “I am sure such assumptions on their part will bring about a certain sense of hope, but I assure you those assumptions would be mistaken. I merely wish to facilitate your journey, and that of the interests of Spira at large.”

Before he finished turning his head back to the door he saw mild confusion tinge her expression. Outside the door he lingered, not in their line of sight, but still able to eavesdrop.

“I—well, that was unexpected,” he heard her say. “Sir Auron, Lord Seymour did not mean as a guardian, did he?”

“No.”

“Okay, then I—oh! That’s a really nice shield, Tidus. Where did you get it?”

“It was a gift from Maester Seymour,” Tidus said quietly, but with obvious pleasure in his voice.

Seymour could only imagine what her expression might consist of; there was every chance she was aware of Guado customs. He figured that might actually be true when she responded, “Oh!” Then in a somewhat admiring tone she added, “He must really like you.”

He decided he had heard enough and slipped off, back to his chambers.

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## The Gandof Thunder Plains

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They walked along the tunnel that led to the Thunder Plains; up ahead Seymour could see the bright flashes that signaled lightning strikes, never in sync with the sound of thunder. He and Tidus brought up the rear of the party, with a nervously jittering Rikku just ahead of them.

“Oh, no. . . . We’re here,” she said in almost a whine as they emerged from the tunnel.

Beside him Tidus looked amazed and awed at the elemental display. “How are we supposed to cross that?”

Lulu glanced over her shoulder, then pointed toward the nearest of the tall structures dotting the plains. “See the towers? The lightning is drawn to them . . . hopefully.”

“We head north,” Wakka said, “not too near and not too far from the towers, ya?”

“Meaning we should avoid wide open areas,” Lulu clarified.

Rikku spoke, her voice tiny and thin. “I think I forgot something in Guadosalam.”

“Nice knowing you,” Auron said callously.

“Okay, okay! I’ll go!” Rikku sullenly trailed along behind the party as they made their way by the first tower, then shrieked when lightning struck it.

“Whoa! That was a close one!” Wakka exclaimed cheerfully.

Lulu huffed and said, “Stop kidding around.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Wakka didn’t sound at all repentant.

They had made it almost halfway across the plains when Rikku began to act extremely peculiar. Seymour felt a great deal like smacking her when she started going, “Heh heh heh heh heh heh heh. . . .” Anyone with halfway decent agility could avoid the strikes, and he knew from watching her in battle that she was hardly a slouch.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?” Wakka shot her a strange look.

“Eh heh heh heh heh heh heh. . . .”

Tidus planted his hands on his hips and said, “‘Heh heh heh. . . .’ You’re givin’ me the creeps!”

Rikku dropped to the ground and cowered. “I wanna go home! I hate lightning! I hate thunder! Let’s go rest over there! Please?” She pointed at a branch in the path; not far away was one of Rin’s travel agencies.

“This storm never stops. Better to cross quickly,” Auron said coldly, then continued right on past the branching. The others followed his lead.

“Pretty please? Just for a few minutes? I’m scared of lightning! Let’s rest, please? Pretty please? I’m too young to die! You’re mean . . . cruel! Your moms would be ashamed of you! Are you having fun doing this to me?”

They made it over the slight rise, then able to see where an additional path branched off back toward the agency. Seymour nobly refrained from hitting the girl with thundaga; he didn’t expect he could get away with it, anyway, not without being noticed.

“It’s not stopping, is it?” Rikku questioned morosely.

“Don’t tell me you were hoping it would,” Auron said. “Fine. Stay here, then, and forget about being a guardian.”

“All right, already. But! You didn’t have to say it like that, you know! You could be more comforting or something! You know, try to cheer me up? You just don’t get me at all, do you? Hey! Are you listening? I’m not scared! I’m not scared, you hear?” She raced off to be closer to the main group.

Tidus chuckled and said to Seymour, “I don’t know if I should feel sorry for her or what. I wonder what happened to make her so afraid of lightning.”

“Had I known of her phobia, I might have considered making sure similar armor to what I gifted you found its way to the shop in town so she could have purchased it. But, even then, I am not sure it would have calmed her fears entirely.”

The remainder of the journey across the plains was much the same, and Seymour continued to nobly refrain from arranging an accident for the girl who was giving him more of a headache than the thunder could manage. He helped in battle when it was asked of him, but otherwise remained slightly aloof, mainly sticking close to his mate.

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## Macalania Woods

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Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when they left behind lightning’s domain and entered the chill atmosphere of Macalania Woods. Seymour loved it there; all his people did. He might not be cognizant of why the Guado seemed to be so closely tied to it, but they and at least one other race could always be assured of a sense of welcome when they stepped within.

Tidus was once again awed at his surroundings, something that brought a smile to Seymour’s face. “It is beautiful, is it not?”

His mate turned a brilliant smile on him and nodded. “I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s almost as though everything is made of ice, or sheathed in it. Is it very dangerous here?”

Seymour shrugged lightly. “Only to the weak, or uninformed. I have observed you, and your friends, and I am confident of your skills. Farther ahead, closer to the temple itself, you will enter a world of snow and ice. But, that is only fitting given which Fayth resides there.”

“Oh. So, like . . . Ifrit and fire, Ixion and lightning, this Fayth is ice?”

“Yes, exactly. Not all of them are aligned to an element, but Shiva is.”

Tidus paused a moment, then hastened forward. “That’s kinda strange, actually. I would almost have expected Ixion’s temple to be in the Thunder Plains, not at Djose.”

Seymour shrugged again. “Some things remain a mystery, even to a maester of Yevon.”

Whatever Tidus meant to say in response was interrupted when a large man rushed up to the party. “Barthello!”

“Hey! Have any of you seen Dona?”

“Dona?” said Yuna. “No, I’m afraid not.”

“What’s up?” asked Wakka.

“We got separated on the way here,” Barthello explained. “Damn it all! I’ve got to find her!”

Auron shifted. “Calm down.”

“But, if anything happens to her. . . .”

“Running around in a panic is not going to help. Right now, you have to keep cool, and search.”

“But—”

“Guard your emotions, then guard your summoner.”

Barthello calmed slightly and nodded. “You’re right.”

“Shall we search?” Auron offered.

“No, I’ve taken up enough of your time. Thank you, Sir Auron.” Barthello dashed off back the way he had come from and Rikku started to follow him.

“What’s up?” Wakka called after her.

Rikku stopped dead and turned back. “Oh, I just wanted to wish him good luck.”

Tidus, Seymour noticed, stared at the Al Bhed for several long moments before looking at him instead. Seymour nodded slightly in response, and the party continued on. It was somewhat rough going; some of the creatures that roamed the woods were elementally powerful, after all, and difficult to kill.

They were nearly out of the woods, literally, when Auron paused and began looking around. “Wait. It is here . . . somewhere.”

“What’s here?” Tidus asked, looking at Auron like he was crazy.

“Something you should see.”

“But, Sir Auron. . . .” Yuna objected weakly.

“It won’t take long.” He then proceeded to carve a path through the tangled vegetation and walk through, obviously expecting everyone to follow.

They arrived at a tranquil spring, the surface of the water shimmering with all the colours of the rainbow.

Tidus looked understandably confused. “This place. . . . It’s just water, isn’t it?”

Auron shook his head. “This is what spheres are made of. It absorbs and preserves people’s memories.” He began scanning the area for . . . something, but was jarred from his search as a large globular mass erupted from the spring.

“What’s *that*?” said Wakka.

“Fiends are also attracted to these places,” Auron said with a slight sigh, then shifted to a defensive position. “Lulu, you’re up!”

The fiend attacked, doing its level best to crush the life from each of them, but a clever strategy based on the monster’s shifting weaknesses soon brought it down, and pyreflies spiraled up into the sky at its defeat, though not without leaving behind a small sphere.

Wakka swooped in to pluck it from the ground and examine it. “Whoa, this is old! Don’t know if it still works.”

“Jecht left it here ten years ago,” said Auron, then ordered, “Play it back.”

Wakka handed it over to a frowning Tidus, who activated it with obvious reluctance.

The scene that sprang forth showed a city in the background, Bevelle by the look of it so far as Seymour could see.

“What are you taking?” Auron asked.

“Well,” Jecht replied, “you said it was gonna be a long trip. We’ll be seeing a lot of neat things, right? So I thought I’d record it all in this. To show to my wife and kid, you know.”

“This is no pleasure cruise!”

“Hey, Braska. Ain’t this supposed to be a grand occasion?” Jecht asked. “Where’re the cheering fans? The crying women?”

“This is it. Too many goodbyes—people think twice about leaving.”

“Hmm. . . . If you say so. Well, it better be a lot more colorful when we come back. A parade for Braska, vanquisher of Sin!”

“We should go,” said Braska. “Day will break soon.”

The scene shifted, with Braska the likely cameraman. The sign visible above Auron and Jecht read ‘Lake Macalania’.

“Auron, could you stand closer to him? Good. That should do it,” came Braska’s voice.

“What’s the matter?” Jecht taunted Auron. “Afraid I might bite?”

“Jecht. . . .” Auron looked weary of it all.

“Braska!” Jecht said. “You should take one, too. It’d make a great gift for little Yuna!”

“I suppose.”

“Lord Braska,” Auron said impatiently. “We shouldn’t be wasting our time like this!”

“What’s the hurry, man?”

“Let me tell you what the hurry is!” Auron retorted.

“Auron!” Braska reprimanded.

The scene abruptly winked out, causing Tidus to remark, “What’s the point? Like Auron said, he wasn’t on some pleasure cruise.”

Rikku grabbed the sphere and examined it, then said, “I think there’s more.”

The sphere clicked as she touched something. Jecht appeared to be alone based on the camera angle, standing approximately where they actually stood in the present.

“Hey. If you’re sitting there, watching this . . . it means you’re stuck in Spira, like me. You might not know when you’ll get back home, but you better not be crying! Although, I guess I’d understand. But you know what? There’s a time when you have to stop crying and move on. You’ll be fine. Remember, you’re my son. And. . . . Well, uh. . . . Never mind. I’m no good at these things.”

Jecht reached over with his free hand and shut the sphere off, signaling a scene transition, though the location did not appear to have changed.

“Anyway. . . . I believe in you. Be good. Goodbye.”

The sphere died again, and there was silence for a time.

“He sounded almost serious, but it was too late,” Tidus said stiffly.

“He was serious,” Auron said. “Jecht had already accepted his fate.”

“His fate?”

“Jecht. . . . He. . . . He was always talking about going home, to Zanarkand. That’s why he took all those pictures—to show them to you when he returned. But as he journeyed with us and came to understand Spira, and Braska’s resolve. . . . It happened gradually, but Jecht changed. He decided he would join Braska in his fight against Sin.”

“So then, he gave up going home?”

“That was his decision.”

It was of Seymour’s opinion that regardless of why Jecht had been brought to Spira, the man had decided at some point that there was no going back. Still, if Sin was Jecht, it remained a mystery as to why he had pulled his son into present day Spira as well.

His musings were cut off when Tidus shook his head as though to clear it and said, “All right! Let’s go, guys!”

And yet, even as everyone else moved back along toward the main path, Tidus and Auron lingered at the spring. Seymour moved far enough away to give them privacy, but not so far as to let his mate out of his sight. Whatever Auron was telling Tidus did not seem to be accepted, as the blond looked to be in denial again.

Auron walked past Seymour without a word, back to the others. Tidus soon followed, but paused and gave him a troubled smile. “Auron seems to think my old man loved me. I just . . . don’t know what to think.”

“Perhaps it will become clear in time,” was the only advice he could give. He briefly pressed a hand to the small of Tidus’s back to urge him forward so they could rejoin the rest of the party.

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## 4 : SCHEMES

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### Macalania

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Soon enough they emerged from the woods into a snow-covered landscape. Off to the side of the path was a frozen lake and the air around it shimmered with faint pastel colours. The scene was, in a word, breathtaking. Also nearby was another of Rin's travel agencies, but Seymour was not in the mood, despite seeing the weary postures of the group, to stay in one. That being the case, he decided to speak up.

"We are very nearly there," he said, ostensibly to Tidus, but with enough projection for everyone to hear him. "Macalania Temple is a bit farther on, past the lake and over a gorge. Were it not for some of the higher drifts, you would be able to see it."

Yuna stopped walking and turned around. "That's right! You're the High Priest of Macalania Temple, aren't you, Lord Seymour?"

Seymour inclined his head and said, "Indeed. While you and your guardians enter the Cloister of Trials, I can arrange for our lodging. That way you will not have far to go after your audience with the Fayth, rather than having to come back here to rest."

Yuna glanced around the group, nodded, and said with renewed energy, "All right! Let's go, everyone!"

They skirted along the edge of the lake, not entirely trusting the center, and continued on until they came to the gorge. The bridge was fairly narrow so they went in pairs, then regrouped on the other side before walking the last of the distance, a winding pathway that seemed almost to hover over nothing at all.

"I'd hate to have to do this if I was afraid of heights," Tidus said to him quietly.

Seymour chuckled, having often thought the same thing in the past. "Can you imagine," he replied as quietly, "a summoner's journey ending here, with them too afraid to walk this particular path?"

His mate laughed; Wakka looked back curiously, and as a result lost his balance on the slippery slope. The blitzball player crashed down and slid into one of the snowbanks lining the path, causing a minor explosion of snow to erupt.

"Aw, man! That's not cool, ya?" Wakka grouched, then carefully found his footing again.

Lulu did not bother to hide her amusement. "I would say it's very cool. It is snow, after all."

"Lu!"

They traversed the remainder of the spiral to the accompaniment of laughter, and finally reached the level ground just in front of the temple itself. The guards there were a mixture of human and Guado, and they straightened up smartly on seeing Seymour and performed Yevon's prayer.

It wasn't until they started up the steps that one of the human guards narrowed his eyes and moved as if to deny entrance.

Seymour cleared his throat and shot the man a nasty glare. "Unless there is a fiend behind us. . . ."

The guard looked from Rikku to Seymour, then backed down quickly. He rushed over to the temple doors and opened them, meekly ushering everyone through.

Seymour hung back briefly. "You forget your place," he said. "I am well aware of why you acted as you did, but you should have enough sense to realize that any person in my company, Al Bhed or otherwise, is not to be harassed or denied entrance. You had best learn that now before something unfortunate should happen to you."

"Yes, Lord Seymour," the guard whispered.

Seymour swept on past him and into the temple, pausing for a moment to appreciate the truly beautiful architecture, then approached the group. "I will arrange for our stay here, so if you are ready to enter the trials, please do. Refreshments will be available once you are done."

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The next morning Seymour was feeling mildly frustrated. There had been no opportunity for him to get Tidus alone and his mood as a result was less than pleasant. Breakfast passed with nothing more than sleepy, murmuring conversation, and they headed out fairly early. Fiend attacks along the way woke everyone up, though, so they were wide awake by the time they stepped onto the fringes of the frozen lake.

They had just begun to circumvent the center again when a small group of Guado skittered across the ice and came to stop just in front of the party. "Maester Seymour!"

Seymour glanced at them, then his companions. "Will you please excuse me for a minute?" he said, then stepped away for some privacy. "What news have you?"

"My lord," said one in a low voice, "Maester Mika has sent warrior monks to the Al Bhed home in retaliation for the kidnappings. They have gone with the intent to retrieve any summoners being held captive there, to be brought back to Bevelle. Any and all Al Bhed who get in their way are to be killed."

Seymour sighed. "How long ago?"

“Several days, Your Grace.”

“All right. Two of you head back to Guadosalam and inform Tromell, and tell him to come to Bevelle with all haste. My personal guard can accompany him to see to his safety. The rest of you will remain with me for the time being.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Two of them took off at a fast clip, leaving four behind.

Seymour sighed again and signaled to Tidus, who trotted over immediately. “Sir Tidus, would you do me the favor of requesting the presence of Lady Yuna and Miss Rikku? Discreetly, please.”

“Um, sure. Be right back, Lord Seymour.” Tidus hastened back over to the group and quickly returned with the two ladies.

“What is it, Lord Seymour?” Yuna asked.

“A very delicate situation, I’m afraid. I regret to inform you that Maester Mika has ordered an attack on the Al Bhed home on Bikanel Island in retaliation for—”

“What!?” Rikku screeched. “No!”

“Is everything okay over there?” Wakka yelled, then strode over.

“Eh heh.” Rikku laughed weakly and gave Wakka a sickly smile. “Oh, just fine, really. We’ll, um, be done in a minute?”

“Okay,” he said with a slight frown and wandered back over to stand next to Lulu.

“Yunie, what—oh, no, not now!”

“Al Bhed!” Wakka shouted in warning.

Seymour whipped around to see several Al Bhed on the ridge on the opposite side of the lake.

One of them shouted. “Rikku! Tuh’d ehdanvana un oui kad drec! Ouin bnaleuic magic yht Aeons yna caymat!”

“Oh, no!” Rikku repeated.

Tidus tapped her arm quickly and said, “Translation?”

“He’s gonna use an anti-magic field on us!”

“Kad dras!”

A huge, mobile machina weapon trundled into view over the ridge and down, coming to a halt in the center of the frozen lake. Seconds later it shot a device into the air, and Seymour could feel access to his magic being cut off. Rather like losing a limb, in a way, and he was definitely not amused.

There was a brief standstill, then Auron yanked Rikku, Tidus, and Wakka over and spoke to them rapidly in a low voice, then pushed them forward to begin the confrontation.

“Sir Auron?” Yuna questioned.

“Wakka and Rikku will take out that negator. Once that’s done, Lulu can swap in and use her magic while Tidus uses haste. That thing is vulnerable to lightning, like all machina. Tidus can also delay it, slow it down. If necessary, Yuna, you can summon.”

“Right!” Yuna exclaimed, then turned her full attention to the battle already being waged.

And it took quite a while, as the crawler had the capability of shooting up another negator given enough time, and many times the chosen fighters barely escaped being knocked out by some of the machina’s attacks. In the end, however, they were victorious.

That same Al Bhed from before rose up again on the ridge and shook his fist, then shouted, “Rikku! E femm damm vydran!”

Rikku stamped her foot and shouted right back, and in the same language. “E ys dra guardian uv Yuna, oui caa? Yuna ec cyva! Fa femm kiynt ran! Cra ec cyva!”

“Oui tu drec ymuha, cecdan!” he responded, then ducked away out of sight.

Rikku sighed and toed the ground with one foot. “I told him I was a guardian. Well, guess I had to, really.”

“How come you speak Al Bhed? Why?” asked Wakka.

“Because I’m Al Bhed,” she said. “And that . . . was my brother.”

Wakka tore his gaze away from her and looked at each of the others. “You knew? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We knew you’d be upset,” Lulu said evenly.

“This is great. I can’t believe I’ve been traveling with an Al Bhed! A heathen!”

“You’re wrong!” Rikku retorted. “We have nothing against Yevon.”

Seymour nobly refrained from groaning, and instead unobtrusively pulled Tidus back a short distance, away from the verbal-only battle unfolding before them. Yuna also stepped back a bit.

“But you Al Bhed use the forbidden machina! You know what that means? Sin was born because people used machina!”

“You got proof? Show me proof!” Rikku insisted.

“It’s in Yevon’s teachings! Not that you’d know!”

“That’s not good enough! Yevon says this, Yevon says that. Can’t you think for yourself?”

“Well, then you tell me! Where did Sin come from, huh?”

“I . . . I don’t know!” she admitted.

“You bad-mouth Yevon and that’s all you can come up with?”

“But . . . that doesn’t mean you should do whatever they say without thinking! Nothing will ever change that way!”

“Nothing has to change!” shouted Wakka.

“You want Sin to keep coming back? There might be a way to stop it, you know!”

“Sin will be gone once we atone for our past mistakes!”

“When? How?” Rikku persisted.

“If we keep faith in Yevon’s teachings it will be gone one day!”

“Why do I even bother?” Rikku turned away in temporary defeat, then gasped.

A troop of warrior monks was approaching at a brisk pace, moving down the gently sloping path with precisely coordinated movements. They came to a halt on the ice and saluted, forcing Seymour to perform Yevon’s prayer in response.

He had just asked, “Yes?” when a series of sharp reports sounded and all heads turned to toward the center of the lake, where most of Yuna’s guardians were still standing, not far from the defeated machina weapon. A split second later the ice shattered under the stress and weight.

Seymour found himself being hauled back abruptly before he had a chance to react, and was relieved to see that Tidus ended up next to him, as well as Lady Yuna. The others, however. . . .

Yuna screamed, “No!” just as Tidus whispered the same, and the Guado held her back as she struggled to get to the edge of the broken ice.

Seymour shook himself slightly and fired off an order at the monks. “Don’t just stand there. Check to see if they’re all right!”

The troop hastily formed a chain and advanced out to the jagged edge in a line. The end man got down on his hands and knees (his buddy crouching and holding his ankle instead) so he could peer into the depths. A long minute passed before he pulled back, and the line slowly retracted back to the safety of the perimeter.

“Maester Seymour! They appear to be alive, but it’s difficult to be sure.”

“And a rescue attempt?”

The monk shook his head. “Not unless you know of a way to the bottom of the lake, Your Grace.”

Seymour scowled and tried to think. At that point time seemed to stop for a moment; he suddenly became aware that he could no longer hear the Hymn of the Fayth, so much a part of the area that its lack was a shock to his system.

“What—?” came Yuna’s voice, then an odd sort of sigh.

Seymour looked over his shoulder to see that she had fainted. “Get her up to Rin’s immediately. Guard her with your lives,” he ordered his Guado, then turned back to the monks. “There is a way, but—”

Cracking sounds came again from the lake, causing everyone to quickly move up along the path. Then one of the monks shouted, “Sin!” A mass retreat ensued, with everyone gathering next to the agency, and Seymour had an excellent view as Sin appeared beneath the ice, not far from the bottom of the temple, which could clearly be seen through the shattered surface of the lake.

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They spent the night at the agency. After Sin retreated Seymour charged half the troop of monks with the task of climbing to the bottom of the lake to see if there was anyone to be brought back. They had returned hours later, almost at sunset, with news that there was no one down there, alive or dead.

Yuna was nearly inconsolable with grief and had locked herself in one of the agency’s bedrooms, so Seymour set guards both outside her door and outside the agency, to swap out in rotation so that there were always people alert and on watch in case she should try to do something foolish.

He had a quiet dinner with Tidus and then retreated to a room with his mate, drawing in one of his Guado as well. “Is there anything else you need to tell me?” he asked wearily.

