Unwinding the Spiral

by eliddell

Summary

Originally, it was just supposed to be the two of them on that pilgrimage. One Summoner and his lone Guardian. That would have been simple. Even having to deal with the drunk who claimed to be a blitzball star from Zanarkand would have been manageable.

Then the fayth demanded that Braska add a stranger to his little band of outcasts, and things became much more complicated.

Notes

Five months, a full megabyte of text, and I'm still not sure why I wrote this, especially since I normally avoid crossovers.

I'm not really pleased with it, either. It feels like there's no clear plotline, and the characters spend way too much time trying to reconcile the mechanics of the two games. Maybe it's just me. I'm posting it anyway, in the hope that it will amuse someone.

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Chapter 1

Rilkes Harbour wasn't a normal stop on the Summoner's Journey. It had no temple and no fayth, just a mythril mine—not an especially rich one, but more accessible than the ones in the mountains at the edge of the Calm Lands. And so there were people here working those mines, perhaps a dozen families in all. Normally, the only ships that called here were Al Bhed, since mythril could only be smelted in their blast furnaces. This time, however, a lone traveler in an outrigger canoe had brought word to Kilika that the town urgently needed resupply and the next ferry to Besaid should divert there if at all possible. We just happened to have been on it.

Lord Braska, as a Summoner, could have asked that our captain not make a detour, but it wasn't his way. Jecht might have tried to make a demand of his own, but thankfully he wasn't in charge, and was somewhere below decks drinking himself into a stupor again. As for me, well, I was in no hurry, knowing what the end of the Summoner's Journey would bring.

The harbour for which the town had been named was smallish and steep-walled, the docks at the bottoms of long staircases leading down from the mines. Tunnels which had been mined out now served the locals as housing, it seemed.

I noticed in passing as I helped Braska down off the ferry and onto the dock that there was fairly fresh-looking seaweed stranded far up the walls of the harbour. It suggested a recent storm.

"Why're you two even bothering getting off?" Jecht asked from the doorway into the bowels of the ship, where he'd suddenly appeared, holding a bottle in one hand.

"Because I've never been here," Lord Braska said patiently. "And we're going to be docked overnight anyway—apparently it's difficult to get out of this harbour after dark, and the captain doesn't want to chance it. Why not take the chance to look around?"

Knowing Jecht, the only thing he would be interested in "looking around" at was the interior of a liquor store, and the island was far too small to have one. Thus, I was a bit surprised when he took one last swig from his bottle, emptying it, and jumped down to join us.

"Better than staying on the boat," he explained as he wandered past us, only slightly unsteady, for a wonder. "So c'mon! We're burning daylight!"

We met our first local—well, first local that wasn't hurrying down to the ship too fast to pay attention to us—at the top of the stairs, where an elderly woman sat on a bench a little off to the side, under a tree that someone had somehow managed to plant in a pot. She had a basket beside her and a shirt on her lap, and was carefully stitching a tear closed.

"Good day," Braska greeted her, smiling. She smiled back.

"Greetings, Lord Summoner. What brings you to our humble island?"

"We merely happened to be on the ferry when it took a detour here to drop off some much-needed supplies. If you'll pardon me for saying so, the harbour looks a bit battered. Has there been a storm recently?"

"Oh, aye. Five days ago, that was. That's the reason we needed the supplies so urgently, you see: one of the storehouses got flooded, and by the time we found out and got someone down there, half our food was turning blue and grey. And you can't grow anything on this island except in pots." She patted the tree beside her affectionately. Behind her, I saw Jecht lean against the low wall around the
edge of this terrace. He almost missed and fell over the edge to bash his skull open on the rocks fifty feet below. I tried not to grind my teeth. If he had missed, Braska would have grabbed for him, and I would have had to grab Braska, since that was a Guardian's job.

Jecht was an adequate Guardian when he was sober, but when drunk, he was a reckless idiot.

"That poor fellow who washed up onto the steps during the storm must be the luckiest man from here to Luca," the woman was saying. "We never did find any sign of a ship, so everyone else on it must have gone down, but no one has any idea who he is, and last I heard, he hadn't woken up. He isn't from these parts, though, that's certain. Not with hair like that."

"Perhaps we should have a look at him," Braska said. "We've all traveled quite widely, and one of us might recognize him."

I wasn't sure whether Braska meant his offer to be helpful or he was just curious. Perhaps he suspected the stranger was an Al Bhed—"hair like that" might easily mean blond, which was common among them but rare on ordinary Spirans—and would need to be rescued, although these people had more contact with members of the heretic race than most. Still the old woman agreed that having us look in on the stranger was a good idea and gave us directions to the clinic where they'd put him.

I waited until we were out of earshot of the old woman to speak up. "My lord, we don't know who this person is. He might even be some kind of assassin, just biding his time."

Braska laughed. "Auron, you're being too cautious. Why would anyone bother to assassinate me when I'm already regarded as a hopeless case who will never be blessed by the fayth?"

"Maybe he thinks his ex is looking for revenge, since he turned her down and all." Jecht's laugh, harsh and coarse, wasn't nearly so pleasant as Braska's.

"If you're talking about the woman they tried to betroth me to, we were never involved in the first place," I said irritably. "In fact, we've never even met. The marriage offer had just been a test of whether or not I would play Church politics by the rules. The whole idea disgusted me, but my old friend Kinoc had a stronger stomach and had accepted the marriage (and attached promotion) in my stead.

"Seriously?" Jecht said. "Probably has a face like a fiend's butt, then. That kind always do."

"Jecht," Braska said. He'd used that warning tone so often with the blitzer that it didn't seem to have any sting to it anymore, though. Fortunately, we got to the door of the clinic before Jecht could try to throw any more fuel on the fire.

Calling it a clinic was a bit of a stretch, perhaps. A bespectacled middle-aged man sat on a stool just inside the door, reading from what looked like some kind of herbal. The staff leaning against the wall beside him suggested that he was a failed Summoner, one of those who completed the training but lacked the courage to go on the pilgrimage, acquire Aeons, and fight Sin. They were welcome in most communities nonetheless, because they could still Send the dead, and many of them were decent white magic users.

"Yes?" he said as we approached. Then he looked up from his reading, caught sight of Braska, and rose to his feet to make the Sign, which Braska returned politely.

"I understand that an unidentified man washed up in your harbour after the recent storm," Braska said. "We'd like to have a look at him—there's a small chance that he's someone we know."
"Help yourself. He's through there." The failed Summoner pointed at a curtain at the far end of the room. "That's the only place we could put him, since we can't get him to let go of that sword of his."

My eyebrows rose. Not an Al Bhed, then: they didn't use swords, favouring machina weapons, or smaller ones like knives or fighting gloves.

Curious myself now, I strode across the room, pushed the curtain aside . . . and stopped dead in my tracks, for a god lay on the narrow cot beyond.

I closed my eyes, counted to three, and reopened them for another look. And discovered I felt no reason to change that assessment.

_He isn't from these parts_, the old woman had said. _Not with hair like that._ Nor was he from anywhere else I knew of. The long hair that tumbled across the surface of the bed was silver-white, like mythril wire drawn out finer than the most delicate silk thread. It had to fall past his waist when he stood, and even with him sprawled on a bed, I could tell he was not a small man—I judged him to be as tall as I was, if not slightly taller.

He was naked from the waist up (and barefoot, although I could see a pair of boots standing in the corner), and the muscles of his chest and arms were developed to perfection. The pale skin that covered them bore no blemishes or scars of any sort. The few other people I'd ever seen who were that pale had freckles, but he was unmarked. His black leather trousers were closely enough fitted to suggest his lower body was similarly well-muscled, although there was no way of telling whether the skin was as fine.

My eyes flicked to his face, and although it was partially obscured by the fall of that silver hair, I could see that it was beautiful—that he was beautiful. His features were finely chiseled, with a straight nose and arching brows and sculpted lines at cheekbone and jaw (there was no hint of a beard that I could see). His mouth would have been soft if it hadn't been drawn down into a frown. There was a line between his brows, too.

I wondered if he was having a nightmare. I certainly would have, if I'd been thrown into a raging ocean during (apparently) a fight, only to wash up here. I also wondered what colour his eyes were. I seemed unable to figure out what would look right on him.

His left hand gripped the hilt of a weapon of ridiculous proportions. An odachi in the old style, with a gently-curved, one-edged blade more than six feet long. The red-wrapped hilt was long enough to allow it to be held two-handed, and I could have lifted it that way, but using such a long sword effectively had to be a specialized skill.

I reached out and gently attempted to pry his fingers from the hilt, only to discover that the healer had been right: there was no way to loosen his grip without breaking bones. Even his hands were beautiful, though, long-fingered like those of a lutenist I'd once known, the nails neatly trimmed.

On his right wrist, he wore an odd bracelet, dark metal with silver trim, more than two inches wide, and studded with six softly glowing circles in randomly assorted colours. It seemed like an odd sort of decoration, and I wondered why he carried it with him.

"I take it you don't recognize him either," Lord Braska said, and I shrugged and stepped back, trying to pretend that in addition to everything else, I hadn't been wondering what those frowning lips might taste like.

Only Kinoc knew that there was a second reason I'd refused that marriage and the promotion that went with it: the thought of being intimate with a woman made my skin crawl. Marrying one would
have made me feel like a hypocrite. I wasn't attracted to breasts and soft bodies. A beautiful man like this, on the other hand . . . well, fantasies about him were likely to turn up in lonely late-night sessions with my hand for some time to come.

*Is that sword compensation or advertisement?* I wondered, and bit down hard on the inside of my cheek as I forced myself not to check out the crotch of those leathers and see what kind of bulge they were hiding.

"I think I'd remember if I'd ever seen anyone like him before," I said dryly. Then, just in case, "Jecht? What about you?"

Jecht snorted. "What, you think he's from Zanarkand too? I sure as hell don't recognize him, and there aren't many people back home who carry swords. Between the sword and the hair, he has to have a reputation wherever he *does* come from, don't'cha think?"

That was surprisingly coherent for Jecht. Maybe he hadn't had as much to drink as I'd thought.

"His belt buckle has some kind of design on it, but I don't recognize that either," Braska observed. "Did he have anything else with him when he washed up?" he added over his shoulder to the failed Summoner who looked after this place.

"Just those ridiculous boots and that mess of straps lying in the corner there," came the reply.

The boots, I decided upon closer examination, were not ridiculous at all, just very high, going up past the knee and fastening with buckles. They were mostly leather, but the well-worn soles were made of something rubbery and textured for good grip. And there were metal insets in the toes, hidden under the leather. I wouldn't have wanted to be kicked by one.

Jecht held up the "mess of straps", muttering, "... the hell is this?"

"A sword harness," I said instantly. "Or part of one. It looks like it's supposed to hook onto his belt. The wider shoulder strap is on the side where the sword hilt would go."

Jecht squinted at it. "And the straps cross over his chest and back and hook to the belt, and then he'd stick the sword to these magnets—they're hella strong, so they'd probably hold it right through a scabbard—and it'd ride at an angle across his back until he pulled it loose. Nice rig."

And not like anything I'd seen or even heard of before. The Al Bhed might have some way of making magnets that strong, but no reason to put them to such a use. Still, he *might* be Al Bhed, or a mixed-blood like Braska's daughter Yuna. *He* might, I wryly admitted, *be* anything, including a fiend, an Unsent, or a Ronso-Hypello cross.

"I suppose it's a mystery that we'll never solve," Braska said regretfully. "For now, I'd like to get a look at the rest of the town before the sun gets too low in the sky."

We all, I think, ended up wishing we hadn't bothered. Rilkes Harbour just wasn't all that interesting a place. The island was mostly rocks and sand, almost as bad as the Bikanel Desert. There was exactly one spring of fresh water, metallic-tasting, and everything living there (including the townsfolk) subsisted on that. There was no inn, because normally no one came here to stay overnight. And not even so much as a general store, although they did have what they called an "exchange cooperative" for durable goods that the original owners no longer wanted. Jecht managed to pick up a bottle of whisky there, carrying it with him as we began to climb back down the stairs to the dock and the ferry, where we would sleep tonight. The sunset was dying the sky pink and orange. It was a beautiful evening.
Until the sirens started to wail.

They were Al Bhed devices, and normally no Spiran settlement would have been equipped with such, but these people were isolated enough that they had more contact with the machina-users than with their own kind. We all stopped dead where we were, trying to understand what was going on. People on the terrace above were shouting, and my blood ran cold as I caught a single clear word.

"Sin!"

And there it was, headed straight for us as it parted the waters, with a chattering horde of Sinspawn acting as its heralds. I had never been so close to it before, and for a moment, I almost froze up.

Then my training reasserted itself. "We have to get back up into the tunnels! The docks aren't going to survive once it comes to land, but the tunnel mouths can be defended—"

"There are still people on the ferry," Braska said in protest.

"We can't help them," I snapped, and winced at my own rudeness. "Please, Lord Braska! You can't fight—you don't have any aeons yet—and our duty is to protect you."

"Auron—"

The first Sinscales were going to come to land any moment now. They charged impossibly across the surface of the water as I ground my teeth and grabbed Braska firmly by the arm. My duty. We should have stayed out here and fought, but my duty was to see to it that Braska made it to Zanarkand.

And then a streak of black and silver hurtled past us. I didn't even recognize it as a human figure until the silver-haired man whom I'd last seen lying on a cot in the town's tiny clinic came to an abrupt stop at the edge of the dock. His sword rose and pointed, and a Thundaga shot out and fried the initial wave of Sinscales at the mouth of the harbour.

"We have to get everyone off the ferry while he distracts them," Braska was saying. He already had the skirts of his robes gathered in his hands, and took off down the stairs at a run.

The next group of Sinscales was larger, and a few reached the dock even though the stranger sent a second wave of lightning dancing across the waters. I fought to keep them away from Braska. Jecht, thankfully, was sober enough to cover my back. And once, during a lull in the fighting, I was able to look up and see him.

The silver-haired man's movements as he destroyed the Sinscales with his odachi were like a savage dance. I'd never seen anyone else wield a sword that way, but there was no denying that it was effective. He was mowing down the enemy in swathes.

Something slammed into the pilings of the dock, and I staggered. Jecht was thrown off his feet, but he bounced back immediately, while Braska steadied himself against my shoulder.

The crew of the ferry had finally begun to move, herding the other passengers down onto the dock and trying to defend them with spears and nets and heavy rope-hooks, but there was only so much they could do. The rough triangle formed by the crew and our group and the silver-haired man wasn't all that big, but it was crowded with Sinscales.

I swung my sword and sent a bunch of the enemy flying—I've never been the fastest fighter, but I've always made up for that by hitting hard. Jecht had to brain a Sinscale with his liquor bottle to get enough space to draw his sword. His taste in weapons was almost as ridiculous as the silver-haired
man's, actually, although the blade was unreasonably wide instead of unreasonably long. I wasn't even sure why the smith we'd bought it from in Luca had made the thing. He could probably have killed a Sinscale just by dropping his sword on it.

Of course, Jecht wasn't sober. He misjudged his initial swing, lost his balance, and went down. Two Sinscales immediately jumped him, and I was a little too far away and Braska was already moving to intercept, and—

The Sinscales were suddenly encased in ice. Pinpoint Blizzaga? But that took a lot of control . . . and from the angle, the spell could only have been cast by the stranger. We'll have to thank him when this is over.

Braska levered the ice-and-Sinscale mass off Jecht with his staff. The blitzer cursed and complained about the cold as he staggered to his feet, and the other Sinscales were . . . retreating? This is not good. They only do that when a major Sinspawn—

It surged up out of the water, clinging to the edge of the dock and looking rather like a giant squid. A giant, gnarled, grey squid with eyes outlined in glowing magenta.

"Get everyone off this dock now," I snapped at one of the sailors, and turned to face the Sinspawn without bothering to listen to his reply.

Before I could get my feet under me to charge, the Sinspawn was screaming, with one tentacle wriggling loose on the dock and dissolving into pyreflies, and a second almost severed. The silver-haired man was dancing among the remaining tentacles, sword lashing out with blurring speed, thrusting at the creature's main body in a rapid-fire pattern that it had no hope of dodging.

Well, then. While it was occupied with him, I ran forward, raising my own blade two-handed above my head, and then smashing it down when I was near the Sinspawn's body. I succeeded in making a deep wound that left two more tentacles dangling and useless before someone shouldered me out of the way.

"What are you—" I began, and then, in a sudden frozen instant, saw the other tentacle. The silver-haired man grunted and bared his teeth as it whipped across his back, leaving a red weal behind.

His eyes were green, I saw as the realization that he'd just taken that attack on my behalf washed over me. Green, but it was a glowing, intense, acidic colour that was nothing like the eyes of the Al Bhed. And his pupils were slit like a Ronso's.

Braska hit us both with a Cura as the silver-haired man gave me a hard shove, sending me skittering away from the Sinspawn. He cut again in the same place I had, then drove what looked like another Thundaga into the wound. The Sinspawn cried out one last time and went limp, and its slayer jumped to the top of its carcass even as it started to dissolve into pyreflies. He turned slightly, and I thought he might be surveying the harbour. Then, for a moment, he was haloed by a flash of bluish light.

Overdrive? But why now? There were no immediate targets—a handful of Sinscales scattered around, and Sin itself now pushing in through the harbour's mouth . . . My eyes widened. Great Yevon, he can't possibly be trying to—

The silver-haired man jumped into the air, sword raised, and once again it felt like everything froze. The sky went black, and some sort of circular diagram with notations in no language I knew flared around him in lines of pale light. An oppressive force radiated from it, nearly dropping me to my knees. Then a wall of light pushed down from high above and annihilated . . . everything. Sinscales
broke into pyreflies, the water in the harbour puffed into steam, and Sin . . .

Sin howled. In silhouette, I saw a chunk of it go flying off and begin to dissolve—not just a Sinspawn but a big piece, larger than the blitzball stadium in Luca. Yevon! I wasn't sure whether it was a curse or a prayer. This wasn't an overdrive, it was pure distilled annihilation.

Then the sky returned to normal as though someone had popped a bubble. I caught sight of the bed of the harbour, reduced to packed sand littered with rocks and bits of trash, in the seconds before the sea burst back in through the harbour mouth to reclaim it. A pair of boots struck the timbers of the dock not far from me with a *thud* in the instant before the returning water broke over the wooden surface, washing around my feet. Fortunately, the local geography and the positioning of the docks reduced the force of the resurgent ocean, so no one was knocked off their feet, and the ferry wasn't destroyed by being caught between the resurgent water and the dock. Sin, in the meanwhile, was . . . fleeing. *Fleeing.* From something that wasn't the Final Summoning. For what had to be the first time in the history of Spira.

The silver-haired man watched the scourge of the world as it retreated back out to sea, ignoring the ragged cheer of the sailors and ferry passengers. If anything, he looked irritated. Suddenly, he turned away from the ocean vista and began to make his way back towards the stairs.

He didn't seem to be in a hurry, and I was easily able to keep pace with him. Behind me, I heard two other sets of footsteps, and the sound of Lord Braska's staff striking wood.

It didn't feel right, somehow, to call out to the stranger, or to put out a hand to stop him, although I was certainly close enough to grab his shoulder. But there was a silent rigidity to him that suggested he wouldn't welcome the touch. And so I just followed him, all the way back to the curtained-off room in the clinic, where he laid his sword on the bed, picked up the sword harness that he hadn't been wearing, and began to untangle the straps. It looked like he was checking the stitching for damage. After a moment, he put it on, securing the cross-straps to metal fittings on his belt, picking his sword up and settling it in place across his back, then reaching up to tweak the position of the hilt.

Only when he was happy with it did he turn to face us, eyebrows rising in inquiry.

"We'd like to thank you for your help down there," Braska began, but the silver eyebrows only climbed higher.

"Hey, you," Jecht snapped, after a moment of no response. "Got a problem?" Maybe he hadn't sobered up as much as I'd thought.

The silver-haired man said something in a sharp, cold tone—I don't think he liked Jecht much either. The problem was that he wasn't speaking Spiran. I couldn't understand a word, although his voice itself was as beautiful as the rest of him. Baritone, with a dark, rich quality to it.

Braska blinked, and addressed him in what I recognized as Al Bhed. The green eyes narrowed, and the stranger shook his head and tried what I thought was a different language from the one he'd used the first time.

We shook our heads, and Braska tried again, with what I thought might be the old language of the southern islands—no one actually speaks it anymore, but the priests and Summoners have certain old documents written in it, and so he would have learned it during his studies. Another headshake, and the stranger this time spoke a few halting words in a guttural tongue.

This time, there was a beat in which no one said anything. Then I made an ungrammatical attempt at speaking Ronso: "*That-person—who? From where?*" It's remarkably awkward to address someone
in Ronso if you don't know their name (the word for "you" has connotations of "you nameless slave", so it's only used as an insult), and I only had the smattering of words Gurrik had taught me when we'd been novices together.

Another headshake, and we ended up staring at each other, frustrated. It seemed that proper communication was out of the question, for the time being.

Just where had this man come from? You would have to comb Spira to find three languages that neither Braska nor I would recognize when we heard them. Hypello was distinctive, full of gargling sounds, and I was confident that it hadn't been among the tongues he'd tried on us. The Musicians of Macalania whistled their language. That left . . . what? High Guado, and maybe whatever language the Pelupelu spoke among themselves. Did natural monsters like the cactuars have language?

I frowned. Well, there was one thing we might be able to get across.


"Sephiroth," he provided, raking me over with green eyes. He seemed to be searching for signs of . . . recognition? Revulsion? Any emotion at all?

Whatever it was, he didn't find it in me, although I didn't get the impression he was too disappointed. He dipped his head slightly, and then made a gesture in Braska's direction, a gradual side-movement of one hand that could only mean please get out of my way. Braska did, and Sephiroth left the clinic.

Well, at least we had a name for him now.
Chapter 2

It was surprisingly easy to get Sephiroth onto the ferry—in fact, when I went on deck for air late that night, I found him on the dock, gazing thoughtfully at the boat. He must have explored Rilkes Harbour in its entirety by then, and discovered just how small a place it was. The townsfolk would have let him stay indefinitely, I was sure, but I could tell that he wasn't the sort of man who would want to. A tiny mining hamlet on a remote island had no use for a fighter capable of driving Sin into retreat. I wasn't sure that all of Spira was big enough for him.

We'd discussed him that evening, of course, over supper in the ferry's passenger cabin. Braska and I were both curious about the mystery Sephiroth presented, but the truth was that there just wasn't much to go on. Jecht had taken five minutes to pronounce us both crazy and wander off to bed. Of course, Jecht had also run out of liquor and had to have been pushing towards the hung-over stage by that point. Regardless, Braska and I agreed that we should bring Sephiroth with us, if we could find a way to do so.

It turned out to be as simple as beckoning him aboard. He looked at my hand, then at my face, then vaulted over the rail from a standing start, twisting his body so that his sword didn't get caught.

I led him to the open area near the prow of the boat, where he tilted his head back and looked up at the stars for several moments, frowning. Then he sighed and went over to one of the benches along the edge of the boat and sat down, propping his sword beside him. Still looking up, he began running his hands through his hair—finger-combing it, I realized, although it didn't look particularly tangled to me.

I had a comb in my pocket, for my own grooming and to neaten up Jecht when he was being a disgrace in public, and I pulled it out and offered it to the silver-haired man. He looked at me for a moment, eyebrows rising, before extending a hand to take it. He offered me a deep, solemn nod, then twisted his hair forward over his shoulder for better access, and turned his attention to working the tangles out.

"You're welcome," I said, and sat down beside him, propping my sword against the opposite end of the bench. A fine martial sight the two of us would have made, if we'd been a little less disheveled. We'd have to see if we could find Sephiroth a shirt while we were in Besaid, although that would cover up a gorgeous view . . . which was not something I should have been contemplating. He probably has a wife and five children out there somewhere, I told myself.

Sephiroth worked through his hair methodically, chasing the tangles down to the ends of the strands, but it looked like there was a mess right there at the ends that he just couldn't get rid of completely. When he was done with the rest, he scowled, took his sword, and cut off the last six inches of his rope of silver hair, tossing the ends overboard, where they sank much more quickly than they should have. Then he cut his bangs in the same extraordinary fashion, shearing them off so that they ended just above his jawline, instead of going all the way to his chest.

He made to hand the comb back to me, with a nod of thanks, but I closed his fingers around it instead. "Keep it."

His eyebrows rose again, and he gave me a look suggesting that he thought I'd lost my mind, but he also pocketed the comb, and returned his sword to the end of the bench. Then he slumped a bit, stretching out his legs with a soft sigh.

He looks tired, I thought. It shouldn't have been surprising. He'd fought harder than I had, taken that
I was feeling drained myself, and I hadn't jumped up off a bed in the clinic and straight into that fight. Or been wandering around the island ever since. I wondered if anyone had bothered to feed him. Surely the islanders would have offered him something.

I wonder how old he is. It hadn't occurred to me even to consider that before, because there was something ageless about Sephiroth. Not young, not old. Like a fine marble statue with piercing green eyes. It was . . . tempting . . . to decide that he was in his mid-twenties, near my own age, but his eyes seemed . . . too shadowed, somehow. And there was the minor matter of just how long it had taken him to become both the brilliant swordsman he clearly was, and a fairly skilled black mage. They were completely unrelated disciplines, and as a novice, I'd been told it was better to concentrate on my sword techniques and leave the magic to the priests and the Summoners, that I'd just get confused if I tried to master both at once. True mage-swordsmen were the stuff of legend—Lord Mi'iilen's second-in-command had supposedly been one, as had one of Lord Ohalland's Guardians, but I had never met one before.

I was going to have to take Sephiroth to the Crusaders' headquarters in Luca when we returned to the city. Of everyone on Spira, they were the most likely to know who he was and where he came from. He hadn't learned such swordsmanship by practicing in a vaccuum—you need skilled opponents to become skilled yourself—and the Crusaders took in people from all over. There would have to be someone who had trained under the same master, or sparred with him, or fought alongside him. Unless he was from Jecht's Zanarkand. Although that would have required Jecht's Zanarkand to actually exist.

I blinked as I found myself nodding off. I needed to get back to my bunk, or I was going to fall asleep here on the bench, and wake up stiff and cold.

I stood, picked up my sword, and beckoned to Sephiroth, who raised his eyebrows before standing and grabbing his sword. He followed me down below, and waited while I unlocked my cabin.

The cabins themselves were tiny, each with a narrow slice of floor and two bunks stacked one on top of the other. As Summoner and Guardians, however, Braska and Jecht and I had all been allotted private rooms.

After closing the door behind us, I pointed from Sephiroth to the top bunk, and from myself to the bottom bunk. Then I took off my haori and sat down on the edge of my bunk to strip off my boots and armour. Sephiroth watched me for a moment, then propped his sword beside mine, unbuckled his boots and slid them off, and loosely braided his hair. I breathed a sigh of relief when he climbed up to the top bunk and, as far as I could tell, laid down. Hopefully he would still be there when I woke up. I didn't want to lose track of him—the ferry was late already, and I doubted the captain would allow us to hold it up any further to search for him.

When I did wake up, we were already underway, and Sephiroth was awake, with his boots on and his hair unraveled back to its loose state, leaning against the wall at the foot of the bed and looking out the porthole. When I sat up, he gave me a dubious look, then shrugged and went back to staring at the ocean until I beckoned for him to follow me to breakfast.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Jecht asked as we approached the table where he and Braska were already sitting.

"I coaxed him aboard last night," I said, taking a seat. The food displayed in the middle of the table was simple, just bread and fruit, since the ferry didn't have a proper kitchen.
"We gonna have to pay an extra fare for him or something?" Jecht grumbled.

"No, the ferries to Kilika and Besaid are funded by the Church, to ensure that priests and Summoners can reach the temples there whenever we need to," Braska said.

I selected some food and pushed the platter toward Sephiroth, whose eyebrows had to be wearing out by now . . . but at least he cautiously took some fruit and bread for himself. The red bananas seemed to puzzle him until he saw me peel one, and I made a mental note: *Probably from a temperate climate.*

He also ate a lot. The previous day, they had presented us with a similar full platter, and Braska and Jecht and I hadn't quite finished half of it between us. Sephiroth cleaned the thing right down to the ceramic, although he waited until he was sure the rest of us were finished to take the last of the food.

"He's gotta have one hell of a metabolism if he can eat like that and still stay ripped," Jecht observed.

"So what's on the plate for the rest of today? Laze around the boat again?"

"We should be reaching Besaid late this afternoon," Braska said. "We'll stay in the town overnight, then head up to the temple."

I'd never been to Besaid before, and I was fairly certain that no one else in our party had either. It was tropical and studded with old ruins; spinning and weaving were major industries; Valefor's Temple, the traditional starting point for the Summoner's pilgrimage, was right on the edge of town, easily accessible, and even the ordinary people were quite devout. That, and being able to find it on a map, was the sum total of my knowledge about the place. Warrior-monks weren't usually posted there, since the fiends were low-level and any stranger was visible from miles away—the temple didn't need defenders.

Sephiroth pushed his chair back from the table. Well, it was normal for him to be uninterested in a conversation that he couldn't understand. We'd have to figure out some better way to communicate than just simple gestures, although I was still hoping to find someone in Luca who spoke his language.

I followed him up on deck, and as usual, the wide area near the bow had only a few people using it, all leaning against the rail or sitting on the benches around the edges. I stepped up beside Sephiroth and, when I was certain I had his attention, pointed to myself, then to him, then tapped the hilt of my sword and raised my eyebrows—*care to spar?* Or at least, I hoped that was what I was communicating.

A hint of a smile flickered across Sephiroth's face, and he nodded, grasping the hilt of his odachi and pulling it loose from the magnets on his harness. Slowly, he raised it to an unusual guard position, grasping it in both hands with the hilt horizontal and even with his jaw, and the curve of the blade pointing downward. I chose a more basic position, with the hilt of my sword near my waist and the blade angled up in front of me.

We circled for a moment, just watching each other move, and then Sephiroth shot forward, although not at nearly the speed he'd used in the fight against the Sinspawn. His blade lashed down, but that was merely a test. I caught it on mine, then found myself having to shift my grip as the pressure from the odachi increased. *Yevon,* he was strong. As well as being agile, fast, and skilled. *And flexible,* I realized a few moments later as he dodged an attack of mine by bending backward, curving his body at an angle I couldn't have managed. And, apparently, equipped with the constitution of a shoopuf, since he remained coolly perfect even after I was blown and breathing hard.

He could have ended the spar at any time, but drew it out instead—not so much playing with me as
feeling me out, as my examiner had done when I'd graduated from the novitiate and become a full member of the warrior Order. Testing my skills, seeing where my strengths lay. And my weaknesses.

I had to admit that his relatively slender blade had made me think a bit less of him at first, but it turned out that he didn't need a heavier weapon. He could fend off the increased weight and momentum of my blade with muscular strength alone, and the odachi showed no signs of damage even after our swords had collided several times with full force.

I wasn't absolutely sure that he was the best swordsman on Spira, but I'd been the best that the Order had produced in the last ten years, and I couldn't imagine beating him. Even if I hadn't been trying to fight with an embarrassing, out-of-place erection hidden under my haori. I'd thought he was beautiful when he was lying on that infirmary cot, but he was infinitely more so in motion.

The spar ended with the point of my sword pinned to the deck under his boot and the edge of the odachi against the side of my neck. It was extremely sharp, sharp enough that I felt my skin part when the shifting of the deck made me brush against it, before I released my own sword and held up my hands to confirm my surrender.

He lowered the odachi and flicked it sharply, sending a minuscule spray of blood across the deck, before returning it to his harness. Several people were applauding, but if he noticed, he ignored it. He made a hand gesture in my direction, and I stiffened as I felt a low-level cure spell wash over me in a flicker of greenish light.

White magic. White magic and black magic and swordsmanship . . . Yevon, what was he?

Sephiroth went over to a section of railing not occupied by any of the other passengers, once more focusing on the ocean. I wondered what he was thinking about. I wondered if I would ever find a way to ask. If he was agreeable to learning Spiran, we might be able to teach him a few nouns using the point-and-name method, but thinking and thought weren't words we could communicate that way.

I sighed softly, wishing that I could give this over to Lord Braska to think about. He had a better general education than I did and might have a better idea of how to go about teaching someone a language. But I didn't want to place any more burdens on his shoulders. The pilgrimage isn't easy even for the most determined Summoner.

Is there anything useful that I can do? I wondered, then stiffened as an idea hit me.

I went to the wheelhouse and waited patiently for the captain to notice me. It didn't take long.

"Sir Guardian? Is there something we can do for you?"

"If you have some kind of map or chart covering all of Spira, I'd like to borrow it for a few minutes," I told him.

A few minutes later, I emerged from the wheelhouse again with a large, rolled-up map in my hands, and went over to where the silver-haired man was standing by the rail.

"Sephiroth?" I said, to get his attention.

"Auron," he replied gravely, turning to face me and raising his eyebrows at the map. It was the first time he'd ever said my name, and I wanted to flutter around him like a lovesick little girl. Somehow, though, I kept myself from blushing and began to unroll my prize. Sephiroth even helped, pinning one end of the large sheet of paper to the rail for me.
I pointed down and then used my finger to trace a path between Kilika and Besaid, trying to communicate this is where we are, and where we're headed. I don't know whether or not it got across, because Sephiroth's expression had . . . vanished, was probably the best way of putting it. He was staring at the map with a granite face. I caught a flash of something in his eyes that might have been fear, but . . . surely not. What would someone like him have to be afraid of? Why would a map be frightening?

"Auron, Braska," I said, pointing to Bevelle. "Jecht." Zanarkand, in the far north beyond Mount Gagazet. This is where we're from. "Sephiroth?"

The silver-haired man shook his head silently and released his edge of the map, so that it snapped back into a tube, butting against my fingers, and turned to face the ocean again. There was a sharp noise as his hand closed on the railing, and I saw a crack shoot along the wood.

"I'm sorry," I said, although I didn't understand what had disturbed him so. Maybe he'd misunderstood what I was trying to tell him?

I took the map back to the captain, crestfallen, and didn't approach Sephiroth again until it was time for lunch. Even then, I didn't try to convey anything more than the usual request for him to follow.

It was obvious that he was once again deep in thought as he ate. And once again, I couldn't tell about what.

The docks at Besaid weren't built near the temple and the village. The islanders lived near their source of fresh water, but the best place for boats was a long curve of sandy beach, so that was where we disembarked. There were drying racks for fish leaning against the dock, and some blitzball players were practicing at the edge of the water.

"Man, what backwater team do they play on?" Jecht asked, watching the blitzers. "That guy just fumbled the ball! Ugh, I can't watch anymore."

"The Besaid Aurochs have been in last place in the tournament in Luca for a dozen years running," I said.

"Thirteen years," Braska corrected. "They have amazingly bad luck."

Jecht snorted a laugh. "Luck? From what I see, they don't need bad luck to lose. They just plain suck at the game. I could take a bunch like that on six to one and still win."

"We're not here to play blitzball," I pointed out.

"I know, I know. We're here for the temple and this Trial thing."

I tried not to grind my teeth. The Trials are no laughing matter! While Besaid's trial was both easy and gentle—the reason why most Summoners came to this temple first, even if they were Ronso who lived on the far side of the Calm Lands—some of the later ones could kill if attempted incautiously.

But getting Jecht to understand that was a lost cause. I sometimes thought he only half-believed our journey was real to begin with.

I wished there was a way we could trade him in for Sephiroth, but it would have been unwise for Braska to ask such an unknown to become his Guardian, even if there had been some way to communicate the concept. And Sephiroth might not have agreed.

A well-worn path led away from the beach, towards the town. Some of the other ferry passengers,
islanders returning from business in Kilika or Luca, were already headed that way, and the four of us
made to follow them.

At one point, a large, birdlike fiend tried to drop down on our heads, but Sephiroth's odachi flicked
out and gutted it before Jecht and I could even pull out our swords. I didn't know about Jecht, but I
intended to work as hard as I could on my speed from now on, because this was getting
embarrassing.

A tuft of phoenix down—which doesn't actually come from phoenixes—fell out as the bird-fiend's
body dissolved into pyreflies. Sephiroth picked it up, examined it, and pocketed it along with the
coins that had also dropped (although why gil appears when fiends disperse is one of the great
mysteries of Spira). I wondered if he understood what the feathers were for.

The village of Besaid turned out to consist of tents made from layers of fabric stretched over curved
wooden frames. Some of them were quite large, and all were colourful. Entering the town was like
stepping into the middle of a field of flowers.

A young man with reddish hair and a gap between his front teeth came straight over to us and made
the Sign of Prayer, which Braska returned.

"Greetings, Lord Summoner and noble Guardians! I am Rakkon, second-in-command of the Besaid
chapter of the Crusaders. Will you attempt the Trials today, or would you prefer to wait until
morning?"

"We had intended to rest for tonight," Braska said.

"Yes, of course. Well, I'm afraid there's no inn, but we Crusaders provide lodging for visitors who
don't have anyone else to stay with. It's just bunks in our barracks, not proper rooms, but . . ."

"I'm sure it will be fine," Braska said, with a warm smile. "I am Braska, and my Guardians are
Auron and Jecht. Sephiroth is not a Guardian, but is traveling with us for the time being. He does not
speak Spiran, or any other language that we've been able to identify."

"How is that possible?" Rakkon asked.

"We don't know," Braska admitted. "He washed up out of the ocean at Rilkes Harbour after a recent
storm. We don't know where he came from before that, but we'll be taking him with us at least as far
as Luca, to see if we can find someone who recognizes him."

Rakkon blinked several times. "Could he have been exposed to Sin's toxin?"

It was an interesting theory, but . . . almost too tidy. And as far as I knew, while the toxin could make
someone remember things that had never happened, no one had ever lost their command of Spiran
because of it before.

Jecht guffawed. "Well, that would explain why he was so pissed off at the thing. Pow! Sent it
running out of that harbour like its ass was on fire."

Rakkon looked like he was about to fall over, so I took pity on him. "Sin attacked Rilkes Harbour
while we were there. Sephiroth participated in the fighting and engaged Sin directly with an
overdrive that did a surprising amount of damage to it. After it was damaged, Sin reversed its course
and returned to sea."

The young Crusader stared open-mouthed at Sephiroth, who didn't seem interested in making eye
contact. Instead, his gaze flicked back and forth over the village—scanning for threats? I wished
there were some way to tell him we were safe here.

Rakkon led us to the barracks, which was set up like most of the others I'd been in, although on a smaller scale. Since the fiends here were so weak, there was little work for Crusaders. Unless Sin decided to drop by, but when that happened, human defenders were of limited value. The vacant beds were at the back of the tent-building, in the best-protected position . . . although the fabric walls would be of limited value in stopping intruders.

"I'm gonna go see if I can find something to drink," Jecht said, then wandered off without waiting for any of the rest of us to comment. Braska removed his headdress and sat down leaning against the head of his bed, taking a small book from his baggage. He'd been studying that copy of High Summoner Ohalland's diary since before we'd left Bevelle, hoping to gain some insight from it that would aid his pilgrimage.

I sat down cross-legged on my bed with my sword in my lap and got out the small kit that included my whetstone and other maintenance tools for the blade. It had been too long since I had last given it a good going-over.

Sephiroth planted himself on the end of his bed, across from me, also with his sword across his lap, and very slowly reached out towards my kit. Of course, he doesn't have any maintenance supplies of his own. And that odachi of his looked well-cared-for. I nodded to him: go ahead.

So we cleaned, sharpened, and oiled our weapons together in companionable silence. Well, Sephiroth didn't actually sharpen the odachi, although he did test the edge by draping a cleaning rag over it. The fabric parted smoothly under the touch of the metal.

It made sense that the sword would be just as incredible as the owner.

When I was satisfied with the condition of my weapon, I packed up my kit again, got up, and beckoned to Sephiroth.

"I'm going to see if we can get Sephiroth a shirt," I told Braska.

"Jecht's going to start teasing you if you keep looking after our stray that way," the Summoner said, glancing up from his book.

He was probably right.

"I prefer spending time with Sephiroth over spending time with Jecht," I said, which was true. Despite the two of us not having a language in common, I felt a closer kinship with the silver-haired man than I did with the blitzer. Sephiroth was quiet and serious, and while it was difficult to be sure when such a gulf lay between us, I thought he might be of a more practical bent of mind than either of my other traveling companions. It would be nice to have someone else with us who remembered to check the emergency supplies, even if we parted ways in Luca.

There were a lot of options for buying shirts in Besaid, especially when you considered the size of the island's population, but then ready-made garments were as much an export business here as the raw cloth. I looked around the first shop thoughtfully, wondering what might look good on Sephiroth, only to realize that he was already going systematically through a display of sleeveless shirts in dark, plain colours, holding them up to check sizes. His final selection was as black as the leathers he was already wearing, undecorated, with a V-cut neck, and he paid for it out of the gil the bird we'd run into on the way in had dropped, simply laying out the coins on the counter and letting the shopkeeper pick out the correct ones. I kept a surreptitious eye on her to make sure she gave him the correct change, but otherwise didn't intervene. Not least because I was feeling a little embarrassed
that I'd experienced the impulse to treat this man like a dress-up doll.

Sephiroth removed his sword harness for a moment in order to put the shirt on under it, then strode off through the town without waiting for me to beckon again. Following him, I found myself on the trail back to the beach, then off to the side of it as the silver-haired man leaped from one jungle-clad ruin to the next and I struggled to keep up.

It took me only a few minutes to figure out why we were here: Sephiroth was hunting fiends, although I wasn't sure whether he was doing it for gil, or just for exercise. And he was good at it. He didn't bother using magic, even against the flans, since his sword was sharp enough to cut into their jelly-like bodies without bouncing off.

By the time we stopped for a break, he had to have accumulated nearly five hundred gil, which wasn't bad when you considered how weak these creatures were. He'd also picked up four potions, and another phoenix down.

He weighed the coins in his hand as we sat together on a block of fallen stone high above the trail, and it occurred to me that he probably didn't know what they were worth.

I picked up a stick and began to write on a convenient patch of bare dirt: numbers from one to twenty, each with a corresponding number of lines above them. I read them out slowly, pointing at each as I went.

When I was done, Sephiroth picked up a stick of his own and began to replicate some of my numerals. He figured out twenty-one right away, and then more or less asked me how to pronounce thirty, forty, one hundred, and so on, going about it quite systematically. He finished by writing out a few three- and four-digit numbers and reading them out, checking for my nods. When he was satisfied, he got to his feet, took up his sword again, and began scanning the jungle for more fiends.

I think he's smarter than I am, I reflected wryly. I was starting to wonder if there was anything Sephiroth wasn't good at. The man was terrifying.

I was tired and dirty by the time we returned to the village that night, exhausted from scrambling up and down inclines and small cliffs that Sephiroth had leaped effortlessly, although, to give him credit, he'd always waited for me to catch up, even though he hadn't exactly invited me along in the first place. The village's equivalent of a shower was a small waterfall tumbling down off a ruined building, and I didn't care that the water was cold as I scrubbed the dirt and sweat off.

"Long day?" Braska asked as I flopped down on my bed.

I shrugged. "Sephiroth must have killed close to a hundred fiends. I was just following him around."

"Get a good night's sleep, then. We'll be entering Besaid's Cloister of Trials tomorrow."

Instead of trying to fall asleep immediately, though, I watched a certain enigma braid his silver hair for bed. Even with the shirt hiding his chest, I could still happily watch the play of muscles under the pale skin of his arms for hours.

I was seriously infatuated, and knew it, but I also knew that this was not the time to indulge in such things. I was Braska's Guardian, and my whole attention should have been on his pilgrimage, and how I could assist it.

However, I was only human.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Besaid's Temple was both more and less impressive than the one in Bevelle. Impressive because it still existed at all, even though its ancient stones had been exposed to the elements for two thousand years. The Bevelle Temple was shielded by the stones of the Palace of St. Bevelle, its form indistinguishable under all the additional layers. But the lack of spires made Besaid's Temple look tiny, and the interior was rustic—not that the statues weren't fine, or the carpets and hangings anything less than well-woven, but the offerings consisted of food and flowers and other things of little value, and I had no doubt that the side-chambers were sparsely furnished. After all, I'd overheard enough priests talking about this place while standing guard duty in Bevelle as a novice.

Sephiroth followed us to the Temple. We hadn't asked him to, but there hadn't seemed any point in trying to forbid him, and now he was examining the details of the sanctuary with an odd look on his face. Or at least, I thought it was an odd look. He tended to be rather stoic, and his expressions were subtle.

He also followed us up the stairs toward the entrance to the Cloister, and that . . . was not acceptable for someone who was not a Guardian, unfortunately, although I'd rather have brought him and left Jecht behind. I did my best to explain that by gestures, pointing to the three of us and the entrance, and then pointing to him and shaking my head. Fortunately, he seemed to accept that, stepping back with a nod.

"You're leaving one of your Guardians behind?" one of the priests said uncertainly.

"Sephiroth is not my Guardian—merely a traveling companion for this leg of my journey," Lord Braska said. We were going to have to explain that over and over again, clearly.

I'd never been inside the Cloister in Bevelle—it was forbidden to all but Summoners taking the Trial, their Guardians, and a handful of priests responsible for its maintenance—and I didn't know what I'd been expecting, but a maze of rock walls adorned with glassy spheres and glowing glyphs had not been it.

"You're telling me that this 'Trial' you've been so worried about is a stupid ball-shuffling puzzle?" Jecht said after we'd been working on it for a little while. "Where's the fighting?"

"It's meant to put the Summoner in the proper frame of mind for contacting the fayth," I explained as Braska contemplated the spheres. "And to keep out the impatient and those incapable of dealing with a given fayth's element. Valefor's Trial is short and simple because she's relatively benign as aeons go, but having someone, say, afraid of fire trying to control Ifrit would be a mess."

"Well, okay, I can see that," Jecht half-mumbled. I probably should have given the man more credit. He wasn't completely stupid or self-involved, just crude and a drunk.

I wondered suddenly if he was as good a blitzball player as he claimed he was. Maybe we could convince someone to let him join a practice match while we were in Luca, since the tournament season was coming up soon. Something to commit to sphere-record for the son he was hoping to reunite with in Zanarkand.

Solving the Trial took less than half an hour. Afterwards, we escaped from the tight tunnels to the
inner sanctuary of the Temple.

Jecht tried to follow Braska as he entered the Chamber of the Fayth, but I blocked him with an extended arm.

"This is as far as we go," I explained. "The Summoner must approach the fayth alone."

"So . . . what, we just wait out here? For how long?"

I shrugged. "An hour, a day . . . it depends on how receptive the fayth is toward Lord Braska. Ten or twelve hours is average, but I believe the record for a successful supplication is eight days."

"Ugh, you've gotta be kidding me." Jecht took his sword off so he could sit on the floor. "And we just . . . wait here?"

"If it looks like it's going to be overnight, it's allowable for one of us to leave temporarily to fetch food, water, and bedding."

"Great."

The silence that followed might have lasted fifteen minutes.

"Hey, Auron."

"What is it?" I tried to make clear from my tone that I didn't particularly want to talk.

"Why'd you want to come on this trip? I've heard the crap about you being kinda-sorta thrown out of the Temple in Bevelle, but why decide to follow Braska around?"

"Because I deeply respect his motivations. He is the only Summoner I have ever met whose true wish is to bring peace to Spira, and nothing else. The others always have a hint of the hunger for fame about them. And because I had nothing better to do at the time we left Bevelle, and someone has to take care of you two. Braska wasn't really all that much more practical than Jecht, left to himself—he was too kind, too patient, too ready to think the best of people. Which was how we'd ended up stuck with Jecht in the first place.

"Oh. M'kay. Figures that it would be something like that. After all, you're a total tight-ass." Jecht snorted. "I'd swap you a thing or two about me for that, but you already know I'm here 'cause I want to get home, and 'cause it's better than a jail cell."

"They would have let you out of the drunk tank in a day or two." All he'd been accused of was drunk-and-disorderly and public urination, neither of which carried a significant penalty.

"Yeah, and I'd still have been on the streets in Bevelle, not a gil to my name, and wondering what the hell had happened to me. At least while I follow you guys around, you feed me and I've got a bed to sleep in. But man, what a comedown. I still wonder what happened to my boat, y'know? it cost me a fair amount of gil, and now it's probably drifted off somewhere and I'll never find it again."

"You're more worried about your boat than your son?"

Jecht shrugged. "Nah, I worry about him too, but his mom's still with him. S'probably not a good idea in the long run for her to raise him without a man around, when he's already such a crybaby, but Tidus'll be okay for now. My boat, though, it's got no one but me."

That . . . made sense in a certain off-kilter way. Jecht fell silent after that, and I paced slowly around
the edge of the chamber, examining walls, floor, and ceiling. And, of course, the heavy, sealed door.

It was about three hours later that the door opened again and Braska staggered out, leaning on his staff. His other hand clutched something small and round, but I couldn't see what it was with his fingers in the way.

"Hey, you okay?" Jecht asked, quite unexpectedly, as he scrambled to his feet and grabbed Braska's arm.

The Summoner smiled. "Merely exhausted. I had . . . the most extraordinary conversation with the fayth after she granted me the aeon. She asked me to take Sephiroth as my Guardian."

I blinked. "Directly? By name? That would be . . ."

"Unprecedented," Braska said when I couldn't find the word. "The fayth don't interfere in a Summoner's choice of Guardians."

"What does it mean, then?"

"I have no idea. She also told me to give him this." He held up a small sphere that glowed softly blue. Not a recording sphere, or any other variety that I was familiar with. "And no, I don't know what it is either. She was very vague about anything she didn't want to address."

Which was common when the fayth decided to talk to a Summoner, as I understood it.

"Fine, whatever," Jecht said. "Let's go back upstairs and talk to that stuck-up silver-haired asshole, then, assuming he's still there."

He is not stuck-up. I bit it back because Sephiroth was perfectly capable of dealing with Jecht himself . . . and because I could understand how he might come across that way. If only we could talk to him —and how did the fayth expect Braska to ask someone he couldn't communicate with to be his Guardian?

Braska leaned on his staff as we made our way back up to the temple proper.

When we first re-entered the outer sanctuary, I couldn't see Sephiroth at all, but a moment later, he detached himself from the shadow of a statue and came toward us. He must have left the temple for a while and gone shopping in the town with the gil from the fiends he'd killed yesterday, because there was some sort of pouch or satchel, big enough to accommodate a large book, hooked to the right side of his belt. Like everything else he wore, it was dead black.

When we met at the foot of the stairs, Braska held out the small blue sphere the fayth had given him, and Sephiroth raised his eyebrows in what was becoming a familiar gesture of inquiry, and reached out his hand to take it. He looked at it for a moment, mouth curling into an expression that might have been a smile or a sneer, I couldn't tell which. Then he held his left hand over the odd bracelet on his right wrist, and a similar glowing sphere (although the new one was purple) popped out of it and into his hand. A small shift in his grip, and the blue one sank in to replace it. He slipped the purple orb into the satchel at his side as though popping them in and out of their mountings in this extraordinary way was an everyday occurrence.

"Well, I guess that shows that at least he knew what it was," Jecht said.

"It's a translation materia," replied a quiet, even baritone voice. "Capable of rendering the speech of whoever has equipped it into the language of the people he or she is addressing, and vice-versa. Previously, I never needed to carry one, but I also never expected to be thrown into another world
entirely. Unfortunate that it only works on spoken language. I suppose I'll have to re-learn how to read in whatever script you use here." The corner of Sephiroth's mouth turned up in a tiny, self-deprecating smile. "I would ask where you obtained the materia, but I suspect the answer would be nonsensical."

I think we all blinked at that, both because we could understand him at all and because it was rather dense information. Braska was the first to pick out the most pertinent bit.

"Another world?" he asked. "Why do you think that?"

"I suppose it does sound insane," the silver-haired man said, with a low chuckle. "I have no way of proving anything, of course—how could I? But aside from the matter of language, the map Auron showed me depicted no land masses I recognized, the flora and fauna here are utterly foreign except for the chocobos, your monsters dissolve into nothing instead of leaving honest corpses behind, and I've seen several people cast spells without materia, which is a rare ability where I come from."

"Then how'd you end up here?" Jecht was staring at Sephiroth, perhaps hoping that the other man's transfer across worlds held the key to getting him back to his home.

Sephiroth's expression shuttered itself "I have no idea. To my knowledge, I should be dead several times over."

"Are you an Unsent?" I asked hoarsely. Oh, please, no.

"What is an Unsent?"

"A person whose will is too strong for them to die when they're killed," I said dully. "Their souls accrete pyreflies, which they shape into a substitute body. However, most of them eventually lose their grip on their humanity and become fiends."

"Pyreflies are the lights that the monsters dissolve into?"

"Yes."

A hint of a frown crossed that pale face. "Is there any way to test for such a condition? As far as I can tell, I am alive and physical in a normal way, but I am not certain what, if any, differences I would sense if I were one of these . . . Unsent."

"I could try to Send you," Braska said. "However, I doubt the fayth would have told me to ask you to be my Guardian if you were an Unsent."

"He probably knows about as much about all this pilgrimage crap as I did when you busted me out of the drunk tank," Jecht said. "Might wanna explain that before you ask for anything, just so he knows what he's getting into."

"Not here, though," I put in. "Let's go back to the Crusaders' lodge. Braska, to my eye, didn't look so good. He was still leaning hard on his staff. Absorbing an aeon was supposed to be exhausting even if the fayth was cooperating with you. "If you don't mind," I added to Sephiroth, who shrugged.

"There's no hurry. I have a great deal to think about already."

I nodded and led off. "This world is called Spira, by the way. The island we're currently on is Besaid. I just realized you might not know."
"My world was called Gaia." Sephiroth matched my pace easily, while Braska and Jecht followed along behind.

"You gonna try to get back there?" Trust Jecht to ask that, directly and tactlessly.

Sephiroth shook his head. "I don't know."

"What? It's your home, isn't it?"

"My circumstances are . . . complicated."

That was the last thing he said for quite a while. Even after we settled on our beds at the back of the Crusaders' lodge with our swords propped out of the way, it remained clear that he was deep in thought. He didn't speak while we were trying to explain the pilgrimage, either, although he did make eye contact and nod from time to time to indicate that he was listening.

And when he did finally say something, it wasn't what any of us were expecting.

"Why is the Final Aeon the only means of defeating Sin, and why is that defeat only temporary?"

"The Church claims Sin is, as its name suggests, the embodiment of all the evil humankind has ever done, and therefore can't be permanently destroyed unless humans stop doing evil," Braska explained.

Sephiroth snorted. "And so the Final Aeon makes it go away until the world once more accumulates an appropriate level of metaphysical grime? What nonsense. Hypotheses based on faith are worthless. Furthermore, I didn't ask your Church for reasons, I asked you, the three people in front of me."

"Count me out," Jecht said, waving a hand in front of himself. "It all sounds like bullshit to me, too. I'm just trying to get home."

As for me, I was trying to catch my balance as my worldview shifted with the same rough abruptness as it had when I'd realized that the promotion I'd been offered was contingent on marrying Maester Esmon's daughter. I'd known for a while that the Church of Yevon was corrupt and riddled with hypocrites who didn't think the rules applied to them. I'd been taught myself to wield machina weapons that were forbidden to all Yevon's faithful except the Order. At the time, I'd been naive enough to think there was a good reason for that, but now . . . well. And if they'd lied about that, what else had they been lying about?

It could have been . . . everything.

"It's probably more accurate to say that the Final Aeon is the only known method of defeating Sin," I said in a low voice. "Others were presumably tried, when it first appeared, but I've never encountered any specific information. As for why it's temporary . . . the only explanation I've ever heard offered is the metaphysical one."

"The High Summoners have left very few records," Braska said. "What little information we have about the Final Summoning is passed down from one of Lord Ohalland's Guardians, who survived to return from Zanarkand, but even his account is incomplete. Ohalland made him leave, and he saw the event only from a distance. Even Lord Ohalland's diary, which the Guardian brought with him, ends while they were still on Mount Gagazet."

"So the mechanism isn't known," Sephiroth said, burning green eyes staring into space. "And Sin's nature, I expect, isn't known either, beyond the fact that it seems to be a lump of these pyrefly things,
like all your other monsters. If we assume that it operates by the same rules, there must be some will binding it together. The question is, whose will? And, again, why?" He ran his hand idly over the hilt of his odachi, propped beside his bed, not seeming surprised when none of us had any answers for him. "Do any records from the time before Sin still survive?"

Lord Braska and I exchanged glances. "If they do, they're in the hands of the Church," the Summoner said slowly. "Or possibly the Al Bhed—they're a people who don't believe in the doctrine of Yevon, and use devices that the Church forbids," he added as Sephiroth's eyebrow rose again. "My wife was one of them."

"Hmm. And knowing that your quest is doomed to offer your people no more than a brief respite at best, you still intend to proceed with this pilgrimage of yours?" Sephiroth's attention was entirely on Braska now, and not in a comfortable way.

"Yes, I do. Even if the Calm I bring lasts only a few years, that's a few years in which perhaps someone can find a better answer—and a few years in which my daughter can grow up without fear. I didn't make the decision to train as a Summoner lightly. This is something I can do to help everyone I love, everyone I know. The biggest thing I can do. I can't... envision doing anything bigger. Maybe you can. Maybe that's why you're here."

When Sephiroth shook his head this time, it was almost violent. "I am no one's hero. I merely find problems for which I can't come up with even a theoretical solution to be somewhat irritating." His hand found the hilt of the odachi again, as though searching for comfort. "But if you truly wish me to go with you, I will."

"You'll be my Guardian, then?"

"If you will have me."

The two of them clasped hands for a moment to seal the agreement. I wondered if Sephiroth's skin was really as silken-smooth to the touch as it looked... *Don't think about it*, I told myself.

"I would appreciate it if someone woke me for supper," Braska said, and laid down, even though it was still only early afternoon. Gaining the aeon must truly have exhausted him.

Sephiroth rose silently from where he was seated on the end of his bed, and picked up his sword.

"Where're you going?" Jecht said.

"Hunting," the silver-haired man said. "Although given how weak the monsters around here are, it's scarcely worth the trouble. I should be back in a few hours."

"Yeah, okay, whatever. Have fun. You, too, Auron," Jecht added in my direction—apparently he'd noticed I was strapping my sword back on too.

I followed Sephiroth as he headed for the path to the beach. Once he was clear of the village, he sped up, increasing his speed to a lope. That was fine, and I was able to keep pace until we reached the point where a major cluster of ruins overhung the path. When he started to climb a crumbling tower, however, I fell behind, because I couldn't move the way he did, jumping from foothold to foothold without stopping. I had to move more laboriously, using both hands and feet to propel myself upward.

I'd been lucky up to that point, but luck doesn't hold forever, so it shouldn't have been a surprise when my foot slipped on a patch of mossy growth as I was reaching for another handhold. But I barely had time to register that I was about to fall when my wrist was caught in an iron grip and I
was lifted straight up onto a wider ledge.

Sephiroth's hand was sinewy and powerful, banded with a swordsman's callus, and fever-warm to the touch, but I barely had a split second to register any of that before he decided I'd found my balance and let me go. I leaned back against crumbling masonry with a sigh.

"Don't lean too hard," Sephiroth warned. "From the echoes I've been hearing as I worked my way up, the interior of the spire is hollow—whatever floors it may once have held have collapsed. And the lowest point of the interior is below the current ground level. You'd break half the bones in your body from that kind of fall."

"And you wouldn't?" I asked, giving him a sharp look.

"I'm somewhat more durable than a normal human, and I've jumped from greater heights. It's painful but survivable, and I heal quickly. However, following me up here was unsafe."

"You expected me to stay behind with Jecht?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

A soft snort. "No, but you have an entire island at your disposal. Why follow me?"

"Because I want to get to know you better. And you've already admitted this isn't your world."

"Are you implying that I might endanger myself through ignorance?"

"More that you might run into something that isn't a danger, but looks like one if you don't recognize it, and overreact and level the island. We don't have enough money to pay those kinds of damages."

"I grant that that wouldn't be impossible," he said with amusement.

He was beautiful enough with his normal cold non-expression, but with the corner of his mouth turned up in a hint of a smile, he was . . . radiant. A shame that it vanished almost immediately, like the sun ducking behind a cloud.

. . . I hadn't been so infatuated with anyone since I'd developed a crush on my beginning swordsmanship instructor, back when I was a novice. The journey to Zanarkand was going to be either heaven or hell for me. Or possibly both at once.

"Why come all the way up here?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Because as far as I can tell, the top of this should offer the best available view of the island. I still don't have a clear mental picture of how this place is laid out, or how the reality corresponds to the map you showed me. Assuming that map was accurate, since I don't know how old it was, or how the information plotted on it was acquired."

All I could do was shake my head, because I didn't know either.

"Wait here," Sephiroth added. "There's no proper ledge at the top of this next bit, and no room for more than one person to balance on the spire."

And he was off again, leaping quickly from foothold to foothold. I watched as he cleared the remaining ten feet or so of the tower and came to a stop with one boot planted at the highest point—only one, because there wasn't enough space for two. Standing on one foot didn't seem to bother him, though. He didn't even wobble back and forth, trying to keep his balance. I felt cold prickle's down my spine when he leaped into the air, and twisted . . . landing on his other foot and facing in the opposite direction, with the same rock-solid balance as before.
I wasn't able to relax until he came sliding back down the side of the tower to land beside me on the ledge.

"How do you even do that?" I hadn't meant to ask that, but it slipped out regardless.

Sephiroth gave me a long, assessing look. Then he said, "Some of it is technique and training . . . but my reactions are faster than those of a normal human, and my senses more acute. Including my sense of balance." He turned away, looking out over the jungle. "There are those who would say that I'm not human at all—just a monster created to fight in other people's wars."

"You seem human enough to me," I said. "Or at least, you're certainly not a Ronso or a Guado or a Hypello."

Silver brows shot upwards, and he turned back to me. "Ronso? Guado?"

Now it was my turn to blink. "Are all the people on Gaia human? No other races at all?"

"There are supposedly some, but they range from the nearly-extinct to the purely legendary. If one discounts the Cetra, who are externally indistinguishable from humans, the only such race whose existence I can confirm from my own knowledge are the firelions, and the one I encountered may have been the last of his kind. Nor have I seen non-humans wandering around Besaid."

I chuckled. I couldn't help it. "That's because Besaid is extremely provincial. Hardly anyone comes here unless it's to trade or to visit the temple. We'll eventually pass through both Guadosalam and the Ronzo capital at Mount Gagazet on our way to Zanarkand, and all the races mingle in Luca and Bevelle."

"Then . . . everyone I encounter in Spira will assume . . ."

I was starting to wonder what kind of life this man had lived, until now. "No one will think of you as anything other than human. An unusual, exceptional human, maybe, but definitely not a monster."

I'd like to find whoever used that word to describe you, and beat him to a pulp.

Sephiroth closed his eyes, bowing his head, and a slight shudder ran through him. "Why now?" he whispered. "Why, after everything that's happened . . . everything that I've done . . ."

I put my hand on his shoulder, and felt him start, head snapping around again to stare at me. And what I saw in those eyes . . . it felt like those jumbled emotions were going to burn me, but I still didn't lower my hand. For a moment, I even had the impulse to wrap my arms around him and hug him, but I thought it might be too much, too soon.

After several long moments of silence, he sighed and said, "We should climb down. After all, there aren't any monsters up here, and . . . I think I need to do something mindless like killing weak fiends for a bit."

You need to think again. It made me feel sad, although—like him—I refused to show it.

He was . . . a bit of a mess, really. A shell, a facade of perfect power and self-confidence layered over a bog of emotional torment. Like I had been after finding out about the political quagmire at the heart of the Church of Yevon, but a million times worse.

Let me help you. Again, not something I could say. But I wanted to see him heal, even if it was only in the messy, somewhat scarred-up way that I had myself.

I didn't realize it at the time, as I stared slightly cross-eyed at the mossy stone in front of my nose
while fumbling for another foothold, but something more than just infatuation or lust or friendship was starting to dig its claws into me.

Perhaps it was inevitable.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know, there are no canonical non-combat materia (except Underwater, sort of). I put that down to the fact that they wouldn't be of any use in the games. And Red XIII's race has no official name that I know of, but under the circumstances, I had to assign them one.
Chapter 4

Kilika wasn't all that different from Besaid in any real sense. Oh, the town was larger and built out over the water, of course, and the temple was separated from it by a stretch of jungle, but it was still small and sleepy and the population was entirely human.

Sephiroth had been rather quiet for most of the ferry ride between the two islands. Occasionally, he'd taken me, or Braska, or both of us, aside, and asked a bunch of tightly focused questions about some aspect of Spira or the pilgrimage, but mostly he'd found the most inaccessible places possible, like the crossbar of the ship's mast, to sit and brood. I'd taken to getting up right at dawn in order to catch him during his early morning sword practice, and even then, we didn't talk about anything beyond the mechanics of swordplay itself. It took too much energy to converse during a high-speed, high-energy sparring match, anyway.

So about the only new thing I'd learned about him during the two-and-a-half-day trip was that he knew far more about wielding very heavy swords than someone who preferred a weapon like his should. And he knew how to teach it. I learned quite a bit from him, as opposed to about him, in the ten-minute segments after our sparring matches.

I wasn't sure that backing away and giving him space had been the best thing for me to do, but I also knew that adapting to a completely different world couldn't have been easy for him even without piling it on top of whatever issues his life in Gaia had left him with.

So. Kilika. We reached the island in midafternoon, and took rooms at the inn there. Supposedly the Crusaders kept the jungle paths between the town and the temple clear of fiends, so it wasn't difficult or dangerous to get from one to the other.

Sephiroth, of course, found the one narrow path into the trees that didn't lead towards the temple, and set out along it. He didn't ask me to go with him, but he didn't seem bothered when I followed him, either, and we destroyed fiends in companionable silence for the most part. This time, Sephiroth insisted on splitting the gil from the monsters evenly with me, even though he did most of the work. He also gave me the electro-marble one of the yellow elements left behind, pointing out that he had no use for it. After I told him what it was, that is. Apparently, Gaian monsters were less generous with their items than Spiran fiends.

It was nearing sunset by the time we returned to the town, and I was soaked with sweat simply from running through the jungle. Sephiroth, on the other hand, appeared not to sweat, or at least I had yet to see him do so. He also hadn't tanned or burned despite several days spent mostly outside in the tropical sun with the pale skin of his arms exposed. Trivial, but useful, qualities. Just like his sense of balance.

We set out for the temple early the next morning, and arrived while the priests were still eating breakfast. The young acolyte who approached us with a greeting hadn't been as careful with his fork as he might have been, and had bits of egg clinging to the front of his robe.

"Another Summoner is communing with the fayth," he intoned at us. "You will have to wait until he is done. Not that it will do you any good."

Maybe the egg hadn't been so accidental after all.

"If I may ask, who is the other Summoner?" Braska was polite, but then Braska was almost always polite.
"Lord Kelanth," the acolyte replied with a sneer. He turned around without offering to show us to somewhere more appropriate to wait and vanished back into the maze of anterooms, leaving us in the outer sanctuary, with its statues and ever-burning flames.

"Well, he's got all the charm of what comes out the back end of a chocobo," Jecht said. "Who's this Kelanth guy?"

Braska shook his head. "I've never heard of him before."

"He's from Luca," I said. "Maester Esmon's nephew. I've seen him a few times in passing, but all I really know about him is that his family wanted him to train as a priest, but he insisted on becoming a Summoner instead." He would also have been my . . . cousin-in-law, or some relation of that nature, if I had done as the maester had bid and gotten married like a good little corrupt warrior-monk.

"One hopes that he has better manners than his partisans," Sephiroth murmured. Then, a bit more loudly, "Do we wait here, or return to the town?"

"Here," Braska said firmly. "At least for now." Then he sat down on the steps leading up to the Cloister's entrance, like a youth with no care for his image. Not that I was about to tell him that he shouldn't behave that way. It was one of the things that made him different from the other Summoners, and would probably annoy the priests here, but it looked like some of them were already unhappy.

Jecht sat down on a lower step, so that he and Braska were blocking the whole staircase between them, and I stood at Braska's side. Sephiroth jumped from a standing start up to the landing above, where he would have a better view of the area, and planted himself near one of the eternal torches.

Braska smiled and shook his head slightly. "I never expected my pilgrimage to turn out this way. Then again, I'm not sure what I did expect. Besaid, especially, was . . . beautiful. A peaceful place. So different from Bevelle." A long pause, then, "Auron? Will you do something for me?"

"Whatever you like, my lord," I said firmly.

"Then, when this is over . . . will you take Yuna to Besaid to live? Regardless of whether I succeed or fail, I think she would be better off somewhere that no one knows who her parents were. Or cares."

"I understand." I would get little Yuna to Besaid or die trying. Especially since I had a feeling Braska was right. The daughter of a High Summoner—or a failed Summoner—and his Al Bhed wife would be placed under immense pressure if she remained in Bevelle.

"S funny, you know," Jecht said. "She and my kid—they're about the same age. Wonder if they'd get along. Not that it's like we can arrange a play date or anything." He shook his head and chuckled. "I wonder if Tidus is okay. He probably hates my guts by now, if he didn't already. Running away was one of the things I promised I'd never do . . ."

"He'd probably be more impressed if you stopped drinking," I couldn't help pointing out.

Jecht snorted. "Hey, I can quit anytime. It just . . . softens the edges, y'know? He'd probably understand." He jerked a thumb in Sephiroth's direction.

"I assure you that I do not." Sephiroth's voice was as cold as the depths of Lake Macalania. "I have spent more than enough of my life with my mind befogged against my will. I would never choose to do such a thing to myself voluntarily. Fortunately, my body treats alcohol like the poison it is and negates it before it can have any significant effect."
"So you can't get drunk at all?" Apparently, Jecht thought this was a terrible thing.

"No," came the arctic reply.

"You poor bastard. You don't get much joy out of—?"

The silencing spell snapped into place around Jecht with a quiet popping noise. Braska raised his eyebrows, although I'd already told him about Sephiroth casting white magic on me. Actually, I wasn't sure whether a condition-inducing spell qualified as white magic or black—there weren't many people who could cast them at all.

Jecht seemed to belatedly realize that something had happened to him, and shook his fist in the direction of the silver-haired man. Sephiroth ignored him.

"How many spells do those materia of yours have in them, anyway?" I asked, looking up.

"The ones I have equipped at the moment provide twenty-five spells, roughly half of which are direct attacks of varying elemental alignment. Unfortunately, the rest of my kit was lost somewhere between Mount Nibel and Rilkes Harbour."

_Mount Nibel._ It was the first definite name of a location on Gaia that he had mentioned. I wondered what it was like, and what he'd been doing there.

"Can you tell us which spells?" Braska asked.

"It might affect our battle tactics later on," I added.

"Three levels each of fire, ice, lightning, and earth-elemental attack spells. Three levels of cure spells. The remainder are miscellaneous: Regen, Protect, Shell, Wall, Haste, Slow, Stop, Sleepel, and Silence." Sephiroth nodded at Jecht, who was glaring at him with irritation. "I don't know if all of those have analogues here in Spira, however."

I exchanged glances with Braska—_earth_-elemental attack spells?

"Spira only acknowledges four elements, in opposing pairs—fire and ice, and lightning and water," Braska said. "I take it Gaia has more."

Sephiroth nodded. "There is some argument as to how many there are, but the range is between eight and twelve, and not all of them form tidy pairs. I suppose I will have to test the Quake spells to determine whether they still function here."

"Why not do it right now?" Jecht's voice was barely a whisper, but it seemed the silence spell was starting to wear off.

"Because I don't want to tear up the floor," Sephiroth replied.

Suddenly, the colour of the ever-burning flames changed. Jecht flinched in surprise, and Sephiroth gave the one he was standing beside a suspicious look, as though he expected it to do something more violent as an encore.

"That should mean that Summoner Kelanth is done with the fayth," Braska said.

"Well, ha-le-lu-jah," Jecht said, rising to his feet and stretching. "I'm tired of sitting here listening to you three talk about all this boring crap."

Stop behaving like a five-year-old who doesn't want to wait while the adults talk. I swallowed the
words back down, because I knew Jecht wouldn't listen.

In the end, it took ten more minutes for Kelanth's party to clear the Cloister, and Jecht ended up sitting down again before the three of them emerged. They walked straight past Sephiroth without acknowledging him, and started down the stairs. Jecht was still sprawled across the bottommost step, although Braska had moved out of the way.

Kelanth's first guardian paused on the third step from the bottom. She was a tiny woman, no more than five feet tall, with tanned skin and black hair in two coiled braids. She wore a pair of dark blue shorts that bloused out around her thighs and gathered in at the knee, a cream-coloured sleeveless shirt, and a pair of simple cloth shoes. Thrust through the back of her belt was a weapon consisting of metal rods bound together with chains—something from the flail or nunchuk family, although I wasn't familiar with this specific type.

She prodded Jecht with her toe. "Kindly get out of my master's way."

"Fine, fine. Don't get your panties in a twist."

The tiny woman sniffed. "Such language. You are unfit to be a Guardian. I pity your Summoner."

"On the contrary," Braska said mildly. "While I will admit Jecht doesn't have the most polished manners, he does his job quite well."

"And you are?" Kelanth spoke for the first time. He hadn't changed much since the last time I'd seen him—blandly handsome face, light brown hair, and wearing clothes that would have been fashionable in Luca, which meant eye-searing colour combinations. He was eighteen or so, much closer to the average age of Summoners than Braska. His other Guardian, standing behind him, couldn't have offered a greater contrast: they wore a black, hooded robe that made it impossible to distinguish any details of appearance, including those of gender.

"Summoner Braska. These are my Guardians: Jecht, Auron, and Sephiroth."

The younger Summoner started as he followed Braska's gesture up to the silver-haired figure on the platform—apparently he really hadn't noticed Sephiroth. "Ah. I am Kelanth. My Guardians are Yukiko and Zurian."

Where "Zurian" was a unisex name used throughout the southern hemisphere, and the third most common name on Spira overall, if I remembered the statistics correctly. It was almost as though it had been deliberately selected to tell us nothing about the hooded figure, I reflected as Braska and Kelanth exchanged the Sign of Prayer.

"They are a collection of rejects, just as we have heard," Yukiko said, once more prodding Jecht with her toe.

Kelanth sighed. "Yukiko, it isn't necessary to be rude. Summoner Braska has just as much right to make the pilgrimage as I do." To my ear, he didn't sound like he really believed that, but complaining would get us nowhere.

"And yet, this lump of a Guardian is still in our way."

"Jecht," I said. "Move, or I'll move you. You're wasting our time as well as theirs."

"Okay, okay. Sheesh." Finally, the blitzer stood up and took a couple of steps to the left. "Y'know, I hate people who're too lazy to go around."
It was true that the stairway had been wide enough for the other party to sidle past him, but it would have been undignified, and I didn't blame that girl Yukiko for asking him to move. Jecht seemed to realize that he would get no sympathy from me as the three filed past.

Once they were clear, Braska climbed the steps slowly, and the three of us fell in behind him, and followed him to the elevator that led down to the Kilika Temple's Cloister of Trials.

At the bottom was a corridor lined on either side with jets of flame, not unlike the temple above, from what we'd seen of it. Braska stopped the moment we were off the elevator and turned to face us.

"I should note that using ice magic to disrupt the flow of the Trial would be considered . . . poor form," he said. "Everything we need to solve the puzzle should already be down here. The priests will have restored all the spheres to their places while Kelanth was communing with the fayth."

While he was supposedly speaking to all of us, his gaze was firmly fastened on Sephiroth, who nodded expressionlessly. Braska started forward again, entering the first chamber and picking up a sphere.

Everything went well until we conquered the wall of flame in the last room and were left staring at a door that we had no sphere to open.

"The hell is this?" Jecht asked no one in particular.

"Split up and search," Braska said. "The last sphere must be here somewhere."

Sephiroth frowned, but didn't say anything until we had spent several minutes searching the Cloister without success, and reconvened in the last room.

"Braska. You say that the last sphere must be here, but is that entirely true? We have already encountered one priest at this temple who was hostile to us. If he, or another with similar sympathies, was the one called upon to 'reset' the Cloister, he may deliberately have left it in an unsolvable state."

"That would be—" Braska began, and then stopped.

"Not physically impossible," I pointed out. And we both know that the Church of Yevon is rotten at the core. Why should some provincial priest committing sabotage be such a surprise? "It does seem like a bit of a waste of time, though. A Summoner who fails the Trial may re-enter it after an interval of seven days, and they can't keep resetting it skewed, or sooner or later they're going to catch some Summoner other than Lord Braska."

"What if their objective was only to delay and shame us?" Sephiroth asked, his eyes still on Braska. "You've said yourself that many Summoners, for reasons of their own, abandon their Journeys before reaching Zanarkand. If the priests here consider you an inappropriate candidate for High Summoner, they may simply want you to give up."

Braska shook his head. "That's the one thing I won't do."

"Then wait here."

Sephiroth crossed back to the other side of the room, climbed to the top of the stairs to reset the location of the pedestal, and pulled the sphere from it. Fire flared across the center of the floor, separating him from the rest of us. My hand snapped up, reaching toward him, in the instant before I forced myself to lower it again. There was nothing I could do about this.

Sephiroth jumped back down and pointed at the floor. I felt my skin tighten as black magic pulsed
through the room and ice sealed off the opening from which the gases that fueled the fire erupted. It only held for a few seconds, but by the time it burned through, the silver-haired man was back on our side of the flames, with the sphere we needed.

"I apologize for 'disrupting the flow of the Trial'," he said, voice as dry as the interior of Bikanel Island, as we all stared. "If you would prefer to try again in seven days, I can take the sphere back."

"The Trial isn't the important thing, in the end," Braska said. "The fayth will decide whether or not our actions were . . . suitable."

Sephiroth offered him the sphere. Braska accepted it and set it in its niche, burning away the final door and allowing the room to softly fill with the Hymn of the Fayth.

The inner sanctuary beyond was like the one at Besaid, except lit by more of the flame jets. Braska was approaching the Chamber of the Fayth when suddenly a voice spoke from the other side of the open door.

"Sephiroth."

Lord Braska halted in mid-stride, raising his eyebrows, and Sephiroth (who, I'd noticed, did not tend to be indecisive) stepped past him, into the Chamber. Where even Guardians were normally forbidden to go. Braska went inside as well, and I stepped up to the doorway so that I could see without entering, and blocked Jecht with my arm.

Inside, a translucent figure of a young man in an old-fashioned version of the Crusaders' officer uniform stood regarding Sephiroth and Braska. Braska made the Sign of Prayer, but Sephiroth just stood up, meeting the fayth's gaze with his own.

"What do you want of me?" the silver-haired man asked.

"For the time being, nothing. Only that you travel Spira with Braska and see it as it is. When you reach the end of the journey, all will be made clear, and the choice will be placed before you."

Sephiroth's hand went to the hilt of his sword.

"I don't like being manipulated. If you know something, then tell me now."

Instead, the fayth became a fountain of pyreflies that swirled around Braska for a moment. The Summoner lurched forward a single step, clutching his chest as phantom flames erupted all over his body. He gasped and staggered, and would have fallen to his knees if Sephiroth hadn't extended a hand to grasp his shoulder and steady him, ignoring the fire. I gritted my teeth and controlled the impulse to move forward. This surely had to be part of what Summoners endured. If absorbing an aeon had been easy, they wouldn't have needed to train so long and hard.

It took nearly half an hour for the phantom flames to die, and during that time, Jecht and I stared through the open door while Sephiroth supported and steadied Braska. At last the false fire was gone, and Braska waved Sephiroth away and shuffled over to lean against the wall beside the door.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"Merely exhausted. Ifrit is . . . not as easy to hold as Valefor."

I began helping him toward the exit that would lead back to the main part of the temple, but stopped when I realized Sephiroth wasn't following us. The silver-haired man was staring at the floor of the Chamber of the Fayth—probably at the fayth proper, the statue that bound the aeon's spirit to the world of the living. After a moment, his mouth tightened, and he turned decisively away, following
There were eight priests and priestesses waiting at the top when we emerged from the Cloister. One—the one who’d greeted us when we’d first arrived at the temple, although he’d changed into a clean robe—held a small sphere in his hands. All of them had disapproving expressions on their faces.

"Summoner Braska," said the one in the middle, a priestess somewhat past middle age, who was no doubt the most senior of the temple. "It appears you have violated the rules of the Trial."

"What the—he broke the rules? So that sphere your little friend is holding is just a souvenir from the gift shop?" Jecht exploded.

"Jecht," Braska said, holding up a hand in warning.

Then Sephiroth stepped forward, putting himself between the temple's clergy and the rest of us. "I was the one who broke your so-called 'rules', when I discovered you had already violated them by not providing everything necessary to solve the Trial. Be glad that I didn't decide to destroy the Cloister—I could have cut the final door out of the way, rather than put myself at risk retrieving a sphere intended to be inaccessible. The fayth did not object to my actions."

"We believe otherwise," the priestess said. "Violating the pattern of the Cloister and disrespecting the fayth is a grave offense."

Braska cleared his throat. "There is a simple way to determine whether or not my Guardian offended the fayth, but we will require more space than this. If you would, madam?"

The priestess scowled in a way that suggested she'd tasted something bitter, but she and the others parted before us, allowing us to emerge into the outer sanctuary of the temple.

"I will summon the aeon granted to me by this temple's fayth, and Sephiroth will face it," Braska said. "If the summons fails, or the aeon attempts to strike him down, it will be clear that he has erred, and we will surrender him to you. If, however, the aeon demonstrates no hostility, it will be equally clear that he has not offended."

_The Aeon Trial._ No one had undergone it in three hundred years, not since a half-Al-Bhed Guardian had been accused of desecrating the temple at Macalania. He had been guilty, and Shiva had turned him into an ice statue as a warning to others.

Sephiroth didn't seem worried as he followed Braska out into the middle of the floor, but perhaps that was because he had never seen an aeon. Or did they have such creatures on Gaia, too?

The two men stood facing each other some ten feet apart as Lord Braska swept his staff through a gesture of summoning. Fire exploded from the floor as Ifrit appeared, and the aging priestess gasped. The aeon lowered its head to allow Braska to run his hand along its jaw, then turned its attention to Sephiroth, who stood straight-backed, meeting the huge creature's eyes.

Ifrit was the one to look away, and the breath I'd been holding came out in a gasp as the aeon bowed its head before the silver-haired man, as though to apologize for the idiocy of the priesthood, then pressed its face against his chest.

"I believe that indicates the fayth's opinion of my fellow Guardian quite clearly," I said, because Braska was looking greyish. A moment later, the aeon disintegrated into pyreflies, and Braska fainted, with Sephiroth lunging right through the fading remains of the aeon to catch him for the second time today.
He swung the unconscious Summoner up into his arms, and turned to face us—no, to face the priests and priestesses who had stood there watching the whole thing.

"It is not your right to judge whether or not Braska is worthy of becoming High Summoner."

Sephiroth's voice rolled like thunder through the outer rooms of the temple. "That right belongs to the fayth, and the fayth alone. If you continue to interfere . . .” Suddenly he smirked, and there was something about the expression that sent cold trickling down my spine despite the flames and the jungle heat. " . . . I have no objection to rending this temple of yours stone from stone, in the name of giving you something constructive to do with your time by repairing it."

He turned away again, heading for the doorway that led out of the temple. I swallowed and hurried to catch up, with Jecht pounding along behind me. By the time we came even with Sephiroth, out in the yard, the smile had vanished behind his normal stoic expression.

"Anyone ever told you that you're good at scaring people shitless?" Jecht asked. "Man, you should have seen the looks on their faces."

"What makes you think I didn't?" Sephiroth asked. "I also saw the one on yours. But . . ." There was a hint of a shiver, although he didn't lose hold of Braska's unconscious body, still cradled against his chest. "It's all a matter of projecting a combination of absolute confidence and absolute indifference to anyone else's fate, with a little rhetoric for decoration. Just a trick."

But something about him said that it wasn't. Or perhaps that he was afraid that it wasn't. Or was I just reading too much into his closed expression and the eyes that were fixed on the trail ahead?

He'd been magnificent in the moments when he'd faced down those priests. Commanding and terrifying (and attractive in a way that made me glad for the loose concealment of my haori). But there had been a streak of madness, too—a sense that, at any time, he could fall over the edge and into darkness.

I was starting to grasp just how little I understood Sephiroth. Indeed, I was starting to believe he was one of the most complex people I had ever met, and there was far to much of him still hidden from me for any real understanding between us.

*Can I help?*

*Will you let me?*

Questions without answers. Questions that, I suspected, would remain without answers for some time.
Chapter 5

Lord Braska woke late that evening, and to my surprise, it was Sephiroth who insisted on forcing some food into him before he would let the Summoner go to sleep again. Between this and his speech at the temple, it was clear that he was taking his role as a Guardian as seriously as I did my own.

It was a little more disturbing when I woke the next morning and realized that Sephiroth hadn't slept at all—just sat all night leaning against the wall with his sword across his lap. As though we were in enemy territory. Although in all fairness, perhaps we were. If the priests decided they didn't want things to end where they had yesterday . . .

Either Sephiroth's wakefulness had thwarted them or they weren't that vindictive, however. We were able to eat breakfast the next morning and board the ferry for Luca in peace. Which lasted all of seven hours before the storm blew up.

I was barely aware of it at first, down below deck playing cards with Jecht and Braska because at least it was something to do. I could hear the wind picking up outside the ship and the waves hitting harder, but it wasn't until Sephiroth, who had remained above deck on the trip from Besaid except to eat and sleep, walked in with his hair soaked and water running down his back that I realized just how bad it had to be out there.

I approached him as he stripped off his shirt and wrung the water out of it and his hair, leaving a puddle on the carpet. "Sephiroth?"

"I thought it best to stay out of the sailors' way while they reefed the sails." He ran his fingers through his long, silver mane, then put his shirt back on, damp though it was. "While I didn't stop to ask, it looked like we're going to be carried a fair distance out of our way, if the ship stays in one piece at all."

"How much time have you spent at sea?" I asked, wanting to know how much of a basis he had for that assessment.

"Enough. Although usually in larger, steel-hulled ships. This one strikes me as disturbingly delicate by contrast."

"Disturbing" was a good word, I decided. It fit the creaking sounds we could hear from all around us, and the shudders of the ship as she fought against the waves. We went back to the card game, but even Jecht couldn't concentrate on that anymore, and in the end, we gave up. The three of us remained at the small table we'd had the cards spread out on, while Sephiroth leaned against the wall nearby.

A sudden lurch threw us from our chairs and put out the lantern that hung from the ceiling of our cabin. It was pitch black for a moment before firelight and an eerie glow flowered: Sephiroth, with a fireball dancing above the palm of his cupped hand and one of the materia on his wrist giving off a ghostly light.

"Is everyone alright?" I asked, scrambling to my feet.

"Yeah."

"Just bruises."
Sephiroth offered me a nod. He had his head slightly tilted to one side, and his eyes narrowed. "I can hear water flowing. I'm afraid we may have sprung a leak."

"Shit, are you serious?!"

"And someone is shouting, up on deck. Braska, I would recommend you take those robes off—you won't be able to swim in them. Auron, the same goes for your outer garment."

I was already scrambling with shaking fingers to get my shoulder guard and haori off. My sword was propped against the wall, and I left it there, beside Jecht's. Braska, under his robes, wore . . . the lower half of an Al Bhed wetsuit. Not a bad choice under the circumstances. He was probably a better swimmer than I was. Actually, I would bet that I was the worst swimmer here, since I'd only taken the handful of lessons required by the Order. I swallowed hard as I watched Braska pull the other part of the wetsuit from his baggage and skin into it.

Sephiroth left his clothes as they were, right down to the sword on his back, even though I couldn't see how keeping the odachi was wise or safe. Perhaps he considered it worth the risk.

He opened the door and led us out into the common area at the center of the ship. There was no light here, either, and several people's eyes reflected Sephiroth's hand-held fireball as we stumbled toward the exit that would let us up on deck.

Before we were more than halfway there, we heard a cracking noise, and suddenly we were knee-deep in water. There was a cry from behind us as someone was knocked off their feet, but I gritted my teeth and kept going, because my responsibility was to Braska, and this was one of those times that we'd end up saving no one if we tried to save everyone.

Sephiroth wrenched the door open when we reached it, and the storm slapped us in the face. The rain was just about falling sideways, and the deck was deserted. Had the sailors all been washed overboard?

I grabbed the back of Sephiroth's sword harness, nearly slicing my arm open on his odachi, as he forced his way out onto the deck, taking slow, firm steps with his feet spread for balance. Behind me, Jecht and Braska held on to my shoulders and clothing, and I thought they might be dragging one or two more people behind them, other passengers who had seen our group as their best chance to escape as the ship sank out from underneath them.

Sephiroth turned his head. "I'm going to take you to the base of the mast! Grab onto it and stay there while I go to the rail! If I can encase the bottom of the boat in ice, I may be able to keep it afloat in spite of the damage!"

"He's actually got a plan?!!" I don't think I would have heard Jecht if he hadn't been practically yelling in my ear. Unlike Sephiroth, who had what we would have called a good parade-ground voice in the Order, the blitzer didn't know how to adapt his voice to make it carry.

Then we were at the mast, and there was no more time to think about it. I looped my sash—I hadn't been sure why I was carrying it with me up to that point, but it turned out to have been a good idea—around the wood and tied the ends to my belt. Then I grabbed Lord Braska and pulled him forward, pinning him between myself and the mast with my arm.

The storm seemed to continue forever, with waves slopping over the deck from time to time and trying to wash us away. Vaguely I was aware of other people around me, Braska and Jecht and two or three others. I thought one of them might be a woman. Sephiroth was nowhere to be seen, but I couldn't afford to worry about him right now. Once more, Braska was my main responsibility. No
matter how much the knowledge might feel like a lead weight lodged in my gut.

After what had to have been several hours, the rain and wind started to slacken a bit. I was soaked through and shivering and exhausted, but the ship was still floating.

I pushed my hair back out of my face and looked around, finally spotting Sephiroth at the railing some twelve feet away, looking over the side of the ferry. As I watched, I saw him cast another ice spell over the edge.

It looked like three people had followed us up out of the interior of the boat, or at least there were three who had done so and survived: a middle-aged man, a young woman, and a teenaged boy. They all looked like islanders, from Besaid or Kilika or one of the smaller villages scattered about on tiny islets that only appeared on the local maps. I wasn't certain how many passengers the ferry had started out with, or how many had drowned on the lower levels or been washed overboard.

"We should try to get inside the wheelhouse," I said. "We're all soaked to the skin."

"Got some rope here," Jecht said, picking up a length of heavy cord that seemed to have been blown down off the mast. "I'll string a line to the door, so no one gets thrown off while the deck's still pitching like a pissed-off chocobo."

"Good idea," I said. I was too tired for much else.

Clinging to the guiderope, we all made our way to the door, and discovered there was still one crewmember inside: the helmsman. Who didn't look very happy.

"She's pretty thoroughly awash, fellas, and I'm pretty sure we lost the rudder a while back. I'm not sure why we're still floating, or where we are, and even if I did know I couldn't get us anywhere specific."

"We're still floating because there's someone outside casting ice spells to block whatever holes we've got in the hull," I said. "I don't know how much longer he can keep it up, though."

"I had some ethers, but they're still in our cabin," Braska said. "If we can find some kind of light that'll work in that mess, I can go after them," Jecht said.

"We've got some of those Al Bhed cold-lights, for working underwater on the hull and such." That was the helmsman. "Just a second."

He started to rummage through some sort of locker. In the meanwhile, I forced myself back to my feet. "I'm going to go check on Sephiroth. Jecht, if you can grab our weapons and anything else you might find that's useful while you're down there . . ."

"Gotcha," the blitzer said. "I'll check for survivors, too. Might be a couple, if they found an air pocket or something."

I staggered out onto the pitching deck and almost slid to the rail. Hugging it tightly, I began to make my way forward to where Sephiroth was standing. He looked wet and tired too, and didn't seem to notice my presence until I touched his hand, finding it fever-warm instead of chilled as I had expected.

"The main breach in the hull is just below us," he said. "Three or four boards broken or torn away—I can't tell with any precision."
"How long can you keep it plugged?" I asked.

"Under these conditions, until morning. If the seas die down within the next few hours and stop battering so hard at the ice, so that I don't have to cast so often, I may be able to keep going for three or four days. At that point, lack of sleep will start to interfere with my concentration and recovery."

"We're trying to scrape together some ethers for you right now."

Sephirioth nodded. "That may extend the time by another day or so."

So we had at most five days to either get to land or find some way to patch the hole.

"Is there anything else I can do to help?"

He sighed. "Find out if anyone else on board can cast ice-elemental spells. If someone can take over long enough for me to snatch even an hour or two of sleep, that will vastly extend our time. There may also be supplies on board for making voyage repairs, although with the hole below the waterline, accessing it is going to be complicated. I suppose there's no telling where we are, other than west of where we started out."

"Why do you think we've been moving west?" Especially since the helmsman didn't know.

"Because the sun is there." He pointed at a stretch of grey sky that didn't seem any different from any other to my eye.

West of Luca and Kilika wasn't a good place to be, although the only good direction to be blown in would have been north, and east would have been even worse. At least there were islands of various sizes out here in the sea south of Bikanel, although the larger ones were, once again, to the north. If we were lucky, we'd end up landing on some nameless speck of rock and getting stuck there until someone with a more intact ship came by. Which might take as much as several years.

*Or we could get eaten by Sin first.* I reflected grimly as I worked my way back across the deck to the wheelhouse. This would postpone Lord Braska's pilgrimage by quite a bit, if it didn't end it outright.

The teenager who had clung to the mast with us knew how to cast some black magic, including Blizzara, and was able to spell Sephiroth off for a couple of hours a day so that he could sleep, sitting upright against the rail.

It took three days to retrieve all the corpses from the waterlogged interior of the ship. Well, almost all. Jecht only managed to wrestle two of the dead chocobos out of the engine compartment—we butchered those to extend our food supplies—and was forced to leave the other two, which had become awkwardly wedged. Braska, once more clad in his robes, sent the souls of the human victims on to the Farplane. Sephiroth, watching from not all that far away, didn't react, proving once and for all that he wasn't an Unsent.

Jecht also put the swimming skills he'd learned for blitzball to use jury-rigging repairs to the rudder, but without the engine we were still at the mercy of the wind. We managed to get a minimal amount of sail up, and the helmsman started tacking north. Or we thought it was north. Our best hope right now was to find an Al Bhed ship and negotiate with them to tow us back to land.

And so we drifted. At least fresh water wasn't a concern, since the teen who was spelling off Sephiroth also knew the lowest-level water spell. Eight days after the storm, we'd managed to bail out the upper level of the hold, although it wasn't really habitable with all the disturbing substances growing on the exposed surfaces.
Ten days after the storm, we ran out of food and had to start fishing. Fortunately, the islanders were good at that.

On the fourteenth day, we reached land . . . more or less.

It was Sephiroth who first spotted the little finger of something solid jutting up from the horizon, a good two hours before the rest of us could see anything without borrowing the helmsman's spyglass. The idea of being able to see with such detail might have been a little frightening if I hadn't been getting used to the silver-haired man's abilities by that point.

As we drew closer, we discovered that what we'd spotted hadn't been a simple island, but a timeworn building. It had been a fine piece of architecture once, but now half of it was fallen into the ocean.

"There are other ruins here, if you look down," Sephiroth observed. "This must have stood on a hill, above whatever settlement existed here before the land dissolved out from under it."

"Baaj," Braska said. "It was the third-largest city on Spira once, with its own temple, but the fayth was stolen two hundred years ago, and then Sin attacked it. The island was already somewhat unstable, the lower areas kept from flooding mostly by machina, and after the bombardment, it began to sink into the sea. The temple is supposed to be the only thing left above the waters."

"Meaning that it's deserted." I tried not to curse. "At least it should be marked on the charts."

"I'm not so certain that there's no one here," Sephiroth said. "It looks like someone's built a floating dock inside the shell of the temple, and left a small boat tied up to it. And I smell baking bread."

His sense of smell was boosted too? I had a feeling that wasn't an unmixed blessing.

"We can drop anchor outside and have Jecht swim in to check things out," I suggested. "Even if they can't do anything else for us, we may be able to get one meal out of them that isn't fish."

When consulted, Jecht didn't mind—he rarely seemed to mind anything that involved swimming, as long as it didn't also involve wrangling corpses. We tossed out an anchor, and he dove off the side of the ship and swam to the floating dock.

About half an hour later, he was back out on the dock, but not alone. With him was . . . a middle-aged Guado man? That was beyond odd. The Guado were no mariners.

By now, everyone had piled out of the deckhouse to greet our visitor. They were watching as I handed him up and over the rail.

He bowed to me as I let him go. "Thank you, good sir. My name is Tromell, and I am a retainer to Lord Jyscal Guado."

"Auron, Guardian to Summoner Braska." I made a quick round of additional introductions, concluding with, " . . . and you already know Jecht, who has also, I'm sure, told you why we're here. Although I don't understand what one of Lord Jyscal's retainers is doing in Baaj."

There was a long pause while Tromell looked carefully at each of us. "Lord Jyscal has assigned me here to guard something that is most precious to him," he said at last. "My wife and a small number of guards and servants also reside here, and we have been provided with the means of summoning an Al Bhed ship in case of emergency. Which this undoubtedly is."
"The Al Bhed may not be too happy when they find out I'm here," Braska said. "But at least they should be willing to take these people to safety." He gestured to the helmsman and the three passengers who hadn't been part of our group.

"If it comes to that, we'll be sure to send someone else back for you as soon as we can, Lord Braska," the helmsman said. "After all, without your Guardians, we wouldn't be here either."

"Thank you," Braska said.

"Go gather your belongings," Sephiroth added. "Once the ice melts through, this ship will settle straight to the bottom, and I will not be staying aboard to maintain it."

After casting ice spells every fifteen minutes for fourteen days on two hours of sleep a night, he looked exhausted, eyes ringed in purple-black. Although he had somehow managed to conserve Braska's ethers to such an extent that he still had one left. It had been the sort of quietly superhuman feat I was starting to expect from him.

He wasn't endowed with fantastic supernatural abilities, but anything a normal human could do, he seemed to be able to do more of and for longer.

I refused to wonder whether that extended to his stamina in bed. Or so I told myself.

He was the last off the ship nonetheless, and he leaped from rowboat to dock with his usual lightfootedness. We proceeded together along the dock, then up a rough stairway built of broken stone, and entered Baaj's broken temple through what had once been a window.

Inside, the center of the dome was open to the sky, allowing light to shine down on the pool that partially filled what had been the outer sanctuary of the temple. Crumbled pillars and worn statues still decorated the area.

"Ah, so we do have guests." It was a light, somewhat affected voice that I initially had a hard time placing as male or female. Then a figure stepped out from behind one of the more-intact pillars, and the half-open front of his robe showed a flat, firm chest, indicating a male . . . although I was having a harder time deciding whether he was Guado or human. Guado tend to be slender, with stiff green or brown hair, pointed ears, disproportionately large hands and long arms, and visible veins texturing the surface of the skin. This man had a build similar to Sephiroth's, although his muscles were less developed, and his hair seemed to be subject to gravity . . . although it was blue, a colour I could never remember seeing before on Guado or human. His hands were unhumanly large, but not quite Guado-large, and his arms were closer to human in proportion. As he approached us, some veining became visible across his face and chest, but not nearly as much as I had expected. And his ears were round and human. It was a somewhat disconcerting blend of characteristics.

"My apologies, I am being rude," he added. "I am Seymour Guado. Welcome to Baaj."

Of course. Knowing his name, everything suddenly made sense. Jyscal Guado's halfbreed son had been in exile from Guadosalam since he was a small child, since the traditional Guado belief in the importance of racial purity had made him an assassination target for the more conservative members of his father's race. His existence had worsened the split in Guado politics between Jyscal's progressive, Yevon-worshipping supporters and those who wanted to continue the old Guado religion. And Seymour's odd appearance also made him less than welcome among humans. The last rumors I'd heard had placed him on Mount Gagazet among the Ronso, but those could have been deliberately spread to mislead.

Seymour was staring at us—no, at Sephiroth, I realized—even as Tromell introduced us and
explained our presence. The silver-haired man was looking calmly back, holding the Guado halfbreed's stare until Seymour smiled and broke it.

"Tromell, please escort our new friends to the guest rooms—they must be tired from their difficult journey," Seymour said, with a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Nah, most of us haven't had to do much work these past few days, thanks to Sephy here," Jecht slapped the silver-haired man on the shoulder, while the other stood like a rock. "He was the one keeping the boat from sinking."

"Jecht."

"Yeah?"

"If you call me that again, I'll cut your tongue out." Sephiroth's tone was even, cold, and precise.

"Yow, talk about touchy." Jecht hadn't stopped grinning, though.

Fortunately, Tromell spoke up before the blitzer could ruffle Sephiroth's prickly pride more than he had already. "This way please, gentlemen and lady."

There were three "guest rooms", and not quite enough bedding to go around. By unanimous vote, however, we were allocated the room with two sets of rough bunk beds, while the islander woman got the smallest room to herself. The other three men would have to make do. Sephiroth immediately took his boots and sword harness off, braided his hair, and rolled into one of the lower bunks. It was understandable, although I would have liked him to stay awake long enough for one of us to brief him on Guado politics and explain why Seymour mattered.

"I'd like to see what's left of the Cloister and the Chamber of the Fayth here," Braska said.

"Yeah, well, have fun. I'm gonna see if they've got any booze. Or a blitzball," Jecht added as an afterthought.

"Auron, will you come with me?"

"Of course," I said—a half-ruined building wasn't a safe place for anyone to be wandering around, but I doubted Lord Braska would allow himself to be dissuaded.

I glanced over my shoulder as I left the room, though. Hopefully Sephiroth wouldn't be too surprised when he woke alone.

The elevator down to the old Cloister was inoperative, of course, but eventually we found the priests' maintenance passage, which had stairs. A couple of candles, and I decided it would be not too terribly unsafe to head down.

The water we found at the bottom was knee deep, and, when I bent to taste it, salt: the sea had infiltrated here. Nevertheless, Braska remained determined to poke around, hiking up his robes to avoid soaking them through.

Our candles gleamed eerily on dead spheres still stuck in recesses in the walls—there were four of them, but it was impossible to understand the full design of the puzzle they'd been intended to support, since some of the walls were missing, and perhaps other necessary bits as well.

"I think it had something to do with floating platforms," Braska said as he poked a bit of rubble with his staff. "Wait, can you see that?"
"What now?" I asked, since my interest in archaeology had been exhausted some time ago.

"Over there." Braska pointed with that staff of his, and when I squinted and moved my candle away, I saw something reflecting the light.

"It's probably just another sphere," I said, but Braska was already off and wading. Which meant I had to follow him across a flooded room and over a pile of rubble.

"It's a chest. Probably an optional trial reward. Here, take this for a moment." Braska handed me his candle and grabbed the lid of the chest, trying to open it one-handed while still keeping the skirts of his robe out of the water. The hinges made horrible noises, but the chest didn't open. I thought it was just because of corrosion and Braska trying to do everything without letting go of his robes, though.

I sighed. Clearly he wasn't going to leave until we got the damned thing open and he was sure there was nothing inside. Braska could be stubborn about the strangest things sometimes.

"Take the candles and let me try," I said.

The hinges weren't so much corroded as encrusted with something, I discovered as I heaved upward on the lid. There was a grinding sound, and my arms shook, but eventually I got it to the straight-up position, and we were able to look inside.

It wasn't empty. Nor was it filled with rubble or rusted junk.

I reached inside and pulled out a pile of supple black leather. A coat, long and heavy and designed to fall to a point below the knee. There was no sign of rot or mold or sea creatures clinging to it, but at the same time, I could tell it wasn't new. There were old wear marks, where something had rubbed against it long enough to abrade the surface slightly, and . . . yes, there were things in some of the pockets. Underneath it, I found a set of metal pauldrons, which gleamed dully in the candlelight.

