**Love Her and Despair**

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**Love Her and Despair**

by [auronlu](http://www.example.com/auronlu)

**Summary**

[AU] 13 years after Yuna falls in the Final Summoning, a Cult of Sin has arisen, Isaaru must resume his pilgrimage, and Auron must try once again to kill a friend before his time runs out. They’ll need all the help they can get from the Crusaders, the Al Bhed, Yuna's surviving guardians and the Crimson Squad to combat a Sin like none before.

**Notes**

Link to Fanvid Teaser/Prologue: [Lulu's Sin](http://www.example.com/lulus-sin)
Schism

Chapter Notes

"In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!" (J.R.R. Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Burgundy sails snapped in a fitful wind that set the sailors muttering. The sea-witch had her ways, they said, and owned both sea and sky. Ships plied the waves by her permission, or not at all. There had been frost at sunrise, great spears of rime coating the rigging. The tropical sun had banished it quickly, but it was one more sign of Sin's proximity. That, and the lightning's balefire dancing on the mast at midnight.

"Land ho!"

The call was hardly needed. All eyes not bent to shipboard tasks were fixed on the wisps of smoke billowing on the horizon, fading now like the last breath of a dying fire. The rising column veiled half the sky in a grayish-pink fume that stretched clear back to Djose. For six disquieting days, the SS *Konna* had sailed under that gray pall, seeing only an orange smudge where the sun should be. Flecks of ash came fluttering down, dissolving to powder wherever they touched. A stark whiff of burning hung in the air.

One of the harpooners began to sing the Hymn of the Fayth. The subdued refrain spread out in ripples from the ship's bow as roughened sailors' voices took up the chorus. A squad of warrior monks, cleaning their weapons on deck, looked up and added their voices in prayer. On the railing above, a red-haired man in priestly robes smiled and cupped his hands in Yevon's sign. Neither he nor the pair of guards flanking him joined in the singing, however.

Clattering up the ladder to the observation deck, the captain raised her arm in salute. "Your Grace. We'll make Besaid by sunset."

"Very good, Kiyuri. Tell your crew the danger is past. Sin is at least a day from here by now."

"With all due respect, milord—" she began. Suddenly, she pivoted towards the woman keeping watch. "Naya, what's that thing you're wearing around your neck?"

The sailor's hands flew to the bone pendant that had slipped out from the bib of her overalls. "It's, ah, it's nothing, Cap'n. Just a carving of a pretty lady, y'know, that caught me fancy." Her cheeks reddened.

"Sin!" Kiyuri spat, stalking towards her. "The Grand Maester of Yevon sails with us, and I have an
idol-worshipper who wears Sin over her heart! Hand it over, or I'll throw you overboard with it."

Torn between duty and devotion, the wretched sailor drew the pendant over her neck and dropped it into Kiyuri's waiting palm. The captain raised her arm and prepared to fling it into the waves.

"Please. Let me see it," the maester said.

For a moment it seemed she might feign deafness. Grand Maester Isaaru was a soft-spoken man, and the sails boomed like a drum-head. However, his shorter bodyguard, a youth who looked too green for such an important post, was blocking her throw. Scowling, the captain held out the necklace. "I'm sorry, Your Grace. Sailors are too far from the temples, too close to the sea. And that one came close to meeting her unholy god six months ago. The toxin—"

"She survived a Sin attack?" said the second guard, an older man with dark skin and a hawk's profile.

Isaaru cupped the bone charm in his hand. At a distance, its triangular silhouette could easily be mistaken for a shark's tooth. Closer inspection revealed a stylized carving of a woman's face and neck down to the collarbones, captured with an economy of line. There was a haughty arch to the brows— or rather, brow, since one side of the face was cut away at a slant. Negative space showed where the hair should be.

"The same face," he mused. "Always the same."

When he slipped the sacrilegious amulet into his robes, the captain stiffened. He chuckled at her expression. "Have no fear, Kiyuri. A scrap of whale-bone the size of a thumbnail is hardly likely to draw Sin's attention... or mercy," he added to the anxious sailor. "If it returns, we are all in equal peril."

"But, Your Grace—"

"Look after your ship, Captain, and let the maesters look after Yevon, no?"

"My lord." The woman gave a jerky salute, glared at Naya and went below.

"Now," Isaaru said, turning to Naya with a reassuring smile. "Perhaps you can tell us what you saw. We need to know all we can, since Sin has changed its ways."

"Aye, it has, me lord," she stammered. "That is, She don't bother any ship that leaves her waters in peace. Stray not west o' Besaid if ye sail under Yevon's holy seal. The Al Bhed heathens live free of Sin's wrath, they say, all around the western isles. Me last ship, me captain tried to make the old run from Luca to Bevelle the short way 'round. Three days northwest o' Luca, the Lady put the ice to us till every sail and line were coated with it and men couldn'.walk the deck. Then the gale-winds came up and shattered the sheets. At the last, lightning struck the mast and split the hull right down into the water like roots o' tree."

Isaaru nodded at a tale that could be heard in one form or another in every port. "How did you escape?"

"Al Bhed ship picked me up, then, didn't it? Me and a few other souls. Dropped us off near the ruins of Old Guadosalam."

"And you saw Sin? What did it—"

"Your Grace," the younger guard interrupted, "can't we finish this later? You're too exposed up
here. There may be sinspawn in the harbor."

"Just a moment, Pacce."

The second guard cut in. "No, Isaaru, he's right. Yevon's your job, but ours is keeping you safe. And you don't make it easy for us! Get under cover. I'll stay up here with our Sin-worshipper and find out what else she knows."

"All right, Maroda, all right," Isaaru shook his head. "Naya, for all of Spira's sake—" he would have said Yevon, but this woman clearly followed a different allegiance—"please answer my brother's questions as well as you can. May High Summoner Yuna bless you."

"Th-thank you, Your Grace."

A melancholy smile played across the maester's features as he descended the ladder. Sin and the temples might be scrapping for souls these days, yet oddly enough, no one had lost faith in the High Summoner, although her Calm was coming to an end.

Lost in thought, Isaaru was nearly flung overboard when the ship gave an abrupt heave. Lunging to block his fall, Pacce helped him down the steps. Cries of Sin rang out. The harpooners leapt to their posts.

"I'll cover you, Big Brother!" Pacce planted himself in front of Isaaru, shielding him as a wave crashed over the side. "The wheelhouse, it's closer!"

Isaaru shook his head and grasped a line, steadying himself. "Pacce, it's not Sin, it's only—"

A flurry of scales and fins burst from the waves in a surge of battering spray. Thudding onto the deck, huge fishy forms landed among the sailors and pounced upon them with terrifying speed. Pacce drew his sword with a yell and jammed it at the nearest one, twisting the blade in a gush of pyreflies.

Blood was already running over the deck. Sinspawn were tearing through unarmed sailors with cruel, snapping jaws. Before he could summon them, Isaaru's warrior monks came charging across the deck, straight into the mob of fiends swarming between them and the ship's crew. Those in front started hacking through the living barrier with bayonets. The others raised their rifles, trying to pick off the sinspawn swarming up the rigging, but the pitching deck and furious melee thwarted their shots.

Isaaru flinched at a cry from above. Looking up, he saw Naya pressed against the railing, trying to fend off two fiends with a coil of rope.

Forgetting his brothers' admonitions, Isaaru raised his hands, letting fly a silent call to the aeon of Besaid. Pterya, old friend, we need you. He had not summoned in so long. Would she heed his prayer?

Everywhere was din, panic and chaos, yet to Isaaru's inner ear there was a hollow silence. No Hymn of the Fayth sang in his mind. No beating wings unfurled around a crimson-feathered spirit arrowing down from heaven's gates.

He watched in anguish as one sinspawn clamped down on the sailor's arm, another on her leg. Where was his brother? A thrusting spear answered his question an instant later. It was one instant too long. Even as Maroda dispatched one fiend, the other leapt off the deck, dragging its screaming victim overboard.
Pterya was not answering his summons, and Isaaru saw with painful clarity that many lives would be lost if he left the warrior monks and Maroda to deal with the threat alone. But the deck would surely buckle under Spathi's weight, assuming there was even room for Bevelle's massive aeon. Pitch, rope and oiled boards were ill-suited for Grothia's fire, but Isaaru was running out of options. Shutting out the sounds of battle, he sketched a series of gestures in the air that he had not needed in thirteen years.

Few here had seen an aeon, and there were more screams when the flaming hulk burst from the deck with a roar. Snarling at its master's command to refrain from flames, the ill-tempered spirit charged into the fray, pummeling and biting. Although these sinspawn had the edge in speed, there were so many that Grothia's swipes found plenty of targets. It slapped them aside like an ogre swatting wasps.

Gradually, the chaos died down as fighters and aeon gained the upper hand. Blades and spears flashed through eddies of rising pyreflies. Shielded by Pacce, Isaaru moved from one wounded man to the next, healing those he could save. He would send the others later.

When the battle was over, the ship cast anchor a league out from shore. The surviving crew set to work clearing the carnage and repairing the damage. There beneath a bloody sunset, Isaaru performed his grimmest duty, sending the spirits of the dead before their bodies were committed to the deep. Naya's corpse was not among them, but there were probably a few other closet heretics who would have been comforted to know that the summoner who sent them carried Sin's token in the folds of his robes.

They spent a restless night in the lee of Besaid Island, huddled to the southwest where the air was clear of ash. At dawn they weighed anchor and sailed towards the harbor. Soaring green cliffs splashed with plunging waterfalls would have made an idyllic landscape, if not for the enormous, jagged gashes in the slopes of the jungle high above. It was hard to imagine a force that could shatter trees and blast away dirt right down to bedrock, a full ten fathoms above the waterline.

There was no question of mooring at Besaid's dock. That much was clear before they reached the harbor. Rounding the point, the Konna encountered a grisly soup of planks, rope, snarled fishing nets and slats of boats, all thumping and scraping past the hull. To the crew's dismay, a few bodies were tangled in the debris. They heaved the dead aboard with nets meant for other kinds of catch. Warrior monks set to work wrapping the pitiful remains in funeral shrouds. At this rate, they might run through their stock even before they came ashore.

The beach had been scoured, its once-golden sands strewn with muck and dead fish. A fine layer of ash coated everything. Beyond the beach, acres of blackened trunks made shocking inroads into Besaid's verdant jungle. Some of the trees still smoldered. A few carrion-birds circling the bluffs were the only signs of life—almost.

Coat blazing red in the dawn, a man stood upon the water. No, not on the water. One scrap of dock had escaped Sin's wrath. Excited murmurs spread across the ship, whispering a name, or, more often, a title.

The Legendary Guardian. He was back again, from wherever heroes were stowed when the world did not need them.

"It's Sir Auron!" Pacce was beside himself. "I don't believe it! It's really him!"
Maroda was silent. His significant look meant that he and Isaaru would be having a difficult conversation later, out of their brother's earshot.

So, then: a brief detour to pick up a singular passenger. Isaaru ordered a dinghy to be lowered. The crew's fear had eased at the sight of the warrior silhouetted against the smoking treeline, and Kiyuri had to select rowers from among too many volunteers. While they winched the boat down to the water, Maroda argued with Isaaru. The spearman seldom lost his battles. A short time later, Isaaru and a frustrated, fuming Pacce were watching the small craft sculling across the harbor, shoving its way through debris-choked water.

Approaching the patient figure, Maroda called out to him. "Sir Auron! What are you doing here?"

The response was inaudible to those left aboard, but Pacce would dig it out of his brother later. "Waiting for a ship."

Chapter End Notes
"Shark's Tooth" by Mintywolf

Meta: In Final Fantasy X, Isaaru's aeons look like Yuna's, but have different names: Pterya, Grothia and Spathi for Valefor, Ifrit and Bahamut. Perhaps each summoner has a unique name for his/her aeon that arises out of the bond between them.

NPC Trivia: I shamelessly borrowed names for minor characters like Naya from the free agent blitzball players in FFX/X-2.

Other fanart: The Lady's Face by Banane on DeviantArt

About "FFX3": Nearly all of Love Her and Despair was posted ten years before that audio epilogue on the X/X-2 remaster. I hope you'll agree that my idea was better.
Chapter Summary

_Thirteen years into High Summoner Yuna's Calm, Maester Isaaru and his brothers take a ship to Besaid to investigate rumors of a Sin attack. Auron is waiting for them._

Chapter Notes

"Waiting for a Ship" - illustration by author

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So have you been on Besaid all this time? Or did you just come here to fight Sin?" Pacce seemed bent on extracting every scrap of information from his idol as soon as Sir Auron stepped aboard.

Not that the legendary guardian was doling out many scraps. He stood in his customary slouch with an arm tucked in his coat, a dour expression, and a crop of more white hair than Isaaru recalled from their last unhappy encounter. Warrior monks shoved forward to form an impromptu honor guard. Maroda and Pacce, as usual, stood to Isaaru's right and left.
Auron shrugged. "I followed a hunch."

"A hunch?" Maroda said, incredulous. "You can predict where Sin will strike?"

"No."

"Then how—"

"Lord Isaaru," Auron said. "I assume a maester of Yevon did not come all this way just for the festival."

The maester shook his head. "Tidings of the attack reached us en route to Lady Yuna's anniversary celebrations in Luca. We came to aid the survivors."

"There aren't any."

Such simple words. Auron had spent a day searching the rubble of the village for any sign of Yuna's former guardians, a second day sifting the corpses tossed up on the beach. Some faces had been familiar, but Auron had not spent enough time on the island to know its inhabitants. The current Sin would have recognized almost all of them.

"Not much use in going ashore then," Maroda said.

"Isaaru can still send them, though, right?" Pacce said.

There was a heavy silence. Auron raised his head and looked from one to the other, causing Pacce to straighten self-consciously. The brothers made an incongruous trio. Isaaru was neither tall nor short, with long red-brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. He had lost some of the slender delicacy of his youth, but most of his girth was simply layers of priestly robes. Maroda, girded in well-worn Crusader's leathers, was tall, dark and rangy, all angles where their little brother was rounded like fresh dough. Pacce was a head shorter than Maroda, a chunky youth of about nineteen with a pink and earnest face. He wore the undented, burnished metal armor of a warrior monk cadet. His short black hair stood up like Auron's, but instead of giving him a grizzled air, he looked as if he'd tried to yank it out. They might not be brothers by blood: Sin's predations restructured families with depressing frequency.

Auron returned his attention to Isaaru. "There's something you should see."

"Yes, we should pay our respects." Isaaru raised his voice. "Captain Kiyuri, we'll need both boats lowered this time."

"Yes, Your Grace." She took a step towards the gathered sailors and began barking orders. "Back to your posts, slack-jaws! Winch teams, port and starboard! You heard the maester. Hop!"

The sailors were less keen to set foot on Besaid's ravaged beach than they had been to ferry a celebrity, but the captain was skilled with the verbal lash. Kiyuri took charge of the tiller in Isaaru's boat, charting a meandering course between fetid rafts of flotsam snagged on the reef.

Chatter died as they breasted the breakers and shipped oars, letting momentum sling the boats up the beach ahead of the waves. Keels hissed in the sand and stuck fast. The sailors hopped out to steady the boats while passengers disembarked. As they began to fan out and explore, a sailor stooping by the row of smashed boats gave a horrified cry. Overturned hulls shielded pathetic heaps from the sun, but could not hide the stench. Auron had not spent all his time marooned on the shattered dock, it seemed.
It was a subdued group that gathered under the bluffs near the head of the trail leading to the village.

"Now," Isaaru said, addressing the anxious knot of sailors huddled around Kiyuri, "I must ask you to do a hard thing. Sir Auron says there is no one left in Besaid to prepare the dead for sending. For pity's sake, we must give them this, since we are too late to save them. I will leave warrior monks here to assist you and protect you from fiends—" he held up a hand to forestall Maroda's protest—"while my brothers, Sir Auron and I take the jungle road to learn what we can and tend the village's slain."

"And if we don't see you by sundown?" Kiyuri said.

Pacce huffed, but Isaaru spoke with soothing assurance at odds with his reply. "Return to the ship and look for our signal tomorrow. If you have not seen us in three days, bring word to Maester Lucil in Luca."

"Aye, sir."

He beckoned to the warrior monks who had come with him from Bevelle. "I need three of you to accompany us to the village. Sergeant Durren, you know some healing arts, yes? The rest of you, remain here and tend the dead."

The chorus of "Yes, Your Grace," was ragged, but more than one of Kiyuri's crew looked relieved. After exchanging Yevon's bow with those staying behind, Isaaru's party plunged into the jungle.

It was slow going, even with Auron's sword to hew a path. Trees snapped by gale-force winds barred their way. Sinscales had multiplied during the week since the attack, giving Pacce plenty of chances to observe his hero in action and test his training. It was mid-day before they reached the village.

They halted outside the uprooted stockade to survey the damage. Sir Auron stood a little apart from the others, leaning on his sword and gazing impassively towards the stumps of columns on a stone platform on the far side of the village.

"Like Operation Mi'ihen," Maroda said.

Pacce had gone pale. "Or the Ronso." Isaaru set a hand on his shoulder.

Before them was a paved square surrounded by rings of burnt timbers, the foundations of the few huts spared by the rising tide. Cables of kelp were snarled around the stumps of nearby trees. A row of fresh graves under palm fronds lined one side of the square. Auron had even buried what was left of the dog.

Stupid, happy dog. It had once brought Yuna a slobberly, drool-drenched book on Besaid Temple's aeon. Yuna and Lulu had spent the rest of the afternoon poring over moldy pages, trying to untangle an obscure passage that promised to unlock the aeon's sleeping powers in a new devastating attack. In his mind's eye, Auron could see the pair of young women sitting in the shade of the temple with their heads together, summoner and guardian finishing each other's sentences in low voices punctuated by fleeting laughter. It was a glimpse of their old life, the one they had left behind when friend became guardian, following Yuna to her death.

Here, ten years before her pilgrimage, Yuna's father Braska uttered the words that had unwittingly joined their fate.

"Auron. When this is over, could you bring Yuna here? I want her to lead a life far away from this
Little had they known.

You shouldn't have chosen a place with a temple, my lord.

There was no temple now.

Isaaru halted at the foot of cracked steps and stared. "What force of machina or nature could do such a thing?"

The brunt of the maelstrom's fury seemed to have been unleashed against the temple. Huge blocks of stone were scattered over a wide area, some of them flung into the crowns of distant trees. Mosaic floors were laid bare to the sky. Some parts had melted and fused into a glassy, blackened mass. Here and there, spears of palm-leaves and ceramic tiles had embedded themselves in stone blocks as easily as harpoons in blubber. The rear of the temple platform had collapsed, revealing the maze of the Cloister of Trials hidden beneath. At the far end was a smoking crater where the Chamber of the Fayth had been.

"So that is why." Isaaru sighed.

Sir Auron raised an eyebrow. "The aeon?"

"I tried to summon her yesterday, when our vessel was attacked. I could not reach her."

"Interesting."

"Interesting?" Isaaru took a few steps towards the cloister's rubble-choked stairwell. "It is rather more than that, when a fayth is lost. I shall not forget her. She was a girl of uncommon courage, much like Lady Yuna. She had lost her whole family, but rather than yielding to despair, she joyously offered her soul to Yevon so that others might not suffer."

"And now she can rest."

"I hope Sin's not getting smarter," Maroda said. "That's the last thing we need."

"Hey, look at this!" Pacce called. "Lady Yuna's safe!"

Auron grimaced, although he knew what the boy meant.

Gazing down from the retaining wall, they saw Pacce on the hillside below, where Yuna's statue had miraculously landed on its base intact. The others hurried over to peer up at the dancing figure, around whose shoulders a few tattered garlands still fluttered. Frozen in stone, the youngest High Summoner twirled on the slopes of her childhood home with staff held high.

"It's a sign!" Pacce crowed.

Isaaru smiled. "You may be right, Pacce."

"Yes, but of what?" Maroda said.

Isaaru knelt before Yuna's statue and cupped his hands above and below his heart in Yevon's prayer. He remained motionless for several minutes. Finally he arose and turned to Sir Auron. "An overdue apology. When last we met, it was my sad duty to carry out Yevon's orders for Lady Yuna's execution. I have never been more gratified by my own failure. But I never had the chance to beg her forgiveness before she was gone, saving a world that had turned its back upon her."
bowed low. "I owe you an apology as well, Sir Auron."

Auron shrugged. "What do you intend to do?"

"We must bring tidings back to Bevelle. I shall discuss the matter with my fellow maesters. Along the way..." He gave a sidelong glance to Maroda. "Sir Auron, after Lady Yuna defeated me, you told me that my pilgrimage was over. I fear I must once again ignore your counsel. Yet I would be honored if you would—"

"Fine," Auron said. "Let's go."

Chapter End Notes

NPC trivia: Kiyuri is a no-nonsense sailor on the S.S. Winno in the original game.

Many thanks to Banane for this gorgeous illustration!

"The Dancing Memorial"
Broken Bones

Chapter Summary

_Investigating a Sin attack, Summoner Isaaru and his brothers are joined by Sir Auron. They spend a dangerous night in Besaid village._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sea-breeze buffeting the headland had faded. The air felt pinched and still, as if Sin's passing had peeled away part of the atmosphere. In the village square, smoke-trails spiralled upwards in straight columns. The torches' blue flames barely flickered. In ones and twos, drifting pyreflies chased the smoke like furtive children stealing out after curfew to play in the fiend-haunted jungle.

Below, guardians and monks kept vigil while Isaaru circled the graves, his solemn gestures a restrained echo of Lady Yuna's whirling dance. Maroda watched intently, but for less than pious reasons: he had noticed his brother's knitted brows and taut face. The summoner was waging an inner battle far from his guardians' aid. At last, Isaaru staggered and halted. Maroda hurried towards him.

The maester waved him off. "It is done. They are free." He nodded to the monks, who bowed and fanned out to clear away the trappings of ritual.

"Leave the torches," Auron called from the temple platform, keeping watch. "We'll need them tonight."

"What?" Pacce said. "But if we hurry, we can reach the beach by sunset!"

Maroda raised his eyes to the sun setting beyond the jungle. "If we hurry, we could run straight into the jaws of fiends," he said. "Sir Auron's right. We don't want to get caught in the forest after nightfall. Don't worry. The ship's not going to leave without us."

"I'm sorry, Pacce," said Isaaru. "I've put us in some peril in order to perform a proper sending. But I have faith in my guardians." He winked. "It's like old times together, no?"
Pacce managed a strained grin. "Yeah. I suppose."

"Come on," Maroda said. "There's cots and mats in the Crusader lodge we might be able to salvage. We can spread them out by the campfire."

"Out in the open where nothing can sneak up on us. Right."

Isaaru sank onto the temple’s broken steps, observing the give and take between his brothers that was almost on equal footing now. It would have to be. Their last pilgrimage had been sheer folly. Pacce had been a child, Maroda a hotheaded young man with more guts than training. Isaaru, too, had been green and fatally naive. Yuna's sacrifice had saved them from a futile end. He closed his eyes in a silent prayer of thanks to the High Summoner.

"A hard sending," Auron said at his shoulder.

"Indeed. The only spirits clinging to their bodies after so many days are those who don't want to leave, and they are bitter, stubborn or in pain. But we were in time for a few."

"Maester thirteen years, yet you still think like a priest," Auron said. "All Spira needs you. You may not have the luxury of saving a few."

"Perhaps not." He reached for the bone pendant under the stiff collar of his robes. "But I think High Summoner Yuna would have done the same."

"Yuna made mistakes."

"As have I," Isaaru said. "I trust, Sir Auron, you will share with us what you know of the journey ahead, so that I may avoid other mistakes."

"You're awfully quick to trust."

"Yes and no." The maester gave him an odd smile. "I wonder, Sir Auron, if you are still a traitor to Yevon. If so, I should like to know what you make of this." He drew the necklace over his head and cupped it in his hands, shielding it from the view of the monks.

Auron arched an eyebrow. "An odd talisman for a maester of Yevon."

"It belonged to a sailor on the ship that brought us here. I believe she carved it from memory. She had encountered Sin at sea. Do you recognize the image?"

"Let me see it." Auron always sounded gruff, but there was a strain in his tone that Isaaru noted and filed away. He placed the delicate triangle of bone in the man's gloved hand, watching him closely.

After a moment, the guardian shrugged. "Another of Sin's victims, no doubt."

"You think so?" Isaaru lowered his voice. Pacce and Maroda had returned, and were arranging cots and mats in a semicircle nearby. "There are those who call Sin The Lady, and hold her in greater awe than Yevon. Sin's cult is growing. They thank her for the good harvests of these last few years, for the gardens of Djose and the rains on Bikanel. Those who breathe Sin's toxin see this face and say *she* is Sin. They maintain that Sin is a woman, a siren of deadly beauty. Yet according to other sightings, Sin appears the same as ever, a terrifying behemoth covered in loathsome scales. Who *is* she?"

"Sin." Auron's fingers closed around the image, forming a cage.
Isaaru waited for the man to go on, but the stones of the temple would probably speak sooner. The warrior's attention seemed fixed on the simple token.

"Ah." The maester leaned forward. "Then who was she?"

Auron raised his head and looked towards the jungle on the far side of the village. For a moment Isaaru thought the guardian was ignoring him. Then he felt the earth shudder. Before Isaaru could frame a question, the pulse crossed hearing's threshold. From the heart of the forest came a splintering sound of trees groaning and breaking. Something massive was churning through storm-tossed trunks. There was a sliding crash as a whole bank of broken treetops, upheld only by a snarl of limbs and thick vines, gave way at the crest of the hill. The jungle canopy tossed and thrashed in the path of something unseen. Limbs and leaves began raining down from the eaves.

"Sergeant Durren!" Isaaru called, rising to his feet. "Come away from the trees!" His monks were lining up at the forest's edge, rifles at the ready.

Sir Auron jammed the necklace into his belt. "Don't summon yet." Drawing his sword and setting off at a trot, he raised his voice above the tramping din. "Ranged weapons, back."

Pacce and Maroda jogged after him. "What've we got?" Maroda said.

A rattle of gunfire broke out as the warrior monks started to give ground. The nearest trees fell outward with a crash as a hulking form lurched into view. Branches and vines trailed from the iron giant's joints. It reached the stupefied monks in four strides. A huge blade flashed in the dusk. Guns clattered to the ground as three torsos jerked and fell sideways like heads of grain.

Isaaru cried aloud in anguish, but his guardians took no notice, converging on the foe from three points. Maroda's spear glanced off with a clang. Pacce lunged beneath another scything stroke. Sir Auron, slower, caught the brunt of it. Somehow his armor held. He skidded backwards across the flagstones and fell to his knees, parrying the blow with his sword braced before him. He barked something, but his words were drowned by the clamor of battle. Maroda and Pacce darted in and out, harrying the creature while Auron hammered at its knees. Yellow sparks flew from the older guardian's blade. Suddenly all three broke and ran for the cover of the woods. The behemoth roared and swung around, stomping after them.

Praying he had understood, Isaaru raised his hands to the sky, gathering himself for the most difficult of summons. Green fire leapt from his shoulders. He felt a breath of benison on his upraised cheeks as the heavens split open, seared by a mighty star plummeting through glyphs etched in living light. The ground quaked again as Bevelle's aeon alighted with a roar, great wings beating the air as it lunged towards the fray. Spathi, youngest and eldest, a child taken captive from Zanarkand, who might have become the greatest summoner of all had he not been bound. Isaaru never failed to feel like a child before him.

This aeon could dwarf a giant. There was no contest between the two, with Auron's gift for turning armor to eggshells. Metal plates buckled under Spathi's fists. Curlers of rising steam transformed into a shimmer of pyreflies as the iron giant toppled backwards and hit the ground with a booming concussion. Spathi roared in victory and hurtled upwards, vanishing from sight.

Isaaru made his way wearily towards the sad remains of the monks. Maroda and Pacce emerged from the forest's edge and stumbled towards him.

"We're fine," Maroda said, answering his glance.

"Speak for yourself," Pacce said, and stopped short.
"It should not have been here," Isaaru said, voice faint. "Do you remember? We fought such creatures on the Thunder Plains." He shook his head and stooped over the bodies, stomach clenching at the warm blood seeping into his shoes. "Forgive me, old friend." He closed the monk's eyes and moved to the next, barely registering Maroda's hand at his elbow.