“My Lord, Maester Mika expects that when you and Lady Yuna arrive in Bevelle there will be a wedding.”

Tidus blinked in shock, but thankfully held his tongue.

“I see. Anything else?”

“Only that we know from overhearing them talk that the monks are here to escort you to Bevelle. They had hoped to arrive in time to prevent any more kidnapping attempts by the Al Bhed.”

Seymour snorted inelegantly. “Yes, and they managed that beautifully, didn’t they. Very well, join the watch rotation.”

The Guado bowed and slipped out.

“Um, Seymour?”

He turned to gaze at his mate. “It seems we will have to warn Lady Yuna of this very unwelcome development, and see how much we can delay.”

Tidus nodded slowly and said, “I could feel him this time. I know he came because of me. Do you . . . think the others are all right?”

Seymour eyed his mate for a moment, then smiled. “I think . . . Jecht is trying to tell you something, my sweet. I would not be surprised if he comes to you for a very good reason. It may be that he wishes, out of anyone, that it be you who has a hand in defeating him as he is now, to release him from what he has become.

“Given that, I tend to think that your friends are most likely all right, though perhaps a little battered and shaken up. After all, he has come to you several times now, has he not? And you have all always been okay. It is more of a question of where your friends ended up, correct? He must know that you will need them.”

Tidus looked away. “I don’t. . . . I don’t understand. How can he be Sin? How is that possible? He was Braska’s guardian, and Auron is okay.”

Seymour sighed; he really did not want to do what he was about to do. “Come sit with me,” he said, and waited until Tidus was seated next to him. “I get the feeling that you do not understand what happens once a summoner obtains the Final Aeon.”

“They defeat Sin.”

“Yes, they do. But tell me . . . where is Lord Braska?”

“I . . . don’t know. He’s dead?”

Seymour nodded. “The price for defeating Sin, Tidus, is the summoner’s life.”

“Yuna is going to die!?”

“That is how it’s been since Lady Yunalesca first defeated Sin a thousand years ago. But there may be a way.”

“Tell me!”

He sighed again. “Unfortunately, I made a promise to Sir Auron, so I cannot answer your questions at this time. I am sorry.”

“But—”

“Please, Tidus, do not make me break my promise. You will know in time, you have my word, before it is too late. I will not let you suffer in ignorance any longer than necessary. Any of you, really.”

“Why didn’t they tell me?” Tidus questioned miserably.

“It is a difficult thing to discuss. Lady Yuna has probably been quite heartened by your cheer so far, and loathe to upset you.”

“She says . . . she wants her journey to be filled with laughter.”

“Then focus on that for now. She is a very strong young woman. And that brings us back to Maester Mika’s expectations. Sweet as she is, I cannot marry Lady Yuna.” He graced Tidus with a seductive smile. “To do that would be to dishonor you, for one thing.”

Tidus frowned and kicked the leg of the bed with his heel. “She would, you know, if it meant the people of Spira were made happy by it. Yuna would probably consider it a duty, like defeating Sin. Sometimes she’s so selfless it makes my head hurt.”

“Well, let it not come to that. Unless you have changed your mind I have every intention of pledging myself only to you, my sweet.”

At that the blond’s brow furrowed. “I haven’t, but . . . just how long is this courtship thing, anyway? I mean, this is crazy. Every time I’m near you I feel. . . .” He trailed off and rolled his eyes. “Ah, man, I can barely think straight at times around you. I must sound like a silly young girl or something to you.”

Seymour chuckled and shook his head. “Believe me, my sweet, it is mutual. I have never been so frustrated in my life as I have been recently. As for the length of courtship, that depends. Courtship ends when you either agree to marry me, or decide to deny me.”

“Oh. Um, but, what about. . . I mean, are you sure about this? It’s not like two men can have children. I saw those pictures at your manor. Your line goes back so far! If you’re stuck with me, it ends.”

He shrugged and reached out to stroke the back of Tidus’s neck briefly, and dare he think it, affectionately. “It matters not. This, to me, is fate, and I am happy to be guided so. If necessary, I will find an intelligent young Guado male to train up at the appropriate time with an eye toward them taking over my position as leader of my race. Pride in one’s family is all very well, but to sacrifice happiness simply for that. . . .”

His mate’s anxious expression relaxed into a slightly shy but cheerful smile. “So, uh, if I were to say yes, like, before Bevelle?”

“Well, I could not very well get married a second time, now could I? If you were to say yes, I would make sure that my Guado intercepted Tromell before he made the turn-off to Bevelle. It would be a very quick decision, though, and I would not want you to feel unduly pressured. We may be able to delay considerably with Lady Yuna’s help.”

“Do you think she might be ready to talk to us? She’s been in there, alone, all day. I’m worried about her. Can we go see?”

“Of course we can. It may well be that she is willing to help us plot and scheme.”

That obviously helped his mate to regain some of his good humor, for Tidus chortled and nodded, and they had barely managed to stand up when a knock sounded at the door, and the lady in question slipped inside without waiting for an invitation.

“Yuna!” Tidus rushed over and grabbed her hands as someone outside shut the door. “Are you okay? I was so worried about you. Have you even eaten anything?”

She laughed weakly. “Tidus, please! I’m . . . okay.”

“Have you eaten?” he repeated, almost accusingly.

“Um, no,” she admitted. “I didn’t have much of an appetite.”

Tidus led her over to a chair and stared at her until she sat down, then went over and opened the door, murmuring to one of the guards before coming back to resume his seat.

Yuna sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'm just . . . so worried. Wakka and Lulu are like siblings to me, and Rikku is my cousin. And Kimahri, well, he's been with me since I was seven. And Auron. . . ."

"I know."

"Lord Seymour, I'm sorry, but. . . ."

"Please, no formalities in here. I would like to think we are friends."

"All right, thank you. I . . . overheard you two talking, through the wall. I'm sorry, I know it's horribly rude."

Seymour waved a hand in negation. It was just as well, as it meant so much less to repeat. "I hope you are not offended that I am not overjoyed at the idea of Mika's wish for our marriage."

She smiled faintly, almost ruefully. "You're right, Tidus. I would have if it would make the people happy for a time. But I couldn't do that to you."

A knock sounded again, so Seymour called out, "Enter!"

A Guado slipped in and deposited a tray on the low table, then bowed and slipped back out.

"Eat," Tidus said. "Please?"

Yuna reached out to take a fruit and had a bite. A few seconds later she said, "So what do we do?"

Tidus cleared his throat rather nervously, blushed, then said, "My answer is yes."

Seymour purred in pleasure and got to his feet. A short conversation with the guards at the door produced a muted flurry of action, and he was back in his seat a minute later. "If possible, we should start by delaying until Tromell can arrive."

Yuna inspected her piece of fruit. "I could pretend to be ill. But, we made it across the Thunder Plains and all the way to the temple in a day because we pushed so hard. You sent men to Guadosalam early this morning, right?"

"Yes, true. Tromell may arrive here by morning, especially if mounted."

"Even so, even if you and Tidus are joined before we reach Bevelle, the people of Spira are going to be very upset if we are forced into a ceremony and they find out it was all a sham," she pointed out, then had another bite.

“Also true, which is where more delaying tactics come in. Our primary goals in Bevelle would be for you to visit the temple, and us to get out of the city while avoiding that very situation.”

“And what about my friends? They could be anywhere. And an attack on Bikanel Island?”

“Hey!” Tidus said suddenly. “Remember when Rikku found me? They made me work for food, helping them salvage. They found an airship down there! The Al Bhed may have had enough time to bring that up and get it working. Maybe it’s on Bikanel Island now. Maybe they can. . . .” He trailed off in uncertainty. “I guess that doesn’t really help those of us who are missing, does it.”

“Well,” Yuna said slowly, “Uncle Cid is the leader of the Al Bhed. If they’re being attacked, and they do have that airship, they could use it to escape if necessary. I’m sure he would go looking for Rikku. She is his daughter, after all. And she would come looking for us, right?”

“Yeah!”

Seymour was privately amused at how quickly his mate could be cheered up.

“And if that happened, so long as they came before, uh, you know, then you wouldn’t have to go through with it.”

Yuna finished off her piece of fruit and looked with a bit more enthusiasm on the bowl of soup awaiting her. She picked up a spoon and started in, her colour, which had been lacking, finally starting to become more healthy in appearance.

“Should it come to it,” Seymour said musingly, “we can delay a day here, and then again for quite a few in Bevelle with supposed preparations for a ceremony. I am sure that you can be quite fussy, Yuna, given the proper motivation.”

She looked up from her soup with a slight conspiratorial grin.

“And I realize that you are, regrettably, lacking most of your guardians, but that will not bar your entrance to the Cloister of Trials. I and Tidus could accompany you, he as a guardian, and I as a maester. And then, if possible, we slip out of the city in the dead of night and head either for the Calm Lands, or back to Guadosalam. It would depend a great deal on news of the whereabouts of your missing guardians.”

Yuna paused and furrowed her brow. “And what of Maester Mika? Your own reputation and position? You could be excommunicated.”

“That is a chance I am willing to take,” he said seriously, then moved on to far less serious topics of conversation until it was time for bed.

Tromell arrived bright and early, looking a bit worse for wear after having bounced along astride a chocobo for hours on end. He was ushered into Seymour's room right away and handed into a seat that wasn't moving. In point of fact, he looked extremely relieved to be stationary.

Seymour waited until his adviser had had something to eat before springing any surprises on the poor man. Yuna was in the next room with Tidus keeping an eye on her. The warrior monks were very restless, wanting to discharge their duty and escort the greatly reduced party to Bevelle, but had been put off by the summoner's grief and alleged illness.

"I will let you rest shortly, old friend, but before that there are some things we need to discuss," Seymour said once Tromell had sat back in replete satisfaction.

"How may I be of service, Lord Seymour?"

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## 5: REUNION

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### Macalania

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The ceremony was, of necessity, very private and very quietly done, though none of the details were skimmed. Yuna stood as the only witness, but that was enough. Seymour and Tidus were joined in a traditional Guado ceremony of marriage shortly after the noon meal, and they sealed it with a brief, chaste kiss.

They spent the afternoon and well into the evening plotting, trying to make a plan for every possible contingency they might face once they reached Bevelle. When they had exhausted all avenues that they could think of Seymour gave orders to his men again, this time sending his spies to scatter in the hopes that they might have the luck to find any of the missing guardians and bring them up to date.

Tromell returned to Guadosalam with some of Seymour's personal guard, and that left the three of them alone again. Dinner was just as quiet as lunch had been, and Yuna retired to her room for the night, what guards they did have immediately closing ranks to provide her the best measure of safety.

And that left two.

Things were slightly awkward at first. After all, it wasn't every day a person got married. Seymour broke the ice, so to speak, by pulling his new spouse to him and kissing him senseless. He waited until Tidus was moaning softly through the assault before switching to his mate's neck to further inflame his lust.

Eventually, however, he pulled back and waited until Tidus gave him a hazy look. "I would not rush you for the world, my sweet, so don't—"

Tidus silenced him with a finger. "Seymour? You're crazy if you think I'm going to play the coy virgin. I'm not one, remember? And"—he paused to lick his lips—"I fully expect you to make good on our earlier joining, this time in the literal sense. Okay?"

Seymour smiled against his mate's finger, then licked it, slowly drawing the digit into his mouth teasingly so he could suckle it. When his mate's eyes nearly drifted shut in reaction he let go and murmured, "Well, in that case. . . ."

The next morning they could no longer delay; the monks were quite insistent, after a second trip down to the bottom of the lake, that there was no sign of any guardians. Of course, neither Seymour nor Tidus were bright and chipper, not after a very long night involving multiple acts of sexual athleticism that finally caused their mating-induced lust to settle into the background like a pleasant hum.

Yuna joined them for breakfast, and after that they stocked up on supplies, gathered up both Guado guards and warrior monks, and headed out from the agency. In contrast to their earlier passage through the forest, Seymour was pleased to point out a pathway of light that stretched overhead, bypassing the fiends entirely.

They used that instead, and made excellent time back to the southern end of the forest where they could, instead of going south to the Thunder Plains, head northeast along the road to Bevelle and circle around the inland lake.

As they approached the turn-off north toward the Highbridge to Bevelle, the monks noticed that the glade often used as a campsite for travelers was occupied and brought it to Seymour's attention. In consequence, the entire party came to a halt so he could investigate, with the monks forming an outer cordon and the Guado inner.

A lone man looked up from what appeared to be his lunch as Seymour entered the glade with Tidus and Yuna to either side of him. And then he spoke. "Maester Seymour."

Seymour eyed the man carefully, a thoughtful frown on his brow, then nodded. "Crimson Squad candidates?"

The man nodded. "Yes, Your Grace. I am Baralai. I would be happy to share my meal with you, as I have plenty."

Seymour considered that for a moment, then glanced at his two companions, who both nodded faintly. "Yes, but we carry our own supplies." He turned back to the men behind him and ordered, "Take a meal break, half and half," then accepted a pack from one of his Guado before moving fully into the glade.

The logs positioned around a central fire pit had more than enough open space to seat all of them, and Seymour made introductions as he handed the pack to Yuna first. "These are the Summoner Yuna, on pilgrimage, and one of her guardians, Sir Tidus."

As he waited for Yuna to fetch out what she wanted to eat, he could not help but notice that Baralai seemed to be rather fascinated by her, and when she happened to glance up for a second and noticed his interest, she blushed faintly and ducked her head. By the time the pack was given back over to Seymour she looked perfectly composed again.

It gave him an absolutely wicked idea.

Seymour fetched out some fruit from the pack and handed it to Tidus, then also gave him a flask of tea before fetching out a similar meal for himself. The pack was set on the ground next to him for the time being.

"Please forgive me for prying," Baralai asked softly, "but you are traveling to Bevelle?"

Seymour nodded.

“May I beg your indulgence, then, Lord Seymour? I am also headed there and would welcome company on the remainder of the journey.”

He arched a brow and deferred the decision to Yuna, given that it was her pilgrimage, and she might not want a stranger along, even for such a short time. She had no choice about the monks, but this. . . . “Lady Yuna?”

She blinked and cast a quick look at Baralai, then nodded. “I don’t mind, Lord Seymour. If we can help, I would be glad to.”

Baralai smiled and nodded his thanks, and their meals were consumed nearly in silence for a bit. Seymour pondered his options, then shot a sidelong glance toward the road, noting that only his Guado were within hearing distance.

“How did you come to be here alone?” he asked Baralai eventually.

The white-haired man looked up in surprise and said, “I was with the members of my squad, but after we recovered from the trials. . . . Well, I was the only one headed for Bevelle, Your Grace. My friends had other destinations in mind.”

“You must be . . . intelligent, strong, and skilled to have not only survived the trials, but also made it this far on your own,” Seymour said smoothly.

“I am flattered you think so, Lord Seymour,” was the faint response.

Tidus shot him a peculiar look, but Seymour was forced to more or less ignore that for the moment. “Does your return to Bevelle mean you will be seeking out Maester Kinoc, then? Or did you have other plans in mind?”

“I am . . . unsure.”

He was beyond relieved when Yuna ventured a question about the Crimson Squad. While Baralai’s attention was taken up with the summoner, Seymour was able to, without obvious rudeness, lean sideways and whisper to his mate. “Did you see the way they look at each other, my sweet?”

Tidus blinked slowly at him, then smiled. “Oh,” he said, putting a wealth of meaning into it.

“Indeed,” Seymour agreed and reached down to pick up the pack, then pulled out a small loaf of bread. “Are you still hungry?”

“Yeah, a little. There’s several of those? And any cheese?”

Seymour nodded and handed over the loaf, then produced the desired cheese. For himself he chose more fruit, then set the bag back down. “Wouldn’t it be interesting,” he murmured, “if those two became attached to each other?”

“Yeah, but, what you said about. . . .”

Seymour looked at him squarely and said with conviction, “I believe there is a way.” And after flicking his gaze over to the potential couple he added, “Either way, I am presently wondering if he could present us with a welcome complication, you see? If Lady Yuna is being courted by someone, well. . . .”

“Other than you.”

“Of course. Then again, it might come to be that I must tell a different falsehood, and boldly lie when I say to Maester Mika that I asked and was refused, but will remain with the pilgrimage.”

“Um, why didn’t we think of that before?” Tidus questioned him teasingly.

Seymour arched a brow at his mate and said, “Who in their right mind would refuse . . . me?”

Tidus laughed, attracting the attention of an openly astonished Baralai, then had another bite of his bread and cheese.

“Would you like more, Lady Yuna?” Seymour indicated the pack, then nodded when she shook her head. “Then when Sir Tidus is done, we shall move out.”

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## Bevelle

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Seymour strolled toward his suite within the palace almost lazily, though inwardly he was anything but composed. He had come away from his audience with the grand maester in a lousy mood and suffering from a horrific headache, but he could not afford to show any weakness in public.

It had taken all his control to appear to be his usual self, and he had spent the better part of an hour persuading Mika that a wedding between himself and Lady Yuna was not to be. Had they met prior to the start of her journey. . . ? No, he had assured the elder, the Lady Yuna was adamant that marriage was a sacrament and to be revered, and to wed without love, merely for the purpose of giving the people the thin semblance of hope, was to dishonor it entirely.

Seymour had, however, slyly insinuated that there was hope for the underlying plan nevertheless, as Lady Yuna was not at all adverse to his continuing company. In that way he convinced the maester that he had every intention of following through with his original plan to become Sin and wreak vengeance upon the people of Spira.

In fact, he received the distinct impression that Mika was vaguely amused by him for some reason, perhaps due to the overweening arrogance he customarily displayed. But if it served his purpose, and if it meant the elderly man backed off from that specific part of the plans, so be it. Marriage had originally been Seymour's idea anyway, so Mika would suffer no great loss should it not come to pass.

He was far more concerned at present, finally being free of the grand maester (and glad that he had not been forced to throw an innocent Baralai into the equation), with the issue of the missing guardians. He paused at the door to his suite, his Guado guardians falling into position around it, then assigned two of them to haunt the city entrance. Should, by some miracle, the guardians return, it would be wise to make sure that the Al Bhed girl, Rikku, could be brought in without attracting undue notice of the staunch Yevonites.

He paused again, once he was safely inside and the door was closed, to release a sigh.

"Seymour?"

He blinked and looked toward the voice, to Tidus, and summoned up a smile. "Not to worry."

"You look pained," Yuna observed. "Is there anything I can do?"

Seymour crossed the room and took a seat at his mate's side, then nodded slowly. "If you would, please. I'm afraid my head is throbbing quite badly." He sighed again after she worked her magic on him, this time in relief. There were drawbacks to having focused so heavily on one type of magic, as he could not heal himself without the use of potions and the like.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "You will be happy to know that Maester Mika has been convinced to drop the wedding idea. That being said, it should not present a problem, entering the temple."

"Well, no offense intended, but that's a relief," Yuna said with a playful smile. Then she sobered. "Has there been any word?"

"Not yet, but I have sent more of my Guado out. Feel free to disagree, but I believe it would be wise, Maester Mika notwithstanding, to remain in Bevelle for several days before even thinking about continuing on to the Calm Lands. This is probably the first place that Sir Auron and the others will look for you. We can visit the temple at any time before we depart."

"Yes. And, well, it's been a long time since I've been here. Maybe you could . . . show us around? I don't remember much."

"Certainly."

And that is exactly what they did. The next two days were spent roaming the streets of Bevelle, with Yuna unintentionally lifting the spirits of the city's residents simply by being herself.

Seymour had met his share of summoners, but none of them seemed to relate to the people quite the way she did. Far too many summoners considered the pilgrimage almost to be a race against others who might reap the dubious honor of being named High Summoner in their place.

They had just finished breakfast on the third morning when a knock came at the door of the suite's reception room, and Baralai was ushered in a few seconds later by the Guado guards. He seemed almost shy as he approached the arrangement of chairs and sofas, and then performed Yevon's prayer.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?" Seymour asked.

Baralai cleared his throat self-consciously, then said, "I know that Lady Yuna will be journeying on soon, and I wished to both thank you again for letting me join you earlier, and to express my sorrow that. . . ."

"They'll turn up. I have faith." Yuna's smile was slightly forced. "We were going to spend one more day in the city. Would you like to join us?"

"I . . . would be honored, Lady Yuna," Baralai said with a bow.

Seymour smiled inwardly, then turned his head sharply at the sound of a commotion outside. A second later someone rapped on the door and opened it, and several people piled in noisily.

"Yunie!" Rikku nearly ran Baralai over as she shot across the room to pull her cousin up and then practically swing her around in dizzying happy circles.

Lulu crossed the room quite a bit more sedately, while Tidus bounced up to dash over and give Wakka a manly sort of hug, then clasp Kimahri's forearm briefly in greeting. It took quite a few minutes before everyone had calmed down enough to take seats, and Yuna ended up wedged in between her cousin and Lulu, while the Ronso took up a position behind them. Seymour unobtrusively gestured an uncertain Baralai to a seat as well during the confusion.

It was about then that Tidus looked around in confusion and asked, "Um, where's Auron?"

The ebullient mood brought on by their reunion fell abruptly flat, and Rikku burst into noisy tears. "I think," Lulu said, "that we should start at the beginning."

"What? What happened?" Tidus asked.

"After we fell through the ice, and Sin came, we woke up in the desert. Once we found each other Rikku was able to tell us we were on Bikanel Island, though how exactly we ended up there is anyone's guess. Having no better place to go, and because Rikku was worried over something Maester Seymour had said, we headed toward the Al Bhed city.

“When we arrived it was under attack by warrior monks and seemingly endless fiends. There were dead everywhere. We rushed in, to help, and Rikku’s father, Cid, found us and told us we needed to evacuate, that he had a way to get us all out of there. So we agreed, and Rikku led us down into the depths of Home, to the Summoner’s Sanctum, where the kidnapped summoners had been taken.

“Many Al Bhed gave their lives to protect the summoners from the fighting.” Lulu paused for several long moments before continuing. “Before we left to board the airship that Cid had waiting, the summoners did what only they could. They performed the sending. The thing is. . . .”

“Sir Auron Unsent,” Kimahri said.

“What!?” said Yuna and Tidus as one.

“Sir Auron was an Unsent,” Lulu confirmed. “And, I’m afraid that with several summoners at work, he . . . had no choice.”

“But, he said something before it was too late,” Wakka added.