"I don't think these were a trial reward," I said. "I would suggest taking them upstairs for a better look, if that's all right with you, my lord." I wanted to go through those pockets, but I needed somewhere to lay the coat out if I was going to do that, and there wasn't enough dry space down here.

Up on the main floor, I draped the coat over a pile of rubble, and then, feeling slightly suspicious, laid the pauldrons on the shoulders. The straps fell across some of the worn areas on the coat, so it was obvious that they went together.

Then I tried the pockets, which yielded a bunch of oddments. A wad of papers, with writing on them in an unfamiliar squarish script. A pair of black leather gloves. A flat object with a few buttons and odd-shaped openings scattered around its surface that looked like some kind of machina. A metal case somewhat larger than my hand, which I couldn't figure out how to open. Some coins, again bearing unfamiliar markings. A whetstone, a vial of oil, and a couple of rags. An ingenious little item about three inches long which appeared to consist of multiple tools and knife-blades that folded into a handle. A comb made of something that reminded me of horn, with a few strands of long, pale hair still caught in it. And . . . a card.

It was made of some slick, white substance, and one side bore geometric shapes, some odd kind of drawing or crest, and more of that blocky writing. The other . . . even more blocky writing on the right, but there was a picture on the left, and the subject was immediately recognizable: Sephiroth, face flat and expressionless, wearing the coat and pauldrons. He had no shirt on underneath, leaving a slice of his bare chest showing, and his sword hilt poked up past his shoulder as it always did.
"They're his," I said quietly, laying the card down beside the rest. "I wonder what the writing says. And how they got the picture—it's clear enough to be a sphere recording, but pressed flat."

"The Al Bhed have machina that can do something similar, although only in black and white," Braska said, going through the papers. "Look, I think this is a map."

A contour map, to be exact, showing some mountainous region from the density of the lines. It was labeled in that same blocky Gaian script that neither of us could read. I wondered if it was Mount Nibel, still the only place on Gaia that Sephiroth had ever mentioned.

"If these are his, my lord, we shouldn't be snooping through them now that we know," I pointed out. Really, it was an odd thing to have to remind Lord Braska of—normally, he behaved with absolute honour.

"True," Braska admitted. "I just wish there were some way of finding out what these were doing in that chest. They can't have been there for long, or the leather would have deteriorated."

"Except that those hinges were so badly encrusted it was almost unopenable," I pointed out. Which meant that no mortal agency could have left the coat and the armour in the chest. And yet there was no fayth in Baaj anymore. Could they still affect the world, so far from their sites of power?

I realized one more thing as I returned Sephiroth's possessions to the pockets of the coat: Although it had been masked by the folds, there was a large tear in its rear panel. Something larger than my sword had been rammed through the garment, and through its wearer's body, judging from the residue of blood that still clung to the edges.

Sephiroth had mentioned that he was supposed to be dead, but I hadn't expected to find a reason so direct and brutal for that belief. And yet he bore no scars. Physically, at least.

*What else are you still not telling us?* I wondered as I folded the coat over my arm and picked up the pauldrons. *Sephiroth, what happened to you?*
"Sephiroth," I said, reaching for his shoulder, only to find an iron grip closing around my wrist.

"My apologies," he said, letting me go again and sitting up. "What is it, Auron?"

"We're expected at the dinner table. You've been asleep for about four hours." I swallowed and added, "And Braska and I found some things that we think belong to you while we were investigating what's left of the old Cloister of Trials."

Sephiroth gave me a puzzled frown. "That makes no sense."

I shrugged. "That's what we thought. And yet . . ." I gestured to where I'd left the coat folded over the back of a chair, with the pauldrons on top.

Sephiroth got up off the bunk and went over to that chair. He picked up the pauldrons and examined them, fingers ghosting over old dents and scratches. Then he set them aside and shook out the coat. He found the tear in the back, and fingered it thoughtfully.

"They are mine," he confirmed. "The same ones I lost at Mount Nibel, unless someone went to a great deal of trouble to reproduce the accumulated wear. How they came to be here . . . well, I can't explain how I ended up in Spira either."

"They were inside a chest that hadn't been opened for several decades, so I doubt there's a simple explanation," I said. "If I may ask . . . why is there such a large hole in the back of your coat?"

"Because someone ran me through with a very large sword."

Whatever I'd been about to say caught in my throat as my thoughts tumbled over one another—How can you be so matter-of-fact about it? and someone ran you through?! and the normal, sympathetic words that I'd long since figured out he wouldn't appreciate.

"I was distracted at the time," Sephiroth added. "And . . . he was doing the right thing. If he'd aimed a bit higher, he would have saved many people a lot of suffering, including me."

"You wanted to die?" Stupid, stupid, stupid, I chastised myself the next moment. If he wanted to explain, he would have started already.

"At the time, I wasn't in any condition to want anything. Which was part of the problem."

"It can't have been that bad." It was exactly the wrong thing to say. I knew that the moment the words left my mouth.

"I murdered two hundred and eighty-one innocent people that night, and burned their homes to the ground. It could have been worse, of course: I could have been near some town much larger than Nibelheim. There is more blood on my hands than you can imagine. I don't deserve your sympathy, and I don't want your pity." He spat the last word as though it tasted bad.

I knew, without question, that there had to have been extenuating circumstances. But it was clear that he didn't want to talk about it.
"I'm sorry," I said instead. "I didn't mean to pry."

I was skewered by a cold, green-eyed look. "On the contrary, I think you did."

"I admit I was curious, but I didn't mean to stir up anything like that. I truly am sorry. It can wait until you're ready to talk about it, if you ever are."

"...Very well." He put the coat down again, and when he looked at me again, his expression had returned to its normal inscrutability. "I believe you said something about dinner."

I ended up replaying our conversation in my head all through the meal. Sephiroth was... difficult, was the only word I could find in the end. Difficult to understand, and difficult to approach. And yet, I found I still wanted to get closer to him.

I had had quite a bit of respect for him from the moment we met at Rilkes Harbour, when he'd jumped straight out of bed, confused and disoriented, and plunged right in to help fight Sin. Even though he hadn't known who the people around him were or what kind of creature he was fighting. The events in the temple at Kilika, and during our nightmarish boat journey, had only cemented those feelings.

He was strong, skilled, intelligent, decisive, and protective of his allies. And attractive. If he hadn't been as prickly and cold as the top of Mount Gagazet, he would have been too perfect to be real.

Am I falling in love? I wondered, and... well, I wished I could laugh. I want him to be happy. I couldn't remember ever having felt that way quite so strongly about anyone before. I certainly wanted more now than just to get inside those leathers. Although that would be nice too. A shame it wasn't likely that he'd reciprocate my interest.

I mean, I knew my inclinations weren't unique in all of Spira. I'd met a few other men who preferred the company of men. But the Church of Yevon didn't approve. The priests and maesters taught that it was our responsibility to have children, to ensure that the human race (and the Guado race and the Ronso race and all the other races) didn't die out before our people fumbled our way to a state of grace and Sin faded away. Men with men, women with women... it wasn't considered an outright abomination, but it was a small-S sin, so most people wouldn't openly admit such a preference.

I wondered, suddenly, if those rules held among the Al Bhed, or the traditionalist, non-Yevonite Guado. Not that the latter would ever take in a human, no matter how much of an outcast that person was.

"Tromell has spoken with the Al Bhed," Seymour said over dessert, and I forced my attention back to the here-and-now. "They are sending a ship to pick you up. It should arrive tomorrow."

"That's a relief," Jecht said. "They're taking all of us, right?"

Seymour glanced at Braska. "I am given to understand that that remains undecided as yet. What did you do to make Cid so angry at you, Summoner Braska?"

"I eloped with his baby sister," Braska said, with a fleeting smile. "I'm surprised you don't know."

"Ah, then perhaps we can encourage a family reunion."

"Unfortunately, no," Braska said. "Akkina was killed three years ago. She was headed for Bikanel to try to reconcile with the rest of her family when Sin attacked the ship. There were no survivors."

"I am very sorry to hear that." What was it about Seymour's voice that made those words sound not
"It's part of the reason I decided to be a Summoner," Braska said. "So that there would be a little sliver of time where no one else would have to go through what I went through."

I couldn't decipher the look that flitted across Seymour's face at that moment. I told myself that it was just because he was half Guado that his expressions always seemed to be subtly off. I'd never had much contact with the Guado before—I'd seen them, mostly at a distance, but never spoken to one (except, on one occasion, to give directions to another part of the temple in Bevelle). Unlike the Ronso, they didn't join the Order.

If they were all as not-quite-right as Seymour, then passing through Guadosalam was going to be . . . odd.

I still had a lot rattling around in my head when we went to bed that night. Perhaps that was why I couldn't seem to sleep. Braska, surprisingly, had no such problem. Neither did Jecht. Sephiroth also seemed to doze off initially, but I was still awake when his breathing suddenly quickened, and he got out of bed, although I could only see him because of the green glow of his eyes.

He moved around the room as though it were fully lit, sitting on the bed for a bit (to buckle his boots?) and then moving to the door. There was a soft click as he attached his sword to its harness, and then he was gone.

I waited a few moments before following him, shuffling carefully to the door, and moving slowly so as not to stub my toes against anything. I wasn't sure whether Sephiroth already knew I was following him—he'd looked straight at me, and I knew his night vision had to be superior, but not whether it was good enough to pick out details like whether my eyes were open or shut—but I did know I didn't want to wake Lord Braska. Or Jecht, because it would take him an hour to stop complaining.

Outside, the crumbling hallway was partly open to the roofless center of the temple, and moonlight poured down, giving me enough light to avoid stepping on anything I didn't mean to step on. The stone was cold and damp and gritty under my bare feet.

I heard the whistle of something long being swung enthusiastically through the air coming up from somewhere below, and rather than try the stairs quite yet, I went over to the edge of the opening and looked down. To my surprise, it wasn't Sephiroth and his odachi that I saw, but Seymour, wielding a staff two-handed, in the manner taught to Summoners and priests.

I didn't know who his mind's eye had placed in front of him, but in the first few seconds I watched, that person collected a shattered kneecap, a smashed throat, and damage to two or three internal organs.

Seymour overextended himself on the next swing, overbalancing and falling to one knee. "Damn you, anyway. Don't you know that it isn't just your own life you're going to have to give up? Are you that ignorant, or do you just not care?" He snarled at nothing and flung his staff to the floor.

"Do you expect the air to give you an answer?" asked a much deeper voice.

Seymour attempted to get up and turn around at the same time, and managed a sort of staggering whirl as Sephiroth emerged out of the darkness.

"Shouting at phantasms won't get you any closer to what you really want," the silver-haired man added.
"Nothing will get me closer to what I really want," Seymour said slowly, emphasizing each word. "I'm a failed Summoner, a half-breed freak, and a political pawn. Not to mention that I'm effectively a prisoner here at Baaj. And even if I were free, what I want is impossible. And I don't know why I'm telling any of this to a fool who insists on marching to his death."

"Death is what I deserve," Sephiroth replied. "However . . . I have the impression that you know something about the Summoners' pilgrimage that is not normally circulated, and I must admit that I'm curious. You made it all the way to Zanarkand, didn't you? What did you learn there that caused you to give up?"

"How did you know I made it there?"

Sephiroth shrugged. "An educated guess. Everyone on Spira seems to know what the first part of the pilgrimage route is like. If you found something secret, you were most likely out past Mount Gagazet when you did so."

Seymour shook his head. "It isn't entirely secret. The Guado have some records—fragmentary, but enough to give some idea of what the Final Summoning truly is. The Maesters of the Church of Yevon may know as well."

Sephiroth waited. So did I, although I was far less relaxed about it.

"In a dome at the center of the ruins of Zanarkand, there is an Unsent who waits for each new Summoner to arrive," Seymour said. "She is Yunalesca, the first ever to defeat Sin. And she is the one who creates the aeon for the Final Summoning . . . out of one of the Summoner's Guardians. My sole Guardian was my mother. She . . . knew. What would happen to her when we reached the end of the journey. And she didn't tell me until we'd arrived. I found out later that she was ill, dying, but it didn't matter. I would rather have had those last few months with her than a fayth for an aeon I couldn't bring myself to use as intended, because it was her and the Final Summoning destroys both the aeon and the Summoner. I was only ten years old."

I forced myself to breathe, because somewhere in that little recital, I had forgotten how. I'd also broken out in a cold sweat. Creates the aeon . . . out of a Guardian.

No wonder so many Summoners failed the final test. They had to sacrifice not only themselves, but a dear friend, a sibling, a lover, a child or a parent.

"Ten," Sephiroth said. "You were fortunate, then."

My jaw sagged as Seymour said, "Fortunate?" in a tone of incredulity.

Sephiroth looked at him. "My mother died soon after my birth and left me in the hands of a madman. I never saw her face, and she never held me, but she died because of me nonetheless. Don't try to compete with me in the area of tragic childhood tales, because you will lose. Do you have any idea how much I envy you? Ten. Whole. Years."

Seymour's mouth worked silently for a moment. Then he exploded. "How is it that you don't hate?!!"

"How do you know that I don't? But my hate is a very private thing, Seymour Guado, and laser-focused. I only aim it at those who are directly responsible for . . . events. I learned the hard way just how dangerous unfocused hatred is. There is always someone out there who is strong enough to oppose you, and who will fight like a rat in a trap to save himself. Or herself. If you're focused on them, such individuals can be handled, but if you spread yourself too thin, you'll end up losing. What do you hate?"
"Everything," the half-breed said.

Suddenly, the blade of an odachi was pressed against the side of his neck. A single drop of blood welled up, black in the moonlight, as Seymour swallowed very, very carefully.

"If you hate everything, that must surely include yourself," Sephiroth said. "You can't win thinking that way, but you're strong-willed enough to do a great deal of damage before someone gets close enough to kill you. Tell me why I shouldn't deal with the problem pre-emptively."

Seymour started to laugh. It was a tight, bitter sound. "No reason. No reason . . . at all. What's the point of living? Sin overshadows this entire wretched, crumbling world, and it will never go away. Even the Final Summoning can't destroy what lies at its core. We are all dead men walking."

Sephiroth snorted. "Sin is a lump of pyreflies, a very large fiend with an effective regeneration mechanism. It had a beginning, and that tells me it can have an end. The problem is finding a way to break its core or its regeneration mechanism. It isn't some sort of immortal metaphysical construct. Although I agree with you that the Final Summoning isn't the solution—we need something else."

Seymour started to shake his head, but stopped when the blade still pressed against his neck drew more blood with the motion. "You may be the most peculiarly arrogant man I have ever met. You don't even just believe you can kill it. You know you can kill it—that sooner or later, it will fall to your hand."

"If not my hand, then someone's, someday," Sephiroth corrected. "It's inevitable."

Complex emotions chased each other across Seymour's face. "Inevitable," he repeated, and followed it with another cracked laugh. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps . . ." He closed his eyes, and a slow shudder ran through him, drawing another drop of blood. Then he looked at Sephiroth. "You wanted a reason not to kill me here. Very well, then, I'll give you one: My death here would be meaningless and worthless. There must be some way we can use it to our advantage instead."

"We."

"Oh, yes. I'm coming with you. I don't expect Braska to take me as a Guardian, but I doubt he'll forbid me from tagging along—not that he could, when the route of the pilgrimage is both a matter of public record, and one that I've followed before. I want to see with my own eyes what you will do to Sin. And if a sacrifice is required . . . I may just offer it. Not out of any sense of altruism, but to prove to them that I'm worth more than this." He somehow managed not to blood himself again as he made a sweeping gesture taking in most of the ruined temple.

"I trust selfish motivations more than I do altruistic ones. Very well." Sephiroth lowered his sword, then whipped it in a familiar diagonal stroke that cleaned the worst of the blood off it, spattering the liquid in a black arc across the stones. "I will see you after the ship arrives."

"Yes," Seymour agreed.

The two of them turned away from each other, Sephiroth vanishing into the darkness while Seymour bent to pick up his staff, still lying on the ground not far away. The half-Guado gave the weapon an odd smile as he held it in his hands, then resumed his practice, although in a more controlled manner this time.

"I thought it might be you watching us," Sephiroth said quietly from behind me. "You seem fascinated by my actions."

I turned to face him, pretending that he hadn't nearly startled me into diving through the gap in the
wall, and offered him a shrug. "You aren't like anyone I've ever met before, so is that really such a surprise?"

The smile that curled his mouth was cold and cruel, nearly a sneer. Not his real smile, which was so tiny I wasn't sure I'd have been able to see it in this light. "Oh, I've had people watch me before. Most of them try to keep their distance, though. What is it that you want that brings you so close to me, Auron?"

"Is it impossible that I simply want to be your friend?" I was feeling my way forward here, just as much as I had when I'd followed him out of the guest room.

"When watching me sometimes leaves you so turned on that you can barely walk?" It was a sneer now, vicious and razor-edged. "Did you think that I, of all people, would fail to notice your reaction? Don't flatter yourself. You're not nearly that good at hiding what you feel."

"I didn't choose to react to you in that way," I said, forcing my voice to stay even. "I'm sorry if it disgusts or embarrasses you. Although you're the one running around dressed in tight black leather! "But I wasn't ever going to act on it. I know you're not interested in me."

The sneer faded slowly, and I was subjected to a slow examination by glowing green eyes, something that was starting to become almost familiar. In the end, Sephiroth sighed and looked away. There was something in his expression that almost looked like disappointment, although I didn't see how it could be.

"What do you think of Seymour's story?" he asked, quietly changing the subject.

"That we're going to have to tell Lord Braska about it," I said grimly. "Even if it's a lie, it's a very carefully constructed and comprehensive one. He didn't come up with it just on the spur of the moment. I'm surprised you managed to persuade him to come with us."

Sephiroth's real smile flickered around the corners of his mouth. "Would you believe that I had no intention whatsoever of doing so? It's just that for a moment, it felt like I was looking at a memory. Part of what I said to him . . . was really addressed to the person I once was."

I learned the hard way just how dangerous unfocused hatred is. There is more blood on my hands than you can imagine. I was starting to be a bit worried about Sephiroth's reasons for refusing to say anything much about his life in Gaia. It was clear that his silence was purposeful, but what could possibly be worse than what he had already admitted to—nearly three hundred innocent dead, and a town burned to the ground?

I hadn't talked to Braska about that, either. And I was going to have to, because he needed to know what kind of dangerous man we were traveling with.

I should have been terrified of the silver-haired man. Should. But somehow, fear wasn't what he inspired in me. The Sephiroth I knew was one of the most rational and analytical men I had ever encountered. There had to have been some reason for everything he'd done. Even the murders.

"I was sorry to hear about your mother," I offered tentatively, and saw his eyebrows flicker.

"I think you're the first person ever to have said that to me." A pause, then, "We should both try to get more sleep."

Needless to say, I didn't, although I did my best to pretend.

The next morning, I tried to find an opportunity to talk privately to Braska, but it seemed as though
there were always Guado nearby, and the information Sephiroth had gotten from Seymour was sensitive. I didn't want the Guado to know what he'd told us. And the information I'd got from Sephiroth himself was, if anything, even more private.

Then, when the Al Bhed ship arrived that afternoon, things instantly became a great deal more complicated.

It was a much bigger vessel than I'd expected, not just one of the little salvage or fishing ships their people had scattered all over Spira. It might even have been their flagship. Regardless, it was too big to get into the pseudo-harbour at the center of the temple, so they anchored outside and brought a rowboat in. All of us who had survived the ferry turned out to greet them, with Jecht and Sephiroth and I positioned in a triangle around Braska.

When he'd gotten up this morning, Sephiroth had put on the long coat over his sword harness, and then added the pauldrons and the black gloves. His sword, invisibly secured by the magnets, looked like it was floating against the dark leather. It also, perhaps not so coincidentally, kept the cut in the rear panel from gaping open. The armour made his shoulders look broader, and the sweeping lines of the coat added to his height; the overall impression was intimidating.

Four Al Bhed landed at the dock. One was a man with a shaven head and the beginnings of a beard, who I guessed to be somewhere between my age and Braska's. With him was a boy perhaps eight years old, who wore a pair of grey trousers held up by suspenders, and no shirt. The other two wore what I thought of as full Al Bhed regalia, wetsuits with goggles and partial head coverings that made it impossible to tell anything about them other than that one was male and the other, female.

Braska stepped forward. "Cid."

The man with the shaven head responded in Al Bhed. The only thing I could pick out from what he was saying was Braska's name.

"Huh. What the hell are they saying—you got any idea?" Jecht asked. I was forced to shake my head.

Something brushed against the back of my hand, and I looked down to see Sephiroth's gloved fingers resting just lightly against my knuckles. I felt an odd ripple pass over me, and my ears rang, and then . . .

"—fool enough to become a Summoner." The Al Bhed words suddenly unfolded inside my head into something I could understand.

"I want Yuna to be safe," Braska said. "At least for a little while. And . . ."

"And what? What in tarnation could be so important that you'd throw your life away for it?!"

"And I miss Akkina," Braska said.

Cid—this had to be Cid, Braska's brother-in-law—gave the Summoner a look almost as cold as one of Sephiroth's best. "So do we all, but that doesn't mean anyone else is gonna go throwing themselves after her! Do you want little Yuna to grow up without her dad?"

"I want her to grow up," Braska said.

Cid deliberately spat on the dock. "I should lock you up. Hell, I should chain you up until you come to your senses. But I bet those Guardians of yours would make a mess if I tried. Especially if the story about that pale git kicking Sin's ass is even halfway true."
"I don't know what you heard, but Sephiroth's overdrive did do enough damage to Sin to make it retreat."

"So where was he hiding when Akkina died? If he'd been there that day . . ." Cid shot a resentful glare in our direction.

"I'll let him tell you that story if he chooses," Braska said, and there was a long exchange of stares until a different voice broke the silence.

"Dad, I want to have a look around the Yevonite place—can I?" That was the boy. I knew Cid had both a son and a daughter, so apparently this was the son.

"Fine, go—just don't do anything I wouldn't. And be back in twenty minutes."

The boy smiled and ran off. Braska and Cid watched him go.

"Did you really name him 'Brother'?" the Summoner asked.

Cid scratched his head. "What can I say? It's an old, old name in my wife's family. Feels weird to call the kid in for supper, though, so I mostly have her do it. Anyway, you and your Guardians should get to collecting your luggage—I'd like to be off again before the tide turns."

The last sentence was in Spiran, and Sephiroth lifted his fingers from my hand midway through it.

"What was that?" I asked him, low-voiced.

"A trick a—that someone taught me a long time ago. I managed to convince the translation materia that your body was an extension of mine, and therefore it should extend its power to you as well. It takes a certain amount of concentration, so I can't do it if I'm actually part of the conversation."

More interesting than the trick itself was the fact that he'd demonstrated it to me. It was an act of . . . friendship, almost.

"Our baggage is all here already," Braska was saying when there was an interruption, in the form of Seymour Guado, dressed in a plain robe that covered his chest properly, carrying a travel pack and his staff, and followed by an unhappy Tromell.

"Lord Seymour, you cannot do this!"

Reaching the dock, Seymour stopped and turned to face his father's retainer. "Can I not? Am I a prisoner, then, condemned to remain here in Baaj for the rest of my natural life?"

Chapter End Notes

I can't think of any character who would win a "most tragic childhood story" competition with Sephiroth, although there might be one out there somewhere.
Tromell looked like he couldn't make up his mind whether to burst into tears or run around tearing his hair out. "Of course you aren't a prisoner here, but there are so many people who want you dead, and your father—"

Seymour raised one finger. Lightning shot from it, and struck in front of Tromell's feet with a clap of thunder. "I am not helpless, Tromell, and please do credit me with some common sense. I intend to conceal my identity, so as not to disrupt my father's precious politics." He spoke the word as though it tasted bad. "If you wish to keep me here, you will have to chain me like the prisoner you claim I am not."

Tromell looked like he wanted to. "I will inform your father."

Seymour gave him a cold smile. "By all means. Perhaps I will visit him when we reach Guadosalam."

The Guado halfbreed strolled over to stand with us—behind Sephiroth, to be exact, which put him right beside me. I nodded to him, and saw him raise an eyebrow in response.

When we boarded the ship, Seymour fell in at the rear of our group, making him the third-last to board. (The very last were the boy Brother, and Cid, who had had to search the temple to locate his wayward son, and was not very pleased as a result.)

"We need to talk," I said quietly to Braska as the Al Bhed weighed anchor and started the ship's quietly growling engine. Yevon, the entire boat gave off a strange, sharp stink the likes of which I'd never smelled before, and it wasn't just because it was mostly made of metal, either. Did machina have their own unpleasant smell that owed nothing to what they were made from?

"About . . . ?"

"I overheard a conversation between Sephiroth and Seymour last night—don't look at me like that," I added. "Sephiroth, at least, knew I was there, and I intend to invite them to this discussion anyway. And Jecht."

"Go on." I had all of Braska's attention now, from the way he was looking at me.

"Did you know that Seymour was a Summoner?"

"That's common knowledge." Braska's expression suggested he was trying to understand what I was getting at.

"Is it also common knowledge that he not only made it all the way to Zanarkand, but received his Final Aeon? And then didn't use it?"

Braska blinked. "No. I had heard that he turned back somewhere on Mount Gagazet."

"According to what he told Sephiroth, that's a lie. Braska, he knows what the Final Summoning is, and it isn't at all what we thought. But I think he should be the one to tell you. It looks like all of us—but you especially—have a decision to make."
"All right, then. I trust your judgement, or I wouldn't have asked you to be my Guardian in the first place. I'll tell Jecht."

Which left me to locate Sephiroth and Seymour. The half-Guado appeared to be talking to Cid, apologizing for almost forcing his way on board, maybe, and Sephiroth was . . . perched in a difficult-to-reach location that gave him a good view of everything going on, just as he had done on board the ferry. This time, he was at the rear of the ship, beside the metal chimney that was belching out black smoke.

I walked over to stand nearby and called up, "Braska wants to talk." I didn't have to be very loud, either.

"Very well." The silver-haired man jumped down, landing neatly beside me, and together we went to collect Seymour.

". . . truly apologize for causing such a disruption," I heard as we got closer. "While it was not a spur-of-the-moment decision, it would nevertheless have been difficult to warn anyone in advance."

Cid rubbed the back of his head. "Well, it happens, I suppose." And he added something in Al Bhed in which the name "Brother" stuck out quite clearly. Then he looked up and spotted us. "You two ready to go to your cabins and get out of our way?"

Seymour raised his eyebrows. "How, praytell, could any of us be in the way? I haven't seen many of your crew on the deck. I suppose that whatever machina you use to propel this thing is more efficient that way than sails would be. If also . . . smellier."

"The grade of oil they're burning isn't very good," Sephiroth said. "The smell is mostly sulphur dioxide." Whatever that was. "I expect the interior of the engine gets eaten away quite badly over time."

"Huh," Cid said. "You know a thing or two, don't you? If I wasn't looking straight at you, I'd think you were an Al Bhed."

"I am not. Although I'm beginning to think I would be more comfortable in your society than as part of the Spiran mainstream."

"Ha!" Cid slapped Sephiroth on the shoulder, causing the gap in the back of the leather coat to flash a bit of pale skin for a moment. "Well, when you're done looking after Braska, come back and visit for a while. Maybe you can come up with some idea of how to keep the engines from being eaten away."

"Burn a better grade of oil, or don't let the engine get cold enough to attract condensation, or find something else that will bind the sulphur before it mixes with the water. Exactly what that would be, I'm not certain—chemistry is not my area of expertise."

Cid looked like someone had hit him over the head with an axe handle. "Damn," he whispered almost reverently. "We thought of giving the vitriol some more layers to eat through, but not of coating the engine with something that would keep it from forming. We'd have to re-do it from time to time, but that's still better than having to take the entire thing apart so that we can swap out the bad bits. Or maybe we could just flush out the engine with a solution of . . . Eh, should probably talk to some people first—not really my area either. Thanks, Sir Sephiroth. If this pans out, you've done every Al Bhed on Spira a service."

Sephiroth just shrugged. Meanwhile, I could feel a cold lump forming in my gullet.
I fell in beside the silver-haired man as Cid led us down into the ship. "Gaia has a machina-based civilization, doesn't it?" I asked him.

"I suppose you would consider it such, yes."

 Damn. It was stupid that it even bothered me. I knew the Church was a den of corrupt hypocrites, so why should that edict be of more value than any other? We were inside a machina right now, and Sin didn't seem to be paying the least bit of attention.

Sephiroth wasn't a Yevonite, I realized, and wondered why that had never crossed my mind before either. It was as though I had been intentionally, willfully blind to it.

Members of the Order of Temple Wardens, colloquially known as warrior-monks, aren't like priests. We aren't encouraged to grapple with theology in depth. We are the hands and feet of the Church, not her head. It seemed that some fragments of the deep, unquestioning faith we were expected to embrace still remained in me, and I was going to have to spend some time figuring out what that meant for me now. Abandoning the Order wasn't the same as abandoning Yevon, I knew.

I had promised myself as they'd loosed me from the whipping post that day that I would never again obey an instruction or an edict that I felt was wrong without questioning the reasons for it first. That was when I'd realized that I could no longer belong to the Order, and I'd staggered into the office of its head with the blood still running down my back to withdraw my oaths. I might have bled to death if Kinoc hadn't been there and taken me aside afterwards to bandage the mess the whip had made. And then he'd half-carried me to my mother's house after I was in shock from having my tattoo burned away.

He'd been a good friend to me, even though I didn't agree with what he'd done afterwards. Although for all I knew, maybe he'd met with the girl and come to an agreement with her.

The scars on my back were throbbing now. *I really do have a lot to work through, don't I?*

I had a feeling I wouldn't be able to help Sephiroth much unless I at least tried to deal with my own baggage.

It was an odd group that gathered in the center room of our suite. Two robed Summoners, one of them a half-Guado considered a failure by the Church, the other semi-excommunicated for marrying an unbeliever. An unkempt blitzball player from a city that no longer existed. A man from another world (and his extremely long sword). And myself, the apostate former warrior-monk.

I watched the play of expressions over everyone's faces as Seymour explained what was truly at the end of every Summoner's pilgrimage. Sephiroth wore his usual expressionlessness like a mask, although Seymour kept throwing glances in his direction, as though asking for approval. Jecht looked sick. And Braska . . . dismay and realization and a hint of horror.

And when Seymour fell silent, Jecht was the one who spoke up in his place. "So you're saying that when we get to this creepy broken version of Zanarkand you keep talking about, either Braska has to give up, or he's going to die and one of us is going to go with him? Shit, I didn't sign up for this—I thought we were just gonna beat up Sin, not perform some fucking human sacrifice! Why didn't any of you guys tell me?"

Sephiroth shrugged. "I didn't know myself until I spoke to Seymour. Perhaps we can yet come up with a better solution. Perhaps that's why the fayth chose to introduce outsiders into this madness."

"Auron didn't tell you because I asked him not to," Braska added. "And I . . . Well. It was selfish, I
suppose, but I found it a relief to have someone around who didn't know. It gets . . . tiring, sometimes, being a walking dead man."

Jecht scrubbed a hand across his face. "Okay. Okay, I can see that, but it was still a shitty thing to do. And what about little Yuna? You just gonna leave her without her daddy?"

Braska and I had talked this out. More than once. But the anguished expression that crossed his face proved that he still hadn't made peace with it, no matter what he'd said to Cid, or to me. "Sin is a constant danger to everyone in Spira. Yuna has a much better chance of growing up healthy and safe if there's a Calm."

"Healthy and safe, okay, but what about happy?"

"That's enough, Jecht," I said. "This is not the time."

"Maybe not, but . . . well, this ain't finished, got it?"

"We should all try to think of a better solution than, as Jecht says, a human sacrifice," Sephiroth said, returning to the original subject. "I should note that, even if Braska decides to turn back now, I will be going on to Zanarkand, since I have questions I intend to put to this Yunalesca. What the rest of you do is up to you."

I cleared my throat. "If it comes to that, I'll go with you." Binding myself to pursue the spirit of Braska's quest, even if he himself no longer could.

Was that a hint of gratitude I saw in Sephiroth's eyes? Maybe he's happy that he'll have a native guide, even if Lord Braska turns back.

"I, too, will continue on to Zanarkand," Seymour said. "And . . . my Final Aeon is still there. I had intended to move her to Baaj, but the opportunity never arose. And while she remains there, she can be used. So there is that option as well."

"You'd perform the Final Summoning now?" I asked.

Seymour smiled crookedly. "Not just for the sake of bringing about a Calm, if that's what you're asking, but if it turns out that we need a Calm to allow us to prepare to wipe out Sin for good . . . I am willing to give my life for that. Or perhaps, with due consideration, we will be able to make two Final Aeons do what one alone cannot."

"I'll go," Jecht said, and I turned to him in surprise. "Hey, I know having me say so isn't nearly that impressive, but I still wanna know how I got here and whether there's a way home. Seems to me that this Yunalesca person's my best bet for that, since no one else's been able to figure out what happened."

That left Braska. I don't think we all meant to stare at him, but it was pretty much inevitable.

He took a long, slow breath. "I . . . can't decide right now. For the time being, I intend to continue. Hopefully by the time we reach Bevelle, I'll have my answer."

"So all we have left to figure out is how to hide Seymour from the other Guado, right?" Jecht said. "You gonna be Braska's Guardian too, blue-hair? Otherwise they won't let you into those Cloister places, right?"

"I am a Summoner," Seymour pointed out, with dignity. "It isn't necessary for me to form a contract with Braska when I have the right of admission to the inner temples regardless. Two Summoners
entering the same Cloister at the same time is abnormal, true, but it isn't technically forbidden, and I have no need to petition any of the fayth myself, since I already did so eight years ago. Presenting myself as a Guardian may prevent unnecessary questions, however."

"Whether or not Seymour enters the Cloisters with us is immaterial," Sephiroth said. "Concealing your appearance will be difficult, however, given the number of racially distinct physiological traits you carry," he added to the half-Guado. "I take it you've made some provision for that already, but I would feel more comfortable knowing the details."

When, exactly, had Sephiroth become the leader here? Until just now, I hadn't even realized that he had. Well, Braska had never really exercised leadership in the truest sense, and that had left a bit of a gap. Sephiroth had slid into it so easily and casually I wasn't even sure he'd been aware of it himself. He had what one of my instructors when I'd been a novice had called "the habit of command", and it was as much part of him as his river of silver hair.

What had he been on Gaia, before the blood-soaked mystery events that had taken place in Nibelheim? A warrior. A leader. An officer in some organization like the Crusaders, or even the Order, perhaps?

"I had already figured out I would need to avoid exposing enough of my skin—or my hair—for anyone to get a good look," Seymour was saying. "I have a headdress with a veil, and the sleeves of my robes can be made to drape over my hands and conceal their shape. It should be sufficient, barring abnormal circumstances."

"Your name is going to draw attention, though," I pointed out. '"Seymour' isn't very common."

Seymour went still. "It is a Guado name, true, but I suppose I am more likely to pass for pure human . . . I don't know many human names."

"'Rufus'," Sephiroth suggested. "Unless that one's used by Guado here, too. You remind me of someone I used to know who went by that name," he explained when Seymour gave him an odd look. "More in attitude than in appearance."

"Ah. Well. It will do well enough, I suppose. Rufus," Seymour repeated, and shrugged.

I didn't get a look at his "headdress" until we disembarked in Luca, and when I did, I shook my head in pure admiration, because Seymour had been smarter than I'd thought. It wasn't one of the eighteen styles of priestly headdress. Instead, it was a plain black conical cap of the type worn by a certain people who lived far to the east, well off the pilgrimage route. They manufactured most of the paper on Spira, but the only other notable thing about them was that all of them, men and women, wore veils for a year as part of their mourning when a spouse or close family member passed away. Seymour had twisted his hair up under the cap, and the semi-transparent veil fell to his chest and hid all but the outline of his features. He would look human enough, to anyone who didn't know.

We drew more than a few looks as we wandered through Luca, although given the kind of people who sometimes turned up in the city during Blitz season, a Summoner and four Guardians shouldn't have been that spectacular. It was just that there was no one else on Spira who looked quite like Sephiroth.

With the inaugural tournament starting today, it would be nearly impossible to find an inn that still had rooms to rent. Unfortunately, proceeding straight up the Mi'ihen Highroad toward Djose without stopping in the city would have been impractical. Even before the storm and the two weeks on the crippled ferry, we'd been meaning to gather supplies here.
In theory, a Summoner could call on local Church facilities and ask for shelter or anything else that was needed, but Braska's circumstances made that difficult. In the end, we had to settle for bunks in an establishment near the gates that was more dormitory than inn. It afforded bedding, but no privacy, and we left again as soon as we'd made arrangements.

We ended up outside the blitzball stadium, since the game was about to start and all the crowds were pushing us in that direction. We had to duck into the entrance to one of the teams' locker areas to get out of the press, although there was a uniformed stadium official there who definitely wasn't going to let us down the stairs.

"We could simply go watch the game," Braska suggested, with a smile.

"I am not inclined to waste my time at a sporting event." Sephiroth folded his arms and leaned back against the wall, his gaze challenging.

"Hey, now—blitzball isn't just a sport, it's the best thing in the world. Next to women and booze, that is. And I'd like to see how the best teams in Spira measure up." Jecht glared straight back at the silver-haired man, who didn't seem about to back down.

"We won't be going anywhere today anyway, and picking up a few additional supplies isn't something that needs all of us," I pointed out. "Sephiroth and I will do the shopping, while Jecht stays with Braska." It would be a lot easier to buy everything we needed without Jecht trying to skim off some of the money for liquor. "Rufus, you can come with either group, or go off on your own. We'll meet back here after today's last game."

"I . . . will stay, I think," Seymour said. "After all, I have never seen a blitzball game either."

They went off together to buy tickets, while I fingered the purse I kept inside my haori and considered how many gil I had, and what we couldn't afford to do without. We were better off than we could have been, thanks to Sephiroth's habit of hunting monsters wherever he went, and my preference for tagging along with him.

Suddenly, there was a commotion from down in the dressing rooms, a door slamming open and a couple of people shouting at each other.

"—just want you to watch, ya? Come on, Lu, don't—"

"Do you think I want to watch you lose? Bad enough that you're going to make Chappu cry again! You make me ashamed to admit I'm from Besaid!"

The guard blocking the stairs moved out of the way to allow a twelve-year-old girl in a long dress the colour of cinders run past us and out into the plaza. A red-headed boy of about the same age, wearing the uniform of the Besaid Aurochs (and were they really so badly off that they needed to recruit new players that young now?) followed a few seconds later, but the girl had already been swallowed up by the crowds.

"Wakka! Hey! They're gonna start setting up the formations in a bit, ya?"

The boy said a word he probably shouldn't have known at that age and went back downstairs again, bumping me with his shoulder along the way. He muttered an apology and continued on without bothering to look up.

Sephiroth had been following him with his eyes, but when the boy was gone, he looked back toward me and arched an eyebrow.
"The game isn't frivolous to them," I said. Wondering, again, if those were the right words. "Think of it as being a bit like a good sparring match. A competition, even if it doesn't involve anything useful outside its own context. One with a certain amount of pride on the line." Did they even play sports on Gaia? Or was this just the single-minded focus of a man who had always known his direction in life?

"Hm," was Sephiroth's only reply.

"It looks like the crowds are thinning out a bit now," I added.

"Not by much."

I shrugged. "Luca's always busy during the tournament season. In three months, they'll have the closing ceremony for the league, and then it'll be dead again until next year." I'd been in Luca a few times during the off season, and it had seemed almost deserted.

When I left the shelter of the stairway, Sephiroth followed. He turned out to be unexpectedly useful on the shopping trip. Members of the Order seldom left Bevelle unless we were delegated to guard one of the Maesters on a trip, so I only knew a limited amount about camping equipment. Sephiroth appeared to know somewhat more. The waterproof groundcloth was his idea, for instance, and he had a better idea than I did of how many six-foot-tall men would actually fit in a tent of a given configuration. He also made the woman who sold us the tent demonstrate how to assemble it and break it down, so that we would have some idea of how to go about it ourselves. He left the haggling to me, though—I'd noticed that that didn't seem to be part of his skillset at all. He paid the asking price for things, even if it was outrageous... but really, how would he know? The values of various items weren't likely to be the same here as they were on Gaia.

"I'm not sure Rufus is going to be willing to carry anything," I said afterwards, eyeing the packs that contained the fruits of our efforts. We'd agreed to call Seymour by his new alias even when talking among ourselves, since it reduced the chances of someone slipping up.

"Then he can sleep on the ground and chase down his own meals. We may all end up doing that before the end, anyway."

"That sounds like the voice of experience."

"Unfortunately." Sephiroth picked up the three largest packs, leaving the smaller two for me. "I don't suppose there's any possibility of getting some chocobos around here—or even just one, to act as a pack animal?"

"We don't have the money," I said.

"Precisely how much do we need?"

"I don't know for certain," I admitted. "Ten years ago, it cost a friend and I two thousand gil to rent a single chocobo, and we had to turn it in at the waystation midway along the road. It being the beginning of the blitzball season might affect the prices, too."

"Do we have the time to check before we have to go collect everyone else?"

"I don't see why not. We'll need to head back toward the gate, though."

We walked in silence for a while. Sephiroth's eyes would occasionally flicker to one side or another—seeing the sights or cataloguing potential threats, but I wasn't sure which and wasn't about to ask—but mostly, he stared straight ahead.
"You must have done a lot of traveling . . . before," I said, hoping for a response more than expecting one.

A slight shrug. "I could probably create a travelogue of the most unpleasant places on Gaia, if I had any reason to consider it a worthwhile endeavour. I must have spent a few days at some point in every swamp, desert, jungle, sinkhole, snowfield, and bat-infested cavern on the planet."

"Hunting monsters?"

"Sometimes." I thought he was going to end the conversation there, but after a moment, he continued with, "You must understand that Gaia has never had anything quite like Sin—no overt threat that everyone knows about and that endangers humanity, that everyone is willing to unite against. Without any external pressure to prevent it, humans are always quick to point their weapons at each other. I was an officer in a military force that worked for an organization called Shinra. While my duties did include killing monsters, to safeguard smaller settlements and keep the roads open and mines and plantations and such operating, I've spent rather more of my life fighting and killing other people."

"I've killed a few people as well, over the years." I knew it wasn't really enough, but I didn't have anything else to offer him, either. "The duties of the Order include providing bodyguards for some of the higher-ranking clergy and keeping unauthorized people out of certain areas of the High Temple in Bevelle, and there are always a few groups of militant anti-Yevonites rattling around. Some of them wouldn't listen to warnings." I shook my head. "At the time, I thought I was doing the right thing."

"I've known many people who died with words like those on their lips."

I grimaced agreement. "Were you at Mount Nibel to hunt monsters?"

"That was the gist of the assignment as it was presented to me, yes—track down and destroy the monsters causing an abnormal number of fatalities in the area. It turned out to be a trap, and not one set by the monsters."

That seemed to be as much as he wanted to say on the subject, but it was more than I had known before.

To my considerable surprise, we were able to rent five chocobos at eight hundred gil each—I hadn't realized Sephiroth still had four thousand gil on him, but perhaps he'd killed more monsters in Kilika than I'd thought. The owner of the stable explained that because everyone had come to Luca and hardly anyone was leaving the city yet, all of his birds were at this end of the highway stuffing their feathery faces with greens and not making any money for him, so he was quite happy to give us a discount to take them back to the other end of the road. We made arrangements to pick the birds up tomorrow, then went back to the stadium.

Glancing at the scoreboard on the way past, I discovered that the Besaid Aurochs had lost again, and the day's final, between the Luca Goers and the Al Bhed Psyches, was in sudden-death overtime. No big surprises there.

The official guarding the locker rooms had moved to the bottom of the stairs, leaving us alone at the top. Not that it made all that much of a difference, since Sephiroth seemed to have expended his supply of casual conversation for the day, and I wasn't going to press him for more.

He'd already given me enough to think about.
Why am I insane enough to still want anything to do with him?

Because underneath it all, the strength and the authority and the emotionless mask that he wears, I can tell that there's still a man. A man who's alone in a strange land and desperately needs friends, even if he won't admit it.

It was a testament to Sephiroth's strength that he hadn't broken down the moment he'd figured out what had happened to him. Hell, Jecht had thrown a public fit when he'd found himself in Bevelle, and he hadn't come here from another world. The name "Zanarkand" was at least known here, and he spoke the same language we did, but he hadn't been immediately able to land on his feet the way Sephiroth had.

I wondered what the silver-haired man thought of me. He did seem to prefer my company over Jecht's or even Braska's. Was I lying to myself if I hoped that there was some degree of understanding between us? Even that, if I was patient enough and wore him down, it might become something more? I didn't think he'd been disgusted when he'd realized I was attracted to him, at least —just angry, and that might have been because of the eavesdropping.

There was a rumbling from the stadium above, thunderous cheering, which I was fairly sure meant that the Goers had won. There weren't enough Al Bhed in Luca to provide such a large cheering section for the Psyches. Sephiroth twitched as the wave of noise broke over us, and I realized it might have been outright painful for someone with his sensitive hearing. His perception of the world had to be subtly but pervasively different from a normal man's.

The stadium began to empty, and soon Braska and Jecht and Seymour-Rufus detached themselves from the stream of people and came toward us. Jecht was holding a movie sphere and talking loudly and rapidly about the game, and I wasn't sure just how much of his babble Lord Braska, his victim, understood, although the Summoner nodded in what seemed to be the right places. Or maybe Jecht just didn't care. Seymour, behind his veil, was inscrutable.

"What do you know? You were just sitting in the stands, ya?" came an angry young voice from below. I hadn't noticed the redheaded boy in the Aurochs uniform sitting on the bottom steps.

"This time, maybe," Jecht said. "And I admit I haven't played in a while, but I used to be pretty good, y'know?"

"What team?"

"The Zanarkand Abes."

"That's not even funny," the young voice exploded from below.

"Not very funny for me, either," Jecht admitted, scratching his head. "I've got no idea why I'm here or what asshole pulled the world out from under me, kiddo. Or maybe I just got my brains fried by Sin's toxin, like a lot of people seem to think I did. Nothing makes any sense, 'cept blitz. That hasn't changed."

"If you can play blitz, then you won't mind proving it, ya?" the boy said. "We're allowed to use the stadium to practice if there're no games on."

Jecht snorted. "Just you and me?"

The boy smirked. "If you're 'pretty good', then you can take my whole team, ya? I'll go talk to the captain."
And that was how we found ourselves in an otherwise-empty stadium, watching a six-versus-one blitzball match between Jecht and the Besaid Aurochs. And to my surprise, it turned out that Jecht hadn't been lying. At this one thing, he was better than good. Even someone like me, who only knew the basics of the game, could see that. In the water, the scruffy drunk was almost as graceful as Sephiroth, grabbing the ball during the blitz-off, eeling past anyone who tried to block him, and slamming it into the Aurochs' goal again and again.

By halftime, the score was 4-0 in Jecht's favour. The man from Zanarkand looked half-dead as he crawled back onto dry land, but then so did the Aurochs. Braska and I watched from the edge of the stands as they all grouped together in the ready area right outside the tank.

"Don't think we need to play the second half of that, ya?" the Aurochs' captain said as he flopped down on a bench and began to towel off. "You're good. No, better than good. Why're you running around doing whatever it is you're doing, instead of playing blitz?"

"You should join us, ya?" added the boy who'd initiated the challenge in the first place.

"Wakka's right—we'd give you a real good contract," the captain continued seamlessly. "So, what d'you say?"

"If I come back alive, maybe," Jecht said. "Right now, though, I've got a couple of things I need to do, and they're more important than blitz. Never thought I'd say that, but there you have it."

"But nothing's more important than blitz," Wakka said.

"Didn't think so either when I was your age, but things've changed a bit since then," Jecht said. Then he pointed at us. "See that guy over there, in the robe and the funny hat? His name's Braska, and he's a Summoner. I'm supposed to be one of his Guardians, even if I've been doing a pretty shit job of it so far. That's one thing. The other thing is, I've got a son—younger than you, he turned seven about a month before I got sucked into this mess. He's probably cryin' up a storm right now 'cause I'm missing. I might not be all that good a dad either, but I've gotta find out where he is and how to get back to him, 'cause he's still my kid."

Wakka just looked confused, but the Aurochs' captain said, "Hard to argue with all of that. But if you do make it back, come see me before you start taking offers from the Goers or whoever, ya? We need you worse than they do."

Jecht laughed. "Yeah, sure, why not? Besaid Aurochs, right? I'll come find you if there's a chance. Gotta go now, though, or Auron's gonna chew my ears off about duty and he and Sephiroth are gonna give me all the heaviest crap we've got to carry, so that it ain't as easy for me to run off."

As Jecht picked up his sword and strapped it on, I decided I might have misjudged him again. He might be disreputable, but he wasn't necessarily irresponsible. Most of the time.

Chapter End Notes

I actually did manage to give all of Yuna's Guardians at least a cameo in here somewhere. See if you can spot Kimahri when he appears, several chapters hence. ;)

And yes, Sephiroth is referring to Rufus Shinra.
All of Jecht's grace in the water was utterly lost the moment we put him on a chocobo. He had no notion at all of moving with the bird's rocking gait. After the second time he was thrown, Sephiroth snapped at him to let the reins go and hang onto the saddle instead, and after that he at least stayed on. The silver-haired man, by contrast, sat his bird as though he'd been riding all his life, and maybe he had.

Seymour was thankfully more at ease on chocobo-back than Jecht, although he couldn't have had much practice while he'd been living at Baaj. Like Braska, he was cautious, staying in the middle of our group as the birds loped down the Highroad toward the Djose temple.

Being part of the land route between Luca and Bevelle, the Highroad was well-patrolled, and we passed an average of two Crusader parties a day, but very few fiends. It should have been relaxing, after everything we'd been through, but it felt closer to boring. We were also getting low on cash.

Which was why, when we reached the travel agency at the midpoint of the road and discovered they had a fiend problem, I didn't fight too hard when Jecht suggested we go after it.

The blitzball game seemed to have flipped some kind of switch inside Jecht. Saddlesore though he was, he'd been much more . . . interested in the world, I suppose, since we'd left Luca.

So I wasn't all that surprised when Jecht made the suggestion. I was a bit surprised when Sephiroth agreed with it, though.

"You've said yourselves that the fiends we're going to face during the later part of this journey are far less benign than those we've encountered to date," the silver-haired man said, leaning against the wall of Braska's room, where we'd gathered to discuss this. "We need a better grasp of each others' abilities before the opponents start to get too tough. I have some understanding of Auron's fighting style, but I have yet to work with the rest of you. I especially don't know what Spiran aeons may be capable of, beyond having the impression that they're more versatile than Gaia's materia-based summoned creatures . . . even though Ifrit is common to both worlds, and possibly some of the other aeons as well."

"You've got a materia for that thing too? Think that's why it sucked up to you back at the temple?" Jecht asked, but Sephiroth shook his head.

"At the time, I had no summon materia on me at all, and the two that were in my coat pocket when it was found at Baaj were Leviathan and Typhon . . . which, judging from your expressions, don't correspond to any aeons. A friend of mine with an affinity for fire spells carried an Ifrit with him most of the time, though, so I've certainly seen it cast."

I hadn't seen any materia when we'd gone through his coat, but perhaps they'd been inside that metal case we hadn't been able to open.

"The other aeons are Ixion, Shiva, and Bahamut," Braska supplied.

"And Yojimbo," Seymour provided. "Or at least, that was supposedly the name of the aeon at Baaj, when the temple there still had a fayth."
"Shiva and Bahamut also exist in Gaia. The other two aren't familiar to me . . . although 'yojimbo' is the Wutainese word for 'bodyguard'. However, that's probably just a coincidence."

"We need to think about how we're going to arrange this," I said, since Sephiroth didn't seem to be in much of a hurry.

A silver eyebrow rose. "We've already supplied some bait, since everyone seems to agree that this fiend likes chocobos, and that it dens in the area below the bluffs. We can simply quarter the area until it decides to attack."

"And if it decides not to?" Seymour asked.

"Then I suppose I'll be spending tonight guarding the corral." Sephiroth didn't seem particularly disturbed by the prospect.

Given that he had had trouble with his chocobo even while riding along the level, grassy Highroad, it wasn't unexpected that leapfrogging the ledges down to the Oldroad nearly resulted in the blitzer smashing his head open. By the time we'd made it to the bottom, he had his arms around his bird's neck and his eyes closed and was muttering what sounded like part of a blitzball playbook under his breath.

"We're at the bottom." Braska had nudged his chocobo over to Jecht's so that he could shake the blitzer's shoulder.

"Ugh. Next time, we're taking the scenic route," Jecht said. "Now, where's this stupid fiend?"

"We'll start by going that way," Sephiroth said, motioning to the southwest, back towards Luca. "We need money, so engage lesser fiends as opportunity allows, even if we can't find the big one."

"Who died and made him a god?" Jecht muttered as his chocobo turned to follow everyone else's.

"Given his strength, one can't claim that his arrogance is undeserved," Seymour said quietly.

I wondered if they both realized that Sephiroth could probably hear them.

It turned out that Sephiroth's excessively long odachi was well-adapted to fighting from chocobo-back. It was light enough—in his hands, at least—that he didn't have to worry about backswing, and long enough that he could poke the tip out well past the bird's beak. Also long enough to flick Jecht's sword aside when the blitzer nearly decapitated his own chocobo trying to take out a vouivre.

I didn't even want to think of how much arm strength that must have required. Jecht controlled his sword by moving with it in long, swooping swings, guiding it without trying to make it stop once it was in motion. It was too heavy to handle any other way, far heavier than any blade I'd ever tried to wield.

"We'll go on foot from here," Sephiroth said crisply, after dealing with the vouivre himself. He dismounted, suiting actions to words. "Tie your bird to the saddle of the person in front of you. Braska, Rufus, if one of you could lead them? It's better for those of us on the front line to have our hands free."

Braska seemed willing enough to lead the birds, his expression an odd mixture of sadness and amusement. Jecht kept grumbling, but he was happy enough to stop pretending he had any control over his chocobo. And Seymour, to the extent that I could identify his expression past his veil, seemed to be trying not to laugh.
We had to maintain some kind of happy medium between looking like we had no idea there was a
large fiend wandering around down here and actually keeping an eye on our chocobos. In the end,
Sephiroth and I ended up walking at the front with Braska, and Seymour and Jecht brought up the
rear, with the birds strung out between us. Jecht kept up a steady stream of grumbling about stepping
in what the birds had left behind.

We'd been walking for a quarter-hour or so when Sephiroth drifted closer to me and said softly,
"There's something large keeping pace on our left. Don't look at it, but be ready."

I gave him the barest of nods without breaking stride, and he drifted back the other way. For the next
couple of minutes, I tried to figure out how he'd detected . . . well, whatever he thought he'd
detected, since we had no proof it was the monster we were looking for. I thought I caught a few
faint rustling sounds, and maybe a branch or two snapping.

Then we reached the dead end where the Oldroad had, centuries ago before the land heaved, joined
with the current path of the Highroad. As we were forced to stop, the lead chocobo let out a loud
wark!, and the fiend jumped out at us.

Seymour instantly slammed it with a barrage of low-level spells—he had good reflexes, I would
grant him that. Meanwhile, Sephiroth was charging it, his sword catching the disproportionately large
arm that was reaching for one of our chocobos.

I was a couple of steps behind him, but my sword wasn't as long, and there was a line of thrashing
chocobos in my way. Even from a running start, I couldn't jump high enough to use one of the birds'
saddles as a springboard to hurl myself into the air and add force to a downward blow the way a
certain silver-haired madman could. Instead, I used one of them to steady myself as I skidded into a
turn to avoid running straight into the arms of the monster.

Sephiroth was using his sword as a stabbing weapon, slipping it past the fiend's armour, keeping it
occupied while I brought my own blade down in a powerful blow that cracked one of the plates on
the creature's forearm. Meanwhile, Jecht was hacking at it from behind, and Seymour was aiming a
barrage of Fira spells at the thing’s eyes, up above our heads.

Braska didn't seem to be doing much but struggling with the chocobos, until I felt a well-timed
NullFrost spell spread across my skin just a moment before the fiend cast Blizzard. It tried for another
chocobo then, but seemed puzzled when it ended up also lifting the ones in front and behind
halfway. They had used some good leather to make those reins.

The change in the angle of its wrist must have offered Sephiroth some subtle opening, because he
shot in and sliced through the fiend's forearm. The chocobo it had been holding warked as it fell. It
didn't sound like a happy bird, but when it scrambled back to its feet and shook off the disembodied
limb, it didn't seem any the worse for wear.

The wound sluggishly bled pyreflies as the fiend suddenly decided that perhaps our chocobos
weren't tasty enough to be worth this, and tried to run away. Seymour's and Sephiroth's parting shots
—Fira and Firaga, respectively—hit it in the back at almost the same moment.

It fell to the ground with enough force to shake it before dissolving.

"Whew," Jecht said, wiping his forehead with the back of one hand. "That sure worked up a sweat!
Everyone okay?"

"None of us got hit, but we need to check the chocobos," Sephiroth said.
The bird that had been picked up was venting soft, distressed kwehs, and there was red soaking through the feathers on its lower belly. It relaxed when Braska cast Curaga at it, and from the look of it, that was the worst of the damage.

"It dropped just under a thousand gil," Sephiroth observed, weighing the coins in one gloved hand. "Very little reward for the amount of work we did."

I couldn't have said exactly why I found that funny, but I did. "Are you saying that Spira's fiends are cheapskates?"

A flicker of those expressive silver eyebrows. "I suppose I am."

"Hey, is there some easier way back up than bouncing around on these stupid birds?" Jecht asked. The nearest chocobo glared at him and tried to peck at his head.

"Not unless you want to meet us at the far end of the Highroad," Braska said.

"Ugh." The blitzer hid his face in his hand, which allowed the ticked-off chocobo to succeed in pecking him this time. "Hey!"

"You could try apologizing to it," I said. "Chocobos are quite intelligent, and they do understand human speech to some extent."

"You're kidding me."

The chocobo promptly responded with a wing buffet.

"Argh. Oh, all right already. I'm sorry I called you a stupid bird. Better?"

"Kweh."

And the chocobo went back to ignoring him.

Braska had a sudden coughing fit. "At least we've been reimbursed for our rooms for tonight. Shall we go back to the travel agency?"

I think the chocobo gave Jecht the most bone-jarring ride it could manage on the way back up, but it didn't throw him off. We corralled the birds again, and Braska, Jecht, and Seymour went off to talk to Rin, the young Al Bhed who ran the travel agency, while I followed Sephiroth out into the plains some distance from the travel agency.

I'd assumed he was going to hunt, but instead he stopped about half a mile from the travel agency, thigh-deep in the long grass, and stretched out his hand in a spellcasting gesture. The ground in front of him shuddered and cracked, earth loosening over a large area and plowing the grasses under.

Sephiroth nodded silently to himself, and pulled the metal case we'd been unable to open from his coat pocket. He did something to the corners, a sort of pinching, wrenching movement, and the lid popped open. Inside were a dozen materia, each resting neatly inside a scoop-shaped depression.

I'd never seen more than one loose materia at a time before, and hadn't realized they came in so many colours. Sephiroth pulled one of the green ones from his armlet and replaced it with one that glimmered red. This time, the gesture of invocation was broader.

"Leviathan . . ."

It came from nowhere, in a wave of water that washed the cracked dirt and uprooted grass away, revealing building foundations from a long-dead city. The green serpent-dragon that rose from the
waters vaguely resembled Evrae, the guardian wyrn of Bevelle, although it was even larger. It roared at the wide and empty sky and sent a tidal wave rushing forward.

When the attack subsided, it vanished again, leaving behind a large area of soaked plains land.

So that was a summon materia.

Sephiroth swapped materia once more, returning the green one to his wristband, and putting the metal case back in his pocket.

"I don't think there's any need to try Typhon as well," he said.

"Does it do anything other than attack?" I asked.

"Not that I've ever seen."

"Not like an aeon at all, then. They can pick up most of the same skills a human can."

"Interesting. So they function more as auxiliary party members than as weapons."

I nodded. "Still, those materia of yours seem to be a useful shortcut."

"A shortcut is exactly what they are. They're the memory of a people that could freely cast spells, written in crystal. Channel energy into one, and the materia will dictate its form."

"So you don't actually have to control more than the amount of energy you're putting in. And that's why it's faster?"

"Effectively, yes. Would you like to try?"

"Me? I have all the magical instincts of a chocobo." Less, probably.

"Then you have nothing to unlearn." He pulled out the translation materia, then stripped his wristlet off and held it out to me.

I took it slowly and turned it over in my hand, figuring out how to put it on. Close up, it was well-worn, scratched from claws and blades. I closed it around my wrist and heard it click as some hidden catch engaged. It was still warm against my skin, even though he'd been wearing it over a leather glove.

"This one is an ice materia," Sephiroth said, tapping one of the wristlet's green spheres with his finger. The translation materia flickered in his other hand, and his voice had taken on an odd, echoing quality—I suppose just holding the sphere wasn't as efficient. "So long as you don't manage to cast it at yourself, you shouldn't be able to do lasting damage to anything here with one of those, and elemental materia are the easiest to use."

"What if I hit you?" I protested.

"I resist magic more strongly than most people, even seasoned casters. The worst you can do is give me a bit of frostbite. But for your peace of mind, I would pick a different target to concentrate on. That bit over there where a couple of the stones protrude above the natural ground level will do, if nothing else catches your eye."

It took me a moment to find it, and when I did, I turned slightly so that I was fully facing it. Sephiroth nodded approvingly.
"Now. Concentrate on the materia. Imagine it lighting up, aware, *listening* . . ."

Imagination had never been my strong suit, but when I tried to think of it as a sword technique, with the materia substituting for my sword and becoming a focal point for my energies, something clicked and the crystal began to burn with an inner green fire much brighter than what it had been displaying before.

"Good. Now, give it a push in the direction of your target."

I imagined it as a thrust, energy moving from torso to arm to hand to hilt and out through the blade of the materia-sword . . . and there was a crackle of frost. Startled, I lost the narrow focus I'd been maintaining, and discovered that a path of white had speared its way across the ground, rimen the grass and depositing a scum of ice on the pool that Leviathan had left behind.

"Very good for a first try," Sephiroth said approvingly. "Again."

On the third try, I managed a normal, respectable Blizzard spell, much to my own shock. Sephiroth made me repeat it several times under increasingly demanding conditions before he took his wristlet back.

"Enough for now," he said. "Let's go hunt."

There were a lot more monsters in the grasslands off to the sides of the Highroad. Mi'ihen fangs ran in packs here, counting on their numbers as much as their teeth and claws to kill the unwary. Sephiroth, at one point, was fighting with one of them dangling off his right forearm, much to my dismay, although the fiend didn't look happy about it either. By the time I fought my way over to him, he'd flung the creature up against the edge of his sword, severing its neck. The head continued to hang there, dripping pyreflies, until we'd finished the entire pack, plus a couple of raldo that had lumbered over to join in the fun.

"Are you alright?" I asked as the head finally disintegrated.

"I'm fine."

He hadn't even *looked* at the damned arm. "Roll up your sleeve, and take your glove off."

An exasperated sigh. "I suppose that would be the quickest way to set your mind at ease."

He pulled the glove off and rolled up his sleeve, then held his arm out to me. I grabbed his wrist and turned the arm to check its underside, but there were no wounds there, either—just small bruises, faint and quickly fading.

"What is that coat of yours made out of?" Not chocobo skin, that was for sure. I'd never encountered leather that could turn the bite of a fiend before. No wonder the creature had looked frustrated.

"King behemoth hide. Actually, all my equipment is off the same king behemoth. I had to pay an extortionate amount of money to get it tanned, but it isn't as though I had anything else I needed to spend it on, and I knew there was no point in saving for my old age."

I'd never heard of a king behemoth before, but given how tough ordinary behemoths were, I could see the appeal in making what amounted to light armour out of the skin of one, if there had been any way to tan fiend hide. However, it was a completely different detail in Sephiroth's words that plucked at my attention.

"They wouldn't have let you retire?" You heard rumors about that sort of thing, in the darkest corners
of the Church, but I'd never found anyone able to confirm them.

A single nod. "I knew too much about certain things Shinra would rather have kept hidden. They wouldn't have been able to stop me from leaving, had I truly been determined to do so, but once I was outside their control, they would have done anything they could to make my life difficult without confronting me directly . . . and in any case, I still wanted to obtain certain information from them. Thought I wanted," he corrected himself, shaking his head. "And what a mess that became. Are you going to let go of my wrist?"

It took me a moment to register what he had just asked me, and a moment more to realize that I was, in fact, still holding onto him. I let go immediately, but the warmth and soft texture of his skin seemed to linger on my fingertips as he pulled his glove back on just in time to chop at a few more raldo who had been late to the party.

As I put my effort into shattering the fiends' tough armour, I thought again about the picture of Sephiroth's life in Gaia that was developing inside my head. There was still a lot missing, but the bits he'd painted in for me were bleak. I was starting to wonder if he had even one pleasant memory from the world of his birth.

We finished with the raldo and resumed walking. Sephiroth was guiding us in a sort of wide half-circle around the trading post, never quite getting so far away that we couldn't get back there within ten minutes if we ran flat out.

The bombs came looping up out of a depression in the ground. I cursed very, very softly—had I still been a member of the Order, I would have been punished for such words, and although I was my own man now, the habit remained.

Sephiroth bisected one the moment it got close enough, moving almost lazily, but that meant that two of them gave him a wide berth so that they could get at me instead, and I was no good with the miserable exploding creatures. Flying fiends had never been my strong suit, and I missed them as often as I hit. Which wouldn't have been a problem if even missed attacks hadn't irritated the bombs and made them swell up.

I switched to completely defensive tactics, hoping that would keep my bombs under control until Sephiroth dealt with the other six, but when one of them came straight at my face, I . . . well, I wasn't entirely sure what I was doing, beyond repeating the second part of the visualization I'd used with the materia and pushing a wave of energy from myself to the bomb.

Frost crackled, and the bomb swelled a bit more, but it was rimed with white and seemed to have a difficult time getting bigger. My sword was white too, the hilt cold against my palm. It should have been painful to hold, but somehow wasn't, and I could see snowflakes swirling around it like a mirage.

This wasn't, I understood, a time to think about what I was doing. Instead, I lunged at the bomb that had frost melting off it, and for a wonder, my swing caught it, slamming it to the ground, where it dissolved in a cloud of pyreflies.

The other one blew up in my face before I could land a solid strike on it, but waving my blade at the expanding cloud of flame broke it apart. Small cinders still fell on me, and they did sting, but the damage was minimal.

Sephiroth sent a Cure washing over me as he dealt with the last of his own bombs. I relaxed into the warmth of the healing magic, and the sword in my hand began to warm again, the frost and the snowflakes vanishing. I almost pitched to one knee, suddenly feeling exhausted, but after a moment
more, I realized my tiredness wasn't physical: I'd exhausted my mental energy, as though I'd been using a rapid-fire series of sword techniques . . . or a single, continuous spell.

I'd elementalized my blade somehow. It wasn't all that difficult to get a weapon that had an elemental effect built into it—Gurrik, the Ronso I'd trained with, had used a fire-elemental spear—but adding the element on the fly was mage-swordsman territory.

"Here." A gloved hand holding an ether appeared in front of my nose, and I snatched the phial and drank it. Only when I'd already gulped it down did I wince slightly at the number of gil I'd just wasted. I'd owned swords that cost less than a single ether.

"I have more," Sephiroth told me, as though reading my mind. "Rest a bit for now. It's obvious that you're not used to that kind of strain."

"You saw." It wasn't a question because it didn't need to be. I knew he had. "I've never done that before. I didn't know I could."

"I have a theory," Sephiroth said, and tapped his wrist. It took me a moment to get it.

"The materia? But I wasn't even wearing it!"

"And you didn't exactly cast the spell it was intended for, either. Materia were originally intended to teach spells and abilities. It didn't occur to me that they could function that way for you because you aren't a Cetra, and most non-Cetra humans on Gaia can use the same materia for years without learning anything at all, but maybe Spiran humans are different. You certainly seem to have picked up something of the feel of the element of ice from somewhere, and I can't think of any other likely source."

I sat in the grass, staring at my hands, and thought about that for a while. "I think . . . I'd like to borrow your fire materia."

"When we reach more suitable terrain. Fire, novice casters, and overgrown grassland don't mix, unless you want to cause a burn-off. Besides, it might be better for you to master one element first, before adding a second to the mix."

"You're probably right," I admitted. I wasn't even sure I could do it again, and if I got fire when I expected ice, the result could have been quite dangerous.

A long pause. Then, sounding as though each word was difficult, Sephiroth said, "I suppose I should apologize. I've known all along that Gaian and Spiran humans aren't quite the same. I should have considered that the materia might have some unexpected effect on you."

I shook my head. "I'm the one who accepted your offer. You're not responsible for what happened, and in any case, no damage was done."

Another long pause. "You're right. I'm depriving you of agency by assuming the responsibility rested entirely with me. But I still should have warned you."

Sometimes I couldn't understand this man. "How are Gaian and Spiran humans different, other than the way we prefer to cast magic?"

A silver brow rose. "If you really want to know . . . you smell different. Although that may be partly diet and chemical exposure. The Al Bhed smell more Gaian, although I can still tell the difference."

"I'm starting to wonder how good your sense of smell actually is."
"Good enough to identify individual people without visual cues. Sometimes I can figure out the owner of an object, if it's been handled enough and not washed afterwards. For people I know well, I can identify some emotions. However, it isn't nearly acute enough for me to track by scent." His shoulders had stiffened as he spoke, and he was scanning the horizon instead of looking at me. Afraid? Ashamed?

"I guess I was prying again. Sorry. I . . . just want to know more about you."

"I know. And I don't begrudge you. You have yet to use anything I've told you against me."

That shouldn't have to be one of the first things anyone thinks of when they answer a question about themselves.

I rose to my feet and carefully, oh-so-carefully, hugged him, as my mother had done for me when I was young. He stiffened for a moment, but then he relaxed and leaned into me slightly, and while he still held his sword in one hand, the other slid around tentatively to rest on my back. I breathed in the smell of leather, metal, musk, and something acrid and chemical. I doubted I could recognize him in the dark that way, but I did my best to memorize it anyway. Because I didn't know if I would ever have another chance.

I hoped I would. He felt good there in my arms, warm and strong and . . . reassuring, even though I knew he was broken, barely holding his shape, like a shattered window that would fall apart if I so much as breathed on it.

Chapter End Notes

The identity of Baaj's original fayth is one of the great unsolved mysteries of FFX, but as far as I can tell, Yojimbo fulfills all the requirements, and assigning him to the position has the advantage of not requiring me to create another fayth (which becomes important later on).
Chapter 9

By the time we camped the next night at the junction where the Highroad, the Oldroad, and Mushroom Rock Road all met, I'd succeeded twice in elementalizing my sword on purpose, and on withdrawing the power before I ran out of energy . . . once. The first time, when I didn't get it quite right, Sephiroth stepped in and pulled my sagging body protectively against his chest while fending off fiends with his sword. That got us a round of teasing from Jecht that we both stoically endured.

It was a bit tight, but we did all fit in the tent that Sephiroth and I had bought, along with the most vital, can't-be-rained-upon bits of our gear. We laid out our blankets side-by-side with our weapons forming minimal barriers between them, which placed me between my sword and Seymour's staff when I turned in after taking the early watch.

The next morning, after returning the chocobos to their handler, a sort of auxiliary of the stable in Luca, we set off along Mushroom Rock Road on foot. The terrain here was barren and a bit unstable, riddled with geysers. The fiends were correspondingly hardy, and ran annoyingly to fast, flying, and physical-attack-resistant types. Sometimes it seemed as though the funguars were the only thing I could hit. But it was good elementalization practice. By the time we stopped for lunch, I'd almost gotten the hang of sending a pulse of magic along my sword just before swinging it, then letting go of it as part of the follow-through, and a few red elements had fatally underestimated me.

I'd ask to borrow Sephiroth's fire materia tomorrow, I decided, propping myself comfortably against a rock. Our food had been chosen for its lightness and storage efficiency rather than its taste or texture (we'd made that mistake on the way down from Bevelle and had to buy more food off a chocobo handler at the junction, for several times what it had been worth), and Braska, Seymour, and Jecht were still working their way through their portions.

Sephiroth had gnawed his way through hardtack and dried chocobo meat with single-minded determination, and was now silently standing guard over the others. It was something that he did quite a bit, I'd noticed. Braska and Seymour trusted the patrols to keep this area clear of fiends, and Jecht didn't care, but Sephiroth insisted on always being alert. I should have been doing the same, but I'd grown to depend on the silver-haired man's superlative senses. He could kill a fiend before the rest of us had even spotted it.

Things would change when we got out past Bevelle. Despite their name, the Calm Lands were full of fiends, much tougher ones than those that haunted the Luca-Bevelle highway, and Mount Gagazet was even worse. As for Zanarkand . . . I didn't want to think about Zanarkand yet. Our only possible source for information about the dead city was Seymour, and he'd been a child when he'd visited it. He might not have noticed things we needed to know.

Sephiroth frowned and raised his head. Usually he lowered it again after a moment, but this time, he reached for his sword, resting his hand on the hilt.

I walked over to stand beside him. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Possibly nothing, but . . ."

I closed my eyes to focus on sound and smell, but couldn't detect anything out of the ordinary, and said as much.

"It's just that I'm smelling more blood than would normally be consistent with a seashore, but perhaps something crawled out of the water to die, and the fiends are tearing it apart. Our path gets closer to
the water up ahead, doesn't it?"

I nodded. "There's a section of the road that runs right along the edge of the beach, then up a ramp at the far end. I'll tell the others to be alert."

A soft snort told me what Sephiroth thought of that, and I had to admit that Jecht, at least, was never really alert. He'd fallen asleep on watch sometime before dawn this morning, for instance.

Then, just as we were done with lunch and were about to move on, a machina weapon barked somewhere nearby, and Jecht took off at high speed in the direction we were going anyway.


"Then why are we standing here?" Braska asked.

"Because our job is to guard you, not interfere in other people's fights," I said.

"I intend to have words with Jecht when we catch up with him," Sephiroth added. "He should have stayed with the rest of us. Of course, if our charge were to head in the direction of the fight, we would be obliged to follow."

Braska got it right away, and lifted his skirts to run.

Sephiroth had been right: something had washed up on the beach, but it wasn't a fish or a fiend. Instead, an awkward-looking globe of metal with arms and legs lay on its side in the sand, with smaller dead creatures strewn around it. There was an Al Bhed standing in front of it with a machina weapon in her hands. Another of her people lay in the sand beside her—I couldn't tell if that one was a man or a woman, but I could tell that they were bleeding.

Opposite them stood three familiar figures that I needed a moment to place as the Summoner and Guardians we'd met in Kilika three weeks ago: Kelanth of Luca, tiny Yukiko, and black-cloaked Zurian.

"Give potions!" the Al Bhed woman barked. There were tears running down her face. "Potions, or —"

"I will give nothing to help an unbeliever," Kelanth said.

And then Jecht came barreling in and made everything worse. It seemed to be a talent of his. Kelanth yelled something about Al Bhed reinforcements and Zurian shot off what looked like a Thundaga and the Al Bhed woman pointed her machina weapon and fired it. It wasn't unlike some of the ones the Order used, so I knew she had just shot a small piece of metal at Jecht's head. And there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

Sephiroth moved in a blur, his sword flicking out to deflect the Al Bhed bullet, which whined as it struck a chunk of rock. He also managed to get his body between Jecht and most of the Thundaga spell. The lightning only grazed the blitzer, but it hit Sephiroth full on. Somehow, the silver-haired man remained upright with his sword pointed at the combatants even though his muscles were jerking spastically with the spell's aftermath. His magic resistance must have been high enough to cut the effect, but not eliminate it completely.

"Stand down!" Braska shouted. "Cdyht tujhi!" Which I assumed was the same thing in Al Bhed. "Back off, please, Summoner Kelanth. We'll tend to this."

The Al Bhed woman said something in her own language, to which Braska responded the same
Yukiko looked at Sephiroth, who was twitching less now and had his sword pointed squarely at the three of them, then at Braska and the woman. "I think that he's right that it may be best, my lord."

"Very well. Disgusting though it may be to see a Summoner bring aid to a heretic, I suppose we can't expect any better of a man who was married to one of their kind." Kelanth turned his back on us and... flounced. The Al Bhed woman said something wry-sounding.

Braska threw a Curaga at the injured Al Bhed as Sephiroth sighed very faintly and lowered his sword so that the point rested on the sand.

"Are you alright?" I asked him. "You need to stop throwing yourself between people and attacks."

"I'm more durable, so it makes sense for me to take the damage."

Why did it seem that I was always making horrifying realizations with respect to this man? "The reason you don't have any scars isn't that you don't get hit, it's that you—"

"Heal that completely, yes."

_There are those who would say that I'm not human at all—just a monster created to fight in other people's wars._

I realized, with a slight inward shock, that I had never told Braska about Sephiroth burning down the town of Nibelheim. In fact, it had been quite a while since I'd spoken privately to Lord Braska at all. I'd been too wrapped up in my fellow Guardian to pay the attention I should have to my Summoner. The thought horrified me.

That was for later, though. Right now, I had to figure out how to deal with a scraped-up, sand-covered Jecht, who was using his sword to lever himself to his feet. Although the first words out of the blitzer's mouth were not what I had expected.

"Everyone okay?"

"The only ones who were ever in danger were you, Sephiroth, and the Al Bhed," Seymour said. "And Sephiroth appears to have survived taking the spell intended for you without suffering serious damage."

Jecht blinked several times. "Huh. Sorry about that, Sephy."

"Next time, I may let you fry," Sephiroth growled. "Especially given that you abandoned your charge and ran on ahead. You are here as Braska's Guardian, not as a private citizen—you have an obligation to see that he remains safe. Which should have outweighed your curiosity about what was going on over here."

"Hey, I knew you and Auron were with him. You're both better at this 'Guardian' stuff than I'll ever be."

"Auron and I are not invincible." Sephiroth's voice had taken on a cold, biting tone. "I do not care what you do when our charge is secure, but if you ever again run off and leave him just to satisfy your own curiosity about something, I will make you wish you had remained in prison in Bevelle. Is that clear?"

"Wait a minute, now—I didn't run ahead just because I was curious."
"Why, then?"

Jecht gave Sephiroth an astonished look. "Because I figured there might be someone who needed saving—and it turned out there was!" He gestured at the two Al Bhed. "It was the right thing to do."

Somehow, I managed not to groan. I'd already discovered how much trouble Jecht could get himself—and the rest of us—into when he thought he was doing the right thing, although a lot of it had happened before Sephiroth had joined us.

"No, it wasn't. It was one of many possible *wrong* things to do. While I will grant that staying with us might also have been one of those, that is the direction your *responsibilities* lay in. Although I do realize you are scarcely familiar with the concept."

"Sephiroth, that is enough," Braska said from where he knelt beside the Al Bhed.

The silver-haired man inclined his head in deference. "Very well. If you are satisfied, I suppose there is nothing further to be said."

I went over to stand beside him, so that I could speak for his ears alone. "Please go a bit easier on Jecht. This journey... it isn't just about collecting the aeons, but about allowing Summoners to form a few last good memories and leave Spira with as few regrets as possible. Lord Braska may yet end up executing the Final Summoning, and it will be easier on him if he doesn't have to deal with dissent among us."

"My apologies," Sephiroth murmured. "I know I shouldn't expect any real discipline from Jecht—he was never any kind of military—but as you've no doubt discovered, it sometimes becomes exasperating to be the one who has to make sure everyone packs enough socks and isn't throwing stones at the coeurls."

That startled a chuckle from me. Not least because I knew exactly what he meant.

Sephiroth moved away after a moment, heading for the place where Lord Braska was kneeling in the sand beside the Al Bhed. "What's his condition?"

"He's going to live," the Summoner said. "I can't completely restore him, though—part of his foot was amputated when the excavation suit was damaged. We're going to have to help them get to somewhere safe. Unfortunately, that means turning back—they won't be welcome at Djose Temple, and the nearest Al Bhed outpost is the travel agency on the Highroad."

Sephiroth's mouth thinned, but he said, "I suppose it can't be helped. Will he be able to walk?"

"With help, but probably not well or very far. It takes time to adapt to that kind of loss, and the scars will be tender."

"Aw, man, we're gonna let that asshole get ahead of us?" Jecht said. "I mean, we can't leave these guys stranded here, but..."

"The pilgrimage is not a race," I snapped. "And if Kelanth does manage to persist to the end and bring the Calm, I, for one, will not complain."

"If nothing else, it would buy us time," Sephiroth agreed. "Jecht, you will carry the Al Bhed man. Perhaps that will keep you out of trouble. If you can't manage both him and your weapon, give the sword to me."

Jecht snorted. "Well, gee, thanks." He did do as he was told, though, taking up the Al Bhed man
piggyback while Braska spoke to the woman. Maybe he thought it would make up for him being an idiot.

It was dark by the time we made it back to the road junction. When Sephiroth assigned the night watches, I asked to take the early one again, leaving the dawn watch for Seymour and the awkward, sleep-sapping midnight one for Sephiroth himself.

I caught Braska's shoulder as he was about to head for the crowded tent. "My lord, we need to talk."

"All right."

But having said that, I didn't know where to begin. We sat on either side of a dying fire, staring into the flames, and I had no words. In the end, I forced out what I had to say in the baldest terms possible.

"I asked Sephiroth about that tear in the back of his coat while we were in Baaj. He said someone had run him through. To stop him from burning down a town... or possibly afterwards, to keep him from doing something worse. He wasn't interested in laying out the events with a clear chronology, and I didn't dare ask him for details. But one thing he was very clear about was that he'd killed three hundred people that night. Three hundred innocent people—he was clear about that, too. We're traveling with a murderer, my lord."

There was a long silence. Braska poked at the fire with a stick.

"You would have said something if you thought he was any danger to me," he said at last. "So you think, as I do, that there must have been a reason."

I nodded. "I can't bring myself to be suspicious of him. And that should worry me in and of itself. But..." Once again, I ran out of words.

"It's difficult to be suspicious of a friend. And you've been spending a lot more time with him than the rest of us. It makes sense that you would trust him."

*I might spend time with him, but we don't talk much.* How much did that matter, though? We spent most of that time fighting side-by-side. There was a certain intimacy there even if neither of us said more than *I'll take the one on the right or watch out—there's a flan behind you.*

It doesn't take along to assess someone when you fight together, on the edge between life and death. Level of trust. That was primary, more important than skill and courage and experience all put together. And I trusted Sephiroth at my back, trusted him to protect me and do his portion of the fighting and not run off on a wild goose chase like Jecht had done earlier today.

"I can't believe he has any ill intentions," Braska was saying. "Before we even knew his name, he took a blow from a Sinspawn for you. And then much the same thing today, with Jecht, even though the two of them don't get along. I have no intention of dismissing him... and really, I can't see what difference it would make if I did. If Sephiroth wanted to go somewhere, whether it was Zanarkand or the Al Bhed Home or Bevelle's Chamber of the Fayth, it would take an army to keep him out."

That made me smile, although really, it wasn't funny. "Given what his overdrive did to Sin, he might even be able to handle an army."

"That is a terrifying thought... and you might be right."

I spent a while more, after Braska had wormed his way into the tent, thinking about trust and our companions. Braska himself, I trusted within the limits of his character: he was a true priest, who
sought to protect, comfort, and cherish. Jecht, I mostly trusted if he was sober, although I had to remember that he was as impulsive and idealistic as a much younger man. Seymour . . . I wasn't quite sure about Seymour yet, but it was clear that Sephiroth trusted him, which inclined me to do so as well.

I didn't say anything to Sephiroth when he came to relieve me, but I laid my hand briefly on his arm. It made his eyebrows quirk for a moment, but then he offered me his tiny, elusive smile.

It took us three days, even with chocobos, to take the two Al Bhed back to the travel agency and then make our way back to Mushroom Rock Road. All the while, I was waiting for something else to go wrong—a flood of Crusaders sent after the apostates who had given aid and comfort to heretics, perhaps, or even Sin itself, herding us back toward Luca. But instead, everything went perfectly smoothly, other than fiends popping out at us now and again when they decided there couldn't be any Crusaders nearby.

It was after nightfall when we arrived at the Djose Temple—or, more accurately, the inn next to the Djose Temple. We'd spotted the lightning and flying rocks that indicated some other Summoner was communing with the fayth while we were still on the causeway, and in any case, there was no hurry.

Sephiroth entered the inn first, taking the riskiest position as he always did. Then Seymour, Braska, Jecht, and me bringing up the rear.

The acolytes who ran the inn—no one ever came out here except priests, warrior-monks, Crusaders, and Summoners on pilgrimage, so the inn was more like a lodging house for the temple, with added forced donations—seemed a little daunted when they saw no less than five tall, grumpy, footsore men, all armed with swords or staves, lined up in front of the desk.

Braska was the one who stepped forward, offering a smile and the familiar gesture of prayer. "Good evening. I do understand that there is another Summoner here, but I hope that you have some rooms left, at least?"

"Um . . . I'm afraid we have only two," the young woman behind the desk said. "Is that . . . acceptable?"

"We'll take 'em," Jecht said instantly. "I mean, the alternative's sleeping in the tent again, right? Dunno about you guys, but it's been a few days since the travel agency, and I'd like a real bed."

Two rooms. With two beds each. That gave us a bit of a logistics problem to solve.

"Jecht and I will share one room," Braska said after we'd inspected both rooms. "Auron and Sephiroth will have the other. Rufus will have to choose according to his preference."

Seymour immediately moved over to Sephiroth's and my side of the hall, only then glancing at us for permission. I nodded—I would be just as glad to have a chaperone. Sephiroth shrugged.

We entered the room together. The beds hadn't multiplied while we'd been in the hallway.

"I'll sleep on the floor," Sephiroth said.

"No."

We both stared at Seymour.

"You keep on doing this," the half-Guado said as he shut the door and removed his hat and veil. "Taking the worst on yourself. It's only small things, but even Jecht has noticed. However, you are
our strongest defender, and we need you in the best shape possible. I will sleep on the floor, and if we are here for more than one night, we will rotate the position between us. And I will hear no argument."

Sephiroth reared back like a fiend that had just had a Firaga go off under its nose. He locked eyes with Seymour, and they spent several long moments having a staring contest across the space between the two beds. In the end, Sephiroth was the one that looked away, over and down, and one of those tiny smiles flickered at the corner of his mouth, looking rueful.

"You're right that it isn't worth arguing about." He laid his sword on the bed nearest the door, shed his coat, and unbuckled his boots. Then he sat down leaning against the headboard and began the routine of maintaining the long odachi, testing the edge (although it had never once shown any sign of being blunted), cleaning the metal, and oiling it.

After a moment, I began performing a similar ritual with my own sword. Seymour, by contrast, checked his staff for damage and, finding none, leaned it against the wall. He unpinned his hair and shook his head, letting the braid fall free down his back, and then unraveled the braid to comb it out.

What followed was a companionable silence, until Sephiroth broke it. "Rufus, you've passed through the Cloister of Trials here before. What can we expect?"

"As you've doubtless already guessed, the aeon here is lightning-elemental. So there's a lot of free energy crackling around. The Cloister has two floors, and the major part of the Trial is activating the elevator to pass between them. I don't remember all the details of the puzzle, since my Guardian solved it for me, but I do recall a few key points—for instance, there is a sphere socket that can only be reached by using one of the pedestals as a floating platform."

"The Trials seem to be getting longer and more complicated as we advance," I said, running my whetstone lightly along the edge of my sword.

Seymour nodded. "Macalania's Trial is spread over three levels and involves creating ramps and bridges. Bevelle's . . . I never really understood the Cloister in Bevelle. The scenery there was so outlandish that I couldn't make sense of it, and I have no idea how my mother solved it. Hopefully one of you will be able to grasp it, or the intervening years will have made a difference. Although I would have expected that one of the protectors of Bevelle's Temple would have seen its Cloister."

I shook my head. "The rule of entry for Bevelle is no different from anywhere else: only Summoners intending to petition the fayth, their Guardians, and the priests charged with maintenance of the Cloister. The only difference is that at Bevelle, the maintenance duty isn't rotated between the priests—there are two of them whose specific job it is. Possibly because it takes a while to understand the inner workings of the place, if it's as strange as you claim."

I suspected that the strangeness had something to do with machina. Although the discussion of it wasn't encouraged, everyone in the Order knew that there were quite a number of those buried in the depths of the Palace of Saint Bevelle. Bevelle and Luca were the only two places in the world that had been continuously inhabited since the time before Sin, so it made sense that there would be machina from the ancient cities buried under the modern ones.

"There is a Cloister in Zanarkand as well, but it isn't like the others," Seymour added. "That one has a true Trial attached. We will have to fight our way in, past Yunalesca's gate guard."

Which actually sounded less annoying than the sphere-juggling puzzles. We'd only done two of those so far, and the two simplest ones at that, and I was already tired of them.
Sephiroth was done with his sword, and Seymour was rebraiding his hair for the night. I gave my sword a quick once-over with an oily rag and returned it to its scabbard, propping it against the wall where it would be near to hand.

"Take the extra blankets from our bedrolls," Sephiroth told Seymour as the half-Guado began to arrange his bedding on the floor. "There's no reason why you should be more uncomfortable than necessary. Speaking of which . . ." He tossed the younger man a pillow.

A ghost of a smile flickered across Seymour's face. "Thank you."

I extinguished the light, and everything became quiet as we all crawled under our blankets and sought sleep in our own individual ways.
Chapter 10

The temple was still enveloped in a mass of lightning and flying rock the next morning. Apparently Kelanth was having trouble assimilating the aeon. Which meant that there was no need for us to hurry to the temple.

I grimaced as I picked up my haori. I could smell myself, which was never a pleasant thing. It had been days since the travel agency and its showers and laundry service. Well, the inn did have bathing facilities, although they were shared between all the guests, and I was at loose ends for the moment. A bath had more than a little appeal.

I arrived at the baths to find the men's side already occupied. Sephiroth stood facing the door with a towel wrapped around his hips, wringing water out of his hair. His eyes flicked to me when I came in, and I . . . well, all right, I let myself admire that body of his for a moment. He already knew I was attracted to him, so he wasn't likely to be surprised. We exchanged nods, and I began to strip out of my filthy clothing.

I didn't realize that he was watching me, too, until I heard his voice from behind me. "Those are from a whip."

I couldn't see the scars myself, except for a couple of spots where the Master of Discipline had struck not-quite-squarely and the lash had curled forward over my shoulder, but I knew they were there. "Discipline in the Order of Temple Wardens is rigid and severe. I don't know if Lord Braska has told you, but I was supposed to marry Maester Esmon's daughter. When I refused, they gave me twenty lashes for disobedience. I resigned from the Order the same day."

"That scar was one that I could see, the brand blotting the mark of Yevon that I'd once worn over my heart. "Surely you must have seen such punishments before."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Sephiroth shake his head. "Only on a few people who had been held as prisoners at a certain camp in Wutai during the war. Gaians regard corporal punishment as uncivilized."

"Ah. It sounds like a nice world to live in."

"Not really. And I'm sure that any recruit who ever had to clean a latrine with a toothbrush would much have preferred to be whipped."

I snorted. "Was that a common punishment?"

"It was assigned from time to time when someone did something egregiously stupid. Occasionally one of them even learned from it. " Having gotten the worst of the water out of his hair, Sephiroth unselfconsciously dropped his towel and slid into his behemoth-leather trousers. Half of me was relieved that he had his back to me while he was doing it. The other half was watching the play of muscles in his back and buttocks and thinking, too bad.

"Don't you wear anything under those?" The words sort of . . . slipped out.

"Not usually, no. And no, they don't chafe. They've adapted to my body over the years—and vice-versa, I suppose."

I flushed. "I'm sorry. It isn't a question I should have asked."

A low chuckle. "Actually, you're not the first. And at least you asked out of genuine personal
curiosity."

I wasn't quite sure how to respond to that. What reason other than personal curiosity could there have been?

By now, Sephiroth had pulled on his boots and fastened the buckles. As he took a step toward the door, his hand briefly, unexpectedly, squeezed my shoulder. "Go have your bath, Auron. I suspect we may be in for a long day."

I told myself that his touch didn't linger, tracing over the muscle, warm and feather-light. I was sure it was just wishful thinking.

I was just putting my dirty haori on over my clean shirt when the flying rocks outside the temple shifted inward, stopped moving, and became the building's protective outer shell once again.

I finished dressing and went outside, to where the others were already waiting.

"I dunno," Jecht was saying. "It's a pretty light-show, but it's kinda missing something. Like it needs more explosions, or maybe a girl on a trapeze in a bikini."

Lord Braska smiled and shook his head—Jecht was good for that, at least. For keeping his spirits up, despite knowing where the path we followed would lead.

"Shall we go?" our Summoner asked. Not a real question, of course. He stepped forward, and the rest of us arranged ourselves protectively around him.

We were met midway by Kelanth. He was staggering along with his arm over the shoulders of the girl Yukiko, and didn't seem entirely conscious.

"Looks like he had too much to drink," said Jecht, smirking.

"He had a bad reaction to the aeon here," the petite girl snapped back, almost growling. "He had a delayed reaction in Kilika, too. Which is how you managed to catch up with us even though your ferry was blown so far out to hell and gone that you apparently ran into the Al Bhed."

"You do realize," Seymour said, "that with a reaction this poor, he may die in Bevelle or even Macalania, without ever making it to Zanarkand."

Jecht's, "Wait, what?" overlapped with the girl's "I know! We've all known all along! But he wants this! And I . . . I can't . . . Oh, damn you! Damn you, whoever you are!"

Braska placed a hand on Seymour's arm. "That's enough, Rufus. It isn't for us to obstruct this young man, or make his choices for him." And he sent two pulses of magic in Kelanth's direction—Cura and Esuna. "That's all I can do for him," he told the girl. "I'm sorry."

Yukiko looked surprised. "It's far more than most would have done. Thank you . . . Lord Braska," Her hands formed the familiar prayer, although she didn't bow very deeply, presumably trying not to dislodge her burden. She took a step forward, then stopped again.

"Why?" The voice was only a croak, but Kelanth had raised his head to stare at us with bloodshot eyes.

"Because I only care about bringing the Calm," Lord Braska said. "I don't care who brings it. If it's you, I will happily return to Bevelle and my daughter to live out the reprieve you will have given me, Lord Kelanth."
Kelanth snorted and took a shaking step. Yukiko moved forward to support him, and with his other Guardian, still swathed in black, bringing up the rear, they left the temple courtyard.

Sephiroth was frowning. "I wasn't aware that the act of absorbing an aeon was dangerous in itself."

"He is, in effect, allergic to them," Seymour said. "Such cases are rare, but there have been a handful of others, and all Summoners are taught about the possibility during training."

"Poor bastard," Jecht said. "Could it really kill him?"

A slight nod from Seymour. "From what I understand, it functions rather like a cumulative dose of poison, getting worse with each aeon he absorbs. Even if he reaches Zanarkand, he may not be able to summon the Final Aeon."

"Why would he have started a pilgrimage, knowing that?" I had a feeling that I already knew the answer, though.

"Only after one absorbs one's first aeon can one tell whether one is subject to the condition," Seymour said. "He should have turned back at Besaid."

I shook my head. I knew what drove Braska to make the Summoner's Journey. I had an inkling of what must have driven Seymour, caught up as he had been in a then-half-understood spiderweb of adult motivations. Kelanth I didn't understand at all, although I was certain he wasn't as altruistic as Braska. His Guardian Yukiko was easier: clearly in love with him, although she wouldn't admit it. The robed Zurian was impossible to grasp—they hadn't even spoken yet in our presence.

Djose Temple involved a lot of lightning and a lot of spheres. At least this time, there weren't any missing. And Seymour's recollections of the place, vague though they were, allowed us to solve it in what must have been record time.

None of us was surprised when the voice from inside the Chamber of the Fayth spoke Sephiroth's name this time. He preceded Braska inside, and the rest of us crowded around the open doorway without passing the threshold, watching and listening.

The fayth here was a man again, older than the one at Kilika, and dressed as a sailor. He appeared in a swirl of pyreflies, and Braska gestured a prayer. As at Kilika, the fayth ignored him, facing Sephiroth instead.

"Have you a message for me?" the silver-haired man asked.

"Only that the secret fear you hold will never come to fruition. There is no Calamity here. She could not follow you to this place."

Sephiroth visibly froze for half a second, breath catching in his throat, before he relaxed again. "Do not speak of her to me," he said, voice low and cold. "Ever."

The fayth inclined his head, and then turned to Braska. "Summoner, the path ahead is both darker and brighter than you know. Call upon me when you have need."

The figure vanished, becoming an arc of electricity that struck Braska straight in the chest. The Summoner convulsed and staggered as though he'd been hit with a Thundaga, little arcs of additional lightning leaping here and there on his body and limbs. Sephiroth caught him as he'd done at Kilika, holding Braska's body securely against his own.

"Well, shit," Jecht said. "Are you just gonna stand there holding him? What about laying him down
"He's flailing fairly hard, and this place is solid stone. I'd prefer not to have him break anything. If this lasts more than an hour, one of you can spell me off."

"Can't be that bad if they normally go in alone," Jecht said.

"There have been cases of Summoners dying inside the Chamber," Seymour provided helpfully. "Burned to death, electrocuted, frozen . . ."

*Reduced to piles of ash,* my memory provided, not to be outdone in helpfulness. Those had only been rumors, but they'd circulated pretty widely in Bevelle.

"It's said that they were the ones unacceptable to the fayth," the half-Guado continued. "Although it's certainly possible to emerge from the Chamber alive and aeonless. Perhaps the ones the fayth particularly dislike are the ones who die. Or perhaps it's purely accidental. No one knows, and the fayth do not explain."

"Stubborn bastards," Jecht said. "I mean, they can talk—we've all heard them. So why do it in cryptic one-liners?"

Seymour shrugged. "Some are less reticent than others. I have held proper conversations with Bahamut's fayth in Bevelle, and with . . ."

"Your mother," I said when he seemed unable to finish the sentence, and he nodded.

"The others seem less inclined to speak—more like sphere recordings than people," the half-Guado continued. "I suspect they are tired, and perhaps putting a great deal of effort into keeping their sanity. After all, even the youngest of them dates back to before Gandof's Calm. The knowledge of how to make a fayth was lost seven hundred years ago. Only Yunalessca now knows how it is done, having learned it in Zanarkand before it fell."

I blinked, because, somewhere deep down, I'd always assumed that the Church of Yevon still knew how to make fayths . . . but now that I considered more deeply, it made sense that they didn't. Otherwise, why was there no temple in Luca? I'd heard maesters and senior priests mutter about the city being a den of iniquity often enough to know they would have loved to have one. But a temple needed a fayth—witness Baaj, now empty and fallen to ruin.

What had happened to Baaj's fayth? There were rumors of a fayth hidden somewhere in the Calm Lands, although they were inconsistent—some spoke of a deep cave, others of a hidden, broken temple. Was Yojimbo there?

It gave me something to chew over while Sephiroth stood within the chamber holding a convulsing Braska, and the rest of us waited outside. Jecht got bored with the wait after ten minutes or so, and backed away from the open door. He did push-ups for a bit, then got bored of that too, and sat down cross-legged on the floor, pulling out a deck of cards.

"Hey, Auron, how 'bout a couple hands of poker?"

We didn't have anything better to do, but . . . "Not for money." Jecht cheated when he thought he could get away with it, and I didn't want to lose everything but my shirt again.

"Okay, okay. There's some rocks here—we can use those instead."

I sat down across from him, laying my sword beside me, and accepted a handful of pebbles. Jecht
dealt me five cards. Five and six of hearts, eight and nine of clubs, queen of hearts. Not the best of hands.

"I have a difficult time understanding why this process takes some Summoners days," Sephiroth was saying to Seymour. "Surely their hearts would give out, were they subjected to this for too long."

"I'm certain they would," the half-Guado replied. "However, not all of a Summoner's time in the Chamber of the Fayth is spent bonding with the aeon. Under normal circumstances, it takes quite a while just to get the fayth's attention. Braska has been fortunate in that regard; the fayth have an interest in you, so he has no need to kneel on the stone for hours or days, reciting ancient prayers. It usually took me a day or more to pass each Chamber, when I journeyed this way."

I dumped the queen and ended up drawing the four of spades in its place. Jecht laughed as he collected his pebbles.

"I can't believe you still try to draw to an inside straight. Even Braska's smarter than that, and he hates this game."

"Shut up," I growled, and shuffled the cards.

"There is also the fact," Seymour was saying as I dealt the next hand, "that Braska is a strong Summoner—far stronger than anyone else I trained with, and possibly even stronger than myself. Although it is difficult to be certain, when I have summoned nothing for eight full years."

"I take it that summoning is not a skill one can lose," Sephiroth said.

"No. I can feel the aeons within myself even now. I felt a tug when the fayth gave Ixion to Braska." Seymour's smile was crooked, not quite a smirk. "Aeons are different for every Summoner, oddly enough, even though they come from the same fayth. Again, no one is quite certain why. The leading school of thought is that we each bond to different aspects of the fayth's personality."

"And the next most common school of thought?" Sephiroth asked.

"Is that the fayth make things unnecessarily complicated, to test the patience and stability of potential High Summoners."

Sephiroth snorted and offered the half-Guado one of his tiny smiles. It made me feel suddenly, intensely jealous. Sephiroth and Seymour seemed to understand each other quite well, certainly better than I understood either of them, and Seymour, while his appearance was exotic, wasn't an ugly man. Just not very Guado-looking, despite the veins marking his forehead and cheeks.

_They are not flirting_, I told myself as I lost three more pebbles to Jecht. _You don't have any reason to believe that either of them is even interested in other men that way! And even if they were both interested and trying to communicate that to each other, Sephiroth is not your property!_

In the end, all my pebbles ended up in Jecht's hands, and I didn't really regret it. Even though I had to put up with watching him gloat. At least it had kept him amused and mostly quiet for a while.

Seymour was leaning against the wall, near the door to the Chamber of the Fayth. Sephiroth was still inside, supporting Braska, who no longer had lightning leaping from point to point on his body, although he still twitched sporadically against Sephiroth's grip. Hopefully our Summoner would wake up soon.

As though I'd given him a cue, Braska opened his eyes. He seemed a little disoriented, surprised to find himself on his feet perhaps, but then adapted and found his balance, and Sephiroth eased his
"Hold on him."

"That was . . . not pleasant," he said, straightening his robes. "Thank you," he added to Sephiroth, who nodded.

"If it's any reassurance, you likely have a slight affinity with water, as I do with lightning," Seymour offered. "That means that absorbing Shiva will not be nearly as hard on you as this was."

"That would be a relief," Lord Braska admitted. "Although I hear that Bahamut is difficult for everyone."

Seymour shrugged. "Bahamut is different from the others. More aware. It creates a conflict of sorts."

"And yet, Bahamut is said to be the oldest fayth." Braska began to walk slowly toward the exit, and the rest of us fell in around him.

"The oldest still in existence, certainly," Seymour said. "According to the Guado records, he was the first fayth ever created in Bevelle, after the formation of Sin and the destruction of Zanarkand. A refugee, still a small child, he volunteered himself to the process in an attempt to save Bevelle and ensure the future of Spira. One could say that he was successful. After all, parts of old Bevelle still stand."

"Perhaps because he was young, his mind was more plastic, and he adapted to his new state better than the other surviving fayth," Sephiroth said. "That would be consistent with him retaining a greater degree of consciousness." He shook his head irritably. "There are still too many pieces missing. Why are fayth so different from Unsent, when logic says they must belong to the same category of being? What are pyreflies? Quantized psychic energy? If so, why is that energy quantized in Spira, but presented as liquid and collective in Gaia? Are the techniques used in summoning the only way of manipulating pyreflies, or are there others?"

We were all gawking at him, I think. Even Seymour looked surprised.

"If answers to those questions exist, they probably lie in the ancient records, from before the coming of Sin," Lord Braska said slowly. "The Church . . . is not interested in examining the basic properties of our world."