Tears dribbled down Pacce's grimy cheeks. Usually Isaaru had words of comfort, but now that well was dry.

Durren had been a fine tutor.

One more summoning. One more sending. Spira's next Calm could not come too soon.

I'm too old for this.

Auron tasted blood and irony on his lips as he lowered himself onto a leaf-plastered bench set in a clearing well back among the trees. Dimly he registered the struts and shredded canvas of a ruined hut looming overhead. Drawing a small flask from the inner pocket of his coat, he pulled the cork with his teeth and spat, then drank.

He sagged as the stabbing ache of a cracked rib subsided. Giving the potion time to work, he allowed himself a fleeting memory of this place. His mind's eye filled the shadows above with curved beams and a dome of tapestries backlit by moonlight. Below, the blush of candlelight played across Lulu's shoulderblades where she lay draped in casual elegance across a surprisingly plain bed. The scent of the jungle and dried herbs hanging from the ceiling mingled with the musky hint of a perfume he had despised for the first half of the pilgrimage. He remembered her hypnotic voice rising and falling as she read to him the tale of two pagan gods that a follower of Yevon ought not to know. Despite the title, it had not provided many clues for their sigil-quest.

"And Venus born of sea-foam renewed her virginity each year—"

"Some trick."

"—bathing in the waves by the grotto where first she had come ashore. There he waited for her, and for one night only war was in abeyance. For then did Mars put off his shield and panoply to help her renew her womanhood."

"Not much point in the bath, then."

She opened her hand, and the scroll rolled itself shut with a crack. "We should be heading back."

"I thought you said you'd burn through the hull if you were cooped up one more night."

"Yes, but your thick skull is starting to look tempting."

"My skull?"

Lulu's languid laughter had always been more dangerous than her barbs. "Among other things."

A slithering rustle in the underbrush drew Auron's mind back to the present. The jungle darkened as the vision faded away. He'd taken more than enough time for ribs to knit. Lifting his sword and laying it across his knees, he ran gloved fingertips along the edge, finding a few notches. There
was no nimble-fingered Al Bhed to sharpen it for him tonight.

"Sir Auron?" Pacce's anxious calls filtered back through the trees. The summoner must have finished the sending. Heaving himself to his feet, Auron started back towards the village.

Something snapped under his boots when he stood up. He looked down. Peering through the gloom, he could just make out the broken bones of a wicker cradle. Someone else must have moved into Lulu's old home when she did not return.

Auron knelt, fishing the sailor's charm out of his belt. He stared at the face of bone gleaming in the darkness. After a moment's hesitation, he draped the necklace over the cradle's shell, rose and stalked away.

Chapter End Notes

NPC Trivia: Durren was in the Crusader training camp outside the Cavern of Stolen Fayth in FFX.

Credit: Many thanks to Banane for the dramatic "Empty Cradle" illustration for this chapter!
The Story So Far: Thirteen years after High Summoner Yuna fell defeating Sin, Isaaru and his brothers resume their pilgrimage, joined by Sir Auron. After investigating a Sin attack on Besaid, they head for Kilika.

Chapter Notes

"You have my thanks. And Lady Yuna's as well, you may be sure. May she guide our path and shield us from Sin's fury. For now we sail... to Kilika!" The maester raised his hands and drew them together in Yevon's sign.

A tepid cheer rose from the sailors and monks gathered at the waterline. They scattered at once to make ready the rowboats, even before the torches had reverted from blue to orange. It was disrespectful to the dead, but Isaaru did not begrudge their eagerness to quit this marred island paradise.

They had worked hard. The beach was swept clean, and they had even washed down trunks and leaves to remove clinging ash. Prayer flags—many of them products of Besaid's weavers—fluttered on poles thrust into the sand. The ocean sparkled under a noonday sun, masking the pyreflies drifting up from submerged coffins jostling on beds of coral. Besaid's harbor had been too choked with flotsam to use for the sending, but they had ferried the dead around to a more sheltered cove.

"Will somebody rebuild here, do you think?" Pacce asked Maroda as they headed for the boats.

"In the next Calm, maybe," Maroda said. "Not before."

Both looked to their brother. Isaaru seemed oblivious to the exchange, although he walked between them. By silent accord they held a boat steady for him to board before dragging it down into the water where the stern floated free.

"Hey," Pacce said, tumbling into his seat, "Where's Sir Auron?"

"For a guardian, he sure doesn't seem to guard much," Maroda said.

Isaaru smiled. Auron was descending the short cliff at the back of the cove. He trudged out to them and stepped into the bow without breaking stride.

"No sign of Sin," he said. "We should have clear running tonight, although it may be another story in Kilika."

Captain Kiyuri shot Auron a jaundiced stare over the backs of the rowers that told what she thought of the legendary hero: landlubber.

It was a subdued company that ferried the maester and guardians back to the ship. Isaaru had not spoken a word since his speech. He sat with chin lowered, gripping the sides and swaying jerkily
as if struggling to match the rhythm of the swells. Halfway across the open water, Kiyuri ventured a soft, "Are you all right, my lord?"

"My heart is heavy, Captain." He turned in his seat with a well-honed smile. "But I am also pleased. The dead of Besaid can rest, and we have gathered much that should assist my pilgrimage. Our trip was not in vain."

"We have?" Maroda mouthed behind him.

"Yeah, and we've got Sir Auron, now!" Pacce said.

"Yes, Pacce." The maester studied at the man's broad back and shoulders. "Ah, that reminds me. Captain, there’s no need to hoist my sigil. In fact, if you can, fly no symbol of Yevon at all."

"Your Grace?" Kiyuri's voice rose in astonishment. "But it is an honor to convey the Grand Maester, and ill luck to sail without Yevon's blessing!"

"Yevon's blessing you will have, Kiyuri, so far as it is in my power to grant it," Isaaru said. "But your crew has faced perils and sorrows enough. If Sin's wrath is truly roused against Yevon, then I shall not needlessly endanger them. Yevon will bring Sin to account, but that battle is for summoners and guardians, not sailors and soldiers."

There was a faint *hmph* from Sir Auron. Maroda's somber nod conveyed more. Thirteen years gone, the ghosts of Operation Mi'ihen still haunted all those who had witnessed that bloody debacle.

"Aye, sir." Kiyuri braced her elbow against the tiller to give Yevon's prayer. "And thank you."

Back aboard the SS *Konna*, Isaaru remained on deck just long enough to make sure the sails had been changed to ordinary canvas. Then, yielding to Maroda's urging, he retired to his cabin.

"For I am weary," Isaaru admitted. "Five sendings in three days is a record I hope never to repeat."

Freed from duties for a while, Pacce joined Sir Auron on the observation deck. The older guardian acknowledged him with a nod. Side by side, they watched Besaid shrink and fade into the blue haze.

It took Pacce some time to muster the courage to speak. "Sir Auron? Do you think Sin is after Isaaru?"

"Not directly," Auron said. "Or not yet. But Isaaru's guess is correct. Sin is targeting Yevon."

"Wow," Pacce said. "I didn't know it could think."

Auron said nothing.

Pacce folded his arms along the railing and rested his chin on them. "I don't get it. Sin's the punishment for our sins, right? Isaaru says that good deeds can balance lack of faith, so we shouldn't blame Sin's return on the heathens. But why does Sin leave the Al Bhed alone and attack us? Shouldn't it be the other way around?"
"Yevon directly opposes Sin. The Al Bhed avoid it."

"Huh." Pacce ran a hand through his hair, leaving it flattened on one side and straight up on the other like a half-mowed field. Wrestling with Yevon's teachings and coming no closer to a solution, he changed tack. "So, um. What happened to Lady Yuna's other guardians, anyway? Is Sir Tidus still alive?"

"No."

"Aw, man." The boy drooped. "I liked him. He was cool."

"He lived well," Auron said with more gentleness than was his habit. "And he died protecting the summoner he loved."

"The Final Summoning, huh?"

"Seymour."  

"Maester Seymour? Wasn't he...unsent?" Pacce blanched at a memory. "You got rid of him, right? Lady Yuna sent him?"

"Yes." So much could be packed into one brittle word: a summoner's tears, the death of hope, a holy fury that had reduced Auron's last bellowing charge against Yuna's to a mere squeak. Lulu must have been proud of Yuna, through the teeth of her own bitter rage. They had all come to love Tidus, each in their own way.

"And the others?" Pacce said. "The other guardians?"

Auron grimaced. "I never found a trace."

"Damn." He kicked at the deck. "I'm sorry."

Auron roused himself, focusing on the youth beside him. "I didn't see them fall. Yuna's last command was for us to stay back when she performed the Final Summoning. I didn't listen, and nearly paid the price. If they obeyed, there's a good chance they're still alive." There. A vital lesson. A lie of omission, too, since Kimahri had remained at Yuna's side to the last. But Auron's task now was to prepare new guardians for another pilgrimage, not brood over the last. There was one loose end, however, that Auron could not leave unexamined.

"What happened to Lord Mika?"

"Oh!" Pacce's cheeks reddened. "Grand Maester Mika? He, uh...Didn't you hear the proclamations? Maybe you were still coming back from Lady Yuna's pilgrimage. He got sick and died. Isaaru said his heart gave out when he learned how Seymour had murdered the Ronso."

"Ah." Auron's eyes narrowed. "Was that before or after your brother was appointed maester?"

"After...no, before, I think." Pacce ducked his eyes. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't really understand everything that happened back then. I was just a kid. You should ask Isaaru or Maroda about it."

"Very well."

Fidgeting, Pacce abandoned the railing and straightened in a self-conscious salute. "Well. Speaking of Isaaru, I'd better go check on him. It was, uh, nice talking to you, Sir Auron!"

Hurrying forward, Pacce found Maroda guarding the door to their cabin. "Isaaru's asleep," Maroda
"said in a low voice. "Pacce, did Sir Auron say anything about how he got to Besaid?"

Pacce shook his head. "I didn't ask."

"Or why he knew Sin was coming?"

"Not really." The youth raised his eyes, troubled. "You don't trust him, do you?"

"Don't worry about it. Just be careful. I know he's Sir Auron, and Isaaru wanted him as guardian. But he's not telling us everything he knows."

"Yeah, well." Pacce shot him a guilty grin. "Who does?"

A clear, star-drenched night sent the S.S. Konna flying on the wings of a cold wind that blew them towards sunrise. Only a few wisps of haze hung in the southwest. A lacy curtain of lightning had danced there for an hour or so, but it had faded away before dawn.

By mid-morning, Kilika's green spur was rising out of the sea like a prow against the sky. Gulls flew out to escort them. A few leagues out from land, the Konna passed through a necklace of fishing boats floating in a wide arc where the ocean changed from jade to blue. Fishermen hailed her with cries of welcome and wonder. The stately two-masted vessel dwarfed any ferry that had plied these waters in living memory.

Isaaru and his guardians joined the captain in the wheelhouse to discuss plans for the brief layover.

"We only need to re-water," Kiyuri was saying. "But I wouldn't mind a few hours to inspect the hull. There's a slow leak somewhere. The hold's damp."

"Very good," Isaaru said. "Meanwhile, my guardians and I will pay our respects at Kilika Temple. There are one or two old friends there we must consult."

"Wait, are you serious?" Pacce said. "A leak? That's not good!"

"You'll find the same in any old ship, boy," said the captain, giving the wall a rap. "We're not going down, don't worry."

As if in response, there was a hollow boom underfoot, and the deck began to tilt. All the lanterns suspended from the ceiling swung to one side. Compartments and trunks rattled. On the upper deck, the ship's bell began to clang wildly.

"Sin," Auron said. Outside, sailors began taking up the cry.

Kiyuri swore and lunged for the door, only to be flung back by a wall of water blasting into the wheelhouse. Thrown into Maroda, she elbowed him in the ribs. "Well, don't just stand there, man! Defend the ship!"

"Stay here," he said, setting her down. "Pacce, come on!"

Isaaru and Auron followed them out into all-too-familiar chaos. The ship was heeled over at a terrifying angle. Towering waves broke over the rails. A seething tide of sinspawn rampaged across the deck, squat crablike creatures armed with jagged claws. They caromed off hatches and
bulwarks, tearing into the limbs of anyone who held their ground. Sailors who let go of handholds to dodge them risked being swept overboard.

The three guardians waded into the fray, cutting a wide swath. Auron took point, whirling his sword in a figure eight and hammering shells until they cracked in a burst of sparks. Maroda and Pacce closed ranks behind him to skewer and hack the weakened fiends to pieces.

"Above you!" Isaaru cried, following in their wake as he sought a clear space to summon. Pacce skidded to a crouch and stared upwards, aghast. A small fishing boat, raised on high by the surge, hung suspended at the level of the mast-head for a surreal moment before plunging down, down, smashing upon the deck. The trio scattered, barely leaping clear in time.

Before they could regroup, an anemic salvo of gunshots rang out from above. Either the warrior monks had been swept away, or their rifles had been damaged by seawater. There was no time to check. Just off the bow, a white curtain of water had parted to reveal a looming wall of scabrous gray flesh. Sin's shadow blotted out the sun.

"It's heading for Kilika!" Maroda shouted.

"I have to turn it," said Isaaru. He grabbed for a metal cleat bolted to the mast, bracing against another deluge.

"But that'll bring Sin back on us!" Pacce cried, dragging a sailor out from under one of the snapping crab-creatures.

"No good." Auron's blade sliced through its arms at the joints. "Your aeons aren't strong enough."

The bulk of Sin had nearly passed. The ship groaned with a long, rattling vibration as its pitted hide scraped against the hull. They could hear Kiyuri's foghorn voice bellowing orders in the wheelhouse.

"I won't let Kilika follow Besaid," Isaaru said, raising his hands to begin his most potent summons.

"So be it." Auron banked his sword across his shoulders, broke from the melee and charged towards the bow where the sides drew together, sloping upwards in a steep ramp. He picked up speed, ignoring the bucking of the ship.

"Sir Auron!" Pacce cried. He stared in horror as Auron barreled up the bowsprit and leapt, vanishing into the surf. "He'll drown!"

Sunlight streamed through the curtain of water off the bow. Sin had passed them by. A shout went up as the spray cleared. Sir Auron, a tiny red figure against the sky, was climbing a horny peak of scale and bone. He held his sword above his head, fending off sinspawn tumbling down on him from above. Abruptly he dropped to his knees, raised the blade high and slammed it downwards, crying out a name.

The mountain convulsed beneath him. Huge green waves rolled forward off the sloping snout. Sin's momentum abruptly slowed.

For a moment a collision seemed certain, but the captain's orders had come just in time. The ship canted in a steep turn. One of the rowboats hanging over the side was sheared off and tumbled into the sea, but the Konna staggered clear of Sin and rode out the swells beyond it, righting herself with a heave. Her crew saw the surge racing ahead of them to crash over Kilika's seawall, built to shield the port against such assaults. Many of the fishing vessels were dashed against the breakwater, but the town was spared the brunt of the onslaught— for now.
Sin halted. Vast and menacing, it loomed above the Konna's main mast, brooding over the sprawling fishing port laid out on the water before it. A hive of gigantic eyes roiled on Sin's brow below a shelf where spires bristled like a city's skyline. Human sight seemed to slide off Sin's sides. For an inexorable moment, it gathered itself for some cataclysmic assault that would vaporize everything in its path. Then the field burst. Bracing themselves for dissolution, the watchers found themselves bathed in a drizzle of warm, gentle rain, salty like tears. A shower of rose petals came whirling on the wind, sticking wetly to cheeks and hair, deck and masts and stays. A rainbow arched overhead.

Murmurs of The Lady rippled across the battered ship.

Motionless now, Sin wreathed itself in a soft cascading mist. Above it reared a wavering vision familiar from temple portraits, yet on a far grander scale. High Summoner Yuna danced on a flowerlike pillar of water, whirling and dipping with her staff to paint ribbons of pyreflies on the wind. Higher and higher she spun, hypnotic, dreamlike, achingly joyful: an image of innocence so pure it burned the soul as the sun seared the eyes. At the apex of her dance, there was a flash and a rumble. An enormous bolt of flames carved a blinding path overhead, stabbing towards Kilika's highest point. A fireball mushroomed over the tops of the trees in eerie silence.

Isaaru gasped and clenched a hand over his heart. "Grothia."

Boom. The sound reached them several seconds later.

With an inrush of water and a mournful wail at the edge of hearing, Sin sank beneath the waves, leaving only a vast drift of rose petals bobbing on the surface of the sea to mark where it had been.

Of Auron, there was no sign.

Chapter End Notes

Meta: In FFX, Grothia was the name given to Isaaru's version of Ifrit when he dueled Yuna in the Via Purifico.
Auron slogged through darkness. He felt the lash of rain against his skin like tiny sullen barbs, warning him to keep his distance. Now and again lightning flickered, but never long enough to show him what kind of landscape this dream-world might be. He felt parched despite the rain, and his feet were numb with cold. At last, after he had forgotten what time and distance meant, he found a wall of leaping flame barring his path. He braced himself for searing heat and pushed through.

On the far side, darkness took on clarity and shape. It was the black and silver of moonlight, wisps of cloud and patches of night sky overhead where stars glittered. At his back was a whispering jungle, shimmering with crickets and the distant cries of fiends. Its lush, fiercely alive scents nearly smothered him. Before him lay a placid harbor, gentle flecks of crested waves rising and falling like a woman's breast in sleep.

He trudged through sand towards the breakers where kelp flexed over hidden shoals just offshore. When the sand gave out, he clambered over submerged rocks encrusted with shells. Mussels crackled underfoot. Water had never been his element, but it was Sin's, and it suited her now as much as fire's wrath, lightning's flash and icy disdain had suited her before.

There. A glimmer of white. He pulled up short, arrested by the same vision that had spawned a cult. Familiarity was no defense.

Lulu lay back against the rocks and purple seaweed with regal indolence, braids swirling around her each time a wave lapped over her. Fishnets still clung to her legs, but that was all she wore. No, not quite all. Her hands were cupped behind her head, manacles discreetly hidden. She was chained to the rocks.

He stood gazing too long, apparently. A stinging smack of seawater drenched him, burning his eye with salt. "Yevon has me still," Lulu warned. "And you, I suppose. You never meant to stay."

He shrugged. "I made a promise."

"Another chain."

For a moment he was not certain whether he still had his sword—Sin's dream was a haphazard slice of reality—but its reassuring weight balanced against his shoulder. Picking his way around to her, he raised the blade slowly, inexorably, like a guillotine's indrawn breath. Lulu did not flinch. It dropped with a bone-jarring clang. Sparks flew from the chains, but it was the sword's edge that came away notched.
"Yu Yevon has me," she said again. "I am nearly his now. I've fought him for so long, Auron. He rides anger so easily." For a moment, an image of Yuna was dancing on the crest of a nearby wave. Then she tumbled beneath it, lost from view. It was hard to see in the moonlight, but the damp sand left by retreating waves was stained red.

"Yes, I knew all their names," she said, eyes remote. "Even the infant's."

"You make a good Sin."

That drew a ripple of laughter, enough to set the waves sparkling under the moon. "Of course," she said with a hint of professional pride. Then the haughty smirk faded, and the moon withdrew behind a cloud. "Thank you for stopping me, this time."

"You stopped yourself."

"No." The mage shook her head, chains clinking as she flicked a hand dismissively towards herself. "There's just one way I've found to keep Yu Yevon out of my mind for a while. One way... and it is a momentary diversion at most." Her lips twisted in a reflective smile. "Memory is a poor substitute, even here."

With a wrench it came whirling back to him, those nights late in the pilgrimage when weariness and delay were eating at his mind, threatening to unravel him with the transition to fiend that all unsent must undergo soon or late. A ritual very much of the living had helped to keep him bound to his own flesh. Or at least, she had distracted him from regrets for a while.

He snorted. For Lulu, even the arts of Venus were a weapon.

He laid the sword on a bank of mussels and lowered himself into the water. He tried not to think of the foul thing inside her as he waded over and gathered her face in his hands.

Lulu greeted him with a profoundly private, delicate, reverent kiss, like those she used to give his ruined eye the few times he'd let her touch it. Yet the merest graze of her lips now threatened to drag him under. Her siren's allure was the tug of the moon on tides—dream though this was, and both their bodies a lie meant to fool the living. Or, if she were not merely teasing, a god.

Perhaps he lingered longer than necessary for her lids to droop and her breathing to quicken. The wind picked up, driving flecks of foam against his face and bare arm. Reluctantly he pulled away, caressing her cheek. Even that seemed to sear his skin right through the glove.

"Sorry. No time for worship. Lulu, I must know: why is Yu Yevon freeing the fayth?"

Sir Auron! A voice from a different life cut shrilly through the timeless music of lapping waves, transgressing Sin's inner sanctum. Please, sir, wake up!

The dream-world rippled, shattered in spreading rings, and smoothed out again.

"Isn't it obvious?" she said. "Yuna and I, and you and Kimahri, we came very near to destroying Yu Yevon. The pilgrimage has become a threat."

Auron frowned. Something was inside out. At first he could not place it, until he realized they were no longer seeing eye to eye, his left eye mirrored by her right. The sweep of black hair covered the wrong side of her face. He reached out to brush the black curtain aside. When it fell back, her face had reversed from left to right again beneath his touch.

"You know," she whispered. "Yu Yevon thinks he knows."
"Sir Auron!" The braying summons came again. Auron abruptly felt himself fighting for air, choking, straining to hold the fabric of the dream around himself like a fraying cloak. The sea hissed angrily. Lightning tracers scurried across the sky. Her braids coiled around his arms, chest and throat, spilling into his lungs. *Mine, mine,* the surf seemed to snarl. His vision went from half to none. It felt like a crew of Al Bhed nailing his brain to the inside if his skull.

Then smooth arms were lifting him towards the surface as gently as jungle fronds reaching for the sun. Concern washed over him in a fading echo. "Go. Hurry. Be. Look for me in my garden, Auron. We'll talk later."

And the dream tore.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Mintywolf for this lovely fanart!
chapter here, BUT I don't want to lose comments on the last chapter posted on AO3, so I'm not gonna combine chapters on AO3 until I've posted enough new chapters to extend past the current numbering.

TL;DR: This is chapter 5, and the next chapter will be combined with it, eventually.
The Story So Far: Joining Isaaru on pilgrimage thirteen years after Yuna falls in the Final Summoning, Auron has a close encounter with Sin during an attack on Kilika.

It wasn't every day the dead returned to the light of day to find themselves drowning.

That was Auron's second thought. The first was to punch the dark figure crouched over him, compressing his chest with forceful thrusts accompanied by a wet crackling noise he failed to recognize as the sound of his own lungs. The water gushing out of his nose and mouth should have been a clue, but Auron's skull was still pounding. Luckily, the second thought made him chuckle, and that triggered a fit of coughing that kept him occupied until he had reclassified Maroda as non-target.

Auron clamped onto his wrist. "Enough."

"Whew!" Pacce's moon-face hovered into view. "You all right now, sir?"

Still half-drowned by dream, Auron transferred his grip to Pacce's collar. "Where is she?"

"Oh, great," said Maroda. "Sin's toxin. Hands off, or I'm throwing you back where I found you."

"Sorry." Releasing the boy, Auron turned his head towards the sound of surf.

"Were you trying to rescue somebody?" Pacce said, rising to scan the harbor.

There was still a harbor. Auron lay on a sloping shelf of rocks hemming the shore. Close by, a causeway extended out to the village and marina. The settlement was built right out on the water, away from the fiend-infested jungle, spread across half a lagoon like an offering on Sin's altar. The houses were plastered partway up their sides with splintered wood, nets and fishing floats, but their walls were intact. Puddles quivered on plank walkways. Barrels and other flotsam bumped against their pilings in the water below. Muffled sobs came from a nearby hut where pyreflies rose from the smoke-hole. But there were people about, cleaning walkways, collecting debris, spreading sodden belongings on thatched roofs. Against all odds, the village had been spared obliteration.

"You're welcome, Lulu."

"Sir?" Pacce prodded. "Do you want us to help look for her?"

Auron struggled to his feet, weighed down by his waterlogged coat. He searched the narrow strip of ocean visible beyond the breakwater. Sparkling blue sped off to the horizon without the faintest scar to mark Sin's passage.

"No," he said. "She's gone."
"Oh." Blinking back tears, Pacce bowed in Yevon's prayer for some imagined damsel in distress.

Auron gave a belated nod to Maroda. "Thanks."

"Sure thing." He grinned and picked up his spear. "Just don't make a habit of it, man. I thought I was going to need a winch."

"I can't believe you jumped overboard with your sword and armor," Pacce said. "Weren't you afraid they'd pull you down?"

Auron shrugged. "Didn't matter. I can't swim."

"Correction," Maroda said, raising his voice. "It's not Sin's toxin. He's just crazy."

"Pilgrimage entails a certain degree of folly," Isaaru said, stepping out of the hut where sobs had now fallen silent. Two warrior monks guarding the door fell into step behind him. Isaaru's face was haggard, but his smile was undimmed. "Sir Auron. Praise Yevon you've survived. I feared my rash words had cost Spira its greatest champion. But your courage has saved Kilika."

"Partly."

The summoner raised his eyes to the smoke billowing up from the jungle's peak. "Yes. If you are recovered, we must go to the temple at once. There may be survivors. If not, we can at least pay our respects."

"Is that a summoner's command, or a priest's?" Auron said. "Sin won't wait."

"No. But where it is now, Yevon only knows."

Auron grimaced.

"Sir Auron?" Pacce said. "You know where Sin's going next, don't you?"

"Djose." He fixed the maester with a level stare. "After that, probably Macalania and Bevelle."

"No!" Isaaru pressed a fist to his breastbone as if trying to staunch a wound. "The aeons... and thousands of people in Bevelle—"

"Now, wait just a minute!" Maroda said. "With respect, Sir Auron, it's about time you explained how you're able to predict Sin's movements."

"You said it yourself," Auron said, ignoring the spear angled towards him.

"Yes." Isaaru set his hand over Maroda's, commanding him to stand down. "Sin is growing smarter. She's making the pilgrimage ahead of us to prevent the Final Summoning, yes?"

Auron arched an eyebrow at his choice of pronouns. "Correct."

"So why'd Sin get so clever all of a sudden?" said Pacce.

"It's like someone's telling it where we're going," Maroda growled.

"Maroda, please." Isaaru raised his hand, postponing further debate. A delegation of villagers was marching towards them, led by an old man, a woman and several children. The little ones bore armloads of flowers, purple jungle blossoms and fuchsia interwoven with white rose petals. The procession halted at the end of the causeway and bowed in Yevon's prayer.
"Your Grace," the woman said, adding with some uncertainty, "My Lord Summoner?"

"As you will. May I be of service?"

"Welcome to Kilika," the old man said, baring a snaggletoothed grin. "Though so far it's not been a welcome fit for a summoner, let alone the Grand Maester of Yevon."

At his nod, the children fanned out, carrying garlands to Isaaru and his guardians. Isaaru bent to let a boy to place a lei around his neck. "Even Sin cannot quench Kilikan hospitality."

"And we'd also like to welcome your guardians," the woman said. "Please accept these small tokens of thanks. Tomorrow we will hold a feast of thanksgiving. We hope you'll join us as guests of honor."

The youngest girl stood frozen, staring at the water dripping from Auron's coat. He held out his hands. Mistaking the gesture, she scampered towards him with outstretched arms. He hesitated, expression inscrutable, then picked her up and lifted her onto his shoulder. The urchin squealed and poked at his glasses. "He's old."

"Deir," the woman chided. "Please give Sir Auron his flowers."

Chastened, the girl tried to drape the garland around Auron's head, snagging it over one ear. She fussed for some time with the arrangement, trying it both outside and inside his collar before looping it around the earpieces of his glasses and turning the garland into a wreath. His salt-caked hair attracted her attention as well, and she gave it a thorough grooming with her fingers. Auron stood patiently until she was finished, then set her down with a gruff, "Thanks." A few nervous titters arose from the villagers.

Isaaru's lips twitched. Maroda tapped the end of his spear against a rock impatiently.

A woman's sneer drifted out from the curtain of vines fencing the jungle path. "Enjoying ourselves, are we?"

"Oh, great," Maroda muttered.