“Yes.” Lulu turned her gaze directly on Seymour. “He said, ‘Tell Seymour to use his best judgment.’”

“He . . . stood so far away, at Mushroom Rock,” Yuna said softly, “on the beach. And he refused to enter the Farplane in Guadosalam. How could I have not seen it?”

“I always wondered. . . .” Tidus frowned. “He was there with me, for ten years, in Zanarkand. He helped bring me here. I guess now . . . I understand how, how he kept his promise.”

Several minutes went by before Seymour said, “What happened then?”

“We evacuated onto the airship, everyone that could fit, and we left. Home blew up as we flew away, and we were nearly caught in the blast, but the pilot managed to mostly outfly it. After that, we went looking for you guys. Cid had some machina onboard that could locate people.

“When we approached Bevelle, though, there was a huge fiend in the air, preventing us from getting too close to the city, so Cid veered off and landed in the Calm Lands long enough to let everyone out. We came here immediately. Guado at the city’s entrance escorted us in.” Lulu turned her gaze directly on Seymour again and said, “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Seymour nodded. “Given that Lady Yuna has an Al Bhed guardian, I wished to make sure that your party would not suffer further delays once you arrived.”

Tidus made an odd sound in his throat, capturing everyone's attention. "Don't you think it's weird," he said, "that there'd be a huge flying fiend guarding the city? I mean, it almost seems like Yevon was expecting something . . . that wasn't Sin."

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The next morning dawned and brought with it a beautiful day. Any dimness among the reunited friends could be associated with the knowledge that Auron was gone, and with him the loss of his wisdom and skill.

Seymour was on his own. He did, actually, agree with Auron that there was a time and place for certain truths to be revealed, and to share too early on was to invite major discord among the group. Granted, when they did eventually arrive in Zanarkand they would learn one of the ultimate truths about the pilgrimage.

Prior to that. . . . Both Yuna and Tidus had become peripherally aware that the soldiers of Bevelle were not limited to so-called approved weaponry thanks to Seymour's habit of taking alternate routes through the palace. Subtlety was an art, of course.

Eventually it was time to visit the temple, and Seymour once again chose a route that was not standard in order to get there, within the Tower of Light, having explained that as it was their last day within the city, they should be treated to the spectacular views afforded from its heights. At that, they took the long way, the vista unfolding to greater beauty with each step they took.

At length they arrived at the upper entrance to the tower, and after soaking in their fill of surrounding landscape, Seymour led them within, and was pleased when Rikku took only a few seconds to notice something peculiar about the place.

"Huh?" Rikku strode quickly toward a panel attached to the wall that formed an archway leading to a set of spiraling stairs. She fiddled with it while the others approached, a look of concentration on her face.

"What's a machina doing in the temple?" Wakka asked.

"I suppose it comes in handy," Rikku responded absently, still focused on the panel.

"That's not what I mean! The teachings! What about the teachings?"

"Hey, don't look at me!" she objected, turning a mild frown on him.

"The panel controls the staircase," said an unexpected voice, then Baralai stepped into view. "I like to come up here to think," he explained. "That panel turns the top four steps into a platform which will glide down to the bottom of the tower. The priests, they aren't fond of exercise."

He walked over and glanced at it, toggled a switch, then nodded when the platform smoothly formed itself. “Here,” he said, “everyone get on. I’ll send us all down.”

There was enough room, barely, though it took a bit of convincing to get Wakka to join. Baralai hit another switch and the platform slowly began to move. He stepped off at the bottom and gestured at a doorway with no visible handle.

“I guess this is where I leave you. Blessings on you and your guardians, Lady Yuna,” he said softly and performed the prayer. “Maester Seymour,” he said just as softly.

Yuna was giving the young man a faintly troubled look, but her attention was pulled away when Wakka said, “Another machina? Man. . . .”

Seymour realized the blitz player was exclaiming over another panel that Rikku was investigating. She fiddled with it, then grinned when the door slid open. “What’s this stuff doing here, anyway? Isn’t Yevon against this?”

“This is Yevon’s true face,” Baralai almost whispered. “They betray their own teachings.” And after a somewhat fearful look at Seymour, he vanished into the darkness.

Seymour came to realize after a moment that both Tidus and Yuna were giving him a look, which was hardly surprising given that he was a maester of Yevon. He arched a brow and gestured at the open door. “Shall we? Who knows what might await us?”

Through the door was the entrance to the Cloister of Trials, and the more customary entrance that summoners and their parties normally used to access them. Seymour was not looking forward to it, though mainly because out of all the trials a summoner must participate in, Bevelle’s was *the* most annoying one to suffer through.

He decided from the outset that Auron would not have guided them through the trial, so neither would he. Lulu and Wakka also held back, which made him recall that they had been guardians for a different summoner. With that in mind he gestured the black mage over.

“This must be a difficult journey for you in more ways than one,” he commented quietly.

“It is, Lord Seymour. More so than either time before.”

“Please, when it is just us, there is no need for formality.”

She inclined her head in acknowledgment, then said, “If they have too much trouble, I suppose I shall have to give them hints.”

“Verily. If it is not too painful a question. . . .”

Lulu looked at him directly for a moment, then gazed back toward Yuna. “The first time, we never made it up onto Mt Gagazet. Down in the gorge, where High Summoner Yocun used to train, there is a cave. Lady Ginnem died in that cave. And after that, up until about a half year ago, Wakka and I were guardians for Lord Zuke, but he ended his pilgrimage in the Calm Lands. He’s a monk now at the temple here in Bevelle.”

Wakka seemed to be well enough occupied with his blitzball-turned-weapon, so Seymour simply nodded. “The summoner’s path is not lightly walked, for anyone.”

“And for you?” she asked quietly.

Seymour chuckled with only the faintest hint of bitterness. “I sincerely regret . . . that I cannot tell that particular story just yet. I did, obviously, turn from that path, though. I went into training as a warrior monk after Lord Braska brought the Calm and my father was ordained a maester of Yevon. I rose quickly through the ranks, I’d like to think through my own merits. I confess I felt little surprise when, after my father died, I was ordained in his place.”

Lulu brushed one of her braids back, and when she spoke, it was to change the subject. “For a time there I thought you were interested in Yuna. But . . . I see how *he* looks at you.”

Seymour opened his mouth to respond, but she cut him off. “You don’t need . . . to explain. I was concerned at first. I thought he would be . . . disruptive. I thought he might make Yuna weak, or Wakka due to the similarity in looks to Chappu.”

“Chappu?”

“Wakka’s elder brother. He died. He set aside his sword and took up a machina weapon, and died during an attack on Sin. Wakka gave Chappu’s sword to Tidus. Still, I’ve grown to like him for who he is.”

“He is aware now,” Seymour offered vaguely.

Lulu shot him a quick look, then nodded. “Had he been with us, he would have learned anyway, there in the Summoner’s Sanctum.” After a pause she said, “Lord Issaru suffered a minor breakdown and had to be sedated once he realized what had happened to Sir Auron.”

Seymour wanted to laugh, he really did.

They were not yet through the trial when she voiced another question. “Do you know that young man well? Baralai, is it?”

“I knew of him. We came upon him on our way to Bevelle, when we stopped for a quick meal. What of him?”

“Yuna seems overly interested in him. And he seems to lack faith in Yevon’s teachings.”

Seymour made a show of looking around the trials before facing her. “Any person who has access,” he said delicately, “to the inner workings of Bevelle. . . . For instance, Baralai was a candidate for the Crimson Squad. Their final testing took place during Operation Mi’ihen, right there at Mushroom Rock.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed. Though, they were not a part of the operation itself. Maester Kinoc was in charge of both, however. The Crimson Squad candidates were in the bowels of Mushroom Rock, which would be why you never saw them. That would also be why you were not aware that they were, each of them, trained in the use of machina weapons.

“Yevon teaches that machina is the underlying cause behind Sin, and that if we stop using machina and atone, Sin will be defeated forever. And yet, Yevon has approved the use of certain machina, has it not? The stadium in Luca is one such example. And even here, in the heart of Yevon. . . . The Palace of St Bevelle, the Tower of Light.

“Machina exists. People such as Baralai question Yevon due to the hypocrisy they perceive. The Al Bhed question the need for summoners to sacrifice themselves, and for guardians to give their lives in that service. In any case, I believe that Baralai is rather smitten by Yuna.”

“Why . . . do you tell me these things?”

“Because. I would prefer to believe that it is more than flattery when I say I think you’re an intelligent young woman who will not remain blind to the truth of the world.”

“Auron knew something, something important.”

“He did.”

“But you know more,” she asserted.

“I do.”

“Then what?”

Seymour shook his head. “One must learn to crawl before walking.”

That proclamation earned him an actual frown from the usually expressionless Lulu. However, before she could respond, Tidus yelled, “Yahoo! We did it!” And indeed, they had arrived at the final walkway and could proceed to the Chamber of the Fayth.

Rikku dashed off in the wrong direction the second she stepped onto it, across a panel of pure light, and skidded to a stop next to a chest, which she quickly opened. A moment later she

Kaleidoscope

fetches out a lance and danced back over to the party, did a little bow, and handed it to Kimahri. “Cool, huh?”

“Kimahri thanks Rikku.”

“Well, let’s go. The Fayth awaits,” Yuna said.

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## 6: TEMPLES

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### Bevelle

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“So,” Tidus said in a low voice, “what exactly is in there?” He nodded at the entrance to the Chamber of the Fayth.

“A Fayth.”

“Yes.” His mate gave him a frustrated look. “But what are they? Do you know what they look like?”

“I suppose that depends. In this case, the Fayth within takes on the form of a young boy wearing a hooded robe that hides. . . .” He trailed off as Tidus’s expression twisted. “What is it?”

“A purple robe? With gold trim?” Tidus whispered. “Funny design on the back?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Because, I’ve seen him before,” Tidus whispered, then added, “In Zanarkand. I saw him that night, when Sin attacked. I saw him a couple of times.”

How was one supposed to adequately respond to that? Seymour contented himself with simply breathing for a few moments, then continued with his explanation. “Fayth are—I should say were—people. What remains is their souls.”

Tidus furrowed his brow and glanced away. “But not like Unsent.”

“Only superficially. An Unsent is someone who, at death, refused to settle. They might have died an unclean death, or had some task they felt so strongly they *must* complete, that they remain behind, not as a fiend, but almost entirely as themselves. Take your Sir Auron as an example. It is likely that he became an Unsent due to either Lady Yuna or yourself, because he was charged with the care of one or both of you.

“Now, a Fayth, on the other hand, is a person who agreed to be . . . transformed. Lady Yuna is inside the chamber, praying to the Fayth. And if it accepts her, it will join with her and lend her its strength. When she calls, when she summons, that Fayth will respond with a corresponding Aeon.”

His mate shook his head, obviously still a bit confused. “So, uh, is there a boy in that room? A lady at Macalania? They just . . . exist there?”

“They are bound there, Tidus, in stone. Statues hold their souls, their essence, and where those statues rest is simply where they are. The only time they leave those chambers is when summoned. And you must understand, these people chose to become Fayth.”

“No, that doesn’t make any sense,” Tidus insisted quietly. “If who I saw is who is in there, then no. How could this Fayth appear to me in Zanarkand, Seymour?”

Seymour spread his hands in a helpless gesture. “I honestly do not know.”

“Can’t we ask? I mean, you are a maester of Yevon.”

“The only people allowed inside a Chamber of the Fayth are summoners. Only for summoners will they appear.”

His mate frowned and glanced over at the entrance, rocking slightly. “Maybe, but he appeared for me,” Tidus said suddenly, then dashed across the room and began muscling the barrier open.

“Tidus!”

His mate looked over his shoulder even as he kept straining to move the barrier, his gaze briefly apologetic. “Sorry, but I don’t care what Yevon has to say about this.” Then the barrier gave just enough and Tidus had rolled inside.

In the split second of time he had to think about it, Seymour decided that Rikku would be mildly shocked, but otherwise uncaring. Lulu would be troubled, but thoughtful. Kimahri would say nothing, but very probably move closer to the entrance. And Wakka. . . . Wakka would probably gape at the utter blasphemy of his friend’s actions.

And he was right.

After a good ten seconds of shocked silence the four guardians all turned their gazes on him.

“What happens to him now is at the discretion of the Fayth,” he said sagely, then crossed his arms over his chest, hands tucked into opposing, voluminous sleeves.

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## Interlude

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Tidus came out of the roll on his feet and surged forward, determination written in every line of his body, though tainted by confusion. It took only a few steps for him to enter the chamber itself, and there he saw Yuna kneeling before a horizontal high relief statue surmounted by a low, translucent dome of swirling pastel-coloured light.

Hovering above it was the figure he remembered.

Tidus stopped dead to take in the scene properly, then jerked in surprise when the Fayth's hooded head swiveled toward him.

"Hello again," it said.

"Uh, hi," Tidus said weakly, having the strangest feeling that the boy was smiling at him.

"I'm sorry, I can't really talk to you right now," the Fayth continued. "But I will. Don't cry. I'll find you." And then its head turned away, and the figure crouched slightly before launching itself at Yuna and disappearing.

She sagged and crumpled to the ground, so Tidus rushed over to make sure she was okay.

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Seymour lowered his arms as the barrier swung smoothly out of the way and Tidus appeared with Yuna cradled against his chest; Kimahri relieved the young man of her weight without a word. Seymour extended his hand toward his mate and waited, feeling a rush of pleasure when Tidus came to him immediately.

"What were you thinking, man?" Wakka asked. "Going in like that—it's forbidden!"

Tidus spun around to face his friend. "Forbidden? Where I come from none of this exists! Whose customs am I supposed to follow, Wakka? Am I supposed to follow Yevon simply because they have the most power? Or should I follow the customs of the Al Bhed, who are at least honest about their use of machina? Should I follow the customs of Kimahri's people, or the Guado?"

"Where I come from machina is an everyday fact of life! We have machina to brighten our way in the dark, inside and out, and to heat and cool our homes. Machina is what allows the blitzball stadium to work, gives us transportation, and helps us cook our food. There is no Yevon in my home.

"But you know what? Yevon's prayer? *That*, in my home, is the symbol for a victory in blitzball! The Hymn of the Fayth? My old man used to hum it all the time. And what about here, Wakka? Yevon *converted* the other races to their teachings. Ronso, Guado. . . . When did that happen?" Tidus looked back to Seymour and said, "Your father, was he the first, the tenth. . . ?"

Seymour arched a brow and replied, "My father was the first Guado maester of Yevon, and was the one who brought the teachings of Yevon to our people. Lady Yuna's father, Lord Braska, was sent at one time to the Al Bhed to attempt to do the same there, though I believe he genuinely wished for peace between the races. And yes, someone was sent to Mt Gagazet for the same purpose. All within the last century, less really."

Tidus gave him a sharp nod and turned away. “So, I’m supposed to follow the teachings of Yevon, huh? Yevon, who only just recently managed to bring in two other races. That’s a heck of a long time for such disunity, don’t you think? And Yevon doesn’t even follow its own teachings! Yevon says that Sin came about because of machina, that if we all abstain from its use and atone, Sin will disappear.

“And yet, you’ve seen that even Yevon uses machina, and right here at the heart of it, in Bevelle. Yuna and I have seen that Yevon’s warrior monks use machina weapons away from the public eye. So I don’t care about forbidden, Wakka. And I’m sorry, because you’re my friend and I don’t want to fight with you, but I refuse to blindly submit to an ethos that displays such hypocrisy.”

“Yeah, but—”

Seymour cut Wakka off with alacrity. “No. This is neither the time nor place to continue such a conversation. We will leave here and continue on to the Calm Lands. With Lady Yuna’s permission, that is?”

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## Macalania Woods

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The glade was a peaceful place. They had quietly removed themselves from Bevelle and stopped there to rest for the night, not having wanted to remain in the city. Seymour was pleased that his advice had been followed, as he had not wished to find out what might happen to them should devout followers of Yevon have overheard anything sacrilegious.

The fire pit had been put to good use and even then a stew was bubbling away, near to being done, and tents had been set up for the coming of night. There was . . . very little conversation as they ate, though Wakka looked as though he was about to speak on several occasions, and Kimahri ate quickly before taking up a watchful pose at the entrance.

“Can we . . . take a short walk?” came Tidus’s soft voice.

Seymour looked at his mate and smiled. “There is a branch of the lake just a short distance away. Will that do? But we cannot be away for very long. It is the duty of a guardian to protect the summoner.”

His mate returned the smile and turned to speak briefly with Yuna, who sat to his other side, then got to his feet and paused, waiting for Seymour to stand. Seymour led his mate out of the glade and along the path to a branching, then headed toward the lake. It was just as beautiful as he remembered.

As they came to a stop at the edge he said, “There is something on your mind.”

“Yeah,” Tidus admitted, then plopped himself down on the ground. “Seymour, I don’t think I like how things are turning out. You said the Fayth were once people, that they choose to

become one. Lord Braska died when he defeated Sin, and somehow . . . somehow my old man became Sin.”

“Yes,” Seymour said, admitting to nothing in particular.

“People become Fayth. The Final Aeon is required to defeat Sin. Did. . . . Did my old man choose to become a Fayth? Is that . . . what the Final Aeon really is?”

Seymour sighed and sat down beside his mate, wrapping an arm around the young man’s shoulders and pulling him closer. “And if that is the case?”

“I don’t like it, it’s not right. I’m”—his voice dropped to a whisper—“afraid of what we’ll find in Zanarkand.” Tidus cleared his throat noisily and continued, “The Fayth in Bevelle, it said it was sorry that it didn’t have time to talk to me, but it would find me later.”

Seymour stared at the water for a time, thinking, then said, “It came to you before, in Zanarkand.”

“Yes.”

“You had never heard of summoners prior to arriving in Spira? Or Yevon?”

Tidus shook his head, but his words belied his action. “I had, but it was all very distant, so unimportant. I didn’t really know anything. Well, just blitzball. I didn’t even really know how to fight. When Sin attacked and Auron found me, he gave me a sword.

“The Fayth, though, came twice that I remember, once when I was getting ready to go to the stadium. Some of the kids wanted me to teach them how to play, but the Fayth said I couldn’t, not that night. I don’t know why I agreed so easily now that I think about it. I put the kids off for the next day.

“It came again after Sin’s initial attack. It was like time stopped or something. People were frozen mid-stride as they ran, and I was the only one who could move. Then the Fayth appeared briefly, said not to cry, and time went back to normal again.”

“Why would it say that?”

Tidus ducked his head and snorted. “That’s easy, I guess. My old man thought I was too sensitive, a crybaby. But that’s not important, okay? I just don’t understand, Seymour. If the Fayth are bound in place except when summoned, then how could it come to me in Zanarkand?”

“I am sorry, my sweet, that I do not hold the answers you seek. I myself am at a loss to understand this.” And he was. The truths he was aware of, those that Yevon hid from the

people of Spira, did not provide enlightenment. The Fayth were bound to stone, never to move under their own power.

And yet, it almost seemed that all of them, Fayth, Sin, and Unsent, could travel across time as though it was merely a stroll along the Mi'ihen Highroad. "However, the Fayth said it would find you. Perhaps then it will have time to give you, and you can present your questions to it directly."

His mate pressed a bit closer before saying, "Maybe. I hope so."

"We will enter the Calm Lands in the morning, where many a summoner and Sin have battled to the death. Despite its use the Calm Lands is a peaceful place, and I think you will like it."

"What's it like?"

Seymour chuckled slyly and said, "So impatient, my sweet. We will be there soon. If you want to know so badly so quickly, perhaps you should encourage me to loosen my tongue."

His mate's head turned and tilted back, his gaze upon Seymour filled with sudden mischief. "Encourage?"

"Why, yes," Seymour said with an innocent smile.

Tidus pulled away so he could scan the area and paused when his gaze reached the area behind them. Seymour looked back over his shoulder to see about what he expected, two of his Guado visible a short distance back.

"It's too bad you aren't a blitzball player," Tidus commented with mock sadness. "I could have shown you some really interesting encouragement, there, under the water."

He chuckled and drew his mate close to capture his lips, totally ignoring their guards, and kissed Tidus until they were both breathless. By the time he pulled back his mate was clinging to him limply and the sun-kissed skin of his face was tinted with a cast of red. In that moment he wanted nothing more than to push Tidus to the ground and take him, guards and guardians be damned.

Tidus let out a sound somewhere between a moan and a groan, then slowly opened his eyes to stare at him dazedly. "You don't want encouragement," he accused. "You want me distracted and moaning your name."

He arched a brow and smirked. "Correct, my sweet. And were it not for the fact that we are outside, in the middle of a fiend-infested forest, and hardly alone, you would be."

His mate smiled ruefully and tilted his head. "I wish . . . we could."

“The next inn we will reach is in the Calm Lands. Believe me when I say I will not wait much longer.” Seymour looked up at the sky and nodded slightly. “We should return. It is getting late, and we too have to take watch just like the others.”

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## The Calm Lands

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The demarcation between the forest and the plains was odd in Seymour’s opinion. The icy perfection of the woods gave way almost abruptly to desolation, a tiny canyon carved out of reddish rock; beyond that one could see lush green.

As they emerged and continued forward up the slight rise, Tidus bounded forward, then came to a dead stop at the edge of the hill. Though really, they were standing at what was almost the top of a cliff. To the west the ground angled downward and formed a path to the plains, and to the east. . . .

Lulu spoke, interrupting his train of thought. “The Calm Lands. Long ago, the high summoners fought Sin here. The road ends here. Beyond, there’re no towns, no villages. Only endless plains.”

“Many summoners stray from their path and lose their way here,” Seymour added almost absently.

Yuna flopped down onto her back on the grass and said, “I’ve always known where to go.” Then she sat up suddenly and said, “Maechen!”

Seymour looked over to see an elderly human approaching; when the man got close enough he could discern the unmistakable scent of the Farplane.

“Lady Yuna, how nice to see you again. And your companions. Perhaps you would like to know a bit more about these plains?”

“Do tell!” said Tidus.

Maechen nodded, looking pleased at such fervor. “As you know, these plains were once a battlefield. A great battle between Bevelle and Zanarkand, a melee of machina! That war left this place a barren, lifeless land. Then, time passed. The summoners took note of this uninhabited land. Great battles could be fought here, with no harm to the common folk. Perfect for the final battle with Sin, as it were. Summoners wait here, ready to perform the Final Summoning.