"What of the Al Bhed?" Sephiroth stepped onto the elevator and stopped by the controls, gesturing the rest of us past him.

Braska smiled ruefully. "I'm afraid they tend to be more interested in 'how' questions than 'why' questions."

"The Guado records won't be of much help either," Seymour said. "Not that I've read or viewed everything we have, but most of it tends to be more historical than . . . fundamental."

Sephiroth frowned. "Then it appears that experimentation is the only way of finding the answers."

"If you want to do something involving pyreflies, we'll be reaching the Moonflow soon," I told him. "They tend to gather there, on the way to the Farplane."

Sephiroth nodded, then ran his hand over a glyph, putting the elevator into motion.

We were nearly at the top when Jecht said, "Never would have taken you for a scientist." A what?"

"I was raised in a laboratory," Sephiroth said. "I suppose certain things rubbed off. Go back to the
inn without me, if you would."

He stepped off the rising platform before it had quite come to a stop, and strode away.

"What," I asked in low tones, "is a 'scientist'?"

"Someone who studies crap like he was talking about," Jecht replied. "'Fundamental properties of the natural world' is how they put it when I was in school—why things do what they do in the specific way they do them, and how to make them do other stuff that's more useful or more interesting. And a laboratory is a place where scientists work, since I bet that was gonna be your next question. No idea why that would touch a nerve, unless his parents were scientists working with dangerous shit and got themselves killed or something."

"Go after him," Braska said quietly. "Rufus, you as well, if you like. Jecht will be enough to see me safely back to the inn." A pause, and then he added, "I've been trying to connect with Sephiroth, but he pulls away every time. He doesn't trust kindness, and we have nothing in common that I can find. He seems to do better with the two of you."

I nodded and took off at a run. Sephiroth was far enough ahead that I couldn't see him, but I knew he wouldn't have stayed within the temple complex. I'd learned early on that whenever something inside turned and stabbed into him, he went hunting if he could. Something about the mindless slaughter of fiends seemed to, if not precisely relax him, then at least distract him.

Behind me, I could hear the swish of Seymour's robes, and a soft curse as he tripped. Unlike Lord Braska, he never seemed to kite them up to free his legs, possibly because he was afraid a flash of veining would be visible on his legs somehow.

I slowed just a little, allowing him to come up even with me.

"I believe I am going to switch to trousers at the next opportunity," the half-Guado said. "It may not be traditional, but I suspect it's a great deal more convenient in situations like this. How Sephiroth manages that coat of his, I can't understand."

"I think it's because the leather is less flexible—it doesn't tangle around his legs as easily," I said. "That and it's open in front, so it tends to stream back when he's moving quickly."

"Indeed." Seymour caught his foot again, and instinctively grabbed my arm to steady himself . . . then snatched his hand away. "My apologies."

"There's nothing to apologize for."

That seemed to surprise him, and I found myself reaching back in my memories, trying to figure out when the last time was that I'd seen Seymour touch someone. I was a bit startled myself to realize that I couldn't remember it ever happening. Like Sephiroth, it just didn't seem to be a normal mode of expression for him. As though they had both been punished for it.

We finally caught up with the silver-haired man near the end of the bridge that provided access to the temple from the road. He turned to face us before either of us could call his name, and arched an eyebrow at the sight of Seymour, although he seemed to have expected me. He stopped where he was and waited patiently for us to speak.

"Hope you don't mind if we join you," I said. "There are basilisks all around here, and it can be a bit awkward to get hit from behind with no one to throw a remedy at you."

"I am not averse to company, but I have no desire for conversation," Sephiroth said in a quiet
"We understand," Seymour said, before I could. "Wrestle with your demons as long as you need to. We can wait."

And from there, we hardly spoke at all, except for a few words here and there to set battle strategies or divide loot. We split the gil and curative items, but the attack items all went to me. I ended up with a nice pocketful of potions, antidotes, and electro marbles. It took a few fights for Seymour to settle into the rhythm of things, but soon we were moving together as though we'd been working as a unit all our lives. Things were never quite that clean with the impulsive Jecht in the mix, or with Lord Braska to protect. Not that I didn't consider Jecht to be a friend, but we'd never had quite this unspoken understanding.

In the end, we spent the entire afternoon out there, with lunch being whatever we had on us, wordlessly combining and then dividing our emergency rations so that everyone got a bit of everything. It wasn't until after Seymour had taken his portion of the jerky that it occurred to me that most Guado were vegetarian, but I didn't care if he didn't, and his expression when he flipped back his veil to take a bite was almost defiant.

I had to admit that, despite being tired and dirty as we trailed back to the inn, I felt much better than I had that morning. Having to concentrate only on the fighting stopped me from worrying about anything else. For a little while, I'd even forgotten about what was waiting for us in Zanarkand.

Perhaps that forced concentration on the present was what Sephiroth sought as well, even though none of the fiends in these parts were enough to provide him with a challenge.

Jecht was sitting in the inn's common room, with his feet propped on a chair and a surprisingly untouched beer in front of him. "'Bout time the three of you got back. You must have killed every fiend in a five-mile circle around this place. You mind telling me why you lit out of the temple so fast, Sephy?"

"Your words held up a mirror of sorts, and I didn't much like what I saw in it," Sephiroth responded. "And . . ." He made a small gesture, and Jecht's beer froze, surging up out of the mug to form a yellow dome as the ice expanded. "That's for getting my name wrong again."

"Huh. So you at least understand the concept of a practical joke. Maybe there's some hope for you yet. I mean, most of the time you seem to have a worse stick up your ass than Auron here."

"And you remind me of . . . someone I once knew. Except that his humour was never mean-spirited."

Jecht blinked. "Maybe I have been a little . . . um. I'll try to bit a little more careful about what sore spots I hit, if you try to loosen up a bit—deal?"

"You don't know what you're asking for," was Sephiroth's only reply, as he swept on out of the room.

"And I do not have a stick up any of my orifices," I said firmly before following him out.

Behind me, I heard Jecht laughing. And perhaps it was deserved. Our exchange might have been, as Sephiroth had said, mean-spirited, but there hadn't been much laughter on Braska's pilgrimage so far except what had come from the blitzer, and the gentle Summoner deserved more than a grim slide down into death.
Chapter 11

When we camped by the banks of the Moonflow the next night, Sephiroth went off on his own as soon as we had the tent set up. Not to hunt—in fact, he remained within sight of the rest of us, sitting crosslegged by the bank of the river, near a patch of moonlilies. His sword lay on the grass at his side, and his hands rested palm-up in his lap. After a couple of minutes, the pyreflies were so thick around him that they formed a solid column in front of him.

We were all sneaking looks at him from the corners of our eyes as the column condensed into a globe. Was he trying to make a sphere? But spheres were made from a medium, usually water, impregnated with pyreflies, not directly from the motes of light.

"He's figured something out," Braska said quietly, as we watched the sphere shrink down.

"Or he's experimenting with manipulating the pyreflies," Seymour said. "It stands to reason that it would be possible—we know they react to emotion and will, and it seems to me that Sephiroth has a very strong will."

"Yeah, but what's he tryin' to do with them? He doesn't seem to be much for light shows." Jecht was sitting on the ground with his arms curled loosely around a raised knee, and managing to look much more casual than the rest of us.

The globe was slowly and steadily shrinking down, and . . . starting to turn greenish?

"I think he's trying to make a materia," I said.

"Wha—Seriously? Okay, that's either very, very smart or very, very dumb, and I'm too dumb to figure out which."

"It could change the face of Spira if it succeeds," Seymour said. "Given that he's been able to use them to teach someone with no native magical ability at all to manipulate elemental energies." The half-Guado nodded at me. "From needing years to train a new mage to needing only a few weeks . . . The ramifications are terrifying."

"I'm starting to lean toward the 'very dumb' side," Jecht said. "I mean, wouldn't everyone be after the things if they knew they existed? Even just the ones he's got on him already."

"If he does succeed, we're going to have to keep it very quiet," I said. Sephiroth was the only person in Spira with materia—the only person in Spira who could make them, if he pulled this off. If someone was stupid enough to try to force him to hand them over against his will, the results would be ugly. His overdrive, wielded against an army, could decimate an entire generation of young men.

"I agree," Braska said. "We'll hope that he does, as well."

It took over an hour of pretending not to watch before the light of the pyrefly globe finally died. Nothing happened for several minutes after that. Then, just as Jecht started to gather his feet under himself, Sephiroth stood, put his sword back on his back, and cupped his left hand briefly over the wristlet to which his materia were equipped. Done with that, he extended a hand, and the lowest-level water attack spell bubbled into existence in front of him.

"He did it," I said in a low voice.

"Holy shit," Jecht muttered as Sephiroth turned to look at us. He had probably heard the entire
We all winced a little as he returned to the camp, but he only raised an eyebrow and said, "I would have expected the fire to be laid by now."

"Nah, the show was too interesting," Jecht shot straight back. "All that just for a water spell?"

Sephiroth shook his head. "The materia was mostly a side effect, although if it matures normally, it will be useful in its own right. I was more interested in the pyreflies themselves."

"So that was an exercise in controlling pyreflies," Seymour said. "What did you learn?"

"That they respond similarly to energy from Gaia's Lifestream, although the quantization aspect still puzzles me. Their overall behaviour does suggest several other ways in which I may be able to use them, but I am still uncertain of the risks."

"Perhaps, if you explain your concerns, one of us can set them to rest," Seymour said. "Both Braska and I were trained in relevant disciplines, after all."

It took a long moment for Sephiroth to answer. "You could describe it as a matter of will. An individual pyrefly appears to have no intent or volition of its own, but it is clear that a large enough grouping of them can possess both of those things. As the Lifestream does, and the Lifestream is frustratingly prone to having its own agenda and sapping the will of those who attempt to draw on it, in order to manipulate them to its own ends. I'm willing to pit my powers of concentration against the equivalent of a few fiends, but not against an entire world."

"I have never heard of the Farplane having a will," Seymour said. "It is spoken of as a place, not a person. Nor is there anything in the Guado records which implies it, and since the largest entrance to the Farplane from Spira proper lies in Guadosalam, I would expect that someone would have come into contact with its will by now if it had one."

Sephiroth's eyes flickered shut. "The Lifestream is both a place and a person. Thousands upon thousands of voices, all joining into one voice . . ." He shook his head, and then seemed to come back to himself. "Best try nothing further tonight," he murmured.

"What kinds of things do you hope to be able to do if you can harness the pyreflies' energy?" Seymour asked. He sounded eager, even . . . hungry.

"Teleportation is one of the simpler and more useful ones," the silver-haired man replied. Braska whistled softly, and I barely stopped myself from doing the same. Some old devices from the Machina Age could be harnessed to move people without having them pass through the intervening space, but they could only be used to reach a fixed target within a limited range. General teleportation fell into the realm of fiction and tall tales.

"Can it be taught?" It was impossible to determine Seymour's expression behind his veil, but he'd turned so that he was looking straight at Sephiroth, who shook his head again.

"I don't know. I've never tried. As far as I can tell, you don't even have the Escape and Remove spells here, do you?"

"I've never heard of them," Braska offered. "What do they do?"

"Escape sends the caster, and any companions he cares to extend the spell envelope to, a short distance back in the direction from which they arrived—as the name suggests, it's typically used to flee from battle, although there are other applications. Remove is a more advanced spell from the
same materia which performs a half-teleport on the target, tying it up inside a fold in space. It doesn't always work, and if the target is a living thing it can fight its way free in a few hours, but in the meantime it can't bother you. The materia itself is moderately common."

There was a long silence.

"Odd how our worlds are so alike, and yet different," Braska said at last.

"One thing I wanna know," Jecht said. "When're we gonna eat? Or are you guys gonna spend the entire night standing there like a bunch of spavined chocobos, talking about this crap?"

That did remind us that we needed to finish setting up camp, although I did wonder if Seymour spent his watch that night contemplating exotic spells and how he might learn to cast them.

Sephiroth used the new water materia several times the next day without having it fall apart on him. He also spent a lot of time looking at his wrist, with a thoughtful expression on his face.

We reached the shoopuf terminal in the late afternoon, just after the beast had departed, but the Hypello handlers told us there would be one more crossing today. Sephiroth, Braska, and I settled in to wait, while Seymour and Jecht browsed the wares of the various merchants, although they were unfortunately bound on two different quests. Seymour was merely looking for some more suitable clothing, but Jecht . . . Jecht was looking for a bottle. And in a place like that, it was inevitable he would find one.

I don't know what was in it. The bottle itself was from Luca, but it had been refilled at least once. Moonshine, perhaps, but it was strong enough that one bottle managed to drive Jecht, who normally had the alcohol capacity of a shoopuf, into drunken stupidity.

The shoopuf finished its return trip and began to unload not long after Jecht had found the bottom of the bottle and we all went out to the landing to board. Seymour had managed to collect dark blue trousers and a plain white shirt with too-long sleeves from somewhere, and really, I thought the clothes suited him better than the high-collared green robe he had been wearing.

When Jecht staggered forward, we all thought at first that it didn't mean anything. Braska and I had forgotten that on the southbound leg of our journey, Jecht had been so drunk by the time we'd hit the Moonflow that he'd passed out before the shoopuf had arrived, leaving me to drag him on and off the beast and dump him at the south terminal like a bag of grain. So he hadn't actually seen a shoopuf during that portion of the trip.

Then Jecht pulled out his sword, teetering as he began an awkward swing at the shoopuf's leg.

"No!" I shouted, but I was too far away, and Jecht wasn't listening to me in any case.

Then a flickering image of something like a clockface appeared in front of Jecht, and he froze in place with his sword above his head. Sephiroth strode over, grabbed Jecht by one raised arm, and dragged him back over toward us, then cast Esuna at Jecht's frozen form.

"That should make him a little more sober when the Stop spell wears off. Hopefully enough that we won't have to wrestle that slab of iron he carries away from him."

"So it's like a short-term petrifaction that doesn't actually turn the target to stone?" Braska said. "Interesting. I do remember you mentioning a stop spell at Kilika, but I didn't realize it was anything like this."

"Another spell you don't have, then." Sephiroth frowned. "Too late to take it back now, I suppose."
"Since it operates as a weaker petrifaction effect, it should hopefully be of limited interest," Seymour said.

Jecht completed his swing, drawing sparks from the stone of the platform, then staggered and made a noise like, "Wha'?"

Sephiroth grabbed him from behind, his forearm like iron across the blitzer's throat. "Drop your sword," he hissed. "Now!"

"Fu', y'don' haveta be shuch'n ash 'boudit," Jecht said, but he also let go of the sword, nearly dropping it on his foot. "Whaddid I do?"

"You attacked the shoopuf," I said through gritted teeth. "Fortunately, Sephiroth stopped you before you could do any damage."

"Shoopuf? Whazza shoopuf?"

I rolled my eyes and pointed at the large animal. "That is a shoopuf."

"Uh? 'Sh notta fien'?"

"If it were a fiend, everyone else would be running away," Sephiroth pointed out. He hadn't slackened his grip, ready to choke Jecht into submission at any time.


Well, that was . . . something, at any rate.

Sephiroth kept a grip on the blitzer's neck and marched him onto the shoopuf when the Hypello attendant gave permission to board. I can't say that Jecht exactly looked thoughtful as he was pushed into a seat, but he at least didn't look combative. Still, I propped his sword well out of reach.

When he started to retch, Sephiroth held him over the edge of the shoopuf by his belt to keep the bile he choked up clear of both the beast and the howdah we rode in. The shoopuf driver complained, of course, but Sephiroth ignored him, dropping Jecht back into his seat when he was done bringing the contents of the mystery bottle back up the wrong way.

The silver-haired man flipped another Esuna in the blitzer's direction after we got off at the north landing, and this time it seemed to do its job, leaving Jecht looking like a wrung-out dishcloth. A greenish one, although I doubted there was anything left in his stomach.

"Ugh," the blitzer said. "That . . . was really fucking stupid. Please tell me no one recorded that. Tidus already knows I'm a drunken idiot, y'know? I don't need to give him any more proof."

"As far as I know, the sphere recorder's still in your bag," I said. "The question is, are you going to do it again?"

"Surprised you didn't chuck me in the river—actually, I thought for a minute that that was exactly what you were gonna do." Jecht glanced at Sephiroth, who was standing with his arms folded across his chest, waiting. "I guess . . . I can't afford to keep screwing up, can I? Once we get past Bevelle, this is gonna get a whole lot harder. I'd feel like the lowest of the low if the reason we didn't make it to Zanarkand was 'cause of me. Never be able to look my wife and kid in their faces again. And if I can't afford to screw up, I can't afford to keep drinking. From here on, I'm not gonna touch anything stronger than shoopuf milk!"
"Are you sure?" Braska asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Probably gonna feel like shit for a while, but better that I work through it now than while we're climbing down the other side of Mount Gigglezet or whatever it is, right?"

"Mount Gagazet," I muttered.

"That's what I said."

I bit back a sigh.

"I wonder if he knows you can ferment shoopuf milk," Seymour whispered to me as we pulled ourselves together and got moving again . . . with Sephiroth carrying Jecht's sword this time, because the blitzer could barely manage his pack.

"If he doesn't, don't tell him," I muttered back, and the half-Guado made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a choked laugh.

The next morning, we followed the bank of the river north, skirting the edge of the forested hills. The fiends were very slowly getting worse, the Crusader patrols fewer. Twice, we had to clear out knots of ochu to permit ourselves—and others—to proceed. The fiends burned easily enough (Sephiroth's Firaga could drop one in a single hit, and even Seymour's Fira could soften them up quite nicely), but we had to be careful about not setting anything else on fire, and fighting them by hand was pure misery. Even Sephiroth couldn't completely resist the effects of an Ochu Dance, although he threw off the confusion immediately and could still attack with reasonable accuracy while blinded. Braska got a lot of practice in casting Esuna.

Keeping watch during the night we spent in the open wasn't nearly so perfunctory a thing as it had previously been, either. An ochu descending on our camp could have torn away our tent and poisoned us all before we were awake enough to deal with it.

It was a terrifying thought, but I was almost looking forward to the Thunder Plains. Since the Al Bhed had built travel agency there a couple of years ago, we wouldn't have to spend all our nights in the open, and most of the fiends were straightforward.

I felt a bit relieved as we approached the subterranean entry to Guadosalam. Until Seymour's hands clenched into fists, half-hidden inside his sleeves, and I realized what might happen if his veil somehow got torn off. If he was just subjected to scorn, we could deal with it, but if someone attacked him physically, we'd have to defend him. And that could get ugly, fast.

"The rest of you have been here before," Sephiroth said. "I assume there is at least one inn, and you know where it is. We should start by securing rooms."

"Okay, so are we gonna visit that Farplane thing this time?" Jecht asked. "We didn't have time on the way down." We'd arrived here late that time, near midnight, and fallen straight into bed when we'd found rooms, then left immediately in the morning.

"I intend to," Braska said quietly, his mouth thinning. Of course, it made sense that he would want to see the person he was seeking to rejoin at the end of this, and the Farplane was the only way she could come to him now. "Auron?"

"Yes, my lord, I will go." I wasn't sure I remembered my father well enough to call his spirit, but I wanted to try.

"I doubt my mother's spirit will be there to greet me, since she is still bound to her fayth, but I will go
in any case," Seymour said. "I have not been permitted to return to Guadosalam since she died."

We all looked at Sephiroth, who shook his head. "There are none among the dead whom I wish to see even if they somehow found a way to follow me to Spira, and it would be unnecessarily risky for me to attempt any experiments with the properties of the pyreflies and the Farplane while there are others present. I may go alone, later tonight, but not with you."

So four would go and one would stay behind. I wasn't sure whether that made things simpler or more complicated.

Guadosalam had several inns, necessary to host the volume of people who came to visit the Farplane, and we managed to secure a suite at the first one we visited—the nicest accommodations we'd had since Braska, Jecht, and I had left Bevelle. It gave us a private, safe space where Seymour could remove his hat and veil for a little while, although his expression as he set them on a low table beside his chair was almost one of regret.

"Are you going to visit your father while we're here?" Braska asked.

"In the morning, I think. Quietly, if he'll permit."

Someone knocked on the door, and Seymour cursed and snatched up his disguise, retreating to one of the bedrooms. I waited until he was no longer visible before I went to the main door of the suite.

I opened it to find . . . Tromell Guado. Wonderful. I already knew the general reason for his presence, but we had to play this through anyway.

"Can I help you with something?" It was the most neutral thing I could think of to say.

Tromell bowed. "Sir Auron, Lord Jyscal requests that Summoner Braska and all of his Guardians join him to sup tonight. At seven, if you would."

"Does he, now," Seymour said from behind me, and when I glanced over my shoulder, I discovered he had emerged from the bedroom again without bothering to re-don his disguise. "Will he allow that my presence be displayed openly, then, or does he wish to be . . . discreet?"

"I am glad that you understand, my lord," Tromell said, bowing again. "Discretion would be preferred."

"Very well." Seymour didn't sound pleased. "Lord Braska?"

"I have no objection," the Summoner said.

"Please inform Lord Jyscal that we accept his invitation," I said, and closed the door in the middle of yet another bow from Tromell.

After a long moment of silence, Jecht said, "So c'mon, let's go to the Farplane now, instead of moping around worrying about this Jyscal guy! Rufus, you look like someone slapped you across the face, 'cept without the handprint."

"Confronting my father will be the most difficult ordeal I have faced since we left Baaj," Seymour said. "A moment, please. I cannot be seen like this."

Jecht blinked several times as the half-Guado went back into the bedroom. "Jeez, he doesn't have to be like that just because I forgot 'Jyscal' was his dad's name."
"He has a lot to think about," Braska said mildly.

Seymour re-emerged a few moments later wearing his disguise, and we all left the suite together.

"Thought you weren't coming," Jecht said to Sephiroth.

"I will see the rest of you as far as the entrance, and wait outside," the silver-haired man replied. "I have certain . . . concerns about what might happen if no one is on guard."

I didn't blame him. Sin might be the most dangerous thing in the world, but I had seen enough during my years at the temple in Bevelle to know that people with an agenda ran a close second, although I abhored politics in all its forms. Unfortunately, having Seymour with us, it would be difficult to avoid Guado politics altogether. But we'd known that from the moment we'd agreed to let him join our group.

Sephiroth settled himself against a wall near the foot of the stairs leading to the Farplane, and the four of us went on alone. Well, not quite alone, not at first, since there were a family of humans standing there speaking to the image of a stooped, grey-haired old woman, but they left not long after we arrived.

I tried to concentrate on my father, on what he'd looked like that last morning, his smile and his brand new Crusader officer's uniform as he'd waved good-bye to my mother and I at the door. It wasn't the first time he'd been assigned to patrol the roads running through Macalania, and we'd expected him back in a couple of weeks, but he'd never returned. Sin had disgorged some of its spawn near the lake, and he'd died defending the temple. He'd been about the same age then as I was now.

The image didn't solidify instantly. The uniform filled in first, most likely because I'd seen others wearing the same clothes since and so hadn't forgotten the details. The hair, lighter than mine, bowl-cut for comfort when wearing the helmet that was tucked under his arm. And then, slowly, the face, like and unlike mine—more oval, with a longer jaw. He smiled the same way I remembered, and his lips moved, silently forming a word. My name. But that, too, was only memory.

"I've missed you," I said softly. "I wish . . ." Wish it had never happened. Wished my mother had been here with me, to see him one last time.

Suddenly, I had to look away. It wasn't proper to let tears ooze from my eyes this way. Not in public. I had made peace with this long ago. Hadn't I?

Maybe coming here hadn't been such a good idea.

Braska was speaking to the image of an Al Bhed woman in her own language, not seeming to care that she didn't reply. Jecht had two people in front of him, an older man and woman dressed in strange clothes. And Seymour . . . Seymour stood alone, head bowed.

I turned back to the smiling image of my father. Wondered how much of him was really in there, if anything was. Viewing the shadows of the Farplane wasn't truly a ritual of Yevon, and the holy writings were divided on what these images really were. I wondered what the Guado thought about it, what their ancient records said. They had been living here since long before Sin.

The Al Bhed, I knew, said that the Farplane only showed pictures inspired by the memories of its visitors, but they couldn't explain why the images were only ever of the dead. And then there were those who believed their loved ones truly came to this barren section of their new world to visit those left behind. The truth, as with most things, was probably somewhere in between.

"Um . . . excuse me?"
It wasn't the voice of one of my companions. I whipped around, reaching for my sword, to find myself facing a stranger.

Translucent, clearly formed of pyreflies just like the figure of my father, he was a young man, or had been when he died. He had tanned skin and black hair slicked back into a mass of outrageous spikes, twinkling blue eyes, and the kind of smile that made you want to smile back at him. His clothes were like nothing I had ever seen, a sort of dark, sleeveless turtleneck with pauldrons made of leather or dull-surfaced metal strapped on overtop, loose trousers, ankle boots, and short gloves. Overtop everything was a harness supporting a sword almost as large as Jecht's, and a belt that had to be six inches wide, rising from his waist to cover most of his abdomen below the ribcage.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt anything, but we need to know—Sephiroth isn't coming, is he?"
"Sephiroth said there was no one among the dead that he wished to see," I told the . . . ghost? Not an Unsent. He wasn't physical enough to pass for a living person, but he wasn't one of the wordless phantoms who hung around the edges of this place, either. With a start, I realized that the symbol engraved on the buckle of his massive belt matched the one on Sephiroth's. "You're from Gaia," I said in realization.

The ghost rubbed the back of his head. "Uh, yeah. My name's Zack, by the way. I guess Seph must have told you a bit, when he wasn't too busy being stubborn."

"A very little bit. He doesn't seem to want to think about the past."

"That's Sephiroth, all right," said another voice. "He's angry and blaming himself for what happened at Nibelheim—and afterwards—even though it wasn't his fault. So he won't talk about it."

Two more ghosts appeared beside Zack. The one who must have spoken was another man with the same clothing—a uniform?—and the same huge sword slung across his back. He was broad-shouldered and powerfully muscled. Like Zack, he had black hair, although it was more normally styled, but he was paler, and his eyes were a lighter, greener blue. He also had a patch of thin, scruffy beard on his chin.

On Zack's other side was a girl with long brown hair and the most extraordinary green eyes—not like Sephiroth's, just so full of life that it was difficult to believe she was dead. Her clothing was as no-nonsense as something involving a long skirt could manage to be, and she had a staff in one hand. I wondered if she was their equivalent of a Summoner.

"Hey, I thought you guys were going to wait until I found him," Zack said.

"Sorry, Pup, but I've never seen another world before, and I got curious," the big man said.

"Dilly-dally, shilly-shally," the girl added, and pressed a quick kiss to Zack's jaw. "After all, there are some limits on our time here," she added more seriously. "Spira is constantly trying to push us away, so I have to push back. We have, mmm, maybe an hour or so before I won't be able to keep it up anymore."

"We're forgetting our manners," the big man said. "My name is Angeal, and this is Aerith." The girl gave me a little wave with the hand not holding her staff.

"I'm Auron," I said.

"Call me Rufus." I hadn't realized that Seymour had come closer until he spoke. "The dubiously dressed man staring at you is Jecht, and the one in the robes who's politely pretending you're not here is Braska."

"Sephiroth is waiting outside," I added. "He'll probably join us if we ask, but do you mind if I ask
you a few questions first?"

"Go ahead," Angeal said.

I'd already figured out what the most important one was. "What actually happened in Nibelheim? Sephiroth says he burned a town and killed three hundred innocent people, but that can't be the entire story. It seems . . . out of character."

"You certainly know how to get to the heart of a matter," Angeal said. "Nibelheim is . . . complicated. In a way, you could say it was the culmination of all of Sephiroth's history up to that point."

"Not that complicated," Zack said, in a voice that was almost a growl. "Let's face it, 'Geal, the war was over, and Seph was starting to realize that there was no way Shinra could stop him if he really wanted to leave, so they threw him away like so much garbage before he could." When Angeal threw him a sharp glance, Zack added, "I was there. You weren't. I was the one who got to watch him slowly losing his mind because I couldn't figure out how to get him to snap out of it."

"Calm down, Pup."

Zack scrubbed his hands across his face. "Yeah, I know. Freaking out doesn't help. Okay, so, shortest possible version of what happened at Nibelheim: Seph's handlers at Shinra had been trying for months at that point to drive him crazy, and they had an elaborate setup in place for that mission that finally made him crack a bit. If that had been all, he'd probably just have gone and put the smackdown on some Nibel dragons or something until he could pull himself together again, but there was a . . . creature . . . at Nibelheim that had powerful telepathic abilities and a nasty agenda, and for reasons that I'd have to go into Seph's life story to explain, he was susceptible to being controlled by her. She turned him into a puppet and used him to burn that town and kill all those people . . . and kept using him for more than seven years."

"Great Yevon," Braska whispered. "Seven years? How can he still be sane?"

"That probably goes back to him having spent most of his childhood being, in effect, a prisoner and a victim of torture," Angeal said. "To him, freedom—both freedom of choice and freedom from pain—would be the novelty."

"He said he grew up in a lab," Jecht said. Not quite challenging.

"As a specimen. The scientist in charge was his legal guardian, and important enough to Shinra that no constraints, ethical or otherwise, were ever placed on his research. And of course, given the way Seph heals, there would be no way to prove where they cut him open, or how many bones they broke, or what poisons they fed him." Angeal's semi-transparent hands had clenched so hard on his belt that his knuckles were white.

Someone made a low, inarticulate sound of distress. I was surprised to realize that it was me.

"One more question." Seymour's words fell into silence. "If this . . . nameless feminine entity was controlling his actions at Nibelheim, why does he insist on placing the responsibility for what happened on himself?"

"Because he's got this thing about being in control," Zack said. "He'd rather believe that everything that happened was his fault for being weak enough to let Jenova get into his head than that he just couldn't help it."

"In any case, we really do need to talk to him," Angeal said. "Could one of you please ask him to
come in? Or we could try to go after him . . ."

The girl Aerith shook her head. "Bad idea. See that membrane across the exit? It's supposed to keep anyone who isn't . . . physical . . . from just walking out into the town. If we try to fight through it, we could end up getting bounced straight back into the Lifestream before we can even speak to General Sephiroth."

_General_ Sephiroth? I blinked and filed that away.

"I will see if I can persuade him to join us," Seymour offered. "Please wait here."

"Wait!" Aerith said. "One thing. It would be better if you didn't mention I was here, because I guarantee he won't want to have anything to do with me."

"I understand," the half-Guado said. "This shouldn't take long."

Seymour slipped back out into Guadosalam, leaving the rest of us, living and dead, staring at each other, neither side quite knowing what to say. Or rather, I had several questions I wanted to ask, but not in front of Braska and Jecht.

Footsteps. Seymour reappeared through the membrane. Then Sephiroth entered, and stopped just inside.

"I can understand Zack and Angeal wanting to speak to me, but not you, Miss Gainsborough. Unless you are here to castigate me, which seems like a great deal of effort for very little return. No matter how richly I deserve it."

Aerith shook her head. "No, nothing like that."

"Then why? It isn't as though you could have any positive memories of me."

"Actually, that isn't true. I don't know if you remember, but . . . the night my mother and I escaped from Dr. Hojo's lab . . . we had to pass an open doorway that led into an occupied room. You were there, with Hojo and some of the other scientists. You noticed us, and right there and then, you knocked something over. I don't know what it was, but everyone in that room was so busy trying to get away or clean up that they never noticed us sneaking past the door. Without your distraction, we might never have gotten out. That means that everything good in my life—every happiness, every piece of freedom I ever experienced, every time I smelled a flower or felt the sun on my face—was because of you. And I forgive you for taking it back. " She touched a point between her breasts. "I forgive you for killing me. The Lifestream may have hated you more than anything except the Calamity itself, but to me, you were always a hero."

Sephiroth's expression was frozen, stricken . . . confused. Then he composed himself. "November twenty-third of 1992. It was a few months before they sent me to Wutai. The thing I knocked over was an IV stand holding Hojo's latest noxious concoction, which was why they were all so desperate not to touch it. Hojo threw me in a mako tank for a week, afterwards, as a reminder not to be clumsy. I never realized that the little girl was you."

"You're kidding me," Zack said.

Aerith poked him in the ribs. "Are you saying I'm a liar?"

"Guess we know who's sleeping on the couch tonight," Jecht said with a rough guffaw.

"Of course you're not a liar," Zack was saying to Aerith. "I'd just forgotten how crazy-exact Seph's
memory can be, that's all. Bet you didn't remember the date either."

"Sephiroth," Angeal said. "Now that Aerith has said her piece . . . well, I need to apologize to you."

A silver eyebrow rose. "For what?"

"For running after Genesis and leaving you behind. Alone in a den of monsters."

"Not quite alone," Sephiroth said, glancing at Zack.

"I wasn't good enough," Zack said. "But let 'Geal finish what he needs to say first."

Sephiroth made a small hand gesture, and Angeal resumed with, "I should have stopped to think about what was going on and who I could actually help. There was no way I could have done anything for Gen, not really—I understand that now—but maybe I could have done something to help you."

Sephiroth shook his head. "Don't be an idiot. I could have approached you, or left Shinra of my own volition. Unlike you, I was in perfect physical health at the time and had all my faculties about me. It made sense for you to go after Genesis. You couldn't have known—even I didn't suspect—just how twisted Hojo's plans were. I was still in the public eye. By any sane measure, I should have been safe. You even left me a guard dog," he added, glancing at Zack again with a flicker of a smile.

"A crappy excuse for one," Zack retorted. "A decent guard dog would have grabbed you by the scruff of the neck and dragged you all the way out of town and down the mountain until you started acting like yourself again, even if it meant risking stabby-death-by-Masamune. A good guard dog would have gone back up to the reactor on his own and knocked that door down and turned what was in that fucking back room into a handful of ash. The only thing I did was leave my sword where Cloud could pick it up and run you through with it."

"And by doing so, you—and he—may have saved Gaia." Now it was Sephiroth's turn to touch his chest, and I realized that they were, indirectly, talking about that rip in the back of his coat. "I don't deserve your contrition, Zack. Nor yours, Angeal. You see, during that entire sequence of events stretching from Nibelheim to the North Crater and beyond . . . my will was not completely subsumed by Jenova's. I was operating on a form of dream-logic, or perhaps that's simply what madness is, but some of the plans and decisions were my own."

"Oh, Seph . . ." Zack looked like he wanted to cry. He had a very expressive face, not at all like the silver-haired man's.

"I don't know why I am here in this world, this . . . Spira," Sephiroth continued. "But I will find out, and I will do what is required of me, and perhaps then, I will finally be permitted to die permanently, and dissolve into nothing, as I should have seven years ago."

That hit me like a punch to the gut, and I stared at Sephiroth's back as he turned and left again, passing out of the Farplane. He wants to die? How can he want to die? This was worse than I'd imagined. Strong, intelligent, beautiful, gifted . . . and he'd been hurt over and over again until he was as hollow inside as a dried-out gourd and wished only for the peace that came with nothingness.

Yevon. Wasn't there any way I could give him hope? Prove to him that something better existed? I don't want you to go away.

"Auron, wasn't it?" Angeal said, from right behind me. "Can we talk to you for a moment?"

I'd been half-intending to go after Sephiroth, but really, I wasn't sure what I could do for him or even
if I'd be able to find him, and I doubted I would ever again have the chance to talk to anyone who knew of his past before he'd come to Spira.

"If you like," I said.

They sort of . . . escorted me off to one side, away from the others. Surrounding me with ghosts. It should have been frightening, but none of them seemed like bad people.

"We saw how you reacted during our conversation." Angeal's voice was gentle, as though trying not to spook a small wild animal. "You . . . care for Sephiroth, don't you?"

Aerith slapped his bicep. "Stop talking like an old man. You know as well as I do that Auron is head-over-heels in love with him."

I felt myself flushing. "Is it really that obvious?"

"'Fraid so," Zack said cheerfully. "Don't worry, we don't think any less of you for it. He doesn't either, even if it feels like he's been pushing you away. You just have to push back."

"I gather that two men . . . being together . . . isn't as much of a problem in Gaia as it is in Spira, then."

"There are some people who aren't comfortable with it, but it's explicitly legal everywhere," Angeal said. "Sephiroth . . . it's hard to tell what his preference is, exactly, but I know he's bedded other men. Probably more men than women, but that might be because of his circumstances."

"I don't understand."

Zack ran a hand through his hair. "Half the higher-ups at Shinra thought Seph would be easier to control if he wasn't allowed any friends or lovers. The other half thought they could use anyone he was close to as the control. That meant he couldn't let himself get close to anyone who could be made to disappear. So, no friends or lovers who couldn't protect themselves, and absolutely no children under any circumstances."

And women might result in children, that was clear enough.

"He ended up never having any real lovers at all," Angeal said, with a sort of wry grimace. "Two or three times a year, he'd pick someone up for a single night. Often a professional, and never the same person twice. He'd go to bed with them, and then never see or speak to them again if he could help it. He figured that no one was dumb enough to bother assassinating them over a one-night stand, or trying to use them as leverage. He didn't have many friends either—really just me and Genesis. And we abandoned him, in the end."

"The point is, we want you to look after him," Aerith said. "He's gotten a really raw deal up to this point, and he never deserved it. But you have to understand that he has . . . issues. Lots of them. And it's going to be hard."

"He's worth it," I said quietly, and watched the two ghost-men's faces light up with smiles.

"You've probably got other questions," Angeal said. "Ask, and we'll tell you what we can in the time we've got left here."

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to put it all in some sort of order. "How old is he?"

"Thirty, now," Angeal answered instantly.
"Then he was twenty-three when Nibelheim happened—and already a general? That's . . ."
Ridiculous, I wanted to say. And, he's only five years older than me. Given Sephiroth's behaviour, I'd been worried the age difference might turn out to be . . . rather more.

"They promoted him when we were seventeen," Angeal said. "There was a war on at the time, Shinra wasn't doing that well, and they were hoping it would raise morale. It did, a bit . . . and then Sephiroth, being the genius tactician that he is, won the war for them and handed them Wutai on a platter. It took him three years, but no one was complaining. Shinra treated him like a hero. Seph hated that part, being a public figure, but he treated it as part of his duty."

I probably had enough information now that I'd be able to pry the details necessary to complete the picture out of the man himself . . . except for one thing. "What happened in Nibelheim that made him . . . break down?"

"He found out he was about ten percent Jenova." Zack grimaced. "Except it was implied it was a lot more than just ten percent, and they primed him for it by setting things up so that he got all this crap about being a monster thrown right in his face. He didn't have any kind of emotional support to fall back on—I was just 'Geal's apprentice to him, so he and I weren't all that close, and 'Geal was dead, and Genesis, who was half-crazy by then, actually showed up in the middle of the mission and made things worse—and I think it was just the last straw."

"It didn't help that he'd been told his parents were Hojo and Jenova," Aerith added. "I don't think he ever found out who his mother and father really were."

"Tell me." It was difficult, I discovered, to hold her eyes for long. They were disquieting, very alive, but also very deep. Zack must have been an extraordinary person to be able to take this girl as his partner.

"Sephiroth's mother's name was Lucrecia. She was one of the scientists working with Hojo on the Jenova Project—the series of experiments that made Sephiroth what he is. His father was her bodyguard, a man named Vincent." Aerith paused. "I got to know Vincent a bit, during the last few weeks before I died, and I know he would have claimed his son if he'd been able, but they weren't married and Lucrecia got engaged to Hojo—I'm not sure why, but it meant that Vincent had no legal right to the child. Vincent confronted Hojo about the experiments being performed on Sephiroth anyway, and was nearly killed. He almost didn't make it, and by the time he . . . might have been able to do something again . . . he'd been told that Sephiroth and Lucrecia were both dead. And so Sephiroth never knew that he was loved, or wanted."

Ugh. Every time I thought I'd heard all the worst bits of Sephiroth's story already, something else turned up to tint the picture just a little bit darker. The man's life seemed to have been an unadulterated tragedy.

Change the subject, I told myself. "Does he—Sephiroth—have any hobbies at all?" Angeal probably knew the silver-haired man's favourite colour, too, but that was a frivolous and not-very-useful question. And anyway, I suspected the answer would be "black".

"Other than killing things?" Zack said. "Mmm. Reading, I guess. Not much else."

"I'm not certain I would call that a hobby, either. It's more that he has an insatiable need to understand the shape of the universe. Most of his book collection that wasn't on tactics and military history was two-inch-thick tomes on advanced scientific subjects. I don't think I've ever see him voluntarily pick up a work of fiction. It always annoyed Genesis no end." Angeal's quiet smile suggested fond memories.
"That sounds very much like the Sephiroth I know," I admitted, as a memory of him working with the pyreflies by the banks of the Moonflow flashed through my mind.

"He probably should have been a scientist, but thanks to Hojo, he despises the entire profession on basic principles," Angeal added.

"Do you think there's any possibility that he'll ever return my feelings?" I hadn't been meaning to let that slip out, either.

"I don't know. He's set up a lot of layers of shielding between himself and his emotions. You're going to have to break through each one... although I suspect you may have gotten a couple of them down already. He looked at you a couple of times. Just little flicking glances, but normally he would have ignored someone not taking part in the conversation, unless their opinion was important to him. And if he talked to you about Nibelheim at all..." Angeal shrugged. "But the closer you get, the more he's likely to lash out. It's become reflexive for him."

"I'll say," Zack said, rubbing his jaw with a rueful grimace. "He threw me through a brick wall one time, when I got a bit too pushy and poked at the wrong sore spot. He knows you're not enhanced, so he'll go easier on you physically, but he's likely to tear into your ego from time to time. He's good at that. Used to practice it on subordinate officers who didn't take him seriously."

"He's done it once already," I admitted. "I survived. I'm not worried."

"Good," Angeal said. "He needs someone strong."

A ripple of... something... passed through the Farplane just then. I could feel it like a hum at the back of my skull, but the effect on the three ghosts was much larger. Zack yelped, and all three of them flickered.

"I think we're out of time," Aerith said. "Something's noticed us, and it doesn't like us being here. Take care, Auron—of yourself, and of him."

"I will," I said, as the three of them faded into a swirl of pyreflies.

It was time for me to go find Sephiroth. I caught Jecht's eye for a moment and nodded toward Braska. He nodded back. So did Seymour, although I hadn't asked him, even implicitly. But they would stay with our Summoner for now.

The tangled passageways of Guadosalam weren't easy for a stranger to search, and most of the Guado wouldn't talk to me. I wasn't even sure that some of them spoke Spiran. A few even spat at the ground after I'd passed.

I was about half an hour into it when something unexpectedly came flying at my head, and I narrowly avoided being brained by a blitzball.

"Sorry about that!" An athletic Guado woman was jogging toward me. "Usually there's no one here at this time of day, but I suppose an outsider wouldn't know that we practice here sometimes. I'm Ihra Guado, vice-captain of the Guado Glories."

"Auron, Guardian to Summoner Braska." Finally, someone who admits to speaking Spiran.

"I'd heard that there was a Summoner here. It was a bit unexpected, given just how bad a time this is for humans to be wandering around Guadosalam."

"Oh?"
She shrugged. "The lid's coming off again, and we're this far—" She held up one long hand with the fingers not quite touching. "—from starting another civil war because Jyscal's being too pushy. He always has been, but he got worse after marrying that Yevonite, and fathering that half-caste abomination."

Sudden rage nearly boiled its way up my throat. "Seymour didn't choose his parents or racial background, and he hates his father even more than you do. Blame Jyscal for pushing his religion on you if you like, but don't revile his son for something outside his control."

Her eyebrows jumped. "You know Seymour."

"Yes."

"Interesting. Very few of us have seen him since he was a small child. He's said to have become hideously deformed as he grew up."

"He is no such thing!" Calm down, I told myself. My temper had always been the greatest fault in my discipline, although it had improved as I'd left adolescence behind. Still, Seymour/Rufus was a comrade, someone that I liked and respected, and I found her baseless insults infuriating. "We met him only a couple of weeks ago, when we were on our way to Luca. He might have a hard time passing for either full human or full Guado, but he's a healthy, intelligent, well-spoken man, and an able mage."

"He seems to have made quite an impression on you."

"What of it?" I asked, scowling.

"It's just that even his own kin don't leap to his defense with such enthusiasm."

"Politics." All my disgust oozed out in that word.

She laughed. "Sir Auron, everything is politics of one sort or another, don't you think? Politics, or war. The natural activities of thinking beings."

I don't think I like the way you think. "And we wonder why Sin is large and violent."

"Mmm. But I've been wondering something myself: why are you wandering around the back streets, Sir Auron?"

"I'm looking for another member of our party. He's distinctive in appearance: about my height, wearing a black coat, pale, has silver hair that falls past his waist, and he's carrying an extremely long sword on his back. Have you seen him?"

"Green eyes?"

I nodded.

"Then he's probably the person I saw leaving via the southern entrance half an hour ago."

"Thank you." Trust Sephiroth to go hunting again while he sorted out his thoughts. Any other day, I might have left him to it, but after the conversation on the Farplane, he had to be more than usually distraught, and we had to be at Jyscal's mansion in about an hour.

Fortunately, it wasn't all that difficult to find him once I got outside. I just had to follow the sound of screaming fiends.
When I found Sephiroth, he was standing in a clearing so full of pyreflies that it looked like the ground was steaming with little sparkles. There were no live fiends there just now, and I would have bet he'd depopulated the north bank of the Moonflow entire. Just as well, because he was staring into space, with his right hand clenched into a fist and his sword held casually in his left with the edge of the blade almost touching the ground.

He wasn't unaware of his surroundings, however. The moment I got within ten feet of him, he spun, blade sweeping up to its now-familiar ready position level with his jaw. Then he realized who it was, and lowered it again.

"Auron. You're as persistent as Zack."

*Because I know that's what it's going to take, if I want to get closer to you.* "We have less than an hour before we have to join Lord Jyscal for dinner. Under the circumstances, we were afraid that the time would slip your mind."

A smile flickered at the corner of his mouth, thank Yevon. *"Don't worry. I have no intention of leaving our youngest comrade without support."*

"I do, though. Worry. About you and about the others." I paused, then added, "You sounded almost like a Summoner back there, except worse. They may accept death as a necessary consequence of the Final Summoning, but that doesn't mean that they go out looking for it."

A long pause. A sigh. "Auron, I am *tired*. Is that really so difficult to accept? That I want to rest?"

"And you think the only way you can rest is to stop existing?"

"Nothing else seems to have worked so far."

"Sephiroth. The people that hurt you . . . they aren't here."

"And what reason do you have to believe that the fayth will be any kinder to me than those who have preceded them? It's clearly their thumb that I'm under now."

"I don't know for certain that they will be . . . but I think they really do want only a single, finite task from you, and they'll let you go after that." Although if the task was "destroy Sin", it was large enough to absorb more than one lifetime. "And you're not alone now."

"I thought that once before, too."

"It's true this time."

"Is it? In the end, you're all here for Braska, not me." There was the sharp edge of his tongue again, meant to cut. Meant to make me run. But this time, I wasn't going to back off even the slightest amount.

"No, we're not. Rufus isn't even really a Guardian—he doesn't have a contract with Lord Braska, he's just following you around. Jecht is beholden to his own sense of morality above all. He doesn't place Braska above the rest of us. As for me . . . I hope to Yevon I'm never in a position where I would need to choose, because I know I would choose you, even if it meant destroying my honour and ripping all my oaths apart. Although I think Braska would understand. He's like that."

Sephiroth's lips parted, as though he was about to say something else, and I darted in for the kill, pressing our mouths together, even though I'd never kissed anyone this way before and had no idea how it was supposed to work. Well, beyond the obvious. But I needed to do *something*, and this at
least was simple.

Fortunately, Sephiroth had more experience than I did, and his free hand came up to cup the back of my head, adjusting the angle of contact. His tongue lapped lightly against my lips, teeth, palate, creating a hot tingle that shot down to awaken a much lower part of my body. He didn't object when I slid my arms around him and hugged him tight, pressing our bodies together, and when we broke the kiss, I lowered my head to rest my chin on his pauldron.

"I don't want just one kiss from you, or just one night," I added. "I'll stay by your side for as long as you'll have me. I know it's going to be difficult. Angeal and Zack both warned me. And I don't care. I still want you."

There was a quiet frown on his face. "Why? What can you possibly see in me?"

I shrugged. Told myself that so far, he'd always appreciated honesty. And I wasn't glib enough to offer him anything other than that or silence. "I enjoy your company. We have a lot in common—or at least, it seems that way to me. I admire your strength and your skills and your intelligence, and I find you physically attractive." Somehow I was getting this out without turning red. "And I... can't, with a woman. They suggested you might be receptive. Despite the way you tried to flay me with words back at Baaj."

A sigh. "Trust those three to try to matchmake from beyond the grave." His arm had settled around my shoulders, and between that and the kiss, I let myself hope. "I don't know. The idea of not always being alone is attractive, and we seem compatible, but... well, I expect Angeal and Zack would have mentioned that I have a poor understanding of how to relate to others on a personal level. I will end up hurting you, Auron."

"I told you already that I don't care," I reminded him.

"Mmm. So you did." His arm tightened just a little, but all he said was, "I need a bit of time to think about this. But I think that, perhaps..." There was the tiniest of relaxations in the hard muscles under the leather, but then he murmured, "Not now," and he began to extricate himself from my arms. I let him go. "We can speak again tonight."

"Tonight," I repeated, and ran my hand quickly, lightly, over his cheekbone and down his jaw, heartened when he allowed the caress. His skin was still fine-textured, soft, and too warm for an ordinary human. There was no trace of beard stubble, and I realized I'd never seen him shave. Perhaps he didn't need to.

It didn't bother me. I was fine with him being different. It was just part of the person that he was.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

First NSFW scene is in this chapter.

We approached Jyscal's mansion at the edge of Guadosalam in what was becoming our usual formation: Sephiroth and I in the lead, Seymour and Braska at the center, and Jecht bringing up the rear. The door opened before I could knock, and an unfamiliar Guado poked her head out.

"Summoner Braska and party, to see Lord Jyscal," I said.

"Of course. Please come inside."

On the inside, the building was almost as opulent as certain private areas of the Palace of St. Bevelle. This had to represent many generations of accumulated Guado wealth. None of our party was particularly impressed, though. Sephiroth gave each new room a once-over, but I could tell he was checking exits and defensibility. Jecht glanced around the entrance hall, snorted, and didn't pay much attention after that. Seymour didn't even look up, but then he'd lived here once. And Braska was inscrutable, a gentle smile concealing his thoughts.

There was a great deal of food set out in the room where Jyscal was waiting for us. More than six men could eat, I thought, even when one of them had an appetite like Sephiroth's. There was no recognizable meat among the offerings. Which felt a bit odd, since in the last couple of days, Seymour had dropped any pretense of vegetarianism, eating what the rest of us ate. Jecht didn't seem to care, though—he went straight for the buffet table while the rest of us were still standing tensely in the middle of the floor.

"Thank you for bringing our guests, Tyndra. Close the door on the way out, and tell the others that they are not to enter unless I call for them."

The servant bowed. "Of course, Lord Jyscal."

The room was silent as she left, closing the door as she'd been told to do.

"I take it this is for my benefit," Seymour said, shattering that silence.

"I would like to see you properly," Jyscal said.

A soft sigh. "Very well." Seymour took off his hat and veil, and unpinned his hair so that the braid fell loose against his back. He left the braid in, though, and between that and his clothing, he managed to look more human than Guado.

"You look . . ." Jyscal began, then stopped.

"Like a human mercenary mage called Rufus," Seymour suggested, with a thin smile. "I find I rather like being Rufus. He has no politics to worry about and no family or community to reject him, nor any responsibilities toward anyone but himself and his comrades."

"I never intended to reject you," Jyscal said quietly.
"Then what do you call sending me to molder at Baaj with only a handful of your spies for company? This is the first time I've laid eyes on you since I left on that disastrous pilgrimage. You didn't even come to inform me in person of my exile, when I somehow managed to stagger back down out of the mountains to the trading post in the Calm Lands. You only sent a quartet of your guards, with orders to make me see the error of my ways."

Guado turn slightly greenish when they go as pale as Jyscal did just then. "What? I never—"

"I had enough white magic to take care of most of it, but there was a bone in my foot that never did heal quite right after one of them stomped on it. To this day, I know when a storm is coming because of the ache."

"I didn't know," the older man said. "Please believe me. They had no orders to do any such thing."

"Let us say that I were to give you the benefit of the doubt. How, then, did they know they weren't going to be punished for exceeding their orders? The only possible answer is that they already knew you had washed your hands of me, father. And that might even be worse. You didn't even care enough to be disappointed in me."

Seymour's words were like well-honed knives. He'd probably been working on them for the past eight years, composing and polishing them to inflict the maximum amount of pain. And I knew it wasn't my place to step in. Seymour needed to vent this if he was ever to move past it. You can't regain your inner peace by hiding and hoarding an emotion, they'd taught us in the Order. Each warrior-monk had a confessor, who was supposed to listen, reassure, and not judge.

I'd never been able to be completely honest with mine, and towards the end, I'd stopped talking to him altogether. Perhaps that was why I'd ended up leaving the Order. There had always been some tiny part of me that didn't believe in its precepts and practices.

"I wanted you to be safe," Jyscal said.

"You sent me to Zanarkand to die defeating Sin! What part of that was safe? Lies, lies, and more lies!" Seymour flung up his hands dramatically. "I only did it because you both wanted it so badly, and when it was over, and I was only a ten-year-old boy broken by the loss of his mother . . . where were you then?"

Jyscal tried to say something more, but he choked on it.

"I was never your son in more than name," Seymour continued. "Never welcome among your people. Fortunately, it seems that some humans are more tolerant than most Guado." His gesture encompassed all four of us. "I have a place now. One that has nothing to do with you."

"It will disintegrate as soon as you—" Jyscal began, but was interrupted.

"Okay, whoa, time out you two. I've gotta admit that I suck at the whole being-a-father thing, but you suck even worse. Didn't think that was possible, short of beating your kid to death or something, but I guess I was wrong." Jecht licked some crumbs from his fingers before continuing. "You screwed up. Big-time, completely, utterly screwed up. And there's really no way to hide it. All that happens if you try is that people get three times as mad at you when they do find out: once 'cause you screwed up, once 'cause you tried to hide it, and once for being the kind of guy who'd try to hide it at all." Jecht sighed. "Can't say that I ever really got it right either, but with a woman, getting down on your knees and admitting you're wrong works sometimes, depending. Maybe it can work with a kid, too. Pretty sure excuses aren't gonna do any good, though."
Jyscal didn't glance in the blitzer's direction as Jecht made his speech. He kept his eyes on Seymour. But I could tell from the way the expression on his face changed that he was listening.

"Is that what it would take?" Jyscal asked his son.

"An admission and an apology might be a beginning, but I've hated you for a very long time, father. You, and the people who rejected me."

I stared as Jyscal got down on his knees. "In the interest of beginnings, then: I am sorry. I did put my politics before your happiness, and your mother's, and I see now that I was wrong to do so. And now I have lost my son and my wife, all in the name of political ambitions that didn't succeed nearly as well as I had hoped. I should have gone with you to Zanarkand, or at least come to the Calm Lands to tell you how proud I truly was of you. My bright, brave little son, who had almost succeeded at doing something that most adults are incapable of accomplishing. But I couldn't, because you have your mother's eyes. I was afraid . . . to look at you . . . I couldn't bear to see her in you, after everything I had done . . ." Tears began to trickle down the Guado's face.

Seymour's expression of rage had faded into a faint curiosity that reminded me oddly of Sephiroth. "And you think that that absolves you?"

"No," the older Guado said in a low voice. "Rejecting my son's needs because of my own discomfort was my failure as a parent. You have every right to hate me."

Seymour sighed gustily. "How am I to . . . ?" He seemed unable to finish whatever he meant to say.

"I think it might be best if you both left it at that, for the time being." Brasca's voice was firm, although not loud. "This has festered between you for eight years, and it's clear it isn't just a misunderstanding where half an hour of shouting at each other can clear the air. You both have to decide what you want of each other, if anything, and work your way toward an acceptable form of contact. For the time being, let us pretend that you are Rufus, a mage who has joined me as a Guardian on my pilgrimage, and Lord Jyscal of the Guado, who has never met any of my Guardians before."

Jyscal dipped his head. "Lord Braska. Perhaps you are right, and that would be best for now. Some things cannot be rushed, although I might wish otherwise." He accepted Braska's extended hand and allowed the Summoner to draw him to his feet. "Would it be possible for you to present the rest of these gentlemen?"

"Of course. This is Auron, who was with me from the first."

I bowed. "Lord Jyscal."

"Jecht, who joined us at the last moment."

The blitzer smirked and gave a little wave before turning back to the food.

"And Sephiroth, whom we encountered unexpectedly while on our way to Besaid, and who has been running my pilgrimage ever since."

"Not intentionally," murmured the silver-haired man as he inclined his head.

"Ah, give it up, Sephy—all you have to do is glare and open your mouth, and everyone does whatever you tell them to."

"Odd, then, that it never seems to work on you," Sephiroth said dryly.
Jyscal ventured a smile, and the atmosphere slowly began to ease. Seymour kept to the fringes of the room, however, deliberately avoiding contact with his father—from time to time, he almost seemed to be hiding behind Sephiroth, or me. Jyscal, to his credit, didn't try to approach him.

Oddly, it was Sephiroth who engaged the Guado in conversation after that, asking him about the customs and history of his race. I listened with half an ear as Jyscal spoke of the rituals that surrounded the worship of Tali, goddess of the forest, which were still practiced by the traditionalist Guado.

_He has an insatiable need to understand the shape of the universe_, Angeal had said. Perhaps that extended to Guado traditions as well as the properties of pyreflies.

In the meanwhile, the food disappeared, and Jecht made no more of a fool of himself than usual. _It could have been far worse_, I reflected as Seymour resumed his disguise, preparatory to leaving to return to the inn. _Far, far worse._

The results are never good when I start thinking things like that, although that didn't occur to me until the next morning. Just then, I was more preoccupied with the knowledge that I was about to get Sephiroth alone. I had to force a frown onto my face as we crossed the hotel lobby, and keep my hands on my sash so that I didn't fall to the temptation to adjust other parts of my clothing, and thereby draw attention to a . . . growing situation. _He hasn't even said "yes" yet_, I reminded myself.

When we reached the suite, I followed Sephiroth into his bedroom and shut the door behind us. He laid aside sword and coat with no indication that he had noticed me, although I knew it was impossible for him to have missed another human being in such a confined space.

It wasn't until he'd unbuckled his boots and pulled them off that he spoke. "Sit." He gestured to a spot beside him on the bed, not that there was anything else to sit on in here—the chairs were all back out in the main room.

I propped my sword beside his and sat down. Raised my eyebrows. Tried to ask a question without asking, the same way he had when we hadn't been able to talk to each other.

"I have no idea how to go about this," he said, in a quiet near-monotone. "I am . . . not accustomed to showing affection for others. I don't even have any good models."

"Zack and Aerith?" I suggested.

He shook his head. "I was almost never a witness to their interactions. And I doubt I could imitate Zack, in any case. No normal person has that kind of energy."

"That bad?"

"You have no idea. His behaviour when you saw him on the Farplane was rather subdued, compared to what I would have considered normal in the old days. He could never sit still for more than a couple of minutes. Getting him to do his share of the paperwork was always a chore and a half."

There was a pause, during which I managed to find some words. "I've never done this before either. Tried to build a life with someone that I care about, I mean. I'll forgive your mistakes if you forgive mine."

"I think we may have to settle for that," came the quiet agreement. "Nor have I ever been someone's first before. Don't try to tell me otherwise—your inexperience was quite evident, earlier."
"Better a perfectionist for my first time than someone who only cares about his own pleasure," I said, and saw him smile one of his tiny smiles. Inspired, I kissed the corner of his mouth, where it quirked upward. I was rewarded with a longer, fuller kiss that curled my toes and made me moan into his mouth. *Yevon.* I was starting to wonder if I'd been waiting all my life just for this man.

Sephiroth had clever hands that somehow managed to strip off my haori and find the buckles holding my armour on without him ever needing to look down. When he did dip his head, it was to nip and suck at the skin of my neck, and he soon found a place that made me gasp and tilt my head back, greedy for more.

My hands shook as I stripped off the glove I wore on the right and threw it randomly at a wall. I touched smooth, fever-warm skin and criss-cross leather harness straps as Sephiroth captured my mouth again. Then I snagged a wandering hand and peeled his glove off too, interlacing our fingers so that my palm was pressed against his.

He pulled his other glove off himself, with his teeth, and then slid that hand up under the back of my shirt. He traced the line of my spine, starting from my waist and ending as high up as he could reach with most of my clothes still on, and all I could think of for a moment was how I wished his hand had moved downward instead.

I wished I had a better idea of what to expect if it had. No one told lewd jokes to a warrior-monk, and I'd been in training since I was twelve—too young for sex of any sort to be more than just a joke. I wanted to touch, and to be touched. I wanted a pale, warm hand to slide down the front of my pants and wrap around the achingly hard erection I was doing a poor job of hiding inside there. But I was certain there was more. I just wasn't sure what, or how it was supposed to work.

I cooperated with Sephiroth to get my shirt the rest of the way off, and didn't resist when he grabbed my shoulders and pressed me down onto my back on the bed. Especially since this let him straddle me and lower his hips so that his leather-clad body pressed against the straining laces that were holding the front of my trousers shut. I cried out and arched my back, pressing up against him in turn.

Sephiroth smirked and pinched my left nipple, and the sensation that produced, pleasure edged with pain, left me breathless.

"I could tease you for hours," he said, and something about the timbre of his voice also shot straight between my legs. "But I think we'll leave that for when you have a bit more experience," he added, bending down to nibble delicately at my ear. "What do you want, Auron?"

"You." It was all I could manage to say, that single syllable. He'd just shattered years of discipline and self-control into fragments. Part of me still couldn't believe this was happening.

"Good." And those clever hands of his went to the lacings of my trousers, untying them so that he could pull my clothes down just enough to free my erection, leaving my legs carelessly entangled. I tried to buck up against him again, desperate for touch, but he held me down with one arm and the weight of his body while he shucked off the last of his leathers. Then a warm hand found its way between my legs at last, and closed around my erection, and *Yevon.* Fire in my belly, and a strange, delicious, aching heaviness. Touching myself had never done *this.*

He was straddling the tops of my thighs again, settling himself into position with his own erection pointing straight at my chin, and I reached out, tentatively, stopping when my hand was still a few inches away and forcing myself to look up at his face—*is this all right?* His eyes glowed brightly, pupils so wide that they looked round, as he guided me to touch—*yes.*

I'd never touched another man that way before, and I was immediately struck by both the similarities
and the differences. The thickness was the same, but the texture wasn't, and the warmth of it . . . The shape of the head was different, too, when I tried to stroke it with my thumb, trying a bit clumsily to do to him some of the same things that I knew I enjoyed myself.

Then Sephiroth loosened my grip so that he could bring our erections together, long fingers wrapping around us both, and anything resembling a coherent thought flew straight out of my head. I didn't know what I was trying to do, and I didn't care. I needed. I wanted. More touch, more friction where we were moving against each other, slick from the fluid we had already both leaked. More of the growing pressure deep inside my body. Were those noises coming from me? I couldn't seem to bring myself to care as I mindlessly tried to thrust upward, only to be thwarted by the weight of my lover's body.

Sephiroth's thumb made a sort of figure-eight over the heads of both erections, and my entire body seemed to tense as pleasure seared through me. I spewed my seed all over both of us, and he followed a moment later with a low noise that sounded almost like a growl.

I lay there, afterwards, for several long moments, waiting for my heart to slow and my control to return.

"You're heavy," I observed when I was certain my voice was steady again.

"I suppose I am. My apologies." Sephiroth shifted, lifting his weight off me, transferring it to his knees.

"Right now, I doubt I would care that much if you squashed me, though," I added, and saw the quick flicker of his smile, which vanished again instantly.

"I would care," he said, voice suddenly sober.

I wasn't sure quite what to say. I reached out to touch him, then stopped as I realized my hand was . . . sticky. Very sticky.

Sephiroth looked at it, frozen in its awkward position, and raised an eyebrow. He rummaged beside the bed for a moment and produced a rag, dampening it with a pinpoint water spell and using it to wipe both of us off. Until that moment, I hadn't even realized that his materia bracer was the only thing he was still wearing. He then destroyed the rag with a tiny fire spell, which demanded even more precise control than the water.

Then he sat back down on the edge of the bed and began to braid his hair, as he did every night. I pushed myself into a more upright position and cautiously touched his shoulder.

"Would you let me do that for you?"

A hesitation. "If you like."

A bit of fumbling, and the three sections of hair he'd been working with were transferred into my hands. This was the first time I had ever touched it, and I discovered that the strands were extremely fine, silken, and impossible to break. Get my fingers entangled, and the stuff would cut my flesh like wire, although it did give slightly to a lengthwise pull.

"It actually incorporates a form of mythril," Sephiroth said quietly, and I knew that he'd noticed me playing around. "That's one of the reasons I wear it so long—ordinary steel can't cut it, and Masamune makes a poor instrument for barbering." He gestured vaguely in the direction of his sword.
"Your sword’s name is Masamune?” I asked, instead of the other, too-obvious question. *Ten percent Jenova.*

"I’m surprised I never mentioned it to you before."

"Zack did, while the two of you were having it out. The context included the words ‘stabby death’."

Sephiroth made an amused noise. "Indeed. I’m surprised you remembered."

"It’s just that the name is an interesting coincidence. Lord Mi’ihen, the founder of the Crusaders, is also supposed to have wielded a sword named Masamune, although it was of a completely different design—or at least it’s recorded in the statues as such. You saw the one outside Luca, near the entrance to the Highroad."

"The one of the armoured man stabbing a rather ill-realized and undersized behemoth?"

I choked back a laugh. "Yes, that one." Trust him to notice the flaws in the statue.

"Another one of the broadswords that seem so popular with you Spirans."

"We can’t create a thin sword like yours that’s still strong enough to cut through the tougher fiends. I’ve been wondering for a while now what your Masamune is made out of." And envying it a little, in all honesty. My swords had the same basic structure and gentle curve, but the comparison made me feel like a lumpy Ifrit face-to-face with a graceful Valefor.

Sephiroth shrugged. "Alloys of mythril, adamantite, and steel, in various proportions. The specific techniques of the Wutainese swordsmiths aren’t taught to outsiders, but Masamune was most likely forge-welded from multiple blocks of metal, each selected for a balance of hardness and flexibility desirable for the part of the sword it was intended to become. The Wutainese also use monster blood and ground bone at some points in the production process, but how much of that is actually retained in the blade is uncertain."

*Adamantite.* The hard, brittle, heavy, silver-grey metal could only be obtained—on Spira, anyway—by salvaging it from old ruins. Which meant from the Al Bhed, who sold it only as finished products. It couldn’t be melted by Spiran hands, and I’d never known anyone who’d tried to forge it.

"...I’m done," I said, having come to the end of his hair while we were talking.

"Thank you. Do you intend to return to your own room?"

"I’d rather stay."

Instead of responding verbally, he flipped back the blankets in invitation. I fell asleep that night with my back pressed to the warmth of his chest.

I was also awoken very early by the departure of that warmth, but I considered that an acceptable tradeoff. In fact, I got up with him, and we left Guadosalam together by the southern exit for morning sword practice. I still couldn’t keep up with my new lover, but I knew that working with him was getting me into better shape than I’d been since before I’d left the Order—possibly better shape than I had ever been in, period.

Was it wrong, to envy him his unhuman speed, strength, and grace? I knew that being what he was had hurt him, and many times at that, but some part of me wished to be his equal in everything.

I was going to have to see if I could scrounge some time to meditate and come to terms with the vast
changes in my situation over the past few days. *There is nothing powerful enough to counterbalance love itself, but you can place it at the center and balance the rest around it, and still find equilibrium.* Another thing I'd been taught as a novice, along with, *if you can find balance any other way, it isn't love.*

I'd known what I was feeling for a while, but going from, *I can't even talk to him about this,* to a situation where my love was requited and we were trying to build something together was a big change, and one that needed to be treated with respect.

I was thinking about that and not paying as much attention to my surroundings as I might have in other company, so I didn't notice the guards outside the inn until Sephiroth grasped my shoulder and nodded in their direction. Eight Guado, heavily armed.

"Tromell is inside, arguing with the woman manning the desk," my lover said, head tilted as he listened to things I couldn't clearly hear. Suddenly, he stiffened. "The phrase 'murder of Lord Jyscal' just came up, and the name 'Seymour'. We need to get in there."

"Let's go, then."

Predictably, the guards crossed their weapons to block us. "No admittance!"

"We are Summoner Braska's Guardians, and you are barring us from our charge," Sephiroth said coldly. "If you have no authority to admit us, then find someone who does. Immediately, or we will admit ourselves, and I will not be answerable for the consequences if we do."

There was some grumbling from the guards. One of them went inside, and returned with Tromell, who bowed to us.

"Sir Sephiroth, Sir Auron. I apologize for the obstruction posed by the guards. They are not considered able to make these sorts of judgement calls . . ."

Sephiroth held up a hand to stem the flow of apologies. "All I ask is that we be permitted to rejoin our Summoner and fellow Guardians."

"Ah, well, that may be a little complicated . . ."

My lover gave Tromell the same withering look he'd given the guards. "It isn't a complex matter. Either you permit us to pass, or we will make our own way, with as much violence as necessary. And I have no intention of permitting you to stall for time."

The Guado held up for several seconds under the green-eyed stare before he sighed. "Very well, I suppose I have no choice, then. Come with me."

He led us directly to the door of the suite, although in so doing, he placed us in the middle of a little knot of guards. I doubted that would stop Sephiroth if trouble erupted. I knew it wouldn't stop me.

Sure enough, when Sephiroth unlocked the door to the suite and Tromell tried to push inside first, my lover took the Guado by the shoulder and pulled him back, blocking everyone so that I could enter first. I think one of the guards tried to grab his arm after he did that, and I winced at the sound of bones snapping as Sephiroth pulled free and followed me in, turning immediately so that he filled the doorframe.

I went immediately to wake Braska, Jecht, and Seymour, pounding on the closed doors of the bedrooms. Behind me, I could hear Sephiroth saying, "Now, you are going to tell us what has brought you here."
There was a long silence. Braska, dressed in the underrobe he wore to bed, poked his head out his door, while Jecht (half-naked as always) just stepped out into the main room of the suite. Seymour didn't make an appearance, although he knocked twice on his door from the inside to indicate he was awake.

"What is going on?" Braska asked in a whisper. All I could do was gesture towards Sephiroth and the door.

There was another pause before Tromell finally gave in. "Lord Jyscal is dead, and I have come to arrest his son, Seymour Guado, on suspicion of murder."

*What?!!*
"We won't leave you here," Braska said through the elaborate tangle of roots that the Guado called a cell wall. This narrow, almost overgrown corridor in the lowest level of Guadosalam served to confine prisoners awaiting trial in the city. Currently, Seymour was the only one being held here.

I understood that exile was a common Guado judiciary punishment, but it appeared that they weren't going to make things easy for us by just slapping that on Seymour and kicking us out onto the Thunder Plains.

Seymour raised an eyebrow. "And how do you expect to get me out?"

"If we can, by proving you innocent," Braska said.

"And if we can't, we'll bust you out," Jecht added. "Abandoning a friend . . . I don't pull that kind of crap, and neither does anyone else here. We know this ain't your fault."

"I'm still hoping to resolve things in a way that would allow us to visit Guadosalam again," Braska said, not quite chiding. "We will try the peaceful options first. But as Jecht says, we will not abandon you." And he touched Seymour's hand, lightly, reassuringly, where the half-Guado's long fingers wrapped around a gnarled wooden bar.

Seymour half-smiled, shaking his head. "You four are the oddest people I have ever known. I . . . think I am grateful for that. But you do know that this is, more than anything, a political ploy. I couldn't have come up with a better method of discrediting Lord Jyscal's policies if I had been looking for one." Lord Jyscal and not my father, I noted, but then they'd just been beginning to reconcile.

"That doesn't make it completely impossible to unravel," Sephiroth said. "If we can find a way to turn it into a political embarrassment instead, they won't be able to get rid of us fast enough. That might actually be the most expedient method, but I don't know enough about these people to make more than a rudimentary attempt."

"I can give you little more information of any value," Seymour said. "As you know, Lord Jyscal sought to integrate the Guado with the Spiran mainstream—with humans, in other words. Part of his effort involved converting as many Guado as possible to the religion of Yevon, although that has never been the primary faith here. He would have had no chance at all if our family hadn't ruled this place for generations. Opposing him are the traditional Guado who wish to remain separate and pure, and continue to follow the old ways, but I know little of them. Obviously, there were none of that faction at Baaj." He offered us a humourless smirk. "They must be in quite a quandary now. Tradition would make me the next ruler of the Guado, but placing a halfbreed in control would be the antithesis of everything they believe in. Or perhaps they intend to use this to stage a coup."

"Y'know, I've been wondering," Jecht said. "Just who is in charge now?"

"Tromell. Jyscal's right hand since before I was born—and his lover both before and after his marriage."

Jecht wrinkled his nose. "Ugh. Now, that was an image I didn't need. Sephy and Auron boning each other is one thing, but a couple of old guys like that . . ."
"You aren't so young anymore yourself," Seymour pointed out, while I gritted my teeth and tried to restrain myself from punching the blitzer out.

"We old folk need love too," Braska added, with a smile.

"We were trying to be discreet," I hissed at last.

"Then you shouldn't've been so loud last night. I mean, I could practically tell what part of you he had his mouth on by the noises you were making." Jecht was grinning broadly, and I wished I could wipe that expression off his face. "Aw, sorry, Auron—are you embarrassed? Might wanna learn a thing or two about how to handle that from your boyfriend."

"You are a blight on the face of Spira," I snapped, and I think that if it had been possible for a living man to turn into a fiend, I would have done so just then—I wanted to go for Jecht's throat that badly.

"We are wasting time here." Sephiroth had his granite expression on as he turned back to Seymour. "Do you have any idea who heads the other faction?"

The half-Guado shook his head. "When I was small, it was a man named Palon, but he died a few years ago. He has a daughter, but she doesn't seem to be interested in anything but playing blitzball."

"We'll have to ask Tromell, then. And hope he tells us the truth."

No one had anything much to say after that, and we left the prison a few moments later. I could see Sephiroth examining each bit of corridor as we passed, presumably assessing it in case we needed to engineer a jailbreak, and I tried to do the same. If only to keep my mind off strangling Jecht.

They all know, now. And didn't . . . seem to care? I'd expected to be ostracized if they found out, but even Braska didn't seem to be bothered by the revelation that I was a disgusting pervert who liked to have sex with other men.

Jecht still needed to learn to be discreet, though. There were certain people in the Church who, if they found out, might try to shame Braska for harbouring me. He already got enough of that for marrying an Al Bhed. And Sephiroth . . . he didn't understand how taboo and just plain wrong a relationship like the one we now had was considered by most Spirans.

Focus, I told myself sternly. I hadn't been this distracted and scatterbrained since I was a new novice. Being in love didn't need to rob me of my wits.

There were four guards in the room at the top of the stairs. All male, all Guado, all deceptively slender. All armed. The low ceiling and tight quarters would make it difficult for Sephiroth to use Masamune effectively if it came to a fight, although I'd seen him manoeuvre the long sword into seemingly impossible positions before, and a punch or a kick from him wasn't exactly a joke either, as I'd discovered during our practice sessions. The real problem was that, with only one exit, the Guado could send in wave after wave of fighters until we were either overwhelmed or ended up depopulating Guadosalam.

I really did hope to Yevon that we weren't going to end up having to break Seymour out, although I wasn't going to argue if the others decided that was the only way. The young half-Guado was one of us now.

"No admittance," was what the guard told us when we knocked on the door of Jyscal's mansion.

"We're here to talk to Tromell, not some gate guard," Jecht said.
"No admittance whatsoever. Master Tromell's orders."

Sephiroth evidently wasn't feeling all that patient. He cast Stop at the guard and pushed the gate open.

Inside the mansion, we found . . . blood. Blood everywhere. Broad spatters and smears of it all over the entry hall, staining the portraits on the walls and sliming the stairs up to the second floor.

"Great Yevon," Braska said, his hands forming the prayer sign.

"Shit, this is brutal," Jecht said. "No way Rufus could have done this. He's a mage, not a slasher."

"True enough," Sephiroth said. "If I were to suspect one of us, it would be you . . . but this looks more like the work of a fiend."

"Yeah . . . hey! I do not make this kind of a mess! And I've never killed anything 'cept fiends!"

"Your sword is more like a metal club—it pulverizes as much as slashes," Sephiroth said, bending down to examine something on the floor. "Wielded with abandon, which certainly describes your style, it could create a great deal of spatter . . . but it would be unlikely to also create anything that looked like claw marks. The question is, how did a fiend get in here . . . and where is it now?"

His eyes narrowed, and he gazed at the mess of blood. "For that matter, where are the bodies? There were more people than Jyscal here—you can identify the areas where they collapsed by seeing where the blood has pooled. And there are a lot of half-spatters. Things have been moved."

He shook his head. "We need someone with training in forensics—I barely have any idea where to start with this."

"You seem to be doing quite well so far," Braska said.

"Indeed," said a voice from the second floor: Tromell. "Pardon me if I don't join you immediately. I will have to go around via the back stairs—these will be unsafe until they can be properly cleaned."

Sephiroth made a slow circuit of the room while we waited. From time to time, he would pause and examine something more closely, but the only time I had any idea what had caught his attention was the one when he telegraphed it to me by hovering a spread hand above some gouges in the wall. His fingers weren't long enough to span them.

He looked away from those when Tromell cleared his throat and stepped out of a side passage.

"Three bodies," Sephiroth said flatly. "And something with large clawed, or taloned, appendages. Meaning a fiend . . . or possibly a Guado, if a pure-blood's nails are stiffer than Seymour's. He couldn't have left these marks, as you would know, Tromell. Why did you arrest him?"

"I had no choice," the aging Guado said. "It was for his protection. Others were threatening to carry out summary justice for this."

"And you thought we couldn't protect him?" The anger that I hadn't yet been able to disperse was flaring up again, aimed in a new direction.

"I thought you would prefer not to be forced to choose between a fellow Guardian and your Summoner—and make no mistake, they would have found some way, sooner or later, to drive you into that corner, Sir Auron."

"'They' being the Guado isolationists," Braska provided.
"Indeed. They hate Lord Seymour for being what he is, and equally hated Lord Jyscal for supporting the new ways over the old. Even if they were not responsible for the murder, they have been quick to take advantage of it." Tromell shook his head. "Perhaps more to the point, there is a traditional Guado combat art whose practitioners coat their nails in a specific tree resin to stiffen and strengthen them. Lord Seymour has never had the opportunity to learn it, and would have no idea where to get the resin."

"And the other bodies?" Sephiroth asked.

"There were two guards with Lord Jyscal when he went to greet the other Summoner."

Other Summoner?

"Not Kelanth again," I said out loud.

"I believe that was the name, yes."

"If Summoner Kelanth and his Guardians were supposed to be meeting Lord Jyscal when this happened, then where are they now?" Braska never had been stupid.

Tromell shook his head. "I fear I do not know. They may never have arrived. If they did, one of the deceased guards would have admitted them."

"Then finding them is the first step. And making a list of any and all Guado who practice this bizarre martial art of yours, if that's possible." Sephiroth spoke as though he expected to be obeyed, his sharp gaze fastened on Tromell.

"Very well. Thus far, you are the only person who has had any constructive suggestions to offer. Although I fear it will be impossible to create a complete list."

"Hey, don't you guys have police or detectives or anyone else that's supposed to investigate crime for a living? Don't dump everything on Sephy . . . roth." This time, Jecht seemed to see something in the silver-haired man's glare that made him complete the name properly.

"Guadosalam is a peaceful place despite the factionalism, Sir Jecht. We do have one person who makes a profession of investigating such matters, but he is a traditionalist, and quite satisfied with the idea that Lord Seymour was responsible for the deaths—indeed, he was the one who proposed it."

"There are two other things I would like, if possible," Sephiroth said. "First, I would like to view the bodies, and any other items you removed from the room. Second, I would like a Guado to accompany us while we work on this."

Tromell raised his eyebrows. "Your first request is easily granted. As for the second . . . may I ask why?"

"Two reasons. Firstly, we may have to question some of the traditionalists, who are unlikely to want to speak with us. They may respond a bit better to one of their own. Secondly, while I am far from experienced in these matters, I do know that successful investigation often requires discerning what elements are out of place. A Guado will be far more aware of what is normal for Guadosalam than a human."

Tromell's eyebrows were trying to blend into his hairline. "As you say. Unfortunately, I cannot accompany you myself, but . . . Hmm. I believe I will send Pah to join you. She is very young, but I'm certain she isn't a member of our isolationist faction . . . if only because she is Jyscal's next heir after Seymour, and having to rule Guadosalam would make it more difficult for her to play blitzball."
"Sounds like a girl after my own heart," Jecht said, with a broad grin.

"She is far too young for you," Tromell said severely, and Jecht pantomimed being shot with a machina weapon. It was hard to find his act amusing when we were standing in a room splattered with several people's blood, though.

"The bodies first," Sephiroth said. "If anyone doesn't have the stomach for that, now would be a good time to return to the inn."

Dead bodies weren't exactly something I was unfamiliar with. Most people in Spira ran into the aftermath of an attack by Sin or massed fiends sooner or later. And Braska had had to perform Sendings during his training as a Summoner, and that, again, meant corpses. Of all of us, Jecht might have been the most sheltered in that regard, although there was no way that someone with his personality would ever admit it.

They'd moved them to the basement of the mansion: three Guado, including Jyscal, their bodies washed clean and laid out under shrouds. Sephiroth frowned when he pulled the first one back, but moved in for a closer examination anyway, using the pressure of his gloved fingers to pull wounds open until they gaped like red mouths.

"You figured anything out?" Jecht said, after the silver-haired man had finished poking at the third body and was staring at nothing, that frown still on his face.

"Beyond the fact that I am no forensic scientist? The wounds are consistent with a Guado hand, a large, clawed paw, or a four-toed talon."

The blitzer rolled his eyes. "We already knew that."

"We already suspected it," Sephiroth corrected, piercing one of the bodies with a glare. "Everything we need to know is right here," he muttered, tapping a gloved finger against the forehead of the dead Guado guard. "Each pyrefly holds memory as well as personality. If we could extract it . . ." He shook his head violently, as though to rid himself of the thought, and his breath hissed through his teeth. I stepped in closer to him and laid one hand on his forearm.

Sephiroth closed his eyes for just a moment, then offered me one of his faint, flickering smiles for an instant before erasing it and turning to Tromell. "I don't think there's anything further we can learn from the bodies themselves. What of their clothes, and the other items from the room?"

"This way," Tromell said, gesturing at a door. It turned out to be a storeroom, but it was easy to tell which of the items in there we wanted, since they hadn't been cleaned. "I am going to send someone around to the inns to search for our stray Summoner. I should have word by the time you've finished in here."

After he closed the door behind him, I took the opportunity to move closer to Sephiroth and whisper, "Are you all right?"

"Bad memories," came the murmured reply. And, "Jenova." Which was not something we were going to be able to sort out while the two of us were standing here.

I don't know whether Sephiroth found nothing of note among the debris or whether he just didn't tell us. I leaned against the wall and waited for him to finish. After a moment, Braska came over and joined me, while Jecht continued poking through things in Sephiroth's wake.

"I'm hoping it's safe to congratulate you, now that Jecht's let the squatter monkey out of the bag," Braska said, tilting his head toward Sephiroth.
I shook my head. "My lord, I don't understand. I expected you all to be up in arms. Why doesn't it bother you?"

Braska chuckled. "Usually you're not this dense. Or did you forget who I married? I know very well that we don't choose who to love—it tends to be more like being hit over the head with that sword of Jecht's. And Sephiroth is an extremely striking person. I may not share your interest in him, but I can understand why you might find him appealing. Akkina would certainly have approved, if she'd ever met him." After a pause, he added, "You deserve someone to love, Auron, and who loves you. And given what those ghosts from Gaia told us, Sephiroth has been badly short-changed in that department as well. I wish you both the best, and so will anyone else who genuinely cares about you."

My face was hot. I was blushing. I hadn't done that in years. "Thank you," I managed to force out, and got even redder, making Braska chuckle again.

Jecht kicked a blood-spattered silver vase that was roughly the size of a blitzball, although not nearly as round. "Hey, Sephy. Are you actually learning anything from this cra—?" He worked his mouth like a fish as the Silence spell interrupted him mid-word. I wished I knew how to cast it.

"It isn't telling me anything we didn't already know," my lover said.

"But we still need to wait for Tromell to come back," Braska said, and Sephiroth nodded.

Jecht rolled his eyes and began jogging on the spot. Even his footfalls made no noise at first. It was a bit eerie.

When Tromell did show up, he had an adolescent Guado with him.

"This is Pah," he informed us. "She has agreed to accompany you while you are in Guadosalam."

Pah scraped her taloned toes on the floor as she examined us. She wasn't wearing proper shoes, just dark footwraps that covered her instep but left heel and toes bare, a style that seemed to be preferred by many Guado. Or maybe it was a blitz player thing, since Jecht went barefoot most of the time, and the rest of Pah's clothes seemed to have been cut down from a Guado Glories blitz uniform. Her hair was dark blue, making her only the second blue-haired Guado I had ever seen.

"It's an honour, my lord Summoner," she said, hands forming the prayer.

"Please call me Braska. My Guardians are Auron, Jecht, Sephiroth . . . and one other who is unable to be with us right now."

Pah nodded. "Seymour. Mr. Tromell told me. It's hard to believe he's all grown up—the last time he was in Guadosalam, he was younger than I am now."

"You don't hate him?" Jecht's voice was still quieter than usual. "Thought most people here did."

"I don't know him well enough to know what I think of him. I only met him once . . . but I'm smart enough to know he didn't pick his parents. A lot of people seem to have trouble remembering that. As for what happened to Lord Jyscal . . . " She shrugged. "My parents were always saying it was surprising the Traditionalists hadn't killed him yet. I don't know for sure that it was them that did it, and not Seymour, but I think it's, well, blurry enough that someone should check before they dump it all on him, and Mr. Tromell says that's what you're trying to do."

Braska nodded. "The four of us have been traveling with Seymour for a while now, and we don't believe he did it, but finding evidence to prove that may be difficult."
Someone cleared their throat at the doorway back to the main part of the basement: a Guado guard. "We've found the inn where the other Summoner is staying, sir, but he's very ill."

"Are his Guardians with him?" Braska asked. "If he's suffering from backlash again, he shouldn't be alone."

"There was a young woman," the guard said. "She told us to go away."

"Sounds like Yukiko," I said.

"Indeed," Sephiroth confirmed. "We will need to speak to her."

The guard didn't look like he was about to argue. Neither did Tromell, or Pah. The girl followed us back up out of the cellar, past the bodies and through the blood-spattered mess of the entrance hall. She was pale, but didn't protest. She had probably seen it all on the way in.

The guard led us to a different inn than the one we had chosen—larger, more elaborate, and nearer the southern gate. He led us back along a corridor without pausing at the front desk, and knocked three times on a door.

"Go away," said a voice from inside. Muffled, but it sounded like Yukiko.

"Yukiko, it's Braska. We merely want to make sure that Summoner Kelanth is all right."

For several seconds, I thought that hadn't accomplished anything. Then the door opened, and Yukiko peeked out, looking terrible.

"Lord Braska, I doubt there is anything you can do to help. We came here from Djose too quickly. I didn't want to, but Lord Kelanth insisted, and Zurian backed him up."

"I hope you'll at least let me try," Braska said.

Yukiko swallowed visibly, then nodded. "Nothing I've done so far has helped much. Please, if you can save him..." She stepped aside and let us into the room.

Kelanth lay sprawled on one bed in a sweaty heap. He'd pushed his blankets off, and his swollen face was almost as red as my haori. Braska touched his forehead, and frowned. "He's burning up. Magic can't treat this."

Yukiko's face was a pale mask. "The healer who came to see him said he was going to die and there was nothing she could do. And I know nothing at all of medicine. He was feverish even before we reached the Moonflow, and now..."

"The recommended first aid procedure would be to get his temperature down before the fever damages his brain, and attempt to get some liquids into him," Sephiroth said. "Unfortunately, my knowledge ends there, but if we can do those things, it may improve his chances. Get me the blanket from the other bed."

Yukiko almost fell over herself pulling it off and handing it to him. Sephiroth shook it out, used low-level spells to soak and then freeze it, and placed it over Kelanth's feverish, twisting body. A similar sequence of spells produced a pitcher full of ice chips, which he set beside the bed.

"Give him one chip at a time, and let it melt in his mouth before giving him the next. Even a few drops of water at a time should help. And monitor his temperature. Letting him get too chilled might finish him."
The petite Guardian nodded. "Thank you."

"Have you slept at all?" Lord Braska asked.

"Not in three days. Someone had to look after Kelanth."

"What of your fellow Guardian?"

Yukiko shook her head. "He went to give our apologies to Lord Jyscal last night and has yet to return."

And yet his body hadn't been found at the mansion. Which might mean that the mysterious Zurian was the last person to have seen Lord Jyscal alive. Or his body might have been dumped in a concealed location.

"We'll find him for ya," Jecht said. "Be easier to spot him if we knew what he looked like under all those clothes, though."

"I have never seen him without them either," said Yukiko. "Although I believe Lord Kelanth has. For the rest, I can tell you only that Zurian is a gifted black mage, but seldom speaks. It's been like having an Unsent drifting along after us." She shuddered.

There wasn't much else we could do there, or ask her, so we left the room after Braska promised to come back later and see how Kelanth was faring.

"So now what?" Jecht asked, once we were back outside the inn.

Sephiroth rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We attempt to learn whether anyone saw this Zurian leave the mansion, I suppose. Or anything else that might be of interest."

"It's like we're stuck in some kind of third-rate crime drama," Jecht said.

"Unfortunately. Pah, we will require your assistance." The silver-haired man gave the young Guado woman an inquiring look.

"That's what I'm here for," she said. "Um . . . it might be better if I went alone. People around here know me, but they don't know you . . . ."

"And we all look kinda scary, except maybe Braska." Jecht grinned, scratching the back of his head. "And there's no way the two stiffs over there are gonna let him go anywhere on his own when there's a murderer running around." He waved in the direction of Sephiroth and myself.

We managed to reach a compromise of sorts, with Sephiroth and his acute senses shadowing the young Guado from a distance while the rest of us went back to our inn to wait.

I've never liked waiting. I don't think anyone does. It's both tense and tedious. Lord Braska tried to read, while I lost many more hands of cards to Jecht. For more than two hours, we tried to pretend there was nothing wrong, and did a horrible job of it. Discipline kept me from running off to slaughter some fiends, but I was seriously considering throwing discipline to the winds by the time Sephiroth and Pah returned.

"It isn't good," the young Guado said the moment the door was closed behind them. "Or at least, I get a feeling it isn't."

"Go on," Braska said.
"Some people saw a person in a heavy black robe enter the mansion, but no one saw anyone of that description leave again. Then I got smart and asked about anyone they didn't recognize, or that they thought shouldn't have been there."

"Gonna tell us what you found out?" Jecht looked more than impatient.

"Several people saw a young Guado male leave, alone, and carrying with him the stench of the Farplane. No one could put a name to him, though."

"What's that supposed to mean?" the blitzer demanded.

Pah rolled her eyes. "It means that this 'Zurian' is an Unsent, old man. Yevon only knows how old he is—one of the people who saw him is the biggest gossip in Guadosalam, and he knows every Guado by sight, if not by name. So 'Zurian', or whatever his real name is, has been . . . away . . . for more than forty years."

"We also found this," Sephiroth added, dropping a black robe onto the back of a chair. I hadn't noticed it against the background of his black coat. "It's been treated somehow, probably to hide the condition of its wearer."

I reached out and rubbed a fold of the cloth between my fingers. It felt . . . odd. The cloth itself was ordinary, of a fine-spun tropical weave, but I almost had the impression it was vibrating.

"Suspicious," I offered, and Sephiroth nodded.

"He may not be the killer, but at this point I find it difficult to believe he is uninvolved. Unfortunately, our problem now reduces to finding one Guado among thousands, based on a vague description of his appearance." Sephiroth was frowning as he gazed at the black robe, and I frowned too. At least if we'd been searching for a needle in a haystack, we would have been able to go to the Al Bhed for a magnet.

"An Unsent is vulnerable to the Sending," Braska said. "It's their only distinguishing characteristic, unless you happen to be a Guado and able to sniff them out. And 'Zurian' has already proven that he can conceal his scent."

Sephiroth's gaze snapped to him. "What do you have in mind?"

"Tromell asked me to perform the Sending for Jyscal and the dead guards tomorrow, although as I understand it, Guado custom is to deposit the bodies of the dead directly in the Farplane. If we require the entire population to be there, one of two things will happen."

"Either our Unsent will be in pain from being so close to a Sending, or he'll be one of the very few people not in attendance," I said. "It might work."

Unfortunately, there was no way around the fact that it would also put Braska in terrible danger. After all, the easiest way to halt a Sending was to hurt or kill the Sender.

Chapter End Notes

Yup, Jecht has an ageist streak. I have no idea why I postulated Jyscal/Tromell, except that it seemed like a good idea at the time.
Chapter 15

Jecht stood at the foot of the stairs that led up to the platform that had been hastily erected in the stairs in front of the mansion, while I stood in the rear, ready to swoop down on anyone who threatened Lord Braska. Sephiroth wasn't visible. I knew he'd found a location above our heads where he'd be able to spot anyone trying to slip away after the Sending started, but I didn't know exactly where it was. And in the meanwhile, Tromell's guards would be searching the rest of Guadosalam. It wasn't a perfect arrangement, but it was the best we had been able to do.

We did have one hidden helper if things went really wrong, though. Seymour stood on the far side of the platform from me, with guards flanking him on either side, but they had orders not to stop him if he tried to cast something. He was wearing manacles, but the chain that stretched between them was long enough to allow reasonable freedom of movement. If this developed into a fight, he'd be able to contribute to it.

The bodies were laid out at the front, with Jyscal's at the center on a . . . well, actually, it was a low table, but they'd draped it with white cloth so that it wasn't immediately obvious that it had come from one of the mansion's sitting rooms. The dead guards were below and to either side of him, although the traditional wrappings made it impossible to tell who was who or, indeed, that we weren't looking at mannequins.

Tromell stepped forward, placing himself directly behind Jyscal's bier. The crowd—for there was quite a considerable crowd here, in the square in front of Jyscal's mansion—quieted.

"Honoured ones, we are gathered here today to commemorate the passing of Lord Jyscal, in accordance with his wishes and beliefs," Tromell said. "By his own request, he is to be Sent according to the manner of Yevon, in the presence of his kin and clan."

Murmurs among the crowd, and uneasy stirring. Only the guards had known in advance that this was going to be something other than a traditional Guado funeral.

"Summoner Braska has been kind enough to offer his assistance in this matter," Tromell continued, and Braska stepped forward, with his staff gripped in both hands. More muttering from the crowd . . . which quieted again as a single voice spoke from the back.

"This is obscene."

Tromell raised his chin. "Only to those who make it so. Show yourself, defiler!" I wouldn't have thought the aging Guado had enough steel in his spine to speak with such firm authority, but maybe Jyscal had meant so much to him that he was willing to force himself against his nature for the dead man's sake.

The crowd parted, and a female Guado in a blitzball uniform stepped forward. The square was so quiet that I could hear Pah's sudden indrawn breath, even though she was several feet away. I was a little surprised myself, because I recognized this woman as well: Ihra, the one I had met among the twisting tunnels of Guadosalam while I was looking for Sephiroth.

"Lord Jyscal may have fallen from grace, but seeing him off using a human ceremony—presided over by a human, no less!—is an attack on everything we stand for."

"It was Lord Jyscal's wish," Tromell said steadily, not backing down an inch.

"Funerals are for the living, not for the dead," Ihra snapped. "He had no right to scorn the traditions
of our people! Nor do you!"

There was movement off to the side. Everyone turned slightly to stare at Seymour as he came forward, trailing guards. Seymour, who had left his hat and veil behind in his cell, but still wore plain, human-made clothing and had his hair braided back. Even I glanced at him before forcing my gaze back to the crowd.

"If funerals are for the living, then it follows that all this display is for those who were closest to Lord Jyscal, and guards Vuon and Teppel," Seymour said, gesturing to each of the wrapped bodies in turn as he came to a stop behind the biers, beside Braska. "Are you claiming you had some sort of personal association with my father or one of the men who died defending him? If not, what gives you the right to dictate the nature of the ceremony here?"

"Lord Jyscal had a personal association with all Guado," was the best Ihra could come up with, but the words made the crowd shift restlessly. They weren't buying it either.

"This is foolishness," Seymour said. "If someone wishes to reclaim Vuon's or Teppel's body for burial on the Farplane, let them speak now."

No one moved.

"Very well. Then, to counter one of your complaints, I will perform the Sending myself, bound as I am . . . if Lord Braska will lend me his staff. I seem to have misplaced my own." Seymour's smile was unpleasant. He was, I decided, pleased that he had found some way to make things worse for the woman in front of him, while also forcing her into a position where she couldn't protest.

"I would be pleased to loan it to you, Lord Seymour." Braska handed his staff to the younger man, bowed, and left center stage, coming over to stand beside me at the back, where he offered me a wry smile and whispered, "I almost called him 'Rufus' again."

"He might have been happier if you had," I muttered back.

Up front, Seymour flexed his arms, testing the limits of the chain that linked his wrists, then bowed his head—I couldn't see his face from this angle, but I thought he might have had his eyes closed as he tried to center himself. I wondered how long it had been since he had performed a Sending. It might have been recent, if one of the other Guado had died unexpectedly at Baaj, or he might never have done so after he'd completed training.

Still, it appeared that the dance was something a Summoner never really forgot. When Seymour raised his head again, he moved straight into the first sweep of the staff, and then on into the turn, and the pyreflies instantly began to rise—only a handful at first, but as Seymour's motions continued, they flowed up in a steady stream.

A pyrefly not sourced from any of the bodies drifted onto the stage from somewhere off to my left, and I tensed. It could just have been a stray, part of a fiend, but then another one appeared, and something howled in agony. It was coming from . . . coming from . . . one of the lattice-covered windows that opened onto the square from above!

I tried not to grind my teeth. There had to be a path up there via some combination of tunnels, but I had no idea where to find it, and none of us had the time to go looking. If this was the mysterious Zurian, we needed to question him, and that meant getting him away from the Sending before he evaporated.

A shadow fell across me, and then Sephiroth was clinging to the lattice of the window. I couldn't tell
where he'd jumped from, and really, I preferred not to think about it, but I could see him tearing the lattice apart with one hand while he hung on with the other.

Then I lost track of him again as the wall exploded in a messy shower of debris.

The thing that emerged from the new hole looked like a Guado with four oversized arms and glowing hair, squatting atop a floating pyramid. I blinked as I realized it also had more than one face—four, from the look of it, one on each side of its head, with ears somehow jammed in between. *Fiend!* And this was one of the dangerous ones. Souls stubborn enough to spend even a short period as Unsent were often immensely powerful.

I drew my sword as Seymour completed the Sending and emerged from his trancelike state. The Guado spectators were still scrambling away from the chunks of wall that had fallen on them from above. Damn it, where was Sephiroth?

The debris shifted, and a black-and-silver form rose from among them. Sephiroth's long leather coat had sawdust and splinters clinging to it, and (as far as I could tell, given that he was nowhere near me) he looked mildly annoyed as he took in the situation with a quick glance around. Then he jumped into the air.

I'd seen him do this before, while fighting large fiends—another aspect of his style that I would never be able to replicate. He seemed to hang for several seconds at the apex of the leap, raining blows down on the fiend. When it tried to counter with an ice spell, Sephiroth got the tip of one boot on an ice shard and used it to fuel another jump. It landed him on the pyramid, astride the fiend, feet planted on opposite corners and his thighs gripping the creature's head as he held his blade almost vertically against its throat.

The pyramid dipped down and hit the middle of the platform with a crash, tilting on one side as it did so. Apparently whatever force had been holding it up hadn't been capable of supporting an extra person. Sephiroth was thrown clear, twisting in midair to land on his feet, but before he could plunge forward again, the fiend aimed with all four hands and fired a spell straight up.

I grabbed Braska as the roof began to come down, intending to shield him with my body, but then there was a flare of energy, clockfaces flickering everywhere, and the falling debris froze in place as several Guado screamed.

"RUN!" Sephiroth's voice was pitched to carry to every corner of the square. "Get out of here NOW!"

Tromell hadn't needed to be told twice. He fled past us in the half-second of paralysis during which I was trying to figure out where we should go. Very well—he knew Guadosalam better than any of us. Dragging Braska with me, I followed the aging Guado into the mansion's anteroom, now clean of spattered blood. Seymour and Pah Guado followed close behind, the two of them also dragging someone between them: Jecht. Who was complaining at the top of his lungs.

"We're just *leaving* him out there? You've gotta be kidding me! There's no way he can hold the roof up and still get out of there in time!"

"And what do you expect us to do about it?" Seymour asked. "Perhaps I should go back out myself, and attempt to blast the falling debris? With fire magic, even, so that we can destroy everything *else* as well?"

"Sephiroth is strong," I said. "This isn't going to kill him." Desperately, I willed that to be true. My duty was still with Braska, and my lover was a man who understood about duty. He'd know why I
couldn't go back for him.

Let him be safe, I prayed to Yevon.

And for once, my prayer was answered, although the thunderous roar from outside as the ceiling was finally released from the spell made my breath catch in my throat. But it was accompanied by Sephiroth striding through the door, dragging a strange Guado by the arm. Pah wrinkled her nose as they approached, and Seymour vented a low chuckle.

"I see that you managed to retrieve our Unsent," the young Guado said. "I am . . . amazed."

"Unfortunately, it was at the cost of not being able to make certain everyone else got clear in time," came Sephiroth's grim reply. "However, since he—" He forced the Unsent forward, so that he was standing between us. "—seemed quite capable of causing another disaster, I felt I had little choice. A case of not being superhuman enough."

Zurian, if that was his name, vented a cracked laugh. "And what makes you think you deserve any better? Defilers. You are all defilers and murderers!"

"Some of us are murderers, certainly, but what is it that you think we have defiled?" Sephiroth asked. "It can't be that you consider Lord Jyscal's funeral rites to be a problem—being a Summoner's Guardian yourself suggests that you aren't violently opposed to Yevon."

Zurian laughed. "All Summoners, and all those who guard. All! You seek to kill her. You seek to sully her sacrifice. You have less worth than the ground under Lady Yocun's feet, and Ryllia . . . fair Ryllia . . ."

Braska's eyes went wide. "You—you name is Vrokk, isn't it? Vrokk Guado."

"Is it? Was it? Who I am does not matter. Only that none of you kill her. Only that none of you replace her."

Jecht rolled his eyes. "What's that supposed to mean? I've known guys on three-day benders who made more sense than you."

Zurian/Vrokk began to laugh again, a tortured sound that made me want to cover my ears. He raised one hand, and for a moment I thought he was going to hide his face in it, but instead he abruptly drew his nails across his throat and slumped to the floor, already beginning to evaporate into pyreflies.

"Did he just kill himself? That's crazy!" Jecht was staring at the swirl of pyreflies with what I could only describe as horror.

"He prevented himself from being Sent, or deposited in the Farplane," Seymour corrected. "I wouldn't be surprised if we saw him again, somewhere between here and Zanarkand."

"So he escaped." Sephiroth scowled. "Braska, you learned something from that babble of his. If you could elucidate for the rest of us?"

Lord Braska shook his head. "Most of it was, as you say, babble, but the names weren't. Lady Yocun was the last High Summoner, one hundred years ago, and the names of her Guardians, Vrokk Guado and Ryllia, are well-known to anyone who has studied church history."

"'You seek to sully her sacrifice,'" Seymour quoted. "That must have been in reference to Lady Yocun. Vrokk doesn't want a new High Summoner to emerge."
"He was going on and on about us killing some woman, though, and that can't be this Yocun, right? 'Cause she's already dead."