Dona stalked into the sunlight and halted, propping a hand on her hip to survey the gathering. She appeared little changed, save that she no longer wore summoner's ribbons. Her guardian blundered out behind her, acolyte's robes giving him the appearance of a badly-upholstered couch. He was smudged with soot.

"Barthello!" Pacce cried, taking an eager step towards him before remembering his duties. Blushing, he altered course and planted himself by Isaaru.

"Lady Dona," Isaaru said. Unruffled, he turned back to the villagers. "I and my guardians are humbled by your generosity, people of Kilika. It is for Spirans such as you that we summoners must play our part. I wish we could avail ourselves of your hospitality, but I must not rest until Sin is defeated. My warrior monks will remain to clear away sinspawn until the next ferry. Now, if you will excuse us—" He stooped to lift a child back onto the causeway, ruffling her hair. "It seems that Lady Dona would like a few words with me."

"Your Grace," The woman leading the delegation bowed. "Lady Dona."

"You better not have lost all your beer barrels in the harbor, Kulukan," Dona told her. "Sending is thirsty work."
"Come back when you've put Sin to rights, my lord!" the old man said. "We'll have another feast. See he doesn't forget, eh, lads?" He winked at Pacce and Maroda.

"Uh." Maroda peered at him, checking for signs of toxin. "Right."

"Good lad." The old man thumped him on the back. There were beaming smiles as the villagers dispersed, but no one save the children and the elder would meet Isaaru's gaze.

"You can save yourselves the trouble of a climb," Dona said. "There's nothing left."

"The priests?" Isaaru said. "The nuns?"

Dona shook her head. "We lost three and five— more, if this idiot hadn't decided to play hero." Barthello straightened and flexed. "The survivors are gathering what's left for sending. We'll be getting back to them after I've checked on things here. So what exactly happened?" She nodded towards the village. "Not as bad as I expected."

"Sir Auron was an idiot!" Pacce crowed. "He jumped on Sin's back and attacked it! He turned it away!"

Barthello's wooden face barely stirred, but his eyes shone. Auron sighed.

"Must be getting senile," Dona said, eyeing Auron. "Sin, that is. I assume this was after it blasted the temple into a molten crater."

"Before, actually," Maroda said.

"Hmph. Well, I suppose we should thank you, Sir Auron, although Isaaru's going to miss that aeon." She cocked her head at Isaaru. "Are you on pilgrimage, or do I need to come out of retirement?"

Barthello drew a step closer to her and gave them a pleading look.

"No." The maester smiled. "I trust that won't be necessary. Defend Kilika. I hope Sin will not trouble you again before I and my guardians have dealt with it."

"Thanks. Enjoy being Spira's new darling— not that you weren't already." For a moment she seemed at a loss, smirk covering a hint of worry or regret. Then she shook it away. "Come on, it looks like the village needs a few sendings. Why don't you boys play in the jungle while Isaaru and I finish up here?" She snapped her fingers in dismissal, then joined Isaaru on the wooden walkway. "Nice perk," she commented of his warrior monk escorts. "Maybe I should try for maester myself."

"Rumor has it there may soon be an opening," Isaaru said, offering his arm.

"Come on, Barthello!" Pacce said, clapping the giant on the shoulder. "Let's find Sir Auron a sword! Sin took his. You've got to see his killer armor breaking move!"

"I'll catch up with you all later," Maroda said. "One of us should guard Isaaru. Don't get hurt."

Chapter End Notes

NPC Trivia: In FFX, Kulukan is a member of the Kilika Beasts and the owner of the
village tavern, big sister to that girl Tidus rescued.

Chapter Renumbering: [5b] in the 2019 remaster (i.e. it's the second half of chapter 5, but I'm not combining chapters on AO3 until I've posted all the NEW chapters so I don't lose the comments posted on the last current chapter).
Half-Truths

Chapter Summary

*The Story So Far: Leaving Besaid and Kilika behind, Isaaru and his guardians set sail for Luca. His brother Maroda wants to know more about Auron and his last pilgrimage.*

Chapter Notes
Many thanks to Mintywolf for the illustration!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A Kilikan sunset of amber and gold had painted a dramatic backdrop for Isaaru's departure, duly sphere-recorded by spectators. The whole village had turned out to see him off. He and his
guardians had embarked with cheers, hymns, a refill of Auron's jug from Kulukan, and an unusually frank, "Good luck, Isaaru— sorry you're finally getting your chance," from Dona. Now they sailed north, muffled in a fog that seemed intent on blotting out the ship's lanterns, crew's voices, and any sign of a world beyond the ship's rails. The gates to the Farplane could hardly be more impenetrable.

Auron sat outside Isaaru's cabin, sharpening the Crusader's blade that Pacce and Barthello had found for him. It had barely sufficed to cut through an ochu's hide. While that had given them a chance to show off to their idol, it might cost someone dearly in his next battle. He wondered if his katana was still lodged in Sin's skull.

Maroda slouched against the wall on the other side of the door. The steady snick of the whetstone had been cutting the air between them for some time, keeping awkward questions at bay. A delaying action at best, but it had given Auron time to prepare.

At last Maroda broke the unspoken armistice. "So, who was the wreath for?" Auron had gone aft and cast the bedraggled garland overboard soon after departure.

"A woman Sin killed on my last pilgrimage. She... mattered to me." Auron's former comrades would have been floored by the admission. It irked him that a thirteen-year-secret could be so casually breached for the sake of tactics.

"Huh." Maroda's double-edged cordiality softened a notch. "Sorry, man. No offense, but you don't seem the type. Is she the one you were looking for today?"

"I saw her in the water. Sin's toxin, perhaps."

"Well, we all saw somebody," Maroda said. "But to me it looked like High Summoner Yuna. I could almost believe that Sin was marking the anniversary of its own destruction."

"Could be."

Maroda let out an explosive breath. "Okay, look. Isaaru may be as patient as a Hypello, but I'm not. You're holding out on us. You know what we'll find in Zanarkand, but you won't say a damned thing. You've survived two pilgrimages, when as far as I know, all your fellow guardians and summoners are dead. You know where Sin's going. It spared you today, and I don't think that was the first time. Just what is Sin to you? Your ticket to fame? Your... pet?"

Maroda's gambit was a good one, but it was not the first time a guardian had tried to provoke Auron into spilling secrets. Of course, Lulu's technique had relied on finesse more than a spear's thrust, turning his oaths against him.

"So that's it? You're going to withhold every scrap of knowledge about Zanarkand, so you can play some game with Yuna's life? And Tidus' too— or is he party to your plan?"

"I promised their fathers I'd protect them. They still have to find their own path."

"And wind up dead just like Lord Braska and Sir Jecht! Exactly where in the teachings is it written that summoners have to enter a fiends' den blindfolded?" In her desperation, Lulu had let slip a secret of her own. And yet her impotent barbs had almost swayed him, for he guessed their source. She seemed too young to bear the weight of a dead summoner on her shoulders, but that night— just the second of their journey together, before she had come to matter— he had suddenly understood what anvil had forged the mage's twice-hammered steel.

"If I reveal what lies ahead, Yuna might turn back from the pilgrimage. But perhaps that's what
"you want." He, too, could wield words as a goad.

"What I want is not a matter for discussion. And there is nothing and no one in Spira that can convince Yuna to turn aside."

"I take it you tried?"

"For two years." The ache in the mage's voice echoed the one that kept him this side of the Farplane.

Then he had slipped. Auron had not realized until much later what seeds his words had sowed. "I will tell you this. The summoner isn't the only one who pays the price for the Final Summoning."

"I...see."

"Do you?"

"Maybe." The curious calm in that one word should have alerted him, but Auron had been distracted, trying to head off her next question. "Except... you said Sir Jecht is still alive, did you not?"

"If Yuna knows the Final Summoning's true cost, she might turn back. Or, if her will is as strong as you say, she'll try to finish the pilgrimage alone, and die far from our aid. No, Lulu. Let her find the answers she seeks in the Hall of the Final Summoning, with all of us at her side."

Auron grimaced. He had broken his resolve after all, and his words had sent Yuna to her death. Or perhaps he had made no difference. One guardian was gone by the time they reached Yunalesca. Tidus might have stumbled upon something overlooked by Yevon-trained minds.

Maroda was waiting. The crack of knuckles hinted that he would resort to more than words to get answers. Had Auron already said too much? No, this warrior lacked the witch's knack for adding up half-truths into a whole.

"Her name was Lulu," he said. "Another of Yuna's guardians. She trusted no one and nothing else to protect her summoner so well as herself. A trait you share. Yet when I answered all her questions, it changed nothing, except that she chose the path I meant to take, and perished in the Final Summoning."

"Ah." Maroda affected sympathy. "I think I remember her. Busty, lots of belts?"

Auron smirked, wondering what sort of verbal fireworks that description might have earned from her. "Yes."

"You know, I'm sorry to hear about your friend— honestly— but that still doesn't explain anything about Sin. What's it doing? Why's it wiping out whole islands one day and showering us with flowers and rainbows the next? And what's with that vision of Lady Yuna that it plastered across the sky?"

Auron stared into the fog, recalling the texture of dew-drenched fur and the scent of wet leather. Was tonight's weather natural, or was Lulu out there somewhere, grappling with Yu Yevon's toxin and the more potent poison of regret? "Sin destroys. Sin grieves. It kills and honors the fallen. It's trapped in the spiral as much as we are."

"Huh. So why's it killing off the fayth this time around?"
"Freeing them is my guess. Maybe it thinks they're trapped in the same spiral."

"Except they volunteered for the job. A little like us, eh?" Maroda missed Auron's wry expression in the dark. "You know, if it succeeds, Isaaru won't die. He can't fight without aeons."

"Would that stop him?"

"No." Maroda slapped the wall. "And sooner or later, it'll kill us all. We've simply got to stop it from getting to Djose. Any ideas, old man?"

"Steal the fayth."

"Huh?"

"Remove the statue from the temple."

"Hey, that's a thought."

"It may not work. It depends on whether Sin can sense the spirit inside."

For once, Maroda's respect sounded unreserved. "Yeah, but it's worth a try. Thanks, man."

*Second Cloister of Trials passed.* Now Auron simply had to deal with Isaaru. The man seemed innocent, but Auron knew better than to judge summoners by their smiles. And he was still a maester of Yevon.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Renumbering: In the remaster, this is Chapter 6, combined with the next chapter. I've posted the 2018 revisions here, but will leave the old chapter divisions on AO3 until I've gotten past the end of the currently-posted chapters so I don't lose comments.
The lights of Luca glittered across the bay, a child's playhouse erected in memory of a half-forgotten dream. Tinny strains of music drifted over the water. Apart from that faint heartbeat, the city slept.

Auron stood on the upper deck and took a swig of Kulukan's ale. He frowned. Either he was forgetting how to taste, or it lacked the bite of Zanarkand's brew. Then again, that dream of a dead city was stretched across the threshold of the Farplane like a spider's web. No surprise its spirits suited his tastes better.

Auron had not returned to Jecht's ghostly Zanarkand in thirteen years, although he had heard the whisperings of its fayth flowing down from Gagazet's peak. He'd killed Jecht and failed to save his son. What more could he do for the rest of the city's damned souls? Of course, his sword would have found plenty of fiends to cleave there now. Sin's attack on the dream-city had made it real, transmuted the memories of the dead into a living nightmare. Or had Gagazet's fayth reset their dreaming to a time before the attack? Maybe Jecht and Tidus had been resurrected, pyrefly simulacra playing out variations of their story in another endless cycle.

No, Auron would not return to dream-Zanarkand. He had unfinished business in the real one.

A kindly voice sliced through his reverie. "You, at least, will not be wanting a blessing."

Auron looked down at the summoner standing on the deck below. Isaaru had emerged from his cabin a short time ago, taking care not to rouse Pacce dozing by the door with his head buried in his arms. They would leave the S.S. Konna in Luca, where she would remain for much-needed repairs. Isaaru had been making his final rounds of the vessel, seeking out each member of the crew, speaking soft words of praise and blessing for their part in tending Besaid's dead and saving Kilika.

Isaaru mounted the stairs and joined Auron on the observation deck. The shadows cast by the ship's lanterns gave the summoner a hollow-eyed look, but his guardian noted it was not merely a trick of the light. He moved with slow deliberation, as if will were required. Auron knew the feeling well.

Compassion aside, it was time to inventory weapons. "You still have three aeons?"

"Two," Isaaru said. "I have not been to Macalania."

"There's one more in the Calm Lands... maybe." Remiem Temple was intact, as far as Auron knew, but the Cavern of the Stolen Fayth was deeply buried. The Ronso had come out of hiding to dig out
the Crusader camp in the nearby canyon, but he had not asked them to unseal the cave. The Ronso were too few to risk in that death-trap. Besides, its statue had likely been pulverized. Yuna was not the first summoner Lulu had lost.

"That is good to know," Isaaru said. "Sir Auron, I am depending on you as no summoner has relied on a guardian before. Yet I understand your reasons not to trust me."

Third trial. Auron shrugged. "If I didn't trust you, Isaaru, I wouldn't have offered my services as guardian."

"Unless you had other motives." Isaaru nodded towards the northern horizon. "Lady Yunalesca, for example?"

"What?" Auron's eyes narrowed.

"You seek revenge. She killed Lord Braska, Lady Yuna, Sir Jecht and his son Tidus, no?" The summoner spoke with quiet compassion, but the rhythm of his speech was too well-rehearsed. "Our goals are the same, Sir Auron. I want to free Spira from her grip... and from her lord father's. I want the teachings, the good we now call Yevon grown from roots of fear, to be disentangled from their lies. Which include the pilgrimage."

"And yet you intend to make one."

"For the same reason you remain a guardian, I suspect. We must play Yunalesca's game and defeat her." He shook his head. "Yet I am at a loss. If I refuse the Final Summoning, what weapon will suffice?"

"I don't know." Twenty-three years, and Auron still hadn't come up with a surefire way to beat the bitch and free a friend. "Did Mika tell you this?"

"No. Maester Mika... passed... without instructing a successor. But I have spent long nights combing Bevelle's archives for clues. Not easy, with so many records purged." Isaaru sighed. "At least you can confirm my guesses, perhaps? First and foremost: Sin dies and is reborn. That makes it an aeon, surely, for aeons return from seeming death, summoned again and again. Only by destroying the housing of their fayth can we truly vanquish them."

"Correct. The housing of their fayth. Cold words to describe the Venus-blessed curves of a young woman's body."

"In Yevon's name." Isaaru smiled crookedly at Auron's expression. "Yes, that's the second lie, isn't it? We pray now in ignorance to Bevelle's ancient foe. Yu Yevon, Zanarkand's greatest summoner and tyrant, girded himself with Sin, using it as both armor and spear of vengeance for his fallen city. What we now call Yevon's teachings were originally rites, taboos and austerities meant to appease his wrath. The question is this: if Sin is an aeon, then whose is its fayth?"

Auron was silent. How could this man bear to uphold the teachings of Yevon, knowing them to be an embalmed corpse with a rotten core?

Isaaru lowered his voice to a whisper. "It's Yunalesca, isn't it? That was the truth that eluded me for so long. I once thought that Sin was her husband, Lord Zaon, but no. He is the Final Aeon, a two-edged sword gifted by Lady Yunalesca to summoners who pose a threat. He is the one aeon who could not, would not destroy the one he loves more than his own life. The Calm is a sham meant to raise our hopes. The pilgrimage is a net. And now Spira is beginning to worship Yunalesca, the Lady, just as we live in thrall of her Lord Father." He sighed. "Lady Yuna came
near to defeating them, I guess, and so they have changed tactics. Have I hit the mark?"

"Close enough." Auron thrust aside a twinge of irritation at Zaon being named Sin's lover. Irrelevant. Isaaru understood almost everything that mattered. Surely he was ready for the rest. Yet something in his manner still smacked of Yevon hypocrisy. "What happened to Mika?"

Only one trained in melee would recognize how Isaaru tensed as if to dodge a blow. "Passed away in his sleep. I fear grief and remorse were too much for him, after the summoner he had condemned sacrificed herself to bring the Calm."

"I... see." Stalemate. They both had secrets to keep. "I take it the other maesters have not heard what you just told me."

"No. Although Maester Baralai knows something. He, too, frequents the archives, and he never says what he seeks."

"Baralai?"

"A former Crusader, a survivor of Operation Mi'ihen."

"Ah."

There were more voices below now as the ship awoke. A gray light was growing. Isaaru paused to listen, head cocked, then went on. "Well, it is some comfort to have a confidante. But we are no closer to a solution. We must protect the other fayth, since Sin seems intent on wresting away those weapons. Sooner or later we must confront Yunalesca. But will the remaining aeons, my brothers and your strength be enough to defeat her?"

"Too close to call." Lulu's magic might have tipped the scales, but there was no coming back from the path she had chosen. Unless…

"Then we need machina. It will not be easy. Some of my fellow maesters blame the disaster of Operation Mi'ihen on the use of forbidden machina, and the Al Bhed remain wary of Yevon. Have you any allies left among them?"

"A trader, but no one of consequence."

"Maester Baralai has negotiated with them, but he's in Bevelle. First, we must—"

The sounds of raised voices on the deck below were growing distracting. "What do you mean, you don't know where he is? Isaaru! Isaaru!"

"First, I had better calm Maroda before he rips out Pacce's hair. Excuse me."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Renumbering: This is Chapter 6b, i.e. the second half of chapter 6 in the remaster.

A large chunk of LHAD stems from owlmoose's comment posted way back in 2007 on Ch2: "I really like [Isaaru] as Grand Maester. I hope you delve a little more into how he got here (like why Mika abdicated his seat even though the cycle continued)."
I had *forgotten* that my AU timeline diverged from FFX canon before Mika bowed out! My ass-pull to solve this problem resulted in my deciding Isaaru was hiding something, and then that *everyone* was hiding something, making this a much more interesting story. :)

Chapter Summary

*The story so far: After investigating Sin attacks on the islands and their temples, Isaaru and his guardians arrive in Luca to much fanfare. They go to Luca Stadium to consult with Maester Lucil.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Despite Isaaru's pleas, Kiyuri insisted on flying Bevelle's banners for arrival in Luca. The grand maester would have his due, even if it dashed his hopes of slipping through the city quickly and quietly. Judging by the din from the docks, he would do neither. Other towns welcomed maesters with hymns and ceremonial. Only Luca could sprout souvenir stands and hawkers in the time it took for the S.S. *Konna* to hoist sails and put into port. Cheering crowds waved prayer flags. Sphere cameras flashed up and down the waterfront like so many pyreflies. Children clutched collectible summoner statues and played dueling aeons while waiting for the ship to dock. Over the general hubbub, the public address system blared a breezy patter, the local equivalent of pious homage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we'll return to the pre-game show shortly. But first, here's an exclusive update on today's developing news story. The S.S. *Konna* has arrived at Dock Three. We can now confirm that Grand Maester Isaaru is aboard. We repeat, Grand Maester Isaaru has arrived! We missed him at the High Summoner's festival, but he's joined us for Luca's most famous tournament, the Eleventh Annual Sir Tidus and Sir Wakka Memorial Cup! And it looks like all Luca's turned out to welcome the ruler of Yevon and the undisputed leader of Spira!"

"While we wait for the maester's party to disembark, Jimma, this is a good time to remind folks of the new security measures in place at the stadium for our fans' safety. All bags will be searched, and machina not approved by Yevon will be confiscated. Sphere cameras with Yevon's seal are permitted. If you're wearing goggles, please remove them as you approach the turnstyles."

Isaaru waved to the crowd placidly while the crew secured the moorings and lowered the ship's gangway. Maroda shook his head at the broadcast. "It's only going to get worse, the longer Sin's out there."

Isaaru nodded. "One more reason to be on our way."

"Some people are saying the Al Bhed are planning to attack Yevon," Pacce told Auron. "They've almost disappeared in the last year. The warrior monks say they're up to something."

Auron snorted. "Keeping out of Sin's path."

"We know that," Maroda said. "But the rest of Spira needs a scapegoat."

"The maesters know it too," Isaaru said firmly. "There will be no war between Yevon and those who should be our allies, Maroda, I promise you."
"That depends on your replacement," Maroda said. "I still think you shouldn't step down."

Captain Kiyuri, barking orders over her shoulder, careened between guardians and summoner. "Hey! Get that dock cleared before you drop a gangplank on someone's head!" She turned to Isaaru. "Almost ready, Your Grace. But I wish you'd reconsider. The repairs should only take a few days. Seal a few seams, replace a few beams—we can catch up to you in Djose, bring you the rest of the way home to Bevelle."

"Nay, Kiyuri, you've played your part. Mine is to tread the summoner's road. Yours to keep your ship intact. Your chances of that will be better without me aboard to draw Sin's ire. If you would yet serve Yevon, hasten to Bevelle and bring tidings to the other maesters. Tell them what we have seen of Sin and advise them to evacuate the citadel in preparation for an attack on the Tower of Light."

"Yes, Your Grace." She bowed. "We'll pray for you. And... you, there! Where'd you learn to coil a line like that, Besaid's weaving guild? It's rope, not a rug!"

Isaaru pinched the bridge of his nose and resumed waving, his smile fraying ever so slightly as the announcers' commentary washed over them.

"Lord Isaaru replaced Grand Maester Mika thirteen years ago at the beginning of High Summoner Yuna's Calm, and no maester has done more to restore Spira's confidence in Yevon. He's always on the move, visiting villages and ports to help Bevelle keep in touch with all of Spira."

"Speaking of High Summoner Yuna, wasn't Lord Isaaru a summoner himself once upon a time? No wonder he treats his maestership like a pilgrimage."

"That's right, Jimma! And by the way, it looks like his old guardians are with him today. The man with the tan is Maroda, captain of the Yocun Crusaders who've finally made the Calm Lands live up to their name. On the right is their little brother Pacce, fresh from training and a full-fledged warrior monk of Bevelle!"

"Quite an accomplishment at his age, Bobba. You know, by my calculations, he must have been less than seven years old the last time he was a guardian—"


"Do not!" Pacce said, glancing furtively to see how his hero was handling the publicity.

Auron seemed oblivious, slouching with his arm slung in his coat and a bored expression. He stirred when the gangway came to a stop. "Let's move."

Isaaru strode to the top of the ramp and paused for a sweeping bow, conferring Yevon's blessings on the crowd below. A spreading ripple of bows flowed out across the dock. At the foot of the gangway, an officer in a red uniform stood at attention, surrounded by a semicircle of Crusaders holding back the crush. Isaaru was spared the need for speechmaking by the loudspeaker crackling to life again.

"Hoooooold everything, folks, do you see what I see? It's the one, the only, the legendary Siiiiiiir Auron, guardian to both High Summoner Braska and Lady Yuna, the most successful guardian in history!"

"He sure is, Bobba. It looks like Grand Maester Isaaru's pulling out all the stops to add 'High Summoner' to his resumé."
"I keep tellin' you, Isaaru," Maroda said. "Spherecasts use forbidden machina. For Yevon's sake, ban them."

"Your Grace," the waiting woman said, dissolving into a broad grin as they drew close. "About time you got here. Follow me, please. The general sent me to make sure you didn't get away."

"Thank you, Elma," Isaaru said. "Maester Lucil is here, I hope? We've much to discuss."

"Yes, sir. I hope you've got a speech ready, sir. She's expecting you at the stadium. There'll be time to talk once the game's started. This way, sir." Shooting Sir Auron a curious glance, Elma gestured for her Crusaders to surround them. She set off at a brisk clip.

Just in time; a reporter with a cameraman in tow was using a large microphone like a ship's prow to cleave a path through the crowd. "Your Grace!" she called after them. "We'd just like a quick interview... Lord Isaaru, please!"

"Don't look back," Maroda growled. "Whatever you do, don't make eye contact."

"I trust you to defend me, my brother," Isaaru said with serene dignity, "even from those who wield such fearsome machina."

"Phew," Pacce said as they broke free of the press of people on the dock. "Almost as bad as the field exam."

"Congratulations, by the way," Elma said.

"Thank you, ma'am!"

"You owe me fifty gil, Commander," Maroda said.

"Not until I see his sword-work for myself," she said affably. "Gotta make sure they didn't go easy on him for your sake."

"Like we'd pull any strings."

"No, but those machina-wielding sissies spend all their time playing temple doorposts and escorting dignitaries in places that never see fiends. They're probably terrified of Captain Maroda and his gang of Calm Lands thugs."

"Elma, please," Isaaru said in a low voice. "I lost several warrior monks on our voyage. Good men and women."

"Oh...dear. I'm very sorry, Your Grace."

"...Isn't this exciting, folks? And now we continue our live coverage of the opening ceremonies. Be sure to stay tuned at halftime for all the latest news on Besaid and Kilika. We'll have interviews with the crew of Lord Isaaru's vessel, including an exclusive eyewitness report giving a play-by-play of a guardian's epic battle with Sin!"

Elma raised an eyebrow. "Epic battle?"

"Sir Auron, of course," Isaaru said. "We'll tell you the whole story."

"You'd better. We feared the worst, Your Grace, when your ship didn't turn up for Lady Yuna's festival."
"Didn't you get my messages?" Isaaru said, dismayed. "A merchant promised to relay them. I pray he did not meet with some mishap!"

"We got 'em, sir, but the general was fit to be tied when she heard where you'd gone. If you hadn't turned up today, she'd have sent me after you as soon as the tournament was over."

Auron, who had been scanning the tide of faces flowing past, broke in. "Wakka. Is he here today?"

"Not that I've heard, sir," Elma said. "The tournament was named for him and Sir Tidus, but he's not been seen in Luca in twelve years. Don't you know where he is?"

"We... parted ways after the pilgrimage."

"Ah." Elma frowned and exchanged glances with Maroda, who shook his head.

Isaaru was starting to lag behind. "Commander," he called, "not all of us are trained to keep up with chocobos."

"Oh! Pardon me, sir." She dropped back a few paces. "Wish I could've met you with some birds, but there just isn't room for 'em in town."

For a time they were carried along by the late crowd rushing to the stadium, until a jam outside the entrance caused another check. Elma veered off and led them around to a side door, surprising a sentry. "Miyu— yep, we've picked up a stray maester. Have stadium security on full alert. Don't let Shaami and her reporters in here. Use batons if you have to— this way, Your Grace!"

Isaaru masked his fatigue when they emerged from the stairwell into a barrage of sound. While the crowd's roar threatened to shake loose the forcefields holding the sphere pool suspended, the beaming maester led the way around the stadium's perimeter. He paused now and again to grasp someone's hand or bless a toddler held out to him. In front of the maesters' box, he stopped once again to shake hands with all the team captains before they exited to their locker rooms. Finally he mounted the dais where Lucil stood waiting, fist raised in a military salute despite the maester's robes she now wore. Her eyes flicked from Isaaru to those behind him, resting a beat on Sir Auron. She bowed stiffly and pushed herself away from the podium, inclining her head towards it. Elma moved unobtrusively to her side and escorted her to her seat. Isaaru strode forward confidently and took Lucil's place.

"People of Spira! Glad indeed are my brothers and I that we could be with you today by the blessing of Yevon, despite Sin's obstructions." Murmurs swirled around the stadium. "I will not keep you long from the day's festivities. But I have heard your pleas in my travels, and I understand your fear. Therefore it is my humble honor to announce that I will be stepping down as maester in order to resume my pilgrimage. In Yevon's name, I vow to do all that lies in my power to shield you and serve you as Lady Yuna and her noble father did before. With Sir Auron and my brothers at my side, I have no doubt we shall succeed." He raised his hands, waiting for the roar to ebb.

"But for today, even the rigors of pilgrimage should be set aside to honor the glory of blitzball and the celebration of life which is Luca's finest art. I'm sure that Sir Tidus and Sir Wakka, who once played in this very stadium, would say that the game is another form of courage in Sin's despite.

"Last but not least, it is my great delight to introduce to you a man who needs no introduction, mentor to Sir Tidus and guardian to Lady Yuna and Lord Braska, the legend himself. Sir Auron, would you care to share a few words with us about your fellow guardians, in whose honor today's tournament is named?"
Auron gave him a withering look and stepped forward into the range of the microphone. "Two," he said. "As Wakka and Tidus used to say before battle: 'Let's blitz.'"

A thunderous burst of applause crashed over them. Isaaru sank into the seat next to Lucil. Guardians fanned out on his right while Elma's Crusaders sealed off the left side of the platform. The buzzer sounded. Lucil turned to Isaaru as the match began.