“Ah, to know what they must feel! In any case, when Sin is defeated here, the Calm will visit Spira once more. That’s why this place is now known as the Calm Lands. Exactly who dubbed it so is unknown. And that, as they say, is that.” Then he blinked and added, “Oh dear, I almost forgot to tell you something. There’s a chasm, a great rend in the earth, in these parts. A scar from High Summoner Gandof’s bitter battle with Sin, four hundred years past.”

“A machina battle?” Wakka asked. “They both . . . used machina?”

“Indeed!” asserted Maechen. “And now, I must away. Journey well, Lady Yuna.” The old man bowed and walked away slowly.

Tidus reached down to assist Yuna to her feet and said quietly, “I . . . I won’t let you die. We’ll find a way, somehow.”

Yuna graced him with a smile tinged with sadness. “Let’s go.”

They ambled down the sloping path with no particular sense of haste; at the bottom they paused as a machina vehicle powered by a large fan approached and came to a stop nearby.

The driver hopped out and said, “Rin’s Traveling Agency, at your service! We offer fine goods at reasonable prices. Please consider making a purchase before crossing these vast plains.”

Wakka’s face scrunched up in obvious distaste for the blatant display of machina, but said nothing as several members of the group investigated what the man had for sale. When they had completed their shopping the man concluded the transaction by saying, “There is a conventional agency a ways to the north of here where you can rest if you need. Have a safe and pleasant crossing.” He nodded sharply and clambered back into his vehicle, then whooshed away.

“Right!” said Yuna. “We’ll head there first. The fiends here might be really tough, so. . . .”

It took some time for them to arrive, and by then they were all ready for a break. Seeing the travel agency loom up ahead was a welcome sight even for Seymour, though he did notice that there was a woman standing off to one side, a short distance away.

Yuna obviously recognized her, as she changed direction on spotting her, and greeted her cheerfully. The two women chatted for a minute, then Yuna waved everyone back. And by then Seymour was beginning to wonder just how many Unsent were wandering about Spira; he really needed to get out more if this was a prevalent sort of phenomenon.

They proceeded to fight a friendly battle of Aeons (which Yuna won), and after exchanging parting words, Yuna rejoined them. “She has told me that there is a hidden temple around here, called Remiem Temple,” she said as she scanned the edges of the plains. “You can only get to it by chocobo.”

Seymour arched a brow and turned to the southeast. “Such as, that area over there?” he said, pointing at a series of staggered grass-topped mesas with chocobos hopping and fluttering between them.

“Hm. I wonder if the agency has any chocobos we could use,” Yuna said thoughtfully. “Maybe we could visit this temple, then return here to rest?”

And they did, though it was not quite that simple. The proprietor of the agency pointed them to the northwest edge of the plains, so they went, battling fiends the entire way, including the very nasty malboro. On arrival they were freshly tired from their efforts, but hardly exhausted.

A woman was there with a chocobo at her side, and quite a few more resided in a makeshift pen. "Hello!" she greeted them.

Yuna performed Yevon's prayer in greeting and said, "Do you have any chocobos we could use while we're here in the Calm Lands?"

The woman glanced inside the pen and shook her head. "The ones I have aren't trained yet. They roam freely in this area, and it's generally a case of simply catching one, but it takes time to get them accustomed to being used as steeds. It'll be some time before I have this bunch ready. It might be faster for you all to walk than to wait."

Tidus bounced over to the edge of the pen and stuck out a hand; one of the wild chocobos stalked over and said, "Kweh!"

"This one seems pretty tame," his mate observed. "I want to ride one!"

The woman's expression was somewhere between frustration and amusement. "They need to be trained. Are you offering to help?"

"Sure!" Tidus enthused, then rounded on his friends. "C'mon, it'd be fun! You know you want to!" He sidled up to Yuna and whispered something in her ear that made her laugh, then grinned innocently.

"If you're sure. . . ." The chocobo trainer vaulted over the side of the pen and began harnessing the birds, then led them out one by one, handing the reins for each to a member of the party. "Okay, the most basic lesson for these beauties is about control, about understanding what their rider wants. So, I'm going to take my chocobo over there"—she pointed—"and wait. You'll go one at a time and guide your chocobo so that it runs between me and mine, getting them used to the reins. Untrained chocobos have a tendency to run every which way, so. . . ."

It took approximately an hour for them to finish, and the task had involved a great deal of laughter as the riders tried their best to get their mounts to understand and behave. Wakka landing on his backside at one point caused Yuna and Tidus to descend into a fit of giggling, with Rikku not far behind.

It made Seymour wonder if that was exactly what had been hinted at earlier. The blitzball player was rather graceful and assured in the water, but on land Wakka was somewhat clumsy at times.

“All right!” The chocobo trainer looked at them all with approval. “I really appreciate your help, so please feel free to borrow these beauties while you’re here, okay? I’ll handle the remainder of their training once you’re done.”

That being the case, the party mounted up and loped off back to the ramped earth and up, bypassing the way south toward Macalania Woods. They didn’t stop at all, but continued east, and many of them shrieked (either in fear or with delight) as their chocobos launched themselves up and sailed over the minor chasm before them, using their wings to assist and guide their descent to the other side.

There, ahead of them, was a wondrous sight; a magnificent temple rose up from the center of the space before them. Reddish rock formed high cliffs in an almost complete circle around the temple, which in itself almost appeared to be suspended in thin air, though Seymour could see that it extended quite a ways down. Rather similar to Macalania Temple in a way.

Directly in front of them was a rope and wood bridge that extended across the yawning chasm, the only access to the rock formation the temple rested on. “I suggest we leave the chocobos here for now. There are plenty of places we can loop the reins over so that they won’t wander off while we proceed,” he said.

And so they did, taking the bridge one at a time, to eventually arrive in front of a set of massive doors. As Yuna approached several symbols lit up, expanded, then faded out, and the doors swung open of their own accord. Inside was the woman again—Belgemine was her name—and she initiated another battle of Aeons with Yuna. Several, in fact.

In the end Belgemine had a request. “I have done my duty, and I believe you are ready for the trials which await you. You will defeat Sin.” She paused before saying, “I have been overlong in this world, Lady Yuna. I request that you perform the sending so that I might finally journey to the Farplane. And once you are done”—she made a half turn and gestured gracefully at a set of doors—“please pray to the Fayth that reside here. I am sure their help will not go amiss.”

“Perform . . . the sending?”

Belgemine smiled and nodded. “Even the dead must rest sometime.”

“I . . . Yes, of course. I shall do as you ask,” Yuna said firmly.

When they returned to the travel agency a while later it was to refresh themselves, particularly with food, but also for those in the party to internalize what they had so recently experienced. Yuna had come away from the temple with a new Aeon, though it might be more accurate to say Aeons. A set of three, the Magus Sisters, difficult to control as they had a mind of their own and frequently worked in concert or to support each other, but still a very valuable set of allies.

“Well. . . .” Yuna seemed to be at a bit of a loss.

“What now, Yunie?”

“Mt Gagazet,” Seymour said, “is not a place to be taken lightly. I would advise that we begin that portion of your journey in the morning, as it is a long and perilous undertaking.”

Kimahri nodded. “Sacred mountain is harsh. Kimahri think Yuna should be well rested before attempting.”

“There is . . . one thing we could do,” Lulu said diffidently. “We have the entire afternoon ahead of us, after all. Though, I suppose, we could fight the fiends around here to become more experienced.”

“What is it?” Yuna asked, looking intrigued.

“There is a cave between the Calm Lands and Mt Gagazet, down in the gorge. Somewhat frightening, actually, given that there are tonberries within. But . . . also within is a Fayth.”

“What? Shouldn’t I have kn—oh, is it like Remiem Temple?”

“What’s a Fayth doing in a place like that?” asked Rikku.

“It is said that it was stolen from a temple long ago.”

“Huh?” said Tidus. “Why would anyone steal a Fayth?”

Seymour decided to field that one. “With no Fayth, summoners cannot train, and without training, they cannot call the Final Aeon. Without the Final Aeon, they cannot defeat Sin. That is why.”

“Cause then the summoner won’t die!” Rikku exclaimed.

“That must be what the thief was thinking,” Wakka offered.

“I kinda agree with him.” Tidus sighed and picked up a piece of fruit to bite into.

“Be that as it may,” Lulu said coolly, “should Yuna wish to acquire another Aeon, there is no harm in doing so.”

Seymour gave the black mage a searching look, remembering what she had told him about that particular cave, and what had occurred there. Lulu returned his gaze calmly, a gaze that was distracted away by new arrivals to the agency.

“Father Zuke!” Lulu greeted. “And Baralai.”

“Long time no see. You are Yuna? Hmm. . . . I had hoped to meet the daughter of High Summoner Braska, but I’m afraid I was unable to while you were still in Bevelle.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Yuna assured the man, her gaze flicking only briefly over to Baralai.

“We came,” Zuke said, “to inform you of the unrest that broke out in Bevelle. I did not want for any of you”—his eyes strayed to Lulu and Wakka for a moment—“to be caught up in any of it should you realize you needed to return there for some reason.”

Seymour privately wondered if that was a reference to the man’s own failed pilgrimage (and even possibly a mild dig at his former guardians, Wakka specifically).

“Unrest?” Wakka asked.

Baralai stepped forward and said in his soft voice, “Word has leaked out among the populace regarding the attack on Bikanel Island. While many Yevonites feel that the Al Bhed should submit to the teachings of Yevon and cast off machina, many also feel that the attack was immoral and an affront to decency. It is, after all, bad enough that Sin kills indiscriminately. Those of Yevon should not be adding to the death toll.”

Seymour narrowed his eyes faintly at the former Crimson Squad candidate. Baralai’s voice might be soft and his general air modest and unassuming, but there was something about the young man’s carriage that nearly screamed of prideful deception and satisfaction. And, given Baralai’s voiced views on Yevon and Bevelle, he had to wonder if the young man had had a direct hand in leaking information Yevon would prefer be left unknown.

“They have been recalling warrior monks from the nearby areas to augment the forces in Bevelle,” Zuke continued, “and some people have decided to decamp and find other places to live. So, should you have need to return to Bevelle for some reason, please exercise caution.”

“We are grateful for this news and appreciate the advice,” Yuna said warmly. “And that you traveled here to tell us.”

“Well, I admit that I was somewhat chagrined when I realized that not only had you and your guardians come to Bevelle, but had left before I had a chance to give my greetings. And besides, I wished to say hello to Lulu and Wakka, as well.”

Zuke turned to Baralai and performed Yevon’s prayer, then strode off back in the direction of Bevelle.

“You are staying?” Yuna asked Baralai.

“Yes, Lady Yuna. It was my intention get in some training in the gorge with the Crusaders. I felt it would be best to leave Bevelle for the time being given the burgeoning situation there.”

Seymour gave the man another assessing look, though that time it was noticed, as Baralai seemed to shrink in on himself slightly.

“Oh? That is where we were headed.”

Baralai looked puzzled at that. “May I ask why?”

Yuna explained briefly, then said, “As you are headed there already, why don’t you travel with us for the moment?”

“I would . . . be honored, Lady Yuna.”

It was a very long walk to the northeastern corner of the plains, but it was not unpleasant, and they were shortly entering an area that denoted the start to the sacred Mt Gagazet. They crossed a bridge and wound back around to walk down the sloping pathway beneath it to emerge on a wide ledge of sorts that stretched off for a distance to the south, its irregular edge marking the height of a sharp cliff.

Somewhat off to the north was the cave Lulu had spoken of, and after parting from Baralai (who had proved to be an excellent warrior) they entered and made their way to the back end, solving puzzles along the way and battling the myriad fiends which infested it. In point of fact, Rikku had a grand time stealing from a whole new crop of fiends she had not yet encountered.

However, just prior to entering the Chamber of the Fayth pyreflies swarmed to perform a spiraling dance.

“Peh! Another fiend?” Wakka said.

Kimahri shook his head. “No. Unsent.”

A lady emerged from within the concentration, the pyreflies swirling around her and making up her misty substance.

“It is. . . . It’s you, is it not, Lady Ginnem? Forgive me. I was too young,” said Lulu.

Yuna stepped up to perform the sending, but the lady made a sharp gesture with one hand.

“There is no human left in you now, is there? Very well, then. Allow me to perform my last duty to you. My last as your guardian.” Lulu nodded as an Aeon appeared, dressed much in the manner of a foreign warrior.

After the Aeon was fairly defeated in battle Lulu said in almost a puzzled tone, “Strange. I thought it would be sadder, somehow. Maybe I’ve gotten used to farewells.”

“You’re stronger now.”

“Wakka, I hope you’re right. Yuna, the Fayth is inside. Go do what you came to do.”

Oddly, or not, Tidus chose to accompany Yuna into the chamber, and they returned a short time later, far sooner than usual, truth be told. Yuna nodded to show she had succeeded, so the group made its way out of the cave and out into the open air. She delayed briefly to speak with Baralai, and then they returned to the travel agency, to rest against the coming of the day.

And, of course, Seymour took advantage, not only of the situation, but of his tempting mate; he made sure they had one of the end rooms.

Seymour slowly stripped off his clothes after they retired for the night, eyeing his mate steadily, who was waiting in the center of the room. Once his clothes were in a neat pile on a lone chair Seymour advanced to strip Tidus as well, preferring it that way, that he did so. He liked to tease the clothing off, stroking and caressing his mate, making the blond shiver and breathe raggedly over what was to come.

And that taken care of, Seymour pulled his mate close and began kissing him while his hands roamed freely over the golden flesh, waiting until Tidus was moaning softly to walk him backwards to the bed. He did so like the sight of his mate sprawled on the bed so wantonly, with eyes hazy with desire and need, just for him.

Seymour knelt on the bed, staring down at his spouse, and said, “You’ll have to try to be quiet, my sweet. While I do not care if we are overheard, it would be thoughtless of us to keep those in the next room from their well deserved rest.”

“Yes,” breathed Tidus.

Seymour smirked and leaned in. “Then let us see just how well I can shatter your control, my love.”

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**7 : GAGAZET**

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**Mt Gagazet**

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Seymour smirked and pulled his mate closer to him; Tidus was sheened with sweat and draped over his broad chest. And while the blond was technically submissive to him in bed, he wasn't a submissive person, something that Seymour found was agreeable to him. He might have once wished for a spouse that would obey his whims, but on having met a true mate, his views had shifted. He decided that once Tidus had fully acquainted himself with his life as it was presently, and had relieved himself of his general ignorance of the world, he would make for a strong, dependable partner.

On that thought he allowed sleep to claim him, the sweet scent of his mate wreathing him in comfort and security.

They headed out early the next morning, but not before being briefly delayed. An Al Bhed man had interrupted their departure, intent on speaking with Rikku. She, in turn, after the man left, said, "He wanted us to know he had a message from Cid. Pops has gone to repair the airship and he'll come get us when they're done. Well, and he wants us to keep Yuna safe or we'll be sorry." She looked a bit petulant at that.

This time they crossed the bridge and kept going, ignoring the gorge where Baralai presumably still was, and continued on up onto the mountain itself, the air growing progressively colder with each step. They arrived at the true base of the mountains to a dubious greeting of one of the Ronso lunging toward Kimahri, who dodged.

In point of fact, many Ronso ringed the area, standing on the projections from the mountainsides, like towering monuments of the race. Maester Kelk stood squarely athwart the path that led upward, arms crossed over his chest.

"Summoner Yuna and guardians," he greeted. "Lord Seymour." Kelk seemed to ignore the contest of wills going on between Kimahri and two of the larger males.

Yuna performed Yevon's prayer, but not without casting a quick look of worry at her guardian. "Maester Kelk. I thought you were in Bevelle."

"Kelk left Bevelle after seeing true face of Yevon."

The party members exchanged looks as Seymour kept his gaze on his fellow maester. "Oh?" he inquired casually.

"Kelk learn that Lord Mika Unsent, and that Yevon use machina against the teachings. Kelk leave, return to sacred mountain Gagazet."

“Ah,” Seymour said as half the party took an abortive half step back in surprise. “And if I may ask,” Seymour said, his tone still quite casual, “does Maester Mika know why you returned to Gagazet?”

Kelk shook his head faintly, then said, “Kelk not certain.”

Seymour stepped up to the Ronso, unwillingly forced to tip his head back to see the Ronso properly given his height. “I suggest you and yours keep a close watch on this side of the mountain, Lord Kelk. It would not do for Yevon to come calling and investigate your departure. If they suspect your reasoning, you may be in for a fight.”

“Kelk wonders why Seymour speak so,” the Ronso said in a low rumbling voice, his expression giving absolutely nothing away.

Seymour graced him with a half smile. “You are not blind. I merely hope that your eyes remain open, that is all. Yevon’s teachings might be reduced to the very simple maxim, ‘Do as I say, not as I do.’ Hm?”

Kelk narrowed his eyes, then nodded.

“In case you are not aware,” Seymour continued, “though perhaps you are, Bevelle is suffering unrest at present, due to an information leak regarding the attack on the Al Bhed of Bikanel Island. Mika has called back many of the warrior monks because of it, and a number of people have decided to leave the city. Not all of the people are pleased that Yevon would attempt wholesale slaughter of a race.”

A low growl erupted, but Seymour could not tell what it was directed at. The Ronso might be angered over the lack of faith, or it might be over the idea that if Yevon would attack one race, who was to say it would not attack his own? Kelk might have retreated on having his own faith bent or even shattered, but it was not always an easy task to cast off the shackles of ingrained lessons.

“Summoner Yuna and guardians, the sacred heights of Gagazet welcome you.”

Seymour nodded and stepped away to rejoin the party as Yuna said, “We thank you.”

As they passed him Kelk added, “Summoner Yuna has small voice, small frame, but a will that towers over Gagazet’s peak. The path to the sacred heights is steep, and lined with the dens of fiends. Strong guardians, be prepared, and guard your summoner well. Guard your summoner with all your heart.”

They had not gone far, barely past the outer enclave, when a voice rang out, “Halt!”

Two large male Ronso leaped down, scattering powdery snow as they landed in front of the party. Seymour did not recognize them (aside from a short time ago), but it was obvious that the others did.

“Haven’t you bothered us enough?” Tidus asked, his voice dryly weary.

“Summoner may pass. Guardians may pass. Kimahri not pass! Kimahri shame Ronso brothers. Kimahri forget his birth.”

The second said, “Forget his people, forget his mountain. Little Ronso! Weakling Ronso!”

“Mountain hate the weak, hate the small. If you will climb. . . .”

“Then I must prove my strength!” Kimahri growled.

“Think you will win?” taunted the larger of the two males. “You not forget who took your horn! Never forget!”

“Kimahri never beat brother Biran! Never win!”

“This time, I win. I will win!”

Tidus gave Kimahri an uncertain look and asked, “This some kind of Ronso thing?”

“Kimahri problem,” said the guardian, then loped forward to face off against the two.

And as they were fighting Tidus sidled over to Seymour’s side and whispered, “The other one is called Yenke. Met them originally in Luca, but we saw them again on our way to the Moonflow. They warned us about the kidnappings. I guess they’ve held a grudge against Kimahri for a long time.”

“For little reason,” he whispered back. “Kimahri seems quite able to hold his own against both, despite how well they work together. And if I am not mistaken, he has even managed to learn a few things from them in the process.”

“Oooo, that had to hurt,” Tidus said with a wince as Yenke was knocked out. “I’m sorta thinking that the Ronso are a bit too isolationist. I think that protecting one’s heritage and culture is admirable, but denying the rest of the world at the same time. . . .”

Seymour arched a brow at his mate, mildly surprised to hear such sentiments coming from a man who knew so little about Spira as a whole, and until recently, had not particularly cared to. He turned his attention back to the fight and observed, “They would do well to learn from Kimahri. He has learned from them, yet they do not do the same. Biran will not win, due to his shortsightedness, arrogance, and lack of control over his emotions.”

And so it was, with Biran knocked out only minutes later. Kimahri stood proudly, his swishing tail the only sign of his high emotion.

Biran eventually struggled to his feet and said, “Strong is Kimahri. Biran is happy. Sacred Mount Gagazet! I honor the name of the warrior who defeats Biran. Remember always, Gagazet! That name is Kimahri!”

Yenke added, “Mountain knows Kimahri strong. Kimahri may pass.”

Snow piled more thickly as they continued on, a serenade of sorts accompanying them in the form of the Ronso singing the Hymn of the Fayth. They had barely reached the first bend in the path when they paused again.

“What . . . are those?” Tidus asked, gesturing at a pile of rocks with a weapon wedged into them.

“These mark the graves of summoners and guardians who failed,” Lulu said. “Summoners that die up here . . . aren’t sent to the Farplane.”

“Why not?”

“Who would send them? They die alone,” she responded.

“So that means. . . .”

Lulu nodded. “Many become fiends, and they may want Yuna’s company.”

“Well, Yuna will be fine.”

She nodded again, then sighed and said, “All this way, only to fail. It must have been tough.”

Seymour judged that they had traversed roughly half the mountain (if he was remembering correctly) when they happened upon a young man sheltering along one part of the path.

“Greetings, Lady Yuna. My name is Wantz.”

“We have met several times before, right?”

“Not running today?” Tidus asked.

“I have to carry on my brother’s business. You’ve met him, I think. O’aka XXIII, merchant extraordinaire?”

Tidus blinked. “Wait, you’re that guy’s brother?”

“My brother wanted to come help Lady Yuna. But the temple imprisoned him for speaking openly about his views on the Bikanel attack.”

“They imprisoned him because of that!?” Tidus said disbelievingly. “No wonder people are leaving the city.”

“He doesn’t regret it, though. In fact, he told me before they took him, ‘Don’t worry about me, just go help Lady Yuna.’”

“But, why would your brother do this for us?” Yuna asked.

“Well. . . . Hey, this isn’t the time for talking! There’s dealing to be done! Welcome to O’aka’s!”

Seeing that no more would be gotten from the man, members of the party pawed through Wantz’s wares to see if there was anything they might wish to purchase before continuing on. Seymour topped off his own supply of potions, absently wondering what sort of arcane magic merchants employed to be able to carry so much stuff around with them everywhere.

Before they left Yuna said, “I will be sure to keep your brother in my prayers.”

“He’s doing the same for you, Lady Yuna.”

“Thanks.”

Some distance beyond that Tidus tripped over a sphere. Rikku bounced over and plucked it off the ground, not bothering to give the blond a hand up, then activated it. Braska could be seen on one of the snow-covered paths of Mt Gagazet, with Auron in the background.