"That part makes no sense to me either," Braska admitted. "However, we can discuss this later. Right now, we need to help anyone who was injured when the ceiling collapsed."

It turned out not to be too bad. Sephiroth's warning had scattered the spectators, so none of them had been under the center of the falling roof, although a few had been caught in the peripheries. Broken limbs, bruises, concussions, and a few people trapped by the weight of the debris. Braska healed, Tromell reassured, and the rest of us lifted chunks of wood out of the way. The most startling part was seeing sunlight in the middle of Guadosalam—not all of the ceiling had collapsed completely, but enough was gone that there were several holes open to the sky.

"It may take years to repair this," Tromell said as he tilted his face up into a ray of light.

"And what if it does?" Seymour replied. "A clearer look at the world may be just what Guadosalam needs."

There was a protesting moan from under the nearby debris. I heaved some wood out of the way to reveal Ihra Guado, who had a nasty compound fracture of one leg. She said something sharp in High Guado and closed her eyes when she saw who had rescued her.

"Humans, abominations, and their comrades," she added. "I should have expected that, I suppose. Don't touch me!" She batted Braska's hands away as he bent down to check her injury. Apparently she was willing to talk to Braska's hands away as he bent down to check her injury. Apparently she was willing to talk to non-Guado, but touching us was a line she wouldn't cross.

"Hey, if you ever wanna blitz again, let him patch you up," Jecht advised her. "He's pretty good."

"I can wait for a Guado healer," she said.

"Maybe . . . and maybe not," Jecht said, scratching the back of his left calf with his right foot. "Knew a guy once on my old team—stupid sap stepped on a tack his kid sister had dropped on the floor, and he just pulled the thing out and covered up the hole like he figured everything was gonna be okay. Three days later, his foot's all swollen up, and he faints on his way to practice. By then there wasn't much they could do to help him. Ended up losing most of the leg from right below the knee. Never blitzed again. Since then, I've always taken that shit really seriously."

Ihra blinked at him. "You blitz?"

"Bet your ass I do." Jecht offered her a grin.

"He's good at it, too," Braska said. "He beat an entire team four-to-nothing in a practice match while we were in Luca. Even if it was the Besaid Aurochs, you have to admit that took some amount of skill."

The Guado woman nodded. "I've played the Aurochs. They're terrible, by professional standards, but not so terrible I'd want to take on the full team by myself."

"So?"

"Pardon?"

"Are you gonna let Braska patch up that leg of yours or not?"

Ihra nibbled her lower lip. " . . . All right."
I was starting to think that a certain old saying about blitzball being the universal language of Spira was true after all. To me, Jecht's manner ranged from annoying to abrasive, but he managed to make friends in the oddest of places.

Braska had to pull Ihra's leg out straight to realign the fracture before he could heal it. The blitzer endured this with gritted teeth, and left the area quickly as soon as she could stand. I wondered just how much of an impression we'd made on her. Or not made. And what difference, if any, it would make to the political situation in Guadosalam.

Tromell cleared his throat from where he stood near the mansion's door. "Lord Seymour . . ."

Seymour smirked. "Ah, have you decided it's time to haul me off in chains again, Tromell?" He raised his arms and, in illustration, jingled the manacles he was still wearing.

"I was hoping I wouldn't need to," the older Guado said. "My lord, with your father dead, we are now leaderless. And you are his only heir."

The smirk remained firmly in place. "Would you put the previous lord's accused murderer in charge of Guadosalam?"

"I think it is clear now that the Unsent Vrokk was most likely Lord Jyscal's killer," Tromell said. "Yes, my lord, we would have you take your father's place. After all, there is no one else."

Seymour's smirk vanished like a light going out. "No."

I think we were all a bit surprised. Even Sephiroth crooked an eyebrow upward.

"My lord—"

"This isn't just a whim, Tromell. I promised—I promised both the others and myself—that I would go all the way to Zanarkand, and ask the questions that I should have the first time, and, I hope, finally find some answers. It is a matter much larger than Guadosalam alone."

"But what are we to do in the meanwhile, with no-one to take charge?" the aging Guado asked.

"Oh, please," Seymour said. "You would have been handling almost everything yourself for the next several months even if I stayed, while I learned what needed to be done. You can keep on doing it for a while longer than that—even indefinitely. Furthermore, you have a better chance than I of de-escalating the political situation here. You are pure Guado; you are acquainted with those on both sides of the dispute; you can play the part of a moderate, whereas I, by virtue of heredity, can never portray anything but a radical. And a false radical at that, since I know that the Church of Yevon is corrupt all the way down to its bones."

"Lord Seymour—"

"No, my mind is quite made up. If I ever return to this place again, it will be by a route that leads through Zanarkand. Or, you can chain me up in a cell again, and attempt to claim me as your ruler despite it." He jingled the manacles pointedly.

"We are not such hypocrites, my lord. One moment while I find the key . . ." Tromell was hunting through his pockets, and going progressively paler as he seemed to find nothing. "It . . . must have fallen out . . . Please believe me that this was not intentional, Lord Seymour!"

"I do believe you," Seymour said. "You wouldn't resort to such idiocy to keep me here. It does leave me with a bit of a problem, however."
"Hold your arms out in front of you, separated by at least a foot," Sephiroth said suddenly.

Seymour raised his eyebrows and extended his arms as requested. Masamune licked out in a blur, and a moment later the shackles were on the ground in pieces. The half-Guado rubbed his wrists as Sephiroth returned the long sword to its place on his back.

"Thank you."

Sephiroth shrugged. "The alternative would have been searching all of this for something no larger than a finger," he said, gesturing at the debris. "Hardly efficient."

Seymour smiled. "No," he admitted. "Shall we return to the inn?"

"You will not stay in your own home, my lord?" Tromell gestured in the direction of the mansion.

"That isn't my home, Tromell. Or shall we say that it is just as much that as Baaj was, in its time? Neither place holds many fond memories for me. I will go with my comrades instead. If I have any home now, I suppose it is with them."

Home, I mused. What was that for me, now? Once, it had been a single bunk in a room that held three others, and no more personal belongings than could fit in a chest of the specific size prescribed by the Rule of the Order. Then, for a few months, I'd returned to the small bed tucked up under the eaves of my mother's house . . . but that hadn't really been home anymore. It had chafed. And then I'd left Bevelle with Braska, and that had chafed a bit too at first, like a new piece of armour whose straps weren't broken in yet. But slowly, as we'd traveled across half of Spira and back, things had started to come together.

Perhaps Seymour was right. This was home, at least for now. With my Summoner and my lover and my friends . . . and the twisting discomfort left behind by the knowledge that when we reached Zanarkand, everything would change. We had to find some path, some alternative, that would cause Braska to abandon the Final Summoning. The lie Seymour had described to us turned my stomach. I wasn't going to lose Braska to that. Or Seymour himself, for that matter, if he decided that attempting the Final Summoning in tandem was our best bet.

If Braska died at the end of this journey, it would mean that I—all of us, but me especially—had failed. But the truth was that Braska didn't really want to live. He wanted to join his wife on the Farplane instead. And convincing him otherwise was beyond me. Where was I even supposed to start? I might no longer be a monk, but I was still a warrior. Death was a risk that I accepted in the course of doing my job. I'd chosen to make my purpose more important than my life. That meant that while I wasn't deliberately turning toward death, I wasn't exactly running away from it, either. People who did that were called cowards.

How was I supposed to turn Braska into a coward?

I was out of my depth here. I needed help. But where was I supposed to turn? Seymour wouldn't be any use—he was more likely to sympathize with Braska than help me. Sephiroth was almost as bad, and not especially good with people to begin with. Both of them had rejected the value of their own lives, and why was I so comfortable traveling with all these suicidal madmen? But if those two couldn't help me, that left . . . Jecht.

Yevon! I had to be insane to even be thinking that.

But although I racked my brain for alternatives, every mental avenue I pursued just made me more certain of my conclusion. It was Jecht or no one.
The trick was going to be to catch him alone. Neither Guadosalam nor our next stretch of travel across the Thunder Plains would offer many opportunities, so I was going to have to go right up to the blitzer and admit that I wanted to speak to him in private. It was enough to make me wince. I mean, I could imagine what Jecht was going to say.

Except that it turned out he wasn't that nasty. I think he started to say something that he considered entertaining, when I spoke to him as the supper dishes were being cleared away from our table at the restaurant, but he stopped himself when he saw my expression.

"Sure, Auron—what are friends for?"

Braska and Seymour weren't bothered, but Sephiroth gave me a sharp look, as though to ask what I was doing. I brushed my fingers over the back of his hand in a quick touch he must barely have felt through the leather. A more demonstrative man might have kissed him, I suppose, but I wasn't comfortable with that, and I doubted he would be either.

"This won't take long," I said. "Wait for me at the inn?"

"Of course."

Guadosalam had many little nooks and crannies that led nowhere, and Jecht had apparently developed some formula for finding them over the past couple of days, because he led me straight to a little cul-de-sac that, in any human city, would have been covered with graffiti.

Jecht folded his arms behind his head and leaned back against a wall. "Can't think of anything I've done since we hit Guadosalam that even the tightest of tight-asses would think it was worth taking me aside to ream me out about, so I guess this must be something else."

I nodded. "It's about Braska."

"Haven't noticed him being much different from the usual, either."

"That's the problem," I admitted. "He's still out to commit suicide. I can't figure out how to make him want to live."

Jecht blew out a breath. "Hoo-oo. That's a toughie. I gotta ask—why now? Why not when he started organizing this trip? Or even when he started doing his Summoner training? Or on board the boat on the way back from Baaj?"

I shook my head. "I've only really known him for about six months. Before that, we weren't more than passing acquaintances. As for why I didn't try to stop him before we left Bevelle . . . it would have been cruel. We thought the Final Summoning was the only way, then. Now there's hope, but he's still holding on to his deathwish."

"And your boyfriend and Rufus both have the same kind of don't-care-if-I-die crap rattling around in their heads, so you come to the one person on this trip who ain't that kinda crazy. Okay, fair 'nough. Dunno what I can do to help you, though. I think . . . first, we gotta make sure there is some kinda hope. 'S pretty obvious why the fayth wanted Sephy and me here—we don't think the same way as you guys, all that 'Spiral of Death' and atonement crap that I hear people talking about—but is that really enough? Figuring out that Sin is just a big, fancy lump of pyreflies is one thing, but that doesn't get us any closer to turning it into a cloud of pyreflies hustling their asses out of here and never coming back, y'know what I mean? Unless your boyfriend has some ideas and he's talked 'em over with you. Damned if I can tell what that guy's thinking most of the time."

"I think he's waiting until after we have a chance to question Yunalesca to try to put together a
concrete plan." Although the truth was, I couldn't really tell what Sephiroth was thinking either. Maybe I should ask, when we were alone. Although he might not answer.

"Huh. Anyway, Braska . . . The most important thing to him that's still on Spira and not the Farplane's gotta be little Yuna. 'S what it means to be a dad, even if you're like me and you suck at it, and Braska doesn't. So if things get really bad, we might be able to snap him out of it by reminding him about her. For the rest, we're gonna have to wait until Zanarkand."

Zanarkand. I was tired of hearing about Zanarkand. Tired of thinking about Zanarkand. But everything seemed to lead back there.

"Auron . . . if it helps, I'll look after Braska." Jecht must have noticed the incredulous look I was giving him, because he added, "I figure . . . well, in blitz I was always a forward, y'know? Right in the middle of the action. That's the job that makes you a blitz star. Doesn't mean the other positions on the team aren't important, though—if the guys defending the net aren't doing their job, your game can get fucked up pretty big, pretty fast, no matter how many goals you score. And at first, I was going into this Guardian gig the same way, as a forward, and leaving you behind to guard the net. But truth is, I'm just not good enough. Not in real fighting. It took seeing Sephy go at it to really make me understand. I mean, when he's serious, that guy doesn't waste a single inch of movement, and you're almost as good. Me, I just wave my sword around and hope I'm gonna hit something. Kind of like one of those kids from Besaid throwing their blitzball around, and hoping the next shot lands in the goal. But blocking some fiend while Braska calls his aeons, that I can do. So I figure I'm gonna concentrate on that, and let the rest of you shine. If we really do turn Sin into a smear of pyreflies, there's gonna be enough fame to go 'round, anyway."

"It does help. Thank you." Although seeing Jecht act mature made me feel very strange indeed. Just as it always gave me a peculiar feeling to remember he was Braska's age, older even than Sephiroth. He just acted like an idiot teenager sometimes.

When we got back to the inn, Sephiroth was sitting in the main room of the suite we all shared, turning a materia over and over in one hand. He put it away as soon as we entered.

"Let's go to bed," I said. "It's been a long day."

Jecht snickered. "Hope you listened to my advice, Auron. Never thought I'd see the day when you came to me for sex tips."

I gave him an exasperated look. "Do you actually find that funny?"

"You guys have no sense of humour," the blitzer said. "See you in the morning." He gave us a casual wave as he went to his room and shut the door.

It was the third night running that I had spent in Sephiroth's bed, although we hadn't done anything sexual again since the first night. Just shared our evening rituals in silence, and then curled up against one another, trying to shut the world away.

Home is made of little things like those.
When Seymour emerged from his room the next morning, his hat and veil were nowhere in evidence, although he still wore his human clothes and had his hair braided. It was Jecht, conveniently tactless, who asked the obvious question as we all shouldered our packs and headed for the door.

"You sure you're gonna be okay like that?"

Seymour gave him a single, sharp nod. "I believe I may have been hiding too much," he said. "Hiding may make my life easier in the short term, but it can also turn against me if the concealment is broken. Better to know from the start if someone hates me. And I know for certain now that the four of you will help me even if it may not be in your best interests."

"What, so you didn't trust us before?" Jecht looked genuinely hurt.

"Trust can be difficult when you've always been surrounded by dishonest people," Sephiroth said. Jecht threw up his hands. "Whatever," he said as he stomped off. Since he was, as always, barefoot, it wasn't the most effective stomping. We were going to have to buy him some shoes before we reached the perpetual snow and ice surrounding Lake Macalania.

Tromell was waiting for us just inside the northern exit from Guadosalam, along with two guards, Pah, and, to my surprise, Ihra.

"Lord Seymour . . ."

The young half-Guado sighed. "Please don't waste your time, Tromell. I have not changed my mind, and I will not be staying."

"I understand, my lord. But . . . will you come back?"

"Someday, perhaps. You will pardon me if I had rather be a bit more certain of my welcome before I approach these gates again."

Tromell winced. So did Pah. Well, she'd already proven she had more than blitz in her head.

"It would be so much easier if we could just agree on which side's right," the girl muttered.

"Unfortunately, they appear to both be wrong," Seymour said, only a little more loudly. "The choice is between intolerance and corruption."

"Lord Seymour, you cannot be serious! Yevon is—"

"Yevon—the Church of Yevon—exists to perpetuate the Church of Yevon," Seymour said, cutting
off the older Guado. "It does that by exerting control over everything it can, and marginalizing what it cannot control. You were the one who taught me history, Tromell—surely you are intelligent enough to see the pattern."

"But the Summoners," Pah said.

"Have also been co-opted by the Church," Seymour said. "The events have been erased from history, but enough fragments remain to make it clear that the art of Summoning predates the Church. I suspect that the method for making new fayths was lost when the Church cracked down on Summoners who were trained outside its control. Regardless, any successful Summoner must believe in the path they follow. Acquiring and using the Final Aeon requires a level of self-sacrifice and purity of purpose that I was not myself able to achieve. The Summoners are true. It is those who send them out who are false."

I thought Pah looked thoughtful after that. So did Ihra. Why was she here, anyway?

The young Guado cleared her throat, almost as though she had been listening in on my thoughts. "Lord Braska, Summoner Kelanth and his Guardian asked me to give you and your Guardians their regards. It appears that the Summoner is out of danger, although he will be some time recovering."

"Will he continue with his pilgrimage?" Braska asked.

"I am told that is in the hands of Yevon," the girl replied, with a shrug. "However, I had the impression that he would be unable to leave Guadosalam for some time."

There was a silence. Jecht shifted his weight. "Hey, if no one's got anything else to say, we're burning daylight here."

"Sir Jecht." That was Ihra.

"Yeah?"

"I would like to thank you. Our coach said that if my injury had not been healed so promptly, I would most likely have missed several games while the swelling subsided."

"Eh, don't mention it. It was just, y'know, the right thing to do."

For the first time in a long time, I didn't add a mental groan when he spoke those words.

"Hey, Rufus, y'coming?" the blitzer added, already halfway to the exit.

"Are we still calling you 'Rufus'?" I asked Seymour.

"If you would. I . . . think I prefer it. Perhaps if I ever come back here, I will have to be Seymour Guado again, but until then, let him share his father's funeral."

I couldn't say that I really understood, but if it was what Seymour wanted, I saw no harm in it.

Although people who have only ever seen the area on a map claim otherwise, the Thunder Plains do not begin immediately outside Guadosalam. There is a brief additional span of hilly, forested land that gradually flattens out and becomes more barren. Then the clouds gather and the rain starts to fall. And finally, when the vegetation has been reduced to patches of lichen hiding in the more sheltered spots, the lightning begins.

"Are we going to continue in this storm?" Sephiroth asked.
"It never stops," Braska said. "That's why they call these the Thunder Plains."

"Interesting that they aren't flooded, then. The geology must be as peculiar as the weather." Sephiroth tilted his head back, scanning the clouds.

"We're gonna get fried," Jecht predicted gloomily. "Just like the first time."

"That was because you tried to treat lightning-dodging as a game, so that you could win free liquor from the travel agency," I pointed out.

"Yeah, well, this is the kinda place that makes normal people want to get drunk, y'know. And it was going okay until . . ." Jecht didn't seem to know how to end that sentence, but the snippy part of my brain provided, "until it wasn't. "Things would be a lot easier if these stupid lightning towers of yours weren't half-busted."

Sephiroth raised his eyebrows. "Lightning towers?"

"Yeah, you know, those tall things with the spikes on top of them that kind of light up purply for half a second when they're hit? They're some kind of machines, and they're supposed to pull the lightning away from the road, or something. 'Cept they don't always work, and I ain't all that impressed."

"Given how tall they are, they should be struck preferentially even if they were just masonry. Unless someone miscalculated the optimal spacing . . ." Sephiroth shook his head. "Again, not my field. I do wonder how anyone manages to transport goods through here, however."

That, I knew, since I'd escorted supplies being sent from Bevelle to the Djose temple a few times. "By placing metal cages with trailing wires over the wagons to channel strikes against them, and casting NulShock on the chocobos. Which have to be specifically trained not to fear the lightning, or they'll panic even if they aren't hurt." And if you had to weather too many strikes and exhausted your mages, you had to stop under one of the towers until the next day even if it was only noon. Crossing the Thunder Plains on foot took slightly under four days, but with carts, it tended to turn into six days or more of pure hell.

"It must make commerce difficult."

"Commerce on Spira is limited in general," Seymour said. "Terrain, fiends, and the presence of Sin all act together to strangle it. The most reliable method of getting something from one place to another is to ship it on an Al Bhed courier vessel, since they are fast enough to outrun Sin. The next best, despite everything, is overland. Although Sin can leave the ocean, it seldom does."

Sephiroth nodded, and dodged a rogue lightning bolt with a quick jump to the side.

We camped under the overhang of a lightning tower that night, with Jecht complaining bitterly all the while. None of us would get all that much sleep, I knew. The crack of lightning reaching the ground nearby was loud enough to cut through even Sephiroth's Sleepel spell. Still, the alternative was walking all night, and the fiends along here were beginning to toughen up. There were a lot of those annoying, too-quick fliers that Jecht and I couldn't hit. My speed was improving, though, since I was able to strike the fast-footed lizards squarely about three-quarters of the time.

I borrowed Sephiroth's water materia when he woke me to exchange watches, and worked with it until I had to return his wristlet the next morning. Then worked with my newly-acquired element some more, until I had each sword-stroke doing double damage to the various lightning-based fiends that kept on interrupting our travels. That gave me three elements, since I'd picked up lightning on our second, uninterrupted trip along Mushroom Rock Road, for all the good it had done me there. I'd
decided to leave fire until we reached the frozen area surrounding Lake Macalania.

*I'm going to have to get my hands on a Sphere Grid for a bit,* I thought as we approached the Travel Agency, towards the end of our second day on the Plains. Acquiring new abilities sometimes released a block somewhere, and I'd been stuck in a rut for a while, with nothing to work towards.

Following established patterns, Sephiroth and I were the first to enter the Travel Agency. My lover frowned as he looked around, his gaze becoming fixed on a table for a moment. When I looked in that direction, it took me a while to notice the little girl cowering underneath it, curled up in a ball with her eyes closed and her hands over her ears.

The Al Bhed youth behind the counter said something in his own language, and seemed a bit surprised when Braska answered him. He blinked several times before tentatively addressing the Summoner by name, and the two of them talked a bit longer. I was about to lay my hand on Sephiroth's arm and see if I could convince him to extend his translation materia's envelope again when the two of them switched back to Spiran.

"Is plenty of rooms," the boy said, and I realized suddenly that he looked a bit like Cid's son, Brother, except older and more conventionally dressed. Well, conventionally for an Al Bhed. "Is no visitors except Rikku. Five rooms, yes?"

"Four," Braska corrected.

"Five is no trouble," the Al Bhed protested.

"Four," Braska repeated, and said something in Al Bhed as he gestured at Sephiroth and myself. The youth blinked and made a noise of sudden understanding, and I tried hard not to flush—with rage or with embarrassment, I wasn't sure, but regardless, I was fairly sure of what Braska had been saying.

In any case, the young Al Bhed took four keys from behind the counter. "Is first four rooms, yes?" he said, gesturing at a door off to one side. "Soundproof for better sleep. Please rest well." He bowed, then switched back to Al Bhed for a moment and said something that made Braska laugh.

"You did just fine, Keyakku," the Summoner said, sweeping up the keys. "Jecht!"

The blitzer caught his key out of the air, and immediately headed in the direction of that door. I was fairly sure that of all of us, he'd slept the worst last night. "Wake me up for supper, 'kay?" He left the room before Braska could even assure him that we would. Seymour accepted his key a little more sedately, but headed in the same direction afterwards.

I forced myself to walk up to the counter and ask, instead of hiding behind a shelf. "Do you have a Sphere Grid I could borrow?" Meanwhile, Sephiroth accepted our key and went back to looking over the merchandise. Braska, being Braska, pocketed his own key and crouched down in front of the table in the corner to try to coax out the little girl.

"Sphere Grid? One moment, please." Keyakku rummaged around behind the counter for a bit and pulled one out. "Free service to friend of Braska, if you give back before you leave. Need to go back and fetch some things. Leave on counter, after."

"Thanks." An unactivated Sphere Grid looks like a slab of . . . grey. Not quite stone or metal. More like bone, but no one seems to know what it's the bone of.

I nicked a finger with the edge of my sword and smeared a bit of blood—not even a full drop—on the grey, and watched it change as reddish lines etched themselves across the surface, interrupted at semi-regular intervals with small, round nodes. Some of them were just indicators of physical or
magical ability, and if you stuck with a regular training regimen and rechecked the grid periodically, you would see them light up on their own over time. I'd triggered several new ones since we'd left Bevelle.

The other nodes governed skills, and would appear, bringing connecting lines with them, as you pursued a course of study or training. The first skill in a chain was always the most difficult to acquire. My training as a warrior-monk had given me both defensive techniques and attacks that weakened my opponents by causing energy disruption, but the nodes for the final techniques in those chains were still dark, sealed off from the rest of my grid by lock nodes.

There are three ways to get rid of a lock. Some people manage to break through one after experiencing a sudden flash of insight, but it's rare. Sometimes they weaken over the course of years of training. Or there's a type of artefact called a Key Sphere that can break them down, but they're even rarer than chocobo teeth.

I had a new section of grid down in one corner, though, with some nodes already lit. FrostSword, one of them identified itself when I touched it. ShockSword. RainSword. FlameSword—that one was unlit, as were the next several. Which turned out to be the white magic null-element spells. A couple of magical-ability nodes had also spawned in the area, already lit. Interesting.

"Those are new," Braska said over my shoulder. He'd managed to coax the little girl out from under the table and pick her up. The telltale yellow orb of a NulShock spell circled slowly around her.

"Fryd'e dryd?" the girl asked—one of the few Al Bhed phrases I actually understood: What's that?

"I'm somewhat curious myself," Sephiroth said.

Braska gave what I assumed must have been an abbreviated, age-appropriate explanation to the little girl in Al Bhed, with Sephiroth listening in thanks to his convenient materia trick. The Summoner finished up by pricking his finger with a pocket knife and adding a little bit of his blood to the grey slab, and the girl giggled and stared as a new series of arcs and lines and nodes appeared, outlined in blue-violet. Two lines shot across to link with my grid, which was interesting—the last time we'd done this, there had only been one line between me and Braska, and there had been no less than five high-level lock nodes decorating it, because our areas of specialization were so different. The new grid section I'd acquired seemed to be more compatible with Braska's abilities, because there were only two locks on the new line.

Braska hesitated, then offered the knife to Sephiroth. "I don't know if it will work for you at all, but now it's my turn to admit that I'm curious."

"I am as well," the silver-haired man replied. He pulled his glove off so that he could nick his hand, and let a single drop of blood fall.

There was a soft hiss as more lines shot across the grey to form an impossible diagram that looked vaguely like a pair of outspread wings. The light that outlined it rippled with different colours, like a demented rainbow, and one side of the diagram flared ominously . . . I blinked, wondering why I had chosen that particular word.

The more normal-looking side of the diagram was so thick with activated physical and magical nodes that it was difficult to spot any connecting line segments. Ability nodes . . . well, there were some, and I touched them cautiously, one at a time, with the tip of my left little finger. Perfect Critical. Far Cut. Scintilla. Sixth Sense. There were more, but they were all sword techniques or extremely powerful passives, most of which I'd never encountered before. Well, Sephiroth's pattern of training had to have been unique even on Gaia.
The other side of the diagram, with its disturbingly irregular pulses, was a spare sketch of lines and ability nodes. The first one I touched identified itself as a spell—Shadow Flare. The second sent me reeling back three steps so that I nearly knocked over a shelf full of merchandise. The node had tried to tell me what ability it represented, tried and . . . I hadn't been able to hold it. It had felt like I was falling into a glowing green vortex with a thunderous voice shouting at me, and I hadn't been able to seize even one syllable.

"Auron, are you all right?" Braska asked.

"Startled," I said. "It's . . . an unusual grid-diagram. I would advise not touching it while you're still holding the girl."

Sephiroth calmly reached out and touched the node that had so disturbed me, then worked his way through the others, one at a time. "You managed to pick the most difficult one," he said. "Most of the others are just spells, although . . . not ones that a human would normally have access to. That one, though—it represents the ability I use to manipulate things like pyreflies and Lifestream energy. The Cetra might have a simple one- or two-word description for that, but I don't, and apparently no one on Spira does either."

I was starting to understand. The packed-but-otherwise-normal side of the grid represented the abilities that came purely from the human Sephiroth, encapsulating the training and experiments he'd been put through. The nearly empty side . . . was a reflection of Jenova. Whatever Jenova was. Or had been.

And now he was looking at me with an intense non-expression—now that something has pushed my unhuman side into your face again, are you going to reject me? Deliberately, I stepped forward again, put one hand on his arm and reached for the grid again with the other, testing more nodes. Angel Whisper, said one. Dragon Force. Lifefbreak. Meteor. Nothing I had ever heard of before, but they had the feel of spells. White Wind. That was a spell used by dark flans, wasn't it? Were they all monster abilities?

Was that why he was afraid?

"I suppose I did manage to get the worst one," I said. "Sorry if I frightened you."

That got me a thoughtful look and a brief nod. I turned back to the grid for one last look, and noticed that Sephiroth's section didn't connect to mine or Braska's at all, not even through a line with multiple locks. It was the first time I had ever seen something like that, either. I suspected it was a warning: this man's abilities are not safe for others to use.

"We should burn that off before returning it," Braska said. "I'd rather Keyakku didn't touch that node either. Sephiroth, can you cast a weak fire spell on the grid?"

The silver-haired man shrugged and extended his hand over the Sphere Grid. A moment later, flames were caressing its surface, burning away the last traces of everyone's blood and making the lines and nodes fade away.

Keyakku re-emerged from the back at that moment, carrying a small crate, and stopped in surprise. "You get Rikku out?"

"I won't say it was easy," Braska said. "And she's still very frightened . . . but this might be the only chance I ever have to meet my niece."

I blinked. "That's Cid's daughter?"
"Mm. Keyakku is her cousin on the other side—mother's brother's son. I think Cid left her here hoping it would get her over her fear of lightning, but it seems to be having the opposite effect."

Keyakku nodded sadly as he set his crate down. "Always hides. Have to bring her food under table there, and she eats little. Be glad when Cid takes her back to ship. Hurts to see her like this."

As though on cue, a crack of thunder loud enough to be heard inside the well-insulated shop split the air, and Rikku howled and buried her face in Braska's robe. The Summoner patted her back and murmured to her in Al Bhed.

"Bedrooms less noisy," Keyakku offered.

Braska raised his eyebrows. "Then why is Rikku here in the shop?"

Keyakku shrugged helplessly. "Cid didn't go to rooms in back. Left her here. And she wouldn't come out on her own once she hid under the table, and he didn't have the heart to dig her out, I completed."

"I'll take her, then," Braska said.

"Is good," Keyakku said.

"I'll join you in our room in a moment," Sephiroth said, holding the key out to me. "I have a purchase I need to negotiate first."

I was tempted to stay, but when the two of them started having a dual-language discussion about copper-mythril alloy wire matching fairly detailed specifications, I decided it was better to ask Sephiroth what he wanted it for later, rather than trying to figure it out from context.

Like the travel agency on the Highroad, this one had small but well-appointed private rooms, with a bed and a desk taking up most of the floorspace. And proper bathrooms with running water, which were otherwise difficult to find outside Bevelle or Luca. And a laundry service, which I intended to make use of tonight. The rumble of thunder was so muted here that it sounded like distant voices, and I felt a bit of my tension ease away. I might not be as terrified of the lightning as poor little Rikku, but it served as a constant reminder that right on the other side of the wall was something dangerous that I didn't control and couldn't fight.

I'd taken off my armour and was contemplating the possibility of a shower when Sephiroth slipped inside and closed the door.

"Why the sudden interest in wire?" I asked, sitting up.

"It's the type used to make armatures for equipping materia. They don't have anything on hand here that meets the necessary specifications, but he's sent a message, and they should have some ready for me to pick up when we reach Bevelle." Having set Masamune aside, he sat down next to me and began unbuckling his boots. I reached for the straps that held his pauldrons in place, and worked them loose so that I could lift the armour away. With it gone, I could push the black leather coat back over his shoulders until it slid down to expose pale, bare skin.

Sephiroth caught my hand before I could do more than let my fingers glide lightly over the curve of his biceps. He still had his gloves on.

"You don't want to?" I meant it to be a matter-of-fact question, but it came out sounding . . . pleading. Which was embarrassing beyond belief. I did not plead.
"It isn't that. But I'm sure Angeal warned you about me, if Zack didn't. Having my partner initiate can be a problem for me sometimes."

Angeal, Zack... I'd tried to burn every word those two had said into my memory, because they were the only guide I had for dealing with this man. "Zack said... you need to feel in control."

"Even when I'm not. Yes. Otherwise, I can't..." He grimaced, and gestured downward. Oh. Yes, that could be a problem. "There are times I'm going to have to ask you to stop and have you do it, and they won't always be predictable or make sense. Even to me. Ironic that intimate contact is more likely to cause flashbacks for me than combat, but there you have it."

"It's fine," I said. "Whatever you need." I knew when I chose you that you were broken, and I didn't care. I still don't. I want... to protect you, all the jagged, cracked parts of you that you never show to anyone else. Yevon, I can't believe myself. "As long as you don't expect me to lie passively back and think of Bevelle, that is." As a joke, it was weak—I'm not good at those kinds of jokes—but it did create a little flicker of amusement at the corner of his mouth.

"No. Not ever that." He leaned in and kissed me, and I parted my lips, inviting him deeper, then chasing his tongue back into my mouth with my own when he began to withdraw. He didn't try to stop me this time. "And we need to get the rest of our clothes off before we soak the bed."

True enough, although fortunately it was just water—there wasn't enough soil on the Thunder Plains to create mud. Still, when we were finally bare to the skin, lying side by side on the bed, the coverlet was damp, as was my hair, and his. It clung awkwardly as I pressed myself into him full-length, enjoying the way his body was always just a little warmer to the touch than it should have been.

When I dipped my head and began to kiss my way down the side of his neck toward the shoulder, I discovered that his skin also tasted... different, some subtle, bitter, complex note that I couldn't quite describe. I decided that I liked that, too. Would he even believe me if I told him I like his differences? Meanwhile, he stroked my back, running his hand down my spine and over the curve of my buttocks. I could feel myself slowly coming erect, and his hardness growing against my thigh, as we both enjoyed the slow, languid pleasure that came from touching each other. Neither of us had the energy for a frenzied coupling after walking and fighting all day in the rain on very little sleep.

"Auron." He gave me another quick kiss before reaching over the edge of the bed and retrieving a small jar labeled in Al Bhed. And then kissed me again and distracted me from what he was doing with it. But when his fingers, slick with some unknown substance, slipped between my buttocks to tease at the opening there, my eyes widened slightly. I had only heard of this sort of thing obliquely, embedded as it was in certain insults. Trust, I reminded myself, and again as he slowly worked a finger inside me, making my nose wrinkle slightly with discomfort. And then...

I wasn't quite sure what it was that he touched, only that it sent a powerful pulse of pleasure through me that had me suddenly rock-hard and grinding my groin against my lover with a low moan rising in my throat. Sephiroth must have correctly interpreted that as approval, because he repeated the motion. With his finger occasionally nudging inside me, he kissed his way in a crooked line down my chest and stomach. When he ducked down and took my erection into his mouth, my eyes nearly rolled back in my head, with hot and wet and suction reducing me to a moaning, whimpering puddle with my fingers tangled in his hair. I was going to come, I could feel the sudden tightening, increasing pressure...
And he stopped, raising his head against the pull of my hands. I gave him my best death glare, but he only smirked.

"So impatient," he said, voice low and smooth. "I'd thought you had more discipline. Was I wrong?"

"...No." If patience was what he wanted, well, I'd been trained in that. I took slow, measured breaths, seeking control. Pulling my fingers loose from his hair. I was still aroused, there was no helping that, but the feeling of being about to plunge into release receded.

"Roll over onto your back," he said then, and I did, wondering again just what he had in mind. But ... trust. Patience. Those were the only things he'd asked of me so far, and I was going to give them to him. "I don't see why I shouldn't take advantage of everything you have to offer me that a woman wouldn't, and I don't think you're ready to do this the other way around quite yet, so ..."

There was that jar again. I watched, this time, as he took out a double-fingerful of some kind of translucent gel. He spread a generous coating of the stuff over my straining erection, keeping his touch light and ... unsatisfying. Then he straddled me and reached back and ... Yevon, he couldn't seriously be about to—

He was. He did. I felt the tight heat of his body encase my manhood as he slid down onto me. With no apparent discomfort, but—

He rolled his hips, and the half-formed thought fled my brain. I had never imagined feeling anything like this, never ... So good ... He took my hand and put it on his erection, and I began to stroke him mindlessly, my thoughts all tied up in hot-tight-slick and the motion of his body. My orgasm was rising again, and it would have taken a superhuman will to fight it this time, or even to remember why I might want to fight it. Maybe he could have done it, but I couldn't.

He began riding me harder, his motions sharper, his hand closing over mine and guiding it to move quicker and more firmly, and as I bucked my body, pressing up against him, I felt wetness and heat against my palm and the glow in his eyes flared brighter and he made a sound that was almost a hiss as his muscles tightened around me, and that was the end. I spilled my seed into the tightness of his body with a low groan as he slowed to a stop, still poised above me.

He leaned down and I leaned up and we exchanged another kiss. We were still lying on a damp bed in a rented room with a wild storm raging outside, but right then, I doubt either of us could have cared less.
Chapter 17

We discovered why Rikku had been left at the travel agency the next day, when we found a trio of soggy Al Bhed camped at the base of a lightning tower in the northern part of the Plains. One of them was Cid, and he was staring at the northern horizon and cursing in Al Bhed—those words are among the few others I know in that language. They've been passed around the novice barracks, often a bit mangled, since time immemorial. Although those who use them more than occasionally tend to withdraw from the Order's novitiate and join the Crusaders instead.

"That sounds like trouble," Braska said as we joined them under the tower. The other two Al Bhed had already noticed us, but Cid must not have, because he jumped.

"You. Huh. Didn't figure you'd catch us up. Yeah, it's trouble, all right. Look."

"Looks like just some more clouds and towers and crap to me," Jecht said, barely glancing at the northern horizon.

Cid rolled his eyes and said, "Wait for the lightning."

I obediently turned north and waited for the next flash. Wait—was that—? There was a huge silhouette outline against the clouds. An iron giant. Except that instead of being around twice the height of a man, like the ones we'd run into already that morning, this one had to be at least thirty feet tall, more on a scale with the lightning towers than with human beings.

"We're here to fix one of the lightning towers at the north end," Cid added. "That thing's in the way, and none of our weapons work on it. Bullets just bounce off, and we didn't bring any rockets or whatever." He seemed irritated by this oversight.

"Heh," Jecht said. "Don't get your knickers in a twist, Baldy—it's in our way too, and we don't mind helping you out. Right, guys?"

"I wouldn't have put it quite that way," Braska said. "Auron? Sephiroth? Do you think we can take it?"

"If it has the same weaknesses as the smaller ones," I said.

"Possibly even if it doesn't," Sephiroth corrected. "I haven't needed to exercise the full range of my abilities since I arrived on Spira, since most of your fiends seem to fall over when I do so much as poke them. Rather like an endless succession of cardboard cutouts."

Cid vented an incredulous-sounding laugh.

"Even when you pasted Sin at Rilkes' Harbour?" Jecht asked.

I wasn't entirely surprised when Sephiroth nodded. "I was . . . disoriented . . . at that time, and somewhat constrained by the presence of non-combatants and vulnerable infrastructure. There were attacks that I either didn't dare use or couldn't concentrate well enough for when I went up against that Sinspawn. And Sin itself left in a hurry when I fed it that Supernova, which rather limited what I could test against it."

"That assumes all your abilities work here," I pointed out.

"True enough . . . but so far, everything I have attempted has functioned as expected."
"I'll have to get your story out of you one of these days," Cid told my lover. "For now, though, I'll settle for you taking down that thing—iron colossus, Daku's scanner said it was called."

"Just wish it didn't mean going back out into that stupid storm," Jecht said.

"And here I thought blitzball players liked water," Seymour said.

"Heh. I like being in water. I don't like dealing with mixes of water and air. Even a teeny little breeze makes you cold in this kind of mess, and seems like there's always a breeze here. Just like there's always lightning. 'Course, I'm not sure some of us get cold." Jecht glared at Sephiroth, and I hid a smile. He makes quite a nice space heater, actually. And no, I'm not sharing.

"Shall we?" Sephiroth asked, gesturing to the north.

"Yeah, fine, whatever. You lead the way—like you're not going to anyway," Jecht finished with a snort. But he did follow Sephiroth back out into the storm, which I suppose counted for something.

The iron colossus became more clearly visible as we approached it. It really was unreasonably tall. I couldn't see how we'd even be able to reach above its legs, unless it picked us up... or Sephiroth performed one of those impossible jumps of his.

"We need to knock it down, if we can," my lower said. Or that. "Fortunately, I don't think it's all that intelligent. Or perhaps humans are too small for it to notice readily. I'm going to try to pull the ground out from under it. If I succeed in making it lose its balance, Rufus, I need you to hit it in the face with anything that has a knockback effect—a high-level ice spell should do if you can't think of anything better."

"Once it's down, I'll hit it with Armor Break, and then we pelt it with whatever we can until it dies," I added, and Sephiroth nodded. I'd told him about my Break skills, although I had yet to demonstrate them in front of him.

My lover raised his right hand, and the ground began to shake. Not a lot, not where we were, but underneath the iron colossus, the ground fissured and broke apart and rose in blunt spikes with a roar louder than the lightning. This had to be a Quakega spell, or whatever you wanted to call it. The monster staggered, and Seymour promptly hit it in the face with the Waterga spell he had only just mastered yesterday.

The iron colossus crashed down on its back, losing its grip on its sword, and I immediately jumped in, focusing my mind. Armor Break! My sword barely scratched its armour, but that wasn't the point: the aura that certain fiends carried with them, that would prevent attacks delivered with anything less than perfect focus from penetrating, no longer protected the colossus. Even a poke from Braska's staff would be able to damage it now. Sephiroth was already plunging in with an unfamiliar technique that seemed to create shockwaves from a stab of his sword, making chips of pseudometal slough from the fiend and revert to pyreflies. Meanwhile, Seymour was casting Waterga again, and I hacked at the fiend's least protected areas: the thighs. Really, the way these creatures were outfitted would have been stupid in a human fighting on foot, and should have been doubly stupid in creatures whose legs were at such a convenient height for attacks, but fiends didn't have femoral arteries, or any other normal vulnerable points.

The colossus was scrabbling for its sword, and not doing a very good job of finding it, by the time Sephiroth had made enough of a mess of its breastplate to stick one gloved hand inside its body. A few moments after he did, what I could only describe as rays of darkness erupted from the various cracks and joints of the fiend's armour. Then it happened again, and the iron colossus became a cloud of pyreflies.
Sephiroth whipped Masamune downward in his habitual blood-removing gesture—this time, it sent only a spray of water across the already sopping ground—and returned the sword to his back, then ran a hand through his bangs, which were plastered to his face. I relaxed and put my sword up as well. Behind me, I heard Jecht, who had made a bulwark of himself between the fiend and our casters instead of attacking, curse and stretch his neck.

"Well, that was . . . unexpectedly easy," Braska said.

"It went almost too exactly to plan," I agreed.

"I doubt the fiend expected one of the people charging at it with a sword to have access to spells of such magnitude," Seymour said. "If I may ask, precisely what did you cast?"

"Shadow Flare," Sephiroth replied. "Arguably the second most powerful spell on Gaia, in the same category as Flare and Ultima."

Seymour frowned. "Rather embarrassing that you're a better black mage than me, as well as a better swordsman than Auron."

Sephiroth shook his head. "I didn't acquire my spells in what you would consider the normal way, so it isn't a fair comparison."

Seymour hadn't been at Kilika to hear Sephiroth's recitation of the spells granted by his materia, so he wasn't likely to realize that Shadow Flare hadn't been one of them. Did Braska remember? Or did he think Sephiroth had pulled it out of his materia case? But I'd touched the nodes of Sephiroth's pattern on the Sphere Grid. None of the common elemental spells had been there, but Shadow Flare had. Beside White Wind.

Which meant that it was part of Sephiroth's inheritance from Jenova again.

It was probably a good thing that he was willing to use those abilities, even if he hated their source. I'd seen people try to deny parts of what they were before, and it rarely ended well. But I knew that being set apart in yet another way wrenched at him.

It's natural for a person to want friends, want family and comrades, want to make and keep connections to the other people around them. But Sephiroth, like Seymour, was clearly abnormal, and that made forming those connections difficult, because people who only came into superficial contact with such individuals tended to feel, if not outright fear, then a subconscious discomfort. Or awe. Neither of which was a good basis for forming connections, unless you realized it was there and were willing to correct for it.

Braska decided it would be polite to go back and tell Cid that we'd taken care of his problem for him, even if it would add half an hour or so to the time we had to spend on the Thunder Plains. I fell in beside Sephiroth as we began to backtrack.

"That was only the second large unique monster I've seen since arriving in Spira, if we ignore Sin and its spawn," my lover said. "Are they really that rare here? On Gaia, it always seemed as though each region of the wilderness had a unique monster at the center of it, as though they'd divided the world into territories. Or, more likely, it took that much space to provide enough food for a single large monster."

"I was taught that Sin eventually corrupts the uniques into more Sinspawn." Or eats them. "And no, I'm not sure how that works, or even if it's true."

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps Sin possesses the ability to influence other pyreflies."
Dangerous, but without the ability to manipulate them consciously . . .” His voice trailed off. I was starting to recognize the signs of that mind of his going into overdrive.

I, on the other hand, had to plod along behind with my linear reasoning. So. Manipulating pyreflies. Sephiroth was the only other . . . being . . . I knew of who could do that. I'd held the proof of it, his water materia, in my hands. Did he intend to somehow compete with Sin in manipulating pyreflies? Or perhaps try to manipulate Sin's pyreflies, the ones that made up its body?

. . . Linear reasoning wasn't going to get me very far with this. I'd have to either ask him, or hope that when he worked something out, he would tell me before doing anything risky with it. But for now, I wasn't going to interrupt him while he might be working out something important.

This might be why the fayth had brought him here, after all. And although I might no longer believe in the Church, the fayth were manifestly real and trying to do something about Sin. Them, I still believed in. To some extent. I didn't like the games they tried to play with Sephiroth. Hopefully Seymour was right about Bahamut being more forthcoming about what they wanted of him and why. It would be a while yet before we reached Bevelle, though.

And so we slogged silently through the storm until we arrived at the tower where Cid was sheltering.

_The next time I come to this place—if there ever was a next time—I'm bringing some proper rainwear. Oilskins. Or an Al Bhed wetsuit. Something that will keep the water off._ Being soaked to the skin all the time was chilly and irritating, and wet cloth provided no protection from the straps of my armour, which were beginning to chafe again. I was going to use up another potion tonight, rubbing it into the raw spots.

I would be very glad when we reached Macalania. We all would, I suspected. Even Sephiroth wasn't completely unaffected by this weather.

. . . I seemed to be spending a lot of time, lately, wishing we'd already moved on to the next segment of our trip. That would end at Bevelle.

"That was sure quick," Cid said as we trudged back to the dry area under the overhang. "Or did you screw up?"

"It's gone," Seymour said. "It apparently wasn't anticipating us. It left this behind." He held up . . . I wasn't quite sure what it was. It looked like a bit of darkness, gripped somehow between his thumb and forefinger, so dark that the edges of it seemed to glow.

Cid blinked. "What the . . . ? Is that a Farplane Shadow?"

"I think it may be," the half-Guado said. "Although you must understand that I have never before seen one in person, only read descriptions."

"I'm starting to wonder if there's anything you won't read about," Jecht said.

"There was nothing to do at Baaj except read, fish, swim, and practice my magic and staffwork. And I hate fishing. At least reading reminded me that the world wasn't entirely made up of stone and saltwater."

"Gaining knowledge at least is not a waste of time," Sephiroth added.

Cid was scratching the back of his head. "I'm still trying to figure out how you five managed to get this far without tearing out each other's throats."
Because when things get serious, all the silly arguments just go away, I thought. If we exchanged barbed comments, it was because we had the time to do so. Slowly, during the walk up from Luca, we'd been coalescing into a team.

"Business, though. You willing to sell that Farplane Shadow?"

Seymour cocked his head. "Perhaps, but I'm not interested in a straight exchange for gil, and I don't think any of the others are, either. At the rate we kill fiends, we aren't going to run out of money."

"What, then? I can't see even a crazy bunch like you taking machina on a pilgrimage. The Church'd chase you all the way to Zanarkand."

"Not machina, no. But your people have unmatched skills when it comes to creating and customizing weapons and armour, and I fear this staff of mine is not going to last the journey. Also, we could all use some attributes added to our armour."

Cid snorted. "One Farplane Shadow isn't that valuable, you know. And none of us standing here do that kind of smithing work, even if we had the equipment."

Seymour smirked. "One Farplane Shadow in return for putting us in touch with the best the Al Bhed have. We'll pay them for their services. This is just in return for making contact."

"Hmm. Don't know about that . . ."

"Cid," Braska said, and the Al Bhed's gaze immediately snapped to him. "I can't change my mind if I'm already dead."

"Vilg," Cid muttered—a word I'd learned in the novice barracks. "Braska, you remind me of a piranha: swimming along all calm and fluid until you come across something you don't like and plant your teeth in its ass."

Braska smiled and glanced down at his feet, looking altogether too gentle and modest to be real. It was only half a lie. Our Summoner could be that modest, that gentle. But he also stood up for the things that were important to him.

"Fine," Cid said. "I'll ask Falde to meet you at the Macalania trading post. She won't like it, but then she never does." He held out his hand, and Seymour placed the Farplane Shadow in it. "Make sure you make it that far, got it?"

"Given the crap we've already been through, I don't think we're gonna fall over and die anytime soon, Baldy," Jecht said.

"Just get out of my sight before I use one of you to test the lightning towers," Cid said, with one more eyeroll.

It took us not quite two more days, and one more night spent camping under a tower, to clear the Plains. By the time we stumbled out from under the clouds on the second evening to see a horizon lit in delicate shades of orange and pink, we were all just about ready to kiss that rain-free sky. We'd still have to camp out tonight, but it would be dry and we'd be able to light a proper fire. Sephiroth had taught Seymour an emergency technique from his military days that involved shotgunning fire spells at a rock until it was hot enough to cook on, but it wasn't the same.

So we settled right at the edge of the Macalania Woods, and ate toast and soup made from some kind of dry mix Braska had bought from the Al Bhed (convenient, that), and outright rejoiced at the fact that the thunder we'd been living with for the past several days had been reduced to a vague rumble.
in the distance.

We still set watches, though: Seymour, then Sephiroth, then me. We hadn't lost our minds, and the borders between two types of fiend territory tended to accumulate lots of stragglers that had been forced out by their own kind, but were still happy to eat humans.

I woke a little early for my watch—normally, Sephiroth's return to the tent would rouse me to consciousness for a moment even if I didn't have last watch, but I couldn't see the green gleam of his eyes in the dark, so I knew he wasn't there. There was no point in trying to get back to sleep with Jecht's snoring rasping at my nerves (although I knew I would be just as loud if I were fool enough to lay on my back), so I grabbed my sword and low boots by dead reckoning in the dark, and went outside.

It was cold in the open air, but at least it wasn't a damp cold. And the stars were glorious. It felt like forever since the last time I'd seen them, although realistically, it had been the night before we'd reached Guadosalam. A bit more than a week.

I couldn't find Sephiroth at first. There was no moon, and we'd put the fire out, and he was standing with his back to the tent. It wasn't until I'd circled around a bit that I managed to pick up a bit of green. As I got closer, I discovered he had his head tilted back, and was looking up at the sky.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked as I came to a stop beside him.

"I suppose I'm wondering which of those stars is Gaia's sun. Assuming that it's even visible from here," He lowered his head to look at me. "Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Even if I wanted to go back, there's no way I could."

I was still trying to figure out how he'd come to equate stars with suns. "The fayth might have a way."

Sephiroth shook his head. "I have no desire to return. There is nothing left for me there. My few friends are dead, my reputation in tatters . . . I expect Shinra even emptied my bank account, after they declared me dead. And that's without taking into consideration what happened after Nibelheim. Anyone who recognized me would probably want to execute me. I suppose I could shave my head, buy dark glasses, and take up monster hunting somewhere in the hinterlands, but it would be a very lonely life."

After a pause, he added, "Auron, I had assumed that it was obvious I intended to stay on Spira when I accepted your advances, but perhaps I should have said as much in so many words."

"I was more afraid of you dying than of you leaving. I still am. "No, I . . . understood that part." It was my turn to pause. "There must be things about Gaia that you miss."

A soft snort. "At the moment? Aircraft. Any motorized transport at all, actually. Certain camping supplies, especially self-heating rations and lighter-weight tents. The ability to retrieve information and communicate with others from almost anywhere in the world. Things that I mostly took for granted. But there are also a lot of things that I definitely don't miss. The Shinra Science Department. Wars between human nations. Being used as a propaganda figurehead. Having to be so very careful who I spoke to or spent time with, to ensure that no one would think I was forming . . . unapproved relationships. And Jenova. One of those suns out there must have been hers, once upon a time, before she left to follow the path that eventually brought her to Gaia. She impressed just enough of her memories on me that I sometimes have nightmares about the world of her birth."

A small shiver ran through him. I wouldn't have been able to detect it if I hadn't been putting so much effort into observing him, into listening for the rustle and creak of leather, and for changes in the cadence of his breathing.
I'm sorry. Somehow, I didn't think the words would be appreciated, though. Instead, I reached for his hand, took it in mine. I wasn't naturally all that tactile, either, but as with the first time I had kissed him, it was still easier than trying to discuss emotions.

His fingers wove through mine, sealing our hands together, so maybe he felt the same way. And for several minutes, we both stood there, contemplating the stars. If each of those was a sun, and each of those suns had a world . . . How many places were there out there? How many lands and peoples of which we knew nothing? How many Gaia’s? Spiras?

Although it's the Jenovas we have to worry about, it seems, I thought, looking at my companion. A being that could control the minds of others, that could keep someone with Sephiroth's strength of will under her control for seven years . . . in some ways, that was even more terrifying than Sin. At least Sin attacked overtly.

I wanted to ask my lover what had happened between Nibelheim and his arrival in Spira. I could tell that it preyed on his mind. But I also didn't want to push. I didn't want to reopen old wounds. And really, there was no hurry. Braska had to acquire two more aeons, and then we had to cross the Calm Lands and climb Mount Gagazet. Weeks of travel, and we would be staying in Bevelle for a while, too, so that Braska could spend time with his daughter.

Even if Zanarkand still turned out to be the end, I could afford to give Sephiroth a little more time to heal.

Maybe that was what the fayth wanted, too. Travel Spira with Braska and see it as it is, Ifrit had said. Spira itself wasn't exactly a pleasant world, not with the threat of Sin hanging over everyone's heads, but for Sephiroth, perhaps having a straightforward enemy that he could confront directly as the worst thing in his life was a relief.

I wished I knew a Cure spell for broken minds and ravaged souls. Everyone in our party could probably have used it. Including myself. I could still feel a low, throbbing ache where my faith in the Church had been ripped out of me, a wound scabbed over but not yet healed. No one can just discard the central focus of their life that easily. I still believed that, even if the Church had taken the wrong path, Yevon himself was still out there, somewhere, weeping tears of blood for what his followers had become. If I ever lost that belief, I had a terrible feeling that I would unravel.

Sephiroth squeezed my hand. "Now you have me wondering what you're thinking."

"That something as vast and dark as the night sky seems to inspire vast, dark thoughts," was the best I could come up with. It startled a low chuckle from him.

"I suppose it does, at that."

When I looked up again, I noticed that the constellation the Ronso call Vos, the Behemoth, was just clearing the horizon.

"My watch," I said. "You should try to get some more sleep."

"Good night, then." But it took him a moment to disentangle our fingers.

I wondered if that was a clue to how he felt about me. He'd never really said—we seem compatible wasn't exactly a declaration of undying love. But I wasn't a teenaged girl. We were both men, and warriors. We had chosen a life that was violent and uncertain and could come to a sudden end at any time.

We both knew we had to take what we could, when we could. And besides, not understanding or
being able to articulate a thing didn’t mean that it wasn't there.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Macalania Forest was cool, crystalline blue, full of butterflies and the faint sounds of distant music as the Musicians called to one another. It had never felt like it was entirely part of Spira to me, and that didn't change on this passage. The road that led to the lake and the temple followed an inefficient, looping path up and down the tree branches, and so did we.

You couldn't see the stars here either, unless you were up in the canopy, but that bothered me less than it had on the Thunder Plains. And the fiends were a lot less irritating, since most of them were ground-bound. I could hit everything reliably except the wasps. Well, all right, I did miss the lizards about one time in ten, but it wasn't that much of an issue. But the chimeras, with their constant barrages of spells, were annoying. Sephiroth, with his high magic resistance, took their attacks for us without comment, but I promised myself that if the Al Bhed smith Cid had promised us really was waiting at the travel agency, I was going to get her to add an auto-shell ability to his pauldrons.

The trees were beautiful, but also oddly fragile, as Jecht proved when he took a swing at a xiphos and his follow-through smashed a trunk as thick as my thigh to shards. We were left with a stump and a puddle of leaking sap that was more than half sphere-water . . . and a cloud of pyreflies from the dead xiphos, since he'd hit the real target as well as the tree.

Sephiroth picked up a fragment of the wood, and frowned. "This is crystalline."

"Bet that's why it broke so easily." Jecht had his sword propped across his shoulders. It wasn't a move he would have been able to pull off if its edge had been sharper.

The silver-haired man gave him a withering look. "My concern is less its fragility than the fact that it makes no biological sense. This seems to be both wood and crystal at the same time, but a crystal doesn't grow in the same way as a living organism. It should kill the cells, but somehow, these—" He gestured at the nearest intact trunk. "—are alive."

"Hey, don't look at me," Jecht said, with a shrug. "First time I even heard that crystals can grow. Usually, they're just kinda . . . there, y'know?"

Sephiroth's tone was surprisingly level as he explained. "Think of a bowl of salt water left out in the sun. As the water evaporates, salt crystals begin to grow on the sides of the bowl. The same concept of minerals coming out of solution is the cause of most crystal growth. There must be something dissolved in the sap of these trees that somehow permeates the cell structure without killing it, even when it crystallizes."

"Pyreflies," Braska said, and Sephiroth's eyes flicked to him. "Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, whatever it is in sphere water that causes it to retain pyreflies better than pure water or ocean water. Water from this forest is used to create just about every new sphere manufactured in Spira today."

"You mean like that pond over there?" Jecht was pointing past the shattered tree. There was indeed a pool of water on the other side. The blitzer threw a chunk of wood at it and watched it sink. " Doesn't look any different to me, but I guess there's one way to find out!"

I told myself as he pushed his way through the gap he'd created in the trees that Jecht was overdue to
do something impulsive, and at least this should be harmless.

I went on thinking just that as he waded in. Right up until the water mounded up like someone had just resurrected a flan, and lifted him in the air by one ankle.

Seeing that silver-black streak fly past was getting almost familiar. I raised my sword and ran after Sephiroth, although I was worried that even Masamune's razor edge wouldn't be able to inflict much damage on this thing. It seemed more liquid than a flan.

I felt relieved when a slash appeared to disrupt it somehow and made it lose a little mass. I was less relieved when it countered with a water spell, knocking Sephiroth back. He skidded, going down on one knee for a moment before straightening up again.

"Stay back!" he called to our mages. "Cast Shell and Protect on Jecht, then Shell on Auron. Keep those spells up at all costs. And keep Jecht healed. This thing isn't scannable, so we're going to have to feel it out. No attack spells or aeons until we do, unless I call for them."

Braska cast at Jecht and Seymour at me, and a wireframe globe appeared around me for a moment before the magic settled over my skin. I ground my teeth, wishing for the ability to cast this spell on my idiot lover as well. I understood that he was trying to ensure that Jecht, who couldn't dodge while he was pinned by the fiend, survived this, but by Yevon, I wished he would worry a little more about his own survival and a little less about my mediocre magic defenses!

He hit the thing with a weak Lightning spell, testing, and the fiend pulsed and wobbled and acquired a rainbow sheen for a moment before Sephiroth jumped in and hit it again. This time, it hit him with a Fire spell.

On a hunch, I jumped in and called on the element of ice as I stabbed it. It did the pulse-wobble again.

On the third iteration, Sephiroth didn't bother using Masamune. Instead, he used Water on it directly.

The fiend threw it back in our faces. All of them, not just his, although I think Braska and Seymour didn't take as much damage, since they were further back. Jecht, though . . . it hit Jecht hard. As for the two of us on the front lines, well, we both kept our feet. Just.

Sephiroth's hair was plastered across his face as he raised his hand and cast Shell, or something very like it, on himself. "Auron, Magic Break if you can, then stab it with the opposite of the element it invokes against me at each attack. Rufus, if it uses ice, cast Fira at it. Try not to hit Jecht. If I tire before it does, Auron will take my place as punching bag, and Rufus will become the main attacker. Otherwise, just keep everyone healed. Go."

Magic Break worked, but the Blizzard spell the fiend countered with froze my haori, soaked from the Water spell, into a stiff, awkward piece of pseudo-armour. I cursed under my breath as Seymour flung a Fira at the enemy. Maybe there was something to be said for dressing entirely in leather: it didn't absorb water the way cloth did.

We kept pecking away at and dodging the purely physical attacks it tried to drop on us between counters until it suddenly dropped Jecht so that it could attack more aggressively. Thankfully, the blitzer was still conscious, although his foot was bending the wrong way and his ankle was beginning to swell. He scrambled away on his hands and knees to the shattered tree, behind which Braska and Seymour were still standing.

Then the fiend flattened itself out and dropped on both of us who were holding the front line,
dropping me to my knees. Just a quick blow, and then it was gone again, leaving me shaking my head, trying to clear my vision as my eyes teared with pain.

*Power Break,* I thought. It was the only way to cripple it if it was now using physical attacks, and I couldn't afford to wait.

I gathered myself, lunged forward, and made the strike. The fiend countered with Water, partially melting the ice from my haori, and I gritted my teeth to keep them from chattering and wondered why cold water always seemed to chill you faster than ice. I even managed to pick up the rhythm when Sephiroth attacked again and got himself hit with a jolt of lightning.

Six more rounds, and it was down, erupting into a dense cloud of pyreflies. Sephiroth put his sword up, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and then glared at Jecht.

"Do you ever learn? You're just like a child! Remember, this is *not* your Zanarkand. Any shadow could hide a fiend. If you insist on running ahead into areas that the rest of us haven't cleared, you have to stay alert. I'd do something to reinforce that lesson, but you don't need a broken jaw to go with the broken ankle."

"Yeah," Jecht said. "Yeah, you're right, I ain't no child. I made a mistake. Haven't you ever made a fucking mistake, Sephy?"

Cold green eyes never wavered. "I have. Each and every one has been paid for in blood. Not always my own. Mistakes kill. You are fortunate that this one did not." Sephiroth turned away from him in a swirl of coat-skirts. "Auron, your lips are turning blue. We need to get you out of those clothes."

"You would think this wouldn't be worse than spending days at a time soaked while we were crossing the Thunder Plains," I said, forcing leaden fingers to move. My haori dropped away in a half-sodden, half-frozen mass.

"It's colder here, and that ice spell seems to have added to the damage. Do you have anything dry to put on?"

I shrugged. I'd only brought one change of clothes, and given that I'd swapped out of them the night we'd left the Thunder Plains, they were probably growing mold.

Which was how I ended up seated in front of a fire wearing Sephiroth's shirt and Seymour's robe. I knew I looked like an idiot, but at least I was a dry idiot.

"I had hoped we would reach the travel agency at the snowline tonight," Braska said, staring into the flames.

"Tomorrow," Sephiroth said. "There is no hurry, and we're going to have to do some shopping there anyway. Running around barefoot in the snow is a recipe for losing toes." He glanced at Jecht.

"Well, so-o-rry! Sin didn't give me much time to pack on the way out of Zanarkand, or I would have brought some boots. And a jacket. And toothpaste that doesn't taste like that crap the Al Bhed sell."

"We're all going to need warmer clothing before we proceed up Mount Gagazet," I said—Jecht seemed more abrasive than usual tonight, for some reason, and I was tired. "Just think of this as getting a head start."

"My clothing isn't suitable for the snowfield either," Seymour said. "Although I suppose I could bundle my robe on over it. Mind you, it looks so fetching on Auron that I might just let him keep it."
I glared at him, but the half-Guado just smirked. I've never been fond of jabs like that—it's part of what makes most people think I'm humourless.

"The sleeves would drive me out of my mind," I told the fire. "They just about are already."

"Ah. One . . . grows accustomed, I suppose," Seymour said, glancing down at the shirt cuffs currently dangling over his hands. It was the only element of his current costume that resembled what he'd been wearing when we'd met him at Baaj. Well, that and the staff that he'd reclaimed when we'd left Guadosalam, which currently lay beside him on the ground, near to hand like all of our weapons.

"It's a good thing you don't blitz," Jecht said. "I can't think of anything that'd make it more difficult than having cloth tangled around your hands. Well, except maybe if it was having cloth tangled around your legs. And I'd bet you can't swim worth a damn. Too bad. Girls'd be all over a fine-looking boy like you. Actually, I don't think any of us would have any trouble snagging a girl or three. Shame most of you ain't interested."

"I can swim, actually," Seymour said, with dignity. "And hold my breath long enough to participate in a blitz match if I were interested in doing so. It was another activity that was available to me at Baaj. Girls, however . . ." He frowned, and shifted. "It is to my considerable misfortune that I am not attracted to Guado women, and it would be unwise for me to marry a human, even if I managed to find one who was as accepting as the four of you. Bad enough that Jyscal's heir is half human. For my heir to be three-quarters non-Guado . . ." A shrug was all that was necessary to complete that thought. The Guado traditionalists would be appalled, and there would be rioting in the streets of Guadosalam. "Even if I prefer not to be Seymour Guado, my obligations will not simply vanish."

"All too true, unfortunately," Sephiroth murmured.

Jecht rolled his eyes. "Well, ain't you guys just a pack of Debbie Downers?"

"You should be used to us by now," I said. "And you're much more talkative than usual tonight. What's bothering you?"

"There ain't nothing bothering me."

"I disagree," said Braska. "Auron's right—you've been talking a lot, and making inept digs at people. And we can't do anything to help if you don't tell us why."

Jecht made a growling noise into the ensuing silence. "In case you hadn't noticed, I fucked up. Again. Another shoopuf-sized fuckup from the Great Jecht. Can't do anything small, I guess. Sephy was right: I'm lucky I didn't get anyone killed. So what the fuck am I doing here? Tell me that! If I was ripped away from my wife and my son and dumped in this shitty world just to make things worse for everyone, I should get my ass the hell out. Go back to Luca and play blitz, or go find Sin and give it a great big hug—doesn't matter either way."

Braska blinked. "Jecht, it does matter. We need you. You may not have helped a lot here, but you may have done a lot more for the political situation in Guadosalam than all the rest of us put together, just by pressing Ihra to accept help from a human. Besides, can you imagine the four of us without you? We'd be so serious we'd cause some sort of localized explosion."

"So all I'm good for is comic relief, blitzball, and making a wall between people and fiends. Is that really supposed to make me feel better?" Jecht rose awkwardly to his feet, trying not to put too much weight on his just-healed ankle, and began limping around to the far side of the pool, further from the fire, while I tried not to sigh. Was I the only person here who wasn't suicidal on some level?
"He'll pull out of it," Sephiroth said quietly. "He needs to vent his frustrations a bit, but he has a kind of unquenchable optimism, and I doubt it's going to fail him now. He reminds me of Zack, that way."

Jecht and Zack?

. . . Actually, that perhaps wasn't so farfetched, although I'd known Zack for all of half an hour. He was less full of himself than Jecht, but I'd had the impression he had a similar way with people.

I fumbled for something else to talk about. The best I could come up with was, "Rufus, have you decided what kind of staff you want the Al Bhed smith to make for you, when we make contact with her?"

Seymour shrugged, fingering his current staff. "Something to increase my magic attack, I suppose, and to lower the drain on my psyche that each spell imposes."

"You don't sound too enthusiastic," Braska offered.

The half-Guado grimaced. "I'd like a weapon that I could actually fight with, if I had the choice, but I can't Summon or Send without a staff, so I suppose I'll have to keep relying on everyone else to deal with magic-resistant fiends."

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow. "You can't Summon without a staff? Why?"

"Some of the gestures used in Summoning need to be performed with one," Braska offered.

"And they wouldn't work if performed with something else of similar dimensions? A spear, for instance? Or a broom?"

"A broom," Braska repeated, with a sudden, impish smile. "I doubt anyone has ever tried."

"We can borrow one when we get to the travel agency and try it," Seymour said. "If it works, it would open up entire new vistas for Summoners."

I snorted. "If you want to fight physically with it, we can have this smith make you something more like a proper quarterstaff, not one of these Summoner's staffs that's halfway to being a wand. Blunt impact weapons can be quite effective if you know how to use them, and you already have some training."

"Hmm." Seymour's expression was thoughtful. "And if I can and do switch to a spear, can any of you teach me how to use it?"

"I was taught the basics," I said. "And I picked up a few tricks from a Ronso I trained with."

"As for me, I know the basic drills only," Sephiroth said. "It wasn't a favoured weapon on Gaia, and few people used it. I know more about staff-work, since that transfers readily in emergencies to random debris like tentpoles. And brooms."

"What weapons do they favour on Gaia?" I asked, curious. "Other than swords."

Sephiroth shook his head. "Swords were rare as well—what you would call machina weapons were close to universal. The force I headed trained primarily with swords because, with our enhanced physical abilities, the machina offered us no advantage, and it made for good propaganda . . . but I was one of the few who didn't carry a small gun as a backup. I'm actually quite a good shot, if I must use one."
That was . . . interesting. I'd trained with guns myself, since the Order required us all to have some proficiency, and I knew it wasn't as easy as just pointing one end in the right direction and pulling the trigger. Depending on the circumstances, even your breathing could jostle one of the blasted things off-target and make you hit a wall—or an ally—instead.

That wasn't the only interesting thing in what Sephiroth had said, though. *Enhanced physical abilities.* They must have tried to make . . . more of him. Was that what Angeal and Zack and the mysterious Genesis had been? A weaker variation with less Jenova in them? *Yevon.* Even if the others had only gotten half of the abilities laid out on Sephiroth's sphere grid, a trained force of, say, a hundred of them would have been able to conquer Spira entire, against the best resistance we could mount. What had those people at Shinra been trying to do?

Jecht was still over by the pond when the rest of us decided to turn in for the evening. He had been supposed to take the first watch, and normally that would have been fine, but I wasn't sure I trusted him in his current state. I had no watch of my own tonight, so I rolled up in my blankets but decided to stay awake for a little longer. Just in case.

I could hear him moving around outside as I stared up at the tent canvas in the dark. Bare feet walking around, which would have been inaudible if anyone had been snoring just then. Splashing. The faint *plop* of debris falling in the lake.

*Plotch-plotch-plotch-plop.* Had Jecht just managed to skip a stone?

"Some future." Low words, barely audible. "If I'd ever thought about it at all, I'd've expected, if I ever landed in the future, to be able to walk into the Blitz Hall of Fame and see my name there somewhere. And a picture. Maybe even a statue, who knows? But not this. Not this crazy world full of fiends where everyone keeps telling me my home's dead and turned into some kind of weird shrine. I just about died too, today. They probably think I'm stupid for not realizing it, but I do. 'S just that they piss me off so much sometimes. Anyone who thinks I have an attitude ain't never met Sephy, and that's the truth. Maybe he gets off on thinking he's superior. Maybe he even is. I mean, he's not the one sitting here talking to his reflection in a pond that tried to eat him."

*Plotch-plop.* "Losing my touch at this, too, not just at blitz. At everything, I guess. I mean, I told off Braska, of all people, because the thought I mighta died today had me so scared I was just about crying like Tidus, so I suck at comic relief, too. I'm no good at fighting, either. Back when I was Rufus' age, I used to think I was all that with my fists, but since coming here, I've figured out that it was because the guys I was fighting back then didn't know a damned thing either. Sephy and Auron are good at that stuff, and they're absolutely cold fighters, like I never was. That crazy sword I picked up . . . yeah, I can mow stuff down with it, and I've got a pretty good sense of timing and all, but Sephy just does this blurry *thing* and then his sword's back on his back and you'd swear he'd never moved except for the bite bug that's falling down in pieces. And Auron, he's not as fast, but he sends stuff flying on *purpose.* I do that by accident a lot, but it usually ends up going in the wrong direction. Even at Braska, sometimes. Auron always gets it right. And what's with Sephy rattling off how to deal with that fiend like he was reading a blitz playbook?"

*Plop.* "Man, that one didn't even skip once. Reminds me of that sucky shot I made during the last tournament, when everyone started telling me to clean up or else. Don't think Spira was quite the 'or else' they had in mind, though. 'Specially not my wife. Ugh, that's the worst part of being here, I swear. Feels like I'm missing part of my foot or something. Can't quite make myself stand straight, 'cause she ain't here to remind me I'm worth something. Can't seem to believe it when other people say it, but it hits home when it's coming from her. Never gonna see her again, I bet. Never gonna see the brat again either, unless he ends up here somehow. I hope not. Bad enough that *I'm* here. If he ever *does* end up here . . . "

A low noise of pure frustration, louder than the rest, and beside me, Sephiroth's eyes flickered open like green beacons in the dark. I shook my head, and he appeared to grasp that that meant, *we don't need to rush out and interrupt this.*

Rustling—rummaging in one of the packs? More footsteps, and other dull, blurry noises I couldn't quite make out. Then I heard someone activate a sphere, and Jecht's voice began to drift back to the tent again.

"Hey, if you're sitting there, watching this . . . it means that 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 not good at these things."

The sphere powered down, then back up again.

"Anyways . . . I believe in you. Be good. Good-bye."

Footsteps. Rustling. A single sob.

I shifted among the blankets. Having listened to that made me feel like a voyeur. I'd caught a glimpse of Jecht's naked soul, under all the brashness and arrogance he put on to hide his uncertainty and his fear.

I exchanged looks with Sephiroth. What were we supposed to think about that? What were any of us supposed to think, say, *do* about that?

It took me a long time to get to sleep, afterwards.

Chapter End Notes

Some readers may have noticed from the beginning that I haven't been quoting the other Jecht spheres verbatim, as so many "outsider crashes Braska's pilgrimage" fics tend to do. I made an exception for this one, though, because I can't see how I could have improved on it or how Seymour and Sephiroth being present could have changed it.
Seymour had a pair of sandals in his gear, the ones he had worn with his robe. They were a terrible fit on Jecht, but fortunately he didn't have to walk very far in them—just from the edge of the forest to the door of the travel agency. Combined with a pair of Braska's dirty socks, Sephiroth's well-traveled shirt, and Seymour's equally well-traveled robe, they got him there without him freezing anything.

We really needed to deal with the laundry, though. Which was why we decided to stay at the travel agency for the night, even though we'd only been traveling for a couple of hours. Besides, we had a contact to make here.

One thing about getting there early in the day: there was no question of us not getting enough rooms to spread out comfortably. This agency was smaller than the one on the Thunder Plains, since that one had to service large numbers of merchants, while this one took only the handful of travelers headed for Macalania Temple. They normally had six rooms to rent, if I remembered correctly.

The goods in the shop area at the front included a lot of warm clothes for people who either hadn't planned their trip very well or had underestimated how cold Shiva's presence made the area, thankfully, so Jecht should be able to put together a set that made him look less . . . odd. Should. The first thing he did when we came in was complain about the toothpaste.

"Dunno what you flavour this stuff with, but it tastes like a shoopuf's ass!" Jecht said, laying a tube on the counter.

The Al Bhed woman standing behind it tilted her head. "Why would we flavour it?" she asked, with only the slightest hint of an accent.

Jecht blinked. "Well, why wouldn't you? I mean, if it tastes like a shoopuf's ass naturally, wouldn't getting rid of that be a good thing?"

"You thought it was . . . But it's . . ." The woman said something in Al Bhed and began to laugh helplessly, while Sephiroth snorted and Braska hid a smile. While I didn't understand exactly what was going on, I was becoming fairly certain that the stuff in the tube was not what Jecht had thought it was.

"I think I'm gonna just pretend this whole conversation didn't happen," the blitzer said, and disappeared between two racks of clothing.

Braska coughed. "Your pardon, ma'am. We've been traveling for a while, and . . . well. In any case, we would like some rooms, and Cid indicated that someone would possibly be meeting us here . . . ?"

"Ah! You are Summoner Braska and party? Yes, Engineer Falde is here to speak to you. I will take you to see her as soon as my assistant has returned from his break."

"No hurry," Braska said. "We do have some shopping to do first—not all of my Guardians are well-equipped for these conditions."

I moved over to the end of the counter to lean against the wall. It wasn't a coincidence that this put me closer to Sephiroth.

"What is it that's actually in the tube Jecht bought?" I asked him in a low voice.
"Brass polish," came the equally quiet reply. "Non-poisonous, I assume, or we would have realized before now."

I forced myself not to smile. "Going to buy anything?"

"I hadn't intended to. Unless it gets significantly colder, I'll be comfortable enough as I am."

"Without anything under your coat?" I hadn't meant to ask that.

"I can wear a shirt, if that bothers you, but it isn't necessary—at most, I'll burn a bit more food. My body maintains its internal temperature more easily than a normal human's."

"Wear the shirt, then. Just in case." More easily wasn't perfectly, after all, and I did worry about him.

Sephiroth gave me a thoughtful look. Slowly, he nodded. "What about you? A repeat of yesterday afternoon would be . . . undesirable."

"I'll be all right as long as I don't get wet," I said. "My haori is warmer than it looks. I'll need some additional gear for the trip up Mount Gagazet, but that can wait until we get to Bevelle."

"We will have to pass above the snowline at that point, I presume."

"I keep on forgetting how little you know about Spira. The pass, so-called, goes over the shoulder of the mountain. I've never been there myself, but the Ronso I trained with said it was 'as cold as an ice flan's guts'."

"I take your meaning, although the equivalent Gaian expression involves ice golems and sodomy." A smile flickered at the corner of Sephiroth's mouth as I pretended not to be embarrassed.

Seymour was trying on jackets (and having a hard time finding one whose sleeves were long enough to make him happy) when a young Al Bhed man emerged from the back, and the woman at the counter waved him over. They had a quick conversation, after which she turned and addressed Braska.

"I will take you to see Engineer Falde now," she announced.

"Thank you," Braska said. Seymour set the jacket he'd been examining aside and came over to stand near the rest of us. "Jecht?"

"Think I'll stay here," the blitzer said from somewhere amid the racks of clothing. "Made enough of a fool of myself for one day."

The rest of us followed the Al Bhed woman through a door that said "Employees Only!" in two languages (or I assumed that was what the Al Bhed version said), and into a different world.

The shop part of the travel agency was plastered and painted white in deference to Yevonite sensitivities, and the lights were hidden behind lightly frosted glass, to make it impossible to see how they worked. Here, in the back hallways the Al Bhed normally didn't allow outsiders to see, there were no such niceties. The walls were bare metal, and the lights were exposed, showing that they were machina. Fortunate that no one in our party was a machina-phobe.

The woman leading us eventually knocked on a door with another Al Bhed sign on it, then opened it in the middle of someone saying what sounded like, "Lusa ih, lusa ih."

I suppose the room on the other side could be termed a workshop. There was a lot of equipment
there that I didn't understand, and various metal ingots, random magical items, tools, and bits of
disembodied machina guts strewn over every available surface.

In the middle of all this stood another Al Bhed woman. She was of a height to look any of us in the
eye, as broad-shouldered and (judging from her bare arms) as powerfully muscled as Sephiroth. She
had the usual Al Bhed blonde hair, bound together in thin braids, and then the braids were tied
together in a tail at the nape of her neck to keep them out of the way.

"So you're the ones who asked Cid for my help." Her voice was a low alto—pleasing enough to the
ear, I suppose. "You know, I don't appreciate being pulled away from my workshop—this one's
piss-poor by comparison—but for the last Farplane Shadow I needed to put Death Ward on
something, I'm willing to tolerate it."

Braska bowed. "We appreciate the assistance, and will try not to waste too much of your time. I am
Summoner Braska, and these are my Guardians: Auron, Rufus, and Sephiroth."

"Thought you had four."

"Jecht is looking through the goods in the front, trying to assemble some clothing that will keep him
from freezing while we're here," Braska said.

"Right. Anyway, I'm Falde. Tell me what you need."

"There is an experiment we need to conduct first," Seymour said, turning to the Al Bhed
counterwoman. "Might I borrow a broom for a few minutes?"

She raised her eyebrows, and pointed to a broom standing in a corner of the room, behind the door.

"Perfect," the half-Guado said, hefting it. "My thanks."

"What do you want a broom for?" Falde asked.

"To test a theory. Unfortunately, this needs a certain amount of space, so we will need to go outside
for a bit."

The two Al Bhed women followed us as we trooped back out through the shop. Once out on the
frozen plain, Seymour took the staff he'd been carrying on his back and handed it to Braska.

"Just to ensure it has no influence," he said, then walked a few feet away, holding the broom. He
took a deep breath and centered himself, then began to twirl the broom in a Summoning gesture.

"What the heck is he doing?" Falde asked.

"As he said, testing a theory," Braska said. "Either nothing will happen, or . . . No. Here it comes."

A gigantic bird-shape fell from the clouds to land beside Seymour with a low cry. Valefor seemed
surprised to see him, and tilted her head to gaze at both him and the broom.

"I'm sorry," the half-Guado said, reaching up to scratch the aeon under her chin. "I've been
neglectful, haven't I? But it's been a while since I was last in enough danger to justify Summoning
any of you."

The noise Valefor made in response was almost a coo.

"I'd say she forgives you," Braska said, with a chuckle. "For the broom, as well. Although I wouldn't
try it again unless it's a genuine emergency."
Seymour nodded. "My thanks," he told the aeon. "And I promise there won't be any more brooms. Go, now."

Falde turned to Braska as Valefor vanished back into the clouds. "I thought you were the Summoner."

"There's no rule saying that two Summoners can't travel together," Braska said, with a shrug. "Or that one Summoner can't become the Guardian of another. I don't think the Church ever even considered the possibility."

"In any case, I am considered a failed Summoner," Seymour said, taking his staff back from Braska. "I received my Final Aeon, and chose not to use it. However, this time I do not intend to be defeated by an overgrown lump of pyreflies."

"One way or another, we will deal with Sin," Sephiroth said, with a certainty that was almost frightening.

"We have to go through the motions of a normal pilgrimage to satisfy the Church," I added. "But we intend to do our utmost to destroy Sin, not just defeat it temporarily." It was a resolve that had grown within us all since we'd first heard Seymour describe what was waiting for us in Zanarkand, I think.

Falde snorted. "Yeah, I can see why you might want to stay quiet—the top of Yo Mika's head would blow off if he genuinely thought you were a threat to his little racket. Now I understand why Cid wanted me to help you boys. So, once again, what can I do for you? And you still haven't explained about the broom."

"The Church teaches that in order to Summon aeons or Send stray spirits, a Summoner must use a staff," Seymour said. "However, a Summoner's staff is a poor weapon for purely physical attacks, and if Valefor will come to a broom, anything of about the same shape can serve as a focus. I want a spear, and finding one with good magic-heightening properties would be... difficult, to say the least. So I thought I would have one made. As for the others... armour, mostly, I think."

"Hmm. Your fellow Summoner intends to keep his staff?"

Braska smiled. "I prefer to stick with what I know, and that's Summoning and white magic."

"So you'll want armour that keeps you from being silenced, or otherwise prevented from using magic. And you—" She pointed at me. "I've seen the Church's heavy swordsmen before. You need a bracer with auto-haste. I'd give you added evasion as well, but I don't have the stuff, and there's no way to get it without a bathyscaphe. You, though, I can't figure out." She glared at Sephiroth, as though this annoyed her.

"Auto-shell, auto-protect, and whatever defense increases you can manage," I said. "For my peace of mind, if not his," I added when Sephiroth raised an eyebrow.

"I need seventy light curtains for an auto-protect, and I've only got sixty-two with me," the smith said.

"We picked some up on our way through the Thunder Plains." About a dozen. I had some in my pocket.

"Mmm. That works. What else have you got? Might bring the price down a bit."

"Let's go back inside, then," Braska suggested.
It took us more than two hours to reach an agreement with Falde. It also took tens of thousands of gil and a whole lot of miscellaneous items that were valuable to the smith, but of little use to us. I'd considered discarding some of those at one point, but I was glad I hadn't. Jecht contributed to the negotiation by coming in when it was almost complete and forcing us to start over again. Of course, he didn't have any armour at all, so it only made sense to commission some for him. And absolutely nothing came cheaply, making me more grateful than ever that Sephiroth spent so much of his spare time hunting. I almost collapsed when I heard what a single piece of armour endowed with auto-haste was worth . . . but Falde was right. It was what I needed. It shored up the worst of my weak spots.

By the time Falde borrowed Sephiroth's pauldrons to use as a pattern, I wasn't sure whether or not we were going to have enough money to pay for our inn rooms. When Sephiroth suggested we go hunting until suppertime, I agreed with enthusiasm, as did Seymour.

When we left the agency, we headed back into the forest, since the best money around here came from hunting chimeras. We tried to bypass the lesser fiends unless we encountered them alone and under conditions that allowed Sephiroth or Seymour to perform a one-hit kill. Of course, this didn't always work. The murussu and xiphos, with their hard shells, tended to be particularly stubborn.

"Do they have chimera on Gaia?" I asked at one of our infrequent rest stops.

"Not as such, although there's a desert-dwelling monster called a harpy that has a similar appearance. The water-elemental attack is the same, oddly enough, but the harpy's other primary attack is a poison cloud type. Zack nearly got himself killed the first time he ran into one." Sephiroth shook his head, and, when we pressed for details, told a story about an adolescent Zack, on his way to the big city to join the army, that began at the edge of a desert and ended upside-down in a chocobo's nest. Sephiroth's dry, sometimes almost uninflected, delivery just made it funnier.

When that story ended, I offered one about the first time I'd slogged through the Macalania Woods on the way to the Temple, during a training exercise when I'd been a novice, and our frantic efforts to cover for an idiotic prank that would have seen our entire novice class whipped if the perpetrator had been caught. Then Seymour told us about the time his mother had sold a merchant a live xiphos, as they'd been passing through the area on his first pilgrimage.

That put the onus back on Sephiroth, who told us about capturing a malboro (on Gaia, the homicidal plants lived in snowy areas, oddly enough) for Shinra's Science Department, admitting that he still didn't know exactly what they'd wanted it for. And so it went. None of the stories any of us told were about anything that mattered much, but the fact that we were swapping them like old comrades was itself important in its way, because it meant that Sephiroth was comfortable around us.

It was a pleasant afternoon that made us almost ten thousand gil, and we returned to the travel agency, relaxed and in a good mood, to join the others for supper. Jecht had recovered from his embarrassment, it seemed, and was talking to the woman at the counter. He seemed to be trying to get her to teach him Al Bhed. As for Braska . . . well, at least he looked rested.

It was getting harder than ever to figure out what was going on behind the mask that was our Summoner's public face, and I didn't quite know how to broach the subject with him. Perhaps I'd ask Jecht to do it for me. Sometimes it was useful to have someone with absolutely no shame working with you.

"We'll make the round trip to the lake temple tomorrow," Braska said as we all put aside our empty plates. "Unless the fayth here proves more stubborn than the others, there should be plenty of time. Once I have that aeon, we can depart for Bevelle."
"Unless we need to wait for Falde to finish her job," I pointed out.

"We can detour back here on the way out to the Calm Lands, if necessary," Braska said. "Although she did say that she would have the spear finished by this evening, and the ring she gave me was an item she already had in stock." He held it up. Like most warding rings, it was ridiculously huge, covering an entire joint of his finger.

"I hope you don't expect to block any attacks with that," Sephiroth said, sounding amused.

Braska shook his head. "It is a little lacking in surface area to be used as a shield, I suppose. As Falde suggested, this mainly blocks conditions that would prevent me from casting, and provides some protection against the magic of others."

"More like an accessory than armour, then," Sephiroth said. "And probably with the same irritating property of interfering with each other if you try to wear too many at once."

"Sounds right," I said. "Try to put on two or more pieces of treated armour, and their abilities start cutting in and out without warning, mixing together in odd ways, or even inverting themselves." I'd been required to try it in training—one bracer with a silence ward, and another with a darkness ward. I'd been deaf and dizzy for the half a minute before I'd been permitted to strip one of them off. Some of the other novices had vomited. I'd been irritated at the time that the instructors hadn't thought the verbal warning was enough, but a few years later I'd been handed the job of teaching the novices, and I'd discovered that not only was there always someone who didn't listen, but it wasn't always the person you'd expect. The direct demonstration had made certain that everyone understood.

"Armour like yours, which combines two pieces as one, may prove a bit of a challenge for our smith," Seymour added. "Or she may add the effect to only one side."

"And with that, I think I will bid everyone goodnight," Braska said. "We have a long walk ahead of us tomorrow."

"Says the guy who spent most of the day lounging around in bed reading a book," Jecht retorted.

I glared at him. This journey was harder on Braska than anyone else—couldn't Jecht see that? Our current state was almost worse for the Summoner than a normal pilgrimage. Braska had known he was going to die. He'd become resigned to it. And now his fate was up in the air. Undecided. He didn't even know what to brace himself for.

"Some find hunting fiends relaxing. Others prefer to play blitzball or chat with women. I happen to find reading relaxing," Braska said, with an easy shrug. "Good night."

Jecht muttered something under his breath that made Sephiroth raise an eyebrow, and stalked off in the direction opposite the one Braska was taking, back into the store.

The rest of us shrugged at each other, gathered our weapons, and went back to our rooms. Seymour parted with Sephiroth and I with a casual wave as we reached our doors.

I waited until we were alone to ask, "What was the last thing that Jecht said? You caught it, didn't you?"

"'Why the fuck don't you ever get mad?'" Sephiroth quoted, somehow capturing Jecht's inflections exactly, and I snorted.

"Still wrapped up in his own problems," I said. "Of course, if we confronted him about it, he would just say that we can't possibly understand."
My lover shook his head. "I suspect that Jecht's Zanarkand, like the larger cities of Gaia, was a relatively safe place. Part of him may have been convinced all along that Spira was just a nightmare... and now he's starting to realize he's awake. In any case, it isn't as though the rest of us can claim we don't have our own problems as well."

I snorted. "Every single one of us is a misfit or a madman. Possibly both."

"Not surprising. I doubt anyone well-adjusted would last a full day in our company."

"We may get a chance to find out, when we reach Bevelle."

"Do you have anything specific you intend to do while we're there?" Sephiroth folded his coat over the back of a chair.

"Visit some friends and family. After all, this might be my last cha—" A terrifying thought came to me, and I froze in the middle of folding my haori.

"What's wrong?"

I swallowed. Hard. "I just realized. My mother is going to want to meet you. Just like she insisted on meeting Jecht before we left. She already knew Braska." A non-sequitur, and I knew it. "I've never told her... where my preferences lie."

"And you don't know whether or not you should introduce me as your lover," Sephiroth said bluntly. "I cannot help you make that decision. You were warned that I was terrible at this sort of thing, I believe." He hesitated, then added, "Is there anyone other than us who does know?"

"Kinoc." I'd talked enough about my old friend when we'd been swapping stories earlier that day that I didn't feel the need to elaborate.

"And do you intend to tell him?"

I nodded. No question there. Probably the moment I got him alone.

"I'll brace myself, then." Another pause. "I wish I could have introduced you to Genesis. And properly to Angeal and Zack. They... were the closest thing I had to family."

"Brothers in arms."

"Just so."

"What was Genesis like?" I'd been wondering that for a while now. Zack had been prominently featured in the stories Sephiroth had told that afternoon, and Angeal, as his mentor, had been present in the background, but Genesis had barely been mentioned.

"Hmm. Shorter and slighter than either of us, closer in size to Kelanth. Auburn hair and blue eyes. He was a few months older than me or Angeal, although it never showed in his behaviour. He took great pleasure in the finer things in life—food, clothes, furnishings, the external trappings of wealth—and liked to show off. He was also somewhat obsessed with an epic poem called Loveless, and to a lesser extent, with literature in general. He often said he would have liked to be a professor rather than join the military, but as one of the subjects of the Jenova Project, the choice was never his. For all of that, he was the finest black mage I have ever known, considerably more skilled than me in that one area, although he was never my overall equal in combat. That ate at him... more than I think anyone understood. That he wasn't, couldn't be, the best. Due to an accident of birth."
"I can't picture you being friends with someone like that." To be exact, Sephiroth had a certain unconscious arrogance to him that I imagined would have driven the man he'd described insane.

"It was Angeal who befriended me first, and then pulled Genesis along with him. The two of them had grown up together, in a small village called Banora, far from the center of Shinra's influence. And the three of us were always grouped together in some ways, since we were both close in age and the most powerful fighters that Gaia had ever produced. If you're suggesting that under other circumstances, Genesis and I might have become enemies . . . well, we did end up that way, when all was said and done."

And this was a man he considered one of his closest friends . . . "I'm sorry."

Silver hair sifted across his shoulders as he shook his head again. "I prefer to remember us as we were, before everything broke apart. That . . . creature I spoke to on Mount Nibel wasn't Genesis, just an empty, gnawed-out shell. And what I became in his wake wasn't much better."

Once again, I resorted to touch as a substitute for words I couldn't articulate, wrapping my arms around him and pulling him against me . . . and then a few words came, rough and faltering. "I'm sorry you had to endure that. Things like that shouldn't have to happen. To anyone."

"Auron, we both know that the universe isn't a kind place, nor even a just one. 'Should' never matters."

"To quote Braska, the universe is as just as we make it. And to quote my Basic Theology instructor, justice is a human concept anyway."

I wasn't sure whether Sephiroth's soft snort was an expression of amusement or of derision. "I never was all that interested in philosophy."

"I doubt I'll ever be all that interested in studying the world the way you do, so we're even there." I kissed him on the jaw. "Come to bed?"

We cuddled for a while, but in the end, nothing more than that. It had been a long, complicated, confusing day, and we both needed rest.

Hopefully tomorrow wouldn't be worse.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The jacket from among the travel agency's offerings that had ended up fitting Jecht the best had turned out to be a pink one with a floral pattern. Even though the rest of us said nothing, the blitzer acted embarrassed and irritable as we made our way through the snow.

The ice monsters were out in force, but they weren't especially strong, and I'd borrowed Sephiroth's fire materia during our practice session this morning, to get a feel for that element. Nothing we encountered between the travel agency and the temple posed a challenge. We even herded a few ice wolves into place for Seymour to test his new spear on.

As we approached the temple itself, however, Braska frowned. "It's too quiet."

Jecht waved a hand. "It's colder than an ice flan's guts. They're probably all inside."

The Summoner shook his head. "I was assigned here as an acolyte, a very long time ago. There are always two warrior-monks on guard outside the doors, and usually a couple of acolytes on punishment duty inspecting the ice or the temple's exterior. And you can hear the fiends, even though they never descend the long path from the shore to the temple. Something's wrong."

"Probably just throwing a party or something inside," the blitzer insisted.

"Be quiet for a moment, Jecht."

The blitzer drew in an indignant breath, but subsided when Sephiroth glared at him. The silver-haired man closed his eyes and turned slowly in place.

"There are no fiends closer than a mile away, except for those in the lake, and even they are fairly deep down. The temple... again, I can't hear anything moving up above the level of the water. Something is wrong."

"I pray that the priests have only retreated to the lower levels," Braska said grimly.

We descended the curving, icy ramp that led down from the lakeshore in full battle array, with all weapons drawn and spells readied, but we were only a third of the way along the curve when Sephiroth made a low, unpleasant noise in his throat.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Pray that I am wrong," was the non-answer.

The exterior of the temple had changed slightly since the last time I had been here—about a year ago, commanding a supply and relief mission from Bevelle. Someone had added two... pillars? Crude statues? to either side of the main entrance.

Then we got a little closer, and I realized they weren't statues.

The frozen corpses of two warrior-monks stood to either side of the temple doors. They hadn't even had time to draw their weapons. Training and discipline kept me from running forward to see if they had been men I knew, but I clenched my jaw so hard I was distantly surprised that my teeth didn't
Our advance seemed painfully slow after that, and being in the open made it worse. I kept on expecting something to happen, an attack to descend on us, but nothing did. We made it to the door unscathed.

. . . I had known one of the two frozen monks, I discovered. His name had been Iello, and he'd been from Glowport, at the mouth of the Moonglow. The other man was very young. He'd probably still been a novice when I'd left the Order. Both were still and stiff and covered with frost that dimmed the colour of their uniforms.

Sephiroth cast a weak Fire spell to thaw the younger man out, and Braska instantly cast Cure, then Life, then checked for a pulse. He didn't have to shake his head to indicate that he'd found none—it was implied by his expression.

The door to the temple was open and unguarded. I don't think any of us wanted to see what was inside, but we knew we had to go. Even if there were no survivors, the dead had to be Sent, or they would become fiends.

Macalania, frozen and remote, had never been a popular temple for lay worshippers, thank Yevon. There was only one frozen body in the outer sanctuary, that of a priest.

"This place smells of the walking dead," Seymour said grimly. "There has been an Unsent stalking these halls, and recently."

"Braska," Sephiroth said in a low voice. "What's the interior layout of the building like? Where do these doors lead? We need to search it systematically."

"The upper door leads to the Cloister. Left, to the priests' quarters and library, and certain areas I wasn't permitted to enter as an acolyte. The right, to rooms used for meetings and instruction, the barracks for the detachment of warrior-monks who were stationed here, and the kitchens, dining room, baths, and supply storage."

Sephiroth barely hesitated for a second. "Auron, have you been here before?"

"Yes. I'm familiar with the barracks, dining room, and such," I added. "Not with the priests' area."

"Take Rufus with you and check that side, then. The rest of us will search the priests' rooms. We'll leave the Cloister until we're done with the rest, unless there's some reason you think someone might be down there."

I would have been happier if we'd all gone in a group, but I knew that if anyone here was still alive, time would be of the essence when it came to saving them, so I gritted my teeth and led Seymour over to the door. It was frozen into its frame, but a fire spell and a good, hard kick dealt with that.

The hallway wasn't as empty as I would have liked. I had to push a frozen acolyte back against the wall to get her out of the way. She'd been nine, maybe. The priests start training even younger than the members of the Order.

No one in the meeting rooms. Frozen priest in the small classroom—it looked like he'd been wiping the blackboard clean. Dining room, empty. Kitchen, one frozen priest and two acolytes. The bed of coals in the stove was still glowing under a layer of ash. Storage . . . empty. Baths . . . empty. Barracks . . . Sounds of breathing, thick and heavy. Not mine or Seymour's. I gestured the half-Guado back and charged my sword with fire before moving cautiously forward.
He was lying in a top bunk—that was probably why whatever had attacked this place hadn't noticed he was still alive. Not unscathed, with both legs and one arm rimed with frost, but still breathing. He'd probably been sleeping after being assigned the night watch, along with his partner, who crouched on the floor between the bunks, coated in rime.

As I approached, his eyes opened and slowly gained focus. "Captain Auron?"

I frowned. Squinted at his face. "Miletus?" I thought that had been the name. He'd been in the same novice class as Iello, two years after mine.

"Surprised you remember." He coughed, and Seymour, coming up closer behind me, cast a cure spell on him. It gave him a little of his colour back, but his frozen limbs remained inert.

"So am I. What happened here?"

Miletus grimaced. "Guado came stumbling in right at the crack of dawn. Said he was a Guardian, last survivor of a failed Summoner party—Summoner Kelanth, that was it. So we took him inside. But he—" Another cough. "They can call fiends, you know. Guado. Hadn't ever seen these before, though. Like women, but white and dead and when they breathed on us, they . . ." He gestured with his good hand, pointing at his frozen limbs. "I didn't even make it out of my bed, and I figured playing dead was safer when one of them got too close."

"Do you have any idea what he was trying to accomplish?" But Guado and the smell of Unsent back near the entrance suggested . . .

"Besides starting a war?"

"The Guado will not go to war over this," Seymour said firmly. "The one who attacked you does not speak for Guadosalam. He was Unsent, and that is anathema to the Guado people. Any true Guado who encounters him will destroy him on sight."

"Then no, beyond disrupting the temple."

I exchanged a grim look with Seymour. If it had been Vrokk, then that might have been an end in itself. Back to practicalities then.

"I'm going to go find the others," I said. "Rufus, if something happens, scream at the top of your lungs—Sephiroth will hear you, even if no one else can. Other than that, use your judgement."

A sober nod. "I had intended to in any case."

My boots crunched on rime as I hurried back up the hallway. Why was everything still so thickly coated, if all this had happened while the priests were preparing to cook breakfast and we were now within an hour of noon? I frowned, noticing for the first time that my breath was still misting the air with every exhale. The temple's heating system was supposed to be robust, and there was a second backup system if the first one failed. Had it been sabotaged? Or . . . were the fiends still here?

Drifting cold against my cheek sent me leaping back to the sound of quiet, eerie laughter.

Miletus had been right, I discovered. It did look like a woman, with bluish hair and skin that was beyond pale, clad in something even more skin-tight than an Al Bhed wetsuit. I sent fire along my sword. Surely this thing would be vulnerable to that.

The air was so cold that my lungs ached with every breath. The air didn't cloud for the fiend, which smiled at me. I think it may have been trying to look seductive.
I had to somehow keep it at a distance, or hit it from behind. Really, I was out of my mind to be fighting it at all. My old bracer had some magic resistance worked into it, but only a little, and what I would have given for an ice ward right now . . .

I drew in a deep breath, ignoring the burning pain, and roared it back out at the top of my lungs: "Fiend! Powerful fiend in the hall!"

There. That should warn both Sephiroth and Seymour. And now . . . Magic Break, I prayed.

Somehow, even with the frostbitten skin on my cheek distracting me by pulling tight, I managed to execute the attack. I wasn't sure how much good it did, though, because as I backed off, the fiend's breath touched my left hand, and it went numb and white there on my sword hilt, making it impossible to shift my grip. Then a moment later, my palm began to burn as the essence of fire now held in the blade of the sword began to thaw the ice.

"Ye'von," I spat, then locked my eyes with those of the fiend and thrust my spirit at it like a sword. "Don't move." Not the most reliable of the techniques taught by the Order, but this time it caught and held, buying me precious seconds to thaw my hand.

I would never trivialize frostbite again. This burned all the way to the bone. But after a few more seconds, trying to flex my fingers made them respond, however weakly. It was good enough.

I altered my grip on the sword. Now, before it shook off the Magic Break, I had to hit this creature for everything I had, betting it all on a single blow and hoping that even if the fiend attacked me, I would still destroy it. It was my best chance.

The fiend wasn't a physical fighter. A simple overhand blow would be best. I doubted it would think to kick me in the stomach, and it had no other way to block. Push off with my left leg, and raise the sword and step in and down again, as quickly as I could make it.

The attack struck squarely, but I'd overestimated the condition of my hand, and the cut didn't have nearly enough force behind it. It clove into the fiend, but not through it. Not a killing blow. And my sword was solidly lodged. I held onto the hilt and kicked away to pull it loose, but I felt the sole of my foot go heavy and numb on contact with the fiend, even through my boot. Ignore it. No major joints, bones, or muscles involved. You can still fight.

I swung sideways at the fiend's waist, and again failed to complete the kill . . . but suddenly there was movement further back in the hall, and fire exploded around the monster, which screamed and burst into pyreflies. Seymour and I were left staring at each other. I nodded to him, acknowledging that he'd just saved my life, and he nodded back with the oddest expression on his face.

Then there were more footsteps as Sephiroth, Jecht, and Braska rushed in.

"I'm fine," I said, before anyone could ask. "We found a survivor, although he isn't in the best of shape. You?"

"Only frozen corpses, although there are some doors we still need to break down." Sephiroth's voice was flat and even.

"Did you find any of the other warrior-monks?" I asked, leading the way along the corridor.

"No," Braska said. "Is that significant?"

I shrugged. "It means eight out of a detachment of twelve are still unaccounted for. And there must have been more than one fiend, to catch so many people unawares like this."
"Maybe your survivor will know something," Sephiroth said.

"Unlikely. He was off-shift, probably asleep, when the attack started. But he was able to tell us that a Guado was responsible for it. I'd guess that Vrokk was here."

"First you say it's fiends, and now you say it's a Guado? That doesn't make any sense," Jecht said.

"Guado rangers are taught techniques for calling and controlling fiends," Seymour said. "I have never before heard of them being used on one so nearly human, but then I was never permitted to study these things."

"Seriously? Ugh. Y'know, every time I think I've gotten the hang of living in Spira, you guys come up with some other crazy stuff and throw me for a loop."

Miletus propped himself up on his good elbow for a look as we all trooped back into the barracks. Braska went directly over to his bunk to check on him.

"This is beyond my ability to treat with cure spells," he said. "We need to get him thawed out. Sephiroth? You have the most delicate touch with black magic of any of us."