"Resigning, my lord? That idea should have been broached first with your fellow maesters. But I am glad to see you and your brothers in one piece, and Sir Auron as well."

"My apologies, General, but there wasn't time. Sin's stepped up its attacks. Besaid is gone. Kilika was spared, apart from the temple. We fear Djose will be the next target."

"If so, it will pass here first." Lucil glanced at Elma.

"The watch is on full alert, ma'am. We'll know the instant Sin shows so much as a scale."

"Very good, Commander. All right, my lord, tell us your tale."

Chapter End Notes

Illustration by author

NPC Trivia: Shaami is the reporter filming Yuna before the blitz tournament and doing a post-game wrap afterwards in FFX. The announcers here (Jimma and Bobba) are the Luca announcers in the original game. Miyu is a very minor npc at the Moonflow, a Crusader who survived Operation Mi'ihen.

The security warnings are a parody of the PA announcements outside Dodger Stadium.

Chapter renumbering in 2019: This will eventually be Chapter 7.
Best-Laid Plans

Chapter Summary

_Isaaru and his guardians meet with Maester Lucil, head of Yevon's military, laying plans for a new Operation Mi'ihen to protect the fayth of Djose Temple._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The carnival ambiance of the blitzball tournament ebbed and flowed around Isaaru and his companions like another world pinned by pyreflies to a gigantic sphere. Fans cheered for their favorite players, bickered over team loyalties, lived and died with every goal. In the maesters’ box, all was still.

Isaaru had been uncharacteristically stark, blunt, and brief as he narrated the bare bones of their journey. Now he and Lucil sat between two worlds, surrounded by a sea of noise. Clapping when the crowd roared, feigning interest in a match that no one but Pacce actually watched, they waited for the final moments of a Bevelle upset ("That's one for the history books, folks!") to play out so they could slip away to ponder the fate of the world.

As soon as the buzzer sounded, Isaaru and Lucil retired to a VIP suite below the maester's dais. The chamber was as dark as a Cloister of Trials, despite a few skylights. Luxurious furniture and refreshments could not disguise the fact that it had been built into the stadium's walls as a fortified retreat against attack—from Sin, or from an angry mob, to judge by its defenses. Years ago, Lucil had commanded the removal of the machina weapons embedded in the heavy doors leading out to the stadium, but the peepholes of gunsights and the stripped mountings on the doors' inner faces were a sober reminder of what Yevon could be.

Isaaru settled into a high-backed chair, his guardians forming a triangle around him. Elma helped Lucil into the seat across from him. The maester in charge of Yevon's military concealed her infirmity in public, but a chocobo accident had left her partially paralyzed. Her aide was no longer a starry-eyed cadet, but a seasoned officer with a scar half-hidden under short dark hair and a complexion weathered by years of riding.

Elma gave orders to the sentries outside and shut the doors. "There. No one's going to disturb us for anything short of a Sin sighting. The next match is in forty-five minutes, if you mean to keep up appearances."

"Thank you, Commander," Isaaru said, forgetting that he was no longer the senior official in the room.

"Djose, then." Lucil steepled her hands in her lap, expression grave. "Elma. Provide Summoner Isaaru and his party with mounts and escort them to Djose. Send couriers ahead to Mushroom Rock Lodge, advising the captain to begin battle preparations and await your arrival. We will need his ground forces as well for this operation."

"Maester Lucil," Isaaru said, half-rising from his seat. "I appreciate your support, but I cannot accept it. Did we four not agree that the tragedy of Operation Mi'ihen must never be repeated?"
"I do not forget a single face of the fallen whom our predecessors betrayed," she snapped. "But if Sin wipes out the aeons, it will strip summoners of our only weapon against it. We must defend the fayth at any cost." Her eyes flicked to Elma, who gave a melancholy little smile in return.

"Actually," Maroda said, "Sir Auron had an idea about that."

Isaaru's brows jerked upwards. "Oh?"

Auron said nothing, but looked at Maroda.

"Move the fayth." Maroda shrugged. "We can't stop Sin yet. So put the statue where it can't be harmed. Hide it."

"But won't that screw up the spirit inside?" Pacce said. "I mean, can it survive without the temple and hymns?"

"It's been done before," said Auron.

"Is that so?" Isaaru leaned towards him. "I should like to know which fayth, and where. Baaj Temple, perhaps? I have been trying to pinpoint its location."

"We're wasting time," Lucil said. "Lord Isaaru, if my Crusaders provide wagons and engineers to move the statue, can you and the priests of Djose ensure the fayth's integrity?"

"In theory, I know what prayers sustain and strengthen the bond between statue and spirit, and I have a link with the fayth which may let me soothe its unease. I believe it can be done. But I cannot be certain. If we do nothing, however, the fayth will certainly be lost."

"Then we must deploy, taking every care to minimize casualties. Elma, you will assist Lord Isaaru in removing the statue to a safe location. I suggest Lord Mi'ihen's Grotto. Order Captain Luzzu to deploy perimeter defenses around Djose Temple. Your mobile units will defend the Highroad between the temple and Mushroom Ridge. Luzzu's infantry and your knights will provide cover for the operation, keeping Sin at bay and staging a mock-defense of the temple."

Elma cleared her throat. "Ma'am, I hate to remind you, but Captain Luzzu is still on probation for heresy. What if he can somehow tell Sin our plans?"

"I'm satisfied with his explanation that it was the toxin speaking, Commander. And if not, then who better to convince Sin we are defending Djose Temple than one of its devotees? The statue's relocation will be on a need-to-know basis. Keep it concealed during transport. Use the pretext of evacuating the temple, its scrolls and relics."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Heresy?" Isaaru said.

"Sin sightings are frequent off the coast of Djose, my lord, as you know," Lucil said. "Our patrols are sometimes affected by the toxin when it comes too close to shore. Some have fallen prey to the Cult of Sin. I confess that is one reason for our exchange program with the warrior monks. Those suffering a crisis of faith are sent to Bevelle, where Maester Shelinda can take them under her wing."

"Or to the Calm Lands to be whipped back into shape," Maroda said, shaking his head. "I wondered why you kept sending us your scraps."
"But Captain Luzzu has commanded the lodge at Mushroom Ridge for ten years," Elma said. "He's refused promotions or transfers. He's gone a little loopy. I caught him up on the headland just talking to Sin one day. He said he was keeping it company so it wouldn't attack."

Maroda snorted. "Sounds like someone else we know."

Auron ignored the jibe. "Are we finished?"

Lucil nodded. "Indeed. Summoner Isaaru, have you any other suggestions?"

"Only that I would urge you to authorize machina for this operation. Your troops—"

"—will stand a better chance than they did thirteen years ago, if we don't use forbidden machina and provoke Sin's retribution. However, this will be a good time to test the new Lightning Rock Shield."

"Anyway, Sin's not going to blow up its garden," Elma said with a chuckle. "It's mellowed."

"Elma!"

"Don't worry, ma'am. I'm not going to start worshipping it just because it's sending us flowers." She sobered. "So. Move statue, check. Keep it under wraps, check. Have Luzzu's lodge guard the temple, check. Chocobo Knights along Highroad. Activate shield. Fall behind the barriers the instant Sin starts glowing. Are we set?"

"You have your orders, Commander. And... Elma?"

"Ma'am?"

Lucil clasped her forearm firmly. "I will see you when this is over. I expect a thorough debriefing. Understood?"

The officer's cheeks colored. "Yes, ma'am."

Chapter End Notes
Meta: It's never spelled out in-game, but the maesters under Mika each seem to be responsible for a branch of government: military (Kinoc), religious (Seymour), and judicial (Kelk). Their replacements here are Lucil, Shelinda, and Baralai. Baralai is also civil administrator of Bevelle, while Lucil oversees the Crusaders from her seat in Luca.

Chapter renumbering: This will eventually be Chapter 8a and be combined with the next chapter.
The Story So Far: Leaving Luca, Isaaru and his guardians head for Djose, escorted by Captain Elma of the Djose Chocobo Knights.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Please have it," the youth standing in the road said, holding up a leather pouch to Maroda. "My mother carried it on pilgrimage. There's a half-dozen remedies. She... didn't get a chance to use them."

The boy looked about Rikku's age, thought Auron, watching the exchange with fatalistic detachment. He knew the pattern, he recognized the cycle, he knew every tiresome beat of this movement in futility, but somehow when the faces were new and young he could entertain a fleeting hope that it might play out differently. That had been his downfall the last time, after all.

"Well..." Maroda shot a glance at Auron, as if the legendary guardian's fame were somehow to blame for these obstructions.

"Just take it," Auron muttered. "It's quicker."

No, he corrected himself. Not Rikku's age. She should be almost thirty, practically old enough to be the boy's mother. It was a minor slip, but troubling. Auron's grasp of time had been growing fuzzy, a warning sign that he might not have much time left.

"We shall honor your mother's memory," Isaaru said warmly, "and use your gift to help us save Spira. You have our thanks."

"Get back to the village now, kiddo," Elma said. "My knights have been pulled off patrol to escort Lord Isaaru, so there may be fiends about." In fact, most of the Mi'ihen Highroad patrols had been sent ahead to prepare. The four mounted Crusaders accompanying the summoner's party were hardly sufficient to cover so much territory.

"Yes, ma'am... thank you, my lord!" The youth bowed in Yevon's prayer, then turned to head back to the cluster of homesteads that had sprouted on the bluffs around the Al Bhed trading post. Faces peeped through windows, watching the cavalcade go by.

Maroda passed the pouch to Isaaru. "Fourteen-year-old potions," he said in a low voice. "Don't get them mixed up with the rest."

Isaaru slipped it into a saddlebag. "Thank Yevon he turned them over to us before someone tried to use them."

"We can drop them off at the hazardous items dump below Mushroom Ridge," Elma said. "Come on, let's put some leagues behind us. Ya!"

Chocobos. Auron had never enjoyed jogging along on a giant bird whose neck stood in the way of
a good swing, but speed was vital. They had already wasted half a day in Luca.

Swift couriers had been sent ahead with Lucil’s orders, but Isaaru had stayed through the tournament to present a semblance of normality and curtail rumors already brewing around his abdication and Sin's latest attacks. The Bevelle Bells' victory parade had turned into a citywide farewell celebration for Summoner Isaaru, since their achievement was hailed as a good omen for the grand maester's pilgrimage. There had been balloons, showers of flower petals (but no rainbows), special pre-Calm sales from street vendors, and live music provided by the Macalania artists colony. Sphere had cameras flashed like fireworks among the throngs lining the roads, eager to record pictures of the next High Summoner and his soon-to-be-legendary guardians. The city PA system had broadcast coverage of the parade interwoven with hastily-thrown-together retrospectives and expletive-laden interviews from sailors recounting Sin's defeat at Kilika. Auron's fight with a dragon in the stadium thirteen years ago had been shown at least a dozen times.

There had been no "fireworks and wailing women," but Jecht would have been delighted. On the whole, Auron shared Braska's preference for a discreet exit.

Unfortunately, fans were not found only in Luca. Pacce was bubbling over again, thanks to Elma's loose tongue. "Hey, Sir Auron, is that where you killed the Chocobo Eater?"

Auron gave a noncommittal grunt.

"That's how it's done," Elma said. "Local Al Bhed had been having problems with it for weeks, but all it took was a few swords and Sir Wakka beaning it with a blitzball! So much for machina!"

Not to mention a black mage capable of roasting a chocobo in ten seconds, Auron thought. Apparently, sports icons and disgraced warrior monks made better celebrities than an aloof young woman, however striking.

Riding made speech difficult, so they ceded conversation to the wind for a while. At their next check, walking the birds across a bridge, Isaaru spoke again. "Commander. I wish you'd reconsider the use of machina. Normally I should never presume to second-guess the general's wisdom on military matters, but I am worried that personal feelings are impeding her judgment. Her desire to atone for the mistakes of Operation Mi'ihen is causing her to make another."

"Sir," Elma said, "if Maester Lucil allowed personal feelings to sway her judgment, she'd never put me in charge of such a dangerous operation. For that matter, she'd not have authorized it in the first place. It kills her every time she has to send the Crusaders into battle while she sits on her ass."

Behind them, Pacce made a choking noise.

Elma grinned. "You're authorized to laugh, kiddo. There's no warrior monks around to give a damn." She waved an arm vaguely at Auron. "At least, I don't think there are."

Auron snorted. "No."

"I respect that Lucil has always put personal…considerations aside, but that's not the same thing," Isaaru said. "It's her feelings towards machina that blinker her. We are pitting the Crusaders directly against Sin, something we had hoped never to do again. As the general said, we must use everything in our power to minimize casualties."

Elma shook her head, holding the reins of his chocobo for him to remount. "I know you're trying to save lives, sir, but you should know better. Machina fall under 'matters of conscience,' remember?"
"Ah. Yes. I'm sorry, Elma."

"Hey, no problem." Elma swung herself up on her own chocobo. "Look, we have safeguards in place that we didn't last time. And we're not going to engage Sin more than we have to. This is a defensive operation, not an attack."

"'Matters of conscience'"? Auron said as they set off again.

"Questions for which the teachings are inadequate," said Isaaru. "In practice, issues on which the Four Maesters disagree. A necessary reform, we felt, to correct Yevon's mistakes. For such questions, no one, not even a maester, may impose his judgment on another. On matters of conscience, each Crusader lodge sets the rule, and any soldier who believes differently may ask for transfer to another lodge."

"Most Crusaders don't permit use of machina," Elma said. "Except for that renegade there." She grinned at Maroda.

Maroda tapped the spear strapped beside him. "Does this look like a grenade launcher to you?"

"Don't play coy, Captain. I know how you train troops to deal with basilisks."

Maroda chuckled. "That's because my men don't use big flapping chocobos to run away."

"As you were," Elma said, when one of her knights twisted in the saddle to glare. "Yo, Maroda, wanna come hunting with me tonight and back up that big talk? Let's see how you handle a dual-horn."

"Elma, Maroda, please," Isaaru said. "Sparring must wait for a later date. How much farther until Mi'ihen Lodge?"

"We'll be there by sunset, sir, if we keep making good time," said Elma. "Oh! By the way, you guys haven't seen the Memorial Gardens yet, right?"

"No, we haven't," Isaaru said.

"You're in for a treat, then."

"Does Sin really make the flowers grow?" Pacce said.

"Hard to say, kiddo. The weather's been crazy these last few years, but that doesn't explain how we started getting roses growing in sand that's half salt." Elma laughed. "One thing I know for sure: if Sin's behind it, it's not doing it to give the off-duties someplace to sneak off and get laid."

You never know; Auron thought, his quiet "hmph" masked by Pacce's nervous laughter. Nevertheless, he suspected other powers besides Venus were at work.

Look for me in my garden, Auron.

He was sourly amused at himself for the impulse to kick the damn bird to run faster.

Chapter End Notes
Concerning Pacce's age: By the time I discovered that the Ultimania Guide said he was ten in FFX, I'd written him for several chapters as a puppyish 19-year-old. (In fact, I'd wanted him to be the same age as Tidus and Gatta, but I didn't want Yuna's Calm to be shorter than her father's.)

Rather than rewrite Pacce, I've opted to ignore Ultimania and stick with my original concept: about to turn 20, innocent for his age. Possibly his brothers continued to dote on him and shelter his innocence as they did in-game. Also, unlike most FFX characters, he's grown up during Yuna's Calm, when Sin wasn't seen for a decade.

Chapter renumbering: Eventually this will be combined with the previous chapter to form the second half of chapter 8.
She Hit Me, Too

Chapter Summary

The Cult of Sin claims "The Lady" is responsible for strange weather and fertile harvests. Isaaru and his guardians get a first-hand look at "Sin's Garden" on Mushroom Rock Road.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three days out from Luca, they were approaching the turnoff to Mushroom Ridge. The Highroad had once been a beaten shelf of dirt exposed to the elements and scoured by the wind, but now berms or seawalls shielded it on the seaward side. Out of sight, leaden waves sighed against the rocks. Ahead, a finger from the cliffs arced down over the road to form a flying buttress. Beyond it, the land was transformed.

It was difficult to make out individual shapes in the growing dusk, but swaying dark fronds draped over the arch in a lush curtain. Nodding white flowers as wide as a woman's hand winked between broad leaves. A profusion of plants carpeted the path below, crushed or snapped by the passing prints of travellers, despite which they seemed to thrive: blue blossoms from Besaid and the coral-pink orchids of Kilika, ivy and hibiscus, lilies and irises, even the glassy trunk of a Macalania sapling with glowing seed-pods in the forks of slender stems.

"Yevon," Isaaru breathed, reining in his chocobo and gazing up at the floral tapestry in wonder. "What enchantment is this?"

"Nobody knows," Elma said. "Good thing it's so remote. Even so, we rescue a few tourists from fiends every month. They forget the danger. Speaking of which, be on your guard. Those vines can hide a full-sized iguion. Nasty buggers— their bite can paralyze. We try to keep the path clear up to the lodge, but the plants grow back fast."

She turned into a narrow cleft in the cliff-face which widened into a ravine. Sentries drew back spears and saluted as they passed.

The path was mostly cleared, but creeping vegetation spilled over the lumps and crags of the cliffs on either side. Sea-fog had collected on rocky shelves and dimples along the edges of the winding track. The larger basins held mats of dark-green pads with pale flowers illuminating the shadowy ravine. Glowing wisps of pyreflies spiraled up from their fragrant blossoms.

"I don't believe it," Isaaru said. "Moon-lilies. I thought they were unique to the Moonflow."

"Well, it rains here fairly often now." Elma spoke in a hushed voice. "Folks say it's Sin's doing. Who knows?"

"They're so pretty," Pacce said, turning to gawk as they passed a ledge overflowing with white blossoms.

"Keep your eyes open," Maroda said. "Macalania's pretty too, and it's got chimeras."
They jogged along in silence, slowing their pace so those riders who did not know the way wouldn't steer their mounts over a precipitous drop. Rustlings in the undergrowth kept them wary.

As they penetrated deeper into the canyon, they began to pass cleared patches on the walls where registers of names had been carved into the cliffs. Here the vegetation was sparser, but ferns and stonecrop tumbled over the inscriptions. Isaaru cupped his hands in Yevon's prayer. Maroda and Pacce, unusually solemn, followed his example.

Auron bowed his head, although he did not pray. He noticed a white vein of quartz cutting through a pair of glyphs that might read Gatta.

Auron felt his hair stirred by a gust of wind from above, bellowed "Down!" before he remembered why, and rolled from the saddle as two huge claws came out of the gloom to rake his mount's shoulders. The chocobo shrieked, thrashed in a flurry of feathers and blood, and bolted. To his annoyance, Auron found his left foot caught in the stirrup.

His sword was out of reach, its sheath lashed to the saddlebags. He was dragged a dozen yards before his flailing fingers closed over the hilt. A black crevasse yawned under him. Cries and shouts were erupting behind him. He felt the air pulse with the forceful beat of a garuda's wings.

Bumping and bashing against the chocobo's flank, Auron's patience had run out. He swung the sword around for an awkward blow, striking the neck and a vital artery. It wasn't a clean kill, but it sufficed. Auron leapt free as the wretched bird, jerking in its death-throes, tumbled over the edge.

He would have to apologize to Elma later. These Djose Knights took their birds seriously. Staggering on legs stiffened by a day's ride, Auron ran back towards the fray.

Overkill, really. Seven fighters, minus the knights herding a protesting Isaaru out of harm's way, were more than enough to handle a garuda. They would probably have made short work of it. Auron, however, was tired, stiff, and eager to press on. He barreled in from one side, raised the sword high, and threw all his momentum behind a scything blow to the neck. The blade was nearly wrenched from his hands. Standard Crusader issue could not shear through a spine like his old sword. Nevertheless, it was enough to bring the garuda crashing down. As reward for his impatience, he was smothered under a heavy, leathery wing.

The fiend wasn't quite dead, but now it was an easy target. Maroda, Pacce, Elma and the other knight waded in to finish it off. Auron lay under the suffocating weight and hoped that no one passed a spear through him. A few moments later, the fiend dissolved into pyreflies.

Pacce crouched at his side. "You okay, Sir Auron?"

"Fine," he said, standing and wiping bloody feathers off his coat. Forestalling an awkward conversation, he added, "My chocobo didn't fare as well. I think it fell." He gestured towards the edge of the crevasse.

"Damn," Elma said. "That's one of Clasko's chicks. Lord Isaaru, are you all right?"

"Perfectly, Commander," Isaaru called. "But one of your knights is not. I will tend her." There was a blue shimmer off the walls as they trooped back to find a circle of chocobos and knights fencing the summoner and his patient. The prone rider groaned, stirred, and sat up groggily.

"All right there, Yuyui?" Elma said. "Good. Let's move before anything else pops out looking for dinner. Sir Auron, if you'd care to—"

"I'll walk," he said. "I remember the way."
"Hm." Elma gave him a skeptical look. "Suit yourself."

He might not have been so eager to have ditched the bird, Auron reflected a short time later, had he realized the Al Bhed lift had been replaced with switchbacks.

They emerged onto a wide shelf sweeping around to the promontory overlooking the bay. A fierce wind off the ocean scoured their cheeks with salt. Lightning flashed in the distance, outlining the temple's cliffs on the opposite side of the bay. Somewhere out there in the dark, where breakers crashed on a lonely beach below the bluff, a generation of Crusaders had met their deaths in a hopeless campaign against Sin.

Elma turned away from the ocean towards the lanterns of the sprawling Crusader camp. A clamor of voices and smith's hammers spoke of preparations for the coming battle. As they dismounted, a tall red-haired man emerged from the gates and marched towards them. More Crusaders hurried to keep up with his long stride, fanning out to take the chocobos' reins and lead them away.

"Lord Isaaru." Luzzu drew his fist to his chest in salute. "Commander Elma. Captain Maroda. Welcome. We have quarters prepared and supper waiting for you in the main lodge."

"You'd better. A garuda tried to make dinner of us back there," Elma said.

"I'm very sorry, ma'am. Does anyone require a healer?"

"It's taken care of, Captain," Isaaru said. "Don't worry. My guardians needed the exercise." He gestured towards Auron, who had just trudged into view. "Some more than others," he added with a chuckle.

"Is that…Sir Auron?" Luzzu stared hard at him, then straightened and beckoned to the party. "Please, follow me. If you wish, Commander, we can review plans for the operation over your meal."

"Food first," Elma said. "Young Pacce here isn't used to a long day's march. He's only had warrior monk's training."

Auron paused outside the entrance to the camp and glanced down. There in the shadows was a delicate, ground-hugging variety of rose pounded into the dirt by foot traffic. Stooping, he found one intact blossom. Its color was impossible to guess. A patina of salt had painted it a ghostly white. Auron plucked it, tucked it into the beads dangling from his belt, and followed the others into camp.

Troop deployments. Supplies. Wagons. Signals. Triage tents. Auron found the evening's routine both restful and irritating. He was no longer directly involved in such affairs. Many might die tomorrow, and for their sake, he had paid attention. But he had little to contribute, or too much that needed to remain unsaid. He was mildly interested to see how Djose's Lightning Shield worked, and what effect it would have on their opponent.
On Lulu.

His knuckles brushed against salt-rimed roses hunched low against the wind. They grew here on
the promontory in stubborn defiance, overlooking the beach where her boy soldier, Chappu, had
met his end. Was his name etched somewhere on these cliffs, or was he one of the forgotten? For
every hero remembered, there were a thousand whose names were never memorialized in stone.
The only mark they left was a scar in the hearts of those left behind.

Auron took another drink. After riding all day, it was foolish to be sitting out here alone in the
damp, watching the clouds rolling in off the ocean, half-dozing in the scent of roses mixed with the
sea's tang. The bay was black, impossible to distinguish from the sky except when far-off lightning
peeled away the darkness for an instant. The promontory beneath him quivered, but that was only
from unseen waves striking the cliffs. He kept scanning the horizon for an answering flash. Sin, as
usual, was moving on its own schedule.

Lulu could be here within the hour, the day, the week. He was not concerned about what others
might say if his prediction seemed to have failed, but it would be awkward if Isaaru chose to press
on.

Slow footsteps crunched towards him. Auron straightened and waited, unsurprised to see Luzzu's
head and shoulders rising above the berm that encircled the camp. The lodge captain had barely
exchanging two words with him during the strategy meeting, but he had watched Auron intently
during Pacce's enthusiastic account of their last run-in with Sin.

"Sir Auron." The Crusader descended the short slope and folded his arms, staring down at the man
seated between the weathered stumps of Kinoc's observation platform. "I thought I might find you
out here."

"Sir Luzzu."

The man gave a bark of laughter. "No one's called me that since Lady Yuna died."

"Hmph."

"So." Luzzu gazed out to sea, relaxing when another fan of lightning revealed the flat horizon.
"Sin?"

Time for another sparring session. Auron was hardly in the mood, but their mutual association with
Lulu demanded an answer and might yield a few more. "What about it?"

"Lord Isaaru said you knew... it... was coming here."

"It fits the pattern."

"Besaid Island, Kilika Temple, and that's a pattern?"

"And one other before that. It buried a fayth statue in the Calm Lands."

"Ah," Luzzu muttered to himself, as if something had clicked. "So, you've been following Sin for
some time. Did you actually see it strike Besaid?"

"No." Auron could hear the strain in Luzzu's voice, knew the man was watching him as warily as
the ocean, seeking some sign of Sin's passing. What did Yevon do to heretics these days, now that
it was bursting with so much goodwill? "She," he amended, voice softening.
"The Lady?" Luzzu demanded, making the honorific an accusation.

"She was that." A memory brushed the edge of Auron's thoughts, no more than a fleeting impression of self-possessed elegance, a regal pillar of black and white holding the rearguard at his side.

Luzzu exhaled. "Not that we ever called her that."

Even now, Auron noted, the Crusader had danced around self-incrimination for heresy. "Luzzu. I know who she is. It's all right."

"Like hell it's all right!" He lowered his head and brought up his fists, struggling to keep his voice down. "What's happened to her? Is she dead... unsent? Or is she a prisoner inside Sin? That's what I thought at first, but lately..." He made a harsh, angry sound. "Dammit. Lulu was a fine woman. A good fighter, too. What went wrong?"

Auron hesitated, keenly aware of what had happened the last time he had answered that question. But Luzzu already knew the what, if not the why, and Auron needed information. "Sin... doesn't die. You can cut it down, but it grows back." He gestured towards the scraggly creepers spilling over the berm. "It puts down roots in whoever defeats it and reforms around them."

"And you did not think to tell them this?" Luzzu said, voice quivering like a cocked harpoon.

"I told them," Auron said. "Lulu thought she had come up with a way to break the cycle."

Wham. Even braced for it, he was rocked onto his back by the force of the blow. His glasses cracked and went flying, skittering off into the darkness. Pyreflies whined in his ears. Auron righted himself with a grimace, watching the man in case he wasn't finished.

The Crusader stood panting, hands clenched at his sides. "Everyone I grew up with in Besaid is dead now. Chappu. Gatta. Yuna. Kimahri too, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And Lulu... worse than dead. No wonder she's so angry." He shook his head slowly as if to clear it. "You said... 'whoever defeats it.' What about the Final Summoning?"

"Lulu is the Final Summoning. The fayth of the Final Aeon must be a guardian's soul, bound by love to the summoner. Her choice. She's a stubborn woman."

Luzzu's breath hissed between his teeth. Auron recognized the sound of a swallowed oath: what was there to swear by, once Yevon had proved false? "Gatta was stubborn too," he conceded. "That's always the way, isn't it? The young get themselves killed. We atone."

"Regrets won't bring them back, Luzzu." What was it Lulu used to say? It's pointless to think about, and sad. Yet here they were, still dwelling on immutables. It was time for answers. One name was conspicuously absent from Luzzu's list. "Wakka. Where is he?"

"I'm not sure. Lulu sent him somewhere far away, out of harm's reach— and hers. At least, that's the impression she gave me."

Auron winced. Wonderful. Dream-Zanarkand, the same place Jecht's Sin had sent him. He should have checked, but that possibility had never occurred to him. He was so tired of going in circles. Wakka would hate it, of course. Lulu had an odd knack for being cruel to him.
"Is there any way to free her?" Luzzu said.