“Hello, Yuna. I hope you are well. I wonder how old you are, now that you’re watching this sphere. You must be very beautiful, like your mother. I wish I could see you. Oh, by the way . . . Jecht and Auron send their regards. So far, our journey has been very entertaining. Of course, it is a hard journey, but I have no regrets. It is the path I have chosen.

“Yuna, when you have grown, you will have to find your own path. Do what you must do, the way you want to do it. Doors will always open themselves to those who do. Listen close, Yuna. Your future is yours to make. Live the way you want to. Whatever way that may be, you have your father’s full support. Yuna, I will always be with you.”

Braska walked toward the sphere camera and took it, the view changing briefly to show Jecht before it shut off.

Yuna closed her eyes for several moments, then took a deep breath and continued on.

Eventually they arrived at a wide plateau hedged in by the mountain on three sides, while the last was open to a breathtaking vista. Stretched out below them was a section of Spira that was

nearly unknown; to Seymour's knowledge no one lived there or had even explored recently, though he could not discount the curiosity of the Al Bhed.

He tore his eyes away finally and moved toward the majority of the party, only to pause when he heard Rikku say, "Zanarkand is on the other side, you know?"

"I know," Tidus said quietly.

"Yunie is gonna get the Final Aeon, you know?"

"I know."

"I still haven't thought of anything."

"Me neither."

"What are we gonna do?"

"We'll do something! We just don't know enough yet. Until we do, we really can't help Yuna. Let's go to Zanarkand. We'll find something there. It'll all come together! I know it!"

"Hey. . . . Just now you sounded like a leader, you know?"

"Star of the Zanarkand Abes! Didn't anyone tell you?" Tidus came to his side and smiled, and together they walked on.

As they emerged into another open area within the mountain's sides Yuna said, "Wow!"

Seymour looked around, remembering his own journey. To his left was a depression masked with aqua-blue streams of . . . something, that spiraled up into the sky. Those same tendrils covered the rock beneath their feet, emanating from the right, where the rock face was adorned with a multitude of partial bodies, and a huge inset disc covered in symbols.

"Wh-what are those?" Wakka asked, eyes wide.

"Those are Fayth," Yuna said. "A summoning! Someone is using these Fayth! Someone is drawing energy from all of them!"

"This many?" Rikku asked.

Lulu studied the wall for a moment, then said, "Who wields power on this scale, and what could they be calling?"

Rikku dashed over to Seymour, a frustrated look on her face. "Hey, you know something, don't you? Spill the beans!"

“Look not to others for knowledge. This is your journey, too.”

“Yunie might die, you know?” Rikku protested.

“No, Seymour is right,” Tidus said slowly. “This is something we need to learn for ourselves.” He reached up a hand, seemingly fascinated, then touched one of the Fayth.

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## Interlude

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He found himself suddenly in Zanarkand. His Zanarkand. “Eh?” Tidus spotted his home, the houseboat, and walked onto it, then inside, starting in surprise at seeing the boy-form of the Bevelle Fayth. The figure was glowing, pyreflies lazily floating around it.

“Welcome home.”

“You. . . .”

“Remember me? We met in Bevelle.”

“Yeah.” Of course he remembered.

“But that wasn’t the first time we met. I’ve known about you for a long time. A long, long time.”

“Where are we?” He knew where he was, but this shouldn’t be possible.

“Silly, don’t recognize your own home?”

Tidus’s attention was caught as a translucent Wakka appeared in his living room, and Rikku as well.

“What’s gotten into you? Hey!” Wakka said.

“Wake up! Wake up!” Rikku added, then both vanished.

“Wait . . . this is a dream.”

“Precisely.”

“A dream? Are you crazy? I don’t have time to be dreaming now!”

“You’re wrong,” said the Fayth. “It’s not that you’re dreaming. You are a dream.”

“Huh? Wait a sec.” Tidus scowled as the Fayth disappeared in a swirl of pyreflies. He ran outside and scanned the area, then dashed up a short flight of steps to the upper deck of the houseboat.

“Long ago, there was a war.”

“Yeah, with machina, right?”

“Yes. A war between Zanarkand and Bevelle. Bevelle’s machina assured their victory from the start. Spira had never seen such power. The summoners of Zanarkand didn’t stand a chance. Zanarkand was doomed to oblivion. That’s why we tried to save it—if only in a memory.”

“What did you do?”

“The remaining summoners and the townspeople that survived the war. . . . They all became Fayth—Fayth for the summoning.”

“The summoning. . . . You mean Sin?”

“No,” the Fayth said, gesturing around with one hand. “I mean this place. A Zanarkand that never sleeps.”

“What?” His worst fears were starting to crash in on him, but he could not help but listen to the small figure. And damn it, he would *not* cry.

“The dreams of the Fayth summoned the memories of the city. They summoned all the buildings, all the people who lived there.”

“The people. . . . What, they’re all dreams? Me, too?”

“Yes, you’re a dream of the Fayth. You, your father, your mother, everyone. All dreams. And if the Fayth stop dreaming. . . .”

Tidus blinked as everything changed. All that remained was a Zanarkand devoid of any buildings, the only thing left the houseboat they were standing on. “No! So what if I’m a dream! I. . . . I like being here.”

“We’ve been dreaming so long . . . we’re tired. Would you and your father. . . . Would you let us rest? Both you and your father have been touched by Sin. Sin, the one whom all Spira—the spiral—revolves.”

“What are you saying?”

“You two are more than just dreams now.”

A translucent Yuna flicked into view long enough to cry, "Wake up! Wake up, please!"

"Now wait just a minute," Tidus said. "Am I even really me, then? Or am I just some crappy imitation of someone who lived a thousand years ago? Some collection of memories only allowed to exist at the whim of a bunch of willfully bound souls? And what do you mean, more than just dreams? Are you trying to tell me that if you stop dreaming, I'll disappear? How is that possible!? How is it possible for a mere dream to become Sin!? How is it possible for a mere dream to be the destined mate of a living, breathing Guado!?"

The Fayth appeared to sigh and turned to face him. "Tidus, you are more than just a dream, as is your father. Sin . . . is a creature that can transcend reality. Like the Fayth it can exist both in Spira and in the dream world, because it is partly a dream, a summoning."

"Huh?"

"When Sin came to your Zanarkand, and inadvertently touched Jecht, it gave him substance and made him real. Your father was torn away from the dream and left in Spira, a man just as real as Braska. After your father became Sin he returned to the dream long enough to bring to you Auron."

"An Unsent Auron."

"Yes. And later, as you well know, Sin returned again to collect the both of you. By that action, you were touched by Sin, and like Jecht, you became more than just a dream."

"So if this all ends. . . ." Tidus waved his hand around. "I won't disappear? I can try to help save Spira from Sin, keep Yuna from dying, and I can try to help the Fayth rest?"

The figure tilted its head to one side. "And what if you did disappear?"

Tidus exhaled noisily and slumped to the deck. "You . . . created me. For all I know . . . the original me is one of the Fayth in that wall." He fought back the urge to cry, tilting his head back abruptly to gaze at the shifting patterns of light in the sky.

"I guess I would continue anyway," he said haltingly. "To stop now would mean certain death for Yuna, and who knows how many others after her. I have to try! I would regret, though, hurting Seymour."

"We are pleased," said the Fayth, a hint of warmth creeping into its voice. "Just a little more, and maybe. . . . Maybe you are the dream that will end our dreaming at last."

Tidus blinked back the moisture in his eyes, then blinked again and looked around.

"Are you all right?" Yuna asked, a look of deep concern on her face.

“Hey! We were so worried about you!” Rikku said.

“I . . . I’m okay.”

“What happened?”

Tidus wanted to laugh, though not from amusement. What happened, indeed. “Nothing. . . I blacked out. I was dreaming. You called me . . . and I woke up. Nothing like a good nap! Well, I’m ready. Let’s go.”

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Seymour narrowed his eyes dangerously as Tidus accepted a hand up from Wakka. There was no way his mate had simply taken an impromptu nap. His gaze flicked over to the Fayth wall, then back to Tidus, and his mate gave him a somewhat haunted look as he walked toward him, then smiled faintly.

“The Trials of Gagazet await,” Seymour said.

“Yes,” Yuna replied, then, “But this mountain is harsh. We will rest briefly. Please, someone start a fire.”

Wakka produced a pile of wood from their supplies and set it up, then stepped back so Lulu could set it ablaze with a well placed spell. That section of the mountain was warmer than the rest, but still chilly.

Yuna sat down on the bare rock and pulled Tidus down with her, then said softly, “I know you’re hiding something from me. What is it?”

Seymour took a seat beside his mate, forming a rough triangle, as the others also dropped down to rest. Only Kimahri remained standing, his eyes scanning the area alertly.

“I . . .” Tidus heaved a sigh and said, “Sin . . . is my old man. Jecht is Sin.”

Seymour noticed in his peripheral vision that Lulu had placed a restraining hand on both Rikku and Wakka.

“How is that possible?” Yuna asked.

“Sin is my old man. My old man became Sin! I don’t know how or why he did it. I felt him, inside. And when I did, I knew it was true. My old man is Spira’s suffering. Sorry.”

“Even knowing that Sin is your father. . . Still, you know, I must. . . .”

“I know. Let’s get him. I think my old man would want that.”

“You’d fight your own father?” Lulu asked quietly.

“Yeah. No problem there.”

“Uh. . . ‘Bout your old man,” Wakka said. “You sure this ain’t some kinda bad toxin dream or something? Then, Chappu. . . I, uh. . . I think I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear nothing. I’m getting a little confused, ya? Why. . . Why’d all this have to happen?”

Yuna turned her gaze on Seymour. “You know something. Tell me, please.”

“We will learn when we arrive. Soon. Until then, consider all that you have learned thus far.”

Conversation died a quick death. When Yuna felt she was ready she stood, prompting the others to do likewise. Lulu put out the fire with another spell, then followed the summoner into the nearby cave mouth, everyone else trailing along.

Seymour held Tidus back slightly, to walk at a slower pace. “That was not all.”

Tidus shook his head. “I was . . . a dream,” he whispered. “Like my old man. Sin made us real. That wall—the Fayth created a dream Zanarkand, my home.”

Seymour faltered, his chest tightening unpleasantly and making it hard for him to breathe. “A dream?” he asked cautiously.

His mate looked up at him, his eyes widening a second later. “The Fayth assured me that I’m real now. I won’t disappear on you, Seymour. I think you’re stuck with me.”

Tidus gave him a weak smile as the constriction in his chest eased. “I am glad to hear that, my sweet,” he said as they took a branching to follow the others within the cave.

“I guess . . . that kind of explains why I know so little,” Tidus added. “It’s just a dream, without any trappings of the war between Zanarkand and Bevelle. The Fayth didn’t exactly say it, but also didn’t deny it—I think Sin itself is a summon.”

Seymour shot an assessing look at his mate, then nodded. “Correct.”

“Okay. By who? And shouldn’t Yuna know this? And the others? Before the Final Aeon.”

Seymour sighed softly. “I must wonder what Auron would have done in this situation. Something tells me he would have waited until we arrived, until there was no time to do anything other than react according to the character of a person.”

“Huh? I don’t understand,” Tidus said as the group stopped and Wakka stepped up to handle the first trial, he being the only one capable for it.

“I could explain everything right now, but even with all that people have learned, do you think they would believe? Had you been told of these things back when you first met Yuna, what would you have done? What do you think Wakka would have done?”

Tidus cleared his throat and slouched for a moment. “I wouldn’t have known anything anyway,” he pointed out. “Wakka would have denied everything and preached that we should trust in Yevon. He probably would have denounced anyone saying such things and labeled them an Al Bhed or Al Bhed sympathizer.”

Seymour nodded, pleased that his mate understood his reasoning. “Precisely, my sweet. Right now he is confused, but far more open to seeing the truth behind Yevon. Lulu is very intelligent, and this is her third pilgrimage as a guardian, but even she, up until recently, would have had much the same reaction. Them aside, Yuna’s views are the most important, as it is she who is summoner.”

“And Yuna isn’t stupid,” Tidus commented. “If Sin is a summon, though. . . . Is it even possible to free a Fayth? To stop the summoning?”

“I suppose that is what we must find out.”

Wakka completed the first trial so they backtracked and took the other branching of the path, eventually arriving at a watery section best left to the two blitzers and Rikku. Seymour felt a great deal like fidgeting as his lover swam out of view, unable to stifle his worry, though knowing that Tidus was a fairly formidable warrior in his own right.

They returned a short time later to shake the water from their persons, then stand still long enough for Lulu to use a bit of careful fire magic to dry them off. They backtracked a second time, though a much shorter distance that time, and took the final branching within the cave system.

Seymour knew they were close to the exit when they were forced to climb a series of ledges, then walk a sharply sloping pathway. And there, up ahead, was a circle of light, evidence of another cave mouth.

“They’ll be upon us soon. She will send fiends to test our summoner’s strength,” Seymour commented to no one in particular.

“Who is ‘she’?” Yuna inquired.

“Yunalesca.”

“Lady Yunalesca?”

Seymour nodded. “In Zanarkand, she awaits the arrival of the strongest.”

“She . . . is still alive?”

He gave her a half smile. “As much as Mika, or Auron was.”

“I see,” Yuna replied a bit stiltedly.

“Shall we continue?” he invited.

“Yes,” she said firmly.

“I think your father would be proud of you.”

“Then . . . I must not let him down.”

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8 : ZANARKAND

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## Zanarkand

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And ‘it’ came, not more than thirty seconds after they left the cave system, a nasty looking fiend that sported a glimmer of intelligence in its eyes. Seymour had to wonder, given the usual quality of fiends, if this one was formed from a person all too aware of what they would become, and therefore retained more than just a lust for misplaced revenge. He mused, in the few seconds they had before the fight began in earnest, if it had once been a failed guardian or a summoner.

It was clever, attempting to use the party’s protections against them, or to its own benefit, but not invincible. After a long, hard fight it exploded into a mass of pyreflies, leaving in its wake an exhausted group.

“Pretty serious, ya?” Wakka muttered.

“Hey! Can’t we rest a little?” Rikku whined.

“There is no need,” Seymour commented. “We reach the summit soon.”

“I know, that’s why I want to stop for a bit. Soon means that . . . there’s not much time left.”

“Rikku. . . .” Yuna said softly.

“Fine. I’ll think on the way.” Rikku stomped off ahead of the others, maintaining a short distance between them, like a reluctant scout.

When they reached the summit Tidus inhaled sharply and ran out onto a nearby promontory. As Seymour joined him he could hear how his mate’s breathing remained affected, and he gazed out over a city he had seen once prior. The ruins of Zanarkand brought up feelings of immense sorrow, not only over the sad remains of a once proud city, but for his own experiences there, with his mother. Seymour rested a comforting hand on his mate’s shoulder and squeezed lightly.

“It’s not mine,” Tidus whispered.

“No,” he agreed. “It is the unfortunate reality. I am no more pleased to be here than you are.”

Tidus turned his head and looked up, anger, curiosity, and what looked like sympathy in his gaze. “Is this where you received. . . ?”

He arched a questioning brow, then nodded.

“So I’m right, aren’t I. If we go down there, if Yuna follows the same path as all the others, then one of us will . . . take my father’s place.”

“That is exactly what will happen,” Seymour said calmly. “But not you, or me.”

Tidus snorted. “No. I think of Yuna as a sister, or a very good friend, but I’m not crazy enough or emotionally invested enough to volunteer for a lifetime of madness.”

Sudden footsteps made him glance over his shoulder; Yuna was standing practically behind them, and Rikku was bouncing their way with all the subtlety of a behemoth.

“Yuna, I say no! If we go down there, then you’ll. . . .”

“Rikku, you’re a true friend, and I thank you, but, I must go . . . down, to Zanarkand.”

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t go. But shouldn’t we think about it some more? There’s gotta be some kind of way we can save you, Yuna!”

“I knew this moment would come. . . .”

“Yunie. . . .”

Yuna stepped forward to give the girl a hug. “I’m just going to look a bit longer, and then we’ll proceed.”

Rikku frowned and scuffled off, at which point Yuna turned to face him directly.

“You overheard,” he stated.

“Yes. Is that what this is? All that this is? Summoners come to Zanarkand to sacrifice not only themselves but one of their guardians? I had always wondered why the only guardian I knew of to come away from this was Sir Auron.” A look of chagrin twisted her face briefly. “I guess I didn’t want to look hard enough. Still, it is a bit suspicious when there’s never anyone left to reveal the truth.”

Seymour nodded. “Other guardians of a summoner have an odd habit of dying after the Final Aeon is obtained.”

Yuna looked off over the ruins of the city, a pensive expression on her face. “And yet, without the pilgrimage, Sin can’t ever be defeated, and the people of Spira will never know peace, even only for a few years at a time.”

“Then we find another way,” Tidus said.

“But how?”

“Maybe *she* can tell us,” his mate replied.

Yuna frowned at Tidus. “If I understand any of this so far. . . . Why would Lady Yunalesca help anyone to change the way things are?”

Seymour cleared his throat softly, catching their attention. “You could . . . simply ask her many questions prior to giving her the answer she seeks of you. It may be that she will tell you something of importance, some clue that will assist us in our goal.”

“You’ve met her,” Yuna stated. “This is where your Aeon comes from, is it not? The one you used in Luca.”

“I have. And I was a child, in no position to question the workings of Spira. Had I been older, then perhaps. . . ?”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” Yuna said resolutely. “We will go down to Zanarkand and see this Lady Yunalesca. Maybe then we will have some answers. I just hope that . . . my guardians will be able to understand.” She flashed a sudden smile at them, then turned and strode away. “Kimahri, let’s go.”

They camped after making the long walk down into the city remnants, there at the water’s edge. In the distance Seymour could see the ruins where Yunalesca waited, a massive uprising from the ocean. He moved away from the camp fire to join Tidus on a slight rise and brushed shoulders to say what could not be said in words.

“That’s . . . strange.”

“What is?”

Tidus pointed at the ruins. “We’re going there?”

“Yes.”

“Why there? That’s the blitzball stadium, Seymour. Was Yunalesca a diehard fan or something? This is ridiculous.”

Seymour chuckled softly. “Look at it this way, my sweet, and look around you,” he said, gesturing with one hand. “So very little remains, and that stadium is one of the few places that could actually house the Cloister of Trials. Can you imagine a Fayth residing in the shell of a house? Would you rather down in the sewers?”

That got him a laugh and a nudge from his mate. “Okay, okay. Point taken, oh wise one. Still, it’ll be weird. I used to play in that stadium. It was such an important part of my life. It’s where I was when Sin attacked.” Tidus paused, then said, “If I concentrate hard enough, I can see it as it was then, in all its glory.”

Seymour did not think it prudent to point out that Tidus had never lived the truth, and therefore remained silent. Eventually they wandered back to the makeshift camp, offering to take watch while the others slept. They were awakened after their own rest by a silent Lulu, and took the time to make sure they were ready for what was to come.

As they walked along a shattered road and carefully picked their way over rubble, Wakka said, "Looks like the Farplane."

"It is close enough," Seymour said as he paused briefly to look at the proliferation of pyreflies. "The Moonflow is similar, though not even close to this extent. Certain places just attract them."

Lulu shot him a look, then said, "Places of mass death?"

"How do you mean?"

She shrugged and gestured slightly. "There was once a city of sorts built over the Moonflow. Now it's a sunken ruin. I have to wonder how many people died there. And here, this whole city, was more or less wiped out."

Seymour pondered that for a moment and then shrugged. "You may well be correct."

At the entrance to the stadium they were greeted by the emergence of a man. As necessary, Seymour held back on speaking, knowing that it was something Yuna needed to deal with. He only wondered if she or anyone else would realize that the man wasn't alive.

"Journeyer of the long road, name yourself."

"I am Summoner Yuna. I have come from the island of Besaid."

"Your eyes, my dear. Show me the long road you have traveled," the man replied, gazed at her, then nodded. "Very good. You have journeyed well. Lady Yunalesca will surely welcome your arrival. Go to her now, and bring your guardians with you. Go." With that he walked past them, fading with each step until he was gone.

Yuna bit her lip and glanced at her companions, then stiffened her spine and marched on ahead, into the stadium itself. It was badly damaged, and only experience with the stadium in Luca allowed for anyone to attempt to visualize how it might have once looked. Well, with the exception of Tidus, who Seymour noted looked fairly distressed.

They had not gone far when the pyreflies swarmed, danced in a dizzying spiral, then reformed into the translucent figures of several people, one of them obviously a summoner. The group paused as a female guardian said resolutely, "If it might benefit the future of Spira, I will gladly give my life. It is the highest honor for which a guardian might ask. Use my life, Lady Yocun, and rid Spira of Sin."

“What . . . what was that?” Rikku asked.

“Many have come here,” Seymour said, “such as they.”

“She said ‘Lady Yocun’, didn’t she?” Lulu mused. “Wait! She guarded High Summoner Yocun?”

“With this many pyreflies the dome is like one gigantic sphere,” Seymour offered. “People’s thoughts remain here. Forever.”

They continued, though Seymour was feeling a slight bit of trepidation about the whole situation. He was rewarded for that worry a short while later, as they had just finished climbing up a collapsed strut, and were preparing to use part of the blitz sphere framework as a walkway.

A boy appeared with a lady, causing Tidus to gasp softly. Seymour sighed almost imperceptibly at the sight of his younger self and mother.

“No!” his child self cried. “Mother, no! I don’t want you to become a Fayth!”

“There is no other way. Use me and defeat Sin. Only then will the people accept you.”

“I don’t care about them! I need you, mother! No one else!”

“I don’t . . . have much time left,” she said wearily. A second later they both vanished in a swirl of pyreflies.

Seeing the hesitantly curious faces aimed his way, Seymour gave an emotionless half smile and said, “She was dying. It was . . . her last gift to me.”

Wakka was gaping; Seymour ignored the young man and gestured for Yuna to continue, and breathed a silent sigh of relief when her movement spurred on the others.

“Your mother is . . . Anima?” Tidus whispered.

“Yes.” He might not wish to talk about it, but for his mate he would. “My father wanted to exile us to Baaj Temple. After all, his public union with a woman of another race had served its purpose. I remember . . . he tried to say once that he couldn’t bear to watch us suffer, but he never once did anything to ease our pain. Only Tromell did.