The silver-haired man stepped up. "We're going to have to hold you down," he warned Miletus. "The pain as your flesh warms will be agonizing, and if you thrash around too much, it may cause additional damage."

The young warrior-monk swallowed visibly. "I understand, Sir Guardian. Do your worst."

Sephiroth nodded. "Auron, get his legs."

"Right." I had to lean pretty far in at the foot-end of the bed to pin them properly. Sephiroth leaned in in much the same way to pin Miletus' torso.

He cast a Silence spell first, so that anything still loose in the building wouldn't hear the screams. Judging from the way Miletus thrashed and jerked against our grip, they probably would have been loud.

It seemed like a very long time before Sephiroth finished and nodded to Braska, who cast Curaga on Miletus twice in quick succession, then Esuna to get rid of the Silence spell. The young warrior-monk's chest was heaving like a bellows. Slowly, he raised his thawed hand and tried to flex it. It seemed to move smoothly, but there were little flecks of scar tissue up and down his arm.

"I suppose it's going to ache for a while," he said. "Did anyone else make it?"

"Not that we've found yet, but there are still some people missing," Braska said.

"So what now?" Jecht asked.

"First, we heal whatever damage has been done to Auron's foot," Sephiroth said. "Then we search the rest of this place in a group. If these fiends were able to injure Auron, I don't think it's safe for any of us to proceed alone."

"I'm handling it," I protested.

"You're limping," Sephiroth said flatly. "Not a lot, but enough to cause a break in your stride. We need you at your best."

It was as bad as thawing my hand had been, although Braska's presence at least allowed for
mercifully quick healing.

Miletus was a little unsteady on his feet when he climbed down from the bunk, but there was no question of who would be helping him, and Jecht didn't protest his assigned role. The warrior-monk insisted on going armed, just like the rest of us, taking a chain-sickle from his storage space under the lower bunk. Sephiroth glanced at it, raised an eyebrow, and said nothing.

We spent another half an hour kicking down doors inside what Braska admitted were normally forbidden areas for those not part of the priesthood—but Miletus, the only person here likely to protest, said nothing, although he was visibly gritting his teeth. He knew that finding any survivors was more important than preserving the Church's petty secrets right now. However, all we found was another priestcicle, this one with an expression of outright terror on his face.

Missing warrior-monks and missing fiends and a missing Unsent Guado. Since there was no sign that any of them had left the temple, there was only one place they could be.

Entering the Cloister, regardless of the reasons, was just too much for Miletus, however. He balked.

"Lord Braska, I am neither Summoner nor Guardian. I must remain outside."

"It ain't safe," Jecht said.

"I would rather be dead than violate Yevon's law so thoroughly," Miletus said firmly.

Jecht snorted. "Hey, Braska, is there any rule against making someone a Guardian for just a little while? Until we leave the temple, say?"

Braska raised his eyebrows. "None that I'm aware of."

"I doubt they ever thought that someone might want to," I added, when I'd searched my memory and come up blank as well. "Rather like Summoning an aeon with a broom." The Church of Yevon was encrusted with traditions that weren't codified as part of the Teachings, and it could be difficult to separate them sometimes.

"In that case—Miletus, will you be my Guardian until I leave Macalania Temple?" Braska asked.

Miletus visibly clenched his teeth. He clearly didn't like this flouting of tradition. Nor would I have, in the days before I'd discovered the rotten heart of the Church. But he also said, "Yes, Lord Braska, I will be your Guardian until you leave Macalania Temple."

At least he was a little steadier on his feet as we climbed the steps to the Cloister and passed through the door. Beyond that was an arched passageway, dimly lit.

Ten feet in, it was blocked off by a pane of smooth, white, glittering ice. Red letters had been crudely smeared onto its surface: Go back.

"Unoriginal," Sephiroth said. And cast Fira at it.

That opened up the rest of the hallway, which ended abruptly in a vertical drop. We also had a stone pedestal, a sphere, and a recess on the wall that the sphere should fit. Columns marked the path that the corridor should have taken up ahead, leading to an opening on the far wall.

"Completing the Trial will rebuild the walkway," Seymour said, putting the sphere in the recess and giving the pedestal a push down the ramp that had now appeared on the right. "I'm afraid I don't remember all the details, but the pedestal can be used to plow through some of the snow and ice
formations."

"If any of you see a way to create a shortcut using magic, do it," Braska added. "We can return later and do the Trial properly, but time is of the essence here. I wish we could have found the maintenance door."

"And I wish the ceiling were higher," Sephiroth said. "If we were outside, I would be able to cross over by jumping, but if I try that here, I'll just knock myself unconscious. I might still be able to make it up to the far side by jumping from the lower level, but getting the rest of you up would be difficult."

Miletus was looking from one person to another, but keeping his mouth shut. Probably wise of him, under the circumstances.

We finished the Trial in what may have been record time, carelessly tossing or rolling spheres from one person to the next, and then trotting across the bridge we'd created as though we didn't feel like it was going to dissolve under our feet. Well, perhaps the others didn't have that problem, but I could feel the hairs at the nape of my neck rising. We had to burn and kick the door at the far end again to get it open, and when we did, we found chaos on the other side.

The missing warrior-monks were all here—still alive, crammed up against the wall in a horseshoe formation that shielded three priests and a couple of acolytes, who seemed to be casting NulFrost in relays. Outside the small area they were protecting... well, I didn't think I'd ever seen that many fiends in a confined space before. Ice flans, some mafdets, at least four of the woman-things I'd fought before, and at the center, in front of what must have been the entrance to the Chamber of the Fayth, a dragon.

And I don't mean a vouivre or some other drake-type. I mean a dragon. Like an ice statue of Bahamut, but with wings more like a bat's and without the wheel hovering behind it. If the ceiling in here hadn't been much higher than that of the Cloister, I'm not sure the creature would have fit.

The survivors from the temple were barely managing to handle the lesser monsters. If the dragon had attacked, it probably would have swept all of them away, but it seemed to be watching with amusement. As we clattered into the room, it lazily raised its head and looked us over. Its eyes were golden and disturbingly pupilless.

Sephiroth took in the situation at a glance. "Braska, Summon Ifrit. Rufus, call up whatever you think would be the most useful. Let's get rid of as many of these as we can, as fast as we can."

Braska spun his staff in a circle, trailing flames, while beyond him, Seymour made some half-seen movement with his spear. The floor fractured as Ifrit clawed his way up out of wherever aeons lived when they weren't being Summoned, while above us, the ceiling seemed to disappear for a moment as Bahamut catapulted down from an unreal sky. Sephiroth raised his hand in a familiar gesture, and a barrier of some sort appeared between the humans and the bulk of the monsters in the room just before the area filled with fire and fury.

The flans and mafdets didn't stand a chance. They evaporated into pyreflies, leaving the floor strewn with gil and miscellaneous items. The woman-fiends had NulFire spells circling them, though, and were casting Curaga at each other. And the dragon was unscathed and still appeared amused.

Then again, so did Sephiroth. "The dragon is mine. As for the snow spirits, they're poor physical fighters. Block as much of their magic as you can, and stab them to death. Auron, you're with me."

"You're genuinely happy to finally have an opponent that you can't just push over with a fingertip," I
grumbled. "Didn't you get enough of that with that blob that nearly ate Jecht back in the woods?"

"I had to be careful there to avoid killing Jecht. This promises to be much more . . . fun."

"Yevon," I snarled under my breath as I sprinted forward in his wake. And yet I was happy to see him enjoying himself. It didn't seem to be something that happened often.

Sephiroth flung a Shadow Flare in the dragon's face as we got closer, and it snarled and whipped its head back and forth, its amusement vanishing as though it had never been.

"Magic-immune," I heard my lover mutter, and then, more loudly, "Armor Break, if you can."

I decided to do one better. A silent fury had been building in me ever since we'd found Iello and his comrade frozen to death at their posts, and it had only grown with every ice statue we'd found. My injuries during the fight in the hallway had made it swell and crystallize into a hot ember behind my breastbone, an overdrive just waiting to be let out.

I snatched up the jug I carried at my belt, took a single mouthful, and spat, spraying sake over my blade in a thin mist. *Feed the spirit of the sword.* It was a tradition my father had subscribed to as well. Sometimes when I tended my blade in the evenings, I gave it a single drop as a reward if I'd made a lot of use of it that day.

*Banishing Blade!* It was half a command, half a prayer to the sword-spirit that I'd just fed. I'd been working on this when I'd been drummed out of the Order, but I could only perform it when I had an overdrive pushing me beyond my ordinary capacity, and then not always reliably.

It worked this time. Ominous symbols circled my sword as I brought it in for an overhand blow, and I felt the dragon's defenses shatter—some of them, at least. I was fairly certain the Mind Break portion of the attack hadn't connected. Perhaps it was immune to that, too.

Sephiroth, in the meanwhile, was dancing right in front of the dragon, fearless. Masamune wove a net of blue lines, shockwaves in the air that battered at the fiend, slicing into it. The dragon was leaking pyreflies from a long cut on its snout and another on its chest, and was swiping at him with extended talons. When it tried to breathe frost at him, Sephiroth leaped and attacked its eyes to spoil its aim. Every move blended together into a practiced, perfected technique that made me wonder just how many dragons he had fought.

I wasn't as quick, or capable of pulling off the jumping attacks that formed so much of his style, but I had tricks of my own. I stabbed at the dragon's chest, and then when it swatted at me, instead of dodging, I raised my sword and braced myself and smiled with savage satisfaction as it impaled its own talons on my blade, then tore them as it attempted to get free. That was one foreleg reduced to near-uselessness as an offensive weapon.

The dragon screamed, then screamed again as Sephiroth drew a long diagonal slash down across one eye. It swatted at him with its undamaged set of foretalons, and he did one of his tricky aerial manoeuvres, kicking hard at the dragon's foreleg to change his direction in midair. He vaulted right over the dragon's head, twisting to land between its shoulders, and slashed at the back of its neck.

Fiends have internal structure: they aren't just blobs of pyreflies, but have a certain logic to their shapes that's carried over from the time when the minds animating them were human. Which is why it's possible to do more damage to them by targeting heads, necks, and chests—brains, spines, and hearts. They don't actually have any of those, but most of them think they do. Other targets that would be viable on a living human, like guts or knees or the femoral artery, won't work on fiends, though, because most humans don't instinctively consider damage to those areas as fatal.
There's also a way that you can tell whether a bipedal fiend was originally male or not. It's easy enough to guess what that is, so I won't explain in detail.

Sephiroth cut deep into the dragon's neck right at the base of its skull, where the spine would have met the brain in a natural creature. He cut an entire wedge almost the size of a human torso out of it, in fact, and kicked it away from the dragon. It evaporated into pyreflies even as it fell, and the dragon's tail and hindquarters seemed to become inflexible, moving spasmodically—it had convinced itself that it had a spinal injury.

But Sephiroth didn't stop there. He brought Masamune down in a hard, scything blow, and the dragon's head fell from its neck, bounced on the floor, and rolled one and a half times before falling apart into pyreflies. And Sephiroth snapped Masamune down, shaking off nonexistent blood, before jumping down from a dragon carcass that was also starting to fall apart.

Everyone was staring at us. Even Braska, Seymour, and Jecht. They snapped out of it more quickly, though. Jecht even began gathering the gil and items left by the fiends while the warrior-monks were still staring.

"Did you enjoy your workout?" Seymour asked as the two of us approached.

"Quite," Sephiroth said, but before we could discuss anything more substantial, one of the priests the warrior-monks had been guarding approached our group.

"Lord Braska and Lord . . .?" The priest raised his eyebrows in Seymour's direction.

"Call me Rufus. I am here as Lord Braska's Guardian, not as a Summoner in my own right. I turned away from my own pilgrimage long ago."

"That is . . ."

"Irregular, but not forbidden," Seymour provided. "The Law of Yevon places no constraints at all on who may be a Guardian. All that is required is that the Summoner accept them."

The priest blinked several times. "Interesting. I believe you are correct." I half-ignored him as he proceeded with introductions, retaining only that he was the current High Priest. He offered us rest and accommodations in the priests' quarters upstairs, but we all shook our heads.

"I will Send the dead," Seymour said firmly. "Let Braska do what he came here for, for certainly we have all faced a greater Trial than the makers of the Cloister intended."

Braska nodded, and we all turned to face the entrance to the Chamber of the Fayth.

I wondered what the priests were going to do when the fayth called Sephiroth's name.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't think of an appropriate mid-boss-level monster from FFX, so I stole the Snow from FFVII and made a few modifications (it's the enemy you have to fight to get the Alexander materia). Given the weather around here right now, it seems all too appropriate. Ugh.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Another NSFW chapter.

Shiva turned out not to have much to say.

The warrior-monks hustled the priests and acolytes out of the antechamber before Braska went in to speak to the fayth, thankfully. Seymour went with them, to execute his grisly duty. I was just as glad not to have to witness it.

When Braska did open the door, a feminine voice spoke Sephiroth's name. As usual, he entered the Chamber with Braska, while the rest of us watched through the open door.

Shiva's fayth had been a priestess, long enough ago that the details of her robe looked subtly odd to me, although the general cut was the same as that of the modern priests' robes. Which I suppose proves that the Church of Yevon is ridiculously conservative, since she had to have been here for at least seven hundred years.

"And your message?" Sephiroth's voice was impressively neutral.

"Gaia fears you too much to have you back," the fayth said. "We are sorry."

My lover shook his head. "That . . . is not unexpected."

Shiva inclined her head. "Summoner Braska, I will lend you my power. Please put an end to this. We are all so very tired."

Pyreflies swirled, and Braska began to shiver violently. Sephiroth unfastened the front of his coat and wrapped it around the semiconscious Summoner, drawing him back against his body. I firmly repressed a flash of jealousy, knowing that Sephiroth was just trying to keep Braska from freezing while he assimilated the aeon. Under other circumstances, it might not have mattered so much, but Braska had to be tired from Summoning Ifrit and the spells he'd cast to get Miletus back on his feet.

Come to think of it . . .

I turned around and saw the young warrior-monk standing by the wall. He hadn't left with the others. Knowing that the tableau inside the Chamber was likely to persist for some time, I strolled over to join him, propping myself against the wall to make it easier to take a bit of weight off my aching, formerly-frozen, foot.

Miletus nodded to me. "Captain, I . . . um."

"Not 'Captain' anymore," I reminded him. "I left the Order."

"Everyone wanted you to stay. You were one of our best."

"I couldn't offer unquestioning obedience anymore. It was right that I leave."
There was an uncomfortable silence that I didn't think was worth breaking, while Miletus fished for another topic.

"So . . . um. I thought Lord Braska left Bevelle with two Guardians."

"Me and Jecht, yes." I took pity on him, and added, "We picked up Sephiroth on our way to Besaid, then added Rufus after we were blown off-course to the ruins of Baaj on our way back to Luca from Kilika."

"Baaj? That's . . . a long way from anywhere."

"Especially in a ferryboat with no working engines and a hole in the bottom," I agreed.

"You're joking."

"I wish I were. A storm hit us about a day out of Kilika, washed most of the crew overboard, and tore a hole in the side of the boat. Which flooded the hold and drowned the chocobos . . . and a lot of the passengers. We sealed the hole with ice and the surviving crew managed to get the sails up, but we had no idea where we were by then, beyond 'west of where we were'. It was pure luck that we reached Baaj, and we were twice as lucky to discover someone else already there who was able to arrange a ride back to Luca for us."

"It sounds like an adventure."

Was he still young enough to want "adventure"? It was at times like this that I felt a thousand years old. "It was quite possibly the most boring, drawn-out crisis that I've ever experienced, trying to pump out the ship and fish for food when the supplies started to run low, and knowing all the while that if we ran out of ether, the only thing we'd be able to do was swim for it."

"That man Sephiroth—do all the fayth speak to him?" At least Miletus knew when to change the subject.

I shrugged. "To him, or in one case, of him."

"But why?"

"I don't know. We can't exactly question the fayth, and Sephiroth himself isn't sure." I didn't quite dare come out and say, We think they brought him here in the hope that he would come up with a plan to destroy Sin, and Jecht may be here for the same reason. That was just a guess, and one based more on what I'd learned about Sephiroth than what we knew about the fayth.

And, well, I had a nasty feeling that Falde had been right: the top of Grand Maester Yo Mika's head would blow off if he genuinely thought we stood a chance of destroying Sin. Without Sin, the Church of Yevon would lose power, lose meaning. And that meant that he would seek to deal with us, one way or the other, before we could reach Zanarkand. It wouldn't be the first time that an enemy of the Church had just quietly disappeared.

Really, when I thought about it, it was a marvel that my faith in the Church had persisted as long as it had. Once I'd let myself start thinking about it, there were so many little things, so much foulness half-hidden from the public by nothing more than sleight-of-hand, pushing people to look here while the Church's agents quietly covered something up there.

I could still understand why people wanted to believe in the Teachings. The idea that there was some powerful being watching over us and offering to help as long as we did our part was . . . comforting. But deceptive. Saying that Sin would go away if we atoned for all of our small-s sins and stopped
committing any more of them wasn't a form of hope, or even an idea to strive towards. It was a taunt: *you can't save yourselves while you remain human.* Not that sinfulness was unique to humans. The Ronso and the Guado were equally as bad.

I was much happier believing that Sin was just a particularly large and stubborn lump of pyreflies with a false mythology built around it. That reduced the problem of getting rid of it to a simple matter of applying enough force, just like with any other fiend.

As for why Yevon hadn't wiped it out himself . . . well, there was an old school of thought, considered heresy by the Church, that said that Yevon only did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. I was starting to like that one.

"He's strange," Miletus said. "A good fighter, but . . . strange."

I found myself venting a low chuckle. "He may be the best fighter on Spira at the moment. Certainly he's better than me."

"That can't be! I mean, with the dragon . . . you were just holding back, weren't you?"

I shook my head. "Without him, I doubt we could have handled the dragon. I just don't have his speed, or his technique. He's older than I am, started learning younger, and practices religiously every day. I've learned more than a little from him while we've been traveling together."

"But you're the best! Even Armsmaster Harrith says so."

I shook my head again. "According to Harrith—" Whose assistant I had been, when I'd spent that year teaching the novices. "—I may be the best student she's ever taught. But that's meaningless. The Ronso have a term you may have heard: Ten-Year Warrior. The best warrior to come out of the tribe in a given decade. That's roughly the level that I'm at. Sephiroth, though, is a Hundred-Year Warrior—maybe a Thousand-Year Warrior. He has it in him to be another Lord Mi'ihen, someone whose legend is remembered for centuries."

"That's . . ."

"Unbelievable?" I suggested. "In your place, I'd probably think so too. One dragon doesn't make a legend. Not yet." Or even one dragon and a couple of other large fiends and rescuing a ferry and holding up a ceiling in Guadosalam and scaring Sin out of a harbour and talking to fayths. *Huh.* Disaster seemed to be following our party around, although so far, we'd mostly managed to stay one step ahead. "Actually, I'd like to see him duel Harrith. Her assessment of him might not agree with mine."

Miletus visibly relaxed. "That's true."

"But I'm still not fast enough," I said. "And I won't be until I can hit things like evil eyes accurately at least half the time. Right now, Rufus would have a better chance of taking one down with his spear, and he's only just begun to learn how to use it. It's actually a bit embarrassing."

Inside the Chamber, Braska was pulling away from Sephiroth, and . . . thanking him, I thought. Sephiroth pulled his coat shut and re-secured it.

"Time for us to go," I said, and pushed myself away from the wall I'd been leaning against as we spoke.

Miletus followed us back along the passageway toward the door of the temple. It was only when we were nearly at that door that he spoke again. "Lord Braska."
Braska stopped and turned. "Yes?"

"Thank you. For saving my life. For saving all of our lives."

"It was the right thing to do," the Summoner said, with a smile. I wondered if anyone else noticed the hint of irony in it.

"Thank you, nonetheless. But I was wondering . . ."

"Yes?"

"Who was the Unsent who started all this? I had the impression that Captain Auron and Lord Rufus seemed to know."

"We encountered him in Guadosalam," Sephiroth said before Braska could. "He appears to want to prevent any Summoner from completing the pilgrimage. Presumably, that's why he attacked the temple here."

"He was responsible for the death of Lord Jyscal," Seymour added. "Which is the other reason why the Guado will not support him."

Miletus' eyes widened. "So the lord of the Guado is dead? Have they called his son back from wherever they hid him to take his place, or—"

"For the moment, Jyscal's subordinate Tromell leads Guadosalam," Seymour said serenely. "Whether that will be a permanent appointment or not remains to be seen. I don't doubt that the information has already gotten back to Bevelle."

"Yeah, but it's probably going to be weeks before it gets out here," Miletus said. "Um, be careful, okay? All of you."

I snorted. As far as he knew, we were going on a suicide mission. Even the Guardians of successful High Summoners seldom returned from Zanarkand alive. "Be careful" to what? Not die until we were done?

Our return to the travel agency felt like an eternal slog. Sephiroth cleared any monsters that popped up almost instantly, before any of us could offer to help even if we'd been so inclined. It was just as well, because Jecht had to help Braska over a couple of the rougher spots.

It wasn't until we were halfway back that I realized Sephiroth still didn't have his pauldrons back from Falde. He'd fought that dragon with no better armour than his behemoth-leather coat, although really, I wasn't sure how much protection the pauldrons provided, or why he wore them and no other metal armour.

Only Jecht bothered to even wave at the woman behind the counter when we entered the travel agency. The rest of us walked straight across the lobby and entered our rooms.

"Take the first shower," I told my lover. "You've more than earned it."

There was only a momentary hesitation before he nodded and entered the small bath attached to our room. I heard him turn the shower on, and reflected that one of the biggest mysteries about Sephiroth was how he washed his hair without taking an hour and half a ton of soap. But as usual, he was out again, hair damp, in fifteen minutes. He hadn't bothered with any strategic towels, either. A hint of a smirk crossed his face as I admired his physique—we were alone, so I could allow myself to do so openly.
He planted an unexpected kiss on my cheek, and seemed amused when I jumped. "Go get cleaned up. I'll be waiting."

"So will I," I admitted huskily, feeling myself harden under my clothes.

I tried to avoid touching myself in the shower. Thus far, Sephiroth had been a patient lover, amazingly considerate of my ignorance, and I didn't want to reward him by expending myself in advance and being limp when I went back out.

I didn't bother wearing a towel either.

When I emerged back into the room, he was lounging on the bed, still naked, legs spread to reveal that he was half-hard, rising to full hardness as he gave me a once-over of his own. I licked my lips as he beckoned me to join him. As soon as I was close enough, he pulled me down for a kiss, and I groaned softly into it.

"I want to be inside you," he whispered near my ear. "Will you let me?"

That brought up memories of our last time, with him touching me inside and sliding down to envelop my erection. What would it be like from the other side, to feel him sliding into me instead?

"Yes," I managed.

"You might not enjoy it much," he warned. "Some men don't."

"It's—*nhh!*—alright." I had never known that having just that spot on my neck forcefully sucked on would transfer a pulse of heat to my lower body—why would I? But he seemed to be good at finding those spots. Learned? Instinct?

Did it matter?

*Maybe.* It would influence the direction I needed to take in learning to do the same for him. For now, though, I was thinking too much. I reached out and ran my hands slowly down over his chest, feeling the solidity of his muscles—*Yevon,* he was beautiful, a work of art.

Suddenly he grabbed me by the shoulders and tumbled me down onto the bed, rolling us over so that he was on top. I didn't fight it—really, I'd more than half expected it. I spread my legs when he urged me to, and otherwise contented myself with little touches and exchanges of kisses and letting the soft, thick silver of his hair pour through my fingers.

The little jar labeled in Al Bhed reappeared for the first time since the Thunder Plains, and I felt a shiver run through me as I saw it. My erection twitched when I felt a slick finger press against me, preparing to enter me from behind, and Sephiroth vented a low chuckle that sounded . . . vaguely evil, pulling his hand away, only to restore it to its place a moment later when I found my hips shifting involuntarily to get that touch back. And so I ended up impaling myself, although only by about half an inch. Sephiroth pushed his finger slowly, smoothly, the rest of the way inside.

"Don't tense up," he warned. "That *will* make it hurt, and I'm going to need to get at least three fingers inside to avoid tearing you. I'm not small, as you may have noticed."

"Do it right," I whispered back. "I can—"

He curled his finger, and I lost track of what I had been trying to say. Maybe it was just as well. We both talked far too much when we were doing this, even though I'd always thought that passion was supposed to make you inarticulate. Maybe it was just our personalities . . . or Sephiroth's need to be
in control of everything, including himself. Self-control had been emphasized in my training, as well. *Such a fine pair we make.*

But just because we couldn't completely lose ourselves in this didn't mean that we enjoyed it any less. I made a low, appreciative noise in my throat when Sephiroth began to stroke my erection with one hand, distracting me as he slid a second finger into me. That was starting to feel a bit odd, as he worked those fingers, sliding them in and out, scissoring them, and rubbing up against that one spot that felt so good whenever he touched it.

The third finger made me wince a bit, erection flagging, at the unexpected burning sensation, but it still wasn't too bad. Then Sephiroth pulled his hand out for a moment, to dip it into the little pot for more of whatever the greasy stuff inside was, and it made me feel . . . uncomfortable. Empty. I vented a moan of approval when the fingers slid back in. Even if it was a little tight, it was better than being empty.

"Maybe I didn't need to warn you quite so thoroughly after all," Sephiroth murmured as he sat back on his heels and reached for the jar again. I snorted a laugh . . . and then put my own hand on the jar.

"Let me," I said, which got me a flicker of an eyebrow first, then a nod. Placing his hands on his thighs, he let me take the jar and slick a generous amount of its contents over his erection, which I handled slowly, massaging the veins on the underside with the pad of my thumb. That coaxed a low noise from Sephiroth, and he tossed his head. Meanwhile, it was taking all my discipline not to display my discomfort at being empty again.

I was a little surprised when he broke first, eyes sparking green as he pushed me back against the bed and drew my leg up until it was hooked over his shoulder. Not entirely comfortable, but I forgot about that as he pushed his hips forward and entered me for the first time. *Yevon!* I bit my lip to keep from saying it aloud, because the last thing I wanted was to remind either of us of anything related to the Church at a time like this. Muscles unused to the intrusion tried to clench down and keep him out, and I concentrated on relaxing and easing them. And then Sephiroth was all the way in, and the hot, full ache of it somehow went straight to my erection. I moaned, low in my throat, as he pulled partway out and thrust back in again, and that sent another pulse of pleasure spreading out from that spot inside me.

"Damn, you're tight," Sephiroth whispered, his voice low and thick.

"Don't hold back," I told him.

"I won't," he said. And then, *Aurrron,* with that low almost-purr in his voice as he pulled out and pushed back in again and I made an embarrassing whimpering noise.

"Sephiroth," I replied, tilting my head to meet burning green eyes. *I want. I accept. I do not worship, and I am not afraid, and this feels . . . so good . . .*

He made a low noise as he settled into a rapid tempo of thrusting, and as I picked up the rhythm, I began to push my hips up to meet him. The tip of my erection left a slick trail against his abdominal muscles, and I tried to thrust up into him until he used one hand to hold me down and the other to start stroking me again. I reached for his hair, but ended up digging my fingers into the muscles of his shoulders and back instead.

I whimpered. I was getting overwhelmed even as I reached for control, *flailed* for it, and felt it slipping away.
"Se—ah!—ngh!" Some distant part of me noted that the noises I was making were more than a bit embarrassing. The rest was more interested in heat and delicious friction and the tightness building in the pit of my stomach as Sephiroth continued to subject me to a rapid cycle of being filled and empty and filled again.

Pleasure shot up my spine like lightning, and I cried out even more loudly as I spent myself messily all over both of us. Desperately, I curled upward and pressed my mouth to Sephiroth's to smother another cry, and felt a low vibration against my lips and tongue and a sudden momentary sensation of being even more thoroughly filled. It wasn't until the rhythm died that I realized he'd just spent himself inside me. It was an oddly erotic thought.

"Thank you," Sephiroth said, voice low. "I needed . . . I'm sorry."

"I wanted this just as much as you may have needed it," I told him. "Making love with you isn't exactly a distasteful task."

"Making love," he repeated, in a tone almost of wonder. "I suppose it really is." His tiny smile flickered.

"Well, I was hoping you weren't thinking of it as meaningless sex," I said as he pulled out of me. With his erection no longer stretching me open from the inside, I became aware of an odd sensation. "Sephiroth, why am I . . . tingling?"

"Inside?"

I nodded.

He grimaced. "Probably trace amounts of mako in my semen. There isn't enough to be toxic . . . although my blood could theoretically poison you if you drank enough of it."

"Mako?" I settled in, curling against him as he began to wipe us both off with a handful of tissues from the box by the bedside.

"Think of it as melted pyreflies—the physical expression of Gaia's Lifestream. I have a lot of it in my system, since I was exposed in incremental doses starting before I was born. I'm so saturated that I even survived going for an accidental swim in the Lifestream itself."

"How did that happen?" My dim understanding of the Lifestream made it very much like the Farplane, which wasn't a place you wandered into by accident.

"I fell off a catwalk in the Nibelheim Reactor. It was one of the most foolish things I've ever done," he added with a snort. "I put it down to a combination of blood loss and the distraction from Jenova shouting inside my head. For future reference, if you ever run someone through, don't be so intent on holding onto your sword that you let him grab the blade and throw you off-balance with it."

"Zack?" I asked.

Another snort. "No, if it had been Zack, I might have been able to keep some of my self-respect. It was Zack's friend Cloud. At the time, he was sixteen years old, five and a half feet tall, and maybe a hundred and thirty pounds soaking wet, with hair like a chocobo's rump. He eventually matured into a fine swordsman and became the third person to wield that ridiculous sword you saw Angeal and Zack hauling around. Although he never did get much taller, or manage to fix his hair. I wonder sometimes if it wasn't sheer embarrassment from being defeated so stupidly that made me give myself over to Jenova. It certainly sapped any fighting spirit I might have had left."
"You thought you were invincible?" I asked, only half-joking.

"Of course not." The response was deadly serious. "But if you're known to be the best, you owe it to everyone who has ever looked up to you, and to everyone you've ever defeated, not to go down easily in a fight. Dying of an illness or something else that I couldn't attack with a sword would have been one thing, but making a stupid misjudgement and losing track of the terrain during a battle . . . that's shameful. Even though I would never have chosen to present myself as a hero without Shinra pushing me from behind, I feel as though I let a large number of people down at that point, never mind everything that came afterwards."

What did come afterwards? From the anguished expression on his face, it probably wasn't a good idea to ask directly. I tried to do it with my eyes instead.

"I was essentially out of circulation for five years after that, while Jenova . . . trained . . . me, although I was able to observe some events." The word "trained" was spoken with extreme distaste. "Meanwhile, both Zack and Cloud were picked up by Shinra and experimented on—they wanted to know how someone like Cloud could possibly have defeated me, not realizing that it was because I was performing poorly and Cloud was desperate. They eventually escaped, but Cloud had already suffered severe, but not irreparable, mental damage. He was left for dead after Zack was killed fighting off most of Shinra's army in an attempt to protect him, but he didn't actually die, and a few months later, he and I met again. By that time, I was out of my mind completely, seeking nothing but destruction. Cloud was one of the ones who fought to stop me. As was Aerith. Thankfully, they succeeded. How did we get on this subject?"

"Mako. I think."

"Mmm. I think it's your turn to unveil your sordid past. I know less of your history than you do of mine, which seems . . . odd, considering."

I chuckled. "Probably because I don't have much of a sordid past. I'm from Bevelle, my father was a Crusader who died fighting off a Sinspawn attack on the Macalania temple when I was four, and my mother is still alive. I became a novice in the Order of Temple Guardians, usually known to outsiders as the warrior-monks, when I was twelve, because I believed strongly in Yevon and it was one of the few ways a boy with no money to pay a teacher could receive weapons training. After I became a full member of the Order, my faith was gradually eroded away as I became more closely acquainted with Church politics. The last straw came when, in order to promote me to a position I never asked for, several of the factions hashed together a compromise that would have seen me marrying the daughter of Maester Esmon, who is also the High Priest of the Bevelle Temple. In addition to my total physical disinterest in her, that would have made me uncomfortably beholden to her father. As a result, I refused. They whipped me for disobedience, as prescribed by the Rule of the Order, and while I was tied to the whipping post, I decided I couldn't handle the hypocrisy anymore and made up my mind to leave the Church."

"And Braska?"

I shrugged. "Kinoc introduced us. It was not long after I left the Order, and I needed a healer. We got to be friends." He didn't need the details—me being delirious for three days with an infected burn, Kinoc cursing as he tied me down so that he could cut the rotting flesh away and make healing possible at all, my nearly throttling Braska when I woke up disoriented after his Curaga had done its work. Sephiroth hadn't given me details of what had happened between him and Cloud after Nibelheim, either.

"I suppose you're right about it not being the most unusual and fascinating of histories, but at least I now know for certain that you share my distaste for institutional politics."
"We all do, I think, given that Braska has been unofficially discarded by the Church."

"The unofficial resolutions are always the dangerous ones." Clearly, Sephiroth did know about politics. "I suppose we should think about putting on some clothes and going to supper, unless you think that the novelty of eating in the nude would compensate for the food being journey rations."

"You're always eating," I observed.

"I can go without food almost indefinitely if I need to, but it does odd things to my mental state. Better for my sanity to keep myself fed."

"Odd things?"

My lover scowled. "Jenova's kind are . . . energy-ingesting parasites, is probably the best way to put it. If I go too long without normal food, my thoughts begin to turn in that direction. On Gaia, before I learned about Jenova, I was able to keep from acting on it—there were plenty of edible monsters around, and in any case I had no idea what my instincts were trying to make me do. Here . . . I suspect I would start to consume pyreflies, perhaps even without conscious intent. And I have no idea what the consequences of that would be for me."

Other than separating him even further from his humanity, that was. "By all means, then, let's eat."

However, I couldn't help but wonder, as we ate, what he wasn't telling me. I wasn't sure why I felt he'd left out something important, something that went beyond mere detail, but I trusted my instincts.

*Give it time,* I told myself. Considering how long we hadn't known each other, it was surprising I'd found out as much about his tortured past as I had.

I just hoped we didn't run out of time. After all, there was a deadline waiting for us out ahead.
Falde distributed armour in the morning. Each piece was a work of art . . . except for Sephiroth's pauldrons, since she'd ended up adding the effects to his original ones rather than making a new set, etching them with rows of tiny symbols to hold the power.

"I didn't realize these were mythril-adamantite alloy until I sat down and took a good look," the smith said as she laid them on the table. "I don't know where you got them, but don't lose them, because replacements would cost a mint. I managed to put auto-shell, auto-protect, and a couple of defense-strengtheners on them. Talk about difficult to work with!"

"You look like you enjoyed the challenge," Braska said, with a smile.

"Always," Falde admitted, with an easy grin.

We departed, newly armoured, to retrace our path. We would have to go back almost to the edge of the Thunder Plains to pick up the road to Bevelle. But at least there were plenty of stray chimeras along the way.

"So . . . decided yet?" Jecht casually asked Braska as we were on our way down a spiralling tree-path.

"Decided what?" Braska asked.

"Whether you're gonna stay in Bevelle or come to Zanarkand with the rest of us. You said you wanted to think about it for a while, but you're gonna run out of thinking time pretty soon."

We all stopped walking. Trust Jecht to haul that out into the open without any fanfare or forethought.

"I will go on," Braska said. "Not to die—that's what you're worried about, isn't it? But I need to see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears that the Final Summoning is a sham. Otherwise, I'll always feel like a coward."

I wasn't entirely surprised, and I didn't think the others were, either. Braska wasn't the sort of man to quit something halfway through.

Seymour said, with a thin smile, "Oh, yes. According to the Guado records, it all started when Bevelle declared war against the Summoners' city, Zanarkand. Sin appeared near the end of that war, although the details of how and
when and why have not been preserved beyond the fact that it was almost at the same time as the destruction of Zanarkand. When it did show up, everything fell apart. The documents record bands of refugees large enough that they would be called armies today roaming the countryside, mass starvation due to the loss of farmland and the machina they used to work it, and other . . . charming details."

"Typical of the aftermath of a war," Sephiroth observed. "Except that in this case, Sin would have ensured that there were no unscathed regions to feed everyone and eventually absorb the refugees."

"Ugh, why do you guys always end up talking about such depressing crap?"

"Spira is a depressing world," I pointed out, and the blitzer rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, got that part a while ago. Thing is, you guys always seem to end up making it worse."

He was right, in a way. We were trying to dig up the causes of Spira's sorrow and drag them screaming into the light. That didn't allow for much levity.

"We keep straying onto serious subjects," Braska said. "If you can suggest something lighter to talk about, I think we'd all be grateful."

"Making me the comic relief again . . ." Jecht rolled his eyes. "Hey, you got anything planned to do with little Yuna, when we get to Bevelle? Bet she's missing her daddy something fierce."

Braska smiled. "I had intended to let her choose. Within reason, of course."

"My wife did that once," Jecht commented. "Brat was about five. We ended up spending the whole day at a petting zoo. Well, until that chocobo tried to eat my shirt."

Seymour smirked, I snorted, and the corner of Sephiroth's mouth flicked up for half a second. Braska, less restrained, laughed out loud as Jecht added mournfully, "It was my favourite shirt, too, and the stupid bird put a hole the size of my hand in it. Couldn't wear it after that."

"Is that why you have such problems with chocobos?" Braska asked. I wasn't sure whether he was genuinely interested or just playing along, but really, what did it matter?

"Nah, that started a long time before that. Hell, when I was just Tidus' age . . ."

Jecht turned out to know a whole bunch of ridiculous chocobo stories. A few of them might even have been true . . . but even if they'd all been lies, it would have been worth it, because they made Braska laugh.

Bevelle, when we reached it, hadn't changed at all. Not that it would have. It was too large a city to notice the presence or absence of one disgraced Summoner and one excommunicated ex-warrior-monk. The land-gates were still guarded to prevent stray fiends from sticking their noses in where they didn't belong, but the guards recognized me (since the city guard of Bevelle was drawn from the ranks of the Order) and waved the five of us through without so much as asking what business we had in the city.

One of them also detached himself to follow us, but that was expected. I wondered which maester's pay he was in. If it was Kelk Ronso, that would be one thing, but Esmo might be quite another. Yo Mika . . . I shook my head. As a trusted and senior-but-not-too-senior member of the Order, I'd stood guard outside the Grand Maester's office during more than one sensitive discussion, but that didn't mean I pretended to know how many pies the old shark might have his thumbs in, or what his current opinion of Braska—or any of the rest of our party—might be.
I wondered if they'd chosen anyone to fill the late Maester Trelikka's vacant position yet. Granted, she'd only been dead for a few weeks when Braska and I had left the city, and it sometimes took them more than a year to decide on a replacement, but they could also be quite quick when it suited them.

Immediately after we'd crossed the first major street, Sephiroth suddenly ducked to the left, into a shadowed space between two stalls selling vegetables. The proprietor of one gave us a nasty glance, but seemed to decide not to start anything when he saw our weapons.

"Unless Braska has a large enough house that we can all fit into, we're going to need to split up," my lover said.

"He ain't even got a spare bedroom," Jecht said, before I could. "Nice couch in the main room, though."

"I'm glad you liked it," Braska said.

"And I hope you're prepared to re-experience it," Sephiroth added. "My apologies, Braska, but we cannot allow you to go unguarded."

Braska grimaced. "I wish I could say you were wrong, but if I were that naive, I would have died long ago. Can we keep it down to one guard while we're here, though? I don't want to frighten Yuna. This is going to be hard enough on her."

"I had intended to keep myself and Rufus less visible, if at all possible," Sephiroth said. "News of what happened in Guadosalam will have reached here some time ago, I would assume, and if news from the Macalania temple hasn't gotten here yet, it will soon. That will draw attention onto the two of us. Auron and Jecht will be your primary guards, while we lie low at an inn somewhere until you're ready to go to the temple for the aeon."

"Rin's trading post in the Al Bhed quarter isn't far from Braska's house . . . if you don't mind going along the roofs instead of the streets," I offered.

"Perfect. I assume—"

Suddenly, a large mass blotted out the sun, and something fell to the ground, landing with enough force to make it shake.

"Sin!" someone screamed, and my eyes widened. Sin. In Bevelle. Normally the Crusaders and the Order collaborated to decoy it away from the city. There hadn't been an attack in my lifetime. I was fairly certain there hadn't been an attack in Grand Maester Mika's lifetime. But when I looked up, there was no mistaking the shape, and the tentacled horror that landed in front of us (shaking the ground again) couldn't have been anything other than a Sinspawn.

"Rufus, handle as many of the Sinscales as you can," Sephiroth ordered. "Try to conserve your magic, but not to the extent of putting yourself at risk. Auron, with me. Braska, support everyone with white magic, but again, conserve if you can. Save the aeons for an emergency. Jecht—"

"Play defense, I know. Luck, you two."

"Thanks," I tossed over my shoulder as Sephiroth began to move.

There was a large, squidlike Sinspawn right in the middle of the intersection we'd crossed only a few minutes ago, and there were other crashing noises and minor quakes as Sin dropped off more of them. Fortunately, Sin's toxin didn't work nearly as well in air as it did in water, and it seemed to be
dropping below effective concentrations before it reached the ground. So at least everyone was aware enough to run away.

Or at least they should have been. I was willing to give the people who had Sinscales between themselves and the most obvious escape routes a pass, but not the ones who had just frozen.

Three guards were shooting raggedly at the Sinspawn with machina weapons, and not making much headway. All of them were men I recognized.

"Kald, Ranalt, Fervo!" I called. "Get the civilians out of here! We'll handle the big one." I couldn't afford to stop—Sephiroth had almost reached the Spawn. He swung Masamune and sent more than a dozen Sinscales flying with what looked like an iron giant's Reaper attack, then struck off two tentacles without missing a beat as I gathered myself. Armor Break!

I felt it connect, Yevon be thanked. Power Break took two tries, and that left the Sinspawn too weak to get through Sephiroth's behemoth leather coat. He made short work of it after that.

Not unexpectedly, he used the dissolving beast as a stepping stone to jump to the roof of a nearby building, then dropped down again to street level with a grim look on his face.

"I think Sin itself is headed out to sea, but it's seeded at least ten more of those," he said, gesturing at the dissipating pile of Spawn. "And thousands of Sinscales, of course. And I would guess that the city has neither shelters nor an evacuation plan. At least the Scales aren't strong enough to break down doors—if we can take out the major Spawn, we should be able to hunt the little ones down at leisure. For now, tell everyone you pass to get inside."

"Understood," I said, then turned toward the trio of guards. "You heard the man. We're going after the rest of the Spawn, I take it?" Sephiroth nodded. "Head back toward the gates, then. Get them closed and turn out the guard to clear the streets."

"Yes, Sir Auron." They looked more relieved than anything. I wondered if they would ever remember that I had no business telling them what to do. Even if I'd still been a member of the Order, taking over a patrol of the city guard would have been a bit questionable, and under these circumstances, I didn't have a leg to stand on.

"This way." Sephiroth's voice was crisp as he turned and strode down the street. Braska, Jecht, Seymour and I all fell in behind him.

The next Sinspawn we encountered was shaped somewhat like a lobster. It had found its way into one of the small fountain squares that periodically interrupted the main road between the gate and the Palace of Saint Bevelle. It also had a lobster's hard shell, but Armor Break once again softened it up for Sephiroth to take out, and I wondered, not for the first time, why all Sinspawn seemed to take shapes resembling sea life.

That one was easy. The Sinscales were easy. We threw people through tavern windows and pushed them into stores to get them out of the streets (well, all right, the tavern window was Jecht, but I will allow that it was efficient). But what we found when we broke out into the plaza at the entrance to the Palace of Saint Bevelle was terrifying.

No less than four Sinspawn had landed here, a crab and an ammonite and two inchoate, writhing masses of tentacles. And the area had been full of people. The stones were strewn with corpses and red with blood. A couple of squads from the Order were making use of the curtain wall that surrounded the Palace proper to protect themselves while they tried to concentrate their fire on the nearest tentacle lump. It wasn't working very well. The bullets just made unpleasant slurping sounds
and passed on through their target.

And there were still civilians hiding in various places at the fringes of the square. I could see one pale face through an iron railing around a staircase leading down to an underground building entrance, for instance.

"Great Leviathan," Sephiroth snarled, in a tone that suggested it was a curse. "What are those idiots doing? Braska, Summon Ifrit. Have him concentrate on the one nearest the gates—it's weak against fire. Rufus, the strongest fire spell you have, same target. Jecht, you know your job. Auron, with me again—we need to stop those idiots from shooting."

"I'm not sure we can," I said.

"They can't shoot if they're asleep," came the reply. "I'd rather not do that under the circumstances, though, so I'd suggest thinking of something fast. I'm not having anyone taken out by friendly fire if I can help it. Or getting shot in the back. Bullets . . . sting."

The crab got a bit too interested in us just then. Sephiroth hurdled its extended claw. I only managed to keep up with him because of the auto-haste on my new bracer.

They had the sally ladder down, I guess on the grounds that Sinspawn aren't all that good at climbing. It was a good thing, though, because I doubted I could have jumped all the way to the balcony-slash-gunners'-platform sticking out of the gate tower three stories above the ground, even with Sephiroth's help. He dropped back slightly to let me go first, but a head popped over the edge before I was halfway up.

"Auron?"

"Kinoc! Call off the riflemen—they're not doing any good!"

My old friend's face twisted into a snarl of frustration. "Neither will the flamethrowers! And Evrae's still chasing Sin out over the harbour!"

"We can handle the Sinspawn, but not with someone trying to shoot us in the back!" I snapped.

There was a pause that stretched on far too long. "Okay, but the moment one of you goes down—"

"You'll still stay out of it," Sephiroth said, and I felt a shiver run down my spine, although unlike the rest of us, he wasn't even shouting. "If all of us go down, then do whatever you want."

"Thank you so much for your gracious permission," Kinoc snapped back, but he also signaled the gunners back.

"Braska's almost finished with his," Sephiroth said as I dropped back off the ladder. "I'm going to take out the nautilus. Then we'll go after the other two."

"You can take one out just like that?"

"Overdrive. I can't use Supernova here, not without a lot of collateral damage, but Heartless Angel should be safe enough. Go back to the others."

"Be careful," I told him, and he gave me a quick nod before running forward.

Heartless Angel wasn't as flashy an attack as Supernova, it seemed. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught an image of a ghostly white figure strewing a foglike powder over the nautilus. Then
Sephiroth gave the Sinspawn a quick slash across its withdrawing tentacles, and it erupted into pyreflies. Meanwhile, the tentacle-knot that hadn't been bombarded into twinkling lights by Ifrit was sneaking up behind him. I ground my teeth, but didn't shout anything, because I knew he wouldn't have missed it. And sure enough, he fired a Shadow Flare into it over his shoulder, then used the tentacles as a ladder and finished up by doing a backflip over the body of the thing—and pulled it all off so fast he was barely more than a blur. By the time I'd reached Jecht and our two Summoners, Sephiroth was only a few steps behind.

"Rufus, hit the crab with something low-level. I have an unpleasant suspicion about it. As for our other friend, don't anyone touch it for now." Sephiroth raised his hand and cast his sleep spell at the tentacle-knot, which immediately drooped.

Seymour cast Water at the crab. Somehow, I wasn't surprised when it threw a Waterga back at us. Sephiroth put himself out front and broke the force of the spell, but we all still got wet.

"Dismiss Ifrit," he ordered. "Healing and support magics only, and whatever you do, keep it from hitting the other one and waking it up. Auron . . ."

"Let me guess: you want me to Armor Break this one too," I said.

"It would help."

It was a bit annoying that that often seemed to be all I could do to help him. That I was so far behind. I couldn't even guard his back a lot of the time, because I couldn't move quickly enough to keep up with his back, or to stay out of range of Masamune.

You're getting faster, I reminded myself as I completed the Armor Break on the Sinspawn. And this opponent wasn't all wiggly, for once. I could land attacks on it, and there were only two pincers to keep track of. We waded in side-by-side like a pair of lumberjacks attacking a recalcitrant mobile tree, and I was grimly satisfied when I landed the killing blow this time.

That left the one tentacle-mass. I could feel an overdrive of my own building inside me, and I knew just exactly what I wanted to do with it. Shooting Star. I just hoped I got it right and didn't make a fool of myself.

I concentrated, gathering power in my blade, feeling it course along my arms, and . . . now! A single, hard swing, and the Sinspawn went flying over the horizon. Wherever it landed would be well away from Bevelle, and I expected it would become pyreflies the moment it crashed down, in any case.

Kinoc was already clambering down the ladder, and I trotted over to meet him.

"Yevon, that was something!" he said, grinning. "Four Sinspawn, and you just took them out as though they were a pack of Besaidan dingoes. Incredible."

"Six," I corrected. "We took out two on the way here."

"And we have at least another five to go," Sephiroth said grimly.

"Five?" Kinoc asked, turning slightly green. "You're certain?"

"I can confirm five, but there might be more. The roof of a three-storey building isn't really the best vantage point in an urban area this dense."

"Yevon," Kinoc muttered, but it was a prayer this time. I'd known him long enough to be able to tell. "Eleven Sinspawn. In Bevelle. Normally it takes dozens of us to handle just one, and . . . it isn't
"Then concentrate on getting people off the streets and clearing the Sinscales," Sephiroth said. "We'll handle the remaining Spawn as we reach them. If you have any ether, give it to Braska—my only worry is that we might run low on magic."

Kinoc gave him a sharp look. "I don't think we've been introduced."

I sighed in exasperation. "Kinoc, this is Sephiroth, who's been running Braska's pilgrimage pretty much ever since we picked him up in the south islands. Sephiroth, this is Kinoc—I've told you about him."

The two exchanged nods. Sephiroth had his granite look on, but Kinoc was less guarded. He looked like a Ronso girding his loins for a dominance fight. Well, he always had worried more about precedence and authority and appearances than I did.

"We can argue later," I added, and gave Kinoc a Look until he grunted compliance. "We'll try to herd any stray Sinscales we find back here, if we can do so efficiently. Get the civilians under cover."

"You know the standing orders as well as I do—I can't open the gate," Kinoc said, and to give him credit, he didn't seem too happy about it either.

"You've got a perfectly good ladder," I pointed out. "And it isn't as though letting them in will do anything except reduce the length of the casualty list slightly."

"... All right. You're paying for the drinks next time, though."

I chuckled. "Wouldn't dream of doing otherwise. See you... tomorrow night?"

"Probably." Kinoc turned back toward the ladder and began barking orders.

Five Sinspawn. It became a sort of nightmare marathon, jogging from one monster to the next, with Sephiroth laying out battle strategy even as he tried to find his way through unfamiliar streets. By the time we got to the third one, there were a mixture of Crusaders and guards cordoning off the area, keeping civilians clear.

It was the last one, down by the docks, that was the most nightmarish to fight. It had taken on the shape of some kind of thick, wormlike creature that shot out sticky filaments. The filaments themselves were about the thickness of a piece of twine and could be broken with a good hard jerk... if you were only dealing with one of them. But a dozen or so of them together would form sticky ropes, like the one that yanked Jecht's sword away from him and left him defenseless.

It was Seymour who thought to use a Blizzard spell on them. Once frozen, they shattered quite nicely. The thaw was going to be a mess, I thought as we finally took the worm-thing down, but that wasn't our problem, thank Yevon.

I staggered over to the first wall I found, and leaned against it, closing my eyes for a single, precious moment. Yevon, I was tired. Nearly a dozen Sinspawn in less than four hours. No wonder I was exhausted. Sephiroth had to be even worse, but he'd returned Masamune to his back and was standing ramrod-straight amid the shattered bits of frozen filament and all the rest of the mess, staring out to sea.

I forced myself properly upright again, and went over to him. "Don't tell me that you can still see it." As far as I could tell, Sin had long since disappeared over the horizon.
He shook his head. "I was merely wondering about the timing of the attack."

I froze. "It has to have been a coincidence." An ugly one, but surely . . .

"Admittedly, that can't be ruled out, by the definition of 'coincidence', but you have to admit that it does seem suspicious. Assume that Vrokk is in some way able to influence Sin, and the rest follows."

_Ugh. Please, no._ "Even if that's what happened, we can't admit it," I said slowly, working through the ramifications.

"No, we can't," Sephiroth agreed. "If it's true, then either we have to run all over Spira after any additional Sinspawn he decides to have dropped, or we accept the responsibility for whatever happens when we fail to stop them."

"Which means the only way for us to get to Zanarkand is to feign ignorance," I concluded. And we had to get to Zanarkand if we wanted to end this. "We may want to reconsider getting into the Church's library. Records on Lady Yocun and her Guardians aren't likely to be restricted, and they may be just what we need right now."

"That's going to have to be Rufus' job, and yours," my lover said. "I still can't read Spiran script, I don't trust Jecht to retain much of anything, and Braska . . . should have as much time as possible with his daughter. Just in case."

I grimaced, but I had to admit that, as usual, he was making sense. "We should help with the Sinscales," I said wearily, changing the subject.

Sephiroth shook his head. "Not when you look like you're likely to fall over if a strong wind starts blowing. And besides, you have family and friends here, don't you? Go check on them. We can regroup at Braska's house in the morning."

"You could at least pretend you'll miss me," I said, feeling a hint of a smile cross my face.

"Always. But right now, this is more urgent. We'll have time."

I forced a nod. "I'll see you in the morning, then."

Once I got clear of the debris field, my feet knew the way. I absently dealt with any Sinscales that crossed my path, and handed out a few potions to people who had been caught in the street—I had plenty.

The neighbourhood where I'd grown up was called Canalside, since one of the shipping canals that allowed bulk goods from the docks to be transported deeper into the city ran right through it. At the height of summer, the canal stank like an open sewer, but that had the advantage of making houses in the area cheap. It was the reason my mother had been able to hold on to ours after my father had died.

No Spawn had landed this far off Sin's direct track between the gate and the harbour, and the few Sinscales that had wandered in had been taken care of by people wielding push-poles and boathooks —when you're out on the ocean, there are no Crusaders to handle fiends for you, so sailors and longshoremen usually have some idea of how to deal with the small ones.

A few people recognized me and called greetings, which I returned with a half-hearted wave. I'd been visible enough around the neighbourhood during the months between my departure from the Order and the beginning of Braska's pilgrimage, so even though I hadn't been very social, it wasn't
surprising that people remembered.

I crossed the bridge that arched over the canal in front of the coppersmith's, and turned a corner. I was so tired that the slight uphill slant of the street made my legs ache, but I didn't stop until I'd traveled another three blocks. Then I turned left and knocked on one particular door.

It opened immediately. "Only— Auron! You're back! Don't just stand there like a fool, come inside."

"Who did you think I was?" I asked with a smile as I deposited my pack inside the porch.

"The guard enumerator. He hasn't been by yet." The enumerators were supposed to go door-to-door after major incidents and determine whether anyone was missing from a household. "They've stopped yelling at everyone to stay inside, so I suppose whatever it was is over now."

"All except for the Sinscales," I said, feeling my smile slip away. So did my mother's.

"Oh. Oh, no. How many dead?"

I shook my head. "I don't know yet. I was too busy fighting Sinspawn to try to get information out of anyone. Speaking of which, I really need to sit down."

She gave me a narrow look. "And here I thought that dealing with that sort of thing wasn't your job anymore. You're just like your father."

"Mother . . ." As usual, I didn't quite know what to say.

She shook her head and pushed a lock of greying dark hair out of her face. "Sit down, then. I'll make some tea, and you can tell me about what's been happening since you left Bevelle."

The tea came with jam-filled cookies, each barely larger than the tip of my thumb. The taste of a childhood I'd once tried very hard to leave behind.

"I barely know where to begin," I admitted. "A lot has happened."

"On the balance, it seems to have been good for you. Even if you're tired, you're smiling more easily now. Did you meet someone?"

What is it about mothers that makes it possible for them to reduce a grown man to a stammering fifteen-year-old trying not to talk about his first crush? I just reached for another cookie without saying anything, but I could feel the heat in my face.

"Oh, you finally did! Will you introduce him to me?"

It took several seconds for that to register. "You knew?"

"That you weren't interested in women? Of course I did, dear. You've never taken a second look at a girl, or gone out of your way to talk to one—not like your friend Kinoc. But you follow other men with your eyes sometimes. All I really want is for you to be happy. If this man, whoever he is, does that for you, then I'm glad."

"It's . . . more complicated than that."

She waited patiently, sipping her tea, but I knew she wasn't going to let this go before I gave in a little. In the end, I sighed and capitulated.

"His name is Sephiroth. We met him in the southern islands, although he isn't from there, and Braska
took him as an additional Guardian. He's a gifted swordmaster, and one of the smartest, strongest, most beautiful men I've ever met, but his circumstances are . . . messy. Almost impossibly so. He also isn't very social. You might not warm to each other at first. I talked to him about meeting you, and he was . . . not unwilling, but wary. He's never really had a family, and I don't think he quite knew how to react."

My mother smiled. "Well, I'll try not to overwhelm him . . . but I'm also not going to entrust my son to him sight-unseen."

Once more, I felt myself reduced to an adolescent. I was within a hair of groaning *Mom!* in a way packed with complex nuances that no one but me would care about.

"I'm going to be traveling with him at least as far as Zanarkand, whether you approve or not," I pointed out.

"And after Braska's pilgrimage ends?"

"I don't know. None of us are thinking that far ahead right now." *Destroy Sin* was a bit too high a wall to be able to see over. "Maybe we'll join the Crusaders." Getting rid of Sin wouldn't also make all the fiends in Spira vanish—as long as there were people who didn't get Sent in a timely manner, there would be fiends. That meant the Crusaders, or something like them, would have to exist.

Really, the entire concept of a future beyond Sin was . . . overwhelming. To me. Sephiroth would, I expected, deal with it in the coldly rational way he dealt with so many other things. Sin didn't loom so large in his imagination. To him, it really was just a lump of pyreflies.

And that, I realized, was part of the reason that I needed him.
Chapter 23

Destroying eleven Sinspawn in front of witnesses turned out not to be the best way to avoid the attention of the Church of Yevon. When I got to Braska's small house at the edge of the Al Bhed quarter the next morning, there was a message lying in the middle of the kitchen table, unopened, with ribbons like poisonous snakes trailing from its formal seals. Yuna was staring at it with wide eyes. She was old enough to understand what kind of person had sent it, if not what it meant.

"I take it you're waiting for the others to open it," I said to Braska.

He nodded. "Hopefully they won't be too long, because I'm itching with curiosity. I was expecting a summons, but not from the Grand Maester."

I raised my eyebrows and picked up the rolled message to get a better look at the seals. Yes, that was Mika's mark. I'd been expecting Esmon, or even the Commander of the Order.

"I take it that's not good," Jecht said, emerging from the living room. He had an amazing case of bedhead, hair sticking straight up on one side and straight out on the other.

"It's hard to tell," Braska said. "But I don't think any of us expected this to go all the way to the very highest level of the Church of Yevon."

"Various Church-affiliated fighters end up taking on Sinspawn once or twice a year, on average," I added. "I did it a few times when I still belonged to the Order: once on the beaches below Bevelle, twice in the southern part of the Calm Lands, and once on the edge of the Thunder Plains while I was escorting a supply run to Djose. Mika didn't pay the least bit of attention any of those times."

A knock at the door interrupted us just then, and Braska left the kitchen to answer it. He returned with Seymour and Sephiroth in tow. The latter was already sizing up the room with his sharp, glowing green gaze.

I felt a tug at my sleeve, and looked down to see that little Yuna had half-hidden herself behind me, looking up at the two strange men.

"It's all right," Braska said, smiling at his daughter. "Yuna, these are my other two Guardians. The one with the blue hair is Rufus, and the scary one with the black coat is Sephiroth."

Yuna stepped to one side, making herself clearly visible without getting any closer, and bowed politely. Sephiroth returned an austere nod. He had his granite face on, but I suspected he was uncomfortable—what could he possibly know about little girls? He might never even have been this close to one before.

Seymour, on the other hand, smiled and said, "Hello, Yuna. I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you," the girl echoed back. "Are you going with Papa to Zanarkand?"

"That's right."

"So you're going to keep him safe? Like Uncle Auron and Uncle Jecht?"

"Exactly."

"Thank you." Yuna sketched the Yevon prayer and bowed. "Papa, I have to get ready for school
now, or Miss Dyna's going to be really mad at me."

"Don't forget to give her my note, and I'll be there to pick you up after lunch, all right?"

"Mm-hmm! Love you, Papa!"

"I love you too, Yuna."

She scampered away, disappearing into her room briefly to fetch a bag, then waved one last time as she ran out the door.

"You look confused," Braska said to Sephiroth, who had been silently watching Yuna.

My lover shrugged. "My own childhood was so abnormal that interactions between other children and their caregivers often seem . . . surreal."

I don't think any of us quite knew what to say to that, especially when it was delivered in Sephiroth's quiet, matter-of-fact tones. So I changed the subject.

"Now that everyone's here, you should open the message."

Braska gave me a grateful look as he picked it up and broke the seal. "Hmm, let's see . . . 'From Grand Maester Yo Mika to Summoner Kai Braska, greetings under the watchful eye of Yevon.' Apparently he's forgotten that the Kai lineage wrote me out of the family tree when I married Akkina. 'Since you and your Guardians have saved the city of Bevelle from certain disaster, it would be improper not to reward you. Please present yourselves at the Palace of Saint Bevelle at the time of the third morning bell. Signed, Yo Mika,' and all of his titles, apparently.'"

Jecht snorted. "He doesn't exactly sound too thrilled that we saved everyone's asses."

"He very likely isn't," Seymour said. "But he will nonetheless use us to further his political agenda, if we permit it."

Braska grimaced and let the scroll re-roll itself, then tapped it on the table.

"The question is, do we go to the appointment or ignore it, and whichever we choose, do we do it quietly or vocally?" Sephiroth said. "And if we go, do we all go, or does Braska attend with only one or two of us? I am ignorant of your Church's internal politics, so I don't know what message we want to send."

Braska and I exchanged looks. Seymour frowned.

"Ignoring him would be dangerous," I said at last. "If we want to maintain even a neutral posture, we have to go. All of us."

"Which leaves the other half of the first question," Braska said. "Do we try to avoid attention, or draw it? I have no desire to make a spectacle of myself, but . . ."

"If we go quietly, we are potentially letting this man Mika choose how to present us to the public," Sephiroth completed, when Braska didn't seem inclined to do so himself. "Whether or not that turns out to be a problem depends on what message he wants to send, and whether or not we require the aid of others in destroying Sin."

Church politics. *Yevon*. I thought I'd left that quagmire along with the Order, and yet here it was again, like a slap across the face.
"I realize that no one here has up-to-date information, but it might be helpful to pool what basic knowledge the three of you who originate from Spira have," my lover continued. "Factions and what they stand for. That information seldom changes all that quickly."

I exchanged glances with Braska. "Each maester has their own faction," I said. "However, one of the positions is currently unfilled. Mika is conservative and wants to avoid change. Esmon is entirely focused on succeeding Mika, and panders to him. Kelk Ronso is . . . honourable, or as close to it as he can be and still maintain his position. If we have to support one of them, I would choose him. Maester Trelikka's faction disintegrated when she died, but there are probably still bits of it hanging around that haven't yet attached themselves to another maester. The Crusaders are their own faction, although they generally support Kelk. They're more interested in eliminating fiends than in the Church's internal wranglings, and would probably be of the most practical use to us if we need help with Sin. The Order of Temple Guardians occasionally acts as a separate faction, but mostly follows Mika. And there are a number of small splinter factions associated with the Great Houses of Bevelle, individually powerless but collectively able to exert some influence by banding together."

"Jyscal was being groomed to fill the vacant maestership," Seymour said, and shrugged as the rest of us turned to stare. "Or so Tromell told me. All part of Mika's 'sub-races appeasement policy'. I just hope he doesn't get the idea that I should replace my father. I have no desire to be some token Guado representative for the Church."

"Hopefully he knows that might cause a civil war in Guadosalam," Sephiroth said. "So. We wish to distance ourselves from Mika, but not to the point of offending him. Suggested courses of action?"

"No clue," Jecht said. "I always let my agent deal with this kind of crap. Since he was the one who actually cared about it."

"I doubt there's much we can do beyond choosing our words carefully, and being cautious about what we accept from Mika," Braska said. "Although I expect that the grudging tone of the message is due to him being pushed into this. He hates me for behaving in a way that calls the status quo into question."

"Lovely," Seymour muttered.

We continued to bat ideas around over a light meal at a nearby cafe, but none of us came out with anything else that was useful. And then it was time to go.

We marched up the front steps of the Palace of Saint Bevelle with Braska at the center of a diamond-shaped grouping of Guardians. Since I knew this place so well, Sephiroth and I had reversed our normal positions to put me in front and him in the rear.

The front entrance led to a cross-corridor parallel with the outer wall of the building. Directly across from us was the entrance to the public part of the temple, the outer sanctuary with its heroic statues of past High Summoners. I turned left, crossed a small room where petitioners were supposed to wait, and led the way through a guarded door. The guards, both members of the Order that I knew by name, acted like we weren't there. Perhaps they thought we had orders.

Then there were about eight flights of stairs—no problem for a group of hardened travelers who had walked half the length of Spira and back, but the only other people using them to go up were a trio of warrior-monk novices who had either been ordered to or decided to put in some extra stamina training. Most of the priests used the elevator at the far end of the building, even if they didn't much like machina otherwise. Just another little Church hypocrisy.

The stairs ended at another wide hallway, lined with polished wooden doors. Each one of them was
guarded. The spaces in between the office entrances were filled with a mural of which each section depicted a particular temple and its aeon.

The door we wanted was at the very end, and once again, I knew both of the men guarding it. Unfortunately.

"No weapons," said the one on the left. His name was Laen, we'd been novices together, and he'd never liked me. He'd never liked anyone who was smarter than he was, or who impressed the instructors.

"Guardians accompanying their Summoner are allowed to carry their weapons anywhere," I said.

"No weapons," Laen repeated stubbornly, planting himself squarely in front of the door. He didn't quite look straight at us.

Sephiroth looked at him, though. "Unfortunate that the Church of Yevon is so short-handed that it must use the mentally deficient to guard its halls."

Laen reddened. Fald, the other guard, visibly smothered a laugh, and Sephiroth's gaze flicked to him for a moment, appraising, before turning back to Laen. I caught the quick flicker from his materia bracer as he put the would-be roadblock to sleep, then caught him by the shoulders, steered him to one side, and propped him against the wall, while I reached past them to open the door.

"Kick him once we're inside," I told Fald. "And remind everyone that ordinary, visible weapons aren't the only way a guard can be put out of commission." I hadn't intended to say it, but I suppose I'd been an officer too long.

"Of course, Captain. I believe Grand Maester Mika is expecting you."

"Did he actually issue any orders about our weapons?" I asked.

Fald smiled. "Even if he had, sir, you were right about what the Teachings actually say. Just like you always were."

Mika's office had a large, richly appointed antechamber, but it didn't include any furniture except the chair, desk, and cabinets used by his secretary. The rest was all fine carpets and paintings and small statues on plinths.

Braska advanced toward the young acolyte acting as secretary and held out Mika's message, with all its seals. "I am Summoner Braska, here with my Guardians to see Grand Maester Mika at his own request."

"One moment, please." She took the message from his hand, went to the inner door, and knocked. A moment later, she opened it by a couple of inches and exchanged words through the gap. Her eyebrows rose as she turned back to us. "He will see you now."

I didn't blame her for being surprised. Normally, Grand Maester Mika kept people waiting in the outer room just to prove that he could. Apparently, talking to us was a distasteful task that he wanted to finish as soon as possible, so that he could move on to something that didn't give him ulcers. Just as well, perhaps. Sephiroth might be able to wait—I'd seen him be inhumanly patient a couple of times—but Jecht certainly wouldn't. Which was no doubt why he was the second one of us to enter the Grand Maester's office, sandwiched between me and Braska. At least he had the brains to move to one side with me so that the others could get in.

Mika was sitting behind his desk, in his usual robes, trying to put on his usual benign facade and
failing miserably. He'd changed his headgear since the last time I'd paid attention, from a starched cap to a soft one, and maybe added a few more liver spots. In a world where almost no one ever lived to get old, Mika bordered on the obscene.

Braska offered him the prayer, with a slight bow. "It is an honour to speak to you, Grand Maester. I am Braska, and my Guardians are Auron, Jecht, Rufus, and Sephiroth." He named us in order from right to left.

"Rufus?" Mika said with a slight quaver in his voice, but his eyes as he looked at Seymour were sharper than sharp.

"Indeed," Seymour said with a fake, gentle smile. Not giving an inch.

"Your pardon," Mika said, quaver mysteriously gone. "You . . . resemble someone."

"That is certainly possible."

"Grand Maester, may I ask why you wished to speak to us?" Braska prodded.

"Of course." He swept his eyes over all of us again—milking the moment, the old shark—before continuing. "Although it is slightly embarrassing to admit it, the five of you appear to have saved Bevelle from being leveled by Sin and its Spawn. All the maesters agree that such diligence in the service of the people of Spira deserves to be rewarded."

"Naturally, we are honoured."

"However, it hardly seems necessary. We are on our way to defeat Sin, and there are few rewards that would persist past that."

"Oh? Your daughter . . ."

"Arrangements for Yuna's future have already been made," Braska said. "She will want for nothing."

Except parents, I thought but didn't say.

"We do not seek money or fame," Seymour took up smoothly. "However, for myself, there is one thing I would like: access to the Church's oldest records, those created prior to Gandof's Calm."

Mika raised and eyebrow. "Oh?"

"It's said in Guadosalam that the first High Priest of Baaj was a Guado halfbreed like myself. Perhaps you can understand why I might have a certain selfish desire to verify the truth of that legend. Baaj's records room was stripped when it was realized that there was no saving the city, and the contents brought here. So if there is any information, that is where it will be."

I wondered how long he's sat up last night to fabricate that story. It fit together beautifully, and Mika's agents could spend weeks searching Guadosalam and still not hear every possible rumour.

"The other thing the Church might be able to provide for us would be rare medicines, especially turbo ether and elixir," I added in a burst of inspiration, naming two items that were seldom available on the open market for any price, and never in quantity.

"And that is all?" Mika said, sounding uncertain.
"Is there something else that you wished to offer us?" Seymour said, still in that gentle, patient tone of voice.

I'd been observing Mika long enough to suspect he was mentally flicking through his options. *Money . . . already refused. Power, ditto. Treasures . . . would have to be useful ones.*

"The people of Bevelle will expect some . . . appropriately symbolic acknowledgment of your help," the old man said at last. "Among the items in our treasury is a Summoner's staff said to have come from Zanarkand itself, when it was still a living city. Gifting it to Summoner Braska in a public ceremony should be more than sufficient. I am told that, in addition to being a treasure, it is also a weapon of considerable quality."

Braska bowed his head. "Very well, I will accept that. Please arrange the ceremony."

Mika nodded. "That is decided, then. I note that only two of your Guardians have spoken—what of the other two?"

Jecht snorted. "I doubt you've got any way to send me home, and there's nothing else that I want."

Mika's gaze turned to Sephiroth, who stared right back at him through several long, silent moments, wearing his granite face. The old shark seemed almost hypnotized.

"I am not interested in symbols, or attempts to buy me off with baubles and trinkets," my lover said, after the silence had stretched uncomfortably long. "Nor do positions of power within your Church hold any appeal for me."

"Then what do you want?"

"Your public acknowledgment of unpaid debt, at the ceremony you prepare for Braska."

Everybody except Jecht, whom I doubted was politically savvy enough to understand exactly what Sephiroth was asking for, stared at the silver-haired man.

"I'm willing to put limits on how I may collect," Sephiroth added. "A single specific action, not a change in Church policy. To be exercised within a year of the ceremony, after which it becomes void. The conditions will be specified in a writ, with one copy to be held by the Church and the other by me, and will be announced to the witnesses."

"You drive a hard bargain, Sir Sephiroth."

Sephiroth raised an eloquent eyebrow. "I will be glad to fetch more Sinspawn to replace those I killed and let them loose inside this building if you find my terms unacceptable."

Jecht guffawed. "See? He's even offering you your money back." Mika gave him an evil look, any pretense of being a feeble, benign old man long since vanished. Although I'd always wondered why anyone believed it to begin with. You didn't become the head of the Church by being feeble and benign.

"Very well," the Grand Maester said. "I accept your terms."

He and Sephiroth exchanged austere nods.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Mika added. "May I know when you intend to depart Bevelle?"

"In a week," Braska said.
"Very well. The particulars of the ceremony will be sent to you by tomorrow. In the meanwhile, Sir . . . Rufus, you are welcome to make use of the archives."

"Our thanks," Braska said, augmenting it with another prayer. "Now, I'm certain we're keeping you from important business . . ."

Mika waved his hand. "Go."

Laen, now awake again, gave us an evil look as we left the outer office, but didn't speak, and no one from our group said anything until we were halfway down the stairs.

"I still can't decide whether that was a win or a loss for us," Seymour said at last.

"A bit of both, I think," I said, after thinking about it for a moment. "And I don't expect Mika to honour his word."

"No, but if he goes as far as producing a contract, it may be useful for intimidating some lesser official," Sephiroth said. "In any case, I didn't want that withered up old malboro to believe we were credulous fools to be manipulated. I've had enough of being a puppet on someone else's strings."

I snorted. "I would say that you accomplished that. He's going to be wary of you now."

"Let him." Sephiroth smirked and let his fingers play over his materia wristlet. It disturbed me when I saw that expression cross his face. There was a cruel streak in my lover, although normally he controlled it well.

"You guys got anything planned for today?" Jecht asked.

"I intend to spend my time in the archives," Seymour said.

I shrugged. "And I had intended to show Sephiroth around Bevelle."

"Just him?" Jecht snickered when I glared at him. "Nah, I get it. Have fun on your date, you two. I'll take Braska duty for today."

"Unusual for you to be so reasonable," Sephiroth said.

"Figured I'd try it for today, just to see. Anyway, you've put up with me until now, so I can't be doing that bad."

"Zack gave me plenty of practice in dealing with unreasonable people," came the dry reply. "Perhaps if you manage to do something more annoyingly ridiculous than gluing a live chocobo to an office ceiling, you will truly anger me."

Jecht gave a surprised chuckle. "What, seriously?"

"Oh, yes. Zack had an ongoing prank war with a man named Reno. The chocobo was what you might describe as the high point of the sequence. Since Angeal was away on a three-day mission to Corel at the time, I was called in to lecture him about it. The problem, in typical Shinra fashion, turned out to be neither the chocobo nor the office—Palmer never did anything useful, so it didn't matter if his desk was soiled—but the glue, which was some sort of semi-secret concoction Zack stole from the Department of Weapons Development. Their director was not amused. I believe she had the chocobo used for target practice when she was testing her latest creation."

The blitzer blinked. "Geez, what did the chocobo ever do to her?"
"I think it was because Zack and Reno were both out of reach, and the chocobo wasn't. Scarlet was never a woman of moderate temperament."

"Sounds like you used to work with a bunch of assholes."

"That would be a fair description of most of Shinra's highest-level administrative personnel, yes."

We parted ways at the entrance to the temple, after I gave Seymour directions to the archives, and I led Sephiroth out onto the Highbridge. I felt a light, unexpected touch to my elbow once we'd passed out of the environs of the Palace and it became just a raised walkway leading downward to the city's entrance.

"I would like to stop here for a moment, if we may," Sephiroth said. "I never did get a sense of the city's layout, and short of climbing the exterior of your Church's headquarters, this would seem to be the best vantage point."

"Not my Church," I said, picking a side wall to lean against. "Not anymore."

"Mmh." He leapt lightly to the top of the wall I was leaning on, to get a better look at the city.

"Mama, why is that man standing on the railing? You told me it was bad to stand on the railing."

"And what do you think's going to happen if he falls off?" a woman's voice asked the child.

A pause, then, "Splat!" Accompanied by a high, childish giggle.

"If you stay up there too long, all the parents in Bevelle are going to hate you," I said.

"Let them," Sephiroth replied. He hopped backward down off the railing and went over to the opposite side of the Highbridge for a look at the other half of Bevelle.

Most of the rest of what I remember about that day is the little things. Explaining who the statue at the center of a fountain was supposed to represent. Former fellow members of the Order nodding respectfully before skittering away from the two of us as though they'd suddenly remembered appointments elsewhere, while Crusaders offered us friendly greetings. Eating food we'd bought from a street vendor. Random people coming up to us now and again and offering us potions or small quantities of gil to help us on our way, as though we were Summoners ourselves. The quick flicker of Sephiroth's smile, and the warmth and flavour of his mouth as we exchanged a good-night kiss in the doorway of his inn room.

It was a brief, enchanted interlude in a stressful journey, and I will always hold it in my heart.
Kinoc and I had always, since we'd graduated from the novitiate, frequented the same bar, one near my childhood home in Canalside rather than near the Palace of Saint Bevelle. Thankfully, the Order didn't forbid alcohol—it was one of the few vices that was openly permitted to its members.

The bartender poured out sake for me without my having to specify, and I took it to where Kinoc was sitting at our old table in the back corner, near where music poured tinnily out of a sphere. It always played the same dozen maudlin love ballads over and over again . . . but no one ever seemed to mind, and they provided enough noise pollution that it would be difficult for a normal person to overhear a conversation in this place.

Kinoc raised his mug in greeting as I sat down across from him. The liquid inside was as black as Mika's heart, with a scud of foam across its surface. I will never understand how anyone can drink northern beer . . . but Kinoc and I had long ago agreed to disagree on that.

"You're looking good, Auron. Being a Guardian seems to agree with you more than being an officer of the Order ever did."

"I think I developed an allergy to hypocrisy somewhere along the way," I said, and Kinoc laughed.

"Just as well you got out when you did, because there's more the higher you go."

"You were always the one advising me to aim higher."

"You're right . . . but I kind of regretted it when I realized what it was doing to you."

"Only 'kind of'?" I took a sip of my sake. It must have been in storage too long, because it had the least hint of an off-taste.

"You know I was hoping to get higher myself by clinging to your sleeves. I never made any secret of that."

"No, you didn't. And now you've got the girl, and the promotion that went with her. How are the two of you getting along?"

"Better than I was afraid we would," Kinoc easily admitted. "She's gentle, and polite. Not pretty, but then I'm no prize myself." He chuckled and patted his paunch. Kinoc had always been built like a fireplug, although there was a surprising amount of muscle under the fat. "We've talked about it, and we think we can make it work, if we try."

"I'm glad for you. And for her." And I honestly was. I'd never meant to hurt the girl. I just didn't like the strings tied to her.

"Good thing her father never told her that he'd offered her to you first, or she'd probably be pining for that handsome face of yours. Hopefully by the time she finds out, she'll have my ring on her finger, and I won't have to explain why she wouldn't have had a chance. On a lighter note, your doppelganger turned up again."

Somehow, I managed not to groan. "What is it this time? A woman, or a dine-and-dash?" I'd never
actually met the idiot who'd been impersonating me on and off for the past couple of years, but I'd lost count of the number of times someone had tried to pin his bills on me. I hadn't lost count of the number of attempts to squeeze child support out of me, though: three so far. Fortunately, I'd always been able to prove that the man who had messed with their lives wasn't me—so far.

"Well, he tried to dine and dash, but apparently the restaurant owner had gotten the news that 'Auron of Bevelle' was no longer a member in good standing of the Order of Temple Guardians, and chained the slimy bastard to his sink for four hours, until he'd washed enough dishes to pay for his meal. Hopefully that'll make it the last time he tries to pull that nonsense."

"Yevon, I hope so." I took another drink, then changed the subject. "So who lit the fire under Mika's tail? He seemed pretty desperate to reward us for cleaning up his Sinspawn."

"The commander of the northern Crusader command made an all-holy stink—quietly, behind closed doors—and Kelk and I supported him. Mika eventually decided it wasn't worth fighting over. I'm surprised that he was able to buy you off with a handful of junk and admittance to the inner archives for your Guado friend, though."

I smirked. "You missed one item. Sephiroth managed to strangle a writ for a limited favour out of him—and if Mika tries to renege, I suspect things are going to get nasty."

Kinoc let out a low whistle. "I can understand why Mika might not want to talk about that. It's been a while since anyone outfoxed him that way."

"I'm not sure that 'outfoxed' is quite the word. Sephiroth has this ability to make you believe it when he offers to do things like release Sinspawn into the Palace."

"Or tells you that the Sinspawn will be taken care and you should go off and handle the small fry and help the civilians," Kinoc said wryly. "Where in hell did you find him, anyway?"

I shrugged. "He washed up out of the ocean in Rilkes Harbour, which is small enough that the entire population wouldn't be able to block the Highbridge. Before that . . . it's complicated, and pretty unbelievable if you didn't watch the evidence build up along the way. The short version seems to be that the fayth deliberately put him in our path."

"The fayth? Is that even possible?"

"Apparently." I ran my finger along the rim of my cup. "We think they think he can take Sin out for good."

Kinoc just barely managed to spray a mouthful of beer back into his mug, instead of all over the table. "That's preposterous."

"It wasn't my idea. Or his either, for that matter."

"I heard a story about someone sending Sin running scared from some little mining hamlet in the far south . . ."

"That was him," I admitted. Then, anticipating Kinoc's next question, "His strongest overdrive really is that powerful. He couldn't use it on the Sinspawn here because it would have done too much collateral damage. I don't think it's enough to destroy Sin on its own, though. The fayth must think he's capable of more. Or maybe they're just desperate. Or we could be wrong about their intentions."

I was treading a very fine line here. On the one hand, I had no business telling Kinoc Sephiroth's secrets, and telling him what was really waiting in Zanarkand might bring the Church down on both
our heads, but at the same time, I had to tell my old friend *something*.

"I don't know if the fayth can *be* desperate," Kinoc was saying.

"Well, Bahamut at least should be old enough to remember the time before Sin came into being. He's been watching us mess around for a good thousand years without getting rid of it. Maybe he's tired of human ineptitude."

"Could be, I suppose." Kinoc drained his mug and signaled the bartender for a refill. With the fresh drink in his hands, he said, "So, I figure that now that I'm getting married, it's time you started thinking about settling down too. You must have met at least one . . . prospect . . . while you were walking halfway across Spira and back."

"You've already met him too," I said, and I admit I smirked again. Kinoc frowned. "Not Braska, that's for sure. He'll be carrying a torch for that Al Bhed wife of his at least until the girl's grown up. Not the drunk who thinks he's from Zanarkand—opposites don't attract *that* much. I've never been within ten feet of your Guado friend, so that leaves . . . Sephiroth?!"

I chuckled and took another sip of my sake. "You look like you tried to swallow a shoopuf."

Kinoc firmly closed his gaping mouth. "Just . . . not what I expected, I suppose. I always sort of thought you'd take up with some slender magely type, not someone who carries a sword longer than yours and uses it to slaughter Sinspawn in two moves flat. I suppose he's good-looking enough in an odd sort of way, but . . . Yevon . . . how do you even decide who's on top?"

"By flipping a one-gil coin," I deadpanned. "You don't really want the sordid details of our sex life, do you?"

"Ugh, no, you're right." Kinoc wrinkled his nose. "It's terrifying enough that you have one. But . . . do you really like *him*, or just the shape of his ass inside those leathers?"

"I really like him. He *can* be patient and considerate, when we're not in the middle of a fight with a ridiculous number of Sinspawn. And I trust him."

"I suppose that ultimately, so long as you're happy, it's none of my business," my friend admitted. "So, what else happened on your little trip to the uttermost south and back again? I understand things were pretty crazy in Guadosalam for a while . . ."

I sighed, drained my glass, and signaled for a refill. That one was going to take a while.

By the time I left the bar, it was quite dark out, and I was quite drunk. I considered staggering back to my childhood home and the bed I'd been using since we'd arrived in Bevelle, but my mother always scolded me when she saw me in this state, which was why I told her I'd be out all night. Instead, I turned toward the Al Bhed quarter, and the travel agency there.

Sephiroth was only wearing the familiar behemoth-leather trousers when he opened the door, although given the way his arm was stretched to the side, I suspected he had his left hand on Masamune's hilt, with the weapon concealed behind the doorframe. He moved out of the way immediately to let me inside. Then my foot caught on the edge of the carpet, and he had to steady me.

"S'rry," I muttered.
"It's fine. Come to bed."

He helped me take my clothes off and lifted the blankets so that I could slide in beside him. Curled against the increasingly familiar warmth of his body, I fell asleep immediately.

I woke up feeling better than I had any right to. A little thirsty, maybe, but there was no other sign of a hangover. Still, I wasn't in any hurry to get up. There was sun spilling in through the narrow window and falling across the bed, turning Sephiroth's pale skin to honey-gold dusted with silver. His long braid snaked over my shoulder, then tumbled over the edge of the mattress and onto the floor. His face never entirely relaxed in sleep, producing something more akin to that granite look of his, but still, he was beautiful.

He also had his morning wood pressed against my belly. Which was only fair, because mine was pressed against his thigh. When I made a small motion, not quite thrusting, he murmured something incoherent and tightened an arm that had been draped loosely over my flank.

I kissed his chin, since the angle was slightly too awkward for me to reach his mouth, and his eyes popped open. "You need a shave," he said, but I'd known him long enough now to be able to tell he was amused, not irritated. And if I hadn't, the proper kiss that followed would have convinced me of it anyway. I must have tasted of sour sake, but he didn't object.

"Unfortunately, I know you don't have a razor," I said. "And I wasn't carrying mine. I'll have to go back to my mother's and collect it."

"There's no hurry," my lover said, and slid his hand down between us. And he was right: there really wasn't.

When we emerged from his room, it was getting on towards mid-morning, and he'd admitted to casting Esuna and Cura on me while I'd been asleep, so that I wouldn't wake up with a pounding head. We were both wearing yesterday's clothes (although his never seemed to get soiled or smell of anything but leather, leading me to wonder exactly what the stuff had been treated with) and smug grins. Well, Sephiroth's "smug grin" was a little tiny quirk at the corner of his mouth, but I was long since used to interpreting it.

"Any plans for today?" I asked as we walked together through the streets of the Al Bhed quarter.

"Not until this afternoon. The alloy wire I ordered while we were at the agency on the Thunder Plains will be arriving today on an Al Bhed vessel."

"I'd almost forgotten that," I admitted. "But until then . . . ?"

"Nothing," came the easy admission.

"Then we might as well get this over with."

A silver eyebrow rose eloquently. "'This'?"

"I think I warned you that my mother was going to want to meet you," I said, and Sephiroth . . . twitched.

"You did," he agreed gravely. "And perhaps it would be best to, as you say, get it over with."

I stopped outside the ordinary small house in Canalside and let Sephiroth inspect it, because I could tell he was uneasy. Set back a bit from the street, it had a strip of green in front of it that was more weeds than grass, walls of plain, solid stone, and whitewash flaking from the shutters.
Once I was certain he'd gotten a good look, I moved forward, opened the door, and stepped inside. He hesitated on the threshold, and I pretended not to notice, wiping my boots on the coarse woven-rush matting in the entryway.

It had never been a large house. The ground floor was divided into five rooms, including my mother's bedroom. My bed was in the attic, although it wasn't a place where I'd ever spent much time when I was awake.

"Auron?" My mother emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. "You should have mentioned you were bringing a guest."

"It was a bit spur-of-the-moment," I said, as Sephiroth finally stepped inside and closed the door. "Mother, this is . . . Sephiroth. Sephiroth, this is my mother, Lenore."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am." My lover dipped his head.

My mother smiled. "And he has manners. I'm pleased to meet you as well, Sephiroth. Make yourself comfortable." She gestured at the door that led to the living room. "You'll both be staying for lunch, of course." It wasn't a question.

Sephiroth nodded again, although he was still tense.

I led him into the living room and put my sword on the rack we kept there for it. Masamune was too long to fit, but Sephiroth solved the problem by propping the blade against the wall in a corner, where it was less likely that anyone would trip over it and find themselves cut off at the ankles. He sat down gingerly on the sofa while I snuck off to shave and put on a clean shirt.

When I got back, my mother had emerged from the kitchen, and was already asking pointed questions.

"And what did you do before joining Lord Braska's pilgrimage?"

"It's complicated," I said, sitting down beside my lover and sneaking my arm along the back of the couch to rest against his shoulders. "She's safe," I added to Sephiroth. "Or at least, she knows how to keep a secret."

"Oh? I didn't realize I was letting my son date a dangerous man."

"My past is no danger to Auron, or anyone else on Spira. However, my situation is bizarre in the extreme, and it's impossible for me to discuss parts of it openly without my sanity being questioned."

My mother raised her eyebrows. "Now I'm even more curious."

Sephiroth was wearing his granite face again. "Very well. The truth is that I am not from Spira. The fayth brought me here for their own reasons, which they have been somewhat cagey about revealing, but which most likely have to do with their desire to see Sin finally and permanently destroyed. In my old world, I was roughly the equivalent of a senior Crusader officer until I was used as the scapegoat for an incident that led to the destruction of a village."

There was a long silence. Then, "That . . . wasn't what I expected. At all."

"He isn't lying," I said quietly. "Not only have I heard the fayth speak to him—which normally doesn't happen—but some people from his old world appeared to us as something like Unsent when we visited the Farplane in Guadosalam."
My mother's attention was still on Sephiroth, though. "And when you go back to your own world, will you leave my son behind with a broken heart?"

I gritted my teeth on a distinctly adolescent moan of embarrassment.

"I have no intention of leaving Spira. There is nothing left for me in the world of my birth. I have no living family, friends, or lover waiting for my return, and those I once served destroyed my honour and reputation in the pursuit of goals I never shared, so I consider myself free of duty as well. I will stay with Auron for as long as he will have me. And if the fayth attempt to send me back against my will, I will make them regret it."

I shook my head slightly, smiling. That absolute confidence in his ability to wreak mayhem on something normally considered untouchable was pure Sephiroth.

"You aren't what I would have chosen for my little boy," my mother said, and this time I let myself grind my teeth a bit. "But perhaps there's some merit to the two of you being in the same line of work. I never did understand Auron's father as well as I would have liked—what drove him to risk his life for others. I respected him for it, but never understood it. And you seem to genuinely care about my son, although you may have odd ways of showing it."

"Does that mean he passes muster, or do you want to check him for feather mites like a hired chocobo?" I asked irritably.

My mother laughed. "No, dear, I'm fairly sure he doesn't have feather mites. If this is what you really want, I won't object."

"Thank Yevon," I muttered. Especially because if she had found Sephiroth objectionable, I wasn't quite sure what I would have done.

... No, that was a lie. I was sure. I'd promised him that I would stay with him. But I didn't want to think about how much it would have hurt.

Lunch went more smoothly after that than I could have hoped, and Sephiroth and I parted ways at the edge of the Al Bhed quarter afterwards. I figured that it was past time that someone relieved Jecht and left him free to do... whatever Jecht did, when he wasn't drinking, fighting, or playing blitzball.

Funny, how I'd traveled the length of Spira with the man and didn't know that. Sephiroth trained or searched out the details of the universe's structure when he had downtime. Seymour and Braska both meditated, read, or practiced magic. Jecht... flirted insincerely with women, but that couldn't be the only thing he did for amusement. Or maybe he'd gone from throwing all of himself into blitz to drowning himself in booze and then trying to play the part of a Guardian, and forgotten what it was like to really relax.

No one answered Braska's door when I knocked on it. I wasn't going to run around asking everyone whether they'd seen him or anything like that, but I decided I'd check a few of the nearby places I knew he liked to take Yuna to. After all, it wasn't as though I was late for an appointment.

I found them in a plaza just off Upper Harbour Road, watching a puppet show. Well, Yuna was watching the puppet show, and Braska was watching Yuna, and Jecht was watching Braska. Jecht was alert enough to spot me watching them, but neither of us said or did anything until the puppet show was over and the puppeteers were passing the hat.

"Hey, Auron! What're you doing here? I can't believe you wanted to watch a kids' show."
"I was just wondering if you wanted to take a little time off," I said, nodding in Braska's direction.

"Nah," came the easy reply. "Having something to do makes it easier not to go looking for a bottle. There ain't no sphere pool here, so I can't blitz, and other distractions... they don't work as well, y'know? Talked it over with Sephy a bit. That's why he didn't bother to set up a rotation while we're here."

"You might want to pick up some warm clothes that aren't pink, though," I said. "After we pass through the Calm Lands, we'll be going over Mount Gagazet, and if anything, it's colder there than the area around the temple in Macalania."

Jecht snorted. "Won't be anyone up there to see me but you guys, though. I might not like pink, but it ain't gonna kill me. And my fans won't ever find out."

"True enough, I suppose."

We both watched as Yuna tugged at Braska's sleeve, trying to draw him toward a stall that sold brightly-coloured candies in the shapes of chocobos and shoopufs and such. Personally, I thought the pink shoopufs were a bit much, but Braska's daughter clearly adored them.

"She's a cute kid, ain't she," Jecht said.

"Did you ever do things like this with your son?"

"Heh. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were prepping for fatherhood. Yeah, I did take Tidus out from time to time. Not quite like this, though. I mean, sure, there're girls who run and wrestle and play blitz, but it's like Tidus never stops moving. No way would he stand there for a whole show. Didn't realize how different it was until I met little Yuna."

"There isn't any reason I couldn't be a father if I chose. There are plenty of orphans around who would be glad to have someone they could call family." Unfortunately.

"Yeah, I guess Sin... kinda does that."

Neither of said anything for a little while, and I let my mind wander. What kind of father would Sephiroth be? His own childhood had been miserable, that was clear. Would he be able to rise above that? Not that I actually wanted children. I wasn't even sure at this point if I wanted to settle in one place. Traveling... could be interesting, and even fun in a way when you didn't have a bunch of people to keep organized or a schedule to meet.

Of course, that all assumed we would survive whatever we found in Zanarkand. I had no doubt that we would manage to get there alive, but I had a feeling that getting out again wouldn't be that easy.

"Auron!" Braska greeted me with a smile as Yuna licked at a pink shoopuf on a stick. "I wasn't expecting to see you until the ceremony tomorrow."

"They're having it tomorrow?" I said in surprise. "Mika must be in a hurry to get this over and done with."

"The Crusaders are pushing him again, I think. They really seem to like us."

_Because it would have decimated them if they'd been forced to fight all those Sinspawn,_ I reflected. "You mean they want a high-profile ally."

"That, too, I expect," Braska said. "But since that fits in with our plans as well, why worry about it?"
Yuna was tugging at his sleeve. "Papa, you promised—no boring grown-up talk!"

The Summoner chuckled. "So I did. Well, Yuna, shall we take Uncle Auron to the park with us?"

"Uh-huh!" Yuna stuck the shoopuf candy in her mouth, grabbed Braska's hand with one of hers and mine with the other, and began pulling us towards the promised park.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently there's a character in some of the peripheral FFX canon material who claims to be Auron's daughter. Since that doesn't work if Auron is gay, I felt the urge to work out how that character could have been telling the truth and at the same time been utterly wrong.

We have a couple more chapters in Bevelle before they get on the road again.
Chapter 25

The award ceremony ended up being just as unpleasant as I'd expected. Although at least I didn't have to wear one of the Order's parade uniforms, with the starched collar that cut into your jaw if you were fool enough to bend your head. Everyone hated those.

Mika had said "public", and he appeared to have meant it, no matter how it might eat at his shriveled soul. They'd gotten out the low wooden barriers they used for parades and festivals, and used them to mark out the center part of the plaza in front of the Palace, where we'd killed four Sinspawn only days ago. They had to have had people working from dawn to dusk to get rid of all the blood from the civilians who had died there.

They'd sent my old teacher Armsmaster Harrith down to Braska's house to ensure we'd arrive on time and in good order (and without following a half-facetious suggestion of Jecht's that involved firebombs). No doubt the maesters had chosen Harrith because they'd known she wouldn't be intimidated by Sephiroth.

"I hear you think you're good," was the first thing she'd said to him—the only non-businesslike thing she'd said to any of us as we departed the house, although she'd exchanged a nod with me.

Sephiroth had shrugged. "My self-evaluation hardly matters."

Harrith had raised her eyebrows without saying anything further. She'd probably been trying to decide whether he was being arrogantly sarcastic or blandly literal. I wasn't sure myself.

We'd formed up around Braska right as we'd stepped out the door, of course—the usual diamond formation with Sephiroth at the front and me in the rear. There were cheers, a surprising number of them, as Harrith led us across the plaza and up the steps of the Palace, where Mika, or whoever was in charge of this farce, had had an ornamental platform constructed. Braska and Jecht both smiled and waved to the crowds—the former sedately, the latter more broadly—but I imitated Sephiroth's attitude and looked neither left nor right.

We shifted out of our close formation when we reached the top of the stairs, with Sephiroth and Seymour moving left and Jecht and I moving right, which left Braska facing Mika at the center. Harrith went around to stand behind Mika, at the end of a row that included both the other serving maesters, the head of the Order, Kinoc as his second-in-command, two Crusader representatives in full uniform, and Winya, the elderly woman who served as Bevelle's trainer of Summoners. They really were going all-out.

"Summoner Braska, we are honoured to have yourself and your Guardians join us today," Mika said. Beside me, Jecht let out a snort. "Your exploits against Sin, even before reaching Zanarkand, have saved the lives of thousands of people . . ."

I tuned out the speech, instead focusing on the crowd. Looking for threats. If Mika wanted to kill us—any of us, but especially Braska—with some amount of plausible deniability, this would be the ideal time. At the same time, though, I couldn't alert on every motion. This was a crowd of ordinary civilians. They were going to shift around.

Sephiroth was still staring at a point somewhere above Jecht's head, but I would have bet anything that he was listening very carefully to everything except Mika's speech. He'd told me once that he found hearing more useful for threat detection than sight, since hearing wasn't limited to one direction at a time.
The sudden *crack* of a gunshot as Mika was handing the treasure staff from Zanarkand to Braska wasn't entirely unexpected. Sephiroth cut the bullet out of the air with a single fluid motion, while Seymour cast Protect on everything that twitched, Jecht stepped in front of Braska, and I moved to Sephiroth's side, positioning myself to his right so that the two of us could block the entire stairway. All as neatly as if we'd practiced it, instead of just discussing it.

A flicker of motion on the roof of a nearby building caught my eye, and I pointed it out to Sephiroth, who immediately cast Sleepel.

Harrith signaled to a couple of junior members of the Order who had been unobtrusively standing in the shadows of the Palace's doorway, and they began to push through the crowd in the direction of the building Sephiroth had just cast his spell at. After a quick glance at my lover, I fell in behind them. Better that we have a look at what was going on before the Church could make any effort to twist it in a direction that favoured whatever narrative they were trying to peddle this week.

The building was a restaurant-tavern of the upscale variety, popular among the higher echelons of the Order even though (or perhaps because) it had dozens of spherecast repeater screens in the second-floor bar area. It was currently empty except for staff, who pointed us at the stairs to the roof when we asked them.

We spotted the gun, mounted on a tripod at the edge of the roof, before we saw the man. He'd tried to shoot Braska with one of the generic muskets carried by members of the Order on guard duty. That didn't, however, prove he was associated in any way with the Church, because they did get stolen from time to time. According to the inventories, there had once been just over five thousand of those guns, but as of three years ago, we'd been down to two thousand four hundred and ninety-one exactly. The bullets were just rounded lumps of metal, and it was possible to get powder and primer from the Al Bhed.

The man sprawled on the roof near the weapon had blond hair, and for a moment I thought he was an Al Bhed. Then I realized just how idiotic that was: an Al Bhed using one of the Church's muskets, when they had far better guns of their own? Ridiculous.

One of the junior warrior-monks I'd followed up here was about to bend down and pick the gunman up by the hair, but I grabbed him by the arm. "Don't. It could be a wig."

"Then what do you suggest?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"I'll sit on him. You two tie his wrists and ankles. Then we haul him out of here like a sack of flour. That way, he won't be able to run." *Or get shot while escaping, unless they want to be really blatant,* I thought cynically.

The junior thought it over. Clearly he wasn't one of my greatest fans, but he also wasn't able to come up with a reason to claim I was wrong. "All right."

The prisoner came awake and started thrashing around as I knelt on his back, but I'd expected that, and didn't let myself get bucked off. Instead, I tested the blonde hair to see whether it really was a wig. It turned out to be attached, but it was also much darker at the roots: it had been bleached. Which was just not something normal Spirans did. Unless they wanted to be mistaken for Al Bhed. Mind you, there *were* Al Bhed with dark hair, just as there were blond Spirans. I'd have to check this joker's eyes to see what he really was. Assuming he ever decided to hold still.

He spat words as he thrashed. They *could* have been Al Bhed, but since he didn't manage to hit on even one of the curse words that I knew, I thought they were more likely to be gibberish.
Once we had our shooter tied up, I took his head and one of the junior warrior-monks took his feet, while the other brought the gun and its tripod. If necessary, I was willing to allow the gun to pass into Church custody, since I doubted it could tell us anything.

We hauled our prize, if you could call him that, back out through the tavern and into the square, and finished by dropping him at the feet of Mika, Braska, Harrith, and Sephiroth, as though we were cats who had found a particularly juicy mouse.

Braska said something in Al Bhed, in an even tone of voice. I caught the name "Yevon" in it, but not much else. The prisoner didn't react.

"Dark eyes, and he doesn't speak Al Bhed," my Summoner observed. "He's Spiran."

Sephiroth plucked the gun from the hands of the warrior-monk carrying it before the man could do anything to stop him, gave it a quick examination, and then returned it. "He's also an idiot if he thought he could hit anything with a smoothbore musket at that distance. The best marksman I've ever known couldn't have pulled that off. Unfortunately, that means we can't tell who he was actually aiming at, although the maesters and Summoner Braska still seem the most likely targets. A moment."

Sephiroth hauled the prisoner up by the collar, and began to speak very, very softly to him. The man's eyes widened, and he began to shake his head. The silver-haired man gave him one of those evil-looking smirks of his, and continued with whatever he was saying . . . and the sniper finally broke.

"No! Leave them alone!"

Sephiroth shook him a bit, and spoke loud enough for everyone on the platform (but not the spectators in the plaza) to hear. "Who was your target? Who sent you?"

"Guardian Auron . . . I was hired by . . . Maester Esmon . . ."

Who was, I noticed, looking absolutely white, with a slight tinge of green. "That's a lie!" The maester spoke the words with force, but didn't raise his voice. It seemed that he didn't want the crowd to hear either.

I felt a laugh building up inside me, and managed to throttle it down to a chuckle before it escaped. "Are you telling me that this is all because I didn't agree to get married?" It just struck me as so very ridiculous. Esmon had tried to turn me into a dead man, not because of anything to do with Sin, but because my refusal to play Church politics had left his nose out of joint.

"Please don't waste everyone's time, Maester Esmon," Sephiroth added. "You weren't at all surprised when this—" He gave the gunman a little shake. "—named you as his paymaster. Afraid, yes, but not surprised. You aren't competent to play games at this level of stakes."

"What are you going to do to me?" the maester asked, still pale, but not bothering to argue.

"Nothing," I said.

Esmon froze. Several other people developed surprised expressions. But it was Kelk Ronso who spoke.

"Are you certain?"

I shrugged. "We have bigger fish to fry than one maester with too much pride. And we have no
proof that Maester Esmon was involved, beyond a questionable confession and the acuity of Sephiroth's observation. I'm not going to sit around here for several weeks while the maester does his utmost to drag out the trial, only to see him go free. The simplest way to sort this out is to claim that the gunman was acting alone, and tried to shoot Braska because he was offended by his attitude toward the Al Bhed. Esmon's daughter marries Kinoc, as currently agreed, and you place whatever internal penalties on Esmon for his lack of judgement that you think are appropriate. In the meanwhile, we continue on toward Zanarkand."

"You would give up your justice?" Kelk said slowly.