"Only one."

"Ah." Luzzu slumped. "Maybe you should just let her be. She's good at what she does. She terrorizes Spira, but she makes us stronger. Not much changed, really."

"I can't leave her like this, Luzzu."

"No, I suppose not. So. What do you mean to do?"

"Take her place, if we can't find a better way. Has she told you what she's planning?"

"No. At least, I don't think so. She doesn't speak to me in words. Just feelings, images." Luzzu shook his head. "The last time Lulu came by, she was brooding over the summoners she'd lost. She showed me how Lady Ginnem died."

"Ah." That explained her attack on the Cavern of the Stolen Fayth, although Auron had already guessed as much.

"Is it true what Lord Isaaru said, that Besaid's been wiped out?"

"Yes," Auron said. "I'm sorry."

"Maybe it really is time to... end her pilgrimage."

"Past time. If not for her, for me."

"Is there anything else I should know about this operation? I'm not a fool, Sir Auron. When the orders came in, I thought this was simply a roundabout way of granting me an honorable discharge: death by Sin, instant glory. But Maester Lucil wouldn't dispatch Commander Elma out here just to evacuate a handful of nuns and priests. They're getting us out of the way so they can open that cave below Mushroom Ridge, aren't they?"

"Cave?"

"Down in the canyon. Rumor has it a crack team of Crusaders was sent in there just before Operation Mi'ihen, and none of them came out. I've heard crazy rumors that they went mad and killed each other, or that Maester Kinoc trapped them in there to die. It's sealed off now, anyway. We use the area in front of it as a hazardous items dump to keep people away."

"I don't know anything about that."

"Maybe they're keeping you in the dark, too."

"Possibly." Auron shrugged. "Just be ready to retreat, Captain. If a bubble of light starts to form around Sin, take cover. That's the only warning you'll get. You remember what happened last time."

"Right. Thanks." Hunching his shoulders, Luzzu turned to leave. "You planning on staying out all night?"

"Probably."

"Inform the sentries if you see her."
"I will."

Chapter End Notes

"She hit me, too..."

Meta: FFX in-game inscriptions were basically English words written in a funny font. Since both the Hymn of the Fayth and Japanese ↔ Al Bhed are syllable-based ciphers, I posit that in-universe, Spiran glyphs transcribe syllables, not letters, like Hiragana. (This will come up again later.)

Chapter renumbering: This is chapter 9 in the 2018-2019 remaster.
Breach of Fayth

Chapter Summary

The Story So Far: Sin has attacked and destroyed several temples and their aeons. Isaaru and Commander Elma lead a secret operation to move Djose temple's fayth to safety. Most of Elma's troops, including Captain Luzzu of Mushroom Rock Lodge, are kept in the dark about the mission's true purpose.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Sir Auron, I must protest! You mean to tell me they're not even guardians? They should never have been permitted—"

"Neither are you, Father," Elma said.

The priest stood spreadeagled in the doorway of the Chamber of the Fayth, blocking the workers who had been dismantling its frame. "Your presence here is sheer outrage! You have defiled the Cloister of Trials, desecrated the fayth's sanctuary! Why, it will take us years to repair the damage!"

"If there's anything left to repair," Pacce said.

"Hey," Maroda said. "Isaaru's communing with the fayth, remember? If you want your aeon in one piece, I respectfully suggest you shut up."

Elma, the summoner and his guardians kept vigil around the fayth's resting place with varying degrees of awe. Electricity tickled along the seams of armor like invisible insects. From the open doorway came the clamor of hammers and chisels, workmen's oaths. Yet Isaaru knelt with an expression of profound benison, oblivious to all disturbances. The placid smile of a summoner had slipped away, replaced by the shy, tentative smile of a boy catching his first glimpse of some rapturous vision that would anchor him all his days. A sheen of sweat lay on his brow, but for the first time since Besaid, he looked rested, whole, and at peace.

At last his eyes fluttered open. Auron reached down to keep him from toppling face first into the shallow glass dome over the statue.

Isaaru nodded to him and stood. "It is done," he said. "The fayth understands and accepts. Father Kyou, I beg you to do the same. If there were any other way, believe me, I would never condone this extraordinary breach of holy ground."

"B-but, my lord! What of the teachings? Crusaders are ever apt to abandon Yevon for rash schemes. Even maesters betray us. But you... you were the one who warned us that day, when we brought Sin's wrath upon us."

"Kyou, I remember. After Operation Mi'ihen, I swore an oath that I would vanquish Sin before any more lives were sacrificed to such folly. High Summoner Yuna postponed my vow, but it still holds." Isaaru met the man's distraught gaze with compassion. "But I cannot fulfill my vow if
every aeon is lost. Three are already gone. We must save this one, so that I can save Spira. The temple can be rebuilt. Its fayth is irreplaceable."

The former Crusader wilted. "Yes, Your Grace."

"Yevon's blessings upon you." Isaaru bowed to him. "And my thanks. I will need your prayers, Father."

"So now what?" said Elma.

"We must crack its seal and free the statue from its bed." Isaaru said. "Sir Auron?"

"Yes?"

"The fayth asks if you would deliver the blow. He trusts you."

Maroda snorted.

"Very well." Expressionless, Auron hefted the borrowed sword like a child's plaything. "I suggest that everyone stand back."

They retreated into the next room with the workmen. Auron peered at the glass lens covering the floor, trying to gauge its thickness. Below it lay a giant figure of a man pressed into a stony bed as if the mass of the rocks floating above the temple had been transferred onto his broad back. The broad-bladed weapon tucked under the statue's arm looked to have the weight of the one he'd lost. Auron brushed aside a pang of envy and selected a point just past the apex of the lens-shaped dome. His boots rang as he raced forward, leapt, and raised a shout timed to match the downbeat of his stroke. Sparks flew. The blade's tip snapped, but the floor held.

Glowering at his reflection, Auron caught a glimpse of a different shape looming above him, four-legged, all bone and sinew and scars. *Ixion*, Yuna had named it. *Ki-rin*, to her father. Eyes like embers blazed.

*Remember, guardian. Your power is to break things... and to free them.*

Which skill did it mean, *Armor Break* or *Mental Break*? Probably both, if he could manage it.

A second time he charged, flinging out his free arm with a shout as he brought the sword crashing down. Reflected in the glass he saw the aeon's horn slicing upwards, mirroring his swing. The sword exploded in a shower of glowing fragments. There was a brilliant blue-white flash that burrowed through skin, marrow, and nerve. Auron went sprawling as the floor collapsed under him.

Groaning, he extricated himself from glassy blocks strewn across the bottom of a shallow pit, covering the statue like chunks of ice. Pacce came running over while the others, more wary, began to file back into the room.

"I'm fine," he said, fending him off. "The fayth?"

Isaaru dropped to his knees, hands cupped over his heart. The chamber had darkened considerably: the pulsing glow within the glass had faded when Auron cracked it. Now the lines of electricity arcing overhead were beginning to fizzle out one by one.

"Shaken," the summoner said, "but undamaged. Father Kyou, I need you to help me with the Hymn of Renewal, to sustain the aeon's spirit while—"
The chamber shook with a tremendous boom, and concussion after concussion followed.

"Sin!" Maroda said. "Isaaru, we've got to get out of here!"

Kyou gave him a scornful look.

"No...no..." Isaaru said. "Have no fear. That's Lightning Rock closing its armor around the temple and its sleeping fayth. But we have little time and much to do. Commander Elma, we are in your hands now. It is time for your engineers to work their wizardry."

"Yessir." She beckoned to her crew. "You three, finish up with the doorway and start wrapping up the statue. Do not touch it directly. The rest of you keep working on that wagon. Pacce, run and tell the rigging team we're ready for them, then join the sentries guarding the cloisters. We don't want any more surprise visitors."

The boy saluted and headed for the stairs, pushing through stonemasons and carpenters laying rails on the steps and assembling a heavy wheeled cart in the guardians' antechamber. Auron trailed after him.

"Hey!" Maroda said. "Where are you going?"

"To find another sword."

Auron and Pacce threaded their way back through the Cloister of Trials, which was both more and less of an obstacle course than usual. Decorative pillars had been removed, doorways cleared and widened, and piles of chipped stone and masonry lay scattered in careless. Tackle and rails stood ready to receive their delicate cargo.

"Sir Auron? Can you... do you sense Sin coming?"

"Sometimes."

"What about now?"

"No."

Pacce sighed. "I wish it would just get here and be done."

"Concentrate on the task at hand. Thinking about a foe you can't see won't help."

Delivering Elma's orders to the rigging team, they continued out to the stairway leading down to Djose's Great Hall. Here the light was stronger, cast by pillars of electricity dancing like fountains over crystalline plinths. To Auron's eyes, however, they seemed dimmer. The remaining clergy, scurrying about like rock-squirrels, halted and looked up anxiously when they emerged.

"The fayth confirms it," Auron said, voice booming out. "Sin is coming. Lord Isaaru and Father Kyou are securing the statue against attack. You have fifteen minutes to evacuate, by order of the high priest. Move!"

They scattered at once, snatching up bundles and rushing for the exit.

"Won't you get in trouble?" Pacce whispered. "I mean, Father Kyou never said—"

Auron looked at him. "Who's going to tell him?"

Pacce broke into a grin. "Not me!"
Auron nodded, resting a hand on his shoulder. "Keep watch. Tell Isaaru I'll be outside with Luzzu."

It was barely brighter outdoors. A heavy curtain of rain hung beyond the point of Mushroom Rock Ridge across the bay. Dark thunderheads roiled in great lumps overhead like the gravity-defying boulders of Djose Temple. Ignoring the sky, soldiers crisscrossed the yard on urgent tasks. Some guarded the line of monks, nuns, and temple orphans marched towards Djose Highroad. Others fenced the edge of the cliff, looking out at the gray sea.

Auron skirted the line of evacuees and headed towards a brigade of soldiers standing at attention. Unlined faces, not a whisker among them: evidently Yevon was still recruiting children. Their captain was haranguing them.

"...escorting them to Moonflow South. You are authorized to engage ochu, but don't waste men or time. Your first priority is to protect civilians. Once there, erect a temporary lodge and guard the town until you receive the all-clear from Djose Command." Luzzu raised his voice over a smattering of grumbles. "Your mission is a vital part of this operation. I know that you're itching to fight Sin. That's commendable. But I shall not be adding your names to Gatta's Wall. If I find any of you trying to sneak into the front lines, you'll be demoted to cadet and sent to Clasko's stables to muck chocobo chips. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sir!" A wave of crisp salutes answered him.

"Dismissed. Yevon watch over you." Standing with arms folded, Luzzu lowered his voice as Auron approached. "Everything in order?"

"Yes." Auron ignored the eager glances in his direction. "Everyone's evacuated except the high priest. He and Isaaru are securing the Chamber of the Fayth."

"Filling the whole temple with rocks, or what? I hope the commander returns some of my engineers to operate the Lightning Shield." Luzzu arched an eyebrow. "So what happened to you?"

Auron glanced down at the blood dripping from his sleeve. Blood was preferable to pyreflies, but it still felt like a cheap counterfeit.

"Ah." Luzzu grinned wryly. "Something else the heretic Captain Luzzu isn't supposed to notice. So. Is there anything you need?"

"A sword."

"Good grief. I hope you'll fill me in after this is over." He nodded towards a small outbuilding next to the temple. "See the quartermaster in there. We're using the inn for stores."

"Thanks."

"And... Sir Auron?"

He slowed his step.

"Sorry about your glasses."

Auron shrugged. "At least now everyone will stop mistaking me for Al Bhed."
"Ha. If you've got time afterwards, drop by the command lodge. I want to show you the bouquet I've picked out for an old friend. It's just her color."

Chapter End Notes

NPC Trivia: Kyou was a repentent Crusader you bump into after Operation Mi'ihen, who decides to help at Djose (he's the guy who won't let you back into the temple for most of the game after Yuna's declared a traitor).

Chapter Renumbering: This is Ch. 10 in the remaster.
Her Favorite Color Is Death

Chapter Summary

*The Story So Far: Summoner Isaaru, Auron and Maester Lucil are racing to save the temple fayth from Sin's destruction. In support of that mission, the Crusaders of Djose must once again take a stand against their old foe.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*I want to show you the bouquet I've picked out for an old friend. It's just her color.*

Luzzu's jest was salt for an old wound. Auron's time with Lulu had been brief, too occupied by their pilgrimage to permit much idle conversation, in which neither saw much point. Whereas her friends from Besaid had shared years of her life he had never known. Still, he had seen her in battle enough to know that Luzzu was right: lightning was her favorite color.

Lightning was fine, but Auron could do without the rain. The slow drip from his white forelock was growing maddening. How long must this charade continue?

It had taken the work-crews half a day to extricate the statue from the temple cloisters. Auron had kept Luzzu busy, suffering himself to be led in a meticulous inspection of Djose's defenses. The day had been a blur of names, introductions, handshakes, until the unexpected arrival of a maester had put his tour on hold.

Lucil must have emptied every storehouse in Luca, bringing her troops an entire cartload of armor, swords and medical provisions as "gifts of Yevon." Their hurried distribution threw the ordered frenzy of battle preparations into chaos. During the confusion, Elma's team trundled the covered statue into the back of the wagon without anyone noticing. It was neatly done, Auron had to admit. Now if only the engineers did not forget their oaths of silence.

At the moment, Auron wished *maesters* were bound by vows of silence. Isaaru had set aside the title but not its platitudes, and could not seem to pass any concentration of Spirans without making a speech. Again Auron wondered how the man dared to invoke the name of Yevon, knowing what he knew. But at least he had been brief, and the troops seemed happy enough with the blessing. Unfortunately, the general's presence demanded more tedious pleasantries before they could be on their way.

"I can't thank you enough, Your Grace," Luzzu was saying. "Your presence is a huge boost to the troops' morale. I wish you were staying longer."

"As do I, Captain. It galls me that the Crusaders may face Sin when I can no longer lead the charge." Maester Lucil's calloused fingers tightened around the pommel of a cane whose grip was wrapped like a sword-hilt. "But you have enough duties without having to babysit senior officers. Yet I am gratified to know my troops are in excellent hands."

Luzzu bowed his head. "Ma'am."
"He looks kinda relieved," Pacce whispered to Maroda, slouched against the side of the wagon. "Guess he's not on probation anymore, huh?"

"Nah, he's just glad to have Lucil out of his hair." Maroda ruffled Pacce's scalp, already a mass of spiky tufts from the humidity.

Isaaru nudged them. "Hush."

Commander Elma stepped forward to help Lucil onto the driver's box, maneuvering around the maester's robes with practiced efficiency. Just then, a trumpet blared, echoing off the natural amphitheater behind the temple. The assembly scattered like startled fish, soldiers rushing to their posts. Cries of Sin! Siiiiiiiiin! broke out along the sea walls.

Lucil pushed herself up on Elma's shoulder, staring out to sea with narrowed eyes. "Not good. Captain Luzzu—"

"We'll hold Sin off as long as we can, General," he said. "Get the fayth to safety. Djose will put up a good fight."

Lucil's face froze for a beat. "Lord Mi'ihen guard you and yours, Captain," she said, matching his salute. "Isaaru! Guardians! Kyou! Get in. Move!"

Maroda seized Isaaru's belt and propelled him up the loading ramp. Pacce scrambled up behind. Father Kyou stayed rooted to the spot. "I will not abandon my temple to—"

"Fine," Auron said, slamming the tailgate shut and heaving himself over it. The planks of the loading ramp clattered to the ground as the wagon trundled forward.

"Tend the wounded, Kyou," Isaaru called, gazing impotently at the figures of priest and soldiers receding jerkily behind them. His guardians took their seats in cramped quarters as the wheels clattered over the bridge.

"It grieves me to be abandoning them like this," Isaaru said.

"We feel the same, sir," Elma said over her shoulder, perched on the driver's bench next to Lucil. "But this is what they signed on for. Don't worry! Luzzu can look after his men now that he doesn't have to look after us!"


"Aye." Maroda clambered over Auron's legs to peer out the back. "Defenders manning their stations along the sea walls. No sign of sinspawn."

"I don't see— wait, there," said Elma. "Sin's just off the point at Mushroom Rock Ridge. I can't tell where it's headed."

"All right." Lucil spoke in crisp tones pitched to cut through a battlefield's din. "I propose that we turn off at the crossroads to the Moonflow and observe the battle from there. The banks will provide some cover. Afterwards, we can take the fayth to Mi'ihen's Grotto or return it to the temple, depending on what happens."

"I defer to the maester's judgment," Isaaru said. He had made an art of sitting still, Auron observed. Such composure must be another part of summoner's training, feigning to ignore every jolt. The man's eyes were fixed on the cliffs dwindling into the distance behind them. In his mind, perhaps,
he was already sending the dead.

"The fayth?" Auron said.

Isaaru looked down, dropping a hand to the canvas wrapping the statue like a shroud. "He sleeps. I do not think I should disturb him, if we are attacked. But I still have Spathi, my aeon from Bevelle."

"Good call on the crossroads, ma'am," Elma said. "Sin's barely budged. If we'd tried to reach the grotto, we'd be heading straight towards it."

A pair of chocobo riders dropped behind, guiding their mounts off the road to let the wagon pass. The Highroad here was narrow and meandering, shielded from the sea by a stone parapet where it ran along the cliffs or earthen berms when it veered inland.

"What's Sin waiting for?" Maroda said. "Us?"

"Maybe it's visiting the gardens." Pacce gave a nervous chuckle.

Auron stiffened, cursing himself for a fool. Of course! Look for me in my garden, Auron. But here he was, trapped like a fayth under glass. "Can we commandeer chocobos to ride?" he said. "We're nothing but deadweight in here." There was another word he needed to strike from his vocabulary.

"Negative, sir," Elma said. "It would take too long to flag down my knights and send for extra mounts. Anyway, an escort might attract attention. With any luck—"

There was a shuddering boom that rattled the metal cage reinforcing the walls.

"What the—?" Pacce said.

"So much for Mi'ihen's Grotto," Elma said grimly. "Sin's blasted the beach and the bluffs behind it. First casualties, I'm afraid."

Lucil sighed. "Let us pray the barriers shielded them."

Fine drizzle, more mist than rain, obscured the contours of the land, but a thin line of fire showed the profile of Mushroom Rock Ridge. Flames marked the site of the Crusaders' camp where they had lodged the night before.

"Damn," Elma said. "I've lost Sin. Look sharp, people."

"She's burning her gardens," Pacce said, dazed.

"Pacce!" Isaaru said.

"Sorry. It. But why? The Crusaders say Sin always leaves the Memorial Gardens alone when it comes by. It hasn't attacked Djose since Operation Mi'ihen."

"Lightning Shield's coming up," Maroda said. "Sinspawn falling on the causeway."

"Thank you, Captain," said Lucil.

Looking back, they could no longer see the temple, camouflaged by its rocky shell. There was a flurry of movement along the parapets and bridges. Rain blurred the dark writhing shapes of attackers and defenders into a heaving mass.
Studding the bluffs below them, Djose Spheres had begun to glow, sending out quivering cords of lighting like the sparking fountains in the temple great hall. Now Djose's energies were channelled on a far greater scale, spanning the whole bay with a net of woven light. As the shield strengthened, all the veins of electricity in the crags around the temple winked out. A massive bolt began to ricochet crazily from Mushroom Ridge to Lightning Rock and all around the bay in a fading discharge, reflected by spheres embedded in the rocks above the high water mark. Thunder clashed in a bewildering tumult, reverberating off every crag and cove.

"Some bouquet," Auron said, drawing a quizzical look from Pacce.

They passed another pair of mounted knights whose raised lances were limned by a blue nimbus of sea-fire. One of them lowered his spear and pointed towards the water.

Maroda leaned out, straining for a better view. "It's working!" he said. "Sin's stopped dead in the center of the bay."

There was a distant groaning scream that made Auron wince.

"'Ware sinspawn!" Elma said. "Get ready! The wagon's armored, but they may punch through!"

The wagon rocked as something struck the side. One of the chocobos squawked and kicked. Fortunately, these were combat-trained birds, inured by constant exposure to fiends along the Highroad. The wagon reeled as the chocobos put on a burst of speed. Auron grabbed Maroda's harness to keep him from flying out the back.

"The shield's dropping!" Pacce said. "It's losing power!"

"Yevon, no," Isaaru said, voice swelling with sudden dread. "The fayth... its energies charge the very rocks around the temple with lightning's current, but now—"

More sinscales began to pound the roof. The wagon lurched again as a wheel rolled over one. On the road behind them, blue-black flickering wings were unfurling in a fast-growing crop. Pacce flung up an arm and yelped, stung by a spine burst.

"Get down!" Auron said.

"General, we've got to get out and fight!" Maroda said.

"Nearly there, Captain. We'll take shelter at the turnoff. Let's get the fayth out of Sin's line of sight."

One of the left-hand chocobos screamed and stumbled, causing the wagon to list alarmingly towards the ocean as the right-hand pair kept running at a full clip. Lucil reined them back, checking the dangerous tilt.

"I'm on it!" Elma jumped down with a yell and pelted forward, slashing at the fiend attacking the bird's legs. A choco-kick punted it over the edge of the road. Then she hopped onto the frightened chocobo, soothing it with her free hand. "C'mon baby... yeah, yeah, I know. He's okay. Let's go!"

"Green flares going up," Maroda said.

"Fallback signal," Lucil said, icy calm. "Good."

Then many things happened at once. An armored snout crashed through the roof, raining splintered wood over the passengers. To his credit, Isaaru's first instinct was to fling himself across the statue.
Auron lunged onto one knee to meet the foe, but there was no room to draw his sword. Maroda, more agile and less encumbered, raised his spear and braced it like a pike, fending off the creature.

Pacce gave a horrified shout. "The temple!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Auron saw Sin's white flash, the rolling shockwave at the fringes of sight, stone bridges shattering into shrapnel, a soundless explosion as all the spires of Lightning Rock came crashing down inexorably over the temple. Pillars of dust billowed up into the sky, enveloping the Crusaders engaged in the desperate melee behind the sea wall.

And Lucil screamed. Yuna had made just such a sound on the peak of Mt. Gagazet, with Tidus' body at her feet and his head clutched in Seymour's claws.

The wagon stuck fast, tipped to the right and smacked the high bank beside the road with a crunch.

"Out," Auron ordered.

Maroda struggled to hold off the fiend burrowing through the ceiling until Isaaru was clear. Pacce tumbled out the back, drawing his sword and whirling it in the figure-eight he had seen Auron use back in Kilika. That kept the sinscales at bay while Auron helped Isaaru clamber out. Maroda dove out the front, scrambling to reach Lucil, who had been thrown under the tongue of the wagon. Bloody feathers and shredded harnesses were all that was left of the lead chocobos. The surviving pair shrieked and struggled in their traces. There was no sign of Elma.

Shielded from sinspawn by Auron and Pacce, Isaaru staggered around to the front of the wreck. "General—"

"I'm unscathed," she said tonelessly, lying on her side where she had fallen. "Get to safety, Isaaru."

There were more sinscales on the road ahead, but they were being swept aside by a pair of Djose knights charging towards the wagon at full gallop.

"Pacce!" Maroda said. "Where are you going?"

Pacce had eased himself over the parapet, fumbling for a foothold. "Elma's... body is down there," he said, fighting tears. "I think I can reach her."

"Guard your summoner, boy," Lucil snapped.

"Run!" Auron was moving before he knew why, grabbing Isaaru and hurling him into the ditch beside the road. He had just time to identify that achingly familiar sound, the sizzling hiss of lightning's passage, an instant before air and wood and stone exploded in a searing flash with the sound of a million shields being riven into scrap metal. Every nerve shrieked pain.

No, said Auron's fading thought. Her favorite color is what follows the lightning. That settled, he yielded to black.

Chapter End Notes
Mi'ihen Mark II

Meta: Luzzu's role here is partly inspired by Captain Ericsson staging a similar diversion in "The Long Night" episode of Babylon 5. ("We'll put up a good fight").

In the 2019 remaster, this is chapter 11.
How Does Her Garden Grow?

Chapter Summary

The Story So Far: On pilgrimage with Isaaru, Auron once again comes face to face with Sin during a devastating attack at Djose-- the same place as Operation Mi'ihen thirteen years earlier. While unconscious, he meets "The Lady" inside Sin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sky was singing. No, not the Hymn of the Fayth. It was a simpler lullaby, rocking with the ocean's rhythm, a tune suited to a child's cradle on some lush tropical island where the afternoons were drowsy and sweet. Auron wondered what had put the image into his mind, monastery-raised as he was. A nun had sung over him once, laving his fevered brow while he lay on a hard pallet fighting sickness after spending the night on Lake Macalania for the sake of a dare.

The hand stroking his brow paused. "I don't think I'd like being a nun, Auron."

He opened his eyes or his mind— it was the same thing in Sin's in-between world, this web of dreams and memories halfway between Spira and the Farplane— to darkness and the glimmer of Lulu's shoulders. Her arms were bare, but she was clad this time in something approximating her formal black gown, a strange blend of minx and mourning attire. The belts of her skirt were more tightly-woven, showing no flash of skin. Her hair fell in a wild mass to the ground, mingling with the bed of vines and briars where he lay. The perfect line of her jaw made him want to compose a catechism, and he choked on his own laughter at the ridiculous sentiment. She laughed with him, lips curving in that rare unguarded smile he had witnessed only a handful of times.

"Thank you for coming, Auron."

Gradually Auron's eyesight acclimated to her present reality. There was no sky, only a blindness when the eye strayed upward. It had more of a quality of darkness than light, but that was only a matter of interpretation, like those riddle-glyphs that could be a cup or two faces in silhouette.

He recognized the profile of Mushroom Ridge in the bluffs behind her. He lay on a ghostly facsimile of Djose Beach, its battle-scarred humps and hillocks overrun by ivy, trailing creepers, pungent rosemary, spears of tropical plants with sword-shaped leaves, purple hibiscus and luminous moon-lilies, and the crystalline spikes of Macalania trees. Everywhere, in burgeoning profusion greater than all the rest, grew sprays of ghost-white roses fringed with salt.

Blanketing this landscape like a mirage was a field of wavering flames, dancing from red to blue and back again, burning without consuming Sin's unholy garden. A gentle rain was falling. Now and again a spiderweb of lightning rippled across the bluffs.

"No snow," Auron observed, watching Lulu's pleased smile broaden as he surveyed her handiwork.

"Silly." She leaned across him and snapped a twig from a Macalania sapling, tracing his cheek with its icy tip. He shivered at a memory: the mage used to apply her elemental magics in the most wicked ways. But the clink of the manacles binding her wrists snapped him back to the present. He
sat up with a scowl and closed his fingers around the metal cuffs, giving the short length of chain between them an experimental tug.

Lulu shook her head, face tranquil and remote. "It's easier now. The more I yield to him, the fewer the chains. I'll be free soon."

"Not that way," Auron said forcefully.

"Shhh." She raised her hands to his face, palms barely grazing his stubble. "Rest now. Walk with me in my garden, Auron. We'll fight soon enough."

They stood up together. Lulu plucked a cluster of roses and clasped them before herself in a demure feminine gesture that reminded him of Yuna.

Casting off the left side of his coat as he did going into battle, Auron fell into place beside her. "After you."

She glided off. "Watch your step."

Bones hidden by the dark vegetation crunched underfoot as they strolled side by side. Gray stones poked up through the green carpet at staggered intervals. Each marker was carved with a single name. Auron recognized some of them.

"You've been busy," he said. Lifting his line of sight, he saw that this beach was infinitely more vast than the one at Djose where a generation of Crusaders had died. The tangled carpet of plants spread out as far as darkness permitted the eye to roam. Sin's graveyard garden spanned the whole ocean.

"They're not all mine," Lulu said, white feet stepping daintily over a skull netted in wild strawberries. "Most are my predecessors' victims. I've been using my leisure to learn all their names. Spira tries so hard to forget the dead; someone ought to remember them all." Her hand brushed against his shoulder.

The bare touch made Auron flinch. The sleeping forces in her flesh were dangerously palpable now that Sin's power augmented them. Auron ignored the pleasant ache, as he often had in the last days of their pilgrimage.

"You never wasted time on regret," he reminded her. "You said it was 'pointless to think about, and sad.'"