“In fact, it was Tromell who convinced my father not to send us away. Looking back on it, I’m fairly certain her health would have failed much more quickly had we been made to live there. She wanted to give me the power and confidence to defend myself.”

“Is that . . . why Anima looks as she does?”

Seymour nodded. "Our pain. In the end, I could not do it. I could not use my mother's sacrifice to defeat Sin and leave her to suffer for years more. At least now she dreams of pleasant things, even though the Farplane is beyond her present reach."

A gasp of surprise caught their attention, and Seymour looked ahead more closely; Tidus clutched his arm briefly.

"Hey, Braska," Jecht said. "You don't have to do this."

"Thank you for your concern."

Jecht scowled. "Fine. I said my piece."

Seymour noted almost absently that Tidus was trembling, though due to anger or pain he could not determine.

"Well, I haven't!" Auron shouted. "Lord Braska, let us go back! I don't want to see you . . . die!"

"You knew this was to happen, my friend."

"Yes, but I . . . I cannot accept it."

"Auron, I am honored that you care for me so. But I have come to kill grief itself. I will defeat Sin, and lift the veil of sorrow covering Spira. Please understand, Auron."

The trio of specters continued onward; Yuna looked like she might weep, and even Kimahri was shifting restlessly, his tail flicking about wildly. The party followed, only to see them again around the next bend.

"Are the Trials ahead?" Jecht asked.

"Probably." Braska shrugged one shoulder.

"Here, too, huh? Gimme a break. I was expecting, you know, parades and . . . fireworks!"

"You can ask for them after I defeat Sin," Braska said even as they faded from sight.

Tidus snorted and kicked the nearby wall. "My old man. So stupid. Right up until the end. So blind. I swear, if I could see him again, I'd deck the bastard."

"No one told him," Lulu said quietly.

"I know, I know. Like nobody wanted to tell me," Tidus said with a halfhearted glare around. "Yeah, anyway, can we go?"

Yuna nodded and offered a smile, then began walking again. There was a long flight of stairs at the end of the hallway, stretching down into a darkness that receded as soon as they arrived. Seymour once again held back, having already been there, leaving it to the others to figure out the puzzle.

They were almost ready to move on when Rikku adopted a confused look and said, “Weren’t there destruction spheres at the last two temples? Why not this one? Did the others have them too?”

That innocent query resulted in a secretive smile on Seymour’s part, and another round of puzzle solving on the part of the group’s remainder. He had to wonder, this being the second time he had been there, if there were Unsent in the service of Lady Yunalesca whose job it was to reset all puzzles in the Cloister of Trials and replace any hidden treasures, not to mention do a bit of repair work.

He was brought out of his thoughts when the final trial appeared at the center of the lift that would take them down. Seymour couldn’t properly remember how he and his mother had managed to defeat the thing, but with a full complement of fighters it went down in a reasonable amount of time, despite the sweeping attacks and necessity of having to move around frequently.

After they caught their breath he said, “Well, we’re here.”

“The Hall of the Final Summoning,” Yuna stated, her tone almost questioning. She stepped onto the lift, which immediately sank and took her out of sight. A whisper of a voice floated by, its origin indeterminate, but sounding a great deal like Jecht. “Huh? What do you mean no Final Aeon?”

The lift returned, with Yuna on it. “Everyone!”

At the bottom was a curious room, more of a hollow than anything else, with only the lift itself and a doorway to remark upon. The party swept through and stopped dead once inside.

“This isn’t a Fayth. It’s just an empty statue,” Yuna stated, then looked up sharply as the man who greeted them outside the stadium appeared.

“That statue lost its power as a Fayth long ago,” he said in a voice dusty with the ages. “It is Lord Zaon, the first Fayth of the Final Summoning. What you see before you is all that remains of him. Lord Zaon is . . . his soul is gone.”

“Gone!?” said Wakka.

“You mean, there is no Final Aeon?” Rikku added.

“But fear not,” the man continued as though he had not been interrupted. “Lady Yunalesca will show you the path. The Final Aeon will be yours. The summoner and the Final Aeon will join powers. Go to her now. Inside, the lady awaits.” He vanished, and the door behind him opened in invitation.

Seymour felt a great deal like laughing. He could recall, during his journey, that the man said almost the exact same words to him. It was like a conversation on repeat, pausing for the expected surprised protestations, a memory called up by circumstance to voice an empty explanation.

“Yuna, wait!” Lulu cried. “Seymour, you knew this was going to happen, didn’t you?”

“Of course,” he said mildly.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Rikku asked with a pouty frown.

“If I had told you the truth ahead of time, would that really have stopped you from coming?”

Yuna glanced at the door, then back at her companions. “Let’s go see what she has to say.”

Kimahri blocked her path. “Yuna.”

“I’m not going back.”

“Kimahri knows,” he said patiently. “Kimahri go first. Yuna is safe. Kimahri protect.”

She smiled and nodded, letting the him go first, then following, the others behind her. “Wow,” she said softly. “This room is in decent condition. And look at all the—” She broke off as the door at the far end opened, and someone very familiar emerged and descended the short flight of stairs.

“Lady Yunalesca.”

“Welcome to Zanarkand. I congratulate you, summoner. You have completed your pilgrimage. I will now bestow upon you that which you seek. The Final Summoning . . . will be yours. Now, choose. You must choose the one whom I will change . . . to become the Fayth for the Final Summoning. There must be a bond, between chosen and summoner, for that is what the Final Aeon embodies: the bond between husband and wife, mother and child, or between friends.

“If that bond is strong enough, its light will conquer Sin. A thousand years ago, I chose my husband Zaon as my Fayth. Our bond was true, and I obtained the Final Aeon. There is nothing to fear. You will soon be freed of worry and pain. For once you call forth the Final Aeon, your life will end. Death is the ultimate and final liberation. Your father, Braska, chose this path.”

Yunalesca turned and walked gracefully back up the steps and through the door, leaving them to stare. They were quickly distracted by another memory forming in not two feet away from them.

“It is not too late!” Auron said almost desperately. “Let us turn back!”

“If I turn back, who will defeat Sin?” Braska rejoined. “Would you have some other summoner and his guardians go through this?”

“But . . . my lord, there must be another way!”

“This is the only way we got now!” Jecht said harshly. “Fine. Make me the Fayth. I been doing some thinking. My dream is back in the other Zanarkand. I wanted to make that runt into a star blitz player. Show him the view from the top, you know. But now I know there’s no way home for me. I’m never gonna see him again. My dream’s never gonna come true. So make me the Fayth. I’ll fight Sin with you, Braska. Then maybe my life will have meaning, you know.”

“Don’t do this, Jecht! If you live . . . there may be another way! We’ll think of something, I know!”

“Believe me, I thought this through. Besides . . . I ain’t gettin’ any younger, so I might as well make myself useful.”

“Jecht,” Braska said softly.

“What! You’re not gonna try to stop me, too?”

“Sorry. I mean . . . thank you.”

“Braska still has to fight Sin, Auron. Guard him well. Make sure he gets there. Well, let’s go.”

“Lord Braska! Jecht!”

“What do you want now?” Jecht asked, clearly impatient.

“Sin always comes back. It comes back after the Calm every time! The cycle will continue and your deaths will mean nothing!”

“But there’s always a chance it won’t come back this time,” Braska replied. “It’s worth trying.”

“I understand what you’re saying, Auron. I’ll find a way to break the cycle.”

“You have a plan?”

Braska gazed at him curiously. “Jecht?”

“Trust me, I’ll think of something.”

The memories of Jecht and Braska ascended the stair and disappeared through the door. Auron dropped to one knee, seemingly in impotent anger and sorrow, then likewise vanished from their sight.

“Choose?” Yuna said, then looked directly at Seymour. “You’ve been here, you have heard it before. I don’t wish to dredge up painful memories, but . . . Anima, she’s your mother, isn’t she? She sacrificed herself to become a Final Aeon, right?”

“She did. Lady Yunalesca asks the same of one of you. Your father”—he looked at Tidus—“did so for Lord Braska, which is why he is now Sin.”

“But how!?”

Seymour laid a hand on his mate’s arm to calm him. “I cannot say for sure, for I have never attempted to defeat Sin. I can only speculate based on what I know firsthand, and what I have learned as a maester of Yevon.”

“Which is?” Tidus persisted.

He gave his mate a smile. “Lady Yunalesca herself told me that Sin will always return. It matters not how many summoners obtain the Final Aeon, how many defeat Sin and lose their lives to become High Summoners. Sin comes back. The hope of Spira is the hope of a brief Calm, that brief peace where people can live without fear. But it always ends. On the other hand, I learned from Grand Maester Mika that Sin is nothing more than a tool of a single man known as Yu Yevon.”

“Huh?”

“Yu Yevon was a summoner, the ruler of Zanarkand. Lady Yunalesca’s father, actually.”

Tidus’s eyes lit up. “The Fayth. . . .”

Seymour nodded. “I learned from Mika that Yevon crafted the armor he designated Sin from the souls of the dead. It is not just to wreak revenge on those who use machina that Sin attacks populated areas. After all, who in Kilika ignores the teachings?

“If anyone does it’s Bevelle, and yet they remain safe, much like Luca. Odd, is it not? Sin uses the souls of the dead to craft an unholy armor, to protect Yu Yevon.”

“And what is Yu Yevon doing?” Lulu asked.

“Aside from directing Sin? I am not sure,” Seymour replied. “Though, having again considered the Gagazet Fayth, and what I have learned from Tidus. . . .”

“Yevon is perpetuating the dream of Zanarkand?” Tidus mused. “Isn’t that kinda like, I don’t know, childishly twisted?”

“That does not explain why Sin comes back,” Lulu said. “Its defeat is only temporary, so why is this?”

“Well,” Yuna said slowly, “if Yevon has always been there, can’t he be the one making the creature return? Shouldn’t it be him we go after?”

“But we can’t do that, ya?” Wakka said. “We gotta defeat Sin.”

“And then Yu Yevon?” Rikku asked. “If we defeat him, no more Sin?”

“We must defeat Sin to get to Yu Yevon,” Yuna said.

“How we supposed to defeat Sin without the Final Aeon?” Wakka protested.

“And if Yuna obtains a Final Aeon, one of you must be the sacrifice,” Seymour reminded them. “And if Yuna uses that Final Aeon against Sin, she will die. Based on what happened to Jecht, whoever is the sacrifice for the Final Aeon will become Sin.”

Wakka groaned and clutched at his head.

“Well, I don’t think anyone here should agree to any sacrifice without some answers first,” said Tidus. “I know, Seymour, you were just a child, but none of us are now. There’s no reason we can’t ask questions, right?”

“Yeah!” Rikku chimed in.

“Then let’s go get some answers.” Yuna adjusted her grip on her staff and made for the stairs.

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## 9: SOULS

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### Zanarkand

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They dashed up the stairs Yunalesca had taken and in through the door; she was waiting for them. “Have you chosen the one to become your Fayth? Who will it be?”

“Might I ask something first?” requested Yuna. “Will Sin come back even should I use the Final Summoning to defeat it?”

“Sin is eternal. Every Aeon that defeats it becomes Sin in its place. . . . And thus is Sin reborn. Sin is an inevitable part of Spira’s destiny. It is never ending.”

“Never ending? But . . . but . . . if we atone for our crimes, Sin will stop coming back, ya? Someday, it’ll be gone, ya?”

“Will humanity ever attain such purity?” Yunalesca countered.

“This . . . this cannot be!” Lulu protested. “The teachings state that we can exorcise Sin with complete atonement! It’s been our only hope all these years!”

“Hope is . . . comforting. It allows us to escape fate, however tragic it might be.” The Unsent sounded just as callous as Seymour would have expected of her.

“No!” Tidus made to step forward, but was interrupted by another memory.

Auron appeared, looking ready to do battle. “No! Where is the sense in all this? Braska believed in Yevon’s teachings and died for them! Jecht believed in Braska and gave his life for him!”

A ghostly image of Yunalesca replied to him, “They chose to die . . . because they had hope.”

Auron’s memory brandished his sword and attacked, but was easily thrown back. He landed in an unmoving heap, then vanished in a swirl of pyreflies.

“Yevon’s teachings and the Final Summoning give the people of Spira hope,” Yunalesca continued, as though the memory had not happened. “Without hope, they would drown in their sorrow. Now, choose. Who will be your Fayth? Who will be the one to renew Spira’s hope?”

Yuna’s eyes blazed. “No one. I would have gladly died. I live for the people of Spira, and would have gladly died for them. But no more! The Final Summoning . . . is a false tradition that should be thrown away.”

Yunalesca disagreed. “No. It’s our only hope. Your father sacrificed himself to give that hope to the people. So they would forget sorrow.”

“Wrong. My father. . . . My father wanted . . . to make Spira’s sorrow go away. Not just cover it up with lies!”

“Sorrow cannot be abolished. It is meaningless to try.”

“My father. . . . I loved him. So I. . . . I will live with my sorrow, I will live my own life! I will defeat sorrow, in his place. I will stand my ground and be strong. I don’t know when it will be but someday, I will conquer it. And I will do it without . . . false hope.”

“Poor creature. You would throw away hope. Well. . . . I will free you before you can drown in your sorrow. It is better for you to die in hope than to live in despair. Let me be your liberator.”

“Oh, no,” said Tidus. “I am not going down without a fight! I am not going to die at the hand of someone who’s been around for so long they’ve lost all humanity.”

“I agree!” Yuna said, then readied her staff.

“Yuna needs Kimahri. Kimahri protect Yuna.”

“Well, I’m fighting!” Rikku chimed in.

“I can’t believe we’re gonna fight Lady Yunalesca! Gimme a break!”

“You can always run, Wakka,” Lulu said dryly.

“Hah! I’d never forgive myself—no way! Not if I ran away now. Even in death, ya!”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Yuna!” Tidus stepped up beside her, sword at the ready, and Yunalesca engaged them.

The Unsent was vicious, not only countering everything they attempted with effects designed to prevent more of the same, but she also attacked. After a few rounds of spending more time depleting their supplies over doing damage, Yuna got the bright idea to cast reflect on everyone. And while they were able to defeat her, it was not the end.

Defeat in that case simply triggered a transformation on the Unsent’s part, into something straight out of a nightmare. The party was more often in zombie status than healthy, and phoenix downs were flung about like candy. It was just as bad when Yunalesca transformed a second time, though it became apparent that being healthy was not a preferred status given one of her common attacks.

However, with patience and perseverance the party prevailed, defeating the Unsent a third, and final, time. She reverted back to a human form and said, "If I die, so does the Final Aeon. And with it, Spira's only hope."

"Then we'll find Spira a new hope!" Tidus said confidently, then added a bit snidely, "And besides, you're already dead."

"Fool. There is no other way. Even if there was. . . . Even if you did destroy Sin . . . Yu Yevon the immortal would only create Sin anew."

"Daddy, huh?"

"Ah . . . Zaon. . . . Forgive me. . . . Spira has been robbed of the light of hope. . . . All that remains is sorrow." Yunalesca collapsed to the floor and ceased moving, then dissolved into pyreflies.

Yuna stared at the spot for a short time, then said, "I cannot believe what we just did."

"Let's do something more unbelievable."

"What?" Rikku asked Tidus.

"Destroy Sin," he replied. "So it won't come back, and without the Final Aeon. I don't know how just yet, but we'll figure it out."

Yuna sighed and nodded, not that there was much else to do in the way of a response, and said, "We need to leave this place. Maybe it's silly, but it gives me the creeps."

"Well," Rikku said slowly, "pops is supposed to come for us once the airship is fixed, but unless he's miraculously waiting for us outside, I suppose we should just head back the hard way. I'd almost rather camp on Mt Gagazet than in Zanarkand again."

Tidus wrinkled his nose and looked to Seymour, who said, "There is nothing here aside from fiends that would mean us harm, and that is true of most places in Spira. Still, one place is usually as defensible as the next, and this place holds many bad memories."

"Kimahri knows of hot springs on sacred Mt Gagazet. Kimahri show."

Rikku squealed and bounced in place. "Ooo, a bath!"

Lulu and Yuna also looked fairly interested, though refused to be quite so girly about it, and that rather decided things. The trip back out of the stadium was strangely quiet, and attacks by fiends were less, almost as if Yunalesca was part of what called them to reside there, or even into being.

Most breathed a sigh of relief on gaining the outdoors, despite the sad ruins now plainly visible in the daylight, then were brought up short on spying the hulking mass known as Sin lurking not far offshore.

The creature did not move or give any outward sign that it meant to attack, though Seymour noticed that his mate seemed inordinately focused on it, rather like he was attempting to communicate. And then Tidus dropped his gaze, and Sin shifted backward into deeper water, then turned and sank beneath the waves.

Unfortunately there was no sign of Cid's airship so they began the trip back, up and out of the city, and toward Gagazet. It wasn't until they had reached the promontory that anyone spoke.

"That was the weirdest thing, ya?" Wakka said. "Sin, just like that, backin' off."

"I don't know if he could understand me," Tidus said softly, "but I tried to tell him we'd figure it out. It sounds silly, but, I think he was worried because we destroyed any chance of there being another Final Aeon."

"And I," Seymour interjected, "believe that lends proof to my earlier theory. Sin as Jecht is not trying to bring death to you, but rather get your attention so that you can set him free. Not once has Sin permanently damaged any of you, and that speaks highly of the idea that a part of Sin really is governed by the soul and mind of Jecht." He was rewarded by a tentative smile from his mate.

As they passed the Fayth Wall Maechen was again noticed. He seemed to pop up in rather peculiar places in Seymour's opinion, but who knew the true agenda of the Unsent?

"Lady Yuna," Maechen said warmly, in no way indicating that he recognized the direction of their approach. "Shall I tell you about the Spira of days long past, eh?"

Yuna nodded, so the old man said, "There is a legend, you know. Just before the horrible Sin appeared . . . a terrible war raged between Bevelle and Zanarkand. When the armies of Bevelle attacked Mt Gagazet, they heard a song echoing across the snowy slopes. 'Tis a song from an otherworld,' they said, and the soldiers panicked and ran. And then, as if to pursue the retreating armies, Sin appeared!

"Some time later, scouts from Bevelle braved the mountain. On the other side, they witnessed the ruins that had been Zanarkand. The city destroyed. Not a single soul left standing. Gone! In its place, a multitude of the Fayth had gathered on Gagazet. They were singing a song, the song we now call the 'Hymn of the Fayth'. And that, as they say, is that. Well . . . maybe not all of it."

Maechen paused with a look of inquiry, then launched into another speech at Yuna's nod of encouragement. "Rumors flew in Bevelle about Sin's sudden appearance. They said that the people of Zanarkand became the Fayth, that they had called Sin. And that the man

responsible . . . was none other than the summoner Yevon, ruler of Zanarkand! Yes, the lord father of Lady Yunalesca. On the eve of Zanarkand's destruction, Lady Yunalesca . . . had fled to safety with her husband, Zaon. Later, the two used the Final Summoning to defeat Sin. Yet the people of Bevelle still feared Yu Yevon.

"It was to quell his wrath that they revered him, and first spread his teachings. And so were born the temples of Yevon. I suppose it's possible Yunalesca had planned it that way from the start! A fair trade, she defeats Sin in exchange for her lord father's honor. Of course, there's no proof. No, the facts are lost in the mists of time. And who'd admit Yevon was an enemy of Bevelle? You can bet the temples had a hand in covering that one up! And that, as they say, is that."

"Then what about the hymn, huh?" Wakka said. "If it was a Zanarkand song, what's it doing now as. . . ?"

"Let me tell you about the Hymn of the Fayth," Maechen said, his face expressing his pleasure at getting to expound once more. "It was once a Zanarkand song, yes, but sung in defiance of Bevelle! Of course, the Yevon clergy of Bevelle forbade it. Then, as these things often go, those who disliked Yevon began to sing it. The Al Bhed, for instance. The Hymn of the Fayth became the symbol of defiance against Yevon. Yevon could do nothing but capitulate. They lifted the ban on the song, and spread a new story.

"They said the hymn was a song sung to soothe the souls of the dead. And so saying, they took the song and made it scripture. That's why today, the hymn is sung all over Spira. You could say that, though Zanarkand is gone from this world, it lives on in the song."

Seymour raised a cynical brow and finally voiced his own thoughts. "Legend, you say? My dear man, you are . . . quite ancient, are you not? You speak almost as though from experience."

Maechen's eyes went a bit shifty at that. "Aaaah, but look at the time. I've rambled on again. I do love stories, you see. Well, I owe you my gratitude for hearing this old scholar out."

The old man hastily toddled off, leaving Seymour to restrain himself from an eye roll, and the others to mild confusion over the abrupt retreat. Kimahri caught everyone's eyes a short time later by pointing upward, bringing to their attention how that portion of the mountainside was stepped. "We climb. Kimahri show you hot spring."

And they did, eventually being led into a fairly large cave that radiated warmth from a shimmering pool of water. "Kimahri guard entrance," the Ronso said, then stationed himself looking outward within the short tunnel that led outside.

Yuna and the girls exchanged glances, then scurried behind one of the larger rock formations, the faint sound of giggling wafting out. Seymour chuckled and pulled Tidus to him and firmly faced the other way before taking a seat, then smiled when Wakka joined them.

“So, pretty confusing, ya? But”—Wakka furrowed his brow in a compelling display of deep thought—“if Sin’s armor is like . . . souls, then couldn’t summoners try to weaken it by doing Sendings?”

Seymour blinked in surprise and turned the idea over in his mind. “You may have something there.”

“Hey! Then all the summoners could help,” Tidus said enthusiastically. “It wouldn’t hurt, right?”

“And,” came Lulu’s voice from behind them, “Sin seems to take distinct comfort in the Hymn of the Fayth. Perhaps that could be used to calm or distract it.”

Seymour started to turn in response, then checked himself. “Yes, that might also be a wise course. Perhaps we could encourage the people of Spira to that at an opportune moment.”

“Though, to what purpose exactly?” Tidus mused.

“Sin is not a living creature in the sense that we are,” Seymour said thoughtfully. “It is possible that if weakened by those tactics, and even direct attacks, we could . . . slip inside? And then make our way directly to the source of the problem, Yu Yevon himself.”