"I am a Guardian," I said, looking the Ronso maester straight in the eye. "My primary concern is to protect my Summoner, not seek justice for myself. Dragging this out doesn't serve Braska. What it will do, if the full truth comes out, is start rumors about Esmon's daughter, who to my knowledge has done nothing to deserve them. Justice isn't served by that." Kelk might be honourable, but he’d been in the Church of Yevon for long enough to understand that there were no moral absolutes.

*Thanks for reminding me of why I hate the Church so much.*

"We thank you for your forbearance, Sir Auron, Sir Sephiroth," Mika said, and bowed. Sephiroth snorted softly and more-or-less threw the prisoner at the junior warrior-monk who had helped me carry the man down.

"Do we need to reconvene this circus at a later time, or can we resume from here?" my lover asked, meeting Mika's eyes directly.

"I see no reason to postpone matters," the Grand Maester said to us. Kinoc signaled to the warrior-monks to remove the prisoner, who was efficiently hauled away, and Mika began speechifying again.

This time, the handover of the ancient Zanarkandic staff took place without any interruptions. Then it was time for Mika to formally hand over the writ Sephiroth had demanded. They'd cobbled together bits of a couple of different ceremonies for this, I realized with amusement when an acolyte brought out the two copies of the writ on a silver platter. Mika picked one up and began to read from it, while Kinoc unobtrusively moved a bit closer so that he could see the text over the old shark's shoulder, to make sure that what he was reading was actually what the writ said, and not an embellishment. While I might not be able to trust him with my deepest secrets anymore, I did still trust him with that.

When Mika was finished, Kinoc caught my eye and gave me a little nod, and I relaxed just a bit. The Grand Maester offered the other copy of the writ to Sephiroth, who accepted it with both hands and bowed over it . . . although not so deeply as to put his head on a level with Mika's, I noted with amusement. The action still managed to look ceremonial, though. I had a feeling it was cribbed from something he'd been forced to participate in back on Gaia.

Mika made another speech. Braska was called upon for a few remarks—thankfully he seemed to have prepared them in advance. The Crusader commander gave a speech. Then, finally, Mika dismissed everyone and retreated back inside the Palace, and the crowd out front began to break up. They didn't spill over into the barriers marking the path from the main street to the platform, but I suspected they'd be waiting for us below. Under the circumstances, I wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea of marching straight into the morass, but it might tarnish Braska's image if he seemed worried about coming into contact with ordinary citizens. As for how much that mattered, when we would be leaving for the Calm Lands tomorrow morning . . . who could say?

In the end, Braska made the decision for us, by slowly descending the stairs. Sephiroth, Jecht, Seymour and I tried to take up our normal positions around him, but Braska motioned us back and
began greeting the people on the other side of the nearest barrier, accepting handshakes and small trinkets.

"You look like you're about to grind your teeth," Harrith said, startling me, because I hadn't realized that she'd followed us down . . . as had the Crusaders. And Kinoc. And old Winya, leaning on her cane.

"I'm surprised I have any enamel left," I said, and rediscovered that Harrith's smile was even more minimal than Sephiroth's, a matter of her eyes lighting up while her mouth remained uncompromisingly flat. "It isn't in Braska's nature to be careful of people."

"Of course not." That was Winya. "There are three kinds of Summoners: the kind ones, the proud ones, and the despairing ones. Braska's always been kind, though there's a streak of despair in him too."

Which was true enough. Even Braska tacitly admitted it, twitching slightly as she spoke, although he didn't turn to face the rest of us.

"You were one of the proud ones," Seymour observed.

"Indeed I was, boy. Until I took a tumble down a Gagazet cliff and broke both legs and my pelvis. That ended my pilgrimage, and by the time my Guardians had carried me back to Bevelle, the pride had drained right out of me. Hard to be proud when you can't even see to your body's needs without help. And what kind were you?"

"Pride layered over despair, I expect," Seymour said, with a wry smile. "I was a child who wanted desperately to please his mother. I didn't really understand on a visceral level what success would mean, and when it was made clear to me, right there at the end, I panicked and ran. I still don't remember how I made it back over Gagazet alive."

"Hey, wait a sec—how'd you even know Rufus was a Summoner?" Jecht said from his position closer to Braska.

Winya shook her head. "Young man, by the time you've trained as many of our kind as I have, you develop a sixth sense for these things. Although I've never heard of anyone attempting a second pilgrimage before."

Seymour shrugged. "It's been proven repeatedly that the Final Summoning alone isn't sufficient to destroy Sin. Perhaps two Final Aeons striking at it simultaneously will be."

"Ambitious, aren't you?" the old woman said, with a cackle. "But then, you're still young."

"Would you prefer to see Spira scourged by Sin for all eternity?" Sephiroth asked dryly.

"Prefer? Of course not, young man, but my preferences have nothing to do with it. Humanity isn't strong enough to defeat Sin. It never will be."

A silver eyebrow rose. "You underestimate humanity, I think. I have seen men and women take on far greater powers . . . and win."

"There is no greater power than Sin," Harrith protested.

"I disagree," Sephiroth said. "After all, Spira is still here."

"Considering the source, I find that a rather disturbing assertion," Seymour said. For that matter, so
"Kinoc was right," Harrith said suddenly. "I do want to fight you, Sir Sephiroth. To see whether you're displaying deserved pride in your abilities, or merely arrogance."

"I don't mind fighting you, but it will have to be today," Sephiroth said. "I leave it to you to select a location, since your knowledge of Bevelle is far greater than mine."

"The Order's practice field, an hour after noon," came the prompt reply. "Auron can show you where it is. You may need this." She handed him a key. Sephiroth gave it a quick glance and slid it into his pocket. Harrith herself then left.

Kinoc clapped me on the shoulder and left too, without actually saying anything. I suspected he was going to turn up at that practice field with precise timing, though.

One of the Crusaders—their commander, with his luxuriant grey-flecked black mustache whose tips drooped lower than his chin, not his slender, androgynous second—said, "I had hoped for a bit more of a conversation, but I don't have the time to wait for Lord Braska to finish greeting his adoring public. If you could visit our northern headquarters when you reach the far side of the Calm Lands, it would be appreciated."

"We'll tell him," I said. Then raised an enquiring eyebrow at Winya.

"I'll wait," she said, in her low, rough voice. "And pester this fine young Guado of yours in the meanwhile. For instance, I'd like to know where you trained, boy. You were certainly never one of my students."

"Did you ever know a man named Almayre?" Seymour asked.

"That drunk?"

"I see that you did," Seymour took up smoothly. "Confining him to Baaj Temple without a supply of alcohol dried him out for a time, although I'm not certain that he ever forgave my parents."

"He also couldn't teach his way across an empty courtyard."

"It was impressed upon him that the more quickly I learned, the more quickly he could leave Baaj."

"Hmm. And you carry no staff."

Seymour hesitated, then told her about Valefor and the broom. Winya didn't seem to know whether to be scandalized or amused. While she was making up her mind, Braska peeled himself away from the last of the crowds, and joined us.

"Teacher," he said, and bowed to Winya.

"Stop that, and let me get a look at you." The old woman grabbed him by the shoulder and forced him to turn until he was standing squarely across from her. "Hmmm. I knew you were going to make waves one way or the other, Braska. You're smart and stubborn and impulsive all at once. I just didn't expect you to go quite this far."

Braska smiled helplessly, and shrugged. "It wasn't me. It was the fayth. They have their own ideas about what they want, it seems."

"Ah, but why would they choose to speak to you? There are six other Summoners wandering around
Spira on pilgrimage right now, and nothing unusual seems to be happening to them. There must be something about you that the fayth consider . . . suitable for whatever it is that they're trying to do. It's enough to make an old woman feel like a foolish stick-in-the-mud, that it's one of my worst students that they chose."

Braska shrugged. "If we understood the fayth, then we could make more of them, and drive Sin out of Spira with the power of thousands of aeons massed together. Since that hasn't happened, I would conclude that we know less than we think we do. And that the Church also knows less than it thinks it does."

"That's very close to blasphemy."

"Once I'm dead, the Church will twist my beliefs around whatever way they want." Braska's voice was . . . disturbingly cheerful. "You know as well as I do that that's the way it always works."

"When did you get so cynical and twisted?" Winya asked.

"I think it was around the time I had to remove Yuna from the temple school because the teachers weren't able to keep order." Braska was still smiling, but there was an edge in his voice: if she was sounding him out with the hope of drawing him back to the Church, she was wasting her time.

"Ah. Well, look after yourself. After all this build-up, you'd look pretty stupid if you fell off a cliff or got eaten by a flan before you even got to Zanarkand."

Jecht waited until she was out of earshot before saying, "So whose side is she on?"

Braska shook his head. "Her own, as far as I've ever been able to tell. She found teaching me to be an exercise in patience because it was difficult for me to keep my mind on much of anything right after Akkina died, but calling me her worst student is . . . affectionate, by her standards. And she finds the Church hierarchy about as pleasant to deal with as half a worm in her apple."

"Time for lunch, I think, since some of us have an appointment," Seymour said.

I led the way to a restaurant that set its larger tables back into alcoves, which meant that we would be hidden from the street while we ate. I wasn't used to being so completely the center of attention in a city the size of Bevelle, and I didn't think any of the others were comfortable with it either . . . except for Jecht, who was always the odd man out.

The key Harrith had given Sephiroth was for the water stairs, one of the back ways into the Palace complex, near the above-ground exit for the Via Purifico that the guardian wyrm Evrae sometimes used. That was the route he and I took onto the grounds after lunch.

I'd expected—no, more like I'd hoped—that the practice field would be deserted except for Harrith, but it was quite the opposite: it looked like most of the off-duty members of the Order had turned out, including the novices. Plus a few Crusaders who had somehow wrangled their way onto the Palace grounds.

"The word spread," was all Harrith said when she came to greet us. She was wearing the same armour she always wore when training: a worn cuirboulli breastplate and metal bracers endowed with auto-protect and additional endurance.

"We weren't exactly trying to keep it secret," Sephiroth said. "Shall we?" He gestured to the field.

Harrith nodded. "Rules: no magic or overdrives. No special attacks that might harm the observers. This is a contest of skill only. Auron will give the starting signal. The fight ends when one of us
surrenders or is unable to continue. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

I nodded and fished a one-gil coin out of my pocket.

They went to opposite ends of the field and drew their weapons. Harrith had always favoured a very basic initial guard position, with both hands on the hilt of her sword and the blade pointing forward and up; Sephiroth raised his Masamune to the odd high guard he favoured, straight out at jaw level with the tip of the blade pointed down.

"When the coin hits the ground," I said loudly enough to carry, and flicked the bit of metal into the air. Everyone went silent, watching.

The single gil struck the hard-packed earth at my feet with a dull click, and Sephiroth flashed forward.

I'd watched my lover fight monsters—a lot of monsters—and I'd sparred against him myself, but this was the first time I had ever watched from the sidelines as he fought another human being. It was splendid and terrible.

The leather coat swirled around his legs as he spun left at the very last moment and leapt, bringing his sword down with enough force to make Harrith stagger back two full steps when she caught his blade with hers. And yet I knew this wasn't his full speed or strength. Not yet.

Harrith tried to sweep his legs out from under him when he landed, but Sephiroth twisted and got one foot solidly under him, then the other. A punch to the stomach was blocked by Masamune, held almost vertically with the hilt above Sephiroth's head, while a side kick glanced off Harrith's worn Ogre Blade. Then they both jumped backward, opening up some distance, and began to circle. With such huge swords, close fighting put them both at a disadvantage.

The second time, it was Harrith who lunged forward to engage, using one of her favourite feint-high-strike-low combinations. Sephiroth blocked it without difficulty. He was warmed up now, and beginning to ratchet up his speed. Masamune flickered out to test Harrith's defenses, once again driving her to retreat a step. Then she thrust at Sephiroth's face, twisting the move around into a diagonal swing as he spun on his heel to avoid being blinded. He batted her blade back outward and away from himself.

They continued like that for a while, backward and forward, trading off offense and defense with each exchange. Swords blurred and rang. Sephiroth was almost using his full speed, but not his full strength or the full range of his technique. In particular, his gift for fighting in the air, leaping over an opponent's sword as though it were a child's jump-rope, wasn't on display here. I suspected he found it unnecessary. Or maybe it amused him to give himself a handicap to compensate for his better-than-human physical abilities.

After several minutes, they broke apart again. Harrith was panting audibly, while Sephiroth was relaxed, his breathing even, as he raised Masamune to its guard position again. He remained there only for a moment, though, before lunging forward even though it wasn't his turn to go on the offensive.

At the very last moment, he aborted what had looked like a thrust and turned it into a series of cuts instead, in a pattern I could follow only because I'd seen it before. Octaslash. For a normal human, the level of speed and precision displayed would have required an overdrive, but Sephiroth's tremendous ability allowed him to perform it without needing the extra burst of power as fuel. Harrith's Ogre Blade went skidding across the ground as Sephiroth brought the attack to an end with Masamune's point resting against her throat.
"Do you yield?" I still hadn't figured out how he made his voice carry like that without it ever seeming loud. There had to be some trick to it.

"I yield," Harrith agreed. There was a red welt on her face, and another on the back of her hand when she reached up to rub it. "You would have taken my arm off if you hadn't been so careful to use the blunt side of your blade," she added. "And I never landed anything on you. From Auron's expression, you weren't using everything you have, either—just enough to handle me. Your full standard must be . . . terrifying. I have never met a swordsman of your caliber before, and I doubt I ever will again. Take good care of my student."

"I would have even if you hadn't requested it." Sephiroth returned Masamune to his back before striding over to join me. "Shall we go, or are there those here to whom you wish to speak?"

I shook my head. "Everything I needed to say, I said a long time ago. Let's go." I'd had friends besides Kinoc in the Order, once upon a time, but they'd all abandoned me after I'd resigned.

Outside the water gate, we traced an irregular path through less-peopled minor streets. Sephiroth didn't seem in the mood for dealing with the public right now, and neither was I.

A thousand-year warrior, I'd told that young warrior-monk we'd met in Macalania. I . . . wasn't exactly glad it was true. Although I also wasn't surprised.

It was a standard that I would never reach, although I'd long ago accepted that I was likely to spend the rest of my life in Sephiroth's shadow. That was just the way things were, and I'd never cared about fame to begin with. Besides, if we destroyed Sin, there would be more than enough glory to go around. More than any of us wanted, likely.

"I have something to give you," Sephiroth said abruptly as we reached the door to the inn in the Al Bhed quarter where he was staying. "Come inside."

I was fairly sure that he meant that literally, rather than it being a rather clumsy attempt to get me into bed again. Although I wouldn't have minded if it had been. I followed him into his room without question.

The first thing I noticed was that the desk in the corner was a mess, strewn with scraps of leather and metal, plus a handful of small tools. Sephiroth reached over and plucked an object from among the debris, offering it to me.

It took me a moment to figure out what it was. Some sort of bracelet or wristlet, black leather and odd pale-copper metal and green glass . . . Then I realized that the glass was materia, and understood.

He'd gotten that wire from the Al Bhed just to create this for me, to give me better access to magic I couldn't use any other way. It was unexpected, touching, and . . . sweet. Not the kind of gesture I would ever have expected from this man, and I found myself groping for words.

"Thank you," was a good start, I figured. "I didn't know you could . . ." Ugh, no, I was going to put my foot in it.

"I learned basic leatherwork so that I could repair my own gear in the field," Sephiroth said, before I could fumble out more words. "I'm glad now that I did, although this wasn't a use I ever envisioned putting the skill to. The materia carry healing and protective spells—Cure, Esuna, Life, Shell, and such."

Exactly chosen to cover the worst gap in my abilities, in other words. "Thank you," I repeated. "I
don't have anything to give you in return. I'm sorry."

"You already have," came the unexpected, quiet correction. He leaned forward and kissed me firmly, as though to prove it. "I want to make you as strong as you can possibly be. I don't want to risk losing you—to your own inadequacies, or to the same mad jealousy that took Genesis away from me."

"You won't," I said, forcing certainty into my voice.

"We can't predict the future, Auron."

"But I do know my own mind," I said firmly. "If the only way for me to stay with you is as an Unsent, that's what I'll do. Until you tell me to go."

_I have utterly lost my mind_, I thought as I let him strip off my haori. He'd still made me no promises. Or . . . no verbal promises. Sometimes his actions spoke so loudly that words seemed irrelevant. And when the words did come, they were halting and not quite right . . . but he tried. Like now.

"Thank you," he was saying. And, "I'm sorry. I don't know how to say what I mean. Not about this."

"I'm not sure I do either," I said. "So shut up and kiss me."

With a flicker of a smile, he complied.
"So why's there a maze of hover sidewalks hidden right underneath the headquarters of a Church that thinks technology's the devil, huh?"

"Shut up, Jecht," I said sourly. Seymour had been right about the Cloister of Trials in Bevelle not resembling any of the others. Our surroundings were already starting to give me a headache, even though we hadn't been here more than ten minutes. And I was absolutely, completely lost among all these machina. It could have been worse, though. Jecht and Sephiroth both seemed to understand what they were looking at, and a little trial and error had taught us how the directional controls worked. It was just that I could have done without the moving, transparent floors and appearing-disappearing pedestals. And I couldn't work out a map of the area in my head.

Other than one hair-raising incident with a drop-off that let us fall twenty feet before floating us back up to the beginning, though, solving the Trial was more boring and headache-inducing than difficult, with Sephiroth doing most of the work. Finally, the last platform disgorged us onto a solid walkway, which in turn led to a heavily-decorated antechamber. Which wasn't empty.

The figure waiting for us looked like a boy of perhaps ten years of age, wearing a hooded purple garment that concealed the top part of his face but left his limbs mostly bare.

"Welcome," he said. "We've been waiting."

"Bahamut," Sephiroth said. "Are you going to explain anything, or just give us another cryptic hint and disappear?"

The fayth shook his head. "The conditions of our creation make it impossible to tell you everything. There are many things we may not speak of directly, or can only discuss with those who already have certain knowledge."

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed. "And Yunalesca can talk about these things without restriction?"

"Yunalesca is Unsent. The only thing that would keep her from speaking is her own madness."

"I take it that 'what is Sin' is one of those questions you're forbidden to answer."

The fayth didn't speak. Didn't move.

"And that you can't tell us which questions you may or may not answer," Sephiroth added dryly. "Let's try something else. Are Jecht and I here because you wanted an outsider's perspective on the situation in Spira?"

"Yes. The spiral can't be broken by someone who moves automatically along its paths."

"'The spiral' being the situation with Sin."

No response.

"Why Jecht? Why me?"

"Jecht was selected long ago. We chose him because he was more awake, and often went to the
ocean alone. You . . . We sensed Gaia ejecting you, and thought we might make use of what she didn't want."

"Chance," Sephiroth said.

"Chance," the fayth confirmed.

"You didn't even know why Gaia wanted to be rid of me. At a guess, you still don't."

"Gaia was . . . not very coherent about certain things, although we did attempt to ask questions. Is the reason for your exile important?"

Sephiroth hesitated for a long moment. He turned to look at all of us, pausing for a moment on Seymour, and then much longer on me. ". . . Yes, it is. Gaia forced me out because Jenova tried to use me as a weapon with which to destroy her. It was a plan that came uncomfortably close to succeeding."

"Destruction is what we require," the fayth said. "A force able to conquer Sin couldn't possibly be gentle. We knew you were strong."

My lover frowned. "My abilities are a very chancy force multiplier. I may end up destroying Spira. Or I may fail to damage Sin at all. Still, I can't . . ." His frowned deepened. "I can't just stop here. But you knew that. You did it on purpose. 'Travel Spira with Braska and see it as it is.' As a world full of people. Who need saving. And I'm not cold enough to give up on them. I should be, but I'm not. Damn you."

"Then you have made your choice," Bahamut said.

"I have made a choice," Sephiroth corrected. "I will do what I can. However, you may end up regretting the day when you loosed me on an unsuspecting Spira. You wanted an outsider's point of view. Once I have all the pieces, that may result in you suffering an outsider's judgement."

"We might welcome that," the fayth replied. "We are so very tired . . . if we can't wake up, then ceasing to exist might not be so bad."

Jecht snorted. "Well, if you're talking in your sleep, I suppose that explains why you're not making a hell of a lot of sense. So you picked me for this a long time ago, then tripped over him by accident, and he's so much better for what you want that I'm chopped liver now? Can't you at least send me home if you don't want me anymore? I mean, I've been gone for months. My wife and kid probably think I'm dead . . ."

The fayth shook his head. "We can't just send you back. We're not actually that powerful, and dragging Sephiroth into Spira drained us. Your only path back lies through Sin."

"And just what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Bahamut remained silent.

Jecht made a disgusted noise. "Sephy, can you kick this guy's ass for me?"

"Not right now, Jecht. We may still need him for something—I don't have the full picture yet. And I thought I told you not to call me that."

"You let Zack call you Seph."
"That's because Zack is somewhat akin to a force of nature. And I always allowed him a certain amount of leeway out of respect for his mentor. You have neither of those advantages."

"You still haven't killed me, though. Even though you've been threatening to."

Sephiroth offered him an unnerving smirk. "I haven't killed you yet. I'm waiting for a point when it would do something useful. Something which is sure to happen sooner or later. I don't like to waste resources, and I have few enough of them right now."

I wasn't sure whether to take that seriously or not. I don't think anyone else was, either. And if it had been a bit of humour gone wrong, Sephiroth would never admit it.

Bahamut cleared his throat. Trying to get our attention. And possibly annoyed that we were ignoring him. I doubted that happened all that often.

"Apologies, honoured fayth," Braska said instantly. "Is there anything else you wish to impart to us?"

"The remaining answers await you on the road to Zanarkand. Until then, I shall lend you my power."

The fayth became a wave of pyreflies and shot toward Braska, flowing over and into him. The Summoner gasped and dropped to his knees. It was Seymour who kept him from falling any further, crouching beside him and speaking to him in a tone too low for me to be able to hear clearly.

"On the road to Zanarkand," I said. "Do you think that's significant?"

"It might be," Sephiroth said.

I looked around quickly. Jecht was wandering around the edges of the room, kicking at things and cursing as he stubbed his toes. Seymour was still with Braska, who was semiconscious and staring at nothing. I took a couple of steps closer to Sephiroth.

"Are you all right?" I said, so softly I could barely hear it myself.

"... Bad memories."

Jenova. I knew that had to be it—I didn't even have to ask. "Do you... have a plan?" I asked slowly. "For Sin," I added in unnecessary clarification.

A headshake. "The problem remains the same: we need to find out what makes it regenerate. Break that mechanism, or find some way to avoid triggering it, and its destruction becomes relatively easy. Otherwise, I'm not sure even vaporizing it would represent a permanent solution."

"Could you vaporize it?"

"There is... a possibility. But there are other problems with it besides Sin's regeneration, and the risk to all of Spira would be extreme."

"And the risk to you?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does." I tried to keep my voice level, but I couldn't keep it from getting louder.

"If you were hoping to tread so lightly across Spira that no one would miss you if you died, you
went about it the wrong way," Seymour added. "If you were to vanish now, you would deprive
Auron of a lover and me of my closest friend—the one person on Spira who has ever really
understood me. Braska and Jecht, Kelanth and Yukiko, the people whose lives you saved in Rilkes
Harbour and on the ferry and in Guadosalam and Macalania and here in Bevelle . . . all of them
would notice you were gone. And I think they would mourn."

"A warrior accepts the possibility of death," I said. "But only as a last resort. Don't throw your life
away."

The expression on Sephiroth's face was . . . complicated. "Very well," he said slowly. "For your
sakes, I will do my best to value my life . . . more highly than I might if left to myself. I will not
abandon you."

Coming from him, that was actually better than I love you. For one thing, I was sure he knew exactly
what he was saying. And for another . . . as long as he was still here, we could work things out. I
love you didn't have that particular guarantee backing it up. In fact, it drove some people to do stupid,
suicidal things as they attempted to help their loved ones.

"Thank you," Seymour said, and offered a small smile. It might have been the first one I'd ever seen
from him that I felt was entirely sincere.

"I wonder, sometimes," Sephiroth said quietly. "If I'd had a younger brother trapped with me, back
on Gaia . . . would he perhaps have ended up a little bit like you?"

"I've never had a brother either," Seymour said. "And Auron might not adapt well to being my
brother-in-law."

"I'll manage somehow," I said, and we all allowed the seriousness of the moment to melt away.

I wondered what my mother would think of Seymour. Unlike Sephiroth, I had a feeling he would
trigger her nurturing instincts. There was a raw pain and emptiness in him, a need for a mother's love
that had long since scarred over and vanished in the silver-haired man, if he'd ever had it in the first
place.

It took another half an hour before Braska regained his awareness of the world and let Seymour help
him to his feet.

"Headache?" the half-Guado asked when his fellow Summoner didn't seem to be quite all there yet.

"Yes," Braska admitted. "I didn't know that a fayth could just . . . do that, outside the Chamber."

"I did warn you that Bahamut is more awake than most," Seymour said. "He does as he pleases."

"Mika would have a fit," Braska said, with a smile.

"Mika isn't a Summoner. Fortunately."

"True. Jecht? It's time to go."

"Fuck that," Jecht growled from somewhere off in a corner.

"Jecht?" Braska repeated, sounding uncertain.

"Oh, sorry, sir high-and-mighty Summoner. I'm not at all hurt by being told that I'm fucking chopped
liver that the fayth dragged into Spira without even so much as fucking asking and then threw away
without even bothering to fucking send me back. Y’know what? I quit. All this pilgrimage shit? You can do it without me. I’m gonna go to Besaid and whip that useless blitz team of theirs into shape."

He made no move to leave, though.

"'Your only path back lies through Sin,'" Sephiroth quoted. "That isn't the same as there being no way back. We'll find it for you."

Jecht laughed harshly. "Yeah, right. You're gonna tie Sin down and study it before you dissect it. Because of the jackass blitz player who's been holding you back."

"Because of a man who's been fulfilling a vital function in our party," Sephiroth corrected.

"And one who deserves better," Braska added. "We'll get you home. One way or the other."

"We don't abandon our teammates," I added, in a fumbling attempt to speak Jecht's language.

"We will," Braska said.

"And I'm tired of being the last to hear about stuff," the blitzer added. "No more of that. Tell me up front from now on."

"We understand," Seymour said. Which wasn't quite the same as agreeing, but Jecht didn't notice.

We took Braska home, all four of us, and crowded into his living room. Fortunately Yuna was at school, or there might not have been room to move in there. Certainly there weren't enough chairs for everyone. Our Summoner half-collapsed into an overstuffed chair with a ripped arm that had been clumsily mended, Seymour took the other, straighter-backed chair, and Jecht flopped out full-length on the sofa. That left a low stool that was probably Yuna's. Sephiroth and I both chose to stand, leaning side-by-side against the wall.

"We leave Bevelle in the morning," the silver-haired man said once we were all settled. "Say your good-byes today and buy anything you, personally, need. Auron and I will handle the food and other common supplies." He paused, and everyone nodded. "Rufus, you've spent the past several days in the Church library. Did you find anything of use?"

"Hard to say," the half-Guado admitted. "Some records—anything that dealt too closely with machina or the exact course of the Bevelle-Zanarkand war, I suspect—have been destroyed, or hidden elsewhere. What I did find . . . strongly implied that Sin was created as a weapon for Zanarkand to use against Bevelle. But something went wrong. Disastrously so. It turned on Zanarkand and destroyed it, and has been beyond anyone's control from that point on. I found no details of how it was made, beyond speculation that it must have been some complex magic. All of this accords with the fragmentary records remaining in Guadosalam."

"Even if the records are incomplete, it seems they confirm that Sin was a creation of human hands and minds, not some . . . godling," Sephiroth said. "There may even be a way to regain control and dismantle it without resorting to combat."

"You'd think someone would've done that by now, if there was a way," Jecht said.

"Yunalesca is the only one likely to know the method," Sephiroth pointed out. "If she has some reason for not discussing it, or thinks some step in it is impossible, and offers only the Final Summoning as an option . . ." He didn't have to finish the sentence. We all understood.
"I did discover one other thing," Seymour added. "A name. Or, more accurately, a partial family tree of the Yu lineage."

Braska frowned. "I'm fairly sure there was never a Yu lineage in Bevelle. Not even among the families that have died out."

"It was a Zanarkandic lineage name—the name of Lady Yunalesca's birth family, before she married Ro Zaon. The generation previous to hers is more interesting, however."

"Well, spit it out." Jecht gave Seymour an impatient glare.

"Lady Yunalesca's father's name was apparently . . . Yu Yevon."

"How very fitting." And I laughed. I couldn't help it. It came out sounding oddly tortured. Just like I felt.

Lies. From beginning to end. Every single thing I had ever believed in, all lies.

I'd allowed myself to believe that there had once been something . . . un tarnished . . . about the Church, now buried under layer after layer of filth. I'd allowed myself to believe that even if his followers weren't true to him, there was a Yevon out there somewhere, a benevolent spirit watching over us. Not some kind of historical figure from the war era.

There was a raw hole inside me again. But this time, I wasn't sure it would ever heal.

"Auron?" It was Braska who had spoken, but everyone was looking at me with concern. Even Seymour. Even Jecht.

I forced myself to smother the painful laughter. "I'm fine. Continue."

"There isn't much else to say, really. Yu Yevon appears to have been a Summoner and a Zanarkand politician. There is no sign that he had any connection with Sin. There is also no sign that he didn't. I found nothing else of value or interest among the documents I was able to read."

"Well, that's a lot of help," Jecht said.

"Actually, if we assume that Yu Yevon was involved with the creation of Sin, Yunalesca has a motive not to want it destroyed," Braska said slowly. "Once Sin is gone, one more proof that her father existed will have vanished from the world. To some people, that sort of thing means a great deal. And Unsent are often unbalanced in their thinking in any case."

"So millions of people've died because an Unsent dumbass wanted her daddy to have a fucking monument? That's sick."

"We don't know for certain that that's the case," Braska said, and yawned. "I think I'd like to get a few hours of sleep while Bahamut settles in."

"And we should deal with the supplies before the shops close," Sephiroth said. "Auron?"

I followed him out of Braska's house, still feeling dazed and disconnected. I let him grab me by the shoulder and steer me . . . and almost walked into a wall when he turned us down a dead-end alleyway. That made me rouse myself enough to look at him.

"Auron, what is wrong?"

"Nothing."
Sephiroth frowned. "Kindly do not lie to me. You are unaware of your surroundings, and you won't meet my eyes. Neither is like you."

*You wouldn't understand.* Not useful, and rather childish. I substituted, "I'm not certain I can explain it to you."

"Try." Rather than my lover, I seemed to currently be talking to General Sephiroth, the stony-faced commander of armies. However, I lacked the energy to care.

"Yevon."

A silver eyebrow rose. "This is about the Church? I thought you had decided it was . . . unworthy of your regard."

I shook my head. "I'm talking about the god, Yevon. The one the Church claims to believe in. The one I believed in, separate from the Church, up until a few minutes ago, when I found out I've been praying all my life to a dead politician from Zanarkand. Right now, I feel like someone's suddenly spun the universe around on its head."

A flicker of expression crossed my lover's face, there and then gone too quickly for me to read. "I admit that religion on Gaia is moribund, and I was raised in an environment largely free of it, so I cannot entirely understand why this is so distressing to you. But I do know what it feels like to have something that has been an underpinning of one's world from childhood suddenly vanish. I understand that it may be a while before you find your feet again. However, I ask that you not try to burn down Bevelle. I would feel obliged to stop you, and I had rather not see you come to harm at my hands."

The laugh that crawled out my throat was still bitter and edged, but at least it didn't hurt this time. And Sephiroth . . . reached out and hugged me. I had a feeling it was the first time he had ever tried to comfort anyone that way. He didn't seem to quite know what to do with his hands. But when the laughter died again, he was still there for me to cling to, strong and solid and smelling of metal and leather. And for several long moments, I did exactly that, holding onto him and telling the voices in my head that argued that it wasn't *manly* to need someone else's comfort to go take a flying leap into Sin's mouth. No one was going to see me here, and I knew Sephiroth would keep my secrets along with his own.

Indeed, after we left the alleyway, the rest of the day proceeded as though nothing had ever happened. We discussed which rations were the lightest and which merchant's potions were cheapest in bulk and how many blocks of charcoal we needed for the brazier that would provide us with heat when we needed to camp out on Mount Gagazet (that one escalated into an outright argument, which Sephiroth won, after a graphic description of finding a squad of his men frozen to death during an attempted rescue on Gaia's northern continent).

I took him home for dinner. It wasn't the first time, and my mother accommodated us without asking any more awkward questions than usual. Afterwards, I went back to the travel agency with him, and laid down with his body curled around mine.

It's difficult, sometimes, to pretend to be strong. I'd been doing it ever since my father had died. To keep my mother from worrying, at first, and then because it had become part of my armour against the world. We all have these shells around us, these things that we do to present others with an impression of ourselves that we want them to see, and if they're stripped away, we become soft and weak and vulnerable.

Since I'd been four years old, there were only two people I'd intentionally shown weakness in front
of: Kinoc and Sephiroth. Kinoc, I'd known nearly all my life. We'd met on the fringes of Canalside when I was seven. Eighteen years ago. I hadn't even known Sephiroth that many weeks yet, but we were already deep in an exchange of confidences that went beyond anything I had ever known. If our lives had both been torn apart, we were both helping each other put them back together again, and maybe . . .

Maybe what? I asked myself, and smiled wryly at nothing in the dark, listening to the sound of his breath and feeling the warmth of it against my cheek. Even if this were a storybook, we haven't reached the climax of the narrative yet. It's too early to even think about happily-ever-after. We're going to take a stand against Sin—and High Summoner Yunalesca and the entire Church of Yevon, by extension. We're more likely to die tragically than ride off into the sunset together on the same chocobo.

But if that was going to be our story, I'd accept it. If there was no Yevon to champion, I'd fight for the sake of the people of Spira, as Braska did. And at least it wouldn't be a shameful death, or a lonely one, if Sephiroth and I went together to the Farplane after giving everything we had to save the world.

I'd witnessed many worse endings. And so, I suspected, had he.

Still, riding off into the sunset together would be nice if we could manage it.

Chapter End Notes

So . . . yeah, the plot thickens. And I'm making excuses again for things in the game that don't quite make sense when looked at objectively, like the fayth being cryptic assholes.

A note on names

Unlike most of the earlier Final Fantasies, FFX never gives any of its PCs last names in any of the canon material. We run into exactly three NPCs who appear to have something like surnames: Yu Yevon, Yo Mika, and Wen Kinoc. The latter two are normally called "Mika" and "Kinoc" respectively. If we assume that they're being addressed by their personal names like everyone else in Spira, then the logical conclusion is that Spirans use Japanese naming order, meaning that those who have a family/clan/whatever name place it first. (The other possibility is that Yu, Yo, and Wen are some kind of weird titles that don't translate, but that didn't feel like it made as much sense.)
The morning we left Bevelle for what might be the last time was quiet and overcast. We'd chosen to depart early, just as Braska and Jecht and I had done when we'd first set out. While the public scrutiny we might have received by leaving in the middle of the day would have been far less mean-spirited this time, it still wouldn't have benefited any of us.

That didn't mean there was no one there to see us off, however. Yuna was there, of course, with the neighbour who would be looking after her while Braska was gone. And my mother. And Kinoc. And Winya, who brought with her two unexpected others.

"Summoner Kelanth," Braska greeted.

"Summoner Braska," the younger man returned, making the gesture of prayer. "However, I am no longer a Summoner. Bahamut refused me. He said that continuing my pilgrimage would indeed lead to my death."

Yukiko, standing beside him, smiled wryly, as though to say, You see what it took to convince him?

"What are you going to do now?" Braska asked.

Winya chuckled. "He's my new helper. I've been thinking about retiring for years now, but this is the first chance I've had."

"And he's finally agreed to marry me," Yukiko added.

"Congratulations, then." Braska smiled as he spoke.

"Just make sure you defeat Sin," Kelanth said seriously. "For all of us who couldn't make it—who fell along the way, or who messed up."

"We don't have any intention of letting Sin get away," Seymour said.

Apparently, that was all the grown-up talk Yuna could stand. "Papa?"

Braska crouched down and opened his arms, and the little girl ran to him and wrapped her arms around him. "Be good, Yuna. I'm going to try to finish this up as quickly as I can."

"They say Summoners don't ever come back," Yuna said. "Not unless they give up."

"No one ever has before," Braska said. "But I'm going to try my best. If there's any way for me to come back alive, I'm going to do it. Because you're that important to me."

As I was watching the family drama, at a loss for what, if anything, to say, Kinoc clapped me on the shoulder.

"Good luck," he said. "I'd ask you to bring me back a souvenir, but Zanarkand's probably been
picked over by now, right?"

"Even if it wasn't, I wouldn't loot it for your sake. It's a graveyard, Kinoc." I didn't give a damn anymore if the city was supposed to be sacred, but I could at least respect those who had died there. Kinoc's jokes were in very bad taste sometimes.

"Wen Kinoc, I can't believe that you just advocated stealing from the dead," my mother added, hands on hips, in the same tone she'd used when we were ten and had just been caught with our hands in the cookie jar right before a meal.

"Sorry, ma'am."

And then I found myself enveloped in a hug as well. "I can't tell you to be safe," my mother said, "but be careful. Please. For my sake. And you, Sephiroth," she added, looking up at him over my shoulder. "Look after my son."

"I would have done so regardless."

"It's a mother's prerogative to say it anyway."

He dipped his head as though he understood, and my mother held onto me for quite a while longer before letting go.

It doesn't take all that long, in the scheme of things, to get from Bevelle to the Calm Lands. A brief flirtation with the edge of the Macalania Woods, and then the ground starts to rise, and the traveler passes through a narrow gap between rocky hills and reaches the edge of a flat plain of grass that stretches all the way to Mount Gagazet, which is faintly visible in the distance if the sky is clear.

It wasn't clear today. It also wasn't really raining, but there was enough intermittent drizzle to leave beads of water on the grass. And on our clothes. Irritating, but not enough so to justify taking shelter from it.

The monsters were many and varied: flame flans and skolls and nebiros and larger, rarer monsters like ogres and coeurls. The north end of the plain, near the foot of the mountain, was the domain of the malboros. I wasn't looking forward to crossing that area, although we had a few days yet before it became a concern.

We made camp that night in the middle of the sea of grass. And the next night. And the next night. It's further from Bevelle to Mount Gagazet than it is from the beginning of Mushroom Rock Road to the shoopuf crossing at the Moonflow.

We finally made it to the travel agency, as close to dead center in the middle of the plains as the Al Bhed could make it, late on the fifth day, and unanimously decided we would stay there the next day as well.

The travel agency was more than twenty years old—the first of its kind, started by the uncle of the current owner—and the rooms were smaller than those at, say, the one in the Thunder Plains. None of us much cared, though. I fell into bed that night and was immediately so dead to the world that I didn't even notice when Sephiroth joined me.

There were a surprising number of people in the bar/restaurant/common room when we went for breakfast. Most of them weren't actually staying at the travel agency, but there were dozens, if not hundreds, of people who lived semi-nomadic lives in the Calm Lands, hunting fiends or wrangling feral chocobos.
They didn't pay much attention to me. Sephiroth, with his silver hair and outlandish clothing, picked up a few stares as we found a small table and ordered food, but that always happened. However, by the time the food had arrived, everyone had returned to their own conversations.

The word *fayth* attracted my attention to one pair in particular, and I nudged Sephiroth and jerked my head in the direction of a pair of chocobo handlers, knowing that he would be able to pick up the words more clearly than I could.

He listened for a while. "They're talking about an abandoned temple in the southeast corner of the Calm Lands. Apparently the Chamber of the Fayth is still sealed, although there is no Cloister of Trials leading up to it. Or at least, nothing they recognize as such. The terrain makes it impossible to reach the temple without a chocobo, and it would be several days' travel in the wrong direction in any case."

"Still, we should inform Braska."

Sephiroth dipped his head. "If he wishes to go there, I won't argue, although we'll need to purchase additional supplies if we want to have a sufficient margin to climb over the mountains."

"Good enough." I went back to my food without protesting that our route should have been Braska's choice altogether. This journey of ours had long since ceased to be a normal pilgrimage and become something else, and Braska hadn't been in charge since Baaj.

When we brought him the news, Braska went silent for a long while. Thinking about it.

". . . No," he said in the end. "Even if there is an aeon at this temple, it can't be stronger than the Final Aeon, and we already know the Final Aeon can't help against Sin. Better not to waste time and energy. Unless you want to acquire it," he added to Seymour, who shook his head.

"I agree that it would be a waste of time. Better to rest for today, and press on toward Mount Gagazet tomorrow."

Sephiroth and I ended up spending the day on a long, rather leisurely fiend hunt that netted us a dozen fire gems. They felt pleasantly warm inside my pocket.

Part of me wanted to give up on Zanarkand, to stay here with Sephiroth and hunt during the days and make love in the evenings and let someone else worry about Sin. It would have been . . . so much easier.

Which, of course, was why we couldn't do it. Neither of us was the sort of person to abandon our posts.

Four more days brought us to the gorge, and the bridge over it, and the Crusaders' northern headquarters, which was chiseled into the rock to the east of the bridge—the better to guard it, since that rope-and-wood bridge that swayed gently in the wind was the only way to get to Gagazet, and Zanarkand beyond it. And it could be taken out by a few days of dry weather and an idiot with a Firaga spell. The Crusaders assigned three squads to guard the bridge at all times: one at each end of it, and one in the ravine below.

I expect that the squad at the southern end would have come to meet us, but they had a little problem on their hands. A trio of malboros had decided it would be entertaining to get rid of the guards . . . and possibly the bridge. The squad from the northern end was trying to help, but the Crusaders weren't having an easy time of it overall.

Sephiroth was squinting at them. "Weak to fire? That isn't right . . ."
"What are Gaian malboros weak against, then?" I asked.

"Water. They look exactly the same, but . . . Well, no matter. Start with the nearest. Single-target
colorado spells, no Summoning—we don't want to hit any of the Crusaders. Braska, stay out of their range.
We'll be relying on you to take care of the fallout from their breath attack."

I called fire to my sword and Seymour began to bombard the nearest malboro with Firaga while
Jecht positioned himself squarely in front of the mages, and Sephiroth and I ran into close-combat
range.

Malboros, I discovered, are not fun to fight at all. I'd never come this far north before, and so never
needed to face one. I'd read about them, of course, and how their breath blinded, confused, poisoned,
and silenced their opponents all at once, but I hadn't known that getting hit with it made your eyes
burn and stream. It burned my nose and mouth, too, and made me cough and sneeze, and even with
Braska casting Esuna as fast as he could, there were times when I barely knew which direction was
up.

Sephiroth seemed to be partially immune to the effects. Or at least he never got confused, and if he
ever got blinded, he fought with such accuracy using hearing and smell alone that I couldn't tell. The
poison did work on him to some extent, though. He was looking a bit green by the time we finished
mopping up, and the first thing he did when the last malboro bit the dust was drink a remedy.

The Crusader officer who approached us was still mopping his eyes with the back of his uniform
sleeve. "Thank you for your help, sirs. Are you Summoner Braska's party?"

"That's right," I said. "Does this kind of thing—" I gestured at the ground that had been torn up
during the fight. "—happen often?"

"Malboros show up here a couple of times a month, but this is the first time I've ever seen three at
once, and hopefully it'll be the last time, too. The fiends have been more active lately. It's as though
something's stirred them up." The Crusader grimaced. "Anyway, the commander wants a word with
your party, if you can spare the time."

"I don't see why not," Sephiroth said.

"Indeed," Braska said, as he, Seymour, and Jecht arrived to join us. "Please, lead the way."

The Crusaders' headquarters were accessed via a wooden ramp that had been built out from the side
of the gorge. Burn it, and the only way in or out would be by climbing the rockface. There were also
some nice chokepoints and protected redoubts for archers and mages built in. They might call it a
headquarters, but this place had been designed as a fortress.

Inside, the building, if one could call it that, was a mixture of natural cave, artificial cavern, and very
old masonry, all with arched ceilings. We were led through a series of unlabeled doors and into a
small room furnished as an office. Rather than oil lamps, the area was lit by Al Bhed-made light
spheres.

"Kindly don't tell anyone about those, Sir Auron," said the man behind the desk—the mustachioed
Crusader commander we'd met in Bevelle. "I consider my eyesight more important than following
the Church's arbitrary edicts about which machina are or aren't allowed, but others may disagree
violently if they find out."

"I think we're all in agreement that the leaders of the Church are hypocrites," I said.

The Crusader raised his eyebrows as Seymour nodded, Sephiroth shrugged, Jecht snorted, and
Braska made not a single motion or sound. "Then you're the first Summoner party I've ever encountered that feels that way. I don't think I ever introduced myself, by the way. My name is Quasin."

"Well, pleased to meet you and all that, but what didja wanna talk to us about?" Jecht asked.

"Fiends, mostly."

"One of your men mentioned that you'd been seeing more than the usual number of them," Braska said.

Quasin nodded. "That's part of the problem. This past month or so, we've been getting not only more than the usual number of fiends, but larger, more aggressive ones. More malboros and coeurls, but only about the same number of flame flans. Part of the reason I was in Bevelle was to ask for reinforcements to be sent up here. And then, of course . . ."

"Sin showed up in Bevelle," I completed for him. "And the maesters are terrified for their lives."

"Precisely so. My chances of getting more troops now are non-existent."

"We can't stay here to reinforce you," Sephiroth pointed out.

"No, but you may be able to take care of our biggest problem for us."

I raised my eyebrows. "Which is . . .?"

"We think it's a great malboro."

"You think," I repeated.

"Well, none of us has actually seen one before—only madmen go to the Omega Ruins to hunt. But it matches the descriptions I've seen: larger than a normal malboro, and blue with grey markings instead of greenish."

"And you want us to get rid of it for you," Sephiroth said. It wasn't a question. "Where can we find it?"

"That's part of the problem," Quasin admitted. "It comes out at night and hides in a particular cave during the day. The monsters inside the cave are tougher than the ones wandering around the grasslands, so sending people in after it hasn't been practical."

"Handling malboros in enclosed spaces is unpleasant, but not impossible," Sephiroth said. "I have no particular preference with respect to this. Braska? Auron? Rufus?"

"I notice you're no asking me," Jecht said, planting his hands on his hips.

"I already know which way your vote would fall," Sephiroth said.

"We help them," Braska said.

"It makes the most sense," Seymour added.

I nodded my agreement. Having the Crusaders owe us a favour would be to our advantage.

Sephiroth turned back to Quasin. "You will supply us with consumables. I also want the run of your armoury, just in case there's something there that might be of help. Also, I take it there's a reason you
havent just brought the whole cave down on the fiend's head."

The Crusader shrugged. "The caverns are extensive. We can't be certain there are no other exits. And
there's said to be something of immense value in the depths of that cave."

"Like what?" Jecht asked.

"Well, it's called 'The Cavern of the Stolen Fayth' on all the maps. Supposedly, several centuries ago,
someone stole a fayth statue from a temple and hid it in there."

"And the name of that fayth? Or, more accurately, of its attached aeon?" Seymour asked.

Quasin shrugged. "No one knows. In fact, no one in living memory has penetrated far enough into
the caves to see it, and the last person who did get that far wasn't a Summoner."

"So why should we believe it ain't just someone's idea of a joke?" Jecht asked.

"Some of us have heard the Hymn of the Fayth from the depths of the cavern. A lone singer with a
deep voice."

Which meant either a fayth or an elaborate deception.

"We'll stay here for the night, and go after that thing in the morning," Sephiroth said firmly.

Quasin nodded agreeably. "I'll have someone set up the visitors' quarters for you. They should be
ready by the time you're done with the armoury, although I'm afraid you won't find much of interest
there."

"Let us be the judge of that," my lover said.

Ten minutes later, we were standing among neatly arranged racks of swords and spears.

"I don't know why you had us brought in here," I said.

"Other than seeing how far this Quasin actually trusts us? Mostly, I was hoping for silence-proof
armour for Rufus. A better sword for you wouldn't be out of the question, either. You're outgrowing
the one you have now."

I touched the hilt. Perhaps I was, in a sense. I'd bought the Hunter's Blade I currently carried in
Bevelle before starting on this pilgrimage. It hadn't been the best sword available, just the best I could
afford with the money I'd had at the time. I could have commissioned something from Falde, but I'd
needed the Auto-Haste bracer more, and we hadn't had enough money for both.

"Nothing here looks that much better than what I already have," I said, turning slowly to check all
the racks.

"I agree, unfortunately."

In the end, all we took was a mage's bracelet some junior armourer taking inventory had tagged as
silenceproof, confuseproof, mag + 5%. Seymour had said it would be good enough, and Sephiroth
hadn't disagreed.

We were given officers' quarters, which meant five narrow military beds split between four rooms.
Sephiroth and I immediately took the double, and pushed the beds together in the center of the room
to form a single, wider surface. We'd have to be careful not to do anything so active during the night
that we jarred them apart again.
Supper was stew, served at the officers’ table in the mess. Judging from the comments that flew around the room, their cooks were fond of that particular recipe, and served it often. It wasn't too bad, but could have used more salt. I'd certainly eaten worse. Jecht fielded most of the many questions about our adventures, and seemed to be in his element. Which allowed Sephiroth and I to quietly return to the barracks alone the moment we were done eating.

One advantage of staying with the Crusaders was that the room had a weapons rack that could accommodate even Masamune, we discovered, and Sephiroth was able to put his sword away properly for once instead of propping it against a wall near the head of the bed.

It was becoming a routine for us: first, remove our extra clothing until we were down to our trousers, then tend our swords, then sit side-by-side on the bed while Sephiroth braided his hair out of the way. Tonight, though, we were alone for the first time in several days, which meant that I could let my hand slip across to rest on his thigh.

"Is it all right?" I asked, when he turned his head to look at me.

"Of course. Especially since it might be our last chance for a while."

There was, I could tell, no possibility in his mind of it being our last chance ever. Just for a while. And that made me feel better about it too.

I drew him in for a long, slow kiss, my hands exploring his back, tracing the lines of hard muscle under his skin, following his spine from broad shoulders to narrow waist and then moving further down to the upper curves of firm buttocks. I doubted I would ever get tired of just exploring his body. He was breathtakingly perfect . . . and sensitive in the oddest places. His right shoulder, for instance. There was a point that always drew a vocalization from him when I licked or rubbed or nipped it, a low, throaty sound that made his whole body vibrate against me.

He fell backward onto the bed, pulling me down on top of him. I didn't try to fight it—wasn't able to do so, even though appearances would have suggested that I, with my broader build, would be the stronger of us two. His hand tangled in my hair and snapped the tie so that black strands flowed loose about my shoulders and mingled with silver on the surface of the blankets.

"I want you inside me," I said in his ear. Ye—Leviathan, did I ever. I wanted something to distract me from the aching, broken feeling that I'd been carrying around ever since Bevelle.

I caught the quick flicker of a smile as he said, "I can see that I'm going to have to fight you if I ever want to be on the bottom again."

"I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"Shh. I don't mind. Usually, I do prefer to top, but it's good to have a change now and again."

Suddenly, he rolled us both over, leaning down so that he could suckle with torturous slowness at the side of my neck. I was going to have purple marks all over me in the morning, and I didn't care. Let the Crusaders think whatever they wanted. The great malboro, if that was what it was, wouldn't even notice.

I somehow got a hand free and slipped it between us to pinch at his nipples, which made him hiss and fix me with a feral green gaze. Then he deliberately grabbed my wrists and pinned them. I let him do it. He'd never even come close to hurting me, so if this was what he needed to feel in control, I was willing to give it to him.

It appeared it was my turn to endure an assault on my nipples, which I'd never thought of as all that
sensitive before. Then again, I'd never thought that having someone kiss my neck would make me react the way it did, either. So maybe it shouldn't have been such a surprise that the rubbing and pinching and gentle twisting Sephiroth was doing with his free hand was making me squirm. I lifted my hips, pressing up into his leg through layers of clothing and wondering what it would take to get him to take the rest of it off.

He looked positively unhuman, rising above me with his green eyes glowing and silver hair tumbling forward to snake over my chest and throat. As far as I was concerned, it all just made him more beautiful.

There was definitely something wrong with my brain, and I couldn't have cared less.

"What are you smiling about?"

"I'm just thinking how lucky I am to have found you."

His smile flickered again, there and gone. "And you are quite possibly the best companion I could have hoped for in this mess."

By which he meant not just this bed, I knew, or even this mad no-longer-a-pilgrimage. No, he meant his entire situation, the whole circumstance of being transported to a world not his own.

"Why," I asked, "are we talking?"

"Because I want to enjoy you slowly."

That was all right, then.

He let go of my wrists so that he could slide slowly down my body, licking and nipping and teasing, unfastening my trousers so that he could pull them down and off and, finally, leave me naked. I brought my hands to his shoulders and began to rub in small circles, searching for the spot on the right that made him make that odd rumbling noise. It took me only seconds to find it. He responded by ducking lower, nipping the insides of my thighs while completely ignoring the stiff, slightly-leaky rod between them, and making me squirm in frustration.

Then the little pot labeled in Al Bhed script came out.

"We're going to have to buy more of this when we get back from Zanarkand," he said as he popped it open, and there it was again. When, not if. His confidence was almost great enough to make me believe it too. That we would be able to return in one piece.

It took a great deal of self-control not to press back onto his fingers as he prepared me. I was more used to the sensation of being stretched open now, and I found I craved it. Even when Sephiroth was being maddeningly slow and thorough about it, watching me with narrowed, glowing eyes as he stroked me from the inside, gliding his fingers again and again over that one incredibly sensitive spot and sending jolts of pleasure through me. Nor did it help that he was still half-dressed, the black leather contrasting artfully with his pale skin.

Finally, it seemed that I was undone to his satisfaction. He left the bed for a moment to strip off his remaining leathers, then turned back the blankets. "On your side," he told me. "I don't intend to get up again until tomorrow morning."

My eyes widened slightly even as he extinguished the light. I hoped he was planning sleep somewhere in there. But I also obeyed and crawled under the blankets to position myself on my side. A moment later, Sephiroth was settling himself against my back, his erection sliding between my buttocks, and then, with a little assistance from his hand, into me. I groaned at the sudden fullness,
and this time I did let myself press back into him. He pressed a kiss to the nape of my neck as he wrapped his arm around me, fingers teasing briefly at my scrotum before wrapping around what I'd been wanting him to touch all along.

"Comfortable?" he murmured in my ear as his hips moved slowly, almost languidly, forward.

"I'm not sure that that's—ah!—the word."

"Do you want me to stop?" he clarified.

"Do that and I'll kill you," I said, and was rewarded with a faint chuckle and another thrust, harder and deeper and sending a shock through me like nothing I'd ever felt. And his hand was getting more active, stroking and squeezing, callus trailing tantalizingly up the veiny underside of my erection. I bit my bottom lip, concentrating on keeping my voice down and not screaming with every thrust as the pleasure built. The moans were almost constant, though. I was helpless to keep them from spilling out, especially as Sephiroth began to handle me more firmly.

I erupted between his fingers with a final strangled noise and a jolt that curled my toes and made me spasm around him—I could feel my body trying to squeeze itself shut around him, and then I felt him jerk and a hot tingle in my gut, and I knew he had just come inside me.

Now spent, I felt warm and languid and comfortable, disinclined to move. Sephiroth seemed to feel the same way, pressing more lazy kisses against my neck.

"Sleep," he whispered, and I did.
I woke up with his morning wood still lodged inside me, and engaged him with a slow, rolling
motion of my hips before I was fully conscious. Just the one movement woke Sephiroth, and he
kissed the nape of my neck and began to thrust, his movements steady as the ocean and driving him
deep inside me. He spent himself more quickly this time—likely every motion I'd made in my sleep
had teased him—and then stroked me until I gave in to pleasure as well. It didn't take long.

"They're going to have to burn these sheets," I observed as he lit the lamps. They were badly stained,
and some of the spots were oddly greenish.

"One would hope they're made of sterner stuff," my lover said easily. "We need to get cleaned up,
though."

I grimaced at the mixture of dried and fresh seed stuck to my stomach and thighs. "Agreed."

The baths here were communal, but fortunately it was very early, and we encountered no one except
Seymour, who entered just as we were leaving.

"Morning practice?" he asked.

"Always," Sephiroth replied.

"Then I'll see you there in a little while." The half-Guado had taken up his new weapon
wholeheartedly, and had been practicing with enthusiasm ever since he'd received it. In time, I
expected he would be a fine spearman, and I wished I knew more about the weapon. He deserved a
good teacher, not the inferior combination that was Sephiroth and I trying to dredge what we knew
about a weapon neither of us had ever used out of the backs of our minds.

We could teach some things, though. Situational awareness. Dodging and supplementary attacks.
Since Seymour had already learned our handful of basic spear katas, most of our "training" with him
had become a series of sparring matches where he fought one of us, and the other critiqued.

It was my turn to play punching bag this morning. By the time Seymour joined us, Sephiroth and I
had finished our own katas and the usual quick sparring match, and some of the Crusaders were
beginning to wander out into the crisp air of early morning for their own training.

"Hey, you guys are up early," one of the younger ones said, nodding at us. "A Guardian's life must
be tough."

I shrugged. "We would normally be breaking camp at this time," I told him. "Not having to do so is a
bit of a luxury."

"Like I said, hard." He couldn't have been more than sixteen, and from his colouring and bone
structure, he was probably from Bevelle—possibly even from a named lineage. Although not, I
suspected, from the Wen. Kinoc wasn't unique in that family in having a sturdy build or in running to
fat, and this boy was downright skinny.

Behind me, I heard Seymour chuckle. "You don't really know what 'hard' is, do you? Most of the pilgrimage route is easy. Few Summoners die before reaching Gagazet, and when they do, it's usually at sea. It isn't until the snowline that things start to become lethal."

The young Crusader seemed to have no answer to that.

"Are you my opponent today, Auron?" Seymour added, doing some quick stretches.

"I'm afraid so." I brought my sword up to a guard position, while Seymour held his spear in front of himself, hands about a foot apart on the shaft.

"Begin," Sephiroth said, taking a few steps back to give us room.

I spent the next ten minutes making Seymour back his way around the practice area, but although he gave way to me, his feet remained solidly under him, he blocked or dodged all of my attacks and even managed the occasional poke in my direction, and most importantly of all, he kept good enough track of what was around him that he didn't run into anything.

When we broke apart at last, by mutual agreement, someone nearby rumbled, "Guado good spearman, for beginner." It was a familiar voice.

I blinked, looked around. Spotted the blue Ronso face topped by the odd-coloured mane, pale with golden streaks, and the ivory horn.

"Gurrik?"


"Yes," I agreed.

"New friends are?" Gurrik swept his hand from Seymour to Sephiroth.

I introduced them, adding, "I didn't expect to find you here, of all places. When did you leave the Order?"

"While Auron still sick from whip and burns, Gurrik take oath back. Return to mountain to see sister and sister's cubs. But Gurrik too long with humans to be proper Ronso. Gurrik happier with Crusaders than in village . . . and still close to Sacred Mountain and sister."

"I didn't know you had a sister."

Gurrik waved a hand. "Not get along as cubs. Went to Order to get away from sister."

"I suppose it's difficult for we three only children to understand," Seymour said dryly, and Gurrik rumbled a laugh.

"Rufus quick-witted. But only beginning spearman!"

"Unfortunately, I've already exhausted most of what my teachers know about this weapon," Seymour said, eyeing the spear the Ronso was balancing casually in his right hand. "If you can show me more, I would appreciate it."

Gurrik nodded. "Gurrik know Rufus not have much time, but Gurrik show Rufus small, quick things. If Rufus come back after Zanarkand, Gurrik can show more."
"Thank you," Seymour said, and the two of them wandered off to the side.

"We should eat," Sephiroth said. "This will be a long day."

At least we didn't have to cook our own breakfast. Or carry all of our gear with us to the cave. Food and water, just in case, and the Crusaders loaned us some lanterns, but we didn't take any blankets or extra gear, and certainly not the tent.

The entrance to the cave was off the gorge, just on the far side of the bridge from the Crusaders' headquarters. Inside, it was an eerie place, lit by clouds of pyreflies so bright that we didn't really need the lantern . . . although it was reassuring.

"Thousands of people must have died here," Seymour said as he looked about. "Thousands upon thousands."

"Or a number of rather large fiends," Sephiroth said, and held out his hands, cupping them together in front of himself. And there was a glow and a sound like rushing wind and the pyreflies flowed over to him and danced in a smooth figure-eight above his hands, lighting his face eerily from below. "I can't get more than glimpses out of them, even now. Some were Crusaders, I think. Others . . . they've been here a long time. So long that even they don't remember who or what they were."

"You've gained that much control over pyreflies?" Braska asked quietly.

Sephiroth shrugged. "It's much the same as manipulating the Lifestream, and I have . . . certain deep instincts regarding such things." Jenova again, the sour look on his face suggested.

"Hey, what's this?" Jecht asked. He'd crouched down and was cleaning off something on the floor with his hands. "Huh. Looks like a teep-pad."

We all kind of blinked. "A what?" Braska asked, on behalf of everyone.

"You know—a teleporter. Moves you a little ways in a straight line, no matter what's in the way. This one's turned off, though, and I can't find the switch to turn it on. Guess it ain't the master pad for this network."

"Even if it were working, it wouldn't be safe to use," Sephiroth said.

"The other end might be buried under a rockfall," Braska agreed. "Still, if we can find Jecht's 'master pad', they might provide us with a quicker way of leaving the cavern."

"It also explains how whoever brought the fayth here moved it to its final destination," I said. I certainly wouldn't want to be caught in here carrying something heavy with a great malboro about to descend on my head.

"Is there a fayth here?" Seymour asked.

Sephiroth nodded. "Or at least, the Crusaders were right about the singing. You should be able to hear it when we get closer."

"How are we doing this?" I asked. "Right-hand rule?"

Sephiroth shrugged. "That works as well as anything."

"What?" Jecht asked.

"It's one of the simpler methods for solving a maze," Seymour explained. "You follow the right-hand
wall. If there are no loops in the maze's design, following the right-hand rule will eventually take you through every path it contains."

"And if we end up back at the exit without finding that great malboro, it means there's a loop and we'll need to try something more complicated," I added. Or that the fiend was moving around, but where would it be going?

The right-hand rule initially found us several dead ends and a chest (an honest-to-goodness brass-bound wooden chest, and why had anyone bothered to haul that in here?) containing a megalixir that hopefully hadn't mutated into something noxious during the years it had been hidden away here. We also found a lot of fiends, and the Crusaders were right about them being worse than the ones outside. Lizards with a petrifaction attack, nimble imps, a ghostlike creature that made Jecht fall over his own feet the first time he saw it, and... tonberries. The tonberries were the first fiends we had encountered that Sephiroth refused to close with, poking at them with the tip of Masamune and leaping backward quickly when one of them tried to charge. It looked comical—the tall, powerful man with the huge sword being so wary of a knee-high creature armed with a paring knife (and that often tripped over its own feet), but the damage that a tonberry's knife attack could do a man was legendary. Jecht didn't believe it until he was stabbed and fell over dead, though. Fortunately, Braska's Life spell came quickly enough to avoid any permanent damage to him, but he was careful of the tonberries from there on.

It was when we hit the second four-way intersection that I began to be able to hear the fayth singing to itself. A man's voice, deep, as the Crusaders had said.

One of the paths away from that intersection narrowed to impassability almost immediately, so we skipped over it despite the right-hand rule and took the next one, which curved to the left. It was darker back here, with fewer pyreflies. That may have been why we didn't realize what was going on when the light in the tunnel seemed to dim. Another couple of steps, and I felt the sudden onset of a headache. I was dizzy, too, and my eyes were watering... bad air?

"Bad Breath." Sephiroth's voice cut through my own thoughts. "Back to the intersection! We'll use fire to flush it out."

Well, at least we'd found the great malboro. We retreated hurriedly. Once I was outside the mess looking for it, I could see the cloudy yellowish stuff in the air at the entrance to that passageway, a dilute form of the malboro's nastiest weapon. Sephiroth flicked a fire spell at it, and the yellow unpleasantness burned away.

"It isn't very flammable, unfortunately," he said. "Rufus, can you cast around corners?"

Seymour shook his head. "I doubt it's even possible."

Sephiroth shrugged. "I used to know someone who could do it, but he's out of reach now." Genesis, I decided. "We'll have to send in Ifrit, then, and follow it along the passageway as it burns off the contaminants. Braska?"

The Summoner spun his staff in an abbreviated dance, and Ifrit pulled itself up out of whatever hell it normally occupied. The aeon stepped forward into the suspect passageway without any hesitation, ignoring the ugly hissing noises the burning gasses made. Sephiroth waited for a count of five before following it. Braska had to be supported and guided by Jecht as we followed the curve, since his senses were bound to the aeon, seeing what it saw and hearing what it heard.

While the tunnels were high-ceilinged enough for Sephiroth to be able to swing Masamune above his head, there wasn't enough space in here for any of us to get past Ifrit. We opted to let the aeon fight
the malboro first, and get spat at and tentacle-whipped while the rest of us waited. By the time Braska winced and dismissed the battered aeon, the malboro wasn't in the best of shape either.

"They supposed to get that big?" Jecht asked, eyeing the writhing mass of blue-grey tentacles.

I shrugged. "I've never actually seen one of these before, but that's what they say."

"Ugh. Damn Spira."

"We don't have a lot of space," Sephiroth said. "Auron, charge your weapon with fire and hit it low. I'll go high. Jecht, block any tentacles that try to get past us. Rufus, Braska, you're on healing duty. Go."

Hearing Masamune whistle past above my head was a nerve-wracking experience, but Sephiroth's thrusts were precise, and he didn't touch so much as a lock of my hair. I didn't know how he was doing it, because I was fighting half-blind, my eyes streaming with tears even when I wasn't recovering from having the malboro breathe at me or spit in my face. All in all, it was a dirty, ugly, close-quarters fight where all I could do was chop at tentacles. I was relieved when the creature finally twitched and went still and began to evaporate. At least then I could wipe my face, even as the noxious fluids became pyreflies.

"That," Seymour observed, "was miserable. And I do hope someone has an ether, because my mental energy is completely exhausted."

Braska handled him one, and the half-Guado thanked him and drank. Casting white magic always seemed to drain Seymour more than black. Some quirk of natural affinity, presumably.

"We should rest for a bit before retracing our steps," Sephiroth said.

"We're turning back now?" Jecht asked.

That got him a raised silver eyebrow and a question. "Is there some reason not to?"

"You don't wanna talk to this fayth?"

"I see no purpose in it. I would be surprised if it weren't labouring under the same restraints as Bahamut."

"Its aeon could still be useful," Braska pointed out. "Rufus and I should try to acquire it. It would give us additional options, at least."

"Very well. It shouldn't be too much farther." Sephiroth leaned back against the wall of the tunnel and closed his burning green eyes, effectively ending the conversation.

With no one speaking, the Hymn of the Fayth became more audible. **leyui... Nobomeno...** The fayth here had a better voice than Bahamut, who had wavered a little off-key in spots. It wasn't unpleasant to listen to, until Jecht started humming along.

"Where did you learn the Hymn, Jecht?" Braska said suddenly. "I've been wondering for a while now."

Jecht shrugged. "They use the melody in Zanarkand, too. Got a dozen different sets of words, and none of them quite fit—but at least they mean something, not like your hymn."

"You hear the lyric as gibberish, then?" Sephiroth said, opening his eyes.
"You mean you don't?"

"The translation materia seems to think it has meaning. It renders it as: Pray to Yu Yevon. / Dream, fayth / Forever and ever. / Grant us prosperity."

"You sure?" Jecht said.

Sephirah rolled his eyes. "I have been hearing that song over and over again ever since I arrived in Spira. If there were any inconsistencies in the translation, I would have noticed by now."

"And you didn't notice the whole 'Yu Yevon' thing?" Jecht persisted.

"Say, rather, that I had no idea it was significant. Or that everyone else couldn't hear it. The materia doesn't differentiate between source languages."

"In any case, there is no question of Yevon not being Yu Yevon now. Or of the creators of the Yevon religion being innocent. They knew exactly what they were doing," Seymour frowned at nothing.

"I find the exhortation to the fayth to dream eternally much more interesting," Braska said. "What are they dreaming about and why does it matter?"

Jecht snorted. "If that Bahamut was dreaming, I'll eat my sword."

"The others almost seem to be sleepwalking, though," I pointed out. "And Bahamut said something about waking up."

"We can always ask," Sephiroth pointed out, making a small gesture in the direction the Hymn was coming from.

As we made our way along the passageway, the Hymn became both louder and clearer, until we eventually reached a large cavern with a hollow in the middle of the floor. A statue rested within it, cushioned by long stripwise hangings made of ancient, fragile silk. More, narrower strips of silk were criss-crossed above the statue, forming a pathetic barrier against removing it.

The statue itself depicted a black-haired man with his back to the viewer. In his left hand, he gripped the scabbard of an old-style katana, like Masamune but of a saner length, holding it behind him while his right hand reached around to draw. There was some sort of abstract confection in the background, and it was all depicted in true, living colour. I stared at it in fascination, wondering if all the fayth statues were like this—I hadn't gotten close enough to any of the others for a proper look.

Pyreflies coalesced above the statue, and a figure appeared, standing on air. A man, wearing an archaic version of the Crusader uniform . . . no, that was the uniform of the Crimson Blades that had preceded them. Beside him stood a dog, an ordinary-looking brown type that would have been right at home hunting or herding chocobos in the area around Luca.

"I am the blade of vengeance," the fayth said. "They dare only whisper my name: Yojimbo. Summoner, I ask you: What do you want of me?"

"Your aid in destroying Sin," Braska said firmly.

"That is what both of us request," Seymour added.

The fayth was silent for a moment. He may have been squinting behind his visor. "Two of you? Well, no matter. If you desire my strength, you must pay my price. Make your offer. Two hundred
"thousand gil each should be sufficient."

"Wait a sec," Jecht said. "You're asking for money?" He seemed to be trying to decide whether to laugh or lose his temper. "What're you gonna do with it once you have it? They got Chocobo-mart on the Farplane, or wherever it is you guys hang out?"

"It is merely a gauge of the Summoner's determination," Yojimbo replied.

Jecht folded his arms and glared at the fayth. "So you just want it for shits'n'giggles. Ever think that maybe it might be better for Summoners to buy better gear instead of wasting gil on you?"

"Jecht," Sephiroth said crisply. "that is enough. By my understanding, there will be nowhere after this for us to spend money, unless we want to exchange for potions with the Ronso. Better to pay than to waste time and energy trying to bring him to heel, even if his price is extortionate."

"You must be Sephiroth," Yojimbo said. "The one Bahamut is so fascinated with. The key to his little plan."

"You disagree with the course of action the other fayth are pursuing?" Sephiroth asked.

"I consider it a waste of energy. All the machina in Bevelle were unable to defeat Sin. Why should you fare any better?"

"Perhaps because I am not reacting to an unexpected threat while already exhausted from fighting a war," Sephiroth tossed back. "I also have no intention of using machina in this. A few poorly-understood relics will do nothing to turn the tide."

"Then how do you intend to fight? Swords do nothing against Sin. I know that for certain. I tried . . ."

"I am still in the process of assembling a plan, and unless you can answer the questions that Bahamut could not, I have no intention of telling you of it."

The fayth's head jerked up, as though Sephiroth had affronted him. Then, quite unexpectedly, Yojimbo began to laugh.

"I had a commander like you once," he said. "A sharp-tongued, confident man with eyes so deep it was like looking into the ocean north of Bikanel. And he suffered fools no more gladly. Very well: I will give your Summoners what I have to offer without demanding an initial fee."

The fayth became a jet of pyreflies, which split into two streams, one of which went to Braska, the other to Seymour. Since I was the closest, I caught the half-Guado as he staggered, and guided him to a sitting position on the floor of the cave, while Jecht assisted Braska. Sephiroth kept his attention on the path back out to the rest of the caves, sword in hand, checking for fiends bold enough to wander into an area where the Hymn could be heard.

Braska returned to full consciousness first. He rubbed his forehead, then chuckled. "He still expects to be paid when Summoned, and considers it his right to choose which attack to use for himself, rather than permit himself to be commanded by his Summoner."

"What a pain in the ass," Jecht said. Which was impossible to argue with.

Seymour took almost half an hour longer to return to himself, and he seemed to be in pain, wincing against the lantern light.
"Are you all right?" I asked him quietly.

"Headache due to having forgotten how to assimilate a new aeon after so many years of not Summoning. I should be fine in a bit. Thank you, Auron." Seymour offered me a weak smile as I helped him to his feet. I cast a Cure spell on him, and his eyebrows rose. "When did you suddenly develop an aptitude for white magic?"

"I didn't," I admitted, and showed him the materia settled around my arm, under my sleeve.

"He takes good care of you," Seymour observed, with a slightly wider smile.

"Of all of us," I corrected, and Seymour vented a low chuckle.

"I admit, he is the most unlikely mother chocobo in Spiran history. But he looks after you, especially. As is only to be expected. I only hope that I can someday find someone who loves me as deeply."

I felt my face getting warm. Sephiroth hadn't so much as glanced in our direction, but I knew he was listening. It was physically impossible for him not to be. Despite that, he said nothing.

I wished I'd been able to tell for certain whether that meant he agreed or disagreed with what Seymour implied. Even though I knew it was stupid to worry about it. I'd accepted from the first that Sephiroth was mangled and broken inside, and that it might take him a very long time to untwist the damaged parts of his psyche enough to be able to understand and articulate what our relationship meant to him. I'd told myself I was alright with that. But at the same time, I was only human. I wanted reassurance. It was a desire that I would just have to control.

I wasn't going to give up Sephiroth because a little, niggling part of my brain was being stupid.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

On the far side of the gorge, the hills rose rapidly into mountains, and the air began to smell of snow. It also started to get colder pretty quickly. On the first night after we left the Crusaders' base, everyone put on extra clothes before turning in for the night. Even Sephiroth added a long-sleeved shirt and a pair of high stockings, purchased in Bevelle, to what he was wearing. As we headed upward towards the snow line, he also began to fasten his coat properly in front, just as I wrapped my haori closer over the thick woolen sweater and fur leggings I was wearing underneath. Seymour had brought furs as well: trousers, a short jacket with a hood, mittens, and high boots. Then again, of all of us, he knew best what he was getting into. Braska had layered wool under his robe, and Jecht had the pink flowered jacket, stuffed with chocobo down, trousers of similar construction but more subdued colour, and an odd-looking hat with flaps that covered his ears.

I just hoped our preparations would be enough. At the Crusader headquarters, we'd met a man who had lost a foot, plus all the toes on the other and three of his fingers, to the cold on Gagazet. He considered himself fortunate to still have functional hands. Being too damaged by frostbite to continue would be an ignominious way to end our pilgrimage.

We found the Ronso on the next day. Or they found us. Four males, probably a hunting party.

"Summoner come late in season," their leader said. Like any healthy male Ronso, he towered over us. The structure of their legs makes Ronso a foot or so taller than a human of comparable build . . . and they tend to be built big. The shortest member of their party had six inches on Sephiroth, and that Ronso made up for his height by being almost grotesquely broad through the shoulders.

"We were unavoidably delayed," Braska said calmly.

"Late in season," the Ronso repeated, as though he hadn't heard. "Summoner should turn back. Wait for spring. Humans too delicate for Gagazet in late autumn."

Braska shook his head. "I have no intention of waiting nearly six months while Sin continues to kill people."

"The weather's just gonna have to wait for us," Jecht added. "See you guys on the way back, okay?"

The blitzer took a step forward, but the Ronso didn't move.

"Hey, what gives?!" Jecht said, all humour gone.

"Summoner and Guardians must prove they are strong enough for Gagazet," the lead Ronso said, while the other three chuckled. It wasn't a pleasant sound.

"Jecht, back off and let me handle this," Sephiroth said. Jecht scowled and retreated, pointedly placing himself between Braska and the Ronso. Meanwhile, Sephiroth stepped forward, examining the quartet as he might have looked over a piece of shoddy merchandise at a market.

"Little Guardian thinks talk will get him past Ronso." That wasn't the leader of the quartet, but one of the others—I wasn't paying close enough attention to be able to say which.

Sephiroth offered them a contemptuous look and shot out one hand. The sound of bone snapping
was clear in the cold, crisp air, and the short, thickset Ronso staggered back several steps and fell on his rump, looking surprised as he pressed a hand to his side, where Sephiroth's open-palmed strike had hit him.

"Little Guardian break ribs," he said in a shocked tone of voice.

"That was a warning," Sephiroth said. "Move aside, or whoever comes looking for you next will find themselves chasing after pyreflies. We have no time for this foolishness."

The lead Ronso stared at him. "Guardian strong enough for Gagazet. Summoner may pass."

We walked past them, and when Braska seemed about to make a gesture toward the injured Ronso, I blocked him.

"It might be satisfying to heal his ribs crookedly, but that doesn't mean it's a good idea," I said, and Braska shrugged, conceding the point (or at least the fact that he had no idea how to go about setting a Ronso's ribs under field conditions).

The Ronso have a . . . settlement, right at the foot of the Gagazet Pass. It isn't really a village—more of a guard post, dusted with snow even in summer. The population is mostly male and between twelve and fifty years of age. It has to bring in food and other necessities from the valley villages, where the young cubs, the majority of the females, and the elderly live. It exists only to keep non-Summoners off Gagazet.

Dozens of Ronso emerged from the shadows among pillars and slabs of stone as we approached, but none dared bar our way until we reached the first gate. Two muscular Ronso barred our way past there with crossed spears, while a third, older, stood in front, waiting for us.

"Summoner comes late in year," this Ronso said.

"So we've been told," Seymour replied.

"Summoner carries spear?"

"We are both Summoners," Braska said, coming forward. "There is no law that says two may not walk this path together. Defeating Sin is not a competition. It is better that we cooperate to do it, as the Ronso cooperate to defend Gagazet."

The Ronso grunted, but before he could say anything else, a voice came from behind us. "Silver Guardian very strong. Broke Arik's ribs with open hand. Summoner must also be strong, to have such Guardian." It was the leader of the four Ronso we'd met on our way up the mountain.

"Oh?" the older Ronso said, looking at Sephiroth.

"It was the fastest and least damaging way to deal with them," the silver-haired man said. "We are here to fight Sin, not the protectors of Gagazet. Energy expended to such an end is wasted."


He stood aside, and the other two behind them uncrossed their spears, letting us file past.

I felt eyes on me, and turned to see an adolescent Ronso with a white mane watching us. He was small and scrawny, by Ronso standards.

"Well," Jecht said, "at least that's over. Next stop: Zanarkand!"

"Whoa, there," Braska said. "We have several more days' travel yet to go."

"Most of it more vertical than horizontal," Sephiroth added, glancing over the landscape ahead.

The mountain paths were infested with fiends, including a type of mobile plant which wouldn't have been able to survive in those heights if it had had the same needs as real vegetation. None of them were as bad as the creatures we'd fought inside Yojimbo's cave. Our worst enemy here was the cold, especially at night. Sephiroth had been all too right about the number of bricks of compressed charcoal we needed, when we'd been shopping in Bevelle. We used three the first night, lighting each in turn with a fire spell when its predecessor burned out. I stood the dawn watch that night, and it was miserable even after I borrowed Sephiroth's coat and put it on over the rest of my clothes.

The snow was even more unpleasant. There were already several inches of it on the ground above the Ronso settlement, and not only did we have to slog through it, but it slid into gaps in everyone's clothes, where it slowly melted, trickling cold water against the skin of its unfortunate victims. Sephiroth, with his gloves and high, buckled boots, had a bit of an advantage over the rest of us there. Although I shivered at the thought of walking around with as little insulation as he was carrying.

It was on the third day after we'd left the Ronso that we almost died.

The storm blew up out of nowhere. It was as though the sky had cracked open. One moment, we were standing in clear air under a cloudy sky, and then suddenly a wall of white descended on us.

"Everyone gather together!" Seymour shouted over the roar of the wind. "Braska, don't move, we'll come to you!" Sensible, since we'd been moving in our usual formation, with Braska at the center.

I only had to walk forward, and found Braska by bumping into him. Seymour was already there, with Sephiroth appearing a moment later.

"NullFrost, both of you," the silver-haired man ordered immediately. "First on yourselves, then on the rest of us."

"Where's Jecht?" Braska asked.

Sephiroth frowned. "He probably got himself turned around. We'll wait five minutes, no more. Then we have to get the rest of you under cover. If he still hasn't shown up by then, I'll go looking for him."

"Alone?" I half-shouted. "You can't be serious!"

"I'm the only one here who can't be harmed by the cold. It has to be me."

I knew that. But it was impossible to completely rid myself of the terrifying thought that we might end up losing both of them. Trading Sephiroth for Jecht struck me as a very bad idea, even from an unselfish perspective (was it possible for me to have an unselfish perspective on this?)

"We could camp right here," Braska was saying.

"The tent could blow away, or collapse under the snow," Seymour said. "We need somewhere more sheltered."
"Back the way we came," Sephiroth ordered, and no one argued.

We found a spot between two shoulders of rock to pitch the tent, and Seymour lit the brazier with a fire spell. Sephiroth quickly and efficiently reduced his pack to a small amount of food, a shallow cooking pan, a length of rope, and two blankets, leaving the rest of the common gear behind.

"If this has died down by morning, and I'm still not back, pack up and move on," he told us. "I can and will catch up with you. Never doubt it."

"We understand," I said. *Which doesn't mean we agree.*

Sephiroth bent and kissed my cheek, lips rasping over stubble. It was the first time I could think of that he'd ever done something like that in public. "Trust me, Auron. Please."

"I do," I said. Even though it felt like the words were being torn out of me. More quietly, I added, "Be careful. Please."

"I will," he said. And then he was going through the tent flap to vanish into the storm. I sat there staring after him for . . . quite a while before Braska snapped me out of it by calling my name.

"Gil for your thoughts?" he asked.

I rubbed my chin. "I need a shave," I said, and Braska laughed.

"So do we all," he said, rubbing ruefully at the smudge on his upper lip that marked the beginning of a mustache. Shaving properly needed warm water, which was in short supply on Gagazet, so only Seymour had bothered since we had left the Crusaders' headquarters. "We also need to eat, and you're sitting nearest to the food."

We ate. We slept, or at least dozed, waking in the dark to hear the wind howling around the tent. There seemed to be no point in setting a watch, since no self-respecting fiend would be out in such weather. The sun rose, casting dull light through the surface of the tent, but when I stuck my head out through the flap, the storm was still in full swing. There was no sign of Sephiroth.

We didn't move on that day, just dozed and exchanged a few words. It was at some late hour of the next night that the wind finally died. When we emerged from the tent the next morning, we had to fight our way through a snowdrift right in front of the flap. The sun was blindingly bright. And there was no sign of Sephiroth or Jecht anywhere.

"We have to move on," Braska said. I couldn't bring myself to answer. "Auron!"

"I know." I forced the words through gritted teeth.

"We can consider what to do when we reach the caves," Seymour offered. "It's warm enough there that we won't risk freezing. And it should only be another two or three days."

Once the two of them were safe, I could risk turning back temporarily. "Let's break camp. We'll have to divide Sephiroth's load between us."

I hadn't realized just how much more difficult travel would be without Sephiroth, although I was soon to find out. He'd been carrying the heaviest of the gear, which, as Seymour had said, had to be redistributed. Of the three of us, I was the strongest, but my mode of fighting was also the most physical, which meant that I couldn't overburden myself. And the logistics problem was just the start. Sephiroth had also been the one breaking trail, although that had been somewhat less necessary before the storm, and the one dealing with the quick-moving, airborne imps. In the end, Seymour got
a lot of practice casting Waterga at flying fiends, and we made less distance than we normally would have.

It took us four miserable days of slogging to reach the caves. At least there were no more storms. And I told myself constantly that Sephiroth would be alright. Nevertheless, I was so on edge that when I saw the silhouette of a clearly-not-Sephiroth figure inside the cave mouth, I nearly drew my sword.

"Hey!" Jecht stepped forward into the light, holding up empty hands. "Glad you made it. We were starting to wonder." We. Oh, thank . . . Leviathan.

Braska's, "When did you get here?" overlapped with my, "Where's Sephiroth?"

"Look, calm down, okay? We got here a couple of hours ago. Sephy's resting in a side cave. He had to climb a cliff with me on his back to get us up here, and then fight this big ugly honking flan, and he hasn't slept much or eaten at all since he found me, so I guess he's pretty tired."

"He took food with him," I protested, already stepping forward.

"Yeah, and he gave it to me. He'd have given the blankets to me too, 'cept that it was so cold we ended up curling up together in those snow huts he made."

I felt a stab of jealousy. I knew it was irrational; I was an adult, not some stupid adolescent boy who couldn't stand it when the object of his crush so much as looked at anyone else. It was, I decided, the knowledge that he had stretched himself so thin to help Jecht that got under my skin so much.

"What exactly happened?" Braska was asking.

"I screwed up again," Jecht admitted candidly. "Couldn't tell where the edge of the path was in the snow, and I went right over. Dunno how Sephy figured it out, but he climbed down and dug me out and healed me up, then made some kind of shelter out of snow and a blanket and some rocks. When I came to, I was lying all curled up with him. Man, he's warm. He was spitting mad, too. Even more when he found out I'd traded off some of the stuff in my pack with Rufus and didn't have any food on me."

"And if I'd realized that was all the food you had, I wouldn't have let you do it," Seymour snapped. "We were all supposed to have a share. You know why."

"Yeah, I do now. Didn't expect that to happen."

My hands curled into fists. "Never mind that. Take us to Sephiroth right now."

"Okay, okay. Keep your panties on, loverboy. It's this way."

Jecht led us over to a four-foot-high opening off to one side of the passageway. Ducking through, I found Sephiroth curled in a fetal position in a sandy little cul-de-sac too small to let him stretch out, with his head resting on a folded blanket and Masamune tilted at a precarious angle above him to make it fit in the space available. He did look exhausted, and I was reluctant to wake him . . . until I saw a pyrefly float by and sink in through his skin, just behind the ear. Damn stupid, stubborn fool . . . . You were the one who told me how dangerous not eating might be . . .

I prodded him with my toe—gently, ready to leap back if he was caught in a nightmare, since he'd warned me once that he didn't always give any outward sign.

His eyes flicked open immediately, and he sat up. "Auron."
"You need to eat," I said, and tossed him a packet of raisins that had been in an outer pocket of my pack.

"You're angry," he observed, opening the packet and extracting one dried grape at a time to place in his mouth.

I ground my teeth. "Of course I'm angry! I thought you'd managed to get yourself killed!"

"I'm not that fragile."

"Anyone can have a run of bad luck, or get distracted," I said. "Anyone. Including you. You can't fight a snowstorm with a sword, and you could easily have slipped off a ledge the same way Jecht apparently did!"

Sephiroth gave me a genuinely baffled look. "Auron, I used to jump out of aircraft on a regular basis. It's unlikely that a tumble down a mountainside would give me more than a few bruises."

"And if a ton of rocks and snow land on top of you?"

A sigh. "I can see you're not interested in being rational about this. I told you I would be careful."

I wanted to throw something. Even though I understood his reasons, his prolonged absence had frightened me half out of my wits, especially since I wasn't entirely certain he'd shaken his deathwish. He could have—surely he could have—met up with us before now instead of leaving me to worry. As he'd said, I wasn't the least bit interested in being rational about any of that. Especially according to his definition of rational. I'd been taught emotional control, but Sephiroth was downright repressed sometimes. Most of the time.

"Forget it," I ground out, and turned away, letting my feet take me back to the cave entrance, where I sat down on a rock and nursed my mood, staring out at the snowy mountainside.

"Was that your first argument?" Braska asked from behind me.

"I don't think it really qualifies as an argument," I said.

"Why not? Because you didn't scream or hit each other?"

"Something like that," I admitted.

"Well, you aren't prone to losing your temper, and if anything, he does it even less. I'm not sure I've ever seen Sephiroth actually angry. Irritated, yes, and disgusted and frustrated and several other things, but anger is more . . . active and forceful."

"Maybe nothing on Spira is important enough for him to get angry about." I knew the bitterness in my tone was uncalled for, but . . .

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Braska shake his head. "I don't think that's the case at all . . . and I learned the hard way, with Akkina, that the stupidest thing you can do when something like this happens is start tacking on maybes that you have no real evidence for. Getting angry about what actually happened is one thing. Getting angry about what you think the other person might have been thinking can mess you up permanently."

"I don't know what he's thinking. That may be part of the problem," I admitted. "Sephiroth isn't just stoic, he's calculating. I've never been that."
"The question is, can you forgive him for it?"

Trust Braska to sidle right up to the heart of the problem. "Eventually, I suppose. Right now . . ."

"Right now, the wound's too raw," Braska said. "Fair enough. Just don't wait too long. We're going to need both of you in top form when we reach Zanarkand, and I'm fairly certain he won't approach you. He seems more confused than anything."

"Great," I muttered.

When we went back inside, Seymour, Sephiroth, and Jecht were all waiting for us. Seymour, especially, had a grave look on his face.

"I had expected us to pass a certain landmark on the way up, but it appears that we somehow missed it," he said. "Perhaps the paths have shifted over the years since I came here first—I have heard that the area is subject to rockfalls that alternately hide and reveal possible routes."

"Why mention this now?" Braska asked.

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed. "What is it that you would have us see? Bahamut said there were answers waiting for us on the road to Zanarkand. Is this related?"

Seymour hesitated, then said, "I expect it is. But I had still rather let you judge for yourselves."

"Okay, then, be mysterious," Jecht said. "Let's go."

An hour later, after sidling awkwardly across a slope formed by a recent landslide, we rounded a shoulder of rock, and I realized why Seymour had been so reticent.

The path here led along the side of a river valley, and extending in a solid wall above it were . . . I blinked, rubbed my eyes, looked again. No, I wasn't mistaken. Those were fayth. Thousands of fayth. Stacked in a solid wall under a rippling curtain of light that shifted from blue to green and back again.

"They're in use," Braska breathed. "Someone is using them to Summon."

"The question is, what are they Summoning?" Sephiroth said. "So many . . . It must be very large . . ." Then he flinched and his pupils contracted into slits. "Sin," he hissed.

"You saying that thing's an aeon?" Jecht asked.

"Unless there happens to be some other large lump of pyreflies of unknown origin wandering across the landscape. It also provides a possible explanation for why it regenerates."

"Because it doesn't, really," I contributed. "The Summoner just calls it again whenever someone destroys it."

Seymour shook his head. "That strikes me as too simple an explanation. Why is the Summoner nowhere in evidence? Why can only the Final Aeon destroy Sin? Ancient Bevelle must surely have had machina weapons capable of the task, given that any other aeon can be destroyed by the systematic application of claws or fangs or sharp bits of metal. There is still a piece missing, somewhere."

"Plus, if it's been the same Summoner all along, is he Unsent or something? Can Unsent people Summon?" Jecht wandered over to more closely inspect the wall of fayth.
"Unsent can do anything they were capable of while they were alive," Braska said.

At that moment, Jecht absently put out his hand to touch the fayth he'd been looking at. And collapsed. Even Sephiroth wasn't quick enough to catch him as he crumpled to the ground.

Braska cast Cure on the blitzer to take care of any bruises, and I shook him by the shoulder, then slapped him across the face when that didn't make him open his eyes. No response either way.

*What do we do if he doesn't wake up?* It was the question we were all asking ourselves, but none of us quite dared to voice it. Losing Jecht wouldn't end the pilgrimage, but it would have weighed more heavily on all of us than I think we were willing to admit.

Chapter End Notes

And so Auron proves that he's only human, after all.

I have to admit that when I originally wrote this, I'd forgotten where the Fayth Scar was located relative to the Gagazet caves. I had to do a quick patch-up job when I realized I'd gotten it wrong. Seams may still be apparent.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a grim fifteen minutes before Jecht opened his eyes. Seymour even tried touching the fayth, but nothing happened to him. Whatever had happened to the blitzer was either reserved for him alone, or for the first person to come into contact with the statues.

We all pounced on Jecht the moment he twitched and began to stir. He must have sensed the four of us leaning over him, because he muttered something like "Go 'way. Lemme be."

"Once we're sure you're all right," Braska replied firmly.

"Ugh . . . Oh, it's you guys." The expression on Jecht's face as he slowly sat up was . . . lost.

"What happened?" I asked.

Jecht scrubbed a hand across his face. "What did you see?" he countered.

"Very little," Seymour said. "You touched one of the fayth, then collapsed."

"So it wasn't . . ."

"Wasn't what?" I pressed, my patience starting to ebb.

Jecht looked down. "I . . . when I touched it, I was home. Sitting on the deck of my houseboat, with my wife asleep on the chair beside me, and my kid playing with another little boy. Except the other boy . . . remember what Bahamut looked like when we saw him in Bevelle? It was him right down to the stupid hood. And he said . . ." Jecht swallowed visibly. "He said . . . it was a dream. All of it. My Zanarkand. Me. My wife and kid. All some shit the fayth here are dreaming up. It ain't Sin they're Summoning. Never was. It's my Zanarkand. Their Zanarkand. The one that got burned up in their stupid war with Bevelle. Until I popped out into Spira, I was living inside their heads."

Sephiroth turned and looked thoughtfully at the wall of fayth. "They must be those that fled the destruction of the city. But this . . . it strikes me as both extraordinary, and extraordinarily stupid. Why choose to do this to themselves? Why spend a thousands years exerting themselves to create a phantom of a dead city?"

Jecht licked his lips. "Bahamut said . . . they wanted to make sure it was remembered. But they never meant for it to go on this long, and they're all really tired now. They want it to be over."

"And if it ends, what happens to you?" I couldn't stop myself from asking. There was an odd inevitability to it.

"I dunno," Jecht said, voice getting quieter and quieter as he spoke. "I think . . . I'm afraid . . . I might just . . . disappear. I know my family will. I'm more than a dream now . . . he said . . . but Tidus isn't. And I don't . . . want that. Brat deserves a chance to live, y'know?" He scrubbed a hand across his eyes. "But if we can't kill Sin without waking the fayth up . . . well, what kind of bastard son of a bitch would that make me, to try to hold onto something that ain't even real while everyone on Spira suffers for it?"

"Jecht—" Braska began, as the blitzer drew up his knees and hid his face against them.
"If you don't mind, I think I'd like to be alone for a while," he said. Then more quietly, "I used to ride my kid's ass about crying, but there're times when you just can't help it."

We went around a corner and put some fayth between him and the rest of us to give him at least the illusion of privacy. For quite a while, no one said anything.

"There has to be some other way," I said to the fayth. Who weren't listening.

"That seems to be what Yunalesca has been trying to do all along," said Seymour quietly. "Do things another way. Preserve the memory of her city, at the cost of . . . everything."

"No matter what we do, someone is going to die," Sephiroth said. "Those in Spira, or those in the dream of Zanarkand. And it appears that we are fated to choose which. I have been placed in this position before, albeit on a smaller scale, and it is never comfortable."

"Comfortable," Braska repeated, with more than a twinge of bitterness.

Seymour rounded on him. "What do you expect me to say? That it should be easy to choose who lives and who dies? If there is some relationship between Dream Zanarkand and Sin, then we cannot save everyone."

"People never like those who inform them of uncomfortable truths," Seymour said, looking at him.

"When I set out on my pilgrimage, I thought the only person whose death I was going to decide was myself." Braska was staring at the fayth, paying no attention to the half-Guado. "I was so incredibly naive."

"I'm sorry," I said, but I was thinking. About what Seymour had told Sephiroth about needing to protect his own life for the sake of others. We had none of us trod so lightly across the surface of Spira that our deaths wouldn't matter to anyone. But I couldn't allow myself to believe that was a mistake.

"We don't know for certain that the fayth's dream of Zanarkand is connected to Sin," Seymour said. It was clutching at straws, and we all knew it, but it also made us feel a little better.

Still, Sephiroth's implied question hung there in the air. Except that it wasn't really a question at all. Destroy the dream, or let the living people of Spira be scourged without end? There was no choice there. Even Jecht would be able to see that. That was why he was hiding away in flimsy privacy and crying.

Half an hour later, the blitzer rejoined us, red-eyed and silent, and we resumed following the narrow path that led back up to the caverns.

There were fiends in the cave too, of course. Behemoths, a nasty ochu variant, and the giant flans Jecht had mentioned, along with a bunch of small fry. We camped for the night right there at the entrance, and standing the night watch was . . . interesting, with the flans going glup! glup! in the distance.

The next day, we went deeper into the cavern, and hit a T-junction where one path led to a dead end and the other dropped down into water.

"Do we have to swim?" Braska asked.

Seymour shook his head. "There's some kind of control, out beyond the flooded section, that provides a way past the dead end. I don't know what it is, though—my mother didn't say, and I've
never seen it."

Jecht was already stripping off his jacket. "I'm gonna go have a look. You guys wait here."

"Jecht—" Braska began, but was interrupted.

"I play blitz, remember? Swimming is one thing I can do better than the rest of you. If I pick up any water fiends along the way, I'll just lead 'em back here and have you guys fry 'em with lightning once I'm out of the water."

Jecht had been gone for almost half an hour when we heard some noises from the dead end. When I went to check, it turned out to have sprouted stairs. Five minutes later, Jecht reappeared, swimming for his life with a whole school of toothy fish at his heels. He jumped out of the water, and Seymour cast a Thundaga that turned the fish into pyreflies.

"Sorry for the wait," the blitzer said. "There was this rotating sphere thing, and it took me a while to figure out what to do with it."

"Don't bother putting your clothes back on," Seymour said. "There's another of these."

"And it's probably got more of those stupid fish," Jecht said with a grimace—in the interest of not sinking straight to the bottom, he'd left his sword with us. "Okay, let's go."

Seymour was right: there was another fork that combined a flooded branch and a dead end, and Jecht went off for another swim. This time, he didn't bother saying anything about how the lock at the far end worked when he returned, trailing fish.

The half-Guado stopped us with an extended hand as we reached the top of the second set of stairs. "Be ready. The first guardian set by Yunalesca to ward Zanarkand waits nearby."

"Just tell me it ain't a fish," Jecht said.

"Not the last time I was here," Seymour replied.

Sephiroth shook his head and led the way out of the cave.

Seymour was right. It wasn't a fish. More like a dragon, although smaller than the one we'd fought at Macalania, and less tough. Its wings were mere shredded strips that didn't even qualify as ornamental. But it wasn't about to let us pass, stupid creature that it was.

Sephiroth didn't even bother giving any tactical commands, just threw a Shadow Flare straight in the thing's face and charged at it while it was still shaking its head. I followed a bit more slowly. Armor Break! In the process of landing the blow, I got in a lucky hit against the fiend's nose, making it shake its head and roar.

Sephiroth was already moving in to do his part of the job as I prepared to baste the monster with a Power Break and make it impotent as well as soft-shelled. The silver-haired man darted in with his usual finesse, slipping Masamune under and between bony plates as he dodged claws and leaped over the sweep of the tail. The fiend had a lot of armour and very few weak spots. If I wanted to attack it effectively, I was going to have to either try to get at the underside or try to pound my way through the armour.

I was just about to release the special attack when the creature's wings flashed and spears of light shot down from the sky . . . and everything went black for several seconds. Something pushed me, hard, knocking me down and backward. I heard a thud, and then felt someone's casting of Esuna
tingle across my skin. As my vision cleared, I discovered Sephiroth with his sword blocking the fiend's tail, muscles visibly straining. Judging from his location, he must have knocked me out of the way.

It should have been, well, *sweet* that he wanted to protect me, but right now, I was still angry at him for not valuing his own life highly enough. I wasn't exactly happy with the monster, either. Which at least gave me something to take my mood out on. I slammed the Power Break that I hadn't quite completed before into the pseudodragon's shoulder, and dodged a weak answering claw swipe.

Killing it was straightforward after that, if exhausting because of the armour and the poison-blindness-confusion-causing rain of light and the habit the beast had of casting healing spells. Sephiroth's silencing spell just slid off it, but Seymour eventually had the bright idea of casting reflect . . . although that negated most of his offensive spells and left him somewhat at loose ends, only able to throw in the occasional Esuna as the rest of us fought. Jecht chopped the tip off the beast's tail when it tried to swing the long appendage at Braska, demonstrating that he was an excellent Guardian in the purest sense of the word.

In the end, Sephiroth got a boot on the ring of bony spikes encircling the lower part of its head, and was able to stick Masamune through its eye and convince it that he'd pithed its brain. The fiend disintegrated into an explosion of pyreflies, and I groaned with exhaustion and leaned on my sword as Sephiroth called a lunch break—was it only noon?

We retreated back to the mouth of the cave to eat. Seymour used the fire-spell-and-rock trick to boil water for tea, which we all drank gratefully.

We camped that night on a knoll near the end of the descending trail. It had a magnificent view of Zanarkand, the ruined dead city, and we hit it right around sunset. Jecht looked like someone had punched him in the gut, and the rest of us left him alone as we went around setting up camp.

As the sky darkened, it became clear that this area was . . . infested . . . with pyreflies. Sometimes, if you got too close to a concentration of them, you could see shadows of events that had happened here long ago, or hear voices, faint and far away. Although the only one clear enough for me to pick out any words was that of a young man, who said, *Listen to my story. This may be our last chance.* For a moment, I could almost see his shadow . . . and then it evaporated again as the pyreflies thinned, and I was never able to find it again.

We were low enough down that there were trees and brush about, and we were able to make a proper fire, not just use the brazier and the charcoal. I wondered if we had enough supplies to get back over Gagazet. I wondered if it would matter.

It was a grim evening. Jecht wouldn't talk. He stared into the fire and then rolled up in his blankets early. By tacit mutual consent, we didn’t disturb him, and Seymour took the first watch even though it should have been his night off. I don’t know what he and Sephiroth might have said to each other when the latter relieved him in the middle of the night, but Sephiroth's and my trade-off, a few hours before dawn, was performed in silence.

That morning, we forced ourselves to eat breakfast, then began to make our way down the last long slope into Zanarkand, following what could only be the remains of an old road. If you looked, you could see where the surface had once fit together to form a flat, hard layer.

It was truly a city of ghosts. The morning light faded as we penetrated deeper into the ruins, leaving us in a darkness lit by clouds and sheets and waves of pyreflies. And where there were that many pyreflies, it was inevitable that there would be fiends. Most of them were the same as the ones we'd encountered in the caves, but there were more of the annoying floating eyes. Watching Sephiroth
fight them while streams of pyreflies danced around him was eerily beautiful.

I smothered a sigh. I was going to have to gird my loins and apologize to him the next time we had a chance to be alone. Now that the fear of losing him had mostly drained away, I was willing to admit just how stupid my outburst and sulking had been.

The cracked and worn road led, effectively, to only one place, with apparent branches soon turning into dead ends. The building we found ourselves approaching was impressive even in its ruined state, with a huge, arched entrance.

"What in hell?" Jecht muttered as we got closer. "Looks kinda like the blitzball stadium . . . but . . . I dunno. It's not quite right."

"'Not quite right' in what way?" Seymour asked.

Jecht scratched his head. "That's the problem. I'm not sure. It's, y'know, subtle. Like they've got the wrong font on the signage—what's left of it—or something."

"In any case, the interior bears no evidence of ever being used as a blitzball stadium," Seymour said. "Shall we?"

It wasn't as thought we had a choice. We weren't about to turn back now.

A door, or at least half of one, still hung in the entrance. Made of rusty metal, it creaked in the pyrefly wind as we approached.

Then it creaked without reference to the wind, and we all tensed and reached for weapons. My grip on my sword tightened, rather than loosened, when I realized that what was approaching us was a human figure, but Seymour lowered his spear.

"You," he said, in a rather disgusted tone. "Well, I suppose this was inevitable."

The man, who was leaking pyreflies all over (surely this was an Unsent), said, "Journeyer of the long road, name yourself."

Seymour gestured at Braska, who cleared his throat before responding. "I am Braska, of Bevelle."

He kept his eyes on the ground.

"Look at me," the Unsent said, and Braska raised his head. " . . . I see. Your journey has been difficult. Do not falter; you have almost reached the end. Lady Yunalesca will surely welcome your arrival. Go to her now, and bring your Guardians with you."