"That was when I had something to live for." She shrugged. "Sin can't regret much, Auron. It's simple acknowledgement. Death is who I am. And I have a great deal of time on my hands, these days."

"Hmph."

Auron was content to let her lead him in an aimlessly meandering path. A few butterflies flickered past. She steered him around the red ones with a scolding glance, as if to say, Have you forgotten? Finally, Lulu stopped before a bare stone leaning against another that vines had nearly covered. She bent to place the bouquet of roses on the empty marker with care. Crackling like brittle slate, a pair of glyphs appeared and chewed into the stone's flesh beneath her hands. "Hardly a match for the bouquet he gave me," she said. "I shall have to try to capture its color. I forgave Luzzu long ago, you know."

Auron grimaced. "He said you sent Wakka away. Where is Wakka now?"
She looked up, mouth setting into a thin line. "I'd rather not tell you, Auron."

Her expression grew more peevish as he burst out with a dry, rolling laugh. "What?" she snapped.

"Nothing," he said, smirking under her baleful glare. "I missed you. Lulu, I want to talk to him."

"He doesn't want to talk to you." She chewed her lip, turning away from the tombstone. "I don't want to get him involved, Auron. And I don't think it's wise for you to seek him."

"Wisdom and strength won't solve this, Lulu. Otherwise you'd have succeeded, and Yuna would still be alive. We need something else. Something he knows better than I."

She looked up in astonishment, expression softening to tenderness. "You underestimate yourself, Auron. Besides, I loved Yuna more than my own life. That is, after all, the error all true guardians make—"

"Exactly."

Her chin lifted. "Ah." She went quiet, withdrawing into herself and considering. Auron waited. Finally, she gave a minute nod and began to walk again, expression now preoccupied.

For a while he savored the silence, the eldritch beauty of the garden of death and its sole occupant, the simple act of walking without direction. Her wild mane brushing against his arm brought back memories of moments beyond words when she had showed him a glimpse of the life he'd missed. But there were still questions he ought to ask, and the queasy feeling in his stomach told him this timeless dream would end soon.

"Lulu. Why is Yu Yevon destroying the temples?"

"That is not his doing." Her eyes flashed and her pace quickened. "He cares not what I do, so long as he endures. Although he likes it well that Spira has begun to worship Sin. If I am strong enough, he may be content to keep me a long time."

"No, I wiped out the temples. Not for myself, but for Yuna's sake and Kimahri's, and for Lord Braska and Sir Jecht and his son, and for you, too, Auron— for you most of all. Yevon banished and dishonored you in life, then made a hero of you in death. It did the same to Yuna. I mean to make Yevon atone for its crimes!"

"It's vengeance, Auron, and nothing else. When I am done, Yuna's Final Aeon will be the last, Sin will be eternal, and that cowardly religion will have crumbled under the weight of its own lies. You ought to help me, you know." She looked up at him, and for a moment a different note came into her voice: a ghost of a plea behind the cold pride. "Help me."

Auron turned towards her, searching her face that seemed now more like an image of graven bone. The world had been growing hazy as she spoke, obscured by a glowing mist like Farplane clouds. His time was almost up. Auron took her hands gently and raised them to his lips, thumbs resting on cold metal. "I will."

Her true smile reappeared. "I know you will. Please give Wakka my love—"

At her final word, the golden light grew unbearably bright. Heat washed over him as the dream-world burned away.

* I heard you, Lulu. I hope Yu Yevon didn't. *
Auron awoke on burning sand. As his eyes acclimated to the real world, he realized there was no fire, only blazing sun. He sat up, numb limbs still jangling from lightning's kiss.

The wastes of Bikanel were a jarring change from Lulu's midnight garden, but anything was better than Zanarkand, where he had feared Wakka might be. Twisting around to get his bearings, he spotted a glint of green between the dunes.

Auron rose and headed towards it. Cresting a dune, he gazed down in astonishment. The outline of the oasis' rocky pool was unchanged, but the spindly desert plants around it had been replaced by a garden more lush than the one he had just left, exuberantly alive and full of vibrant color. There were flowers, there were vines, there was even grass in the desert, winking with tiny blue blossoms. A grove of fruit trees scaled the dunes beyond. He saw oranges, figs, other fruits vaguely remembered from a mission to the islands west of Bevelle. Stumbling forward, he felt a pop and looked down to find he was trampling on squash.

"Hey!" That was not Wakka, but the youthful voice sounded familiar. "Watch where you're goin', mister!"

"Sorry," Auron said, looking around for the speaker. His legs were still not working properly. Before he could correct his balance, he toppled down the slope. Crashing through rows of melons, string beans and beets, he fetched up against one of the only remaining cactuses in the oasis. He wasn't sure how, but he thought petulantly that even that was part of Lulu's design. She had a discerning knack for detail.

A squeal had punctuated his fall. Auron found himself squinting up at a heart-shaped face and a pair of mismatched eyes, green and brown. Peering down at him under a mop of strawberry-blond hair, the child puckered her lower lip and tilted her head in a manner he recognized at once. "Hi!" she said brightly. "Where're you people comin' from?"

Auron was not the least surprised when an older boy sporting a flame-red crest yanked her back with a sharp, "Yunie!"

"Hey!" she said, pawing at him.

Seven and nine, Auron guessed, opting to lie quietly and let Lulu's design play itself out. He started to reconsider when the boy planted a sandaled foot on his throat.

"Get Pops," the boy said, glaring down at Auron.

"Vidina, stop it! It's not nice to step on people!"

At least the boy did not weigh very much. "We don't know who he is, Yunie. Go get Pops. He might be a Yevon."

"I think he's a nice man," the girl said obstinately. "Look, he wears red too." She tugged at Auron's sleeve. "What's your name, mister?"

His collar had saved him from choking, but he was hardly in a position to answer. Luckily, the voice he was waiting for cut short debate. "Yunie? Vidina? What are you two up to, eh? You better not be messin' with Mum's tomat—"
Auron could not see much from his current position, but he had a good idea of the man's expression.

"Oh."

_Eloquent as ever, Wakka._ Auron could almost hear Lulu's voice in his ear. Pinned under a child whose father might take any sudden moves amiss, he lay still and counted seconds. The explosion was not long in coming.

"Get the HELL away from him!" Spluttering, he bounded towards them. "Vidina! Take your sister back to the house, quick! You tell Mum to close that door and don't let anybody in except me, ya?"

Vidina caught his sister's hand, craning his head to watch as he started dragging her away. Auron coughed and massaged his neck, sitting up gingerly. Wakka was charging around the pool like an enraged dual-horn. The gun he carried was nearly large enough to fire blitzballs.

"Don't you move," Wakka said, planting his feet and hefting the barrel onto his shoulder. "Vidina, what you waitin' for? Get going, both of you. I mean _now._"

"Lulu says—" Auron began.

"I don't wanna hear it!" Wakka said, clenching his teeth to keep from shouting. His eyes darted after the children, watching them scamper away. He waited until the sound of their footsteps had dwindled, then took aim. "I don't know why you came here, but I'm not gonna let you screw up my family. Weren't Lu and Yuna enough? Rikku's gonna be mad at me, and I guess I'm sorry, but I'm gonna do what I shoulda done thirteen years ago."

Auron heard the click of a safety catch being released. On the whole, he reflected, it was best to heed the counsel of black mages.

Chapter End Notes

I am utterly stunned and grateful to CumulusCastle for this painting.
Update: If that gift weren't precious enough, Mintywolf has drawn this gorgeous illustration that looks like it comes from a graphic novel, then colored her original b&w lineart for the remaster. Here's the full-sized version.
"Walk With Me"

Chapter renumbering: this will change to chapter 12.
The Story So Far: A Sin attack at Djose separates Auron from Summoner Isaaru and transports him to Bikanel Island. There he finds Wakka, who blames him for the conclusion of Yuna's pilgrimage.

I have become his Yunalesca.

Auron no longer knew what it meant to face death, but he knew what it meant to face a friend's murderer. He had a perverse wish to yield Wakka the satisfaction of revenge.

An image of Kinoc's face swam before Wakka's. Were the pyreflies playing tricks again? No, Wakka had put on weight, but his traces of flab showed only the fruits of living well, not living off others like a tick on Yevon's ass.

Wakka's fingers tightened on the trigger, but Auron's words had found their mark. "All right," he said, sounding irked at himself. "Tell me what Lulu said."

"And then you'll kill me?"

"You got it!"

"Not much motivation, then." Auron took a deep breath, attentive to the simple act in case it was his last for a while. "She told me to give you her love."

"Ku du ramm!" Wakka's glower darkened even further at Auron's faint smirk. "You think this is funny, ya? Yeah, I'm Al Bhed now. They don't lie to their own people, they don't guilt you into being good with a pile of religious crap, and they care about protecting family more than anything in the world, Sir Auron." Auron was impressed by his ability to heap so much scorn onto a simple title. "So, you supposed to 'give me her love.' Now that's funny. Like you could ever give love to anybody." Wakka was all but bellowing now. "And you know what? If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't even be having this conversation!"

Auron ignored the absurd tautology. "Lulu would still have chosen this path. She followed Yuna."

"And so that's supposed to make it all right, eh? Lulu stuck in that thing forever, while I try to make the life she can't, raise a family, be a good daddy, be happy all the time she's out there somewhere bein' Sin?"

Better than going to Zanarkand, Auron wanted to say, but that wasn't true. Raising Tidus for Jecht's sake had been the only oath he had ever gotten right. The boy had died, but at least he had lived.

Releasing the trigger to wipe his eyes, Wakka went on in more subdued tones. "You saw little Yunie, ya? Sometimes she tells me what Lu's thinking, where she is right now making rain or snow or the flowers grow. I donno whether Yunie's making it all up— she's only seven— but she's got
the talent. She's gonna be a healer. But no way is she gonna be a summoner. And I'm not letting anybody mess her up with talk about aeons and guardians."

"So you've been protecting her with a lie, and now you're willing to kill to protect that lie?" Auron said. "Sounds familiar."

"Shut up." Wakka resettled the weapon on his shoulder and braced. "Man, you better not come back like Seymour."

_I can't promise that._ Could he? Pyreflies skittered in the back of his mind, insects gnawing at his will.

Rikku's voice rang out, banishing their insidious whine. "Wakka, no."

The weapon's muzzle dipped as Wakka looked up towards the top of the dune where Auron had just taken a tumble. "Rikku," he said, cupping the name with tenderness. "I... I know it's wrong. But he deserves it, just like Seymour. Maybe more. Seymour was crazy, but Sir Auron—"

"He doesn't mean to hurt anybody, any more than Lulu does."

"Yeah, but..." He screwed up his face. "I won't let him hurt Yunie. I won't let him hurt you."

"You're not a murderer, Wakka," she said quietly.

"Yeah, but..." He slumped. Slowly his bluster drained away, sinking through desperation to defeat. "Damn." The gun thudded to the ground, narrowly missing a row of cabbages.

Auron had forgotten just how quickly the big man could move. Before he could rise, Wakka reared back and landed a punch across his jaw that felt like it had Armor Break behind it. Auron went flying and struck the slope behind him. More vegetables paid the price. He found himself staring up a pair of long skinny legs and shut his eyes quickly before Wakka found another reason to hit him.

"Dope." Rikku stepped over Auron, strode down the slope and wrapped her arms around Wakka as far as they would reach. She drew him into a long, unselfconscious kiss that left him beet-red by the time Auron deemed it was safe to look. He saw that she had sprouted into an attractive young woman, with golden braids down past her shoulders (imitating Lulu, he guessed), lean curves, and a relaxed self-assurance in striking contrast to Wakka's fragile bravado. They wore yellow jumpsuits of an Al Bhed style that Auron had always found ridiculous, with cutouts and straps baring so much skin that it was a wonder their wearers wasted time putting them on. Rikku's was practically a bikini. It suited her, of course. Whereas Wakka bulged. Nonetheless...

"You look well," Auron said to both of them, and meant it. A third time he tried to pick himself up, stiff and wobbly-kneed. Being hit by both Wakka and Lulu on the same day was probably some kind of accomplishment.

"Oh for goodness' sake," Rikku said, coming forward to help him up. "Anybody else running around out there? We've already found whassername, the chocobo lady."

"I don't know," Auron said. One of the little girl's remarks suddenly clicked. "Elma. Is she alive?"

"I don't want Sir Auron in our house," said Wakka.

"And I don't want him bumbling around in the garden like a drunken shoopuf." Rikku kicked at the ungainly weapon lying among the cabbages. "C'mon, Wakka. We can handle it. He can't make us
do anything we don't want to, right? He's a big jerkfaced idiot who goes straight for trouble and doesn't have the sense to avoid a battle that's gonna get friends killed, but he's not gonna eat the kids."

He stooped to pick up the weapon and slung it over his shoulder. "Maybe... but if he says one word to Yuna about—"

"Then you hit him." She patted his arm and turned back to Auron. "So yeah. Elma's chewed up pretty bad, but I think she'll make it. Looks like she went through an ore shredder. What hit you guys, anyway?"

"Lulu."

"Oh. Right." Rikku made a face. "Let's get you back to the house. I've got some Al Bhed potions left, though I just used a ton of 'em."

"Thanks."

She elbowed Wakka. "You gonna be okay if I send the kids back out to finish collecting ingredients? At this rate we're gonna need 'em sooner rather than later."

"I guess. 'Specially if he's in the house."

Rikku winked at Auron, reached for Wakka's hand and set off towards the orchard. Lagging behind, Auron watched the easy way they moved together, clasped hands swinging as Rikku trotted beside her trudging husband. Despite Wakka's fuming, Auron saw in them an echo of Anna and Braska, and perhaps of Yuna and Tidus had she not answered to a greater calling. No wonder Lulu had been so reluctant to bring him here. She was still a guardian.

"Hey," Rikku said. "Lulu's not still hanging around here, is she?"

"I doubt it."

"Phew. We still get the rains, but she never comes anywhere near us. At least, not since—"

"She's always been careful," Wakka mumbled.

They followed a path up a huge dune covered with a thin layer of chalky soil, blue-eyed grass and a stand of young trees about twice Auron's height. Rikku picked a few mangoes as they passed. Beyond the small orchard, they came to a circular courtyard paved in sandstone, freshly swept. Auron guessed from pipes rising out of the pavement that it covered a large cistern. The lush vegetation of the oasis petered out here, but the flowering grass overflowed the trees and spilled out into the sand.

Behind the courtyard was an even larger dune, straddling the transition from oasis to desert. Its steep face was pierced by a thick sandstone arch, supporting a short tunnel with a door at the back. Recessed windows framed by smaller stone arches interrupted the dune's sides at regular intervals. A crop of antennas, pipes and vents marked the buried structure as Al Bhed, but the soft green carpet of grass anchoring the roof gave the house a more welcoming feel than most Al Bhed architecture.

"Well, here we are!" said Rikku. "Pretty neat, huh? We started a fad with it."

"Hm." Auron had forgotten what a human home looked like. The last one, and in fact the only one where he had spent any length of time, was Jecht's houseboat. As if stumbling across one of Jecht's
spheres, Auron remembered with a jolt the pride he had felt when passing such places on Braska's pilgrimage, be it Luca's townhouses or the mangrove huts of Kilika, Macalania snow-cabins or the lavish mansions of Bevelle. Homes like these had been what Braska and he intended to die for.

Wakka spoke up as their footsteps drummed across the hollow pavement. "So, Auron. Where you been, anyway?"

"Gagazet."

"For thirteen years?" Rikku said. "Doing what?"

"Guarding the Ronso."

"Oh, cool."

"What Ronso?" Wakka said belligerently. "Didn't Seymour wipe 'em out?"

"The warriors fell," Auron said. "The children and some of the elders survived."

Looking after the survivors of Seymour's genocide had been the least Auron could do to honor Kimahri, after he had spent ten years fulfilling one of Auron's broken promises. Gagazet's lonely heights had given Auron a place to rest and to fight, far away from the madness of autographs and sphercams, fiend hunting and mall security, and all the other odd jobs he had used to pay for Tidus' expenses until the boy grew up. Training Ronso cubs had been engrossing, enjoyable despite the broken bones. It had helped keep him sane.

The door opened onto a large oval living room with sofas and squishy chairs at one end and a kitchenette/dining area in the other. In the middle of the floor was a hot tub covered by a locked grating. Tendrils of steam curled up through the grill to humidify the dry air. An archway opposite the front door revealed a curved hallway wrapping around the main room, leading to other rooms cut like spokes into adjacent dunes.

Vidina and Yuna crowded forward and wrapped around their parents' legs, bombarding them with questions. Yuna, at least, seemed delighted the "red man" was staying for now. They bounced from one piece of furniture to the next, tagging after their parents until Rikku shooed them out to collect herbs. A five-year-old boy and a four-year-old girl, Etta and Mbelu, completed Wakka and Rikku's growing family. These two seemed less interested in their visitor than in building a block city in the deep window over the sofa.

Rikku pressed Auron to take a potion and disappeared into the back of the house while Wakka bustled around the kitchen, keeping an eye on their guest while preparing lunch. Auron sank into a chair that resembled a shaggy brown bag. He nodded when Rikku popped her head out of the hallway to say that Elma was still unconscious, and that "you boys" were to keep out while she finished changing the woman's bandages. By the time the light meal was served, the legendary guardian was snoring.
Meta: In an optional cutscene in FFX, Rikku explains to Tidus that Spirans usually get married young, and she's already made plans.

Chapter renumbering: This is chapter 13 in the Remaster.
The children were a blessing and balm to the spirit, apart perhaps from Etta, who had roused Auron by targeting his belt as a landing pad. They swirled around the dining table, under no particular orders to stick to their own seats or plates as long as no food wound up on the floor or in each other's hair. (This latter rule required occasional reinforcement.) The younger children's chatter was largely in Al Bhed, apparently reflecting a switch in the household's primary language. To Wakka's annoyance, Yuna latched onto Auron with a child's knack for sensing parental disapproval. Her father monitored every word with a glower while Auron answered endless questions about Ronso cubs and snow.

After the meal, Auron atoned for trespass by washing dishes. Rikku set to work on a new batch of potions. Fleeing the stench of Al Bhed alchemy and their unwelcome guest, Wakka took the children out to the oasis for a swim. As soon as they were gone, Rikku cornered Auron in the kitchen and proceeded to grill him. For once, he was willing to speak frankly. There were few secrets that Rikku did not already know. His report on the Djose operation left her shaking her head.

"Agh! Stupid Crusaders. Didn't they learn anything last time?"

"They learned to duck."

"Fat lot of good that does when Lulu kicks into overdrive. Walls block some energy attacks, but when she goes Ultima on your ass, you'd better be ten miles away. That Lightning Shield sounds buff, though. I'll have to smuggle somebody over there for a look. Of course, for all we know, she just soaked it up and shot it back at you."

Auron shrugged and moved to the flatware. "That's possible."

"Rrrgh! Getting usable intel out of you is like getting intelligence from my brother." She looked up from the pot she was stirring. "So anyway. My real question is, what brought you here? And if you say 'Lulu,' this spoon is going right up your nose."

Auron applied himself to the scouring-rag.

"Hmph," she mimicked. "Okay, Mr. Legendary Pants, I want an answer. Lulu's steered clear of Bikanel for years. In fact, we think she's been trying to shield us; she targets Yevon ships every time they come this way. So, did you put her up to this? Why?"

"Yes. You know why, Rikku," Auron said. "I need your help. I need Wakka's advice. He knows
"Wakka won't help," Rikku said. "Unless you've got a plan to free her. But even then, he wouldn't trust you."

"Do you?"

"Of course not!" She rapped the back of his head with the spoon. "You'll do whatever it takes. Whatever you think is necessary. We've got family to think about. And Wakka, he..." she sighed. "Look. It's not fair to leave Lulu like this. But killing her isn't the answer. After the kids are grown, maybe Wakka and I can find a way to get her out. But we're not gonna help you kill Lulu just so you can put someone else in her place. Who's it gonna be this time, Auron? That Elma lady...is that why you're travelling with her?"

"No. Her abduction by Sin was an accident, I think. But Lulu needs our help now. It's not just Djose that's been hit. Lulu's been targeting all the temples. Soon, summoners will no longer have any aeons left to fight her."

"Well, good!" Rikku said. "Wish she'd listened to me sooner. I don't see the problem, Auron."

"Dozens died at Djose, Rikku," he said. "Hundreds more on the islands. She obliterated Besaid. This isn't what Lulu wants."

"Ugh. I'm sorry, Auron, but that's what Sin does. You know what your problem is? You know Yevon's a sham, but you still think you've got some righteous mandate to fix everything. You can't stop the weather, you can't stop people being idiots, and you can't stop Sin. They're just—" Rikku paused. "Ah, hell. She's targeting the fayth?"

"Yes."

"Vilg." She dropped a lid over the pot. "Watch this. I need to make a call. If it starts to boil over, turn the heat down to sixty. If it does boil over, run."

Hurrying to the other end of the room, Rikku reached for a sphere sitting on a table. There was a flurry of curses. After rummaging around for a base to set it on, she tapped the sphere and plopped down on a chair in front of it. She switched to Al Bhed for the call, but Auron could follow most of it.


Sprawling sideways across the armrests, Rikku kicked her feet and waited.

Finally, Cid's voice bellowed through the static. "Rikku! Where in Spira have you been? We've been trying to raise you for hours!"

"Sorry, Pops. I left the commsphere off the charger. We're fine, okay? Sin didn't touch us. But listen, Pops, I've got news. Sin's attacking all the temples of Yevon. All the fayth. It may be headed for Baaj next."

"What? Are you certain? Who told you this?"

She hesitated. "Sir Auron, Pops. He just washed up."

"You're kidding! Why didn't that blockheaded husband of yours—"
"Pops. You have to evacuate, NOW. I don't know how much time you've got."

"Roger that." There was a pause. "You all stay put, kiddo. No sense in coming down here 'til Sin's blown past us. Hug your babies for me. But once this is over, you bring Auron to me. You hear? He and I have unfinished business, and it's long past time for him to pay up!"

"Uh," she said, glancing towards the kitchen. "Okay, Pops. Now scram, please?"

"You bet. Home out."

Rikku trotted back just as the lid began to rattle ominously. She seized the pot and transferred it to a cool burner. "Sorry," she said. "You wanna take your chance with the sand worms, you know where the door is."

A chime sounded.

"It's all right. I should apologize." Auron toweled off the last plate and put it away. "Your people have time to evacuate. It will take Sin several hours to reach Baaj."

"Well, yeah, but you've been here for hours." She sighed. "No, you're right. They'll be fine. Pop's got a good evacuation plan. I just hope she doesn't wreck everything. This Home's even better than the last one." Setting the pot on a centrifuge, she moved to the sink to wash her hands. "There. That alarm means Elma's awake. Wanna check on her?"

Rikku led Auron into the back of the house, opening a door at the end of the hallway. "Whoa-whoa, lady, don't you be gettin' up yet. You'll pop a seam." She moved to the side of the cot which filled most of the room. A crib—decked out with blankets and a mobile of ribbons as if awaiting another occupant, Auron noticed—had been shoved into the hallway. "Hiya. Name's Rikku."

Elma, struggling to sit up, started when Rikku slipped an arm behind her. "Thanks." Her face was covered with green ointment, and her arms and upper body were wrapped in bandages that disappeared under the blankets, but she seemed to have all her limbs. "Don't...remember you, soldier. Good work."

"We're not in Djose," Auron said, standing in the doorway.

"S-sir?" She turned her head and winced. "Status report, please?"

"We were carried to another place by Sin. Rikku is Al Bhed. Guardian to Lady Yuna."

"Ah... oh?" Elma peered at the woman's eyes. "Thought that name sounded familiar."

"Ex guardian," Rikku said. "Nevermind. Look, Auron's filled me in. You might pass out before you dig the whole story out of him, so basically: a pack of sinspawn pulled you off the wagon and nearly tore you in half, Sin dropped a cliff on Djose Temple, we don't know how many Crusaders were squashed, and Sin yanked you halfway across Spira. I found you here the next day bleeding on our front porch. Here being Bikanel Island. "Rearranging the pillows one-handed as she spoke, Rikku eased Elma to a sitting position. "Did you get all that?"

"I think so." The woman sat staring at the blankets, absorbing the news. "We failed, then. Failed them." She tried to raise her arms in Yevon's prayer, but got only halfway there before she shuddered and grabbed the sides of the bed. "Yevon guide the fallen," she said through gritted teeth.

"I'm sorry," Rikku said with some feeling, reaching for a bottle on the nightstand. "Here, drink this.
It'll settle your stomach. I had to use a lot o' potions on you. Ours work faster and pack a lot more punch, but they're rough on the system after the buzz wears off. You're gonna feel like crap for a while."

"Thanks." Sipping it slowly, she sounded less shaky when she spoke again. "What about Isaaru?" Her voice rose and cracked. "Lucil?"

"Unknown," Auron said. "The wagon was hit by lightning. Isaaru was farther away than I. Lucil was closer."

"No." Elma's eyes squeezed shut, damming tears. Rikku took the bottle slipping from her hand. "How far is it back to Djose?"

"Far. We're several days west of Moonflow North by ship. I'm sorry."

"Huh?" Elma's jaunty smile looked ghastly under the green salve. "Oh, don't worry, sir. The general's alive. I'm sure of it! I'm just worried about my troops."

"You still suck at cheering people up," Rikku muttered to Auron.

The front door banged open. The sounds of shrieking, laughing children carried down the hallway. Elma gave Auron a bewildered blink.

"That was quick," Rikku said. "Excuse me. Gotta corral some cactuars. Back in a minute. Move, ya big meanie." She squeezed past Auron and hurried down the hallway. "Hey, hey, no running—Vidina! Mbela! You're soaking wet! Everybody up! Get towels and dry off before you sit on the furniture! And put some clothes on. We've got guests!" The sounds of chaos faded several decibels as she took charge.

Moments later, Wakka stormed down the hall, halting behind Auron outside the door. His hair was dripping, and he was clothed only in a towel and sandals. Breathing hard, he drew himself up for another explosion, then spotted Elma sitting up against the pillows. He ducked his head. "Uh. Hi. Sorry, ma'am. Good to see you're in one piece." Then he turned on Auron, growling, "Didn't think to mention you got a new summoner, eh?"

Chapter End Notes
Chapter renumbering: This is now chapter 14.
Auron stepped out into the late afternoon sun, ears ringing from Wakka's marching orders. Isaaru and Maroda were waiting under the shade of the fruit trees, the one meditating, the other pacing.

Maroda tensed at the scrape of the door. "Oh. It's you." He kept both hands on his spear as Auron trudged towards them. "What's going on?"

"Sir Auron," said Isaaru. "I had faith we would meet again. What is this place? We seem to have flustered the natives."

"Bikanel Island," Auron said. "Former Home of the Al Bhed."

"Ah! That would explain their alarm. Sir Auron, have you seen Pacce or the rest of our party?"

"Elma's inside. No sign of the others."

"Elma!" Maroda said. "I thought we'd lost her. That's something, at least."

Isaaru exchanged an apprehensive look with his brother. "May we come inside? The man we met at the oasis seemed uneasy, but he invited us to follow. He told us to wait while he spoke to his wife of our arrival."

"And you don't look like the wife," Maroda said. "Say, am I crazy, or wasn't that Sir Wakka? He shooed off the kids and bolted before we had a chance to talk."

"Correct," Auron said. "Isaaru, listen. Wakka has renounced Yevon. His wife is Yuna's cousin Rikku, an Al Bhed. They blame Yuna's death on Yevon."

"That is unfortunate," Isaaru said. "I had hoped we might solicit the aid of the Al Bhed. Maester Baralai has been working towards an alliance with them for months. Our need is now imperative. Without aeons, we must look to other weapons."

"First things first," Maroda said. "Are they going to let us in? I want to start searching for Pacce, but we need information and supplies before we tackle this desert."

"You may enter," Auron said, "as long as you promise not to mention summoners, guardians, or anything to do with the pilgrimage in front of the children. After losing Lulu and Yuna, Wakka is determined not to let his children follow in their footsteps."

"Lulu?" said Maroda. "Isn't that the gal—"
"Another of Yuna's guardians," Auron said. "It would be best not to mention her, either."

"So, basically, we should take a vow of silence," Maroda said.