“Well, it couldn’t be, right?” Tidus questioned. “And if a Final Aeon can defeat it, but then becomes Sin, and there’s that time gap, then something is obviously going on for it to regenerate, right? If souls are used as armor, that might also be why it’s common for Sin to be defeated in the Calm Lands. It’s fairly close to Zanarkand, which is packed with pyreflies and fiends. Still, wouldn’t that mean we’d be at risk if Yuna or any summoner were to use a normal Aeon near Sin?”

Splashing noises erupted behind them, then Yuna’s voice could be heard. “Perhaps we should speak to the Fayth directly?”

“Is that even possible?” Rikku’s voice asked.

“Sure, I’ve spoken to the Bevelle Fayth several times,” Tidus said, then winced. “I mean, when we were there, and then, uh, when I blacked out at the Fayth Wall, though maybe that time was just a dream.”

Seymour smirked faintly. “They might be persuaded to venture an opinion if asked.”

They talked about that and other things for some time, certainly long enough for the girls to complete their bath and for the men to have their own, then set up a watch rotation for the night and claimed their rest. The next morning they continued on down the mountain, pausing briefly to speak with Maester Kelk, then journeyed on.

As they approached the bridge across the gorge Baralai emerged from underneath and hastened over. He bowed and said, “Lady Yuna! Have you come to—” He stopped in confusion as he got a good look at the party. “You are all of you all right? I . . . don’t understand.”

“We are,” Yuna said. “Perhaps you will walk with us? We can discuss this in a more . . . congenial setting.”

And they had barely made it onto the broad plains of the Calm Lands when Rikku shouted and jumped, waving wildly at something in the sky. They were obviously spotted, as the airship came in to land as near to them as it could, and Rikku rushed forward and clambered onboard, yelling for the others to join her.

She led them inside and to the bridge, bolting off the lift to launch herself at an older man. “Pops!”

“Well,” he said around an armful of female, “you all look okay. What’s going on?”

“Oh, pops! We—”

“Uncle Cid,” Yuna said. “I’m really happy to see you.”

“You’re alive, and that’s what counts. Now what’s going on?”

“Pops, we defeated Lady Yunalesca! There’s no more Final Aeon! We gotta find a new way to defeat Sin, and we think we know how!”

Cid pushed his daughter back firmly but gently, and looked to Yuna for a less excitable explanation. Baralai was fascinated with the ensuing explanation, and looked to Seymour’s eyes to be quite relieved. Of course, it did not hurt that Yuna and Baralai kept sneaking glances at each other, lending credence to the idea that something would evolve given half a chance.

“So, we think it would be a good idea to revisit the temples,” Yuna concluded, “before we do anything else.”

“All right. And with this baby”—Cid patted a nearby console—“we can get places quick. And what about Mika in Bevelle?” He shot a suspicious look at Seymour. “He’s gonna be more ornery than a long-tailed cat in a room full of rockers when he finds out.”

“With any luck he will allow himself to move on,” Seymour replied smoothly. “If he is as convinced as Lady Yunalesca of the inevitability of Sin, his will to exist may vanish, and him with it.”

“If you say so,” Cid said gruffly. “Besaid first?” When Yuna nodded he barked out a few orders in Al Bhed, then said, “Rikku! Show everyone to the cabins and where they can eat.”

Seymour took advantage once again given the situation. As the trip to Besaid would take some time he pulled Tidus into the cabin he had chosen as soon as it was not impolite to do so, then pinned the young man to the wall and kissed him breathless.

“Now,” he whispered, “barring any unforeseen emergencies, I plan to have my way with you, my sweet. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” his mate responded, then slid a hand inside Seymour’s outer robe to begin stroking his skin teasingly, sliding around his ribs to his back, then lower.

Seymour chuckled and bent his head again to kiss his mate, tangling one hand in the hair at the nape of Tidus’s neck while the other reached down to encourage his love to lift a leg to wrap around his waist. A minute later he was carrying Tidus over to the nearest bed and depositing him on it, then stripping off his clothing with celerity before reaching over to tug off his mate’s shoes.

Once he had relieved Tidus of clothing as well, as slowly and as teasingly as he could, he stretched out on the mattress and pulled his mate atop him. “I will kill anyone who dares interrupt us,” he said quite seriously, then proceeded to reduce his love to a quivering mess of desire, and further, several times.

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The people of Besaid were incredibly surprised to see Yuna again, never mind a maester of Yevon, and each of them had something they simply had to say to her. It made the trip to the village slow, but Yuna would not brush off the people, regardless of any sense of urgency she might be feeling.

They eventually made it to the temple, and into the Cloister of Trials. By some strange coincidence Baralai was with them, and no one objected, perhaps inured at that point by Tidus’s previous behavior when it came to heathen dealings with the Fayth.

And so the entire party packed into the Fayth’s chamber to see what resembled a little girl with pigtailed appear, hovering above her statue, and it did not wait to be addressed before speaking. “Sin is cursed. Sin prays. It curses its form, it prays for dissolution. Sin sees dreams of its own destruction. Sin is looking at us. We live in a fading echo of time left us by the destroyer. Free him from Yu Yevon. Free him—the Fayth that has become Sin.” And with that she vanished.

Back in the outer room Yuna said, “Well, that’s kind of confirmation?”

They returned to the airship, and then went to Kilika. The Fayth there was dressed in the manner of a Crusader, and offered, “Sin swam in the sea near Zanarkand. Perhaps the waking dream eased its suffering. Your father touched Sin and became real that night, foundering in the seas of Spira. How sad now, that he is caught in the tragic spiral. He is Sin. He is lost.”

Tidus was cornered once they left the chamber with questions about what the Fayth meant, since its words were obviously directed at him. He demurred long enough to return to the airship, then explained everything he knew about the origins of both his father and himself, and what the Fayth meant about the waking dream.

Wakka had a tendency for a while to poke Tidus experimentally every so often, just to make sure he was real, but aside from that everyone mostly took it in stride and turned their attention toward the next temple, Djose. That Fayth, resembling nothing so much as a ship's captain, imparted, "For a long time, we had forgotten how to go forward. You reminded us we must go forward. Yes, we must run. Let us go, you who shared our dreaming, and we will run till the dream's end."

The Fayth of Macalania appeared to have once been a nun if its clothing was anything to go by, which Seymour found mildly amusing considering what the Aeon Shiva looked like in action. Still, "Should the dreaming end, it all will disappear—fade into Spira's sea, Spira's sky. But do not weep, nor rise in anger. Even we were once human. That is why we must dream. But we are weary, and would like to rest."

"This is all very well," Lulu said back on the ship, "but nothing of what they say is answering the question."

"They aren't really giving us the chance to ask," Rikku pointed out. "They just appear, say something sorta cryptic, and vanish."

"Then it must be Bevelle," Tidus said firmly. "I know that Fayth is capable of, er, normal speech. Maybe the others are so caught up in dreams that . . . they can't focus in this world well enough to . . . I dunno?"

"That reminds me," Rikku said suddenly. "I overheard one of the men on the ship talking about Baaj Temple. One of his friends went there to explore, sorta like we were back when we found Tidus, and he mentioned that he could hear, faintly, the Hymn of the Fayth. Do you suppose there's a Fayth there, too?"

For some reason everyone looked to Seymour for an answer, so he straightened up and said, "I see no reason not to check. And if there is a Fayth present, its help may be welcomed, and possibly its counsel." And that made him wonder anew where his mother had been laid to rest, so to speak.

Cid was happy to fly them over, and investigation proved that there were entrances other than that of which Tidus or the Al Bhed had used previously. The room outside the Chamber of the Fayth sported six pedestals, each lit up with symbols of a distinct colour.

"They kind of remind me of the known temples," Lulu said quietly.

“It’ll have to remain a mystery, I suppose,” Yuna said, then approached the barrier, which swung smoothly out of the way.

Inside was a Fayth, one that Seymour recognized immediately. The lady looked surprised. “Son. . . .”

Seymour inclined his head, both in respect and to hide the sudden wetness that stung his eyes. “Mother.” He was inordinately grateful when Tidus unobtrusively pressed against his side.

They stared at each other for a timeless moment before the lady looked to Yuna and said, “You desire my help? You do realize that . . . I cannot be a Final Aeon for any but my son, correct?”

“Yes. But we will defeat Sin nonetheless, and this time for good. We’re concerned, though, about what would happen should I summon any of you during our attack.”

The lady’s expression went contemplative. “I, more than the others, must feel some worry of my own, for I was fashioned to be a Final Aeon. You must seek out the wisdom of Bevelle’s Fayth, for I am unsure. Even so, I am willing to lend you the aid you seek, should you wish it of me.” She cast a lingering look at Seymour before returning her attention to Yuna.

Yuna looked over her shoulder at him. Seymour nodded, giving silent permission, so she gazed on the Fayth and said, “Please.”

“Then so shall it be.” With one final look at her son, the lady crouched and launched herself into Yuna, who was caught by Kimahri before she hit the floor.

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**10: BEVELLE**

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**Bevelle**

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Approaching Bevelle was slightly nerve-wracking; entering it and walking toward the temple was more so. The people of the city were quiet, the normal sounds muted. Mika's reaction to the information leak had certainly affected the citizens, and more were still leaving. Yet, many found a smile for Yuna, though Seymour was looked upon with some suspicion.

They had not managed to make it to the temple when a warrior monk trotted up to intercept them. "Lord Seymour! Maester Mika desires an audience."

Seymour rolled his eyes mentally and began planning to ask Yuna for healing spells to handle his upcoming headache. "I shall be along directly." The monk saluted and dashed off so Seymour turned back to the party. "It is likely that Mika heard of our arrival back in the city and wishes to know why Sin has not yet been defeated. Please, continue on to the temple. I will join you there as quickly as possible."

He began to turn and was quickly stopped by a very quiet, "Seymour?"

"Tidus," Yuna said, "why don't you go with him? I don't like the idea of *any* of us going off alone, not with how unsettled things are here."

His mate cast a grateful smile at the summoner and watched as the rest of the party continued on, then looked back at him. "You don't mind, do you?"

Seymour shook his head and gestured for his mate to come closer. "No, but I do think there's something we should discuss prior to arriving at that audience."

"Is there something wrong?" Tidus asked with a faint frown.

"Not as such. Come, let us sit over there for the moment. It is secluded enough." Within a minute they were seated on a stone bench placed diagonally at the meeting of two walls. "My sweet, what I'm about to say may cause you upset. I ask that you let me speak fully before you react, all right?"

Tidus gave him a mildly suspicious look, but nodded.

"I explained to you of my youth. Over time I became a vengeful man, much given to hatred." He quickly raised a hand and pressed a finger to his mate's lips as Tidus went to speak. "There was a time when it was my intention to become a summoner's sacrifice."

His mate's eyes went quite wide and the lips beneath his finger tightened.

“And then I met you. I met you, Tidus, and in that moment I was willing to cast aside everything for the possibility that you might choose to accept me, and instead strive toward a true solution to Spira’s sorrow. And out of all of you, I knew that Auron held the best understanding of our world, what lies hidden beneath. So, at the next best opportunity, I spoke with him, as well you know, and asked for his help. I told him what I was willing to offer, and he agreed.”

His mate’s expression took on a cast of outrage, which made Seymour chuckle softly. “I would not expose his secret, for yes, I knew he was an Unsent, and he would allow me to speak with you privately. He did, we did, and you indulged my desire for confirmation. At that point, the world changed. Now, the point of this little confession is that Mika will likely attempt to sow dissension given that I will not be seeing him on my own. I would not for the world place you in that position of ignorance, or allow him to hurt you.”

Seymour removed his finger and waited, feeling some slight anxiety, for his mate’s expression had not yet softened. Eventually Tidus spoke.

“I’m angry with you for misleading me. What would have happened if I hadn’t agreed? If I hadn’t let you kiss me?”

“I did tell you there was risk to both parties, my sweet, should confirmation not occur. I did not lie. I would certainly have died at some point, though I am unsure as to your fate, for *you* are not the hybrid child of two races. It is very possible that your weakness would have abated on my death and you could have continued on normally from that point.”

Tidus furrowed his brow and shook his head. “I don’t like to think about that.” He gazed at Seymour steadily and said, “But if that had happened? You died, I mean. What then? What of your previous plans?”

Seymour shrugged faintly. “Even with so very little to go on, my bitterness at losing the bliss of your presence might have prompted me to remain as an Unsent. I might have attempted to conceal that, to continue on as I had been. I might even have gone along with the push to marry Yuna as a means to an end, and see her safely to Zanarkand, to become her sacrifice.”

His mate frowned again, looking almost confused, then lifted his chin and said, “I think I’m just going to be flattered that I could so completely change a man’s life just by being there. I never thought of myself as anything special. Well, aside from blitzball.”

“You are special,” Seymour said, “and not just because you’re my mate. Though, I suppose it might be said that my opinion on that is suspect.”

As he had hoped for, Tidus relaxed into a faint smile.

“Are you ready to brave Grand Maester Mika with me, then? Quite frankly, I would be glad for your support there. Perhaps with you at my side I can hold fast against the splitting headache

I had expected to walk away with. Besides, I prefer you with me anyway, so I am happy that Yuna saw fit to release you from duty for this.”

“Yeah,” Tidus said softly. “Okay, let’s go. Hopefully it won’t take too long, and maybe he’ll. . . .” He made a vague gesture with one hand.

“Indeed. And then we can rejoin the others, to see what Bevelle’s Fayth has been willing to speak of. And, Tidus?”

“Yes?”

“I do intend to make up for having caused you distress.”

His mate smiled almost shyly, something he found endearing. Seymour rose and gave Tidus a hand up, then led him off to a confrontation he was not exactly looking forward to.

“Why are you here?” Mika demanded.

Seymour arched a brow and waited the man out, to see what he would say.

Mika repeated himself, then added, “You must go and defeat Sin, quickly! The summoner has obtained the Final Aeon from Yunalesca, has she not?”

“Well, we did meet her,” Tidus said mildly. “But we fought and defeated Yunalesca.”

“What!?” Mika staggered.

Seymour stepped in with, “Summoners and guardians will be sacrificed for the Final Summoning no more.”

“You have profaned and subverted a thousand-year-old tradition? Fools! Infants! Do you realize what you’ve done? You’ve taken away the only means of calming Sin!” Mika turned on Seymour and shouted querulously, “And you! You betray Yevon! You betray everything you’re sworn to! How could you permit this to occur, you who would have become—”

“Hey,” his mate shouted right back. “Maybe that’s not the only way! We think we’ve got another.”

“Why. . . . Preposterous! There is no other way! Spira has lost its only hope. Destruction is inevitable. Yu Yevon’s spiral of death will consume us all. I have no desire to watch Spira die.”

“It won’t die,” Seymour said smoothly.

“Yu Yevon, clad in the unholy armor of Sin, is invincible. And the only thing that could have pierced that armor, you have destroyed! Nothing can stop it now,” said Mika with a fatalistic

shake of his head. After aiming a look of betrayal and disgust at Seymour, he raised his hands upward and dissolved into pyreflies.

A second later, before they even had a chance to feel relief that that particular issue had been resolved, the Fayth of Bevelle appeared before them.

“It’s you.”

The Fayth nodded at Tidus and said, “Come, to my room.”

“Okay.”

Agreement was barely out of his mate’s mouth when the Fayth vanished. They quickly exited the courtroom and made all decorous haste to the Temple of Light in order to join the others. Seymour cheated outrageously and bypassed the Cloister of Trials entirely, instead taking an entrance known only to the maesters.

While their audience with Mika had gone more smoothly than expected, and Seymour did not have a headache, there was no point in inviting one by suffering the Trials. The barrier to the Chamber of the Fayth was retracted so he and his mate passed on inside without pause.

“You’re here,” Yuna said. “The Fayth has been unwilling to speak.”

“He came to us,” Tidus said, “just after. . . .”

“Just after Grand Maester Mika decided to depart for the Farplane,” Seymour finished. “He requested we come here.”

“I suppose he wished us all to be present?”

“Yes.” Everyone turned to see that the Fayth had appeared. “Hello.”

“I must thank you for the Aeon,” Yuna said politely.

Tidus asked, “So, what’s up?”

“Have you found a way to truly defeat Sin?”

“Well,” Tidus said, “we think so. Several things, actually.”

“Yes,” Yuna said. “Sin seems to be affected by the Hymn of the Fayth, and that might slow it down.”

“Because of my old man,” Tidus muttered.

“Hmm. . . . Perhaps.”

“You mean, it won’t work?” Yuna asked.

“A very long time has passed since Jecht became Sin. He may not be able to hear the hymn anymore.”

“I know it’s a long shot. . . . But we gotta try anyway if there’s a chance,” Tidus insisted.

“Yes, you must,” said the Fayth agreeably. “I’m glad you’re doing this. You have a good spirit, truly. If it works, what’ll you do then? You need more than the hymn.”

“We defeat Yu Yevon,” Lulu said.

“Yes. . . . If you defeat Yu Yevon, it will end. Tell me, what do you know about Yu Yevon?”

“He’s what makes sin come back!” Tidus said.

“Sin is his armor, it protects him,” added Yuna.

“Yu Yevon was once a summoner, long ago. He was peerless. Yet now he lives for one purpose, only to summon. He is neither good, nor evil. He is awake, yet he dreams. But . . . maybe not forever.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Tidus said. “Because we’re ending it.”

“Yes,” said the Fayth. “Even if you defeat Sin with the Final Summoning, Yu Yevon will live. Yu Yevon will join with the Final Aeon. He will transform it into a new Sin. Yu Yevon merges with the Aeon. . . . Then, protected by this new Sin he has created, Yu Yevon continues the summoning.”

“For eternity . . . huh?”

“But you know,” the Fayth continued, “there is no such thing as eternity if you end it, is there.”

“Uh huh.”

“Yu Yevon lives inside Sin. Yuna, listen. When you fight Yu Yevon, we will help you. Promise me you’ll summon us. I’m afraid your swords and magic won’t be enough. Please, call us. Promise?”

“Yes, of course. And that is part of why we came back to Bevelle.”

“Oh?”

“We were concerned. We had learned that the Aeons could become Sin, and were unsure if we should call on their help during our attack.”

“You must. Until you face Yu Yevon there is no concern. But you must call us when the time comes.”

“I promise,” Yuna affirmed.

“You know. . . . When it is all over . . . we will wake, and our dream will end. Our dream will vanish.”

“Yeah,” said Tidus somewhat mournfully. “You’ve been dreaming a long time, haven’t you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m grateful,” Tidus said firmly, then ducked his head as Bevelle’s Fayth vanished.

Seymour felt sorrow for his mate, at the knowledge that Tidus’s Zanarkand would disappear should they succeed. And he could see that the others were not so different than he in their reaction. Still, as Tidus had said, he too was grateful, for that dream had produced not only his mate, but in a way, the solution to the problem of Sin itself.

They were part way back into the city proper when a nun rushed by, stopped dead, then doubled back. “Lady Yuna!”

“You’re . . . Shelinda, right?”

“Yes!” Shelinda blushed and ducked her head.

“We met in Guadosalam,” Rikku said.

That might explain, oddly enough, why Seymour had no notion of the girl’s identity, and his mate neither.

“Lady Yuna,” Shelinda said, “I must tell you, your courage has been a great inspiration to me. Why, all Yevon seems to be in a state of confusion. Yesterday they called me out of the blue and made me captain of the guard!”

“We had heard that monks were being recalled,” Yuna said.

“There is chaos in the temples,” Shelinda confided, “not just among the people. And all the priests do is blame each other. I worry what will become of Yevon. But no! I must be the rock that stands against the swirling tides, right?”

Rikku bounced in place excitedly. “Hey! Maybe you could help us with the hymn.”

“Good idea!” Tidus chimed in.

Rikku continued, “It’s like, we need you to tell as many people as you can.”

“What should I tell them?”

“A ship in the sky will sing the Hymn of the Fayth. When they hear it, we need everyone to sing along!”

“Everyone in Spira!” Wakka urged.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

Rikku bounced again and shook her head. “You don’t have to! Just tell everyone!”

“A ship in the sky will sing the Hymn of the Fayth? So when they hear it, everyone should sing along, correct?”

“If they do,” his mate said, “we might be able to defeat Sin!”

“Truly?”

“Yes!” Yuna asserted firmly.

“That’s wonderful! You can count on me! I shall tell all of Spira!”

“And. . . .” Everyone turned to look at him, so Seymour half smiled and added, “Do you hold awareness of whether or not there are other summoners in the city?”

Shelinda pressed a finger to her lips and considered. “Lord Issaru is in the palace. I believe that Lady Dona continued on her pilgrimage. Um. . . .”

“Very well. Please, spread the word. We shall speak to Lord Issaru personally.”

“Yes, Maester Seymour. At once!” Shelinda performed Yevon’s prayer and rushed off a second later.

“Shall we head to the palace?”

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Issaru appeared to have recovered from his little breakdown, mostly. Yuna was forced, though, to graciously accept more than one apology from the man’s lips. The group explained their theory and plan of attack, something that made Issaru alternately confused and

admiring. He had dropped heavily into a chair on hearing that Yunalesca had been defeated, but otherwise he seemed to be all right.

“So, you would like all summoners to be a part of the battle, to help weaken Sin’s armor, because of what it is. Yes, I shall help you, of course. My ability is at your disposal.”

Yuna smiled broadly and nodded. “Thank you so much, Lord Issaru. With all of us working together, even the people singing at the right time, I know we can defeat Sin and lift the veil of sorrow from Spira for good!”

“Please, when shall we be leaving?”

Yuna looked to Seymour, deferring that decision. He said, “We will spend the night here. We are also on the lookout for Lady Dona, and it may be that she has already been to Zanarkand and realized something is amiss, and decided to return to Bevelle to seek answers. We will depart in the morning, and I’m sure we would be pleased if you would join us for breakfast, here in my suite.”

Issaru bowed and replied, “You are too kind, Lord Seymour. I would be honored. I shall take my leave of you for now, to make preparations.” He performed Yevon’s prayer and quietly left.

Seymour waited a minute, then headed to the suite’s door, opened it, and ordered one of his Guado to spread the word among their own race within the city regarding his desire to see the lady summoner should she appear. He had not yet retreated when Kinoc appeared.

“What is going on?”

Seymour quirked up a brow and invited the man in with a gesture, then closed the door. “What do you mean?”

Kinoc paused on seeing Baralai, then looked back to Seymour. “It is bad enough that the city is greatly unsettled due to recent events. I am now hearing all manner of talk about a great undertaking with regard to the defeat of Sin.”