He walked past us, fading into nothing. Seymour muttered something that sounded distinctly like, "Pompous ass."

"If you'd been trapped in a ruined city for a thousand years, I expect you would be a bit odd as well," Braska said. "I'm surprised he's managed to retain so much of his humanity."

Seymour snorted. "When I was here the first time, he almost turned into something that looked rather like a malboro's ghost—I refused to look at him, you see."

None of us quite knew how to respond to that. Sephiroth just moved forward into the building without speaking, and the rest of us followed him, once more taking up our usual formation.

Inside, we found broken walkways and more pyrefly-ridden darkness and shifting, shadowy shapes.
Sephiroth stopped in mid-stride as some of the pyreflies coalesced, forming a tableau of three figures. The clearest was a woman in a Crusader uniform, who spoke to a wavering shadow of a woman in a robe, while a Guado man looked on from the side.

"If it might benefit the future of Spira, I will gladly give my life. It is the highest honour for which a Guardian might ask. Use my life, Lady Yocun, and rid Spira of Sin."

Lady . . . Yocun? I squinted at the robed figure, even as the trio faded, but it was the Guado's face that sprung into sharp focus for an instant, and I recognized Vrokk.

"What the hell was that?" Jecht asked.

Seymour shrugged. "The interior of this dome contains more pyreflies than any place outside the Farplane itself, and they appear to capture and replay emotionally-charged memories. I saw that playlet before, when I came here with my mother, although it wasn't so clear then."

"If that truly was Lady Yocun, then the Crusader must have been Ryllia—her Final Aeon," Braska said, looking grim. "Are there more of these?"

"We saw one of the death of a Summoner who was unlucky with the defenders of this place, and another that appeared to concern Lord Ohalland, although that one was a bit difficult to make out, with the voices cutting in and out."

"So they fade?"

The half-Guado shook his head. "I think . . . not as such. It's more that every living person who enters the building erodes them a little more."

"By imposing our own will on the pyreflies," Sephiroth said. "Are these replays dangerous?"

"Not unless they distract someone at a bad moment."

"Then we ignore them," the silver-haired man said. "Let us finish this."

Seymour hadn't used the word "fiends" to describe what lurked inside the dome, and it seemed that was on purpose: the enemies that appeared next weren't normal fiends. It was more as though the building were populated by ghosts that rode the knife-edge between Unsent and true fiend. We fought spectral machina, and figures with machina weapons in uniforms not unlike those worn by members of the Order, who dissolved into pyreflies when they died. Even though I tried to avoid looking into the shadows of their helmets, it tripped me up a bit, and Sephiroth had to cut down a phantom machina that was gunning for my back at one point. He did it without comment, but somehow I felt his reproach all the more keenly because he wasn't even offering it.

Midway along, another tableau manifested. Sephiroth seemed all for pushing on past it, but Braska slowed to a stop to watch as it resolved into a little boy in a robe speaking to a woman. I blinked.

A familiar little boy in a robe, with blue hair that stuck out in horn-like protrusions.

He hadn't been braiding it then.

"No! Mother, no! I don't want you to become a fayth!"

Seymour's free hand, the one not holding his spear, balled into a fist, and he visibly gritted his teeth. I deliberately turned away from the tableau and put my hand on his arm. His head whipped up, and he stared at me for a moment before forcing a smile.
"Things are different now," he said. "Then, I was alone, except for her." Now I'm not, was the unspoken completion of the sentiment.

I just nodded, without saying anything.

We passed the scene of the dying Summoner and his Guardians without stopping, and left the dome in favour of a wide passageway with an arched ceiling whose floor was strewn with debris. The remains of the same kind of red carpet that we'd seen elsewhere in the dome rustled under our feet, somehow inexplicably retaining its rich colour under the dust even as its substance crumbled into nothing.

From the passageway, we emerged into an area lit by more than pyreflies and holding the faint echo of the Hymn of the Fayth—a woman's voice, I thought. A rich alto.

"This is the temple," I said, observing some details of the decor.

"And the fayth whose voice you hear is my mother," Seymour said.

"Let's get this over with," Jecht said, striding forward.

The Cloister of Trials at Zanarkand wasn't the most difficult we'd encountered, but it was definitely the oddest, with hardly any spheres at all. Myself, I preferred Yojimbo's cave, and said as much while Sephiroth was tracing out the pattern on the floor of the second room.

"The puzzle isn't the only trial this time," Seymour said. "On my previous journey, Yunalesca had placed a guard on the descending platform. It almost killed us."

"Describe it," Sephiroth said, returning to us as the floor lit up and started chiming with musical tones.

"Its physical appearance is bizarre," Seymour said. "The most important aspect is that it has disproportionately long forelimbs, which it swings to attack over a large area in front of—" He stopped in mid-sentence as something began to rise above the level of the floor. "He certainly wasn't here."

We all pulled out weapons as a little more of the figure on the elevator came into view. "Vrokk," Braska identified.

The Unsent Guado dipped his head. "Summoner Braska. My apologies, but I can't let you go any further. I can't permit anyone to receive the Final Aeon." He seemed a little more coherent than on our previous meetings. Was being in a pyrefly-rich environment good for Unsent?

"You believed in defeating Sin once," Braska said. "What changed? It can't simply be that you found out where the fayth for the Final Summoning comes from. It seems clear that Ryllia gave her life voluntarily, for Lady Yocun's sake."

Vrokk's laugh sounded like it hurt. "So you still don't know."

"Know what?" Sephiroth said, his voice calm and flat.

"Why should I tell you?" Perhaps Vrokk was still just as unbalanced as previously.

"Depending on the nature of your information, you might persuade us to set aside our course. We might even choose to help you."
"No," said Vrokk slowly. "No, you won't. But I think I'll tell you anyway. Just because that bitch Yunalesca won't like it. Do you know why no High Summoner has ever survived Sin's defeat?"

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed. "I had assumed it was merely the risk inherent in fighting a foe far above one's level, but I take it there is something more specific."

Vrokk smiled. It wasn't a pleasant expression. "Oh, yes. The Summoner invokes the Final Summoning, and sends their Final Aeon against Sin. They succeed in burning away the layer of pyreflies that forms its shell—in 'destroying' Sin. But a shell always has something inside. He is there, the ancient Summoner Yu Yevon, and he tears the Final Aeon away from its Summoner to form the core of a new Sin. The shock is inevitably fatal."

"... It fits," Sephiroth said, after we all shared a moment of stunned silence.

"It isn't even just a monument to her daddy, it is her daddy," Jecht said.

"Yunalesca is quite a piece of work," Seymour said. "Sending out Summoners as intentional sacrifices would certainly not be beyond her."

"And currently, the Final Aeon at the core of Sin is your companion Ryllia," Braska said to Vrokk, his expression sympathetic. "That's why you don't want anyone to obtain the Final Aeon. Because as long as Sin isn't defeated, she remains alive in some sense."

"Which leads to the question of why you didn't stop me the first time I came to Zanarkand," Seymour said. "If you wanted to prevent us from acquiring a Final Aeon, you're too late—I already have one."

"At the time, I thought that a child would not be able to complete the pilgrimage, so I didn't interfere in yours," the Unsent replied. "It seems that my judgement has grown poorer as of late, since I didn't foresee the success of this peculiar group of yours either. I thought Kelanth was the most likely threat among the present generation of Summoners, not an assortment of outcasts and semi-apostates."

"Outcasts are sometimes shunned because they have too much power," Sephiroth said.

"And will you turn back now?" Vrokk sounded almost hopeful.

The silver-haired man shook his head. "I still have a few questions that need answers. And I think we may need to destroy Yunalesca, in any case. She is the one perpetuating this ridiculous cycle by providing a false method of defeating Sin."

"Then we must remain enemies."

"So it appears," Braska said. "I'm sorry."

Vrokk inclined his head. Then there was a massive swirl of pyreflies, and what stood there . . . was no longer a Guado, although Vrokk's face was visible on it, somewhere around mid-chest. Other than that, it looked a bit like a six-armed bashura made out of tree roots, with a scorpion's tail grafted on.

"Tasteless," Seymour murmured.

"We handing out style points now?" Jecht asked as he unshipped his sword. "'Cause if we are, I'd like to do it retroactively, y'know? We've seen uglier stuff than this guy."

"Another one that doesn't scan," Sephiroth grumbled. "We'll have to feel it out. Rufus, one element
at a time, while I poke at it a bit. The rest of you, try not to get its attention for now."

Seymour threw each of the lowest-level basic elemental spells at the Unsent-turned-fiend. It didn't counter, but only the fire spell did any visible damage. When Sephiroth thrust at it with Masamune, it whipped its tail at him, missing as he quickly leapt back.

"It's vulnerable to fire, but resists all attacks so thoroughly that it's difficult to make a dent," he said. "Auron, break it."

"Understood." Anger was slowly building into a knot under my breastbone once again, and I took a deep breath and pulled the sake jug from my belt before channeling it into an overdrive. **Banishing Blade!** It connected with full force, and I felt Vrokk's defenses shatter. I also got scratched on the leg by that damned scorpion tail. It left a burning sensation behind, and I took a few steps back away from the action so that I could cast Esuna, just in case. "The tail's poisoned," I warned the others.

"Hey, is that little face doing something?" Jecht asked.

Sephiroth glanced. "**Get down!**" he thundered suddenly, flinging himself to the floor as he cast an odd combined Shell-Protect spell I'd see him use a couple of times before.

It turned out to be exactly the right advice. The fiend waved its uppermost hands, bringing them together with a sharp clap and created a zone of explosions at about chest height, strong enough to give me a painful burn across my back even though I was face-down on the floor. Once again, the materia I wore were enough to get me back into fighting condition immediately, but the insulted section of my skin stung even after it was healed. Regardless, the fight had just gotten . . . interesting.

Sephiroth must have thought so too. As the explosions faded, he went from prone to on his feet to in the air with blurring speed. He landed atop the fiend's shoulders (top shoulders?) and wrapped his legs around its neck in a stranglehold, although with a weapon like Masamune, that wasn't the most advantageous position for him. Still, he held on as the creature thrashed and tried to throw him off, grimly stabbing downward.

"Auron, Jecht! Go all out while I still have it under control! Braska, Rufus! Healing and support spells only!"

I was already charging, and infusing my blade with fire, making ready to attack its weakness. I just hoped that Jecht had better control of his sword this time than he had in the past.

My first swing was a powerful sideways blow, intended to do maximum damage without hitting Sephiroth, who was still engaged in an insane piggyback ride on the fiend. When my sword bit into the fiend, it felt more like hewing wood, and it stuck for a moment when I completed the swing. Then the fire in the blade turned Vrokk's substance into brittle charcoal, and I was able to pull my weapon loose . . . just in time to get scratched by that tail again. I scowled and cast Esuna once more, grimly aware that I was whittling away at my magical resources. Such as they were. My magical endurance had improved since I'd first gained the elemental sword techniques back at the Mi'ihen Highroad, but I was far from being a true mage.

I had two ethers on me—Sephiroth had insisted—but our overall supply was finite, and we still had to deal with Yunalesca. If we had to fight her . . . well, Vrokk was merely a hundred years old, and was proving a serious nuisance. How much worse would she, Unsent for a thousand years and long since accustomed to her state, be?

"**Shit,**" Jecht grunted, yanking on the hilt of his sword. He hadn't had the advantage of a fire element, so it had remained wedged. He swore again and just barely dodged that tail.
Sephiroth managed to bring one heel against the hilt of Jecht's sword and kick it loose, so that it spun away across the floor at an angle. The blitzer threw himself after it, almost overbalancing as he grabbed the weapon with one hand and it suddenly asserted its weight. Sephiroth, in the meanwhile, had been thrown free of his perch, but ended up on his feet through a series of actions that seemed to involve a one-handed handspring and a backflip.

"Close from different directions," he ordered. "I think it can only do the explosions directly in front of itself, and it isn't going to bother for just one of us. Don't give it any openings. Jecht, go for the limbs."

"Right you are, boss-man!"

I didn't bother with a verbal response, just moved a bit to my right to divide the space around Vrokk up into the most even slices I could manage.

I won't say it was easy after that, because it wasn't. We were fighting a monster with unnatural endurance and flesh as hard as wood, which would have been enough trouble even if he'd been unable to cause those explosions. And he turned out to have a regenerative spell up his sleeve as well. But even if it was difficult, it was at least straightforward. Don't get too close to the other physical attackers, try to dodge the tail and the arms, hack with the sword, and send a little pulse of fire along my weapon if it got stuck. Simple. My biggest problem was encroaching fatigue. I hoped we could take a little time to rest after this. At least the area was free of other attackers—normal fiends tended to avoid places where the Hymn of the Fayth could be heard.

Sephiroth didn't appear to tire. He fought like a well-oiled machina, attacking Vrokk's back until our constant chipping away at the fiend's life told, and it began to dissolve into pyreflies. The outer, more fiendlike parts were the first to go, leaving a translucent Guado kneeling inside the mess.

Braska approached the kneeling figure, and crouched down. "Vrokk. We can't rescue her . . . but I promise you that we will free her. And that no one else will ever have to suffer the way Ryllia did, or the way you did. We're going to see to that."

The Unsent's lips moved, but I couldn't hear any words. Still, he was smiling as he faded away entirely. Perhaps that counted for something.

We sat down then and ate an overdue noon meal, just bread and cheese and cold sausage, but it helped, putting us in a better frame of mind to tackle whatever lay at the bottom of the lift Vrokk had arrived on. Thankfully, the guardian fiend Seymour had mentioned didn't materialize as we traveled down—that would have been insult added to injury.

The lone alto voice singing the Hymn became stronger and clearer the lower we went, until we arrived in the short corridor at the bottom. And just beyond it was the Chamber of the Fayth. It lacked a proper anteroom like the ones in the other temples, but perhaps that had only become the custom after Zanarkand fell.

There were two fayth in the chamber: one a dim and faded statue imprisoned under cracked glass, the other lying off to one side. It depicted . . . well, it was hard to say, really, even though it was possible to walk right up to it for a detailed examination. A woman, certainly. Enwrapped in . . . something . . . and encircled with chains.

Seymour walked up to the woman's statue and laid his hand on it. His expression was tender as he said, "Mother. I'm back."
So . . . yeah. I have no idea whether what Auron heard on that hill was Tidus' cross-time phantom, or Shuyin actually stopped there on his way to Bevelle and had a long talk with someone. It was just one of those things that wrote itself.
We all watched silently as pyreflies slowly coalesced into the form of a fayth, hovering above the statue. She had been, perhaps, in her late thirties when she had died, hair just beginning to be threaded with grey, and wore a dress in the classic Bevellan style.

"Seymour. My son . . . Oh, you've become a fine young man. And these people . . . are they your friends?"

"'Course we are!" Jecht said, before Seymour could respond.

"They are," the half-Guado agreed. "One of them in particular, I view as the older brother I never had." He glanced at Sephiroth, and the silver-haired man's tiny smile flickered at the corners of his mouth.

"We've certainly come a long way from me trying to beat some sense into you by any means possible," he said.

Seymour smiled back at him. "And if you hadn't succeeded, I don't know what I would have done . . . but I doubt it would have been good. Besides, isn't that part of an older brother's job?"

"Both of mine always seemed to think their job was forcing the blame for whatever their latest harebrained scheme happened to be off onto me," Braska said.

"Didn't know you even had brothers," Jecht said.

"And a sister, too," the Summoner admitted. "We haven't been on speaking terms since I married Anikka, though—they have the same opinion of the Al Bhed as the majority of Spirans. We're all outcasts and oddities here, I'm afraid," he added to Seymour's mother. "But your son is still one of us. He doesn't have to be alone anymore."

"You don't know how happy that makes me," she said, a single tear running down her face and becoming a pyrefly. "I . . . did you come here . . . for the Final Summoning?"

"No," Sephiroth said flatly. "We came here to put an end to Yunalesca's thousand-year deception. She's been pretending to fight Sin while actually conspiring to preserve it, holding Spira hostage for ten centuries."

"That is—" the fayth began to say, then cried out, her image wavering.

"Something you aren't permitted to speak of, I expect," Sephiroth said. "After all, it was Yunalesca who made you what you are. You most likely have the same limitations as the other fayth, even if you haven't realized it yet."

"Limitations . . . I . . . What did she do to us? What?"

"She did her best to ensure that no one would find out what she was doing, by doing . . . something . . . to the fayth that she and her followers created," I explained. "But locking down every single Unsent and ancient document was beyond even Yunalesca. Even though she's silenced you and the other fayth, we've been piecing together the truth."
"Tali," the fayth whispered, invoking the Guado forest goddess. "I thought I knew what I was doing when I brought my son here, but now . . . now you are telling me . . ."

"I'm sorry," Braska said. "It must be a great shock."

"In the end, it came out alright," Seymour said quietly. "Although I would rather have had those last few months with you than . . . this. But you will be the last Final Aeon. We are going to put an end to all of this. No one else is ever going to have to suffer because of Sin and Yunalesca and the legacy of a war that ended a thousand years ago." He smirked. "And I have to admit, I'd be lying if I claimed I didn't like the idea of the heads of all those fossils back in Guadosalam exploding when they find out I was involved."

His mother had a fond expression on her face as she shook her head. "Seymour . . ."

"I survived to grow up," her son said. "I've had some difficult experiences, but I'm mostly all right. I have friends. I have a future. You don't have to feel guilty anymore."

The fayth let out a soft, choked sob as her tears began to fall. Seymour made an abortive motion to embrace her, but stopped as his hand went right through her body.

"I wish we could have had those last few months," the fayth said at last.

Seymour nodded.

His mother ran a hand across her face. "Go now. Yunalesca is waiting for you inside, and she is impatient for someone a thousand years old. I'm surprised she hasn't already sent her lackey to see what's going on in here."

"We will return soon," Seymour said, and smiled at her.

The room beyond the far door was in better repair than the rest of the building, and well-lit, allowing us to see details of the ornamentation. It was also empty. Stairs on the far side led up to another door, and Sephiroth was beginning to lead us toward it when a figure materialized out of nothing. She was in the process of descending the steps, and coalesced out of pyreflies between one riser and the next.

She had what I suppose a man interested in women would regard as a finely-formed body. It was easy to tell, because she was wearing so little clothing that although technically—barely—not indecent, she would have been arrested if she'd gone out in public in Bevelle. Perhaps her hair was supposed to offer enough additional coverage to offset her costume. It fell all the way to her ankles, and if I had never met Sephiroth, I might have described it as silver, but it lacked the metallic sheen he displayed. Call it pale grey, then, shading to lavender here and there.

"I have been wondering for some years now," Seymour said, just as she opened her mouth. "Did women truly wander around the streets of Zanarkand dressed like that?"

"Not that I ever saw," Jecht responded. "Well, the beach, maybe. And the hired dancers at a couple of our victory parties weren't wearin' much more." He ogled the woman, who could only be Yunalesca, openly, and she scowled at him.

"Welcome to Zanarkand," she said, ignoring Jecht in favour of Braska. "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."

"Before that, we have some questions," Sephiroth said, interrupting what I suspected was a prepared speech.
Yunalesca gave him a glare, and then frowned when Braska nodded. "Very well. Ask."

"Was Sin intended to defend the illusion of Zanarkand Summoned by the fayth on Mount Gagazet?" Sephiroth apparently didn't intend to pull any punches.

"How is that relevant?" Yunalesca countered.

"Madam, if you intend to divert me from acquiring the last few pieces of information I need to complete my understanding of the situation, you will need to do far better than that. Or you could simply answer the question, and save us all time and effort." Sephiroth was wearing his granite face again, but his eyes were burning a cold green, pupils narrowed to slits. He was annoyed.

"Then, yes." She didn't elaborate, but Sephiroth seemed satisfied with that and moved on to his next question.

"Did Sin destroy the true Zanarkand?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Yunalesca gave my lover a hateful glare. "He lost control."

"Yu Yevon. Your father."

"Yes."

"He is the one maintaining Sin."

"Yes," she spat. "He no longer remembers the need to do anything else."

"So destroying the fayth on the mountain, and the Zanarkand they dream, would not cause him to stop maintaining Sin."

"He is no longer conscious enough for that."

"Sin is formed around an aeon which acts as its core, correct?"

The sudden change of topic made Yunalesca blink. "Yes."

"And each time a Summoner defeats it, their Final Aeon is taken as the new core. What happens, then, if Sin is defeated by a means other than the Final Aeon?"

"That is not possible."

"Pretend that it is," Sephiroth said.

Yunalesca blinked several times. "The nature of the Summoning would cause the aeon of the nearest available fayth to be drawn into it," she said after a period of contemplation.

"And if there were no other aeons anywhere in Spira?"

"I do not know."

The smile that crossed Sephiroth's face then worried me. "One final question. Have you intentionally been feeding your father other people's lives in order to perpetuate something that should have
vanished a thousand years ago?"

There was that hateful glare again. "The High Summoners bring hope to Spira. They allow the people to accept fate. Sin is an inevitable part of Spira's destiny."

"Sin is a lump of pyreflies that your father brought into existence through his foolishness," Sephiroth corrected. "It is neither eternal nor inevitable. It was made by human hands, and it can be destroyed in the same way. Would have been destroyed long ago, I suspect, if you had not been influencing Spira's people to place their hope in your false solution. You have been this world's jailer for a thousand years, but no longer." The silver-haired man reached over his shoulder, and Masamune suddenly gleamed in the space between him and the underclad woman. "There will be no more High Summoners, and no more Final Aeons. We will ensure that."

Sephiroth might be terrible at handling people in many ways, but someone had taught him how to make a speech, or perhaps his natural way of phrasing things was simply that dramatic. Yunalesca was so taken aback for a moment that she didn't even flinch away from the sword whose point was suddenly inches from her nose.

"Then it seems that we cannot be anything but enemies," Yunalesca said. "I must liberate you from your sorrow before you infect others."

Her figure began to pulse with light, drawing in a torrent of pyreflies, but the ensuing roar wasn't enough to drown out Sephiroth's answering words to her.

"Sorrow and despair don't end with death. You should know that as well as I."

Yunalesca's form as a fiend was even more difficult to describe than Vrokk's. Her human form was still there (and still mostly naked), but her hair became a sort of aura behind her, and . . . there were tentacles. From somewhere. Far too many to have been growing out of her spine, but that was what it looked like. Why was it that fiends were so fond of tails, tentacles, and other odd appendages?

As for why I was so obsessed with her personal geometry . . . I suppose it was to keep myself from running away gibbering. There was a psychic weight to this Yunalesca that made me want to cringe away from her. But Sephiroth didn't seem bothered, and I wasn't about to give him any indication that I was, either.

Inevitably, the first thing she did was attack Sephiroth. Inevitably, he danced away from the tentacles that somehow phased through the carpeted floor to strike up at him, counterattacking with Masamune. Yunalesca tried to slap the blade out of his hand, and got the tip of the offending tentacle sheared off instead, when it struck the edge of the blade a bit too firmly.

I attempted a Power Break, and felt it connect, but it seemed to have no effect. Grimly, I ran systematically through the other abilities of that class which I possessed, but only Magic Break worked. And Yunalesca didn't seem to be casting any spells just now.

Meanwhile, Seymour had run through all the elements and settled on Waterga, as he often did—it had the fewest side effects of any elemental spell. Jecht was blocking Yunalesca's appendages with his sword and muttering about "tentacle porn", whatever that was. And Braska was casting Protect on everyone.

We needed to get past those tentacles. No, correction: I needed to get past those tentacles. Sephiroth's speed allowed him to adopt a hit-and-run strategy, and Seymour's spells were making it through as often as not, but I couldn't close without getting stabbed or slapped. Well, I could take a lot of punishment, and I was the only one here with more than token armour. I would just have to bull
through it.

Or so I thought. I should have known it would turn out to be a mistake to pit my strength against Yunalesca's.

I was doing well enough at first as I blocked tentacles with my sword or dodged them by twisting to the side—I might not cover distance as fast as someone who went unarmoured and used a lighter weapon, but I could twist and turn with the best of them. Then . . . well. My sword broke when I tried to block the next attack. Sephiroth had been right. I had outgrown the damned thing. And apparently, I'd used up my quota of luck for that day. One of the shards bounced back at me and carved a furrow down my face, straight across my eye, oh gods (don't think about it right now), as it spun away.

I overbalanced backward and fell onto a tentacle. Clanking around the wilderness in a suit of plate wasn't an option, so I only had strategic leather patches protecting me in the back, and this time, they weren't enough. It went in at an angle, came out the other side, and Leviathan, it hurt.

"Auron!"

The hilt-shard of my sword was falling from my slack fingers. Sephiroth was there, cutting the tentacles away behind me and grabbing me by the shoulders, before it had hit the ground. He swung me up into his arms—why had I never realized he was strong enough to heave a grown man of my size around like a doll?—and carried me over to Braska.

"Make sure he stays alive until I finish this, even if you can't heal him," Sephiroth said as he laid me down. He was . . . angry. So angry. Not hiding it behind his familiar granite expression. "Don't concern yourself with the fight. Any of you."

"Are you sure?" Braska asked, his hands already moving to cast Curaga.

There was an ominous pressure in the air.

"Yunalesca has just made her last mistake," Sephiroth said in a dark tone. Pyreflies swirled around him as he walked away.

I still had part of a Yunalesca tentacle sticking out of me. On the one hand, it was keeping me from bleeding out, but on the other, I wasn't going to heal around it. Braska was on his third Curaga. His face was white. At least his spells had lessened the pain, even if they weren't fixing very much of the mess Yunalesca had made of me . . . my eye . . . If I lived through this, I was going to have to retrain from the beginning if I ever wanted to be any kind of swordsman again. Assuming I could learn to compensate for such a loss at all.

"I don't . . . I think most of your liver is just . . . gone," he said. "Even if you don't bleed to death, I don't see how you can survive more than a couple of days."

"I'm hoping for one more miracle," I managed to say as Jecht and Seymour came running over. "Or I'll haunt all of you as an Unsent. For now, though, prop me up so I can see what he's doing."

"Auron . . ."

I took Braska's hand and squeezed it. Shock hadn't yet stolen all the strength from my limbs, although I could feel it encroaching.

"Please," I repeated. "Prop me up."
This time, he did.

Sephiroth was just positioning himself directly in front of Yunalesca. A line of bloody tentacle-tips which had been violently disconnected from their owner marked the path he had taken to get there.

"Why do you rage so?" Yunalesca asked suddenly. "You will soon join him."

"Auron is not going anywhere. Nor am I. You, on the other hand, are not much longer for this world." Sephiroth's voice was taut with anger, and there was a wind swirling about him, laden with pyreflies, playing with his hair and . . . I stared as his feet visibly lifted off the ground. "I have been fighting you on a human scale up to this point. From here I will not be so kind."

I seemed paralyzed, unable to make a sound as a single black wing unfurled from my lover's right shoulder, pyreflies catching among the feathers and making it glow eerily. A larger swirl of tiny lights still eddied around him almost lazily, but there was nothing lazy about his expression, or about the way the floor crumbled in a straight line from the shockwave as he brought Masamune down. Yunalesca shrieked as a mass of tentacles were severed and fell away. Her misshapen form was leaning to one side. Then Sephiroth evened it out with another shockwave.

Yunalesca screamed. Then she regained her composure. "If you will fight with all your strength, then so will I!"

Her form mutated again, into something far less human: a behemoth-sized head with hair made of giant, skull-tipped tentacles. Sephiroth's face displayed utter contempt.

"Your humanity is of so little value to you that you would become a thing like that? Clearly, someone should have killed you long ago."

Yunalesca cast some kind of spell at him—I wasn't even sure what it was. It splashed against the whirl of pyreflies surrounding Sephiroth, and fell away without touching him. In return, he held up his right hand. Pyreflies gathered into a burningly intense globe of light in his leather-gloved palm, then shot towards Yunalesca in graceless silence.

When it struck, a sphere-shaped area around her went white, then black, and began to collapse in on itself, still in eerie soundlessness. It, and everything inside it—Yunalesca included—contracted down to a tiny pinpoint, then exploded outward with a roar. Sephiroth appeared unmoved, still floating in midair with his feet off the ground as the blast of hot wind whipped at his hair.

Yunalesca was a mess at this point, leaking pyreflies everywhere. The giant head and the skull-snakes evaporated, leaving her on her hands and knees in human form, her breathing loud and harsh as she tilted her head up to glare at Sephiroth.

"What are you? Not human . . . No living mortal could do this, could be this."

"Not entirely human," Sephiroth corrected. "I am still learning the limits of my power, but I discovered long ago that I am stronger than you."

Yunalesca managed a cracked laugh. "And you think you are strong enough to go against Sin?"

"It appears that I will have to be." Sephiroth dropped back to the floor and folded his wing against his back. The wing didn't disappear, however, and pyreflies still swirled around him as he moved toward her, raising Masamune. "If you have any last words, best voice them now."

"If you fail, there will be no hope for anyone in Spira," she said, still staring at him.
"If I fail, someone else will eventually succeed," Sephiroth corrected. "Humanity is not as weak as you paint it."

Yunalesca closed her eyes. "Zaon, forgive me, for I cannot hold. It seems that I will soon rejoin whatever remains of you after all, my love, and leave Spira to its fate."

Sephiroth brought his sword down, and Yunalesca disintegrated into pyreflies that flared and vanished into nothing instead of trickling away, the scattered bits of tentacle dissolving along with her main form.

That included the one spearing through me, and Braska and Seymour began frantically casting Curaga as a stream of blood flowed from the hole it left behind. I clapped my hand over it, of course, but that helped even less. But then a swirl of pyreflies slid between my fingers and into the wound. I could feel them expanding inside, blocking the ruptured blood vessels, and the bleeding slowed to a trickle, then to nothing.

Sephiroth knelt beside me, setting Masamune aside on the floor. His right arm wrapped around my shoulders, replacing Braska's left. That lone black wing wrapped around me as well, and I smiled, because the feathers were warm, and I was starting to get cold.

"I'm afraid I don't have a tearful deathbed confession to offer," I said, looking up into his face. "Just an apology. I'm sorry I've been giving you the cold shoulder for the last couple of days. I was too afraid of losing you. I never expected it might end up the other way around. I'll do my best to come back as Unsent, but if I don't—"

His finger pressed against my lips, silencing me. "You're not going to die."

"Sephiroth, he's too badly injured. There's no way he can be healed with so many organs so badly compromised. I wish I could agree with you, but we need to face facts." Braska sounded like . . . No, he was crying. Over me? What a waste.

The silver-haired man drew in a shaky breath. "Pyreflies can take on physical substance. We've seen that; we've fought things, touched things, that were created out of motes of light and energy. A liver, a kidney . . . they aren't just parts of the body, they're physical objects. Therefore, someone who understands their structure should be able to recreate them."

Jecht's eyes went wide. "Shit, you're serious."

Sephiroth looked down at me, and in his face I could see a combination of terror and fury and determination, all tightly bottled up. "You'll be relying on my ability to remember exactly what a liver is and does, and if I mess it up, I still might kill you."

"I'll take the risk," I said. "Do it." I trust you."

His left hand joined my blood-slick one where it pressed against the open mouth of the wound, and pyreflies spun around us, wrapping the two of us up together in a glowing cocoon. Some of them were slipping between my fingers again, going inside my body to shore things up. It was so quiet that I could clearly hear the rapid rhythm of my own breathing. I was cold where Sephiroth's wing wasn't folded around me, and thirsty (why was I even noticing that?), and everything hurt . . .

"Auron. Let go. You don't need to stay awake. Everything will be fine."

"People who die in their sleep never return as Unsent," I pointed out.

"I'll wake you if it looks like it's going to come to that."
"I'll hold you to that." It was getting harder and harder to talk.

"If I fail, I'll deserve to have you haunt me."

"Mmh," was as much of a response as I could manage.

I let the world fade away as I sank bonelessly into the warm support of his wing.

Chapter End Notes

Auron should have known that heading into a major boss battle without patching up the quarrel was a flag. ;P

I considered having Sephiroth go full Safer mode on Yunalesca's ass, but in the end, I decided that was a bit much.

And Auron is damned lucky that Sephiroth grew up in a bio lab, because if I recall correctly, livers are bloody complicated and do a lot of different things.
Chapter 32

Waking up was . . . not quite what I would have expected, if I'd been in any shape to expect anything when I'd lost consciousness. I was lying on a bed, I could tell that much, although it wasn't quite like the beds I was accustomed to. The mattress swung from side to side just a little as I shifted. I was covered over with something that was light but almost too warm.

Opening my eyes showed me an odd room, with one curved wall made of wooden latticework with something else that I wasn't quite sure of filling in the holes, and two straight not-quite-walls . . . some kind of hanging blanket or tapestry? An oil lamp dangled from wooden roof-beams. And the thing lying on top of me was a layer of black feathers. I went to prop myself up on my elbow, and it pushed me back down with unexpected force, solid bone and muscle hidden under the feathers . . .

The recent past came rushing suddenly back, and with a jolt, I realized that the thing covering me was Sephiroth's wing. And that, although the right side of my face felt tight and ached a bit, I could see clearly out of both eyes. I managed to worm a hand out from under the wing, and traced the line of the scar down my cheekbone with my fingers. A straight cut, like a few others I had, not some massive furrow. Probably still inflamed, definitely sensitive.

Pressure against my belly with the other hand told me that I ached there, too, but there were no bandages and no open wound. And . . . well, I was alive, and not feeling too bad, all things considered. And my hand looked like it was its normal colour, as far as I could tell by the light of the unfamiliar lamp—liver failure caused jaundice, didn't it?

The trick to getting out from under that wing, I discovered, was to slide out, rather than try to lift it off of me. I worked my way awkwardly over the head of the bed and immediately fell on my rump on the floor, jarring my tender insides. Fortunately, the bed was less than a foot off the ground, formed of a thin mattress suspended by ropes from a frame, which explained the swaying. Unfortunately, I was still sitting there looking like an idiot when someone brushed aside one of the walls—I'd been right about it being some kind of hanging—and entered the room. Seymour. Well, it shouldn't surprise him too much to see me looking like a fool.

"I thought I heard someone moving around in here," he said. "Welcome back. How do you feel?"

"Like I did too many sit-ups and then got punched in the face," I said, turning to look at him more fully. The half-Guado sucked in a startled breath.

"Your eye is the wrong colour," he said.

I chuckled. "If that's the only thing wrong with it, I'll consider myself the luckiest man alive. He . . . rebuilt that too, didn't he?" I nodded at the bed where Sephiroth still lay sprawled on his left side, with the lamp casting a golden glow over his pallor.

"Yes. It took him nearly six hours to finish . . . fixing . . . you, and then he somehow managed to carry you here and strip both of you of your boots and outer clothing before he collapsed. That was about a day and a half ago."

"Where are we?" I asked, pushing myself to my feet, although the floor was unexpectedly warm, more than I would have expected even with the thick rugs I was now standing on.

"The Ronso settlement at the mouth of the Gagazet pass. Jecht found a set of teleport pads, like the ones in Yojimbo's cave, and managed to reactivate them while the rest of us were working on you."
He's also the one who thought to collect everyone's packs."

"I'll have to thank him," I said, taking stock. I was wearing bloodstained trousers and nothing else, although there was a shadowy mass in one corner of the room that might include clothes and packs. Masamune was just visible on the far side of the bed, sunk into the carpet, now that I was looking for it. Positioned so that Sephiroth could easily reach down and grab it. As for me, well, I was going to need a new sword. I touched my face absently.

Sephiroth, still asleep, frowned suddenly and twitched his wing, then reached for what had been my side of the bed. Finding nothing there seemed to push him down the path to wakefulness. His eyes opened and he rolled to his feet, somehow grabbing Masamune along the way. Upon seeing me and Seymour, he relaxed slightly and put the sword up across his back—he’d kept his harness on, in addition to his trousers.

"Are you all right?" he asked me—well, more like "demanded". "Can you see?"

"Out of both eyes," I said, trying for a reassuring smile. "I just feel like I overdid a practice session yesterday."

"Thank the Goddess." His shoulders . . . weren't quite slumping, I decided, but it might be the greatest instantaneous relaxation I'd ever seen in him. "I wasn't sure . . . the liver supports so damnably many functions, and you had other organs torn up as well . . ." He pulled his usual nighttime braid forward over his shoulder and began to unravel it. "I should also warn you that I have no idea what the long-term effects of all this are going to be. Whether the pyreflies will stay where I put them. Whether your own cells will displace them when they regrow—which they should, to some extent—and if they do, whether the pyreflies will evaporate through your skin when they're no longer needed, or diffuse through the rest of your body. Or what effect that might have."

"We'll find out," I said. "Right now I'm just glad to be alive." A horrible thought crossed my mind. "Assuming that I am alive, and not some bizarre new kind of Unsent."

Seymour took in a deep breath through his nose. "You don't smell at all dead," he said. "Not quite the same as you used to, but definitely not dead."

"Thank you." At that moment, my stomach growled.

Sephiroth smiled one of his tiny smiles and said, "A medic I knew during the Wutai War once told me that if one of his patients felt hungry, it was usually a good sign."

"It's the middle of the afternoon, but the Ronso left us their idea of a light snack," Seymour said. "Although I hope you like mountain goat cheese. It seems to be a major component of their diet here."

"Right now, I could eat a shoopuf," I admitted. "We'll join you as soon as I'm not half-naked."

"We'll be waiting," the half-Guado said, and disappeared back through the wall-curtain.

When the curtain had settled again, Sephiroth fluffed his wing out slightly, then folded it in . . . and in . . . and in, until it disappeared.

"Is the wing the reason your right shoulder is so sensitive?" I asked, poking through the mess in the corner until I found my pack and hauled it out. It was under Sephiroth's coat, which I tossed on the bed.

"Probably. It doesn't bother you?" Sephiroth reached down to pick up his coat, but he was watching
Deliberately, I shrugged. "No more than your eyes and hair do. Or Rufus' hands, or Gurrik's fur. It's just part of what you are. Although I have to wonder... is it really good for anything?" Shirt, shirt... with a grimace, I picked the least dirty one and pulled it over my head. It would have to do for now.

"Other than a blanket, a sail, or possibly a scoop for diffuse materials? Not that I've found. I certainly can't fly with it alone—I need to apply magical energy for that. But it tends to extend itself involuntarily if I try to... exert more than a certain amount of direct control over pyreflies or similar energies." A quick, restless movement, and Sephiroth had his coat on and Masamune back in place over it. He moved to put his boots on, finding them in the pile by some mechanism that I certainly didn't understand.

"Can you extend it voluntarily?" I asked.

"Yes...?"

"Then I'd like a better look at it later. Right now, I'm too hungry."

His smile flickered into being again for a moment. "Very well."

Pushing through the wall-curtain placed us in a high-ceilinged room lit by several more oil lamps. It contained a brazier, a low table, cushions... and the other three members of our party. Seymour and Braska were on their feet, and Jecht was sort of lounging among the cushions, spinning a blitzball he'd picked up somewhere on the tip of one finger.

"Welcome back, both of you," Braska said, smiling.

"It's good to be back," I admitted. "Rufus said something about food."

Braska gestured at the table. I hadn't noticed the tray of sausage, flatbread, and cheese (more cheese than anything else, as Seymour had warned) at first, but now I didn't know how I could have missed it. I sat down immediately, and cut some of the cheese with the knife our hosts had provided.

"Sephiroth," Braska said, taking on a serious tone. "I think it's time you told us about your plan. I assume, from what you said to Yunalesca, that you now have one."

Sephiroth nodded. "You should be able to assemble the bare bones from the questions I asked her, and her answers. Destroying Sin requires us to apply a considerable amount of force without calling upon the Final Aeon, while ensuring there are no other aeons for it to take over and use to regenerate itself. Once we've dealt with Sin itself, we ensure Yu Yevon, whatever may be left of him, is also thoroughly and permanently dead."

"And how're we gonna hit it hard enough without the Final Aeon, genius?" Jecht asked. "Plus, all those fayths up on the mountain're gonna take a long time to junk just using a pickaxe and a crowbar."

"Shouldn't you be protesting more? It's your city that's going to be destroyed along with those fayths. But Jecht kept his eyes trained on my lover.

Sephiroth grimaced. "There is a spell called Meteor. Auron should remember seeing it on my sphere grid at the Thunder Plains Travel Agency. Until then, I didn't realize I'd learned it well enough to cast it, since I had done so only once before, and the materia is no longer in my possession."

"You don't look too happy about it," Braska said.
"Meteor draws a large chunk of rock down from the heavens—by 'large' I mean larger than Sin itself, and by the time it reaches the ground, it's white-hot and moving extremely fast. The one time I cast it previously, the Lifestream itself erupted to defend Gaia against it . . . and as a result, it only succeeded in destroying Midgar, a city similar in size to ancient Zanarkand. I have been considering it as a potential weapon against Sin since before we reached Lake Macalania, but in addition to the minor problem of accidentally destroying the world if I mishandle it, it has a number of other defects. They are not insurmountable, but this will require a more complex plan than just firing the spell at Sin and hoping for the best."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense," Jecht drawled.

A muscle in Sephiroth's cheek twitched. "First, Meteor requires more energy than I can muster from my own resources. I can supplement my mental energy by using pyreflies, but that limits the locations where I could cast the spell to those with a high pyrefly concentration: the Moonflow, Guadosalam, Yojimbo's cave, and the Zanarkand ruins are those I know of that meet the criteria. We will have to lure Sin to a specific area—ideally, the hills above Zanarkand in the direction of the fayth—several weeks after the spell is cast. It has an extremely long lead time, which is more of a nuisance than an obstacle in this case. Secondly, we will have to destroy the other fayth before embarking on this. Meteor itself will take out the Gagazet fayth when it lands. Yojimbo and Rufus' mother—my apologies, but we have no choice in that—should be easy to destroy, as will Valefor and Ifrit, as the island temples are not seriously defended. Ixion and Shiva will be more difficult, and Bahamut almost impossible. Our first task, therefore, must be a raid on the temple in Bevelle. That will gain us the enmity of the Church of Yevon, but we will still need someone to help us lure Sin into position after meteor is cast. Thirdly, I have no idea if I can cast Meteor delicately enough to keep from destroying Spira, and the technology needed to monitor the rock once it's in motion was likely destroyed at around the time of Sin's creation."

"You want one of those astronomer guys," Jecht said. "With a honking big telescope."

A silver brow rose. "That would be ideal, yes. If we knew how much force the rock was likely to produce on landing, it would be possible to counter it to some extent if it were excessive."

"Well, there's one place you can still find someone like that: Zanarkand. My Zanarkand, that is. Dunno about the telescope, though. I'm pretty sure they're difficult to move."

"They are," Sephiroth confirmed. Then, "I'm surprised you're not railing against this."

Jecht shrugged. "I've had a while to think about it since we ran into those fayth. And nothing's changed. It's still us or everyone else, y'know? We're—my Zanarkand is—killing people just by existing, pretty much, 'cause Sin won't go away while we're still around. I don't wanna die. I mean, who does? And I don't want my family to die. But I don't want little Yuna to die either, or you guys, or those hopeless blitzers from Besaid, or, like, anyone. I might be an ass sometimes, but I know you can't always have everything you want, and I can't just go back to playing blitz back home like none of this crazy pilgrimage thing ever happened. Living a lie. And I'm not fucked up enough to kill a bunch of people to prop up a lie. Even if it's a lie I love. Helping you guys end it is the right thing to do, even if it hurts like a son of a bitch."

I winced, I have to admit. Ever since I'd met Jecht, I'd been thinking of him as shallow and disreputable. Even when he showed a flash of kindness, of humanity, of—dare I say it—nobility, it soon disappeared again, drowned under the flood tides of ego and triviality. Or maybe I just thought that because I kept trying to force him to conform to my first impression of him. But this . . . Would I have been strong enough to do this? Would any of us? If it had been me, if I had been asked to destroy Bevelle and my mother and even Sephiroth so that Jecht's Zanarkand could survive . . .
I couldn't have done it. I'd lost that unerring, almost childlike sense of "the right thing to do" long ago. All that was left were muddier, more selfish considerations. Protect those I loved, those I respected. Fight those that hurt them.

Jecht and Braska were the only two people I'd ever met who were willing to give everything up for a greater good that offered them no advantage. Even Sephiroth... his was, in some respect, a quest for redemption, raw and deeply personal. Selfish, in the sense that he was doing it as much to atone for his own past as to help others.

Right now, I felt very small. I hadn't realized before that in some senses, I was the weakest person here.

"Assuming that there is a suitable person inside the fayths' dream of Zanarkand, how do we go about getting them out to the real Spira?" Seymour was saying.

Jecht grimaced. "Either I go back to the fayths on the mountain, or we've gotta find Sin. That's where that squirt Bahamut said my path back was, remember? Through Sin. I dunno if you guys can go with me, though. My guess would be 'probably not', but Sephy keeps surprising me about stuff like that."

"I wouldn't risk it," Sephiroth said. "If you go alone, how long do you think it will take to find an appropriate astronomer and bring him back?"

Jecht shrugged. "Assuming I don't screw up 'cause I know jack-all about astronomers? Few days, maybe. Science types like that are always strapped for cash, right? And cash is something I've got plenty of. Wave a big fat donation under their noses, and they'll follow me anywhere. The tough part's gonna be finding which one to ask, and then getting out of there again with him and his gear. Or her, or whatever."

"And in the meanwhile, the rest of us will be hunting fayths," Sephiroth said. "We will need a safe meeting place. I would also like better transport... a ship, at least..." He fell silent, frowning.

"We should contact the Al Bhed," Braska said. "If we're going to be running around destroying fayths, Bikanel Island would be the safest place to use as a base. Yevon has no presence there."

"Got some walkin' to do, then," Jecht said. "Bet the Ronso don't have a phone, so we get to go all the way down to the nearest trading post."

"We'll start tomorrow," my lover said. "We need to make sure we have enough supplies. And find Auron a new sword."

"That isn't going to be easy," I said. I'd never met a Ronso who used any weapon other than a spear. "We may have to wait until we get to the Crusaders' headquarters."

"If we have to, you can borrow my sword and I'll use a spear, 'kay?" Jecht said. "I'm probably just as bad with either."

"Thanks," I said, although the thought of using Jecht's sword didn't thrill me. He hadn't known a damned thing about weapons when he'd chosen it, so it was an awkward blade even by heavy sword standards. Still, I had to give him credit for trying.

As it turned out, I didn't need to take him up on his offer. When we asked, one of the Ronso admitted that they sometimes gathered the weapons of those who didn't make it over Gagazet before building cairns over the bodies. Summoners' staves were often left as grave markers, but metal weapons were too valuable for trade to be abandoned that way.
The selection wasn't wonderful, mind you. It was piled at the back of an older yurt (I'd finally figured out that we'd woken up inside a yurt, less than a normal solid-walled building but more than a tent) that was used as a general armoury. The spears at the front had racks, but the swords were lying on the floor. Most were tarnished or rusty . . . and what was a spiked blitzball doing in here anyway? I couldn't see how it would make an effective weapon. You'd have to throw it with immense force.

In the end, we were able to pull eight heavy swords out of the mess, but once we discarded the common Knight Blades (one rusted past use), elemental-infused swords, and the like, there was exactly one left. It was tarnished and had probably been lying there for a good few years, but I knew I was going to take it the moment I put my hand on the hilt, because Riot Blades were rare, and Riot Blades with deathstrike were even rarer. It also had stonestrike, poisonstrike, and silencestrike—a deadly combination. I was going to have to be careful not to cut myself with it. Or anyone else I didn't want to kill, for that matter.

Sephiroth's hand touched the hilt briefly beside mine. "I can see that I'm going to have to generate a new set of materia before our next sparring match. I don't have the ones I'd need to block the death and stone aspects of this."

"You can do that with materia too?" I propped the weapon against the wall and started digging through a pile of scabbards—the Riot Blade had a hook at the end that my old sword had lacked, so I couldn't reuse the one I'd had.

He nodded. "It's a flexible system, if occasionally cumbersome. Unfortunately, defending against that combination of effects requires a set of four materia, all of which are fairly rare, although that hardly matters when I'm creating them myself."

"Still, it sounds better than having to decide on the effects when you buy your armour," I said.

"No less expensive, though—an Added Effect materia normally costs a hundred thousand gil, and I'm going to need two for this. And a Contain, which would normally not be for sale at any price."

"It's a good thing none of that has to come out of our travel funds," I said, at last finding what had to have been the Riot Blade's original sheath. A hundred thousand gil wasn't an impossible sum for a good fighter to accumulate, but it represented a lot of dead flame flans.

"Indeed."

It took me a couple of hours to rehabilitate the sword, polishing the tarnish away and sharpening the edge, but I didn't mind. It was something to do while I still ached too much to want to go out and hunt fiends in the thin, cold air. I did force myself to run through a few basic katas with my new weapon to get used to its balance, but the whole time, I couldn't help feeling that there was something else subtly off. As though the pyreflies that had colonized my abdomen weighed less than the flesh-and-blood organs they had replaced, perhaps.

I also managed to get a look at myself in the polished side of my sword. The details were a bit distorted by the slight irregularities of a surface that had never been intended as a mirror, but I could tell that Seymour had been right about my eye: it was unmistakably the wrong colour, a sort of pale blue-grey that was almost no colour at all. The streak of the scar, still pink and fresh, slashed right across the lids, running from my forehead almost to the corner of my mouth. And I really did need a shave. I was on the verge of going from stubbled to having an actual beard.

That last, at least, I could remedy. I set a pan of snow on the brazier in our yurt to melt and warm, while I dug out razor, brush, and soap.
The scar was just slightly raised, enough so that I cut myself worse than I had since I was an adolescent learning to deal with my first growth of peach fuzz, but a quick Cure spell took care of that. I was starting to wonder how I had ever managed without materia. Even if—perhaps especially though—I had been mostly using it outside of combat, magic could be useful in so many ways.

Still, even though I’d done my best to clean up, I was a little surprised when that night, after we’d retreated to our "bedroom" along one edge of the yurt, Sephiroth kissed me with tender appreciation . . . and then withdrew abruptly.

"Auron? What's wrong?" The subtle expression in his eyes was . . . Was I wrong in reading that as "hurt"?

I shook my head. "I suppose I can't believe you still want me now that I've managed to ruin my good looks." I’d never thought of myself as vain, and yet it did prick at me a little, knowing that everyone who looked at me from now on would see the slash across my eye, the mark of how I'd almost gotten myself—gotten us all—killed because I hadn't noticed that my sword was suffering from metal fatigue.

"And I can't believe you haven't pulled away from me, now that you've found out just how much of a freak I am. Nor did I accept you because of your appearance. I don't find your scars unsightly at all, this one included." He traced a featherlight line over my cheekbone with one knuckle.

"I suppose we're both fools, then," I said, putting one arm around his waist and leaning into him. "If I weren't so sore, I'd throw you down and ravish you. With your permission, of course."

"We'd make too much noise, anyway. This place isn't exactly soundproof. I have no intention of giving our hosts a show."

"I don't either," I admitted. "But . . ."

"Mmm?"

"Don't bother laying out the blankets. Your wing's warmer."

The flicker of his smile was worth any embarrassment I might have felt.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

NSFW chapter. I think this was the last one.

Unfortunately, I didn't get to enjoy the warmth of Sephiroth's wing very often during our trek back across the Calm Lands, since we were all stuffed into the confines of the tent every night. We didn't even stop in at the Crusaders' headquarters, because we weren't sure how they would react if they found out what had really happened. The Ronso had just assumed we had failed the pilgrimage, although they'd honoured us for trying.

It took a couple of days for my abdomen to stop being quite so tender, and for me to start feeling at home inside my skin again. I was also starting to get used to the Riot Blade, and the way a single strike with it could kill most common fiends. It felt lighter in my hands than my old sword, and I wondered whether it was because it really did weigh less, or I'd gotten that much stronger. It did seem as though I was the tiniest amount faster. And pyreflies tingled through my veins whenever I pushed myself . . . or was that just my imagination?

The travel agency hadn't changed, still a pale lump sitting in the middle of the now-snow-dusted brown grasses. It took a long conversation in Al Bhed for Braska to convince the counterman to let him use whatever machina communications device they had hidden away in the back. And then we settled in to wait.

It took three days for us to get an answer, and when it came, it wasn't in a form any of us had expected.

We woke up that morning, not long after dawn, to the sound of someone yelling, "Yencreb! Yencreb!" outside the window.

"What's he saying?" I muttered sleepily to Sephiroth.

"'Airship'," my lover muttered back. Then he jerked and sat up, depriving me of the nice warm wing that had been draped over me. "They have an airship? Interesting. I wonder if Braska knew." He reached for his clothes, and I sighed and sat up and began dressing too. We'd effectively been sleeping in anyway, enjoying the luxury of not having to stand watch.

"What," I asked as I pulled on my boots, "is an 'airship'?"

"Exactly what the name suggests: a large vessel that floats in the air. It moves somewhat faster than a chocobo, aided by the fact that it can almost always head for its destination in a straight line, without worrying about the terrain. If the Al Bhed have one, it will make travel much more convenient."

"And if they don't want to let us use it?"

"I may just steal it. I am that tired of Spira's primitive transportation."

I snorted, recognizing his idea of a joke.
An airship, I discovered when we went outside, looked like a large, stubby white cylinder with one rounded end, one finned end, and a sort of cabin dangling underneath it. The Al Bhed staff of the travel agency were busy mooring multiple lines to deep-sunk posts that I had thought were for hitching chocobos. Apparently not.

Once everything was tied down to their satisfaction, one of the Al Bhed signaled the airship with broad gestures, and someone threw a rope ladder over the side. It was long enough for its end to slap the ground. A moment later, someone started climbing down. He was about halfway when I recognized Cid.

"Huh. It ain't as fancy as the ones from *my* Zanarkand, but I guess it'll do." Apparently, the commotion had woken everyone, because Jecht had emerged from the travel agency a few minutes behind Seymour and Braska.

"*It is* from Zanarkand," Cid said as he approached us. "Or at least, that's what we figure. Found it on the bottom of the ocean, so there wasn't a heck of a lot of documentation."

"And you managed to get it in the air again? I'm impressed—and curious as to how much of it is still made from the original parts," Sephiroth said.

Cid laughed and rubbed the back of his head. "Yeah, you've got me there. We had three of those ships to start with, and most of the parts weren't good for anything except patterns. Hell, a few were so bad we had to recreate them by guesswork. Took us years, and this is just a rough prototype that isn't half as fast as the one we're planning out now is going to be. Anyway," he added, going sober. "I understand from Braska that you guys need my help with something. Something big."

"If you consider the final destruction of Sin to be 'big'," Sephiroth said. "We have a plan, but its success may end up hinging on whether or not we can keep ahead of the Yevonites. Your airship would be ideal for it, both as transport and as a mobile base."

Cid whistled soundlessly. "Yeah, that would be big, all right. Let's go inside, and you can tell me what you have in mind."

It was Sephiroth who explained, in the dry, spare prose of a military report. Not the most engaging delivery, perhaps, but clear and precise. When he'd finished, Cid leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands.

"Okay, so . . . This all hinges on you guys destroying the fayths, right? Seems like a crying shame, but I've got to admit that it's one of the few things no one who's gone after Sin has ever tried. And getting to all the fayths means you've got to get from Bevelle to Macalania to Djose to the islands ahead of news and reinforcements. Just one problem with that: the Church has the same communications stuff we do—we pick up bits of their messages sometimes. It's for the real high ranks only, but the maesters and temple high priests all have access."

"So we're going to have to hit Bevelle, Macalania, and Djose all at once," Sephiroth said with a frown. "The islands have no effective defenses, so it doesn't matter whether they're on alert or not, but Macalania in particular could collapse the temple entrance and keep us out indefinitely unless I want to risk teleportation. We're going to have to split up." He hesitated for half a second before adding, "Myself to Bevelle, Auron to Macalania, and Rufus to Djose, I think. Jecht should be in Zanarkand by then."

"No," Braska said suddenly. "We can't just smash the fayth without explaining why to them, and Auron . . ."
"I have no way of waking them up," I provided when he seemed to be fumbling for words.

Cid snorted. "That's easy to fix. Braska'll just have to go with you."

"I . . ." Braska began, then stopped. Shook his head. "We get Yuna out of Bevelle first. And warn Auron's mother. Those things aren't negotiable."

I couldn't believe I hadn't thought about the risk to my mother. Never thought about the repercussions my angering the Church might have for my loved ones . . . although really, there weren't many left other than her. Kinoc, but he'd be able to talk his way out of it. Possibly even without using his ever-increasing pile of blackmail material on the higher Church officials.

Thankfully, even the long arm of the Church of Yevon couldn't reach the family or friends of anyone else here, since they couldn't raise the dead or reach into other worlds or the fayths' dream. We could have ended up having to evacuate dozens or hundreds of people . . . to where? Bikanel?

"No reason Yuna shouldn't get to know her uncle and her cousins, right?" Cid was saying. "Bet she and Rikku'll get along like a house on fire. Bet the Yevonites'll be glad not to have to worry about her anymore, too."

"Thank you," Braska said, his tone one of relief.

Cid waved a hand. "Don't mention it. Yuna's welcome any time. Fitting in your monk friend's old lady might be a bit more of a problem, though."

"She probably won't want to leave Bevelle," I admitted. "But we do need to warn her, so that she knows enough not to answer the door if Church troops come knocking."

"If we're going to enter Bevelle beforehand, we need to do it quietly," Sephiroth said. "Cid, can you transfer Braska and Auron to an ocean-going ship somewhere off Bevelle, so that they can enter via the harbour without attracting too much attention? For obvious reasons, Rufus and I can't go."

"We both stand out too much," Seymour agreed. "But what of Jecht?"

"We find Sin first and drop him off. I'm afraid someone's going to have to follow Sin from a distance and keep an eye out for his return," Sephiroth said to Cid.

The Al Bhed sighed. "You're really putting us to work, aren't you? But if it helps get rid of Sin, I'll do it. Be crazy not to."

"Thank you," Braska said, with a smile.

Cid shrugged. "Least I can do. And it's good to see you not chasing after death for a change."

"Are you sure I'm not?" Braska asked. "You have to admit, this is a ridiculously risky enterprise. There are a hundred different ways we could die doing this."

"Could die isn't will die. That's the difference. Look, you and little Yuna are all I've got left of my sister. I want to see you both live the long, happy life she didn't get."

"That isn't what you said when you threw Akkina and I out of Home."

"I've got a temper, okay?! Truth is, I didn't mean half of what I said that day. I was just pissed off. Thought Akkina had lost her mind. Didn't stop and think about it until afterwards." Cid was a bit flushed as he rubbed the back of his head. "Anyway, pack your bags and come up to the airship. I've
Climbing a rope ladder that dangled freely in the air was . . . a novel experience. Once I got above a certain height, it took a great deal of willpower to force myself to keep climbing, especially when a gust of wind would make the damned thing sway. It was, I decided, just something I would have to get used to. Only Sephiroth and Cid were able to calmly climb up to the airship as though the ladder had been metal and securely bolted in place.

Once I had something solid under my feet again, though, the view from the airship was fascinating. The circular craters from old battles against Sin that pockmarked the Calm Lands were clearly visible from that high up, as were the flocks of wild chocobos and the occasional nomad yurt villages or groups of hunting Crusaders. And, of course, the larger fiends, although I could infer the locations of some of the smaller ones as well, based on what the chocobos were doing.

Someone shook me by the shoulder. "Auron."

"Sorry."

"It's all right. I suppose it must seem magical, in its way, to someone from a world where air travel isn't routine."

"Could you . . . I don't know what the word is . . . steer one of these? An airship?" I asked—he did seem to know a great deal about them, after all.

Sephiroth's eyebrows rose. "A Gaian-made one, under calm conditions, certainly. I wouldn't want to try it with this one until I'd had the chance to study the controls. Truth be told, we didn't use airships all that much except as portable bases or for heavy cargo transport—heavier-than-air vehicles were always quicker and more efficient. If also more prone to fall out of the sky if the person at the controls doesn't know what they're doing. In any case, Cid has assigned us cabins. You may want to move your pack to ours." He nodded at where I'd left the thing huddled on the deck in a lump of waterproofed canvas. I picked it up and gestured for him to lead the way.

The layout of the airship was quite simple, I discovered: engine at the rear, command area at the front, and two levels of straight hallways in between, with rooms off to either side. The rooms themselves were . . . compact, with storage built in above and below the bunks, and no other furniture except a fold-down shelf that could serve as a temporary desk or table. There were common shower and laundry rooms, and really, I was surprised they had enough water aboard to manage even that much.

"Home sweet home," I said dryly, sitting down on the edge of the bunk, which was wide enough to accommodate two people only if they were in love.

"For the time being, anyway," Sephiroth said, laying Masamune aside so that he could sit beside me. "I hope you're ready for our next couple of steps."

"I hope Jecht's ready for them," I replied. "He's the one with the most dangerous job. All I have to do is slip quietly into Bevelle, talk to my mother for a few minutes, then slip out again."

"And then raid Macalania Temple."

"While you sneak into the Palace of Saint Bevelle," I retorted. "Braska and I might at least be able to talk our way out if we're caught before we can get to the fayth. If anyone spots you, they'll probably assume you're an assassin, and react accordingly."

"I still have the Grand Maester's writ," Sephiroth said, a trace of wryness in his tone. "And I doubt
"I'll ever be able to use it for anything else."

"Don't tell me you're going to be relying on that," I said, caught between humour and horror.

"No, actually, if I'm caught I intend to start a very large fire. That's always wonderfully distracting for anyone who wants the building and its contents to remain intact."

"Not something that would work for us in Macalania," was all I could find to say, still unable to decide whether I wanted to laugh or choke.

"Too much of a risk of melting the wrong thing," Sephiroth agreed. "If you want insurance, I would ask Cid whether he has any smoke bombs, flash-bangs, or non-lethal gas grenades. Those would be variously startling or incapacitating without risking damage to the ice. Also, caltrops. Or quick-setting glue packaged in such a way that it can cover large chunks of floor when dropped or thrown, although that's less useful on a ice-covered surface."

That forced a chuckle from me at last. "Remind me never to go up against you in an invasion or area control exercise. You are vicious."

"'Vicious', when you're dealing with real area control, is land mines, pit traps with poisoned spikes, and captive malboros staked out in strategic places." I winced, but he ignored me and continued, more soberly, "Also, Braska will still have access to Valefor, Ifrit, and Yojimbo."

Since we wouldn't be destroying those fayth until later. "That's a last resort," I said. "Especially since we'll have to share them with Rufus." And every other Summoner in Spira, although they would hopefully be in bed asleep while we were raiding the temples.

Before either of us could say anything else, a box on the wall made a crackling noise, and Cid's voice came tinnily through it. "Now hear this! We have Sin in sight! Get in position, everyone!"

It was questionable whether the two of us were really needed for Jecht's drop-off run, but Sephiroth and I both immediately rose from the bed, and my lover led the way to the airship's command center. Seymour, Braska, and Jecht were already there.

"That thing looks even more ugly from the air," Jecht was saying. "You sure I can't just go back to the mountain and cuddle up to those statues?"

"Not if you don't want to freeze," Braska said.

"We've already discussed this," Seymour added. "The mountain fayth appear to project only your mind into Zanarkand, or you would have disappeared from Gagazet when you touched them. If we want to get your body home too, it's easiest to go back the same way you came." He paused. "Well, perhaps 'easiest' isn't the best word, but you understand."

Jecht grimaced. "So how're we doing this?"

"Simple," Cid said. "You climb down the ladder, then drop off onto its back."

"What?!"

"You got a better suggestion?" the Al Bhed asked. "I mean, you could swim up to it, I guess, if you'd prefer. I'm not risking the Delisle, or any of the boats, more than I absolutely have to."

"The Delisle?" Braska asked.
"That's what I named her," Cid said, stomping a foot on the deck. "You got a problem with that?"

"Of course not," Braska said mildly.

Cid scowled. I suppose he'd braced himself for an argument that never arrived. "You might want to say 'until we meet again' or whatever to that Guardian of yours. He's going to need to jump in about five minutes."

"Nah, that's okay," Jecht said. "Look, I changed my mind. I'm gonna stay riiiight here where it's safe, and someone else can jump off the airship and go kiss up to Sin, okay?"

"I would go myself if I thought it were possible," Sephiroth said. "As it is, you can either jump, or I can carry you to the ladder and throw you off."

Jecht groaned. "All right, all right, already! Sephy, you are such a hardass sometimes!"

"It is what they used to pay me for," the silver-haired man pointed out. "You'll go on your own, then?"

"Want to come with me and cut the ladder off if I'm not quick enough?"

"Yes."

Jecht seemed not to know how to respond to that, other than with an eye roll. "Fine, come on, then."

We all trooped back through the ship to the platform supporting the ladder. The wind outside made Sephiroth's hair whip wildly. Forewarned, I stuffed my own down the back of my collar before venturing past the door.

Jecht had stripped back down to the clothes in which we'd first seen him, and left his sword behind. I suppose it was rational enough, given that he was likely to arrive back in Zanarkand somewhere off the coast, but the thought of jumping down onto Sin's back completely unarmed made my skin crawl. Although, really, who was I trying to kid? If the Sinspawn down there wanted to tear Jecht apart, one sword wouldn't make that much difference.

"Guess this is it!" the blitzer yelled above the roar of the wind. "Wish me luck!"

"Every bit we have to spare!" Braska yelled back.

I think Jecht laughed. "That ain't much! See you in a couple of weeks!"

He swung himself onto the ladder, and began to climb down. I watched until he disappeared, but unlike Sephiroth, I wasn't fearless enough to step forward and look down over the edge to watch the blitzer descend. My lover stood there for several long, fraught minutes, ignoring what the wind was doing to his hair.

"He's gone," he informed the rest of us, stepping back. "He disappeared the moment he touched Sin."

I let out a breath I hadn't intended to hold. If Jecht had vanished instantly, he most likely had been transported, rather than killed. Thank . . . Leviathan.

I wondered if it was ever going to feel natural to me to take the name of any deity other than Yevon in vain. A shame that taking the name of an ancient Zanarkandic politician in vain felt unsatisfying.

Back inside, Seymour said, "Braska, Auron—Cid told us it would be a few hours before he reached
the ship he intends to transfer the two of you to, so you might want to get some rest in the meanwhile."

"We intend to," Braska said. I just nodded.

Back in our cabin with Sephiroth, I watched, amused, as he fought the tangles in his wind-blown hair, until I saw an opening to take the comb from him. He surrendered it without any argument, and angled his body to give me better access to his back.

"You seem to enjoy playing with my hair," he said quietly.

"I hope it doesn't bother you." I worked carefully at one tangle in particular, one of the few that hadn't fallen apart at the mere touch of the comb. The wind had whipped a few strands around with enough violence to tie them into knots, and since they wouldn't break, I had to untie them. Ideally without slicing my fingers to the bone. That property of his hair was frustrating to deal with. It cut into the comb, too, which was in a much more battered state than it had been when I had given it to him on board the ferry to Besaid, what felt like half a lifetime ago. I wonder if Cid would have someone make a comb out of adamantite, if I asked?

"Not at all. You're not the only one ever to take an interest in it, either, but I've always had to be careful about letting people touch it, given the way it can behave like razor wire."

"It suits you," was all I could find to say, although I wished for a moment that I were of a more poetic bent.

He shook his head slightly, tugging at the comb. "On Gaia, there's a legend about a man who was renowned for his feats of strength and his extremely long hair. When it was shorn short, he became as weak as a newly-hatched chicobo. I've sometimes been . . . half-tempted to experiment."

I chuckled. "That's certainly a ridiculous story, but please don't use it as an excuse to get rid of this." I ran my hand through his hair, now free of tangles.

I wasn't at all surprised when he twisted around to kiss me. I would have tried something myself in a little while longer if he hadn't beaten me to it. The tie holding my hair back snapped—it was at least the third one he'd destroyed by running his hands through my pony tail. I didn't worry about it, since any thong or bit of string could do the job. Instead, I enjoyed the taste of him, and the feel of that long silken hair, so soft and yet so ridiculously strong. When he lifted his mouth from mine, I clung to him, strands of silken silver wire wrapped around my fingers, and bent to kiss his throat instead.

"You're supposed to be resting," he observed.

"I can rest on the boat . . . but you won't be there with me."

"So you want to make the most of the time we have."

I smirked. "Oh, yes."

There wasn't much room, so undressing had to be a cooperative effort if we wanted to get it done quickly. I unbuckled his pauldrons while he went to work on my breastplate. My haori puddled unceremoniously on the ground on top of his coat. Getting those buckled boots of his off while refusing to stop touching each other . . . well, Sephiroth was flexible. He managed.

He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled me down with him so that I was sitting sideways on his lap. Not a position that I had ever anticipated finding myself in, but I decided that I liked it. It meant that we were in constant contact, and I had good access for kissing him and touching him and running
my hands through that silken silver hair. And having my head higher than his was an interesting novelty. That gave him, in turn, excellent access to my neck. His sucking and nipping there were going to leave me with a purple half-collar. Anyone I met in Bevelle would be able to see that someone had laid claim to me.

Which felt like a very good idea.

I rubbed at the place where his wing lay hidden, pulling a deep, wanton moan from him as he bit down more firmly on one certain place on my throat. His hand delved between my thighs, curling around my erect manhood while he stroked the underside tantalizingly with his thumb, and it was my turn to moan. When his fingers picked up a single drop of fluid and he brought it to his mouth and slowly licked it away, I found myself staring at his lips and tongue with fascination. Which made another thought blossom.

"Can I taste you?" I asked, gesturing down in an attempt to make sure he understood.

"Of course."

"Lie back?" I was careful to make it a question and not an order.

His smile flickered into being for a moment, and, once I got up off him, he rearranged himself on his back on the bed, legs spread enticingly, watching as I crouched between them and bent my head.

I licked him gently, and decided there were no words to describe the taste. Faintly salty, faintly chemical, and all Sephiroth. Strange, but not as unpleasant as I'd half-feared it would be. And the low, throaty noise he made as I slowly began to take him into my mouth would have been enough reward even if he had tasted vile.

Slowly, slowly, I took him deeper, but had to stop before I reached the root, because I was afraid I would choke. I did my best to suck on the portion of the fleshy rod that I had managed to take in, and he made that sound again, one of the wordless noises that never escaped him except at times like this. Encouraged, I slid my hand in to run my fingers over his scrotum, then further back . . . I grazed the pucker of his entrance with a fingertip, and once more my reward was one of those quiet noises.

"Don't try anything more there without using this," he warned, and the familiar jar with the Al Bhed label appeared in front of me, held loosely between his fingers.

I pulled back a bit, freeing my mouth. "I don't have to if you don't want me to."

He tilted his head slightly. "Is that what I said?"

"No," I admitted, blinking slowly.

"Good. I have to admit that I sometimes don't understand the implications my words have for other people until after I've spoken them . . . and by then, it tends to be too late. If you do anything I don't want, then believe me, I won't be ambiguous about stopping you."

I felt my lips curve into a smile. "No, I don't suppose you would be." He hadn't been, the one time it had come up, but I was always all too conscious of his fragility.

Maybe it was time to stop worrying quite so much. He'd survived things that would have broken me. He should be able to survive me, too.

I took the jar from him and opened it. Slicked my fingers with some of the stuff inside, midway between gel and grease. Touched him again, slowly sliding one of my fingers into him and feeling
his body squeeze it, then relax around it, leaving me buried in heat as I began to stroke him from the inside, searching for *that* spot. He had to have one too, didn't he?

I identified the moment I found it by the jerk of his body, by the low moan and the way his voice changed to a deep purr as he spoke my name. "Aurrren." Just the sound of it sent a powerful pulse of lust through me, and I groaned, feeling my buttocks clench. I was enjoying touching Sephiroth, but I wanted more than that.

Sephiroth curled upward into a half-sitting position and reached out to cup my jaw, the pad of his thumb brushing over my lower lip. "Try lying down on your side with your head pointed towards my feet," he suggested. *What . . . oh!* Yes, it took me a moment to figure out what he intended, but this was still new territory for me.

We worked ourselves around so that we were facing each other, but with his head near the juncture of my thighs, and vice-versa. I shuddered and whined as he lapped at me, not trying to control my reaction. He continued nuzzling and licking and nipping now and again at the insides of my thighs, teasing me until I was barely able to keep from cursing at him. *Two can play at that,* I thought, and embarked on my own teasing campaign, until the sudden invasion of a finger that curled into me just so had me jerking and crying out.

That ended the teasing, and I was suddenly buried to the root in *hot-wet* while his fingers worked inside me, and I did my best to reciprocate. Although I was too lost in a haze of pleasure to notice, Sephiroth had to have been exercising superhuman restraint to keep his hips from moving. I don't think I would have been able to handle it if he'd started to thrust into my mouth. I wasn't able to show him the same courtesy, but he didn't seem to mind, even though I think the head of my erection hit the back of his throat more than once.

I tried to take a bit more of him into my mouth and almost gagged, and I more felt than heard him chuckle, and oh-whatever-god-wasn't-listening, the *vibrations* . . . They worked their way deep inside me, heightening the delicious tension I already felt. It was enough to drive a man mad, but maybe I was mad already. I closed my eyes, trying to hold on to the sensation, to savour it, but they popped open again when Sephiroth slapped me across the buttocks with his free hand. He didn't hit me all that hard, but something about that little sliver of pain made the knot of tension inside me unspool, and I cried out unashamedly as my orgasm hit me like a runaway chocobo. And then I was trying not to choke as something hit the back of my throat with a tingling burn. I pulled off of Sephiroth's now-wilting erection, coughed, spat, and blinked bemusedly at the opaque, faintly glowing, pale green liquid that now stickily splattered the palm of my hand.

"Apologies," Sephiroth said. "I should have pulled out, but I fear I wasn't cognizant enough to remember it was your first time doing this."

I chuckled. "Don't worry about it. I love you too much to be angry about such a small mistake."

He was staring at me as though I'd grown an extra head. "You . . ." A long pause, during which I realized, with a jolt, what I had just said to him that I'd never said before. And I'd let it slip out at such a time, over such a thing . . . "I love you too, I think," he said seriously. "I can't be certain, mind you. These emotions have no cognate in my experience."

I felt a joyful smile stretch my mouth. "Take all the time you need to figure it out," I told him. "I'll still be right beside you when you're done."

Chapter End Notes
Like the canon FFX airships, the Delisle is named after a temperature scale, although it was one that never achieved widespread usage.

It was after this chapter that the story started running off the rails and being generally uncooperative. I think I managed to corral most of the loose ends and weave them back in, but I'm not sure how satisfactory everyone is going to find the ending. :shrug:
I leaned against the rail of the Al Bhed ship as it cut its way through the waves to enter the harbour at Bevelle. I felt odd without my haori, but the main point of this trip was to get in and out of Bevelle with as little attention being paid to us as possible, and that meant leaving the distinctive garment behind, along with my sake jug. I was taking enough of a risk by wearing my armour and sword.

Braska looked even odder. He'd abandoned his robes, even more distinctive than my haori, and was now wearing a mixture of clothes borrowed from me and the other members of our party, with his hair, the same brown as Yuna's, tied into a tail at the nape of his neck. He'd also left his elaborate Summoner's staff behind, substituting a still-raw length of hardwood that the machine shop aboard the airship had shod with steel for him.

Overall, we looked like a pair of mercenaries or off-duty Crusaders, not like a Summoner and his Guardian. If we didn't meet anyone we knew, the not-disguises might be good enough.

It felt like we'd been away from Bevelle for a lifetime, but it had actually been less than a month this time. They hadn't even cleared up all of the mess that the Sinspawn had made in and around the harbour, although scaffolding had gone up around the edges of the scars, so that masons could patch the salvageable buildings.

The ship's crew had done this many times before—well, not semi-smuggling Yunalesca's killers into Yevon's capital, but tying up at Bevelle—and the arrival and perfunctory inspection of the ship's primary cargo of refined mythril and alloy rods and wire went smoothly. Braska and I were on land within the hour.

"Be careful," I warned the Summoner. It would be the first time since the beginning of our pilgrimage that he'd been completely separated from his Guardians.

"I will be," he promised, with a smile. "Unless something goes wrong, I'll meet you back at the ship before evening, just as we planned."

The water in the canal near my mother's house was starting to ice over a bit along the edges. Don't fall in, I told myself. If I did, it would be as bad as the Gagazet blizzard. Or would it? The pyreflies in my belly felt oddly warm, circulating, never still. When was the last time I had really been cold?

It was, I told myself firmly, a hallucination. The knowledge that part of my body was no longer flesh and blood was combining with Sephiroth's admitted lack of knowledge of the potential consequences to prey on my mind, that was all.

Most of the weeds that formed the poor excuse for a lawn in front of my mother's house were turning brown, frozen to death by the increasingly cruel weather, although a few still showed tenaciously green at the roots. The door was locked, but that wasn't unusual at this time of day, when my mother was often out shopping, or working a certain fried-dough stall at the nearby market to help out a friend of hers. In any case, I still had the key, and I let myself in.

The house was quiet and clean, as it always was. Leaving my pack by the door and setting my new sword on the rack by the sofa, I found myself too restless to sit down, and instead slowly circled the room, stopping by the shelf where my mother kept a handful of keepsakes, like her mother's patterned china teapot, and the medal my father had been posthumously awarded for his bravery in defending Macalania Temple.
If we went forward with what we intended on doing, my father's sacrifice would be, effectively, in vain. The thought made me feel a sudden, uncomfortable kinship with Yunalesca. But my father's tragedy had been caused by Sin, and in any case, I wasn't selfish enough to think that only my wounds mattered.

If we could kill Sin . . . it wouldn't turn the world into a utopia, but at least humanity would have a chance to grow, rather than die.

"Auron! You're back!"

I turned. I hadn't even heard her come in, but here she was, arms full of groceries. She almost dropped them when she got a better look at me.

"Blessed Yevon, your eye . . ."

I forced a smile. "I can still see out of it—that's the most important thing."

"If you've returned . . . did Braska turn back? Or did he send you away?"

"It's more complicated than that," I said. "And you may be happier if I don't explain it to you."

My mother gave me a look as though she'd caught me stealing from the cookie jar. "You know better than that, young man. At least with the truth, I'll be able to prepare myself for whatever comes next. I can't prepare based on a falsehood . . . and if you aren't going to explain, why are you here? You wouldn't be this twitchy if you had come home to stay."

"I mostly came to warn you. And to say good-bye," I admitted. "But if you really want to know, then sit down and I'll tell you what I can."

"You can talk while I put the groceries aw—"

"Sit. Down." I'd never used that tone of voice with her before. It was the one I had once reserved for errant novices.

"Now you have me worried," she said. She also placed her bags on the kitchen table. And sat.

"You should be worried," I said. Paused. Forced out a few more words, not looking at her. "The Final Summoning is a lie."

"A . . . lie? Dear, that doesn't make any sense. The Calms weren't fake."

I shook my head. "The Calms were real, yes, but the process of the Final Summoning was designed so that it could never cause more than temporary injuries to Sin, and then presented as the only method of defeating it to prevent people from searching for a more permanent solution."

"What does that even mean?" Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that her face had turned white. She already understood. She just didn't want to think about it.

"It means that the upper echelons of the Church of Yevon have been colluding with an Unsent to keep Sin alive," I said grimly. "We think we've found a way to destroy it permanently and create a Calm that will go on forever, but it means making an enemy of the Church. That's what I wanted to warn you about, that they're likely to want to question you if you stay here, and they may not be . . . kind . . . about it."

"Give me a moment. Please." I'd seen that tight expression on her face before. Three times before:
when the news of my father's death had arrived, when Kinoc had dragged me home half-dead after the Order had given me its parting gifts, and when I'd told her I was leaving with Braska on pilgrimage.

Silently, I went into the kitchen and closed the door behind me. For want of anything better to do, I began to put away the groceries that were still sitting in their bags on the table. Ice in the icebox, then lay the chocobo meat that had probably been intended for supper in the top compartment, and arrange the vegetables in the lower one with the cheese. The bread went into the breadbox, the dried beans into a heavy crock sitting on the counter. How many times had I done this as a child? Would this be the last time?

The kitchen window was tiny, and looked out on the rear courtyard that three other houses shared with this one. A single tree, bare of leaves. Dust and weeds and frozen puddles and a worn swing hanging from a tree branch. I wondered what children used it now.

I didn't turn around when I heard the door open. "You said, if I stay here," my mother said quietly. "That means that there's an alternative— somewhere else you think I can go, where Yevon won't be able to reach me."

I nodded. "We've allied with the Al Bhed. Bikanel Island, and their bases and ships—they're all open to us."

My mother had always been a practical woman. She'd had to be, raising a son alone with a widow's pension from the Crusaders as her only steady income. She was—I knew she was—very unhappy right now, but she didn't lose her temper or disintegrate into tears.

"I have so many memories here," she now said. "The good and the bad. But it isn't as though this house is going to disappear. I'll be able to come back after Sin is gone."

*Unless someone burns it down,* I didn't say.

"It might take a while," I warned her instead.

"Then it takes a while," she said. "I know as well as you do that it's safer if I don't try to remain in Bevelle, and with such a huge job in front of you, I don't want you to be distracted by worrying about my safety. I admit that I don't like the idea of living among heretics, but it sounds like I'm going to have to adjust my thinking on that anyway. It's difficult to believe that the Church has been lying to us for so long . . . but it's more difficult to believe that you're lying to me with that expression on your face."

I shook my head. "There's a lot I never told you about the Church." I didn't say anything more, but my disgusted expression must have told her volumes. "If you want to come with us, you have a while to pack—the ship we came in on won't be leaving again until tomorrow morning."

"I'll make supper for you, then," she said. And, more softly. "Auron. I'm proud of you, you know. That you're doing something like this, striving so hard for the good of Spira . . . You've become a great man. I just wish you'd chosen a safer way." Safety. I couldn't start thinking about safety now. I'd made my choices.

When we went back out to the docks the next morning, we both had bruise-like circles under our eyes. I don't think either of us had slept. That was perhaps why I was a bit slow to react when I heard a familiar voice.
"I think it would be safer for everyone if you just walked on past."

Braska?

It took me a moment to spot him, in the shadow of a warehouse. He wasn't alone, and it wasn't just Yuna who was with him, either, although she was there, hiding behind her father and clutching his belt. There was another man standing opposite them. Probably a longshoreman—no taller than I was, but as broad as a draft chocobo. He had a knife in his hand. Braska was holding the metal-shod staff he'd brought with him on this side trip in a defensive position.

I reached for my sword, but before I could draw it, Braska slammed the staff into the big man's kneecap, and then came back and sank the other end into the pit of the man's stomach. The longshoreman folded, crumpling to the ground. Braska looked at him and walked away, pulling Yuna with him. A moment later, he noticed us, and diverted his trajectory toward us.

"Are you all right?" I asked him as soon as he was close enough that I didn't need to shout.

Braska smiled. "Yes. Although . . ." He glanced back toward the longshoreman, and his smile faded. "I don't think I could have done that a year ago, even to defend Yuna. Going on pilgrimage has changed me more than I realized." And not entirely in a good way, his expression suggested.

"It's changed us all," I said. "Even Jecht, I think. Even Sephiroth."

"Maybe you're right."

Meanwhile, my mother was crouching down to put herself on the same level as Braska's daughter. "Hello there, sweetie. What's your name?"

"Yuna," the little girl said hesitantly.

"Yuna. That's a pretty name. And a strong one."

Yuna nodded. "I try to be strong, so that Papa won't worry. I'm not very good at it sometimes, though."

"Trying is enough, for things like that," my mother said, and Yuna nodded again.

The moment we stepped aboard the boat, one of the Al Bhed sailors (although no Al Bhed dressed like any other sailor I had ever known), addressed Braska, who listened gravely for several moments before turning towards the rest of us.

"The airship has gone on to Bikanel," he said. "Apparently, there was some kind of emergency. We're to meet them there."

Well, there wasn't much any of us could do about that. The airship wasn't likely to come back just because we wanted it to.

Even in an Al Bhed vessel, it took a good week to get from Bevelle to Bikanel. The currents were against us, and the narrow passageways among the islands, reefs, and rocks that formed the edge of the inland sea that stretched from the Calm Lands to the mouth of the Moonflow were especially treacherous in winter. At least Sin was nowhere in evidence. According to the Al Bhed, it had headed south after we'd dropped Jecht on it.

I spent a lot of time pacing the deck. Practicing, when I was certain I wasn't going to get in anyone's way. With nothing to fight, there wasn't much else for me to do.
Braska would come up there and join me from time to time, staring out to sea. We never talked, and I wondered what he was thinking. Maybe he felt the same way I did: suspended in between. Waiting to resume his life when we rejoined the others. Although Yuna had to be keeping him from the worst of that.

My mother, ever-practical, had thrown herself into figuring out how to live with, and among, Al Bhed. She was also trying to get Yuna to warm to her, and slowly, seemed to be having some success.

By the time we sighted Bikanel, I was wishing some fool of an ocean-going fiend would jump up on deck—almost wishing that Sin would show up, even—just to give me something to do. I couldn't get off the ship fast enough, even though our Al Bhed hosts had been nothing but hospitable.

I was halfway down a dock when I noticed the atmosphere. It was as though a massive weight was hovering over Bikanel Island and pressing everyone down. I couldn't see any evidence of an emergency, but there was a lot of depression. And I couldn't even ask what was going on, because if I selected a random Al Bhed to question, I had about one chance in ten of getting one who spoke Spiran. Gritting my teeth, I stopped and waited for Braska to catch up.

"Something feels wrong," I said. "Do you know what happened to make them call the airship back?"

"From what I understand, it wasn't the airship they wanted so much as Cid. Some kind of problem with a machina." He looked around, and added, "My guess at this point would be that someone got killed."

I grimaced agreement.

"Someone did." Trust Sephiroth to creep up on us like a cat from somewhere unseen. "Unfortunately, it was Cid's wife. I hope you can do something for him, Braska, because this is . . . utterly beyond my ability to handle, and Rufus' as well."

I forced myself to ask the necessary question. "Has it damaged our arrangements?"

"Not yet," Sephiroth said. "Cid hasn't been in any condition to issue orders to anyone, so his last ones still stand, and we haven't needed anything new yet. Getting the airship to move may be a problem, though. Especially since stealing it is out of the question. Even if we had enough people to fly it, we can't afford to burn any more bridges."

"I think I should talk to Cid before we make any other plans," Braska said. "Were you seriously considering stealing his airship?"

Sephiroth sighed. "You may have noticed that I tend to be rather . . . goal-directed. Yes, I did consider it, albeit briefly, since it was a potential path forward. I apologize if that offends you."

"Coming from you, it isn't unexpected," Braska said, "but I hope you didn't talk about it to anyone else."

"Only Rufus. I'm not that foolish."

Braska nodded. "Where are we staying?"

"In a rather untidy jumble of rooms recently vacated by some of Cid's third cousins. This way."

Even in this season, Bikanel was hot and dry and just not suited for walking around outside in. I didn't know how Sephiroth was managing in all that black leather, and my armour was giving me a
hard time. I was sweating like a pig before we'd gone a hundred feet, and I was beginning to understand why the Al Bhed often wore clothes that would be considered scandalous even in tropical Besaid. I breathed a sigh of relief when we entered one of the patchy-looking buildings at the edge of the port, constructed from a mixture of stone and metal and—thank Leviathan!—cool inside. Due to machina, no doubt, but I'd long since stopped caring about those.

Sephiroth's and my room was on the third floor, an airy space with two walls that were mostly glass, offering a view of the desert. It also had the largest bed I had seen in quite a while. It was almost too bad we weren't going to be staying here for long.

The moment the door was closed behind us, I embraced him and kissed him hard. "I missed you."

"And I missed you. I trust there haven't been any . . . problems?" He traced the line of the scar down from my eye, indicating just what sort of "problems" he was talking about.

"Not that I've been able to detect." How could I possibly complain about not feeling cold, if the pyreflies were even the cause of that?

"Good, because I don't know what we'd do about them anyway."

I dropped my pack to the floor. "We should go find Cid and Braska."

A soft sigh of regret. "Indeed."

That meant going outside again. I was looking forward to having a shower after all of this.

The building Cid lived in was smaller than the one we had somehow commandeered. I glanced at Sephiroth, who shrugged.

" Apparently there's another settlement further inland, although they haven't let us near it yet. Cid's permanent residence is located there. This is just for visiting the port."

I'd already figured out that this wasn't Home, the settlement Braska had visited as a missionary all those years ago, so that made sense.

When we knocked, it was Seymour who opened the door. "Braska is with him," the half-Guado said.

"And the children?" Sephiroth asked.

"Rikku is with Yuna. I haven't seen the boy."

Sephiroth frowned. "Hopefully he hasn't tried to run off again."

"Don't tell me you've been baby-sitting Cid's children," I said, half-amused and half-horrified.

My lover shook his head. "Some cousin of his is supposed to be looking after them, but she keeps losing track of the boy. We've had to retrieve him from the desert twice now."

"He probably just wants to be alone for a while to work things out," I said. It was an impulse I could understand, since I'd experienced it myself a few times.

"And I would allow him to do that, except that the first time he ran off, when we didn't go after him, he came back to town with a sandworm in tow," Sephiroth said. "If we hadn't been there, it would have made a mess. A large, lethal mess."
I grimaced understanding.

"Just stop bugging me and take the damned airship!" suddenly echoed off the walls, coming from deeper inside the building.

"I assumed Braska would try to comfort him, rather than needle him," Seymour said, eyebrows raised.

"You never can tell with Braska," I said.

"Nevertheless, it solves our immediate problem," Sephiroth observed. "Now, if he can—"

A door inside the building opened, and an Al Bhed woman poked her head out and said, "E lyh'd veht dra lremtnah!"

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed, and he snapped, "All of them?"

The woman nodded.

"What is it now?" Seymour asked.

"She can't find the children," Sephiroth said grimly. "I assume that includes Yuna."

I wished I'd thought that was a joke.

Sephiroth turned back to the woman. "Keep looking inside the town. We'll check outside."

She nodded again and headed deeper into the building with a crisp stride.

"The sand skimmers?" Seymour said.

"It's what he's done all the previous times, and with the girls with him, I can't imagine that he'd try walking this time," my lover said. "Let's go."

A "sand skimmer" turned out to be a small machina vehicle that moved at high speed across the desert. They looked rather like floating benches with controls at the front, and were kept in a small shed at the edge of the settlement. There was an Al Bhed man there, working on the underside of some kind of larger machina which was propped up on a hoist. When Sephiroth addressed him, he told him that he hadn't seen the children, and that there were supposed to be eight skimmers in the shed.

We counted seven.

"Now what?" I asked.

"We follow," Sephiroth said grimly. He took one of the sand skimmers by the forward handles and pulled it out of the shed.

The skimmers were meant to hold four, but could accommodate more if they were good friends. Or children. So both Seymour and I fit behind Sephiroth for the trip out, but I couldn't help wondering how we were going to get three children and two skimmers back to the town when only one of us knew how to drive. Or had Seymour learned, while I'd been away?

I grabbed Sephiroth around the waist and held on as we shot away from the town, and felt Seymour grab onto me in turn. My lover drove straight for a time, then guided the vehicle into a wide turn.
"We're going to spiral out from here," he told us, eyes fixed front. "Rufus, watch the left. Auron, the right. Tell me if you see anything."

The path we followed was more of a series of concentric semicircles than a spiral, each ending near the seashore. Sephiroth never stopped, or even slowed, the skimmer. A couple of times, I thought we were going to hit an outcrop or a broken ruin sticking up out of the desert, but we always slipped past with less than a foot to spare. We also went off the crests of a couple of dunes at speed and landed hard. I concluded after the first half-hour that while my lover might be a capable handler of transport machina, he was probably never a careful one.

"Isn't there an easier way to find them?" I asked at one point, raising my voice to be heard above the roar of the wind.

"Stupid brat has no sense of direction!" Seymour answered me. Which meant that the children might be anywhere.

And then, at last, after several false alarms, we spotted a thin plume of black smoke. Arriving at it, we found a skimmer lying on its side and three sets of very small footprints. Which would have been more worrying if we hadn't also been able to hear two high-pitched voices arguing in Al Bhed.

Sephiroth slowed the skimmer and brought it around a nearby outcropping. In its shadow, we found Cid's son and daughter shouting at each other while Yuna was curled into a small ball, arms wrapped around her knees and back to the rock. As we came to a stop nearby, little Rikku kicked her brother in the kneecap and came walking towards us, leaving him hopping on one foot. She was going to be a handful when she got older.

When she reached us, she planted her hands on her hips and lectured us for a bit as we slid down off our skimmer, which was all the funnier because I couldn't understand what she was saying. Sephiroth gave her a look that said he wasn't impressed.

"What did I tell you to do if your brother tried something stupid again?" he asked. Rikku glared down at the sand and stuck out her lower lip. Sephiroth sighed.

Meanwhile, I went over to check on Yuna. "Are you alright?" I asked, crouching down.

"Uncle Auron! I'm fine. We got bruised up a bit, but I did my Cure spell, and everything's fine now."

"That's good." That sounded stupid even to me. "We're going back to town now," I added, and held out my hand.

She took it immediately. I'd never been around children much, and Yuna's trusting nature both fascinated and frightened me. In the meanwhile, Sephiroth had Rikku's brother—was his name really "Brother"?—by the collar, and was hauling him back toward our skimmer, ignoring any and all protests.

"It's going to be crowded," Seymour observed, examining our little group and our lone skimmer.

"We don't have a choice," I was saying, when Sephiroth froze with his head tilted back.

"Zu," he said in a tight voice. It took me a moment to understand—since the huge birds had disappeared from the area around Luca, they'd assumed quasi-legendary status, but apparently they were still alive and well on Bikanel. "Auron, take the children to that tower over there, and get inside. Rufus, with me. You three, no arguments," he added, rounding on the children with a fierce expression. "One word, and I put you to sleep and Auron carries you over. Understood?"
"Yes, sir," Yuna said. The two Al Bhed children just nodded, wide-eyed.

"If you understand, then run," I said grimly. I could see the zu now too, a black dot nearly the size of my smallest fingernail against the blue of the sky.

I jogged along behind them. If one of them fell, they were likely to get snapped up by the zu unless I picked them up and carried them to cover. I wished I could have been the one fighting beside Sephiroth, but once again, I knew that he'd made the right choice by keeping Seymour with him instead. Most of my abilities were useless against an airborne enemy.

The tower Sephiroth had pointed out was tilted awkwardly to one side, the doorway half-filled with sand, but it seemed solid enough. I stood facing outwards, with my sword drawn, while the children ducked inside. I had to get down on my hands and knees to get through the entrance, but once inside, it was cool and shadowy and much more comfortable than the scorching heat outside, and the ceiling was high enough above my head for me to stand. Rikku was silently crying, Yuna was trying to comfort her, and Brother was glaring at nothing in particular. Well, they might just have had the scare of their lives, but they were all healthy, at least.

I went to the window. Sephiroth was in fine form, battering the zu with insane aerial strikes as Seymour pounded it from below with Blizzaga spells. It didn't take long for the giant bird's wings to become so tattered it could no longer hold itself in the air. When it fell, it shook the desert. Of course, it held up for all of ten seconds on the ground before Sephiroth pithed what it thought was its brain and turned it into pyreflies.

"It's alright now," I told the children, although I knew that only one of them truly understood me. Hopefully my tone of voice would make up for that.

We somehow sandwiched ourselves back onto the skimmer for the ride back to town, and once we got there, Sephiroth took matters into his own hands, striding straight into Cid's house with Brother in tow. Seymour and I shadowed him as he tore open a series of three doors (ripping the lock on the last one right out of the frame) to get to Cid.

"You," Sephiroth said coldly to the Al Bhed leader, "are going to get it through your son's head that returning to Home is not going to make his mother magically come back to life. This is the third time I have retrieved him from the desert for you, and there will not be a fourth time. Especially since he almost got his sister and his cousin killed today."

Cid looked hung over, but he roused himself enough to glare at Brother. "Fryd'e drec?" he asked in an ominous tone of voice.

We withdrew from the room as the boy began to talk. Braska, whom I had half-noticed in the corner of the room with Cid, followed us out.

"He took Yuna?" the Summoner said.

I nodded. "We got them all back in one piece, no thanks to the zu."

Braska visibly winced, but all he said was, "I do have some good news. Cid has given us—more accurately, given Sephiroth and I—the use of the airship. We can leave at any time."

"We should try to get a good night's sleep, then," Sephiroth said. "Tomorrow, we move."
Chapter 35

Macalania Temple was cold and quiet at the best of times, but in the depths of the night, it took both adjectives to disturbing levels for a place where people lived. Dream powder taken from lupine monsters in the Calm Lands dropped the guards at the entrance and allowed us to creep into the Cloister, which, since we knew where everything was, we were able to complete in less than ten minutes.

Shiva's powerful soprano voice filled the air as we entered the antechamber where we had fought the dragon. Braska stopped in the middle of the room, staring at the door leading to the Chamber of the Fayth.

I nudged his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"No, not really. I can't believe we're doing this."

"Neither can I," I admitted. "But we don't have a choice. You know why."

"I know. If we were going to choose a different path, we would have had to do it before destroying Yunalesca. Still, since Zanarkand, everything seems . . . unreal." Braska smiled wryly. "But if all of this is a dream, I still can't decide whether or not I want to wake up."

"I think, in that case, I had rather dream," I said slowly. "Despite everything."

"Mmm. Besides, if I woke up, you might go back to calling me 'my lord' again."

I tried to remember the last time I had done that, or even thought it. Guadosalam, maybe? In any case, it had been some time ago.

"I didn't realize you hated it that much," I said now.

"I don't like being distanced from people that way."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine. We didn't know each other all that well when I asked you to come with me, and I knew you were only trying to show respect. But I'm glad you've unbent a bit."

I really wasn't the same man now as I had been when I had left the Order, I realized. The worst of the bitterness had drained out of me somewhere along the way, leaving . . . what? Maybe if we survived this, I'd have a chance to figure out the answer.

When we opened the door to the Chamber, the fayth was already waiting for us. Her translucent form bowed to us, hovering above the statue.

"Bahamut has already told us," she said. "Do what you must; I will not hinder you."

"Thank you, lady," Braska said. "We apologize. If there were some other way . . ."

"For a thousand years, all of Spira has striven, and no other way has been found. I am inclined to believe that there is none. We thank you—we thank all of you—for your efforts on our behalf. Even if we are not truly the ones you seek to aid."

She made the Sign of Prayer, bowed again, and vanished. I crouched down and opened the bag we'd
brought with us. The Al-Bhed-made explosives inside were, in the words of the technician who had prepared them for us, "enough to make big malboro into little pieces", so hopefully they'd be equal to the task of destroying one fayth. We'd been over the process of setting them up over and over again until even my machina-ignorant mind had grasped it. Place the pre-shaped chunks of rubbery stuff just so around the fayth. Then put that wire there, and that wire there, and once that lit up, twist that other bit. Done. Now we just had to get out.

It was a good thing we didn't have to do the Cloister a second time again in reverse, although I was oddly relieved when I slipped and almost twisted my ankle while trotting along the walkway above, because everything had been going far too smoothly up to that point.

The explosion went off just as we were clearing the rim of the lake. The vibration transmitted itself up through the soles of our boots, and we could hear water sloshing under the ice. The guards at the entrance woke yelling, and went running inside.

We waited tensely on the shore for a couple of minutes, but the temple didn't collapse in on itself, thank Leviathan. Not that we could have done much if it had. I wasn't much of a swimmer, but I wouldn't have asked even a professional blitzer like Jecht to dive into frigid Macalania water after the priests.

"One down," Braska muttered, voice tight with emotion that I couldn't interpret.

"Two down," I corrected. "If Bahamut's been telling the other fayth to be ready for us, Sephiroth must have made it into the Chamber at Bevelle."

We made good time back across the snowfield to the travel agency where the airship would be picking us up. Although not for several hours yet. Until the ship that was supposed to provide Sephiroth's escape from Bevelle signaled the all-clear, the airship would remain drifting just off the coast there, ready to help with anything that went wrong. Once he was safe, it would swing by and pick us up on the way to get Rufus.

That meant waiting, which had been my least-favourite activity for quite a while now. A shame we had to do so much of it. I tried to meditate at first, but I was too restless. And I couldn't go outside to hunt or practice kata in the snow and the dark. I ended up asking Braska to teach me more Al Bhed, on the grounds that it might be useful to communicate with the people we were now working with. We focused on simple, important words, like "yes", "no", "help", "danger", and "fiend", and I drummed them into my head despite my distraction.

It was mid-morning by the time the airship arrived. Thankfully, Sephiroth and Seymour were the first people we saw after boarding, or I think Braska and I would both have crawled out of our skins. As it was, I embraced my lover unashamedly and kissed him in front of everyone, earning a glance and a chuckle from an Al Bhed crewmember who happened to be passing by.

"I take it everything went smoothly for you as well," Braska said.

"As smoothly as a slide down a behemoth's gullet," Seymour said airily.

"I think Bahamut had already guessed some of what we intended," Sephiroth added. "Or perhaps they are merely so tired that being unbound from this plane of existence, even in a violent manner, is something they crave. He also told me that there is one more fayth on the fringes of the Calm Lands, although thankfully it isn't in the custody of the Church. We'll deal with it on the way to Yojimbo."

"Kilika and Besaid first," I said, and everyone nodded.
Finally I was able to catch a few hours of sleep, with Sephiroth's wing unfurled over me, as we flew south to our next destination.

The temple at Kilika was guarded. Not by warrior-monks or even Crusaders, but by ordinary citizens of the island, wielding hammers and boat-hooks. They shook their makeshift weapons in our direction as the airship floated overhead.

"We can't fight them," Braska said as the four of us stood looking out.

"It would be a slaughter," Sephiroth confirmed. "Fortunately, they're only guarding the road up from the town, not encircling the temple. And there's no one on the roof. I should be able to get in and out without confronting them."

"Just you?" I asked.

"Unless there's someone else here who can jump twenty feet straight up from a standing start. We let the ladder down, I drop from it and use a Quake spell to open part of the roof, then jump back up to the ladder when I'm done. There's a small chance I could end up collapsing the ceiling of the temple, but most of the other possible ways in involve either a confrontation or a lot more magic."

How many hundreds of times in my life had I forced down the desire to behave like the hero of a tale and do something stupid, emotional, and impulsive? But I wasn't Jecht, to act on such a desire. You have an objective here. Your actions should support it, or at least not detract from it. That was how the Order had trained me, and I still recognized it as common sense. Unless I could think of a less dangerous way of destroying Kilika's fayth, I had to let him go.

"Don't take any stupid risks," was all I said.

"I won't." Sephiroth's familiar, minimal smile flickered into existence for a moment before vanishing again.

I watched him go—from inside the airship. I wasn't insane enough to try to avoid being blown off the ladder platform outside for what might end up being half an hour or more. As he'd said, he climbed down the ladder, dropped to the temple roof, walked a short distance before breaking the roof open, and disappeared inside. Within fifteen minutes, he was climbing out of the hole again, and as far as I could tell, no one at the temple had noticed anything . . . although, granted, I couldn't see through the roof, and everyone inside could be running around like spooked chocobos.

"That went altogether too smoothly," I said when Sephiroth had re-entered the airship.

"Indeed," my lover replied. "Whatever is waiting to go wrong may end up being spectacular. I don't anticipate any difficulties in Besaid, but we may have a difficult time getting to Yojimbo."

I grimaced. Nodded. That had always been the problem with our plan: the possibility that we might not be able to get into Yojimbo's cave without killing some Crusaders. We couldn't have taken it out on the initial sweep, since it wasn't a place even Sephiroth could safely enter alone, but we also couldn't guarantee that there would be no opposition when we got there.

"We need to deal with Besaid first," Seymour said, and we all nodded agreement.

Besaid went off like clockwork. We borrowed some Sleepproof armour (or, in Sephiroth's case, rearranged some materia) and, quietly, in the middle of the night, filled the temple with dream powder from stocks held aboard the airship. We went in, Valefor gave us her blessing, and Sephiroth destroyed the fayth with his highest-level quake spell. By the time dawn broke, we were almost at Luca.
Three fayths remained: Yojimbo, the nameless fayth Bahamut had warned Sephiroth about, and . . .
Seymour's mother. That one was going to be difficult in ways that had nothing to do with fighting,
but at least we could be reasonably certain that there would be no Yevonites waiting for us inside the
Zanarkand dome.