"Nay, we need merely follow Sir Auron's lead," Isaaru said, eyes twinkling. "Say little and offer more questions than answers. Maroda, please leave your weapon outside. A show of good faith may ease their fears."

As they filed into the living room, there was a burst of giggling from several pieces of furniture. Only one person was visible: Etta, standing stiffly in the hallway with his back to the door. His arms were spread, bent at the elbow with one hand up, one down. He spun around as they entered.

"Muug uid! E's y Cactuar!"

Two beanbag chairs and a pile of pillows tittered. Isaaru stepped forward, smiling. "Oh? Well, I'm very pleased to meet—"

"Zap-zap-zap-zap-zap!" Etta crowed, leaning towards them and pointing with outstretched fingers. "Oui suja, oui muca!"

"You move, you lose!" echoed the mound of pillows.

Isaaru was not caught off-balance for long. He clutched his chest and staggered sideways, gasping, "My brother, help! The needles, they burn!"

"What the—?" Maroda grabbed his elbow to keep him from crashing into a rack of goggles and sand-jackets hanging by the front door.

Shrieks of laughter erupted. The other children popped out from their hiding places. Stepping into the doorway behind Etta, Rikku set her hands on his shoulders. "Great job, Etta! Welcome, guests! It's Isaaru, right? Sorry for the sticky reception."

Wakka appeared behind her, frowning. He had exchanged his towel for baggy blue trousers. Old battle scars on his bare chest were a silent warning as he folded his arms.

"Lady Rikku. Sir Wakka." Isaaru bowed deeply, offering Yevon's sign. "It is an honor to meet you. My brother Maroda and I are grateful for your hospitality. We will not speak of sad memories, but please tell your people that the maesters offer formal apology. Yevon wishes to atone for the injuries it has done your people in the past."

"Oh, yeah?" Wakka said. "Kinda late to be sayin' that now, eh?"

"Weeeeell, actually, they've said it a few times lately," Rikku said. "That Baralai guy's been kissing up to Pops for months. I think he wants something." She shook her head. "Wakka and I aren't really into politics, but thanks for the thought."

"He's a Yevon?" Vidina demanded, crawling out from under the pillows.

"Yeah, but don't worry," Wakka said. "He's not the really bad kind. Otherwise I woulda zapped his butt when he first showed up."

"Zap-zap-zap-zap!" said Mbela, launching herself at Etta as he hopped up on the sofa. A tickle war erupted. Squeals, thumps, and more giggles provided a surreal distraction for those lately come from the devastation of Djose.

"Are they Auron's friends?" Yuna asked, edging away from the free-for-all as Vidina flung himself
onto the other two with a shout.

"Yes," Auron said.

"Hm." Wakka massaged the back of his neck. "Well, uh, have a seat. Dining room's safer until the cactuars run out o' juice. I'll get some drinks, ya? You gotta be dying in those robes."

"Thank you," Isaaru said.

Maroda cleared his throat. "Excuse me, but have you some way to search the area? We had two more people with us before we got dragged here, and we haven't seen either of them. One's our baby brother."

"Aw, shoot." Wakka's face fell. "Rikku, can we break out the hover?"

"Hang on!" Rikku bounced towards the commsphere, rescuing it from flailing limbs. "We can't scan the whole desert, but I can check the spherecams at all the emergency shelters. This won't take long. In the meantime, shouldn't you be checking on Chocobo Lady? She's at the end of the hallway, recuperating. I bet she's itching to say hello."

"Recuperating?" Isaaru said.

"Ya, you new maesters should take better care of your Crusaders," Wakka said. He waved towards the hall. "Through there. Last door on the right by the baby crib."

Etta and Mbela came tumbling off the sofa to try their luck on their sister, since Vidina had climbed into the windowsill and was keeping them at bay with his feet. "Safe zone!" Yuna squeaked, diving under Auron's coat. "No noogies!"

"Awww," Etta and Mbela said in unison, staring up at the imposing figure.

Auron looked down and dropped a hand to the girl's hair, recalling another tousled blond head. "I'll wait here," he told Isaaru.

"You'll have to introduce us later," Isaaru said with a smile.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor with the sphere between her knees, Rikku fussed over dead channels while the tickle-war rolled around her. About the time the "cactuars" were reduced to limp, giggling heaps on the floor, emitting an occasional "ow" or "meanie," Isaaru and Maroda returned with Elma. Wrapped in a bathrobe, the woman was moving tentatively but under her own power.

"Hey," Wakka said, setting a tray of iced drinks on the dining table. "Guess magic's still better for some things, eh? You look pretty good."

"Her face is green," Etta said, peering at her upside-down from the floor. "Is she a cactuar?"

Elma laughed. "Green is good, sir?" she said to Wakka. "I suppose it's better than being chopped steak. I should thank Lady Rikku for putting all my parts back in the right order."

"Ya, she's good at fixin' things," Wakka said. "Soon as she's finished checkin' spherecams, she can help you out of those bandages and show you how to work the shower."

"Great!" She looked at Auron, who was holding Yuna in his arms above tickle-range of her siblings. The girl had wrapped herself around his neck and seemed to be falling asleep, face
mashed against his collar. "Looks like you've found a friend, sir."

"Yuna."

"Yuna?" Isaaru said, turning to peer at her. Wakka scowled.

Rikku sat back with a sigh, switching off the sphere and setting it back on the charger. "Sorry. I got nothin'. Are you sure the rest of your gang came here?"

"When it comes to Sin, we cannot be certain of anything," Isaaru said.

"Telling me." Brow knotted, she gestured towards the dining room table. "Go on, folks, drink up. It's the desert, you know."

"Is there a problem?" Auron said.

"Oh," Rikku said with forced cheer. "We've lost the signal from Home."

"What's that mean?" Maroda said.

"It means Sin's between us and them, or they've lost power, or..." She shrugged. "All we can do now is wait."

Wakka took Maroda out in the family hover to search for Pacce and Lucil. They returned after sunset, tired and discouraged, just as Rikku was setting out a meal for twice the family's usual size. Wakka waved off Maroda's apologies for a fruitless afternoon, saying that family came first, and brothers were brothers.

The children were fretful over dinner, sensing their parents' unease. Etta and Mbela, the youngest, took turns sticking their fingers in the platters being passed around. Vidina received a dressing-down from Wakka after talking back to his mother. Yuna, reduced to monosyllables, refused to eat more than a few bites. Elma finally came to the rescue with tall tales that set the children laughing. Her dramatic recital of Clasko the Hapless' quest for the Golden Chocobo helped end the evening on a merry note, although Wakka and Rikku would probably tire of the addition of "kweh" to the children's vocabulary before Mbela did.

After dishes and evening chores, the children were tucked in with bedtime stories featuring their new friend, the chocobo. Commander Elma also turned in early, before, as she put it, she got to "gnawing her own leg worrying about what's around the next bend or the last." Isaaru and Maroda stayed up, trading news with their hosts around the dinner table. Auron listened from the sofa. Turned towards the window, he kept the flickers of lightning on the horizon to himself.

Wakka, despite his exasperation with Yevon, was hungry for news of old haunts. When talk turned from Luca to the southern islands, Isaaru did his best to break the story of Besaid's destruction gently.

Wakka took refuge in disbelief. "No way. Must've been Kilika."

"We were there, man," Maroda said. "I'm sorry."

"We did not witness the attack," Isaaru said. "But we saw the signs. Sin must have struck swiftly:
"too swiftly for fear or suffering. I sent the dead when we arrived a few days later."

"Damn." Wakka sagged, cupping his face in his hands. "I can't believe it. Besaid Village. Our home. That's where our pilgrimage started."

"Exactly," Auron said.

"You shut up," Wakka said through his fingers.

Rikku scooted her chair behind Wakka's to rub his shoulders.

"We found Sir Auron on the dock," Maroda said. "He was waiting for us. I still want to know how he got there."

"A merchant dropped me off," Auron said. "Gippal."

"You're kidding!" Rikku said. "What was he doing there?"

"Returning a favor."

"Must've been some favor." Wakka said.


"That's him," Wakka said, raising his head. "He'll sell to anybody, even the Guado. You know him?"

"Sure. My Crusader lodge buys supplies from him a couple times a year. He's got a trading post on the north side of the Calm Lands." Maroda gave a lopsided grin. "Don't tell Commander Elma. She doesn't approve of grenade launchers."

"Gippal's a pain in the ass," Rikku said, "and his prices are steep, but he'll never sell you anything shoddy. He does custom work, too. Wakka's gun was a special order, made for bozos who can't operate anything more complicated than a blitzball."

"Hey, hey!"

"We should definitely get in touch with him, then," Isaaru said. "Without my aeons, I cannot hope to defeat Sin. But with powerful machina, perhaps—"

"Whoa." Wakka jabbed a thumb against the tabletop. "The only thing Yevon's teachings were ever good for is to keep people from messing with things too big to handle. Machina in Yevon's hands are a bad idea. All you'll do is stir up Sin worse than you done already, until some Seymour comes along and uses 'em to hurt people."

"Sir Wakka, I share your concerns, truly," Isaaru said. "Lord Seymour duped me as well. He showed me how far maesters may fall in the pursuit of grand designs. Yet how can I stand idle, when other places will suffer the fate of Besaid?"

There was a faint sniffle from the hallway. Making frantic shushing motions, Rikku tapped Wakka on the shoulder and pointed.

"Huh?" He followed her gaze towards the unlit doorway and stiffened. "Uh-oh." Rising to his feet, Wakka crossed the room and knelt, spreading his arms. A small figure in pajamas darted out and burrowed against his chest, shaking with mute sobs.
"Aw, Yunie." He wrapped his arms around her. "Another bad dream, eh? Sssh, it's okay. I've got ya, honey. You're safe. Sin's not gonna bother us here, and Pop-pops' machina keep the fiends away, ya?"

"But the Lady's upset!" she cried. Maroda and Isaaru exchanged startled glances. "She's upset and she's blowing up Home! She doesn't want to. But the dark mother's there, and the Lady has to make her go away."

"Another fay—" Maroda said, but Isaaru cut him off.

"Yunie, it's gonna be okay," Rikku said, coming over. "Pops evacuated everybody. No one's gonna get hurt. Once the Lady's gone, we'll just have to clean up the mess and rebuild."

"B-b-but I don't want her gone!" Yuna said, tears redoubling. "I know she's been bad, but she makes the garden! What'll we eat?"

"Oops," Rikku muttered. She combed her fingers through the girl's hair. "Yunie, hon, I didn't mean she's going to disappear. I just meant we'll fix Home after she goes back to the ocean, okay?"

"Nobody can make her go away, Yunie," Wakka said, glaring at Auron. "She's too strong."

"But," Yuna sniffed, her weeping starting to subside.

"That's better. See? You just gotta... h-hey!" As soon as Wakka relaxed, she squirted out of his embrace, darting across the floor towards the silent figure on the sofa.

"S-Sir Auron?" Yuna scaled his knees, clutching at his belt. "Are you going to make the Lady go away?"

Chapter End Notes
Legendary Pillow by Ayrania-chan @dA

Chapter renumbering: This is now Chapter 15.
The Gippal Express

Chapter Summary

Gippal arrives at Wakka and Rikku's house by airship, and offers to take Summoner Isaaru and his companions to the new Al Bhed Home to negotiate with Cid.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"S-Sir Auron?" Yuna clambered onto his knees, clutching at his belt. "Are you going to make the Lady go away?"

Wakka made a strangled sound, shooting a panicked glance at Rikku.

For once, Rikku's inventiveness had exhausted itself. All she could manage was a strained, "C'mon, Yunie, he's a stranger. He's not gonna understand."

Auron contemplated the small, tear-stricken face before him. Her mismatched eyes were a haunting reminder of her namesake and the fate that had claimed her. How often had he tried to push against the spiral of death?

"She wants you to," Yuna said softly. "She feels sick inside. Can't somebody fix her?"

"Yuna," Auron said, choosing his gruff words with care. "Can anyone but the Lady change the weather?"

"Um..." The girl pondered, then shook her head, curls flopping around her ears. "No, 'cause she's the Lady!"

"Then how can we change her? The Lady is stronger than the weather," Auron said. "But if she leaves, she will give you a gift."

"Um, Auron," Rikku said, edging towards her daughter.

"Really?" Yuna said breathlessly.

"Yes," Auron said, stroking the girl's nose with a finger. "If you wish it, you'll find a way to grow gardens in the desert."

"Oooh!" Yuna said. "Garden magic? That sounds fun."

"Yunie, it's past bedtime," Rikku said. "Say goodnight to everyone, okay? I'll sing you a lullaby, but only if you come right now."

Yuna set her hands against Auron's coat, raising herself to kiss the scar on his cheek. "Tell the Lady I said hi." Then she scrambled down and took her mother's hand, waving shyly to the other guests. "Night-night."

Watching until they disappeared around the corner, Wakka turned to Auron with a grudging nod.
"We're cool, man," he said. "For now."

"But who is the Lady?" Maroda said. "My brother thinks—"

"I think that we, also, must rest," Isaaru said, rising to his feet and bowing. "Sir Wakka, thank you again for your hospitality. If there is anything you're willing to tell us about the Lady, we would be grateful. But we shall not impose."

"Uh," Wakka said, accent thickening. "I donno what to tell you. Yuna got a bad case o' the toxin, and it's been messin' with her dreams ever since. That's about it. So, anyway... sleep well, ya? We'll make another sweep for your brudda in the morning."

Dawn found Rikku dozing on the living room couch which Auron had finally vacated. As the light grew, a groggy Wakka emerged from the hallway, shuffling over to her. He lowered himself to the floor next to the couch, folding his arms along the edge of the cushions and pillowing his face on his wrists. Eventually she stirred, rolled over to check the sphere, and bumped into him.

"Hey," he said, nosing her tummy above her pajama shorts. "You could take that thing back to the bedroom, ya know."

"Didn't want to keep waking you," she mumbled, rolling towards him for a sleepy kiss.

"You okay?"

"Mmm. Yeah. I just hate waiting!" She rested her cheek on his forearm, stroking his ridiculous plume of red hair. "Are you okay?"

"Ya." He exhaled. "So far, so good. But how long we gotta keep 'em here for, eh?"

"Pops wants me to bring Auron to him once things calm down."

A faint buzzing noise outside the house grew to a throbbing hum that rattled the windows. A boom shook the walls and floor. The din faded to a whine, then silence.

"What the—?" Wakka peered towards the front door, hopping to his feet. "Don't tell me Sir Auron crashed the hover."

"That's not our hover," Rikku said, suddenly wide awake.

"I'll go see." He jogged across the room, scooped up a blitzball from the base of the coat rack, and reached for the door. His face relaxed into a goofy grin. "Heee-eeey! Who's this bum on our front porch?"

Gippal set his hands on his hips and leaned back, striking a pose. "Someone you owe two hundred gil. Heya, Wakka, Rikku, how've you been? How's the Cactuar Patch?"

"Doing great," Rikku said, peering past Wakka at the craft parked outside. It was a sled-like vehicle with stubby wings, turbine rotors on the rear and bottom, and a guardrail surrounding four seats clustered in a u-shape behind a windshield. It had blown a layer of sand into their front entryway, coating surfaces with a fine spray. "Keep your voice down. You may not have woken all of them. Gippal, do you have any idea what time it is?"
He spread his hands. "Sure do. Do you have any idea that Sin just flew past your house? Damn thing moves faster than I thought. Can I come in?"

"Oh, why not," said Wakka, dropping the ball and kicking it back into place. "Though we've kinda got a full house right now. But come on. I'll get you a drink."

"Thanks, but none of that tea crap. Battery acid, please." Gippal sauntered in and threw himself down on a chair, pushing back his goggles. "Seriously. You guys have no idea how glad I was to see your lights on when I flew over. I was afraid I might find a big smoking hole in the ground."

"You flew over us in that thing?" Wakka said. "We're lucky we aren't a hole in the ground. What'd you do to your old ship?"

"Landed four miles away. That's my new flyer. Like a hover, only it goes up, not just sideways. Pretty spiff, eh?"

"Great," Rikku said, distracted. "You mean Sin's backtracking? Gippal, what's happened to Home?"

"I was just getting to that," Gippal said. "Half flooded, no power, but it's not as bad as it could've been. Sin trashed the old Guado temple, but left most of the new construction intact. Brother and Buddy are babysitting the evacuees on Delg Island. Elder Cid's assessing the damage to Home with Shinra's salvage team. We had a major Cid-plosion when my scanners showed Sin headed back your way. He ordered me to get you guys to safety, only Sin outran me." Gippal took the glass Wakka set at his elbow. "Thanks."

"Aww, you were worried about us," Rikku said.

"Damn straight. Two hundred gil ain't chocobo chips." He tossed back the amber liquid and beamed, eyes watering. "And that ain't tea."

"Knock it off with the gil, man," Wakka said, dropping onto the sofa and curling an arm behind Rikku. "You been taking cheatin' lessons from Rin. Anyway, I thought you were making all kinds of money selling to Yevon. You decide to come home and start making an honest living?"

"Things were getting a little hot back in Yevonville. Sin's stirred up, and I figured it was time to clear out of the Calm Lands before summoners start showing up for the big dance."

"Elder Cid told everybody to clear out eight months ago, Gip."

"Yeah, well, the Crusaders have been stocking up on weapons ever since Sin came out of hiding. Rin and I made a bundle."

"Same old Gippal." Rikku said. "By the way, did Pops say anything about our guest?"

"Actually, now that you mention it—Hey! LJ!" Gippal flashed a thumbs-up towards the front door as it swung open again. "Speak of the devil. Still chasing Sin all over Spira?"

Auron stamped the sand off his boots and stepped inside.


"Yeah," Wakka said, face clouding over. "How'd you know him, anyway?"

"L... J?" Rikku said.
"Longtime customer. The LJ, or rather, O.L.J., actually. The Original Legendary Jackass."

"And you're the new legendary jackass, I suppose?" Rikku said.

"You always were the brains here, Sunshine." Gippal took another swig and raised his glass at Auron. "Yo. I think I've got something for you. You lose a sword in Kilika?"

The corner of Auron's mouth twitched. "Maybe."

"I thought it looked familiar. Better quality than anything the Crusaders have. I reckon it'd pull in at least a thousand gil, twenty plus if I hold it until the Calm and let Rin auction it off as memorabilia. Soooo. How much is it worth for you to buy it back?"

"Much." Auron folded his arms. "However, it will have to be eighty-four gil."

"Broke, huh? I guess 'legendary' doesn't pay well." Gippal slapped his knee. "Nah, man, I'm just pulling your leg. You got things to do. I heard about that stunt you pulled in Kilika. You're utterly mog-snogging nuts, Auron, you know that?"

"What'd he do?" Rikku said.

"Jumped off a moving ship onto Sin's back and stuck a pin in it. And Sin stopped. He just about drowned when the thing swam off. They're all yapping about how he saved the town. By the way, where's your shiny new summoner?"

Auron nodded towards the back of the house.

"Hoo boy." Gippal began to chuckle at Wakka's long face. "Full house, eh? Well, look. I've got orders to take Auron to Elder Cid. I doubt he wants to give you a hero's welcome, LJ, but orders are orders. So if you want, I can take the summoner, too."

"Acceptable," Auron said. "Isaaru wishes to consult Cid."

"And the others?" Wakka said, leaning towards Gippal with desperation in his eyes. "Gip, we're up to our ears in Yevonites, and Yunie's got a crush on Auron."

"No problem. I'll take them all off your hands."

"Oh, really?" Rikku snorted. "How much?"

"Oh." Gippal folded his arms behind his head and leaned back. "I reckon two hundred gil should cover it."

Happily, Isaaru's offer to pay their travel-fee out of Yevon's coffers tickled Wakka's sense of justice. Maroda was all for it, once Gippal explained that his ship's sensors could scan the whole island for their brother on the way out. After a quick meal, they prepared to leave. Elma's scruples put up a stumbling block when she saw the small craft parked outside.

"A machina?" She gave Maroda a rueful grin. "You couldn't arrange something a little more appropriate for a maester, maybe?"
"A maester? Man, Elder Cid's gonna love this," Gippal said. "Look, lady, all the ships off this island use machina, so you're gonna be stuck here a while."

"Er," Rikku said, scratching her cheek, "actually, so does the shower I showed you last night. And our water supply. And the toilet. Come to think of it, that outfit you're wearing—"

"Oh, no." Elma looked down with genuine alarm at the clothes she had borrowed, a pair of cargo pants and a tank top from Rikku. "Don't tell me there's machina in it!"

Rikku grinned. "No, no, it's just artificial fabric. Never mind. It won't eat you, I promise."

Elma reddened. "Sorry, it's just—"

Gippal snorted. "Enh, you sound just like Wakka when he first got here. Machina this, forbidden that. You'll get over it." With a shrug, he jogged towards the flyer and swung himself up by a short ladder in back, fixed between the tail rotors. "So, is this everybody? Hop on. You comin' with us, Rikku?"

"You got room?" Rikku eyed the small craft. "I want to check on Pops, but..."

"No prob," Gippal said. "You and Yevon-lady don't weigh more than a chocobo. Just sit in my lap."

"Kweh!" Mbela said from the cluster of children peeping around Wakka in the doorway.

"Nice try," Rikku said, wrinkling her nose. "I'll sit on the floor, thanks."

"Don't push it, Gip," Wakka said. "Rikku, I still don't think—"

"I'll be back before you know it, hon!" Rikku said, bouncing over to him and cupping her hands on his shoulders. "Anyway, I gotta make sure Pops doesn't get sweet-talked by Isaaru into doing something stupid, right?"

"Okay, okay," he said, slightly dazed by her jiggling. He hauled Rikku in for a fierce kiss that left the children giggling behind his legs. Rikku dropped to a crouch for a group hug. "Zap Dad for me," she told them. "Vidina, make sure somebody puts the sphere back on the charger."

"Oh," Wakka said. "Almost forgot. Isaaru, uh... this is a sphere we found in Zanarkand. It'll answer some of your questions." He fished out a sphere, cradling it in both hands as though it were a precious heirloom, and slipped it into Rikku's satchel.

Her eyes darted from Wakka to Auron. "Hoo boy."

"We are in your debt," Isaaru said. "Thank you, Sir Wakka."

"So, are we leaving, people?" Gippal said. "Hop on. Wakka, you'd better get the gaggle inside so we don't sandblast you on lift-off. Be good, kiddies!" He wiggled his fingers towards the children.

Yuna, scooped up by her father as he herded them back indoors, began to cry.

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" Elma said cheerfully, belting herself into the wing-seat opposite Maroda's.

"Just think of it as a very large chocobo," Maroda said, tucking his spear under his feet.

"Kweh," she said sarcastically.
"Ready when you are, Gip," Rikku said, crouching behind Gippal and Isaaru and gripping the backs of their seats.

"Hang onto your jock straps, ladies and gents," Gippal said. The deck trembled as the engines whined to life. There was a puff of dust, and the craft rose to the level of the treetops, swaying slightly. "The Gippal Express is ready for launch. Next stop: Home sweet Home."

Gippal hit the throttle. Elma's heartfelt Oh, Yevon was lost in the whine of the engines. The flyer catapulted forward, cleared the orchard by inches, and shot off across the desert sands.

Chapter End Notes

Meta: "Legendary Jackass" is a reference to Gippal's hidden cutscene/flashback with Auron in FFX-2 (and his habit of giving all his friends nicknames, like Dr. P for Paine).

(Author's illustration)

Chapter renumbering: Chapter 16 in the remaster.
Chapter Summary

The Story So Far: En route to Baaj Island to meet with Elder Cid and investigate yet another Sin attack, Summoner Isaaru and his companions watch a sphere left behind by Yuna.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The flyer wobbled under the weight of extra passengers, accompanied by Rikku's swearing in two languages. Maroda rode white-knuckled, his brother with serene resignation. Elma, the machina-phobe, clung to her seat with a dour expression, but gave herself away with a whoop when the flier hopped over a sand-worm that unexpectedly rose behind a crumbling ruin. Auron simply played barnacle. Gippal was quiet too, for once, focused on steering a smooth course for the sake of his unsecured passengers.

They were streaking towards a gray hump emerging from the dunes. The shape soon resolved itself into a bulbous, unlovely hulk of an airship with the profile of an oversized bathtub, its hull a crude patchwork of fins, engine pods, exhaust ports and mismatched panels. It was moored on the southern tip of the island with the bulk of its fuselage hanging over open water. An aft loading ramp extended down to the beach.

The flyer slowed to a crawl and slithered up the ramp into the belly of the ship, coming to an abrupt halt against a stack of barrels. The engines screamed in the enclosed space, then faded to silence. Deafened passengers roused themselves and looked around. Floor-to-ceiling stacks of crates and gun racks loomed on all sides, making it a wonder they had not struck anything on the way in.

"Well, here we are," Gippal said, hopping up onto the flyer's windshield to kick a knob on the wall. The ramp and cargo bay doors began to close with a hiss of hydraulics. Dingy amber lights flickered to life in the ceiling as the rectangle of daylight behind them narrowed and vanished.

"You gotta get a new paint job for this bucket, Gippal," Rikku said. "It looks like a flying turd."

"Flies like one, too." Gippal circled the small craft, securing it with magnetic clamps. "Joyride's over, people. Head upstairs. I'll be there in a minute."

Rikku pushed past Auron, scrambling over the side and heading for a ladder scaling the forward bulkhead. Auron climbed up after her. The others followed slowly, feeling their way in the alien environment. They emerged in a dim corridor lined by metal doors. Double doors at the far end opened onto a flight deck. Here the Yevonites pulled up short. The walls, floor, and ceiling were made of a clear material that looked like glass but clanked like metal. There were four crew stations arranged in a diamond in the nose of the ship: a pilot's seat suspended from the ceiling, a gunner's station in a well below, and secondary operations consoles on either side.

Rikku slid into the left-hand seat and started pecking at the controls. A sphere of blue light materialized over the console showing a map of the island. "Oh," she said, glancing over her
shoulder at the logjam of people on the short tongue of metal in front of the doors. "Take any seat but the top one. Don't touch anything."

Gippal emerged from the back as they were settling in. He chuckled at the shellshocked expressions of his Yevonite passengers. "First time flying, eh?"

Elma lowered herself into the gunner's bubble with nothing beneath her but ocean. "Wow. I think I'm gonna have to do all kinds of atonement when we get back to Bevelle."

"We, uh, were on Cid's airship once," Maroda said, helping Isaaru into the remaining seat.

"The Fahrenheit's a luxury yacht for some high muckety-muck. This slug's an old army transport. Hey, Rikku, you remember how to work the scanner?"

"I'm on it." She waved Maroda over. "Take a look. Red dots are fiends. Green dots are alive. Green dots with a white circle around 'em are alive plus metal, which means people. Simple, eh?"

"Or a sand worm that's eaten a machina," Gippal said, climbing into the pilot's seat and pushing the steering yoke forward. The airship swung out over the waves and back inland. Dunes began to scroll beneath them, accelerating to a blur. "Sing out if you spot anything."

"I'm not sure if Lucil's carrying anything metal," Elma said, watching the desert rushing between her feet.

"Boots," Maroda suggested. "Buckles. Her cane. Is that enough for the sensors to pick up?"

"Should be," Gippal said. "Oh, that reminds me. Rikku, what's Nooj done to get himself locked up this time? He got left behind when Home was evacuated. Cid blew me off about it."

"Oh," she said. "Gip, Nooj had another fit and shot up the R&D lab. Landed Shinra in the infirmary. Pops is still trying to decide what to do about him. He's a whiz with ancient machina, but if Shinra can't figure out what's making him fritz, I'm afraid he may get his death wish." She sighed. "Assuming Sin didn't save us the trouble."

"The Nooj?" Elma said. "He's still kicking? I thought he was dead."

"Not for lack of trying," Gippal said. "Lnywo vilgehk sukchukkan."

Isaaru eased out of his seat and walked back to Auron, who had planted himself against the aft bulkhead beside the doors.

"Sir Auron?" he said, lowering his voice. "Your thoughts?"

"We're running out of time." Not for the first time, he felt the maddening tug of a goal receding into the distance, as he had so often in Dream-Zanarkand before he had mastered slidewalks.

"Yes. But we must make certain that Pacce and Lucil are not lost in this Yevon-forsaken wilderness."

"I know. Sin won't wait. But in all honesty, my friend, do you believe we are ready to face Sin?"