Wakka let out a low whistle. “She’s quick, ya?”

“Please, have a seat,” Seymour offered, then took one next to his mate. “By the way,” he said casually, “I suppose I should mention that Grand Maester Mika has departed for the Farplane.”

“What!?”

“Yes.” Seymour shook his head with mock regret. “It seems he was less than pleased that Lady Yunalesca is no more.” He fixed his fellow maester with an intense look, ostensibly ignoring

how Kinoc had blanched. “Tragic, I’m sure. But then, Mika was very set in his ways and unwilling to adapt to changing times. He lost his will for continued existence.”

Kinoc sat there for a bit, shaking his head slightly, then gazed at Seymour almost warily. “How do we go on?”

“We go on as we must, naturally. I *suggest*, my dear Kinoc, that you consider putting a leash on the priests in this city who are wasting time arguing amongst themselves. I also advise that you release the recalled monks back to their former duties, and set free those people imprisoned for speaking their minds, those who did not agree with Mika’s choice to attack the Al Bhed.”

Kinoc stared at him, then suddenly nodded. “Yes, of course. All of that would serve to calm the people.”

“I’m sure it has not escaped your notice, Kinoc, that you are the only remaining human representative of the maesters of Yevon. Given that you reside here in Bevelle, I expect you will take care of correcting Mika’s mistakes. I will send Guado to Mt Gagazet to inform Maester Kelk of recent events, so that he is not left in ignorance.”

“After Sin has been. . . .”

Seymour smirked faintly. “Oh, Lord Kinoc, I’m sure the maesters of Yevon could sit down and discuss things at that point. For surely, there are a great many changes on the horizon.”

“Please,” came a soft voice.

He looked over to Baralai. “Yes?”

“May I be allowed to assist Lord Kinoc? Surely he will need support in this, from someone who understands the situation.”

Seymour looked back to Kinoc, who nodded and said, “Yes. You can begin by filling me in on . . . the details. Well, all right. There is no sense in wasting time. Baralai, with me.” He got to his feet and made for the door.

Baralai stood and performed the prayer, then additionally bowed to Yuna and Seymour. “I look forward to our next meeting, and hope it is not long in coming.”

“Well,” Yuna said once both men had departed.

Tidus gave him a halfway admiring look and commented, “You can be pretty intimidating.”

“Kinoc certainly seems to think so,” said Lulu.

“Kimahri write letter to Lord Kelk. Guado take?”

Seymour nodded instantly. “Certainly. I will have them borrow chocobos from the palace stables so that they might make all haste.”

That night, Seymour was pleased to have his mate to himself, with all the comforts of a grand suite in a palace, and showed Tidus, in no uncertain terms, just how special he was. And then again, just to make sure the message got across.

And, after breakfast, they quit the palace and headed to the rendezvous point with Cid and the airship, collecting along the way several relatively unknown summoners and their guardians. When they arrived at the bridge it was to see that Lady Dona and Barthello were there, though she looked impatient and somewhat skeptical.

Cid looked up at their arrival and said, “Well, this is it, eh?”

“Yu Yevon’s hiding somewhere inside Sin, and we’re gonna find him,” Tidus replied.

“Well, that sounds pretty simple.”

“Simple is the way you like it, right?”

Cid flashed a smile and said, “You got that right.”

“And we summoners are supposed to . . . send?” Dona asked.

“Yes!” Yuna turned to face her fellow summoner. “Sin’s armor is made up of souls! While the main group attacks it may be further weakened by performing the sending with all your hearts.”

Dona looked a bit disgruntled by that, but nodded. “I’ll take charge of it, then. You lot, come here!”

The nameless summoners scurried over (Issaru more gracefully) and clustered around Dona, then began nodding as she issued a series of low-voiced commands. “We will begin after the Hymn picks up, once you’re ready to attack,” she stated, then gestured sharply and strode toward the lift. Before the group disappeared she added, “We won’t stop until you’re inside. Our guardians will protect us.” And then they were gone.

“Soon as they’re in place. . . .”

“Pops! I’m countin’ on you!”

Cid glanced at Rikku and said, "Would I let my little girl down?" He drifted off to gaze out one of the windows, then nodded a short time later. "Okay," he said, then moved over to a panel and fiddled with it. "How's that?"

"Right on!" Rikku said with an excited bounce.

Cid shouted several orders as the Hymn of the Fayth began playing, and the airship lifted off to hover in the sky.

"A singing ship in the sky," Lulu said softly.

"I hope everyone got the message, ya?"

"Yeah, like my old man," Tidus muttered.

Rikku's brother bolted up from his post and yelled, "Sin!"

Cid launched himself at a console and started tapping buttons. The front window of the airship suddenly served double duty as a display screen for the results of an analysis, making Seymour realize that it wasn't actually glass up there.

"Okay!" Cid turned to face them and said, "There are weak spots at the fins. We start there, then attempt to get inside."

"If we can't get in through the mouth, we'll rip open a new one!" his mate said. "You with me?"

"Now that's what I call a plan!" Cid agreed. "Get up on deck."

"Vydran! E ghuf fryd du ica!"

Cid aimed a wide smile at his son. "All right!" he said, then looked back at the group. "I won't tell ya to be careful. Do your worst!"

"Roger!"

"Fyed! Rikku, you . . . guard."

"Will do!" said Tidus cheerfully, then dashed off toward the lift.

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11 : SIN

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## Sin

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Up on deck they could hear the sound of many people singing, adding their voices to the ship's playback of the Hymn of the Faith. Rikku bounced in place excitedly and squealed, "They listened to us!"

"We won't let them down," returned Tidus, then flung out his arms for balance against a sudden tremor in the ship.

"Hey, guys? Guys? That's not good, ya?"

Seymour looked at Sin somewhat apprehensively, taking a step back as the great beast formed a massive sphere of energy around itself. Moments later eight smaller spheres shot out in perfect symmetry, carving cylindrical paths through sea and sky and earth. His mate dodged closer to him as a great upwelling of dirt was flung toward the ship, muttering, "Damn you, old man. . . ."

Just then the deck speakers activated, Cid's voice issuing forth. "Hey, I saw somethin' shine on the base of Sin's fin! I reckon its a weak spot!"

And as though Sin heard and understood its (presumably) minor peril, another shockwave shook the ship in response.

Seymour shook his head lightly as the sound of Al Bhed came through the speakers—bickering from the sound of it—and readied his staff. He did not need Rikku's translation to understand that Sin was pulling them closer, even flying to keep pace with them.

"Damn!" came Cid's voice. "Keep it busy while we charge up the guns!"

Seymour assessed the target quickly, then shouted, "Listen! We won't be able to get in very close so we must choose carefully. Rikku, Lulu, you're up with me. Wakka, you're Lulu's backup, Tidus, you're Rikku's. Yuna and Kimahri come in as needed for healing."

Tidus gave him a sideways look and murmured, "I assume you paired Rikku and I because we're the only ones Cid and Brother will listen to for moving the ship?"

"That and she has taught you how to throw an Al Bhed potion, my sweet," he replied, flashing a quick smile, then moved forward into position.

The fight itself was almost unremarkable, with members of the team working well in concert. Seymour motioned them all back when Cid's voice came through the speakers, and they watched as the ship pulled away and fired the guns, blowing what remained of the fin clean

off. Sin shuddered, its position in the sky destabilized to some degree before it was able to compensate.

“Couldn’t have done it without you! All right! Everyone look sharp! Time to hit the other side!” Cid bellowed, then dove around the massive bulk of Sin to give them a clear shot at the other fin. It wasn’t long before the guns removed the remainder of that target, too. “Yeehaw! Where next?”

Seymour sighed as another round of bickering in Al Bhed commenced. He rather thought these people took nothing very seriously.

“The main gun’s busted,” Rikku translated.

“Dang it! All right, back inside! Time for another plan!”

Seymour wasn’t entirely surprised when Tidus shouted, “No! We’re going in! Every blitzzer knows: when you got the ball, you gotta score!” Ah well, at least his mate was not without courage. He watched as each of them shouted out a response to Tidus, then jumped, but before his mate could also, he stepped up to take Tidus’s hand and jump with him.

They landed on the thing’s head. Clearly visible (and macabre in and of itself) were some ruins, those in the style of a long-dead Zanarkand, set back a distance from their landing point. Directly before them was a peculiar structure, not unlike a sinspawn made from a particularly deadly, man-eating flower, with a discoloured patch of ground in front of it. That pushed upward, forming an incomplete sphere with overlapping plates. A quick assessment revealed that the thing was Genais, there to help protect Sin from magical attacks, and looked to be rather deadly in its own right.

The battle was long but well fought, Seymour keeping them concentrated on Genais, even when it retreated into its shell. It was eventually bested, the party shrugging off the gravity-based attacks from Sin as they could not actually be knocked out by them. Seymour then directed them against Sin itself, and that part of it was defeated in due time.

It became obvious almost immediately that Sin was having trouble staying aloft, and might well crash. He looked around quickly, saying, “We need. . . .”

“Jump!” came Cid’s voice as the airship swooped in close.

A minute later they were safely on the deck, watching as Sin made a crash landing into part of the city of Bevelle.

“This isn’t over,” Tidus said quietly.

“Yes,” he agreed, “let’s get to the bridge.”

Yuna gazed out the bridge window and sighed. “It’s going to come back, isn’t it.”

“Yeah,” said Tidus, “so we have to beat the guy inside Sin.”

Lulu glanced over and said, “It has weakened, I’m sure of it.”

For a moment Seymour wanted to roll his eyes. Of course it had been weakened. Otherwise it would not have crashed. He somehow doubted that the controlling force of Sin was into playing mind games.

“All right, I’ll see what I can do with the main gun!” said Cid, then quit the bridge.

Yuna left as well, so Seymour motioned to his mate and followed, eventually finding her on the viewing deck. She was staring out one of the many windows, a pensive look on her face. And, seeming to sense them approaching, said, “I wonder if Sir Jecht is in pain.”

“Let’s just end this . . . quickly,” his mate said. “The Fayth said they’d help, right?”

“It bothers me, the way they said that.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, they’ve been fighting alongside us this whole time, but now they say they’ll help?”

“I guess so. . . .”

“Wait! Sin is reborn when Yu Yevon merges with an Aeon, isn’t that right? If I summon an Aeon, Yu Yevon will join with it. But at first, it’ll be small, won’t it?”

Seymour shifted to catch their attention. “It should be, yes. And if so, we can defeat it. We can do so for as many Aeons as you have, and he will have nowhere left to run.”

Yuna sighed. “I never thought it would come down to this.”

“Hey, the Fayth, they’re tired of this whole thing, too. Let’s let them rest,” his mate said quietly.

They turned as Rikku’s voice came over the speakers. “Yunie! Guys! Something’s happening to Sin!”

Seymour’s eyes were drawn irresistibly toward the movement, and he watched as the previously motionless creature began to rise, then sprout wings, and come to a rest perched

atop the Tower of Light. He chuckled inwardly at the perceived blasphemy of the situation, then turned to Tidus. "I think Jecht is waiting for you."

"The main gun is still busted!" came Cid's voice. "We can't give you any cover fire!"

Unable to directly respond, the three of them returned to the bridge, where Tidus said, "Hey, just take us in. We'll do the rest."

"All right. Take us up, flush to the mouth! No mistakes, or I'm gonna tear out that mop you call hair!"

Brother made a face and replied, "Trust . . . me. Me . . . take you there. No problems . . . ya?"

"Then let us go," Seymour said, and followed as the party dashed off toward the upper deck again.

Sin was waiting, and watching. As they appeared on the deck it launched from its perch and flew upward.

"Here we go!" Cid bellowed.

"Yeah! I'm coming for you, dad!"

Sin began by drawing them closer to that gaping maw as Tidus cast Hastega on his friends. Unfortunately, at that distance, only Wakka, Lulu, and Seymour were within range to cause damage, which they did. The creature continued to draw them in, until Rikku was able to join the battle, and Wakka could use some of his more powerful moves against it. Eventually they were close enough that everyone could participate, and with the help of a few abilities they had learned, they were able to cause excellent damage to the beast.

Seymour, feeling an impending sense of doom, directed Tidus, Wakka, and Rikku to the front rank, and watched as they unleashed everything they had against the creature.

And then . . . Sin let loose with its peculiar hold on gravity and pulled the ship in completely. It was like flying through the Farplane. All around were puffy clouds the colours of sunset, and pyreflies flew with reckless abandon. It was, Seymour thought, like the most tenuous boundary between the living and the dead.

"The Bevelle Fayth, he told me that Sin transcends reality."

Seymour looked at his mate and nodded. "It must be so. You did not visit the Farplane, my sweet, but I assure you this is not unlike it."

"But . . . you can't actually *enter* it, can you?"

He smiled. “Think of the entrance to the Farplane at Guadosalam as . . . a bubble, a meeting point between life and death. You can stand there and gaze out upon the beautiful wonder of it, but you cannot truly enter it and explore. At least, I know of no way to do so. But this . . . is about as close as we may get to doing so. It is remarkably similar.”

Yuna stepped closer and tilted her head. “Do you think this is more like what we experienced in Zanarkand, then?”

Seymour shook his head lightly. “I don’t know. There it was only memories. Here. . . ?”

The airship came to a gentle stop amidst ceaselessly shifting phosphorescent mist. The party stepped out tentatively, the surface beneath their feet strangely yielding and bringing to mind the thought of standing on flesh.

“Dad! Where are you?”

“We must go to him,” Seymour said gently.

“Then we will! I’ll take front! Follow me!”

The paths were almost totally obscured by the mist, making it difficult to see where it was possible to walk, and they were frequently assaulted by horrific fiends as they muddled their way around. It was quite some time before they came to a set of stairs, which they ascended, the view changing suddenly to that of a dead city. They trekked onward, having to withstand the ambush attacks of great malboros and curses of demonoliths, and eventually came to another set of stairs. Those led them to an immensely tall tower that seemed to rise in defiance to the sky itself.

“We should rest briefly,” Yuna said firmly. “I have a bad feeling about that tower, if we enter it.”

“As you wish,” Seymour said smoothly, neglecting to voice his own unease, but noticing that everyone looked somewhat jumpy. He produced a small satchel of food and drink to share around, then took a careful seat on the ground.

“This place is creepy,” his mate said as he sat next to him and reached for some bread and cheese. “I keep expecting to see more visions of the dead.”

“We may well, given the preponderance of pyreflies.”

“What do you think will happen once . . . once this is over?” Tidus asked as he handed off the satchel to Yuna.

Seymour pretended not to notice the interest of the others as he replied, “I expect many things. For one, there shall be great celebrations all over Spira. And for another, I will be

pleased when you and I settle in nicely at Guadosalam. After that, it's anyone's guess as to how the people of Spira will adjust to not having the threat of Sin in their lives."

Tidus nodded and chewed thoughtfully on his bread as Lulu said, "I must wonder what will happen to Yevon."

"I think a lot of people are gonna be angry, ya?"

"I suppose so," Yuna said. "But is that our problem?"

"But—"

"Kimahri think Yuna fulfill her duty if Sin and Yu Yevon defeated."

"Think about it, Wakka," said Lulu. "Do you really wish to become a politician?"

Wakka wrinkled his nose and said, "But everyone looks up to Yuna. Don't you think they'd expect her to, I dunno, stay involved?"

"Perhaps," Yuna replied, "but I haven't done all this alone. Without you, my friends and guardians, I would never have made it this far. And a summoner may be trained for certain things, and to sacrifice for the people, but I think it's my choice if I get drawn into anything more. It would be nice to be . . . normal, don't you think?"

"I think," Seymour said slowly, "as the leader of my people, and as a maester of Yevon, tarnished though that institution might be, I will stay involved to some degree."

"Doesn't hurt that Kinoc is intimidated by you," Tidus piped up with a grin.

Seymour chuckled. "And I would certainly remain open to any and all suggestions from each of you, you who will have defeated Spira's sorrow for good. If Yevon is disbanded I shall hardly cry myself to sleep at night."

"I don't think it will hurt that a maester of Yevon is a part of all this," Yuna pointed out. "Anyway, I think we should get moving. We've had our rest, and people are counting on us."

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On entering the tower they were transported to a strange, roughly circular space, like a common in a city. Randomly scattered about were spears of ice, popping up unexpectedly as they moved about. One touch and they would shatter, only to reform into yet another fiend. Seeing no way out of the area the group moved about, investigating the curious spheres of light and collecting various items that appeared. And then, suddenly, they were transported a second time.

Tidus gasped. "I've been here before. This was where I saw . . . my old man, inside Sin."

"You're late," said a rough voice.

Tidus sucked in his breath and turned toward the voice, then began to advance slowly.

"Hey," said Jecht.

"Hi."

Jecht laughed. "Hah! You got tall, but you're all bones! You eating right, boy? You've really grown."

"Yeah, but you're still bigger."

"Well, I am Sin, you know."

"That's not funny."

"Well, then. . . I mean . . . you know. Let's end this."

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"I hate you." The look on Tidus's face was more distressed than angry or hateful.

"I know, I know. You know what you have to do."

"Yeah."

"I can't hear the Hymn so well anymore. Pretty soon, I'm gonna be Sin. Completely. I'm glad you're here now. One thing, though. . . When it starts, I won't be myself anymore. I won't be able to hold myself back. I'm sorry."

"That's enough. Let's finish this, okay?"

"You're right," Jecht replied. "Well, then. . . Let's go!" He staggered backward and tipped over the edge of the platform.

Tidus darted forward as though to save his father, then stopped, one hand outstretched. Within moments flames arose and the monstrous form of Braska's Final Aeon came into view. Tidus dropped his arm and reached for his sword. "I promise this'll be quick! Hit me with all you got, dad!"

It was a difficult battle. To either side of Jecht were Yu Pagodas, nasty constructs which not only healed the Aeon and removed any negative effects, but would also attack the party. A plan of attack was quickly devised, with nearly everyone taking turns to contribute something special, and things became slightly easier once the pagodas were no longer synchronized.

The group was given a brief respite when Jecht transformed into an even more powerful form, and then it was back into the thick of battle. Yuna's Aeons were especially useful at that point, with Anima leading the charge toward the final push. And then it was over.

Jecht reappeared in his human form, lying in the center of the platform, and Tidus rushed up to drop to his knees and cradle his father in his arms.

"You'll cry," Jecht said, his tone between a jest and a taunt. "You're gonna cry. You always cry. See? You're cryin'."

Seymour watched with blank-faced sorrow as his mate did so, wishing to comfort him, but knowing this was something Tidus must handle on his own.

"I hate you, dad," Tidus choked out, his expression anything but that of hate.

"Save it for later."

Tidus straightened up a bit, shaking his hair back. "Right. . . . We've got a job to do, don't we?"

"Good. That's right. You are my son, after all."

"You know . . . for the first time, I'm glad . . . to have you as my father."

"Heh." Jecht had the look of a man who had finally realized a goal in his life.

"Sir Jecht, I should—"

"No, Yuna, there's no time!"

Something . . . malevolent approached, flying through the air in a dizzying pattern of threat. Tidus straightened further and shouted, "You stay away!"

"Yuna," Jecht said with difficulty, "you know what to do. The Aeons. . . ."

Strangely choral voices sounded. "We Aeons. . . ."

"Call them!" Jecht managed as his body began to devolve into pyreflies.

The Bevelle Fayth appeared and ordered, "Call us!"

“Yes,” Yuna said.

“Here it comes!” shouted Lulu, just before they were transported again.

“Yuna!”

She nodded and readied her staff, then summoned the first of her Aeons. Her expression was sick as the Aeon was overcome with the influence of Yu Yevon, but she took a deep breath and began to fight, others coming to her aid. Again and again the sequence was repeated, Yuna’s expression becoming more and more tragic, until at last they were gone, all of them, defeated before they ever had a chance to become completely corrupted.

Yu Yevon was then alone before them. He was more of an it, truth be told, looking like the parasite he was.

“Everyone! This is it! After we beat Yu Yevon, it’ll be over.”

Strangely, though perhaps not, Yu Yevon was an exceptionally stupid being. Seymour had to wonder if that was the result of dreaming for so many centuries, or if the man’s talents had always lain in summoning over intelligence. Given that he had once been the ruler of Zanarkand. . . . In any case, he was handily defeated, and by using extremely simple tactics.

Yuna stared blankly at the empty space before them, then startled as Seymour said, “Send, Yuna. Send the remains of these poor souls to the Farplane, where they can at last find rest.”

“I—yes.”

Tears ran down her face as she did. All around them were representations of the Aeons, each of them being sent in turn. And also, the very structure of Sin itself was dissolving, possibly aided by the summoners on the ground, as the armor of souls was shattered for good, and the pyreflies that clustered in great numbers within the creature were forced away. When it was just the platform they stood on remaining the airship swooped in and collected them, and Yuna finished her duty from the deck, lowering her staff as an explosion of pyreflies rained out over the countryside.

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## Luca

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Seymour and his mate stood at the back of the maesters’ box in the stadium as Yuna stepped forward to make a brief speech.

“Everyone . . . everyone has lost something precious. Everyone here has lost homes, dreams, and friends. Now, Sin is finally dead. Now, Spira is ours again. Working together, now we can make new home for ourselves, and new dreams. Although I know the journey will be hard, we have lots of time. Together, we will rebuild Spira. The road is ahead of us, so let’s start out today.”

She paused, then said, “Just, one more thing. . . . The people and the friends that we have lost, or the dreams that have faded . . . never forget them.” Yuna turned away from the roaring cheers of the crowd, then smiled tentatively as she saw Baralai.

“I would like to believe that will work out fine,” Seymour whispered.

“I suppose we’ll all split up now.”

“Assuredly. I would not doubt that Wakka and Lulu will return to Besaid, and Kimahri to Mt Gagazet. Rikku will likely assist her people in rebuilding Home. Yuna may choose to go to Bevelle, for a time, at least. And you and I, after some political maneuvering, shall go to Guadosalam. But Spira is not so large as for this to be good-bye.”

“Politics, huh? I guess I can live with that.” His mate paused to slant a sidelong look his way. “Especially if we get that nice suite again in the palace.”

“Oh?” he replied with an arch of his brow.

“Definitely. Such nice, thick walls. . . .”

Seymour smirked. “I think, my sweet, we can put that to the test most admirably.” He reached out to take his mate’s hand and lead him away to privacy just as Dona and Barthello barged into the box.

— **The End** —