"It should be in the southeast of the Calm Lands, cut off from the plains by a series of cliffs and
gorges," Sephiroth explained to the helmsman as we stood together in the airship's command center.
"It was described to me as both rather large and mostly intact."

When we did find it, I didn't understand how it could have taken us so long, because it was a huge
building, larger than any other temple save Bevelle's (and perhaps Baaj's in its heyday). It stood at
the center of a deep crater in the land, which, in turn, was ringed with mountains.

The airship set us down on the narrow bridge that gave access to the temple, and we made our way
along it and through the tall, arched doors.

The temple wasn't empty.

"Stop. Who are you?" A woman in a green dress stood at the center of the large open room inside
the temple.

"Who are you that asks?" Sephiroth shot back.

"I am Belgemine, a Summoner."

Braska's eyebrows rose. "Lady, the only Summoner of that name fell to a malboro at the foot of
Mount Gagazet some two centuries ago. There has been no other since."

"You have studied the histories," Belgemine said. "I ask again: who are you?"

"Summoner Braska, of Bevelle. These are my Guardians: Auron, Sephiroth, and Rufus, who is a
Summoner in his own right."

"A Summoner Guarding a Summoner?"

"It isn't forbidden," Seymour said. "Lady, why do you bar our path?"

"Are you the ones who have been destroying the aeons, and with them the only means of resisting
Sin?"

"So you, too, have been taken in by Yuna's lies." Sephiroth's voice was sharp, and his hand
reached up and back to caress Masamune's hilt where it was visible above his shoulder.

For the first time, Belgemine seemed non-plussed. "I do not understand."

"The Final Summoning was never intended to destroy Sin," Seymour explained. "It was designed to
make the people of Spira think they were doing something about Sin while, in fact, achieving
nothing of lasting significance. Sin has an aeon at its core. Every time it is defeated, it reforms around
the Final Aeon that strikes the blow. The only way to be rid of it and ensure it does not come back is
to rid ourselves of the aeons."

Belgemine's eyes narrowed. "This is nonsense. Why would anyone believe such a story?"

*Because it's consistent with reality, and explains all those niggling little problems like the deaths of
the High Summoners and why so many of the Church's records are sealed. But I didn't get a chance*
to say anything. Belgemine whipped her staff around, creating that eerie pressure in the air that heralded a Summoning.

The aeon—aeons?—that appeared weren't familiar, taking the shape of a trio of young women with differing physiques dressed in insect costumes, who rose out of flowers that grew impossibly from the stone floor. Sephiroth and I drew our swords. Braska bit his lip and gestured with his staff, and cherry blossoms began to drift through the room. Yojimbo. Rather than playing the part of a white mage, he'd Summoned his sole remaining aeon.

Then Seymour struck the floor with his spear. "Come, Anima!"

Begelmine’s eyes widened as a massive hook-tipped chain shot down from the heavens and began drawing something up out of the depths. "What is that?" the Unsent Summoner asked, her expression shifted to one of horror as she saw the bound and mummified form that was now surfacing.

"That," Seymour said coldly, "is a Final Aeon: mine. That is what you were striving for all those years ago when you fell before Gagazet. Do you see now? There was never anything at the end of that path but death and torment."

My eyes flickered shut for a moment as I understood a few more things about Seymour. It couldn't be coincidence that his mother's aeon had taken this form. She had felt imprisoned, chained by her choices. It had probably leaked through into everything she did, including her relationship with her son.

Suddenly, the tallest of the insect-girl aeons fell to her knees with a shrill scream and evaporated into pyreflies as Sephiroth made use of everyone's distraction to neutralize part of the threat. The plump girl in the ladybug suit scrambled out of the way of a vicious stab of Masamune, and then the entire room erupted. Braska tossed a clinking pouch to Yojimbo, and the aeon hurled himself forward in a sword attack. And Anima . . . Anima threw her head back and groaned, and crimson-edged black energy flared around the ladybug girl. Sephiroth withdrew as the aeons fought amongst themselves, taking up a defensive stance beside me, where I'd positioned myself between our Summoners and the action.

"You're not going to stab her in the back too?" It came out sounding more accusatory than I had intended.

Sephiroth shook his head. "If she were alive, I might have tried it, but these Unsent seem to be . . . durable beyond all reason. If Braska and Rufus prove themselves the better Summoners, perhaps she'll allow them to Send her and ensure she stays out of our hair." He smiled suddenly. "I believe I'm beginning to understand why it used to anger Cloud so whenever I turned up alive again when he thought he had killed me. It must have been an utterly frustrating piece of illogic."

I still found it difficult to envision a world where people just stayed dead when they died, no matter how it happened. A world with no Unsent and no fiends as we knew them, only monsters that were just as alive and physical as a tree or a chocobo, where life energy flowed like water when released from its containers. A place where you could skin a behemoth and eat its meat and the thought of cannibalism wouldn't even fleetingly cross your mind.

The ladybug girl had gone down under Anima's onslaught, and Braska threw another pouch to Yojimbo to inspire him to make another attack. This time, the aeon nodded upon receiving the gift and pulled a long sword out of nowhere, inspecting it before he used it to slash the third insect girl in half.
Belgemine dropped her staff with a clatter as her last aeon evaporated. "Stop! That is enough! I will not oppose you further. But . . . promise me."

Braska and Seymour dismissed their aeons.

"What would you have us promise you?" the half-Guado asked.

"That if your plan to destroy Sin, whatever it may be, fails, whichever of you survive will become aeons to take the place of those you have destroyed."

I froze. *That* possibility had never even occurred to me. Nor to any of the others, judging from the expressions on their faces as we all exchanged glances.

There was a long, long pause. Then Seymour said, "No."

Belgemine stared at him. "What?"

"Do you think we chose this path lightly? Do you think we made our decisions in ignorance? Spira has been dying a slow death for the past thousand years, caught in a spiral of destruction that none of her people could escape. We will not re-establish the pattern."

"If we fail to find a way to destroy Sin, the people of Spira will have to search for another method," Sephiroth added.

"A lot of people may die," Braska said. "And I don't like that any more than you do. But lying to them, giving them false hope . . . that's worse. It's a recipe for failure."

"One way or the other, in true hope or despair, it ends with us," I finished.

Belgemine looked shaken. "You intend to reshape Spira entire."

"Other, wiser people have tried everything else," Braska said.

The Unsent Summoner remained silent for several moments. Then, "I cannot say whether you are insane, or simply confident in your chosen path. Either way, I will not be here to see it. My work is over: if there are no aeons, I cannot aid in training Summoners. Send me."

"As you wish," Seymour said.

At some point, he had attached streamers to his spear, just below the head. They flared out as he began the simple, graceful Sending dance.

I stared at Belgemine as she vanished into pyreflies, thinking about what she had said. Because she was right. No matter whether or not we succeeded in eradicating Sin, we had already changed Spira in ways that couldn't be undone. An era was ending here. Seymour would be the last Summoner ever to grace this world's history, because his Anima would be the final aeon that we broke. Or, the last save Yu Yevon.

I hoped there were no other young Summoners, wandering on their pilgrimages, who had been put in danger when the aeon they tried to call didn't respond. Justifiable casualties, perhaps, but the knowledge they existed would wound Braska.

We were left with an empty room that had a very large door on the far side. There was a glowing seal plastered across it, and I heard Seymour curse in Al Bhed. He, Braska, and Sephiroth all walked forward to examine it. After a moment, Sephiroth raised a hand, and the seal disintegrated into
pyreflies, which swirled around him for a moment before departing the temple through a gap in the dome above.

We pushed the doors open, expecting a Cloister, but they turned out to open directly into the Chamber of the Fayth. Three ghostly figures, all young women with medium-brown hair, were already waiting for us. They were dressed in clothes that would have been right at home on the streets of Luca, and they resembled each other so much that they had to have been sisters, or at least cousins.

"We're sorry," said the one in the lead.

"Belgemine has been our only friend here for such a long time . . . We couldn't refuse to fight for her," said the second.

"We're ready," added the third and smallest. She had her hair in dual braids, and looked very young. As though she'd been barely pubescent when she'd become a fayth.

"We're sorry too," Braska said, and a materia in Sephiroth's bracer flashed as he raised his hand one more time. The Quake spell left a deep crack across the middle of the floor, shattering the fayth statue, whose colour leaked away into nothing as we watched.

"Yojimbo next," Seymour said.

"Indeed," Sephiroth replied. From his expression, he was still worried, though, and so was I. Even if we'd met opposition here, it wasn't nearly enough to satisfy the deep, instinctual belief that any fighter has about no plan surviving contact with the enemy. Something else was going to go wrong. Something else had to go wrong.

Inevitably, it did.

It was near sunset by the time we reached the northeast corner of the Calm Lands, and the entrance to Yojimbo's cave, but the level of sunlight wouldn't matter once we were inside, and I think the innate sense of urgency that Sephiroth and I now shared had spread to the Summoners, as they were prepared to descend with us before we saw what was waiting for us.

"That," said Seymour, "is an army."

"A smallish one," Sephiroth agreed.

"How many people would you need to have in one place for you to consider it a large army?" the half-Guado asked.

"Hundreds of thousands. Come to think of it, there might not be enough people in Spira for that."

"It looks like they've turned out every Crusader stationed between here and the Moonflow," I said, leaning forward for a better look. Red uniforms, like blood against the grass. "And some members of the Order, as well." I hoped there was no one I knew down there, although I doubted I would be so lucky.

"What do we do now?" Braska asked. "We can't kill all of them."

"We can, actually," Sephiroth said. "A steady bombardment of black magic from above would kill or scatter everyone fairly quickly . . . but they would be able to regroup afterwards, and make it difficult for us to leave the cave." He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Under the circumstances, I think our best bet is to gather a train and lead it right over them."
We all blinked. "To what a what?" I asked.

"We annoy a large number of fiends and lead them over there, then slip past in the confusion," Sephiroth explained. "With enough fiends, it will likely take their troops days to get the area completely clear, and while they're working on that, most of them can't keep watch for us. It won't be bloodless, but it's better than fighting our way through."

"A tactic from your wars?" I asked.

"Applied to temporarily interdict areas where the terrain made aerial bombardment difficult, yes," Sephiroth agreed. "The trick was always finding someone who was good at throwing rocks from a moving vehicle—or, in a pinch, the back of a chocobo. Which is probably what we're going to have to use here, unless the Al Bhed have a version of their sand skimmers that's adapted to this kind of terrain."

They didn't, as it turned out, although they were intrigued by the idea. They were still discussing it when we moored at the trading post early the next morning to buy some chocobos. We did insist on buying them outright, since what we intended to do with them was so dangerous. The handler overcharged us ruthlessly, and the birds shat all over the airship's deck as we hauled them north and east. Then we had to wrestle them back off again, although they calmed down once we were down among the grasses a half-day's ride from the cavern, and the airship was lifting away.

Once again, we all had our jobs. Sephiroth rode point, as scout, since his senses were the most acute and he could spot fiends easily. Seymour was in charge of getting their attention with low-level spells. I kept an eye on the rear and flanks to make sure that we still had the attention of the fiends we'd already picked up, and that none of them were getting too close. And finally, Braska was to hand out potions and spells as necessary to keep us and the birds going.

We picked up a pair of coeurls, several flame flans. An ogre. A whole pack of skoll, and another, the second accompanied by a small swarm of nebiros.

When we attracted the first malboro, I decided that this was going to end badly for someone. I just hoped that "someone" wasn't us.

By the time we'd reached the path down into the gorge, we had a couple of hundred fiends pursuing us. The chocobos had foam flying from their beaks, but they weren't about to slow down with all of that on their tails. We collected a few epaaj to add to the parade as the rock walls rose up on either side of us.

And then there were Crusaders pointing spears at us as we came charging down the last straightaway. Our birds came close to being perforated, but then the men caught sight of what was behind us, and most of them dropped their weapons and ran. The few who kept their weapons braced and waited were easy enough to go around, their formations broken to the point of uselessness.

We couldn't have stopped the chocobos by that time, so we let them crash on through the ranks, guiding them towards the cave mouth as shouts came from behind us. The birds finally scrambled to a stop just outside the cavern, evidently sensing that what was waiting inside was worse than the fiends of the Calm Lands. Sephiroth knocked the surrounding Crusaders out with his convenient sleep spell, and we dismounted and vanished into the dark as quickly as we could.

The cavern was still the same at first glance, dark and monster-filled and lit by pyreflies. The sounds of combat outside were muffled by the stone. But there was one thing that had changed.
Sephiroth knelt in the middle of the floor of the first real cavern to confirm it. "People have been through here. At least twenty, possibly more. Going in, but not coming out."

We all understood what that meant. They could have been dead somewhere further inside, stabbed by tonberries, pierced by epaaj, or electrocuted by coeurls. But we had to assume that they were alive and waiting for us, because not doing so would have been taking too much of a risk.

Silently, we trotted through the passageways with our weapons at ready, tracing the shortest path to Yojimbo's fayth. It was disturbing, but unsurprising, that the footprints had taken the same route.

And then we emerged into the makeshift Chamber of the Fayth, and found them waiting for us: two dozen members of the Order, in full battle array. And at their head . . .

"Maester Esmon," Braska greeted politely, but my eyes were fastened on the man beside the maester.

Oh, Kinoc, no . . .
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Kinoc looked just as unhappy about this as I felt. He'd armoured up, and carried one of the familiar muskets braced against his shoulder, but stood awkwardly. I reminded myself that, despite his lax stance and apparent awkwardness, he was a good enough fighter to have survived all these years, always just squeaking by. And his expression reminded me of the one he'd worn the day I left the Order, when he'd grabbed me by the arm as I wove unsteadily toward the entrance to the Palace of Saint Bevelle and sat me down on a bench in an alcove and bandaged my back and salved the burn on my chest.

"I told you it was them!" Esmon was saying. "They have come for the last fayth."

"That isn't established yet," Kinoc said stubbornly. "They could also be here to defend it."

"No," Sephiroth said. "It is as he says."

"Why?" Kinoc's question sounded like it had been wrenched out of him. He was staring at me, his eyes pleading.

"Because while even one fayth remains, Sin cannot be destroyed." Sephiroth's voice was calm and flat, but Kinoc didn't so much as glance at him. The factual answer wasn't the one he had been looking for.

"I suppose it's the natural end to a progression," I said slowly. "You know as well as I do what the Church does. What it is. Is it really surprising that its Teachings about Sin and the fayth are off at right angles from reality like everything else? Did you really think that, once I found that out, I could let it lie?"

Kinoc blinked. "No. I suppose you couldn't. You and your honour. If anything, what I really don't understand is how you could have risen as high as you did in our ranks and still held on to that idealistic streak of yours."

I shrugged. "I almost didn't. There were times when I felt myself sliding towards . . . being someone I didn't like very much." A pause. "I don't want to fight you," I admitted.

"And I don't want to fight you, Auron. Old friend. But I have my orders."

Suddenly, Sephiroth reached into one of the pockets of his long coat. He took out a scroll with familiar ribbons and seals. "Maester Esmon. You know what this is. You saw Grand Maester Mika give it to me. I'm calling it in now."

"That little writ can't make us stand aside," the Maester said. "'A single, concrete action, not against Church policy'—that's what you promised the Grand Maester. And letting you destroy this fayth would certainly be contrary to Church policy."

A silver eyebrow flicked upward. "Do you really consider me that much of a fool? That isn't what I want you to do. I don't expect to get out of here without bloodshed. However, you can dismiss Kinoc from this duty without reducing your forces by much. That is my demand, according to the terms of the writ."
I felt my eyes widen. Kinoc was less restrained. His jaw dropped open, and he stared at my lover for a long moment before returning to himself.

"You can't truly mean to waste that on me," he said. "I know you don't value me in any way whatsoever, or care if I end up dead."

"Auron cares about you, and I care about him. You are quite correct that it would not matter to me if we ended up killing you, but he would be devastated. I don't want that."

Kinoc shook his head. "You make a better pair than I would have expected."

Maester Esmon waited them out. And then waited some more, just to make us nervous, I think. "Very well. Captain Kinoc, you are dismissed. Please await us in a safe location. As for you, Sephiroth, I wish to verify that that is the real writ before I burn it."

Sephiroth tossed him the scroll. The maester skimmed the text, snorted, and cast a fire spell. Meanwhile, Kinoc had set his musket on a rock and moved off to the side, all but hiding in one of the convolutions of the wall—sensibly waiting for the victor to escort him out of the cave, instead of trying to fight his way through tonberries and dark elements alone. I shook my head. Kinoc had never been the best fighter in the world, but as a survivor, he was unmatched.

"Let's try to avoid bringing the cavern roof down on our heads," Sephiroth said, raising Masamune to his unique "ready" position. I took up my stance beside him. With the aeons not in play and Jecht absent, Seymour would be the one to defend himself and Braska if anyone got past us.

It was a bloody, messy fight, but, truth be told, not really a difficult one. Compared to tonberries and behemoths, a bunch of humans armed with rifles and flamethrowers were pushovers. None of us were happy about killing these people, but under the circumstances, I couldn't see that we had a choice, and not even Braska protested.

Maester Esmon was the only advanced mage in the group, and so the only person among them who was remotely dangerous to us. His strongest spell was evidently Thundaga. However, he'd never before dealt with someone who would willingly step in front of the most powerful lightning spell in existence. The muscles in Sephiroth's back and free arm were twitching spasmodically as he ran the maester through, and I cast a cure spell on him, hoping that it would at least help a bit with the pain.

As for the rest, Seymour cast Firaga at the two men with the flamethrowers. It touched off the tanks of fuel they carried on their backs, which in turn burned them to ashes. The muskets were more useless than not. Several of them misfired, and I barely noticed where most of the other shots went . . . except for the one that creased my ear and the other that lodged in my shoulder. As the slower and more-laden front-line fighter, I was the easiest target, although some of them certainly shot at Sephiroth too, because I heard the metallic noises of deflected bullets.

The last four warrior-monks standing (other than the still-quietly-lurking Kinoc) threw down their muskets and surrendered when they saw Sephiroth and I coming at them for the kill. My lover destroyed their weapons instead.

"A few more witnesses won't matter," he said, and I relaxed and put my sword away, then winced. With the pressure the battle had placed on me suddenly gone, I could feel the burn of the hole in my left shoulder. I unwrapped my haori, breathing through clenched teeth as the muscles around the bullet wound involuntarily spasmed. Hard. A gush of blood flowed out, staining my shirt, and then, before my unbelieving eyes, the bullet was pushed out of the wound and fell to the ground with a dull click. A pyrefly floated after it, looking—in some bizarre way—self-satisfied. Afterwards, I could feel a hot itch beginning deep inside the wound, but that stopped when Braska looked it over
and cast Cura on it.

"Well, that's one pyrefly we know isn't still rattling around inside you," Seymour observed as Sephiroth helped me to my feet.

Kinoc had emerged from the folds of the cavern wall, and was staring, bemused, at what might have been that very same pyrefly. "Auron, what the hell?"

"A memento of the six-hour patch-up job I needed after what happened in Zanarkand," I said. "Much like this." I touched the scar just below my pale blue eye. "When this is all over, I'll take you out for a drink and tell you the story. Right now, we have a job to do."

Kinoc and the four disarmed monks followed us as we walked over to the pit where the fayth rested. Even my old friend stared in fascination. This was likely the first time any of them had seen a fayth . . . and it would be the last, as well.

"Yojimbo," Sephiroth named the fayth. "If you have any last words, now would be a good time."

The image of the uniformed man with the dog slowly formed above the fayth. "Last words? Not hardly. When I was still human, I always expected to die by the sword. I'm merely a few centuries late. Do your worst."

Sephiroth nodded, and made the theatrical hand-raising gesture he usually used when invoking a spell. The Quake—Quakka? Quakeja?—spell cracked the hollow within which the statue rested right across, as well as crumbling the statue itself. All that was left afterwards were the sad shreds of ancient silk ribbons, and fragments of stone from which the colour was rapidly fading.

"He didn't even protest," Kinoc said quietly.

"The fayth understand what we're doing, and why we're doing it," Braska said. "None of them have argued about it. Although I'm a bit curious what you told Bahamut to get him to agree," he added to Sephiroth, who shrugged.

"I told him the truth," my lover said. "This situation already has too many layers of lies wrapped around it. More wouldn't make it any better. But he might have gone along with a lie just as easily, given a shred of an excuse. I have the impression that they truly were that tired."

"What are you doing?" Kinoc asked.

"I'll give you the short version on the way out," I said.

And so I did, in between fiends. Even the shortest possible version took a while.

"I have to admit that I don't like this one bit," Kinoc said, as we watched a trio of foolhardy stray epaaaj evaporate into pyreflies. "In the end, it's about to what he can do . . . and how much do you know about him, really? Of course, it may not matter to you. You're in love, and you have no responsibilities to anyone other than your own motley crew. I have a lot more than that to consider."

"When did you ever care about responsibility?" I asked, half-amused.

"Since you haven't been around to take care of it for me," he shot back. "I admit to being ambitious and cynical, but I hope I've never been feckless. I've always made certain that anything important I was assigned to do actually got done."

"That's true," I admitted. Otherwise, I never would have been able to tolerate being around Kinoc.
"As for the plan resting entirely on Sephiroth's shoulders . . . that isn't quite true. This spell of his just happened to be the quickest, simplest way of providing enough force to dissipate Sin's outer pyrefly layer without involving an aeon. If it doesn't work, we'll come up with something else." I held up my hand, because I could guess what my old friend's other objections were going to be. "The spell is real—I've seen his Sphere Grid. I've been present for all the conversations that led to him piecing this mess together, so I know his conclusions aren't skewed. If you have a better plan than ours, float it now."

"How do you expect to attract Sin to this . . . wall of fayth you described?"

That was the weakest link in all of this. Of course he would hit on it. "Machina are forbidden to the general population because Sin hunts them down when they become too concentrated. With the Al Bhed working with us, we can set up an awful lot of machina in a small space. Types that project energy. That should lure Sin from the moment we turn them on."

"I've always wondered why Sin never attacks Bikanel Island."

"The Al Bhed know how to hide their machina. Anything over a certain size is shielded, or underground, or both."

"We may not even need all that many machina to attract Sin," Sephiroth added, absently flicking his sword to get rid of the non-existent blood of the dark element he'd just destroyed. "The Al Bhed records suggest it homes in on radio waves—a type of energy that many machina above a certain level of complexity put out. However, there is a specific type of primitive device whose entire purpose is to generate radio waves. All we should need is one of those, plus a large power source. They're setting one up out on some nameless rock in the ocean for a test run. If it doesn't work, we're going to have to put everything on hold for a few weeks while we round up some Sinspawn."

That part I hadn't heard about. Sephiroth probably hadn't thought it was important enough to bring up.

"If the Al Bhed knew all of this—" Kinoc began.

"They didn't," Sephiroth interrupted. "Not exactly. The Al Bhed are masterful applied technicians, but somewhere along the way, they lost much of the theory that would have allowed them to understand why certain things work the way they do. They discovered by trial and error that Sin tended to ignore devices that were surrounded by a Faraday cage, but they didn't know exactly what the cage was preventing from escaping, or how. My education covered enough of the relevant theory that I was able to piece together what was most likely going on, but my conjectures still need to be proven in the field before we use them for anything this important."

"And here I thought you spent all your time on Bikanel hunting fiends and arguing with Cid," I said.

Sephiroth shook his head. "I spent most of it explaining equations and rounding up the parts for a spark-gap transmitter, since the Al Bhed had never heard of one before—not surprising, since it's obsolete technology on Gaia, too. And I did use up several hours arguing with Cid," he acknowledged, with a flicker of a smile. "I didn't think you would be interested in the details of how we were going to call Sin."

"So long as you understand them, that's good enough," I said. Kinoc made a gagging sound, and we both gave him sharp looks.

"What? It's just that you're scarily attuned to each other," my old friend said.
"Far be it from me to disturb your adolescent sensitivities," said the only adolescent among our group, "but I believe we have another tonberry on the way."

We emerged from the mouth of the cavern into the blood-red light of sunset, among Crusaders tending their wounded on a mess of monster-trampled ground. A few perked up and grabbed for weapons when they spotted us . . . but then they saw that Sephiroth was holding Masamune's razor edge to Kinoc's throat, and backed off.

"I'm surprised you're willing to do something so duplicitous," Kinoc had said when we'd discussed this bit right at the entrance to the cavern.

"I've spent most of my life in a snake pit," Sephiroth had replied. "It was inevitable that I would learn how to slither, even if I didn't really want to. But if it reduces casualties, I'm willing to get down on my belly and squirm."

Kinoc had snorted at the colourful metaphor and agreed to play the part of a hostage for long enough to get us past the Crusaders. He'd also ordered the other four survivors of his forces to keep their mouths shut.

"What do you want?" Commander Quasin of the Crusaders, with his long mustache, didn't look nearly as friendly as he had the last couple of times we'd encountered him.

"To leave in peace," Sephiroth said. "That's all. We're done here."

The Crusader's shoulders sagged. "It's over, isn't it? There's nothing left to stop Sin now."

"On the contrary," Seymour offered. "It's just beginning."

"Our plan to destroy Sin is about to enter its next-to-last phase," Sephiroth said.

"Sin's been eating the Final Aeons, more or less," I added. "It was using them as the fuel to regenerate itself. But if it were desperate enough, any aeon would do."

"And we intend to make it very desperate indeed," Seymour finished.

All right, so that was the shortest possible version of our plan. Kinoc wouldn't have accepted that brief a summary, and I think Quasin would have liked more details as well, but I could see the wheels moving inside the man's head.

"Are you really a prisoner, Commander Kinoc?" he asked suddenly.

"No," Kinoc admitted easily. "Maester Esmon dismissed me from the defending force before the fighting began, which left me free to surrender. Just as well, since I'm not even a match for Auron in a fight, never mind all four of these madmen. But we thought seeing me like this would keep any of your men from doing something . . . premature."

"And you support what these people are doing?"

"At this point, we don't have any choice," Kinoc said, more than a little sourly. "They've already burned all of humanity's bridges. No more fayth, no more Summoners, no more High Summoners or Final Aeons. Either their plan works, or we'll have to suffer the scourge of Sin forever."

"Yevoen," Quasin muttered. He chewed on the tips of his mustache as he looked around at his men, battered and bloody, some trying to take up a fighting formation and others just standing there, or sitting on the cold, snow-dusted ground. "Fine. Leave Commander Kinoc here, and go. I'll have my
men stand down. But if it turns out you don't know what you're doing, we are going to hunt you to the ends of Spira."

"We would expect no less," Sephiroth said evenly. Braska winced and closed his eyes.

We returned to the airship, which began to work its way northward, towards Zanarkand. There was a substantial headwind flowing down off Mount Gagazet, which reduced our progress to almost nothing.

I slept all right at first, but then woke at some unexpected noise and spent half an hour staring at the darkened ceiling before I slipped out from under Sephiroth's wing. His eyes flickered open as I stood up.

"Auron? What . . . ?"

"Can't sleep, so I'm going for a walk," I explained, and leaned down to plant a kiss on his cheek.

"Mmh. Don't be too long."

Since he was already awake, I let myself flick the lights on briefly, just long enough to find my trousers and haori. There was no point in getting fully dressed, and the metal plates of the airship's floor were warmer under my bare feet than the ground of the Calm Lands had been through my boots.

The hallways were dimly lit at this time of night, for the convenience of the Al Bhed who worked with the airship's engines and helm on this shift. I padded along the hallway to the point just behind the control room, where it opened out into a sort of observation lounge, with floor-to-ceiling windows.

I was a little surprised to discover that I wasn't alone there. Braska stood with his hand resting against the glass, staring out. He was still fully dressed, in his layered robe.

I came up beside him slowly, giving him a chance to see my reflection and notice me coming.

"Auron. So you couldn't sleep either."

"It happens sometimes," I said, gazing out at the blackness that was night in the middle of the Gagazet wilderness.

Braska invisibly traced the sigil of Yevon on the glass with his forefinger. "I've been wondering . . . When did it all start going out of control?"

"Zanarkand," I said firmly. "When we killed Yuna..." that's when we burned the first bridge. Before that, we could have turned back at any time, kept our mouths shut. You would have become a failed Summoner, but that isn't really so unusual, is it? Everyone would have sneered for a little while, and life would have gone on. Or we could have chosen her path, and died in return for a few years of Calm. And Jecht would have gotten his parades and fireworks."

"Posthumously," Braska was tracing the sigil over and over again, as though to wear it into the glass. "That would have been . . . easier. Much, much easier. I think a part of me died with Akkina, and the deeper we plunge into this insanity, the more I feel the lack of it. She died because of Sin, and because of the divide between us, Al Bhed and Yevonite, dictated by the Church. The pilgrimage was supposed to be my revenge. I know you . . . thought otherwise. I've been trying so hard not to show anyone that dark and petty side of me. But in the end, I'm just a man. I'm not capable of complete altruism."
"We're none of us perfect," I said, knowing that was nothing more than a set phrase, worn down to the point where it held little meaning.

"I think it went out of control much earlier than Zanarkand," Braska said. "Out of my control, at any rate. Bevelle? Macalania? On the ship from Baaj, even, when we found out about Yunalesca and the real cost of the Final Summoning? I don't know anymore."

"If you insist on that as a gauge, it might have been as far back as Rilkes Harbour. Or even when we fished Jecht out of the drunk tank. Sephiroth might be more terrifyingly effective, but he and Jecht were brought to Spira for the same reason. Something would have happened." Which wasn't a comforting thought at all.

"So this pilgrimage was doomed from the beginning."

"If the fayth cursed us," I said slowly, "it was because they thought we were strong enough. Because they thought you were strong enough."

"The fayth, by their own admission, were mostly sleepwalking," Braska pointed out. "And while I respect the sacrifices they made for Spira, I don't think I'm comfortable having them meddle quite this much." He held up his hand, halting his constant retracing of the sigil. "I realize there's nothing we can do about it, but I . . . want to register my protest somehow. It's either that or get very thoroughly drunk."

"If it's any help, I'm not sure Sephiroth's entirely happy about this either," I said. "He feels obligated to help, because of what happened on Gaia. And once he's chosen a course of action, it isn't his way to hesitate in what he's doing, or second-guess himself without new information coming to light. But I know he realizes just how fine a line we're walking. And one way or the other, I don't think he's going to give up before he destroys Sin, even if it takes a hundred years."

"That's as much terrifying as it is reassuring," Braska said.

"I've chosen to go with 'reassuring'."

Braska echoed my wry smile. "I think we've discovered what it's like to be dragged along in the wake of someone like Mi'ihen or Ohalland," he said.

"Perhaps."

"I wish there was still something I believed strongly enough in to be able to pray to it," the former priest said, still staring out into the Gagazet darkness. "He needs it, we need it . . . Spira needs it."

You need it, I thought but didn't say. Instead, I offered, "There were gods before Yevon, and Sin. Perhaps we should follow the Guado and start worshipping Tali."

"That would be ironic . . . but if Tali is specifically the goddess of the forest, then there must have been others. Gods of mountains, plains, cities. Gods of chocobos." That finally pulled a real smile from him. "Maechen might know. I'll have to ask him, the next time we run into him."

I snorted softly. Yes, the old scholar knew the oddest things, some of which couldn't be confirmed from any other source. He'd shown up on the Thunder Plains, and then in Kilika, on our initial trip south, but we hadn't seen him since Rilkes Harbour.

"Look after yourself," I told Braska. "I'm going back to bed."

It nagged at me, though. Part of Braska still wanted to die. There had to be a way to fix that. But I
had tried, and Jecht had tried, and even little Yuna, in her own way, was trying, although she might not be able to understand what it was she was doing.

I had wrestled my darkness down because I had fallen in love. Sephiroth had promised to safeguard his life when Seymour had made plain to him that there were people who genuinely cared for him, and Seymour himself had found contentment in having comrades for what must have been the first time in his life. Jecht had never been suicidal to begin with, and in any case, I suspected he was caught up in one last, huge, "right thing to do". But Braska seemed incapable of turning from his path.

My friend, my friend . . .

I crawled back under the warmth of Sephiroth's wing that night without coming up with a solution to that problem. I wasn't sure there was one, unless Braska fell in love again, and there wasn't much chance of that.

Zanarkand had gotten colder in the days we'd been away. After quickly sticking our noses outside, we went back to our cabins to change into our Gagazet-climbing clothing before descending the ladder.

The airship had been able to drop us right outside the dome, and we used the teleporter network Jecht had reactivated to bypass the huge open space with its undead defenders and replays of past tragedies. None of us needed those right now.

Outside the door to the Chamber of the Fayth, Seymour paused. "I would like to be alone with her for a bit."

"Take all the time you need," Braska said, and stood aside for the younger Summoner, who entered the Chamber and shut the door behind himself.

He stayed in there for nearly an hour, while the three of us sat around a chunk of fallen rock that we'd retrieved from above and heated with a fire spell. None of us begrudged him the time. This would be his last chance to speak to the person he'd loved most in this world, after all. Let him have as long as he needed.

It just would have been nice if we'd been able to do this in warmer weather.

I wasn't sure what the look on Seymour's face when he emerged from that room meant, but he said, "It's time," calmly enough.

Sephiroth was the only other one who went in. Braska and I watched from the door as the fayth silently nodded to him, and he raised a gloved hand.

As my lover exited the now-empty chamber, he laid his hand on Seymour's shoulder for a moment. I think he'd only intended a quick clasp of reassurance, if he'd been thinking that clearly about it at all, but the half-Guado turned, wrapped his arms around Sephiroth's waist, and buried his face in the slice of thermal shirt visible under the older man's coat. Sephiroth wrapped his arms around Seymour in a loose, reciprocal embrace, although from his expression, he was right on the verge of plaintively asking Braska and I, *Am I doing this right?*

They stayed like that for quite a while, until Seymour had cried himself out. His eyes and nose were red as he pulled himself away from the man he'd said was like the brother he'd never had.

"Thank you," he whispered.
Sephiroth nodded in return. It was probably the smartest reply he could have made. There are no words to take away the pain of having killed someone's most loved person with your own hands, even when all three of you agree on the necessity. Sephiroth probably knew. He'd been a general during a war fought on scales that were unimaginable on Spira. He'd probably written hundreds, thousands of those horrible letters, the ones that begin, \textit{It is with great regret that I inform you . . .} I'd only had to do half a dozen, for warrior-monks who'd died in the last year before I'd left the order, and the formula still haunted my nightmares. The one widow who had found me outside the Palace precincts and cursed and beaten on my breastplate with her fists until her shouts turned to sobs haunted me even more.

Grief is difficult enough to handle when you know you're not responsible for it. I just hoped we weren't about to create any more.

There was one last thing we needed to do before leaving the environs of Zanarkand. Or, one more thing that one of us needed to do, but we weren't about to send him alone to do it.

We used the teleport pads once again to make our way to the mountain, where Sephiroth, alone, climbed the ridge through which the cave we'd traversed tunneled, moving from one imperceptible foothold to another in great leaps that a mountain goat couldn't have pulled off. We stood on a ledge below, watching from an awkward angle as he reached the top and his wing erupted from his back. Then he raised his hand and \textit{called}.

Pyreflies began to stream up out of Zanarkand, eddying around him in a whirlwind of cold light. There were so many that it was difficult to look at them directly . . . but still they came, becoming concentrated enough that the subliminal pressure they created set my teeth on edge. And . . . did I feel a pull as well? From my gut, from my eye? \textit{Imagination}, I told myself.

I cursed in Al Bhed and covered my eyes a moment too late as an even brighter flash blinded me. The ground vibrated under our feet as the entire mountain groaned. I cast Esuna on myself, but even so, it took several long moments for my sight to clear, and several more for me to be able to pick out Sephiroth's black coat and silver hair against a background of snow and dark rock. He was already on his way back down, moving much more cautiously than he had on the way up.

I went to meet him as he slid down the last few feet, and was appalled to see the bruise-like rings around his eyes and the sallow tinge to his skin. He looked like he hadn't slept for a week.

"It's done," he told us. "We have about three weeks before it hits, I think. There must be more asteroids here than there are near Gaia. Now all we need to do it get Sin to this area at the right time."

And avoid destroying Spira. But we all knew that already.

\section*{Chapter End Notes}

Spark-gap transmitters are a real thing, although they're forbidden by international treaty because they spray radio interference over a whole bunch of bands, or so I understand. That's a good thing for Sephiroth's plan, but a bad thing for general use in the real world. (Faraday cages are also a real thing.)

I have way too much information sloshing around inside my head . . .
"Look, I promise you, you're gonna have all the answers you want and then some in just a little while longer, so hold your fucking horses!"

I'd never been so glad to hear Jecht's uncouth language as I was when we returned to Bikanel Island and found him waiting for us at the port. Him, and a few other people: two women, a little boy, and .

"Maechen?" Braska asked incredulously. "Is that you?"

"Why yes, I am Zy Maechen, but who are you?" The old man blinked mildly at us through his glasses, which were much squarer than I remembered. In fact, everything else about his clothing was wrong as well. This Maechen wore a sort of long, white shirt-jacket thing over trousers and a turtleneck sweater in dark, nondescript colours. He had no hat. And now that I was looking for it, I noticed that his beard was shorter, trimmed close to his jaw.

"Braska, I don't think this is the same Maechen we ran into in Kilika," I said.

"Indeed, I have never been to Kilika. I am not even certain what manner of place it is."

"These must be the ones he told us about, Grandfather," the younger of the two women interrupted before he could really get started (Did this Maechen communicate in lectures too?) She had dark hair in floppy spikes that almost reminded me of Zack, and wore a black sleeveless shirt, tight-fitting blue trousers, boots with a scale pattern on the leather that suggested snakeskin, and a black leather choker around her neck with a silver skull decorating it at the front. The skull motif was repeated in her earrings.

"Yeah, that's Sephiroth, Auron, Rufus, and Braska." Jecht pointed at each of us in turn.

"Zy Paine," the girl introduced herself. "I came along to look after the old man—he's kind of absent-minded sometimes." She finished by giving each of us in turn a confrontational glare. I met her without expression. Seymour and Sephiroth both seemed amused. Braska met her gaze for a few seconds, then looked away.

"Dad, can I go and play with Yuna and Brother and Rikku now?" the boy said, then cringed away from Jecht as though he was expecting to be hit.

"It's probably a good idea, dear," the other woman told the blitzer. "This is going to be very boring for him."

Jecht rubbed the back of his head. "Okay, fine. Just make sure you stay in town. I don't want you to get eaten by anything."

"Kay." Judging from Tidus' tone, he was going to forget about that restriction the moment he passed through the door. Hopefully Cid's cousin had gone with the other children to keep an eye on them.

"Can we get down to business now?" Paine asked. Sephiroth ignored her, addressing the old man instead.
"How much has Jecht told you about what's going on here?"

"Oh, not so very much, actually. He said there was an asteroid whose trajectory you needed monitored, one that was not visible from Zanarkand. And as such asteroids have been my life's work, I could not help but take an interest. You see—"

"There's a bit more to it than that," Sephiroth said. "What we have is an asteroid on a collision course with this world. We know when and where the impact is going to occur, but we need to know size and speed to get some idea of the magnitude of destruction it's going to cause, and what measures, if any, need to be taken to ensure people's safety."

Maechen blinked. "Oh. Oh, dear. That is . . . most disturbing. Most disturbing."

"Can you do it?" Once more, Sephiroth interrupted the old man.

"Well, I . . . Yes, I suppose, if that's all you need. It would help if I knew the impact point . . ."

"It's in the Gagazet mountains, south of Zanarkand. Estimated time of arrival is about three weeks from now. We can have someone take you there, if that would help."

"You cut things fine," Paine said.

"That would have to do with the reason the asteroid is on its way in the first place," Seymour said. "However, I doubt you need to know its purpose in order to observe it."

The young woman shot a sour look at old Maechen. "We'll talk after I have Grandfather settled somewhere."

Paine was a puzzle to me. She obviously didn't enjoy looking after her grandfather, so why had she come? And why had Jecht agreed to bring her?

Braska was over by the door, having a quick conversation with one of the Al Bhed. "All the resources here are at your disposal," the ex-Summoner told Paine and Maechen. "Housing, equipment, and transport—whatever you need."

"We need somewhere to set up an observatory," Paine said immediately. "High up, good windows, roof access. That kind of thing. If you've got computers or telescopes or anything like that the old man can use, it would help. We brought some stuff, but there's only so much you can fit in a watertight container that you have to carry yourself." She did not look happy upon seeing the looks of incomprehension covering most of our faces. "Never mind."

"There is some observation equipment, but most of it is likely to be no better than what you brought—and in worse repair," Sephiroth admitted, with a grimace. "As for the other, until you arrived, I was the only person on the island who would have known what a computer was. I've seen some circuit boards mined from ruins and landfills, but the only things in working condition are control boards for specific equipment."

Paine rolled her eyes. "Great. Not that we weren't warned. We'll make do."

After a little more discussion with the Al Bhed, she and Maechen were led away to what would hopefully be a suitable space for their needs.

"We should get going too," Jecht said. "See what the boy's gotten up to."

"Not until you've explained," Sephiroth said evenly. "We sent you back for one person, Jecht. Not
"Well, what in hell was I supposed to do?" the blitzer asked. "Poke my head in, say, 'Honey, I'm home for a bit, but after that I have to get on with saving the world and destroying our city,' and then take off again once I found you your egghead? I know, when we're done they might vanish along with me, but at least this way, my boy's got a chance, y'know?"

"That explains your family," I said. *And we should have expected it.* "But it doesn't explain that girl Paine."

Jecht shrugged. "She wanted out. There's always a few—people who feel like Zanarkand's too small. Most of 'em disappear eventually. I . . . might've been headed that way myself. And the old man needed someone to carry his shit, 'cause there was more there than I could handle on my own. 'Specially with the whole take-a-ride-on-Sin-and-fall-off-into-the-ocean thing."

"Given that, it seems odd that you would choose such an elderly man to bring with you," Seymour said.

"And his resemblance to the other Maechen is altogether bizarre," Braska added.

"Yeah, threw me for a loop too," Jecht admitted. "But as for picking him . . . Well, I kinda overestimated what people're willing to do for money, okay? By a lot. He was the only one I could get to come, and he's mostly retired these days. Most of the other 'stronomers think his brains are starting to leak out his ears, 'cause there was more there than I could handle on my own. —just rambles a lot. Like the other one."

"So there are people inside the dream of Zanarkand that echo those living in Spira." Sephiroth murmured. "I suppose they could only get so far by recycling the personalities of those who died with it."

"You're curious about it," I observed. "About the dream."

"It's a unique phenomenon. Even several thousand human minds shouldn't have the capacity to simulate every happening in a city of millions for ten centuries, and yet they somehow seem to have done exactly that, in great detail. Otherwise, Jecht and the others wouldn't be able to function properly in the real world. But unfortunately, there is no way to preserve the dream for study. It needs to end."

*But you wish you could be that selfish,* I thought, looking at his profile, at the way his brows were slightly knitted over the bridge of his nose.

"There's nothing more we can do today, so why don't we go upstairs?" I said.

"That sounds like a good idea."

Braska offered us a nod on the way out, and Jecht broke out into a wide smirk. His wife, quiet woman that she was, didn't quite seem to know what to make of us.

The moment the door closed behind us, I captured his lips in a kiss. It was midaftemoon, and the big bed lay spread out below the windows, empty and ready for us. And I hoped to spend the next several hours engaging in levels of decadence that would have been unimaginable to me as a member of the Order.

We did leave briefly for supper. I insisted. I was not going to have Sephiroth start absorbing pyreflies again. And he still wasn't completely recovered from casting Meteor. He had admitted that in one of
our quiet in-between periods, that it would likely be another day or two before he could cast any
other spell, if he let himself recover naturally rather than drinking ether. I was gratified that he would
allow himself to admit that much weakness to me. Sephiroth always held himself straight-spined,
even when he was on the edge of falling over. It was just the kind of person he was. It was easy for
me to see, because I was the same kind of person myself.

In the end, we lay there too tired for another round, with his wing spread across me and the desert
stars blazing outside the windows.

"So now we just wait for three weeks?" I murmured.

"Assuming that the spark-gap transmitter works as I expect it will," Sephiroth replied. "If it doesn't,
we're going to be wrangling Sinspawn onto the airship . . . and praying that the airship continues
working. The Delisle was never meant to be more than a prototype to test a few concepts,
apparently. They have technicians working full-time to keep it in the air."

I winced. If we lost the airship, that could be . . . bad.

But of course, when something did go wrong, it was nothing that we could have predicted.

The next morning, a shadow followed Seymour outside for our dawn practice session. It took me a
moment to recognize Paine. She was staring at our swords with what could almost have been
described as an avid look. When she finally looked up, and Sephiroth met her gaze, she flushed and
looked away.

"I saw you from the window," she said. "I want to learn that." And she nodded at our swords, still
unsheathed in our hands.

Sephiroth and I exchanged glances. I knew that asking my lover to teach a beginner was a bad idea
—he'd been trained in swordsmanship from such a young age that the basics were as reflexive for
him as breathing, and he had no awareness of them as something that needed to be taught or learned.
He'd gotten away with teaching Seymour, barely, because they didn't use the same weapon and
because Seymour had been taught staff-play, so he wasn't starting from zero the way Paine would
be.

"If that's what you really want, then after we're done here, I'll find something for you to practice with
and start you on the basic exercises," I offered.

Paine nodded and moved off to one side. Well, let her watch.

After Seymour had warmed up, we worked him for half an hour on how to handle multiple
opponents. Paine never stopped watching, not until Seymour and I, blown and sweaty, went inside
with Sephiroth to get something to drink.

The transition between outside and inside, where the latter was kept at exactly the same temperature
throughout the day by Al Bhed machina, was always a bit of a shock to my system. Paine hovered
on the edge of our group as we quenched our thirst and talked about the practice just completed,
what had looked good, and what we needed to work on. Her expression was . . . almost lustful, but
she didn't seem interested in any of us in particular. It was more an unfocused look of I want this. As
she'd said.

"Is there an armoury here?" I asked the two who had spent a week on the island while I'd been on
my way to and from Bevelle. "Any kind of weapons storage?"

"The one you want is in the basement, a couple of buildings down," Sephiroth said. "I'll show you."
The Al Bhed armoury was larger than I had expected. Gleaming machina weapons rested beside fighting gauntlets and paired daggers and racks of swords and spears.

"Part of this is for the export trade," Sephiroth said. "I'll square things with Cid later. Try those," he added to Paine, gesturing at a rack of medium-weight swords—Force Sabers and such, it looked like.

"They're a lot smaller than either of yours," she said. "I'm not weak."

"No, but you're not strong yet, either," I said. "The swords Sephiroth pointed out are about the same weight I started with. You can work up to one of the heavy ones if you like, but it takes a few years of practice to be able to wave something like this—" I touched the hilt of my Riot Blade. "—around at arm's length for more than a couple of minutes at a time. It isn't just your arm strength—there are some tricks to it."

Paine frowned, but she also turned back to the rack of swords Sephiroth had indicated. She tried the plain Longsword at the end of the rack first, then tested a Twilight Steel, an Ice Brand, a Flametongue, and a Fencing Saber.

"This one," she said decisively, returning to the Ice Brand.

"Good choice," I said. "Let's take it outside."

Sephiroth disappeared off somewhere on his own before we made it all the way back to the training ground. Probably something to do with machina. When we had gone for supper the night before, a young Al Bhed man had come up to him to show him something, and they'd talked for quite a while. I might have felt jealous if I hadn't been able to tell that all their conversation was about the object the younger man held, with Sephiroth pointing at various parts of it and speaking in what bordered on a lecturing tone. Really, I was just as glad not to know what all that had been about. I was learning to ignore machina, but I doubted I would ever be comfortable around them to the extent that my lover was.

I admit, I worked Paine hard, mostly just because it was something to do. And she was stubborn and bore up under it. I was aware of a few people stopping to watch for short periods, then going away again. Braska, with Yuna and Rikku. Jecht. Cid, once, I think. And young Tidus, who picked up a metal pipe from somewhere and began trying to imitate Paine's movements. I hadn't expected a second student, and he was young to start learning weapons-work, but the boy's face was fiercely intent. So when I hit the point of giving Paine a basic kata to practice, I went over to him.

"You need to hold that a bit differently," I told him, reaching out to rearrange his hands. "You don't want someone to knock it out of your hands. It might not matter too much if you drop this on your foot, but if you drop a real sword the same way, you could end up cutting off your toes."

Tidus blinked. "Oh," he said.

"Do you want to learn?" I asked him. "Or are you just playing around?"

"My dad isn't very good at this, is he?"

"No," I admitted.

"Then I want to learn. I want to be better at something than he is for once."

"It's a lot of work," I warned him.

"So is blitz."
"I suppose it is." Or at least, blitz players seemed to spend a lot of time practicing. "Fine. We'll start with how to hold a sword, and swing it."

Tidus truly did want to learn, but he wasn't as stubborn as Paine. And he really was too young. I did my best to treat him gently, but even the novices I had taught before had been more like Paine. At least I didn't send him running away crying, which had to count for something.

I ended up meeting with the young ones every morning for the next week or so, while the effects of Meteor became gradually visible in the sky. According to Maechen, the giant rock was on course and on time and not likely to hit so hard that it took out Bevelle, although he would continue monitoring it until the last minute and tell us if anything went wrong.

Meteor was occupying a thumbnail-sized piece of sky on the night that Sephiroth and I were woken abruptly an hour before dawn by someone hammering on the door and shouting in Al Bhed.

"Are we under attack?" I asked sharply.

Sephiroth shook his head. "He's shouting 'Messenger! Messenger! You must come!'"

"That doesn't make any sense," I said, but I was also rapidly putting on clothes and armour and weapons-harness. "Who could have sent us a message so important that they'd bother waking us up in the middle of the night?"

"Perhaps the Grand Maester is declaring war," my lover suggested. "Or it could be a practical joke... but we need to find out for certain."

I grunted agreement and settled my sword on my back.

The young Al Bhed waiting in the hallway led us down to the ground floor, where an unexpected group of people waited for us. Cid, Seymour, and Braska I'd expected. But not Paine. Or Jecht, who had largely withdrawn from the rest of us. And especially, especially not Kinoc.

My old friend looked like he'd been dragged through a fence backwards. His robes were torn and stained, and at least some of the stains were blood. His left arm was in a sling, the eye on the same side was swollen shut, and he had a fat lip.

"What happened to you?" was the first, involuntary question out of my mouth.

"I got into a fist fight with some guards at the Bevelle docks." His voice was a bit slurred, but clear enough. "They didn't approve of a Maester-candidate getting on board an Al Bhed ship. Mika's orders, as I understand it."

I blinked. "Maester-candidate? You?"

"They've got two open slots now, remember? And Kelk and Mika couldn't agree on anyone except me. Fat lot of good that does them or me right now."

"So you gave up a bright future with the Church to come here... why, exactly?" I knew Kinoc. He wasn't here just because he couldn't take the strain of becoming a maester. Hell, that was what he'd been working towards.

Kinoc shrugged. "Actually, I was thinking of going somewhere to hide out. I can read the writing on the wall—I knew there was no way of stopping your plan. And then I overheard Mika trying to come up with a way of stopping it anyhow. Or at least creating one hell of a mess."
"Go on," I prompted.

"He's sending everyone he can up Gagazet to defend the fayth there. Warrior-monks, Crusaders, Ronso, priests, and for all I know, Evrae itself."

"Placing them inside the blast zone," Sephiroth said. "And they may interfere with the transmitter. May Leviathan gnaw that fool's bones."

"I get from the expressions I'm seeing that you're going forward with your plan anyway," Kinoc said.

"We can't do otherwise at this point," Sephiroth said grimly. "Meteor has already been cast, and even I can't halt it now—blunt it a little, perhaps, but it would still take out the Gagazet fayth and the ridge between them and Zanarkand. If it isn't going to be in vain, we need to continue. Chasing Mika's lackeys out of the impact area can't be our first concern. I'll come up with some way of protecting the transmitter." I heard the creak of leather as his hands balled into fists, tightening his gloves against his knuckles.

"You can't be serious," Jecht said. "You're just gonna let those poor bastards die 'cause they listened to the wrong idiot in a robe?"

"Back off," I snapped before Sephiroth could respond. "We can't frighten them away if they're willing to enter an area where they already know Sin is going to show up. There's no way we can get them out and keep them out without killing them. Not if they have the help of the Ronso."

"They will," Kinoc said. "'Profane sacred Gagazet with machina? Cannot be allowed!' Kelk even half-lost his Spiran for a bit."

"Bribe them," Seymour suggested.

"That might work on some of the Crusaders, if we can scrape enough gil together," Kinoc agreed.

"So it's 'we' now?" I couldn't help but ask.

"It's 'we' now," my old friend said. The smile that went with the words was sly, but, well, that was just Kinoc.

"We'll try bribing them first," Sephiroth said. "The ones who won't come . . . use the dream powder again, and move as many of them as possible out of range while they're unconscious. Our own safety is still paramount, however, and the timing is going to be narrow. We won't get everyone. Under other circumstances, I might suggest petrifying and leaving them, but the shockwave is going to be powerful enough to vaporize stone—if it weren't, this wouldn't work."

"Not sure how much dream powder we've still got," Cid said, shaking his head. "You guys're going through it like you're chocobos and it's fresh greens."

"Sleeping powder, then," I suggested. "Whatever you have."

"I would try casting Sleepel over a wide area, but I need to conserve energy for the attack on Sin," Sephiroth said. "In any case, we're going to need whatever transport you can round up as well as the dream powder. Chocobos aren't going to work for this."

"You want the snowmobiles, then," Cid said, with a grimace.

"If they're the same as the ones I'm familiar with, they would be appropriate to the terrain, yes,"
Sephiroth said, "We'll also need trailers, if you don't already have them. And drivers."

"Trailers . . . I guess trailers on skis would work, wouldn't they? Right. Leave it to us. I'll call for volunteers to drive the things."

Paine stirred. "You've got one already."

I felt my eyebrows rise. "You?"

"Did you think I was going to just sit around here? Look, I know I don't understand everything that's going on—I get about as far as, 'somebody's old superweapon from a war that ended a long time ago is running around the countryside eating towns, and the best way anyone's been able to come up with to stop it is to drop a really big rock on it really hard' before people stopped talking to me. I'm not going to be ready to help fight, but drive a snowmobile? That I can do. And . . . even if our Zanarkand isn't really real, even if it goes up in smoke the way Jecht says it will . . . I'd like to help make sure it's remembered the right way."

Sephiroth nodded. "Have someone give you a look at one to make certain the controls are close enough to whatever you're accustomed to."

"Got it," the girl said.

We went back to our room after that, although I'm sure neither of us expected to get any more sleep that night. Sephiroth, after securing Masamune on the brackets he'd had put at the head of the bed, sat on the edge of the mattress staring out the window.

"Gil for your thoughts," I said, settling beside him.

"Only that I never thought I would wish I had as horrible a reputation in Spira as I do in Gaia," he said. "There was a time when the rumour of my arrival would have sent batallions fleeing. But now when I actually could make use of that . . ."

I put my arm around his shoulders, and he sighed and leaned into me. We stayed like that for quite a while, watching the stars until the sun came up.

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea how Paine ended up in this. (I have an excuse for Maechen—he probably spent some time in the original Zanarkand and met some of the people who became the Gagazet fayth, and so was available to use as a template for a citizen of Dream Zanarkand—but not for her.) And I originally intended to ignore X-2 as much as possible. Sigh.
Our salvation was huge and looming now, splayed across so much of the sky that I could barely cover it with my hand. Everyone else was ignoring it, including the Al Bhed who were offloading the components for the second transmitter from the airship.

We'd decided to set up three of the machina Sin lures: one to draw it into the area, one to entice it back if it destroyed the first one too quickly, and one on the other side of the ridge as a backup for the other two. The test unit that had been deployed on a tiny rocky island between Baaj and Bikanel had worked almost too well, with Sin showing up mere minutes after it was turned on. Sephiroth had used the timing information provided by the Al Bhed technicians and the boats that had been on Jecht-watch at the time to get an idea of how fast Sin actually moved. The answer had troubled him, because it turned out that a chocobo sprinting over flat ground could outdistance Sin, although the giant pyrefly lump had greater endurance. That meant we were going to have to run the transmitters for longer, and although we'd chosen positions for them that would be difficult to reach without the airship, we hadn't been able to get them entirely out of range of spells and muskets from below.

And there was plenty of "below". The first elements of Mika's army had already been here when we'd set up the first transmitter, and others had been trickling in since then. Tidy rows of tents, of yurts, and even of snow huts turned the landscape below into a series of washboard lines. The figures moving between them were most easily distinguished by colour: brown and orange and olive for the Order, red for the Crusaders, blue for the Ronso. At least we knew there were no Guado. Seymour had sent Tromell a message telling him to lock down Guadosalam and dispatch no troops anywhere for any reason, and the news we'd received through the Al Bhed indicated that suggestion was being followed.

How many faces would I have recognized if I had gone down there? I shook my head. I'd promised myself that I wouldn't think about such things. If we failed to stop Sin, a good number of them were going to die over the next few years anyway. Because in Spira, people always died.

*We'll make it, I told myself. One way or another, we'll make it.*

"Auron," Sephiroth said from behind me. "It's time."

I nodded and turned. Phase One of Operation Get Mika's Followers Away From Here was about to begin.

We'd spent some time considering who should go down there with Kinoc. Whoever went had to be, first, respected enough by the Yevonites that they wouldn't get shot on sight, and second, capable of dealing with the fallout if the discussion suddenly did go south.

Sephiroth's and my names had kept coming up, and in the end, we'd both agreed to do it. Braska had also been suggested, but Cid had vetoed that with a firm, "Li'l Yuna needs her father." Seymour had bowed out with, "I am considered a freak, gentlemen. My presence in this party can only make things more difficult." At least he'd said it with equanimity, and no evidence of deep hurt.

Jecht hadn't offered. He also hadn't been suggested by anyone present at the informal conference. He might be famous in the dream of Zanarkand, but no one out in Spira found Jecht especially impressive.
Paine had offered, then backed off with a scowl when I'd told her it was too risky. The young woman from Zanarkand was determined to become a fighter, and was making quick progress with the sword, but she wasn't ready yet.

So it was just us, and a rope ladder down from the site of the second transmitter . . . and some good-sized moneybags hidden inside Kinoc's uniform. We also had a few other bribes available—we had access to the Al Bhed smiths, after all—but we'd agreed to try reason first. Which was going to be . . . interesting.

The climb down, however, was tedious. Sephiroth went first, so that he'd be there to provide a backstop if Kinoc lost his grip. It denied me the opportunity to watch the play of my lover's muscles through his clothing. Perhaps it was just as well, though, given that I was supposed to be concentrating on what came next.

When a wide ledge appeared to our left about midway down, Kinoc stepped off onto it without saying anything, and stretched as much as the limited space would allow. Sephiroth had stopped and was looking up. I sighed and rolled my eyes. Typical Kinoc.

"If you're going to stop for a rest, at least give us some warning," I said, dropping down the last few rungs to land beside him on the ledge. Sephiroth, who had already moved further down, gripped the rock and pulled himself up.

"Couldn't shout without catching my breath first," Kinoc said, and indeed he was panting. "I'm not as athletic as you two madmen."

"You've been neglecting your training, you mean," I retorted. "That belly of yours used to be as much muscle as fat."

"Well, until all this blew up, I was pretty far along in the process of moving from grunt to administrator. Administrators don't need to be able to climb ladders half a mile long."

"You might be surprised," Sephiroth said. "For several years, I was running a fair-sized military division, and there were still missions I couldn't assign to anyone other than myself. When I was under extreme time pressure, it was sleep that went, not training."

*Which may be why you snapped in the end,* I thought but didn't say. Discipline was one thing, but the Order had always insisted that we get a certain minimum amount of sleep and food. Well, my lover wasn't a general anymore, so hopefully it wouldn't become an issue again. "Did any of those missions involve half-mile ladders?"

Sephiroth raised one silver brow. "Not that I can recall. The usual routine when I had a remote objective involved jumping out of an aircraft to reach it, and then walking to the nearest pickup point when I was done. If there was a cliff in the way, I generally had to free-climb it without the aid of a ladder. Or just jump again, if I was headed down."

Kinoc blinked and made a noise like *ulp.* "You're a far braver man than I am, then."

"Bravery isn't the word. Nor is desperation, although that comes closer. Resignation, I suppose. From nearly my earliest memory, it was drummed into me: serve their purposes, or be discarded. And they always made certain that no one else could play with their toys. Small wonder that madness, at the time, seemed like the sweetest possible release."

I put my hand on his arm, and for a moment I saw that familiar smile flicker across his face.

"It seems like a very long time ago, now," Sephiroth said. "If you've caught your breath, then let's
continue on. We need to finish this."

Inevitably, there were people waiting at the bottom of the ladder for us. I don't think there was any way we could have missed being spotted, climbing down a cliff in full view of everyone below. Sephiroth once again kicked off the ladder and dropped the last fifteen feet or so with Masamune bare in his hand, which opened up a little space. He grounded the point of the blade, but didn't return it to his back, while the rest of us finished the climb.

"Kinoc," rumbled a low voice from the largest of the figures surrounding us. "You have a lot of nerve, traitor."

"When have I ever betrayed the Church, Maester Kelk?" Kinoc shot back . . . while hiding well behind Sephiroth and myself. I put my hand to the hilt of my sword, but didn't draw. Yet. It might not do much good even if I did, given the number of muskets pointed at us. I wasn't capable of knocking bullets out of the air with my blade the way Sephiroth could.

"You arrive here in the company of these destroyers of fayths, with the murderers of a maester, and have the temerity to say that?" the elderly Ronso thundered.

Kinoc shrugged. "Maester Esmon attacked them—what were they supposed to do, stand there and die? As for the other . . . Sir, the fayths are gone. They can't be restored. I only chose to face those facts, and select what I believed to be the best course of action based on them. And now we're here because we want to talk about what's going on, and about what you're doing. Because you are all in terrible danger."

There was a long, tense silence.

"I am to understand that you descended from whatever outpost the Al Bhed are building up on that ridge in order to rescue us?" Maester Kelk said incredulously.

It was Sephiroth who replied. "In effect, yes. Since the fayth dropped me into the middle of this mess, the number of people I've had to kill has been comparatively small. It's a trend I would like to see continued."

"Please," Kinoc said. "Just let us explain."

"Once we're done, we'll leave in peace," I added. This time.

Kelk Ronso stared at us for several moments more, then vented an exasperated harrumph! and signaled to the warrior-monks to put their weapons away. "Very well. Speak your piece."

Sephiroth returned Masamune to its usual position across his back. "To everyone, not just to you and your bodyguards."

"You are in no position to make demands."

"You should have kept that writ, instead of wasting it on saving my life," Kinoc said wryly to my lover, who shrugged.

"Had I done so, we would have had far less warning of all this. I do not consider it coin ill-spent."

Kelk frowned even more deeply, looking back and forth between them. "Answer me one question: Why did you destroy the fayths?"

"Because, while a single fayth remains, the final destruction of Sin is impossible," Sephiroth said
"Such a matter should have been brought before the Church."

"Maester Kelk," I said. "Without Sin, the Church of Yevon loses its meaning, and therefore its authority. Even if you, personally, aren't concerned about that, can you say honestly that there is no one in the hierarchy who would see Sin continue its rampages if it meant they would be able to hold on to their power?"

I wasn't an expert at reading Ronso expressions, but Kelk's struck me as odd. "It is true that there are some who have strayed from the path. But surely, we must be more than that. Surely . . ." He shook himself. "Very well, you shall have your opportunity to address whoever will listen. Yevon help me."

He led us away from the cliff, towards the center of the nearby encampment. Members of the Order formed up on either side of us, and I hoped they were supposed to be an honour guard, rather than our jailors. But we gathered up others, too, as we walked—Ronso, and Crusaders. Bored, no doubt, of sitting there in camp. Some were curious, some were hostile. I thought—I hoped—that the curious ones were the more numerous.

They cleared a circle near one of the campfires for us, and Kinoc began to talk. I just let the words wash over me.

*Listen to my story. This may be our last chance.* The words of the dim pyrefly ghost on the outskirts of Zanarkand. Doubtless gone now, burned up to fuel Meteor. Why was I remembering them now?

What had that young man's story been, and who had he been telling it to? A hostile audience, like the one we were facing now? A friend? What had he been doing, where had he been going, that he thought he might never be able to tell that story again?

. . . He'd probably been a Guardian, or a Summoner on his way to petition Yunalesca. And I was putting altogether too much thought into this. What was I really worried about?

*Everything.* Sin. Meteor. Sephiroth. Yu Yevon. Jecht, and Tidus with his surprisingly sunny nature, and Paine, and everyone else in the dream that was about to evaporate.

When I thought about it that way, pyrefly whispers struck me as a much better thing to worry about.

"Surely you can stop it," Kelk was saying as I returned my attention to the conversation.

"No," Sephiroth said flatly. "It can't be stopped. Not by me or anyone else. The only thing that can change is whether or not Sin is in the right place to be hit by it . . . and how many of you die from it because you didn't evacuate in time. Meteor will destroy this ridge, the fayth, and parts of Gagazet and the Zanarkand ruins. No matter what you or anyone else does."

"You see now what my choices were," Kinoc said. "Either we go along with their plan, and let it succeed or fail on its own merits, or the destruction of the fayth is wasted. It's all or nothing. A Calm that lasts forever . . . or no more Calms, ever. And I, for one, am very glad that they took the decision on whether or not to proceed with this out of my hands—out of the Church's hands. Because we would have shot it down as too reckless."

"That is because it is reckless!" Kelk thundered. "You foolish cubs always think you know the answers to all the questions in the world, when you should stay quiet and listen to your elders!" He ground his teeth, audibly. "But at the same time, I have no desire to cause deaths for nothing. The only one that gains from that is Sin. In the name of Yevon, all forces deployed here are ordered to
return to Bevelle." He added a string of Ronso that, by my shaky understanding, included an order for some of the warriors deployed here to check for hunters or wanderers nearby and warn them, and to others to evacuate certain villages, if there turned out to be enough time.

"The Al Bhed have transport that will allow you to move more quickly, if you're willing to put saving lives ahead of the ban on machina," I offered.

"We were never the dedicated enemies of machina that you lowlanders are," Kelk rumbled. "We avoided them because we saw no reason to violate the Teachings for the sake of frivolity, but under these circumstances, I believe their use is permissible."

"Will Elder Kelk go to villages, or search for hunters?" one of the Ronso asked, in their language.

"Elder Kelk will stay," the old Ronso replied in the same tongue, eliciting gasps of dismay. "Sacred Gagazet will be wounded by falling star. Mountain deserves to have at least one stay and see. And . . . elder is old. Elder will not understand world without Sin. Elder will release soul here, go to Farplane, leave new Spira for young Ronso."

"No!"

"No, Elder!"

"Biran stay too!"

"Biran will not stay!" The old Ronso raised his voice again. "No one else will stay! Only Kelk!"

"Do we use your transport plan on him?" Kinoc whispered.

"No," Sephiroth said. "This is about honour, I think. Best not to interfere. He would not thank us."

"Nor would the rest of the Ronso," I added. "I didn't know you spoke their language, Kinoc."

"I don't, really, but I understand enough to make out simple words like 'stay' and 'no'. I'd need a deep, growly voice like you two have to actually speak it."

Sephiroth took a device from his pocket and was using it to contact the airship, explaining the Ronso and their need for transport. I had a similar gadget in my pocket, although I wasn't sure I remembered which buttons to push. It would be a long time before I really understood machina, if the day ever came when I did.

Meanwhile, the Crusaders were packing up around us. The members of the Order, on the other hand, were . . . decidedly not.

I cursed inwardly, and looked around to see if I could spot someone I knew—someone high enough in the hierarchy that they would know what was going on. After a couple of minutes, I found Harrith, who was standing, arms folded, in the shadow of a tent.

She watched me as I approached her, and sighed as I got close. "I know why you're here. The answer is that we serve Grand Maester Mika, not Maester Kelk. He can't change our orders to such an extent."

"And what are those orders, exactly?" I asked.

"To stay here and prevent you from doing anything to interfere with the Gagazet fayth. Even if it's beyond our power to stop your spell, we still must stay."
It's the sort of thing that makes you want to scream, but I had never been a screaming sort of person. I could never let my emotions out that easily. I wrenched myself away from Harrith and went back to Sephiroth, who was still standing where I had left him.

"The warrior-monks won't leave," I told him. "And there's no point in trying bribery with them, either. Most aren't susceptible."

"Meaning, most of them are stiff, humourless bastards like Auron used to be before he met you," Kinoc put in.

"Are you saying that I've loosened up, the way you were always telling me to do?" I might have been amused by that, in any other situation.

"Just the tiniest bit. I suppose we'll have to use Plan C now to have any hope of getting everyone out."

"Unfortunately," Sephiroth said. "Let's return to the redoubt first." So that we weren't caught in the haze of dreaming powder when they dropped it, right.

We had to spend ten minutes on the ledge on the way back up, because Kinoc just could not manage. Lazy bastard, I mouthed at him as he panted.

*Training freak*, he mouthed back. Old, practiced, friendly insults.

He sat down on the nearest crate when we did reach the top, ignoring the creaking sounds it made. If I'd asked, he probably would have claimed it was ice.

"We give the Crusaders about an hour to move out of range," Sephiroth said. "Then we drop the dreaming powder, and hope we can move most of the monks before it wears off."

He tilted his head back and looked up at Meteor, where it was splashed across the sky. 

"How long do we have?" I asked.

"According to Maechen, about forty-eight hours. Thirty-six before we have to get out of here to ensure we'll be far enough away when it strikes that the shockwave won't knock the airship out of the sky."

And we had two hundred or so warrior-monks to move. Without waking them up or letting anyone freeze to death. And it would take longer for ground vehicles to get clear of the impact area than for the airship. The timing was going to be tight, but not impossibly so. However, some people were going to have to work through the night, and I wouldn't have liked to be one of the ones driving a snowmobile in the dark.

The Al Bhed rose to the challenge, however. There had to have been as many of them as there were monks, scrambling around gently laying people in the trailers and covering them with blankets before they set out along the path back to the Ronso settlement at the far end of the pass. It was all very tidy and efficient . . . and well-lit, thanks to the airship shining its machina lights wherever they were needed. Meanwhile, other Al Bhed were working rapidly to assemble the second transmitter. The first was already in operation, calling out to Sin.

By midnight, the technicians were done and all but two of them had been pulled out, along with Kinoc. The others, like us, wouldn't be leaving until the last minute. At least they'd brought a better tent than the one we'd slept in on the way to Zanarkand, and we were all able to lay out our bedrolls for the night without being crammed in shoulder to shoulder. But I had to make do with blankets for
warmth, since Sephiroth didn't unfurl his wing. And I didn't ask him to.

We were woken not long after dawn when the machina connecting us to the airship started yelling about Sin. It was on its way a little more quickly than we'd expected. Which could end up being very, very bad. If it arrived after we'd evacuated, smashed the first transmitter, and then quickly left again, it could be outside the area of strongest impact when Meteor hit. I watched Sephiroth do the calculations, scribbling rapidly on a bit of paper, and I didn't have to understand his Gaian mathematical notation to understand what the expression on his face meant.

"The critical moment is less than two hours before impact," he told us (and the two Al Bhed technicians and everyone aboard the airship). "We can't just turn this transmitter on and leave it, either. Sin will destroy it right after the other one, and then wander out of the area. We're going to need a way of turning it on remotely."

"Don't know how we'd do that in the time we've got," Cid said from the airship, almost inaudible under a loud buzzing noise. "How do you set up something to trigger on a transmission that isn't going to trigger on the crap the other transmitter's putting out too? We can barely hear you, and a machina won't be smart enough to pull sense out of the background."

"It can be," Sephiroth said, his tone extremely grim. "As you say, maybe not with the equipment and time available. But you know what the only other choice is."

"Yeah, I know."

"Well, I don't," Jecht said. "So someone give it to me, nice and simple."

"If we can't activate it remotely, someone has to stay behind and do so. A suicide mission, essentially." Sephiroth's tone was clipped and emotionless.

"Oh. Oh, shit. What about that Kelk guy? You said he was staying anyway."

I snorted. "Ask a Maester of Yevon to activate a machina to call Sin, at the discretion of a group of renegades and Al Bhed? That would certainly go over well."

"Oh, yeah. I . . . kinda keep forgetting about that machina stuff. I mean, most of 'em never seem to take it seriously."

"If someone has to stay . . ." Braska said, then trailed off again.

"It has to be me." Sephiroth's expression grew even grimmer as he spoke. "No one else here has the least chance of surviving."

"And you think you can manage not to be killed by this? When you've been so thorough about warning everyone else?" Don't be angry, I told myself. It won't help.

"Jenova believed I would have been able to survive the impact on Gaia. So there is a chance." But he wouldn't look at me. At any of us.

"I'll stay."

We all stopped and looked at Jecht.

"What are you saying?" It was Braska's mouth that the words fell out of, but we were all thinking them, I knew. "Tidus needs you."
Jecht rubbed the back of his head. "Well, the way I figure it . . . There's a fifty-fifty chance, or maybe even more than that, that the moment Meteor hits, I'm done. Fayth stop dreaming, and I go poof! No more Jecht. So there's already a chance that staying behind won't be what kills me. And even if it does . . . he doesn't think much of me, y'know. My own kid. It'll hurt him, I guess, but not as much as it could. And he'll have something to remember me for beyond being a shitty dad and a has-been drunken blitzer."

"Jecht," Braska said. A low, pained sound.

"The rest of you ain't gonna go poof, and you've all got a lot to live for, y'know? Family, friends, lovers, a future. Plus, Sephy, you absolutely can't be the one to stay. Even after you squish Sin, someone's gotta fight Yu Yevon, and you're still the strongest, the best fighter. We can't waste you on saving my sorry ass. Promise me, though. All of you. Look after my boy, if you can."

"Of course we will," Braska said. Seymour nodded, and I forced myself to do the same.

"Good enough," Jecht said. "Tidus is on the airship. I'll trust you to tell him. And I'll buy you all a round of drinks when we meet up on the Farplane, okay?"

"I thought you'd sworn off liquor," I said. Forcing banter even though I felt no lightness of heart.

"No reason I can't buy myself a shoopuf milk," Jecht said, with an equally forced grin.

Our little outpost took on the feeling of a funeral after that. The two Al Bhed technicians showed Jecht how to operate the transmitter. It was just a matter of throwing a large switch, so simple I understood it even before Sephiroth translated the instructions from Al Bhed to common Spiran. The rest of us paced, or cleaned and sharpened weapons that were already clean and sharp, or stood watch for flying fiends as Sin worked its way slowly deeper into the mountains.

It was in the early hours of the next morning that it appeared, floating along above the peaks, looking as unconcerned as a giant whale-like entity made of pyreflies could. Its destination was a mile or so further down the ridge, the unmanned transmitter that had been calling it here.

Sin hesitated in midair for half a second. Then it shot out a massive wave of destruction and the other transmitter became powder, along with a section of the ridge.

"I'm pulling you out of there right now," Cid called from the airship.

"Wait," Sephiroth replied. "We have three hours yet before the deadline, and now that it's satisfied, it seems to want to head back the way it came. We can't risk the airship."

Three hours, yes. Three tooth-clenching hours of watching Sin's tail move slowly away, and Meteor growing larger in the sky. Sephiroth stood at the edge of the small slice of level ground we'd claimed for the second transmitter, staring out at the enemy, while Jecht did frantic push-ups, Braska pretended to read, and Seymour moved through spear katas at a slow cadence. I sat down cross-legged and tried to meditate. I didn't succeed very well, but as the novice instructors had told me, that did happen sometimes, especially when one was agitated. It was the trying that was important, not the success.

Sin was still faintly visible near the horizon when the three hours were up and the airship moved in. Climbing that damnable ladder and leaving Jecht behind on the ground was one of the hardest things I have ever done in my life. I wanted to scream and batter fiends into pyreflies with my bare hands. Instead, I climbed.

When we reached the airship, I headed for our cabin without saying a word to anyone. Sephiroth
followed me.

The moment the door was closed behind us, I wrapped my arms around him and clung. I don't know whether or not he understood, but at least he let me do it, and settled his arms around me in a reciprocal embrace.

"I never really got along with Jecht," I said slowly, brokenly, after long moments of silence. "From the moment we met, he was as irritating as a pebble in my boot. But . . . he made Braska laugh. And he was kind in ways that never occurred to the rest of us." And technically he wasn't dead yet, but it felt like I was building toward a eulogy.

"Genesis always annoyed the hell out of me too," Sephiroth said. "It just meant that I missed him all the more intensely when he was no longer there. Jecht . . . will be missed as well. I've come to think that people like us need people like them. Without that push from behind, it's difficult for us to reach out. For all his failures, Jecht is a good man, and he will deserve to be mourned. If I had thought more clearly in advance, we could have constructed some kind of remote actuation mechanism for the transmitter and avoided this painful necessity."

"No," I said, more forcefully than I had intended. "This is not your fault. You aren't a god. You can't be expected to foresee every possible thing that might happen."

"I have been in command of this chaotic mess of an operation since before we first reached Zanarkand. While the mistake may be understandable, it most certainly is my fault. However, you need not fear that I will crumble under the weight. Much though I might wish otherwise, this is not the first time I have made a mistake leading to someone else's death."

No, it wouldn't have been. Nevertheless, the words made me hold him just that little bit tighter, and wish for a world where he didn't have to shoulder that kind of burden. And where we didn't have to watch friends die.

Chapter End Notes

And everyone's probably figured out by now why I added that "Character Death" tag.
"Yeah, I just threw the switch. Like you can't tell, from the noise coming down the line. Anyway, don't tell me if the son of a bitch isn't coming my way. Bad enough knowing what's coming without having to add suspense to it, y'know?"

I wanted to reach across space and strangle the forced cheer out of Jecht. It was grating on my nerves.

The command center of the Delisle was crowded. It had never been meant to hold more than Cid and the three Al Bhed who ran the airship, but now it had to hold the four remaining members of Braska's original pilgrimage party, plus Paine (who, to do her credit, had faded back a couple of feet into the corridor when she's realized just how much space we didn't have), and little Tidus, scrunched into a ball between two of the command consoles, with his knees drawn up and his face pressed against them in a futile effort to hide the fact that he was crying.

"Hey, Tidus—you there, boy?"

"Yeah," came the slightly sniffly reply.

"Sorry about this," Jecht said. I think it surprised everyone a little. "If you're crying . . . I guess it's okay, this once. I'm scared shitless too. Guess this time, I came up against something that was bigger than my swelled head . . . and ten times as nasty. Been thinking, it might've been better just to leave you and your mother in Zanarkand. Things might still've happened, but you wouldn't've known until they did."

I had been thinking that it was unfortunate that Tidus was old enough to understand things like I might die and you might die and there's nothing we can do about it, so I wasn't surprised when Jecht's words brought out a fresh torrent of tears. Somehow, with his son, Jecht always hit on the worst possible thing to say.

"I HATE YOU!" Tidus screamed.

"I know. I've been a shitty dad, and I'm sorry."

"STOP SAYING YOU'RE SORRY!"

Because that makes it real, I thought. Poor Tidus.

"I . . . Yeah, I'll shut up now. Probably better that way."

Braska knelt, trying to comfort the boy, but Tidus jerked away from him and eeled between Cid and Seymour and . . . latched onto my leg. I was a familiar figure, I suppose, thanks to our fighting lessons, but I had no idea what to do for a crying child. The Order hadn't accepted novices younger than twelve, and Tidus was barely more than half that. A boy, not a youth struggling to be a man.

Cautiously, I put my hand on his head. I don't know whether it helped, but no one was giving me disgusted looks. Maybe there wasn't anything that would have helped.

The Delisle was beginning to shake. I got a better grip on Tidus, and Sephiroth (who was like a rock,
as always) wrapped an arm around me, clinging to some part of the airship’s superstructure with his other hand. Outside, the sky was turning red, and I could hear a roaring noise, complicated and many-layered, encompassing both a deep note that vibrated in my bones and a high-pitched scream that made my ears ache.

Meteor was here.

The impact . . . wasn't like anything. There was an instant when the world seemed to stop, perfect silence and a bright light pouring out from the far side of Gagazet's peak. And then the roar returned even more loudly, and the airship was tossed through the sky like a child's toy. Someone screamed as we tumbled over and over, bouncing off the walls and ceiling. I wrapped myself around Tidus, and Sephiroth drew us both in close, so that the boy was cushioned between us.

And then, almost miraculously, the awkward motion went away as the Delisle steadied itself in the air.

"Thought you said this was the safe distance," Cid said, as Sephiroth and I disentangled ourselves and stood up.

"We're still alive," my lover pointed out. The his head snapped down, and his pupils, which had been slits, dilated. I couldn't figure out what he was looking at at first. All I could see was empty air and pyreflies, both a common sight anywhere in Spira. Then it hit me, and I jerked.

Pyreflies.

Coming off of Tidus.

The boy was crying, and his lips were moving as though he was trying to say something, but no sound was coming out. I was horrified to realize I could see the deck of the airship through him.

"Leviathan," Sephiroth muttered, and raised his hand. More pyreflies came up off Gagazet in a thick stream, whipping around him and Tidus both as he knelt beside the terrified boy and placed a gloved hand under his chin, forcing the child to meet his eyes. "He is still here," my lover said, voice barely above a whisper, but each syllable was hard-edged and firm. "I demand it." The words had a weight to them, a force . . . It was like the pressure that had come from him when his wing had broken free while he'd been facing down Yunalesca, as unhuman power rose within him.

"I demand it," he repeated, and the pyreflies drew closer around Tidus and sank slowly through his skin. The boy looked more solid now. Sephiroth let go of Tidus' chin and heaved himself to his feet. He looked tired, and I immediately took an ether from my pocket and gave it to him. He drained it with a faint grimace. At least it brought a hint of colour back to his face. Well, as much as he ever had.

Then I heard a soft footstep from the direction of the hallway, and turned to see our other, half-forgotten, passenger from Zanarkand approaching. Paine was also leaking pyreflies, but she seemed to be holding together better than Tidus had.

Sephiroth raised his hand toward her, visibly bracing himself, but Paine grabbed his wrist with both hands, and shook her head.

"It's okay," she said, her voice sounding like it was coming from the other end of a long tunnel. "I'm willing to go. I'm not like the kid—I've lived my life. Maybe not the longest, but I made sure it was full. Save your strength for Yu Yevon." She let him go, and switched her attention to me. "Thanks, Auron, for teaching me. It was fun while it lasted. Maybe if someone out there gets more than a
couple of my pyreflies, part of me will find you guys again someday, and take up where I left off. If that happens, don't turn her away, okay?"

I nodded. Kelk, Jecht and his wife, Paine, Maechen the astronomer . . . So many lives were just slipping through our fingers. At least Sephiroth had managed to save Tidus. Or had he? I wondered about that, as Paine vanished into pyreflies and the sword she'd been carrying clattered to the deck. Was the boy alive, or Unsent?

Seymour must have been thinking the same thing, because he leaned close to Tidus, nostrils flaring. "He's alive," he confirmed. One life saved, then, but at what cost? Sephiroth still didn't look good.

"Are you alright?" I asked him, but he made a gesture of dismissal.

"I need more ether, that's all. See what you can scrounge up."

I frowned. Needing ether implied that he'd expended a lot of mental strength on saving Tidus. He met my eyes steadily.

"It may not have been the right thing to do," he admitted, "but I felt I owed it to Jecht. Unless we're very unlucky indeed, it shouldn't end up mattering. Yu Yevon should be fairly soft in comparison to Sin, or why would he have needed such protection in the first place?"

Logical, but . . . Leviathan, I hope he's right.

We'd know in a few minutes.

Cid opened a stash of ether for us, a dozen bottles in all, and Sephiroth drank all of them while the rest of us watched, astounded. The rule of thumb I'd learned in the Order was that ten ethers should sate the strongest mage.

"I suppose no one has a turbo ether," he said when he was done.

"I suppose turbo ethers grow on trees on your Gaia," Cid mimicked. "You have to bribe monsters for them here, and they're expensive. What we get, we give to the smiths."

Sephiroth raised his eyebrows. "I wouldn't say they grow on trees, but they're dropped by certain moderately common monsters. I didn't realize they were that rare here." He shook his head. "I suppose that, in the worst case, I have the option of snacking on pyreflies."

Don't. The word was on my lips, but I choked it back. We couldn't afford to give up any advantage until we were certain that Yu Yevon was gone and never coming back.

At that moment, the Delisle came out of the shadow of Gagazet's peak, and we could see what Meteor had wrought. Well, sort of, anyway.

"Didn't expect this much dust," Cid growled. "It's going to gum up the engines."

"Fix them later," Seymour said, not even turning around. We were all intently peering through the windows, trying for a look at the ground—a look at Yu Yevon.

After a few moments, the air cleared a bit and showed us what Meteor had left behind.

"The Ronso are going to be beyond pissed," Cid said, his tone almost reverent.

The slopes of Mount Gagazet now ended abruptly in a sheer cliff that had to be thousands of feet high. There was no sign of the fayth, or the ridge, or the caverns—just a massive crater that bit into
the ruins of Zanarkand. In a few years, I expected the sea was going to erode into its edge, but for now it was raw rock and dust.

Near the center, something moved amidst a ripple of pyreflies.

"That must be him," Braska said. "Yu Yevon."

"Doesn't exactly look human," Cid said, scratching his head.

"He's Unsent," I pointed out. "They can look like whatever they want to."

"Take us in." If Sephiroth was still weak from healing Tidus, he wasn't showing it now. He stood squarely, shoulders back, feet apart. The very image of a warrior. Jecht probably would have ribbed him about posing dramatically.

There was a soft clink as Tidus picked up Paine's fallen sword. "That thing killed my dad, didn't it? And he might not have been much of a dad, but it was still my job to kick his ass, not that thing's. I want to go with you."

"You're not ready," I said, before anyone else could. *Even if Sin did steal your kill.*

"Sure I am!" Tidus swung his sword . . . a little too enthusiastically. He overbalanced and fell, but this time, he didn't cry, just got back to his feet with a determined expression on his face.

"Tidus," Braska said, crouching down. "There's something else I need you to do instead, alright?"

The boy offered him a suspicious frown. "Like what?"

"Protect Yuna. Especially if I don't come back. You may not be ready for that sword yet, but you'll grow into it one day, and you're strong. And kind. It would make me feel better if I knew she could count on you."

Tidus blinked slowly, several times. "Okay," he said at last. "Okay, I'll look after Yuna. And you'll get that guy for me, right?"

"That's why we're here," Braska said.

"This is as low as we can get," Cid said. "Ladder's trailing the ground. It's now or never, people!"

"We're going," Braska said. I just followed Sephiroth out of the room and to the head of the ladder.

I was getting very tired of ladders, and climbing down into the dust cloud was even less fun than escorting Kinoc down that cliff. I awkwardly flipped a fold of my haori up in front of my face to keep the worst of the mess out, but I still coughed and sneezed all the way down. The others did too, even Sephiroth. Who leaped from the ladder midway down again, seemingly just to get it over with. His landing stirred up even more dust, to the point where I was tempted to close my eyes and feel my way from rung to rung.

When I reached a point about ten feet up, it started raining. That did get rid of the dust, but it made the rungs of the ladder slippery, which was not helpful at all. I was forced to grit my teeth and finish climbing down very slowly indeed.

A couple of steps away from the bottom of the ladder brought me to Sephiroth. "Are you doing this?" I asked, although I was fairly certain he didn't know a spell to create rain.

He shook his head and gestured at a shadow faintly visible through the rain. "It seems to be a
modified Water spell rather than a true rainstorm," he said. "I suppose he doesn't like the dust any more than we do."

I grunted, drew my sword, and settled in to wait for Braska and Seymour to cover the last ten feet of ladder. Seymour slipped and fell with a sharp cry when he was still about that far up, and Sephiroth caught him and set him on his feet.

"We seem to have drawn his attention," my lover said, gesturing out into the thinning rain. "Be ready."

We all brandished our weapons. If Jecht had been there, he would no doubt have shouted at the bizarre creature that was slowly emerging from the mists. Yu Yevon retained no vestige whatsoever of his human form. He looked like a purplish lump with short tentacles. There were two other things that looked like stacks of rock blocks crudely carved with glowing runes floating to either side of him.

"This is what we have feared all our lives?" There was a fine edge of sarcasm in Seymour's voice as he glared at the purple thing.

"So it seems," Braska replied.

"Another one that doesn't scan," Sephiroth put in. "Feel it out. Standard tactics. Auron, be ready to fall back to take Jecht's position if it looks like Rufus has too much to fend off."

As the silver-haired man and I ran in to close with Yu Yevon, a punishing force suddenly beat down on us. Gravity spell, I realized. I hadn't encountered one since training. Sephiroth hardly seemed to notice it, and continued to charge forward, teeth bared... although I noticed that he finished closing on the ground rather than leaping into the air in one of his signature moves.

Armor Break! I was a little shocked when I felt it connect. So did the other three skills of the same class. But the gravity spell still beat down on us even though our opponent should have been weakened. I was going to ache when this was over, from the simple strain of standing up.

When this was over...

I almost laughed. Almost. But oddly, Yu Yevon hadn't made any moves against us except the gravity spell itself, and that was debilitating, but not likely to be fatal unless I did something stupid like tripping over my own feet and breaking my neck.

One of the rock pillar fiends flickered and sent me into stinging darkness for a moment, but a quick Esuna from Braska lifted the darkness and poison and whatever other conditions had been mixed in.

Then Yu Yevon healed himself, and the other rock thing healed him too, and I heard Sephiroth curse. He hit a rock pillar fiend with a Shadow Flare, and the runes on it lost their light, but it didn't stop floating, much less crumble into gravel.

"Rufus, handle the one on the left! Auron, the one on the right! Keep them out of this while I deal with our purple friend!" Sephiroth barked out the orders quickly, then turned back to Yu Yevon, stabbing and hewing at the Unsent at a speed I couldn't easily follow. He was really pounding the purple creature, and at that rate, it had to be over soon. Didn't it?

I battered my rock pillar fiend back into submission as quickly as I could every time it lit up again. On the other side, Seymour was putting his spear training to good use, since these things appeared to be immune to elemental magic. And to Armor Break and other techniques of the same family. Still, the pillars were much less tough than Behemoths, and neither of us was having much trouble...
keeping them under control. It was so easy that Braska didn't even have to keep an eye on us, just on Sephiroth, who was still battering at Yu Yevon through the gravity spell. The silver-haired man was doing quite a bit of damage, from the look of it. The Unsent was leaking bursts of pyreflies with every sword strike.

Were we really going to win this easily? Yu Yevon seemed to be half-destroyed. He was sagging in the air . . . but I also felt an ominous prickle on the back of my neck. Especially when the gravity spell suddenly vanished.

"Down!" Sephiroth shouted, but it was already too late. Greenness was already shooting out from Yu Yevon in an expanding half-dome: an Ultima spell. It seems that he does know how to attack after all, was all I had time to think before an impact to my chest sent me flying through the air.

The impact . . . wasn't as hard as I had expected. What I landed on wasn't solid stone, but something slightly yielding that made a crunching sound on the first bounce. Then I realized, horrified, that Sephiroth had once more stepped in to protect me. He'd taken the brunt of the spell, and then twisted himself around so that I'd landed on him. And, from the sound of it, broken not a few of his bones.

For one horrible moment, I thought he was dead, that he had killed himself for me, but then glazed green eyes regained focus. Hurriedly, I got off him.

"I broke my back, I think," he said, sounding unreasonably calm. "That hasn't happened in a while. It takes about ten minutes to heal, even with the aid of spells and potions, and I can't move or be moved until the nerves finish knitting, or it gets worse and takes longer. You'll have to handle this until then."

I nodded. Ten minutes was an eternity in battle, but for him, I would do it.

I would have to.

"Pull my left leg out straight before you go," he added, and I did so, shuddering as I felt the ends of another broken bone grate against each other before they settled into place. Then I picked up my sword and turned back towards the enemy.

At least Yu Yevon wasn't aggressive. After releasing the Ultima at us, he hadn't done anything further except recreate the gravity field around himself. Maybe he'd seen Sephiroth as the only dangerous one, and with the silver-haired man temporarily out of commission, he was ignoring us.

Seymour, who was on his feet, turned toward me as I approached, dawning horror on his face. "Auron, please tell me that he isn't—"

"He'll be all right, but he's out of action for the next few minutes. We'll have to finish this ourselves," I glared at Yu Yevon, purple and floating and unconcerned. Something was building in me. Not the hot pressure of an overdrive, but a slower, deeper wave of energy that made something click inside my head. I adjusted my grip on the Riot Blade, and sprang forward, acting on instinct.

It was one of those crystal-clear, perfect moments that happens very rarely in the lifetime of someone practicing bushido. I'd experienced one only once before, when I had learned Power Break, the first skill in that class that had come to my hands. And now . . . now it was . . . Break its life. Those were the words that floated through my mind as I felt all my energies focus through my sword. I swung, and distinctly felt something non-physical shatter, in a way that was subtly different from the other Break skills. And Yu Yevon's purple took on a greenish cast, with puffs of black circling around him. Only then did I understand. Zombie Attack. The lock node on my
Sphere Grid that had been preventing me from learning it had dissolved under pressure.

Then the light of a Life spell flowered around Yu Yevon, and the ancient Unsent screamed and began shedding a torrent of pyreflies. I turned in time to see Braska lower his staff. So, after all of this madness, it had been our Summoner who had finished off the final vestige of Sin. How very . . . fitting.

"Is it over?" Seymour asked no one in particular as the two rock pillar fiends crashed to the ground and came apart.

"I'm not sure," I said, tightening my grip on my sword once again as I saw a stubborn shadow among the pyreflies.

But when I stalked over to confront it, I found only a man, an Unsent, translucent and dressed in a simple robe. He had short grey hair and a neatly-trimmed beard, and the expression on his face as he knelt amongst the pyreflies was both sad and terribly guilty. I felt only a slight shock as I recognized a resemblance to Yunalesca.

"You are Yu Yevon," Seymour said, from beside me. A soft, bitter laugh, barely audible above the sound of escaping pyreflies. "That was my name," the Unsent agreed. "Yu Yevon, the greatest fool ever to walk the surface of Spira, who thought he could wield the power of the gods against Bevelle. My arrogance destroyed the very things I wanted to protect. My city. My people. My daughter. All gone because of me. And millions upon millions of other lives. No apology or atonement I could make would ever suffice. I can only thank you for putting an end to it. And to me."

Braska crouched down beside him, putting their eyes on the same level. "I understand. I have a daughter too, and I was going to do something very stupid for her sake. I know what it's like to want to protect your child. I only wish that you'd had the same kind of help that I did. They saved me—we saved each other. Next time, try not to go alone."

"Ah." To my surprise, Yu Yevon voiced something that might have been a chuckle. "You may be right that that was my mistake. I will remember." There was a hint of a smile on his face as he disappeared in a final rush of pyreflies.

"Now it's over," Braska said, straightening up. "All we need to do is collect the last member of our party."

Sephiroth was still lying on his back about twenty feet away, but his head was slightly raised, and he watched us as we approached.

"Feeling better?" Braska asked him, while I knelt down at his side.

"I should be back on my feet in another two or three minutes. Although I gather that you finished up without me."

"Should we apologize for stealing your kill?" Seymour asked.

That familiar smile flickered across Sephiroth's face and was gone. "No. On the contrary, it's . . . fitting. That Spira's problem should be ended by Spirans."

"And a very big rock," I pointed out. "Which was not from Spira."

"It was more Spiran than I am." Sephiroth shook his head slightly. "Sometimes, this all seems like
some kind of bizarre dream."

I leaned down and kissed him, firmly, on the mouth. If Jecht had been here, he would have been catcalling and heckling by the time I was done.

"Is that enough to convince you that you're awake?" I asked, and saw the flicker of his smile again.

"Very much so."

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, they used a cheap shot to deal with Yu Yevon. The fact that it's a canonically viable cheap shot probably doesn't redeem it too much. What can I say? It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. 😎

Just the epilogue left.
If anyone had ever asked me where and how I expected to spend my twenty-sixth birthday, "in a yurt at the edge of the Calm Lands, alone with my lover, experimenting with unusual sex positions" would not have been my response, but it felt very good indeed while we were doing it.

We could have stayed in Bikanel, but the desert island felt a bit claustrophobic, after everything that had happened. It had caused me an odd sort of internal pain when I'd realized that I wanted to be away from Braska for a while. It felt disloyal . . . but at the same time, being near him reminded me too much of the pilgrimage and of the faces that were no longer there. Then we'd arrived in Luca and discovered that the news had flown ahead of us—not just that Sin was dead, but how it had died, and at whose hands. We had to hide out on the ship that had brought us from Bikanel until we were able to slip out of the city in the middle of the night, covering the distance to the travel agency as quickly as we could, and renting chocobos from there. It didn't take us long to realize that if we wanted any peace, we'd have to go somewhere where there were no people, and after some discussion, we'd decided on the northern Calm Lands as the best available choice. We'd bought the yurt from the central travel agency, and Sephiroth had built a platform to set it on by hewing apart the stone of the cliffs using a trick energy slash that I was still trying to learn.

As midwinter passed and began to push its way toward spring, we hunted and trained and made love and basically lived in our own private world.

Not that there were no intrusions at all. We weren't too far off the direct line between the travel agency and the bridge across the ravine to Gagazet, and now and again, a traveling Ronso or a squad of Crusaders would stop by and bring us news from the outside world. We heard about Kinoc's unexpected ascension to the position of Maester, and about Grand Maester Mika's heart attack. The Church of Yevon was still stumbling along, although even that old shark Mika hadn't found a way to claim the credit for Sin's death.

It would take time for the Church's influence to crumble completely, especially in Bevelle. Generations, perhaps. Oddly, Sephiroth approved—and I did too, once I understood his reasons. Too much change happening too quickly is one of the things that causes humans to fight amongst themselves. Now that the pressure from Sin is off, we'll be seeing more of that. For the time being, the continuity offered by the Church is necessary to help people keep their anxieties under control.

It was Seymour who brought the news about the Crusaders, though, during the period when the snow had melted and the long plains grasses were once more changing from brown to green. He also brought his own yurt, thankfully, since he didn't seem inclined to leave any time soon.

"They've broken completely with the Church, with Kinoc's blessing—Mika's too ill to fight about it," he was saying as we finished lunch, wiping his empty bowl with the heel of the load of bread he'd brought with him from the trading post. "They've got agreements with Luca and Kilika to be paid directly by the municipal governments to guard the settlements and the highway as far as Djose, and they're negotiating with Guadosalam. What that means for Macalania and the Calm Lands, no one is quite sure yet. The warrior-monks will protect Bevelle itself, of course, but there aren't enough of them to guard the forest road, and this oversized chocobo pasture is out of the question."

"You don't have to stay here if you're offended by chocobo pastures," I told him dryly, but he shook his head.
"It isn't offensive at all. I find . . . that I am not entirely comfortable around large numbers of people yet, now that the dust has settled and I've had time to reflect. At Baaj, it was always the same dozen faces, year in and year out. Bikanel, and even Guadosalam, were . . . too much. So I hope that you don't object to me living next door for a bit."

"Not if you don't mind splitting the camp chores," Sephiroth said easily. And so it was decided.

Seymour brought other news too. About Braska, who had decided to remain in Bikanel with Yuna for the time being. About my mother, who had quite unexpectedly taken Tidus under her wing. About Cid, who was considering setting up another Al Bhed settlement in some remote location on the mainland, now that they no longer had to worry about Sin destroying it if they built somewhere a bit vulnerable. And minor things, gossip really, about Kinoc and Tromell and others we had met along the way.

The next group of Crusaders to show up on our doorstep included Quasin, the northern commander, with a request: he wanted us to train some of his men. I'm still not quite sure why we agreed. I suppose just hunting fiends was starting to get a bit stale. In any case, our tent-encampment grew to encompass twenty enthusiastic young men and women, and our fiend hunts became much larger, coordinated exercises.

Then we acquired a few adolescent Ronso, down from the mountain to see what the lowlands were like, and learn to socialize with humans in a setting where everyone had already been exposed to other Ronso. Chocobo-loads of supplies were going back and forth a couple of times a week, and a bird-handler settled at the encampment. Then a journeyman Al Bhed smith, enticed to the area by rumors that we had large quantities of fire gems available.

Quasin turned up again in the middle of planting season, with another request. Apparently he and his second had both been recalled to Crusader Headquarters in Luca for some kind of meeting, and he needed someone to take over here. His third was too green for the job, and when he'd asked around for suggestions, one name had come up almost universally: Sephiroth's. My lover scowled, but accepted, on the condition that we were going to stay right here. And so we acquired more Crusaders, running in and out.

By the time early summer rolled around and Cid's airship—Cid's new airship, the Fahrenheit, larger than the old Delisle—came along and parked itself overhead, there were at least sixty people encamped in what had once been a secluded spot at the end of nowhere, and some people were talking about putting up more permanent buildings. We climbed up a very long ladder and were invited into a room that had been fitted out as a temporary conference room. It was full of grim-looking Crusader officers, among whom I recognized not only Quasin and his second, but Mandragore, Marshal and head of the organization for the past ten years.

He was the one who addressed us, coming straight to the point. "As you may have heard, we've broken off relations with the Church, formally and completely. Instead, we're allying with the civic authorities of Luca, the Al Bhed, and possibly the Guado, although that's an ongoing negotiation."

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow. "What has that to do with us?"

"It's come to my attention that I lack the ability to weld the disparate groups involved into a single fighting force. Also, I know nothing of the tactics involved in the use of machina weapons and transport. It's come to my attention that you do know machina-related tactics, and as one of the Destroyers of Sin, everyone in Spira looks up to you. Sir Sephiroth, I am asking you to take over as the head of the Crusaders, or whatever that force eventually becomes."

Unexpectedly, a smile flickered across my lover's face. "I suppose it is my fate never to be able to
rest for long." And he glanced in my direction.

*Hey, Auron, don't you think you've both rested long enough? Jecht's ghost seemed to whisper in my ear. Admit it, you were both getting bored.*

I made the smallest of small nods, and Sephiroth's gaze returned to Mandragore.

"I accept," my lover said. "However, you will remain as commander in the south, unless you wish to retire completely. We will be moving the headquarters."

"Here?" one of the other officers said incredulously.

"Once it seeps into the subconscious of the general population that Sin is gone for good, people will start moving north to settle in the Calm Lands," Sephiroth said. "The drop in the death rate will lead to increased population pressure, and this is good, arable land, empty except for chocobos and fiends. It won't happen today or tomorrow, but in twenty years I expect that large areas will have been put to work growing grain and greens. When that happens, it would be best for all of Spira if it isn't under Bevelle's control. So yes, here."

That led to an uproar around the table, during which I leaned closer to Sephiroth and muttered, "I know everyone's been trying to convince us that we need to build more than a few stone platforms for the tents, but isn't this overkill?"

"Have you ever known me to do anything by half-measures?" he replied.

No, I hadn't. I had to admit. And I wouldn't have had him any other way.

Chapter End Notes

And that's all, folks.

(Digression, likely not very coherent) One of my main complaints about FFX-2 is how implausible its version of Spira is. Too much change, too quickly, if you sit down and think about population size, resources, human nature, and how much Sin's destruction would actually change things. Overall, X-2 is an okay game if you consider it as a separate entity, but it's not a very good sequel.

Currently, I'm working on, um, three other full-scale FFVII 'fics (although I'm still not sure what I'm going to do about Night of the Were-Chocobo) and I've also got several fragments a couple of chapters long which may or may not turn into something. I'm not expecting to revisit the FFX universe any time soon, although you never know. Oh, and I've got a migraine, which is why most of this may not be making much sense. Going to crash for half an hour or so before supper now. Ugh.

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