"No." Auron grimaced. "This pilgrimage is going nowhere."

"As I thought," Isaaru said, unruffled. "I must speak with Elder Cid. His machina may be our only chance of saving Bevelle."

"We won't reach it in time. Sin's heading north. We're headed south." Auron considered. "Except..."
it's expended a great deal of power. Eventually it has to rest."

"May Yevon grant it so." Isaaru moved through the motions of prayer, then turned towards Rikku. "I'm eager to learn what is on that sphere. Do you know, Sir Auron?"

"Probably."

"You don't sound pleased," Isaaru said. "Are you afraid of what it will show us?"

"You'd learn sooner or later," Auron said. "I just hope 'sooner' turns out better than 'later.'"

Two hours later, they had found nothing more than machina drones, a salvage team in the ruins of Old Home, and a territorial zu that kept bouncing off the glass until they gave up on that sector. Elma was starting to drift off. Gippal nudged her with his foot. "Yo. Don't touch that, lady, or you'll really have something to atone for." He turned to Isaaru. "Well, that's the whole island. You folks satisfied? We've got to turn for Home sooner or later. Cid's gonna blow a gasket as it is."

"But—" Maroda said.

Elma jerked away from the gun controls. "I know how you feel, Captain, believe me." She stared at the monotonous landscape speeding below them. "But we've got a job to do, eh? Pacce's a trooper. He'll be fine wherever he is. And the general wouldn't want us wasting time on her."

"We must pray that they were left behind in Djose," Isaaru said. "Meanwhile, Sin continues its pilgrimage. We must resume ours."

Rikku rolled her eyes. "Yevonites."

"I'll take that as a yes," Gippal said, throwing the steering yoke hard to one side. Elma yelped as the ground tilted steeply and a burst of acceleration pressed them into their seats. Maroda went skidding backwards. Dunes gave way to reef, then open water, dropping away rapidly as the ship climbed.

"Whew," Rikku said. "You've been tinkering with the engines, haven't you?"

"You'd better believe it. Though I can't take full credit. I'm testing a new booster for Shinra."

Maroda righted himself and looked irritably at Auron, who had not budged. "Give us a little warning next time, okay?" He came forward again as the ship began to level off. "So how long till we reach Home?"

"We've got about five hours," Gippal said. He pressed a button, pushed away the controls and propped his boots on the steering yoke. "Phew. I'm beat. I've locked us on cruise. Rikku, think you could handle things up here if I crash for a while? I haven't slept in two days."

"Sure, leave it to me!" Rikku chuckled at Elma's expression, which had changed to alarm at the word crash. "Don't worry. I know how to fly this thing. I just can't land!"

"Oh, great," Elma said.

"All righty, then. No rearranging the control preferences while I'm out." Gippal climbed down
from the pilot's seat. "I'll see you in a few hours.

"Well." Maroda cleared his throat as the doors slid shut behind Gippal. "Since we've got some time —"

"Gotcha," Rikku said, digging Wakka's sphere out of her satchel. "Gimme a sec. I think I can project the recording onto the forward screens." Moving to the console in front of Isaaru, she popped Wakka's sphere into a socket. "Auron? If you've got anything to say, better do it now."

Auron shook his head. "Just do it."

The breathtaking panorama of ocean and sky receded behind a floor-to-ceiling hologram, a nebulous darkness spattered with stars and swirling lights. At first, it was impossible to decipher what they were looking at. Then the lower half of a girl's face flashed into view, filling most of the screen. Elma gasped. Thirteen years had passed since anyone had seen the High Summoner alive, but her ethereal, sweet smile was unmistakable.

Rikku squatted down on the floor by Isaaru, folding her arms tightly around herself. The view tilted crazily as Yuna set the sphere down and stepped back, revealing a night-shrouded landscape of rubble and broken spires. The darkness was not merely black, but a tapestry of somber colors too subtle to distinguish. Rivers of pyreflies flowed over the ruins in sluggish eddies, weaving across pulverized walls and broken pavement. It was a beautiful, terrible, unreal vision, a dream flirting with the shores of nightmare.

"Zanarkand?" Maroda said in a hushed whisper.

Isaaru rose to his feet in reverent awe, sweeping his arms in Yevon's prayer. Floating before them, Yuna's slim form seemed to soar through an expanse of sea and puffy clouds. As their eyes began to adjust to the double image, a dark figure stepped forward into focus. Yuna's companion was camouflaged by her black garments, so that her pale shoulders, neck and head seemed suspended in mid-air. Black hair falling at a slant over her left eye reduced her face to a white triangle.

"The Lady," Isaaru said, recognizing the likeness he had borne briefly on a talisman of bone. "In Yevon's name, who...?"

"Hello, everyone!" Yuna said, clasping her hands and beaming out at them. "Um... I just want to say... thank you so much. And I'm sorry. Lulu and I have gone on ahead. But before you go chasing after us, I... I want to explain. Please, hear us out."

"Giving you a bigger headstart," Rikku grumbled.

"I know this isn't what we talked about last night. But we've come so far. All the way to Zanarkand. I can't stop now. If I did, all we've been through—all the sacrifices of the people we've lost—would be for nothing." She trailed off, fingering a necklace with a Y-shaped pendant. Lulu held her until she regained her composure. "And now... Sir Auron says the pilgrimage itself is a lie. But fighting Yunalesca won't bring my father back, or save Sir Jecht, or help Spira."

"A lie?" Maroda said, turning to glare at Auron. He did not answer, but was staring transfixed. His detached mask had fallen away, replaced by raw, impotent anger so bleak that it held a tinge of madness.

Yuna, stubborn and certain beyond the reach of any protests, kept talking. "Sir Auron, you were
right. There is another way. Lulu's thought of a plan to break the cycle, really and truly. When we've finished, we'll be with our loved ones, and Spira will be free of Sin... forever. So you mustn't be sad for us."

"Yunie," Rikku breathed, eyes starting to water. "We loved you too."

"But we'll need every one of you for this to work. So I've got to ask you to help me one last time, although it's the hardest thing I've ever asked you to do. Please. Help me... help us end Spira's sorrow. I know we can do it, together." Again Yuna's smile flashed out like a pyrefly's gleam.

Lulu placed a hand on her shoulder and began to speak in the same measured tones that she had used to instruct Tidus. "Sir Auron has given us a weapon possessed by no summoner or guardian before: the truth. At last we know what the Final Summoning means, so we can prepare for it. Yuna and I shall vanquish Sin. Then it will be up to you to defeat the next Sin, before Yu Yevon can replenish it. Listen closely." Another audience, one that neither Yuna nor Lulu could have anticipated, held their breaths. "In the battle against Sir Jecht, I shall expend as much power as I can. Thus, when Yu Yevon joins with me, I will be vulnerable. That is when you must—"

"Jecht?" Elma said, bewildered. "Yu... Yevon?"

A gruff voice cut through Lulu's speech. "You're not going."

Isaaru started. But this, too, was part of the recording. An image of Auron with darker hair stepped into view.

"Sir Auron?" Yuna said. "You would stop me now, after guiding us all this way?"

"No." He moved towards her, looming over the sphere's lens until his red coat filled the sky. "If you are resolved, I am still your guardian. But there is no reason for Lulu to die."

"I... I don't want anyone else to die. But if it truly ends Sin forever..."

"Sir Auron," Lulu said. "I have trained for this moment all my life, although I did not understand clearly until now what I was preparing for. When Yuna chose the summoner's path, I made my choice, too. I told Yuna the morning we left: This is our journey."

"Lulu," Yuna said, voice raw.

"There's no need to sacrifice another guardian," Auron said. A shift in his stance uncovered the spherecam again. Yuna was just stepping back from embracing Lulu. "I made a promise to Jecht."

"Which is precisely why you cannot be the Final Aeon," Lulu said. "Above all others, you cherish Sir Jecht and Lord Braska. Loyalty to them is what brought you here. I came here for Yuna. Did you not say that the bond between summoner and summoned is what gives the aeon its power? But even if Lady Yunalesca accepts you, and what you have sacrificed—" she gave him a pointed look — "how could we hope to destroy you, when nothing else has? Please, Auron. Help us. Don't hinder us. The others may awaken at any moment."

He stared down at her. Viewers waited with bated breath for history to reaffirm itself. Finally, he gave a grudging nod. His answer was a surprisingly gentle whisper. "Let's go."

Yuna smiled fondly at both of them. "It has been an honor, Sir Auron."

Marching away, the two guardians fell behind their summoner in lockstep. Forgotten, the abandoned sphere kept recording until they were swallowed by Zanarkand's ruins and its pyrefly
custodians. Back on the flight deck, Rikku wiped her eyes, reached forward, and switched off the recording.

"So," Elma said. "About how many years should I atone for hearing that? Operation Mi'ihen took three."

"Don't you get it?" Rikku said. "Yevon's a stupid lie. It's a big fat leech that eats guardians and summoners!"

"Hey!" Elma said. "That's blasphemy!"

"Elma, Rikku, please," Isaaru said. Even now, he sounded unperturbed, although his smile was melancholy. "The truth, it seems, is that love defeats Sin. It transcends even Yevon: both the foe whose ravages inspired our religion, and the wise teachings that arose from that unpromising beginning."

"Sir?" Elma said. "Do I wanna know what you just said, or can I just forget it and wait for orders?"

"You've gotta be kidding me," Rikku said.

"The truth," Maroda said, turning and storming towards Auron, "is that he wasn't going to tell us any of this. So when were you going to let us in on the big secret? In Zanarkand? After me or Pacce volunteered for the Final Summoning? After Isaaru was dead?"

Auron sagged against the wall, face hidden in his collar. As Maroda reached him, he slid to the floor, doubled over. A single pyrefly drifted from the folds of his coat. When Maroda stooped over him, Auron lashed out, swinging a wild punch that Maroda dodged with a curse.

"What the—?" Rikku said, jumping up.

"Sin's toxin?" Elma said, starting to climb out of her seat.

Exasperated, Maroda threw himself upon Auron and seized his collar, barking into his face. "Just what are you playing at, old man? Are you trying to stop Sin, or protect it? No, her! The Lady's your girlfriend, is that it? You've been talking to her all along, haven't you? Haven't you?" More pyreflies floated loose as Maroda shook him. Auron snarled and reached for the man's throat.

"Maroda!" Isaaru said. "Sir Auron, stop!"

"Toxin, yeah," Rikku said, stepping in front of the summoner. "I guess if Lulu doesn't make 'em horny, she gives 'em PMS. Isaaru, Elma, don't breathe!" She tossed a pellet towards the grappling combatants.

There was a yellow flash, a bang, and an acrid stench. Everyone's vision tunneled. Isaaru staggered. Maroda and Auron went down, collapsing on top of one another. Rikku sat down on them, kicking her heels against the floor with an air of triumph. "Wow. Is there something in the teachings that says guardians have to be blockheads?"

Chapter End Notes
Heartfelt thanks to Mintywolf for this perfect illustration of Yuna's sphere.

Chapter Renumbering: This is now Chapter 17.
"What have you done to them?" Isaaru hurried towards his unconscious guardians, stumbling over his robes. "In Yevon's name—"

"Calm down. They're fine!" Rikku said, tapping the back of Auron's head. "Funguar pollen: works better than a hammer on skulls like his. They'll wake in a few. You'd better sit down till your head clears."

The intercom activated with a burst of static. "Rikku, what are you doing to my ship?"

Rikku pressed her hands over her ears. "Nothing, Gip. Maroda and Auron got into a fistfight. I hit 'em with a nightcap."

"Oh, great. Hull breach? Dents in the deck?"

"Ummm..." She lifted Auron's feet, first one and then the other, letting them drop with a clunk. "Nope!"

"Keep it that way."

"Right-o!"

"Sorry, Captain," Isaaru said, reaching out for the nearest wall to steady himself. A gesture of faith, that: he found himself leaning against Al Bhed glass for support, although it looked like open sky. Faith's ironies suddenly caught up with him, and he struggled to stifle a laugh. Apparently the pollen was making him light-headed.

"Apology accepted. Try to keep the Yevon love-fest under control, okay? Gippal out."

Elma moved to Isaaru and steadied him, falling back on familiar duties. "Funguar pollen, eh? Could've used it at a few staff meetings."

"Thank you, Elma," he said. "If you would..." He nodded towards the fallen guardians. Leaning on her, he approached the pair and dropped to one knee to examine them. Rikku scooted out of the way. He moved first to his brother, feeling for the pulse at his wrist, smiling at the Al Bhed woman's offended pout. His smile drained away as he turned his attention to Auron. Isaaru reached out, hesitated, and slipped his hands into the man's collar, gently turning his head to a more comfortable position. Splaying his fingers over tufts of white hair, the summoner chanted a prayer.

"What's with him, anyway?" Rikku said. "He looked sick."
"I cannot be sure, but I fear that..." The delicate pause was masked by his deliberate manner of speaking. "Elma's guess may be correct. Sir Auron is not a young man, and he has faced Sin more times than any man alive. The toxin must linger in his very bones. It is a wonder he is still sane. Despair, perhaps, remorse, or the pain of memory triggered its effects. As for Maroda, I don't think we need blame Sin's toxin. He is worried about our brother, and he has harbored doubts about Sir Auron since he first joined us."

"Smart guy," Rikku said. "Hey, Elma, you okay? You look like you ate a bug."

Elma, crouched next to Isaaru, was staring past his shoulder towards the drifting clouds. "Hm?" She came back to herself with a start. "Oops. Thinking: never a good idea. So, anyway. Are you all right now, sir?"

"Yes, better." Isaaru pushed to his feet. "I should apologize, Commander."

"Sir?"

"Lady Yuna's sphere." Isaaru touched her wrist in mute thanks and stepped away. "I was somewhat prepared for what we might hear. You had no warning. I know what ache you feel, Elma. Some years ago, I learned a part of what you just saw. I realized then that the teachings of Yevon had arisen in the same way as the cult of Sin: rites meant to appease a fearful enemy. But I tell you, Elma, even if Yevon is not what we believed, a prayer from the heart is as true. The teachings are not Yevon-sent, but they are hallowed customs cherished, sanctified and passed down by our ancestors, a gift of wisdom to guide us in a world full of trials. Can you find some comfort in that?"

"Not really. But it doesn't much matter what I think, eh?" She gave a crooked smile and lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm just a soldier. Point me at a foe and I'll fight it. For now, you've got a spare guardian, until I find my troops and my general safe and sound. If you'll have me, I mean."

"It would be an honor. With my brother, Sir Auron, and Lucil's right hand to defend me, I need fear no fiend in Spira."

There was a groan from the floor. "Ugh." Maroda pushed up to his hands and knees. "What the hell?"

"Wakey wakey!" Rikku said, wiggling her fingers over him.

"Buzz off." Maroda sat up and glowered at Auron's red coat. "Jeez, did he knock me out?"

"No, I did!" Rikku said, skipping backwards hastily. "No more fighting, kids. Mr. Grouch could crack the hull if he loses it, and then we'd all be flying without a ship...straight down!"

"And we're supposed to trust this guy?" Maroda said, rubbing his neck.

Isaaru placed a hand on his shoulder. "Sir Auron's not the only one keeping secrets, remember."

"So?" Maroda said. "I repeat, we're supposed to trust him?"

"Maroda, please. Trust me, at least. Sir Auron's bond with Sin may be a weapon we can use."

"Ha." Rikku shook her head and walked back to check the scanner.

"Rikku," Maroda said. "Were Auron and Lulu lovers?"

"Eew, no way! Those two never had any fun. It'd be against the code of Grumpy Guardians or
something." She jabbed at buttons irritably. "Besides, if he loved her, he'd never have gone along with her stupid plan."

"Not...necessarily," Elma said. She reddened under Rikku's incredulous stare. "You can't keep someone you love from doing her job just because it's risky, eh?"

"Lady Rikku," Isaaru said. "I beg you pardon, but one thing I must know. Why did Lulu's plan fail?"

"Oh." She flipped her braids behind her shoulders and applied herself to the controls, scowling. "Well, your precious Maester Seymour killed Tidus on Mt. Gagazet, so we were already short one guardian. We lost Kimahri when...when Yuna called up the Final Aeon. She told us to get back, but he tried to shield her. So then it was down to Wakka and me and Sir Auron, right? But Wakka, he...he just couldn't hurt Lulu. And I wasn't much into fighting friends either, especially when they're about fifty feet tall and dressed to kill with flames and lightning bolts shooting every which way. I know we should've tried, but...we didn't. Except for Auron. Like that worked really well. I thought she'd killed him too. Then boom, bang, major kablooie, and that's all I remember till I woke up on Pops' airship."

"She was too strong," Auron said hoarsely. He stood and withdrew his arm into his coat, returning to his spot against the wall.

"Or maybe you didn't want to kill her either," Maroda said, the accusation muted.

"Better than becoming Sin."

"And so now you would be Sin in her stead?" Isaaru said, watching him with focused compassion. "Is that your plan, Sir Auron?"

Maroda's shoulders hunched. "Oh."

"If no better way can be found."

"But that won't help!" Rikku said, flapping her hands. "You kill another summoner, turn into Sin, and then we've got Sin Grouchypants instead of the Lady! What difference would that make, huh? Maybe that's why Lulu's been blowing up the temples, to keep you out of trouble!"

"She's destroying the temples to avenge Yuna," Auron said, "and all those killed by Yevon hypocrisy."

"Wow," Rikku said. "In that case, she should've left Baaj alone!"

"Hey!" Elma bristled. "What about my Crusaders? What've they ever done to Lady Yuna?"

"Lulu is still Sin, bound more to its will than it to hers," Auron said. "But I believe she is also trying to end the pilgrimages."

"Sir Auron," Isaaru said. "I take it that Lady Yunalesca rejected you and chose your friend. That being so, what hope is there that she'll accept your offer this time?"

"Leave her no choice," Auron said. "Send your other guardians away before we enter the Hall of the Final Summoning. Yunalesca's running out of options, too. Lulu's seen to that."

"So what?" Maroda said. "Rikku's right. All you're doing is buying us time, at the cost of Isaaru's life! Ten, twenty years from now, we'll have to start all over again."
"That is nothing new," Isaaru said. "All summoners accept that the Calm is only a fleeting blessing. But I may be a summoner in name only, by the time Sin is finished her work."

"You aren't one now," Auron said, drawing another glare from Maroda.

Isaaru smiled. "No, not much of one. I am not Lord Braska, though I have tried to emulate his wisdom. I lack Lady Yuna's potent rapport with her aeons. But such as I am, I will help you see this through. We'll find a way, Sir Auron, I promise you."

"I've heard this before, Isaaru."

"Yes," Isaaru said, soothing, "but my way will be different. If we can convince Elder Cid, we shall have machina to compensate for my missing aeons."

"Sir," Elma said. "Teachings aside, the Al Bhed's strongest machina couldn't puncture Sin's defenses at Operation Mi'ihen. They got creamed. I doubt they're eager for a rematch."

"Machina alone will not ensure victory, Commander. But machina, aeons and guardians, all Spira's powers united? Such an alliance may achieve what the pilgrimage cannot."

"Not likely." Rikku sighed. "Elma's right. On top of which, Pops hates how Yevon kills off summoners and guardians. He won't help you commit suicide!"

"He may make an exception for me," Auron said drily.

Chapter End Notes
"Blockheads" by author

Note: This is chapter 18 in the remaster.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction...

— William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming"
Chapter Summary

The Story So Far: Sin has been systematically destroying temples and their aeons, and Baaj Island, the new Al Bhed Home, has become its latest target. Isaaru and his friends arrive in the aftermath of the attack to offer help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wreaths of steam and smoke marked the sunken island of Baaj long before the piers of New Home rose from the sea. Late afternoon sun flared off distant panels and windows. As the airship began to descend, the jumble of structures resolved itself into a circular hive of new stone buildings built on and apparently from a vast field of submerged ruins, interconnected by arching bridges of metal and glass. The town was surrounded by a fortified ring-wall of more typical Al Bhed design, an intimidating exoskeleton of girders and rusted metal, massive guns facing out to sea. Baaj Temple reared up at the center of the settlement. Black smoke vomited from a wing jutting out behind its central tower.

The temple's cracked dome was not the only testament to Sin's passing. All the windows facing north had been blown in. Struts and spans tilted at dangerous angles. Porches and awnings had been ripped away from houses. Every channel of open water was fretted by a spiderweb of snapped cables drooping from twisted pylons. Yet apart from a few missing roofs, most of the structures appeared to be intact.

Gippal, returning to the flight deck with noisy disregard for his somber passengers, thumped Rikku's back before climbing into his seat. "Buck up, Sunshine. It's not as bad as it looks."

"Easy for you to say, Gip," she said, drooped over her console. "You're gonna make a fortune selling construction materials, right?"

"Two percent," he said. "Rin wanted a big markup, but I won't kick the home team when it's down."

"What a mess," Elma said. Ensconced in the gunner's bubble, she had a bird's eye view of the devastation crawling by.

"At least they had warning," Isaaru said. "Thank Yevon they fled in time."

"Besaid got hit a lot worse," Maroda said. "Maybe Sin was trying to pull its punches?"

"If that's pulling punches, I'd hate to see a direct hit," Rikku said.

"I have," Gippal said, glancing over his shoulder at Auron. "Wish I hadn't. Okay, people! This is where you get off." He hopped down and extended a hand to Elma. "Machina cooties?"

"Yevon cooties?" she shot back, grasping his arm and pulling herself up.

Descending through the ship, they stepped out into humid sunshine and a light rain falling from
shreds of clouds, the last wrack of the spent storm. At the foot of the loading ramp was a flooded courtyard that the Yevonites recognized as the great hall of a temple whose dome had fallen in. A semicircle of broken summoners’ statues jutted from the shallows. The area was spanned by crisscrossing catwalks, one leading to a crude square opening cut into the great stone tower that formed the hub of New Home. Cid's gaudy airship was moored on the far side.

As they started towards it, a pair of armed Al Bhed emerged, marching behind a stumpy figure in a stifling head-to-toe coat and goggled mask. It was impossible to tell age or gender, but the leader was slightly shorter than Rikku.

"Protect," Auron said.

Maroda gave a grudging nod. He and Elma closed ranks ahead of Isaaru and marched shoulder to shoulder as if they had served in the same company for years. Auron took his customary post as rearguard.

Isaaru sighed in fond exasperation. "We're among friends here, remember?"

"That remains to be seen," Auron said.

"Yo, Shinra," Gippal said, sauntering towards the welcoming party. "Got some visitors. Where's the boss?"

"Working on the generators," he replied, voice muffled by a respirator. There was a loud bang and a green flash from the far side of the tower. "Gippal, I've found Nooj. He was still in his jail cell after all."

"He okay?" Gippal said. "Wait...are you okay? Rikku said Nooj went nuts and shot you up pretty bad."

"No and yes, thanks to Rikku's potions. Got a minute? We need help digging him out."

"I beg your pardon," Isaaru said with a bow. "I am Isaaru, a summoner. I came to speak to Elder Cid. But first, may I and my guardians offer aid?"

"Feyd!" Rikku interposed herself between guard and guardians. "I'll vouch for them, Shinra. They're gung ho on fighting Sin, but they don't mean us any harm."

"That's all we need," Shinra said. He peered up at the man, debating. "Well, they could help with Nooj. Not much harm they can do there."

"I am a healer," Isaaru said. "If one of your people is hurt—"

"This way." Shinra turned and clanked back towards the tower. "Follow me."

"We shouldn't get involved," Maroda said, dropping back to whisper in his brother's ear. "We're falling behind again. But this time, we're racing Sin, not another summoner. We've got to find Cid and finish our business here as quickly as possible. Bevelle needs you."

"Maesters Baralai and Shelinda can hold Bevelle just as well without me," Isaaru said. "And we must earn Elder Cid's trust. We need his help."

Entering the tower, they found themselves facing large double doors at the far end of a darkened
antechamber. They stood open, revealing the great circular hall within the tower. Its decor was a fusion of old and new: ornate columns and ancient statues and stone vases scattered like pieces on a gameboard between concentric rings of workstations. All the screens were dead. Several Al Bhed were crawling under the computer banks with hand-lights, inspecting a network of cables crisscrossing the floor.

Shinra waved at the technicians, but steered the Yevonites away from the control room. He turned left, following a walkway that hugged the tower's perimeter. Small square windows in the outer wall provided inadequate light. Passing several doors on the right, most of them smashed or sealed tight, they eventually reached a flooded antechamber. Out of the water rose broken stone steps leading up to an inner door. It was flanked by two squat statues of stylized dragons.

"What is this place?" Elma said. "It looks Yevon-built."

"Correct," Shinra said. "Baaj Temple. Former prison of Seymour Guado and his mother. We tap the Chamber of the Fayth for power, the way you do at Djose."

"Hey!" Elma said. "We don't—"

"Prison?" Maroda said. "When was this?"

"When his father's hold on the Guado was less secure," Isaaru said. "Yet another dark secret of the old regime."

"It still is a prison, in a pinch," Gippal said, leading the way across the flooded area on a floating walkway. "The Chamber of the Fayth is pretty secure."

Elma exchanged rueful glances with Maroda. He shook his head and drew a finger across his lips.

Gippal and Shinra led the way into the inner room. Six statues, two of them toppled, crouched along the walls of the chamber. Colored spheres set in steles before their knees provided eerie illumination. The far end of the room had collapsed, choking the portal to the Chamber of the Fayth with huge blocks. A cloud of pyreflies drifted over the rubble.

"No," Gippal said, hurrying towards them. "Nooj!"

"Isaaru," Maroda said, barring his brother at the door. "Stay back. Let your guardians make sure it's safe. This guy sounds dangerous."

"Oh, come on already!" Elma said, hurrying after Gippal. "Man down. Let's do something."

Shinra turned to one of his companions. "Ehvuns Amtan Cid drao'ja lusa. Rikku yht Gippal fedr drnaa Yevonedac." The woman nodded and slipped out.

"He's under there?" Gippal said, staring glumly at the pile of broken masonry. "You sure? He's got to be dead."

"My scanners show a pocket of open space," Shinra said, "and someone in it. Faint heartbeat. Still alive, but weak."

"Then we'd better hurry."

They converged on the rock-fall, picking their way down the aisle between statues and debris. Shinra, Elma and Rikku cleared away smaller fragments while Auron, Gippal and Maroda levered away the larger blocks. Isaaru, shooed off by his brother, paced around the chamber, examining the
statues and their inscriptions. The remaining Al Bhed stood guard by the exit, gun sloped against
his shoulder.

At length they uncovered a large block that had once spanned the portal. It had dropped straight
down and cracked in two, forming a triangle with the threshold. Fragments from the door's
moldings were wedged under the two halves, propping them inches above the floor. An
unrecognizable spur of red cloth and twisted metal jutted out from underneath.

"Wait," Gippal said. "I see him. Damn, this looks bad."

"See him where?" Maroda said. "All I see is a smashed machina."

"That's him," Shinra said. "Be careful. His leg's supporting most of the weight."

"His leg?" Elma said, staring.

Preoccupied as he was, Gippal chuckled. "Yeah. You're gonna love this. Shinra, got your scanner
handy?"

Auron had stepped clear of the rubble to give the Al Bhed room to plot their next move. Abruptly
he swung towards Isaaru, who had frozen on the plinth of a toppled statue. "What's wrong?"

"I could swear there is someone here," Isaaru said, dazed. He gestured blindly towards the choked
doorway of the inner chamber. "The fayth...it weeps, Sir Auron, but I do not think it has been
destroyed! Perhaps I can reach it."

"Forget the Fayth," Elma snapped. "Haven't we lost enough people already for some damned
statue? Let's just get this guy out!"

"Shhhhh!" Rikku said, making frantic hushing motions.

There was a croak from the far side of the rubble. "...a dead man. Forget him too."

"Noojozter!" Gippal said. "Not cool, man. Is your arm free? Give us a hand. You're the one with the
built-in forklift."

"Ugh," Elma said. "Are we trying to rescue a man or a machina?"

"Both," Shinra said. "We replaced the arm and leg he lost in battle. My father's best work."

"Your father was a sadist," came Nooj's muffled retort. There was a scraping sound from the other
side of the barrier. The two halves of the lintel shifted slightly, dust and flakes of stone pattering
down between them. "No good. Can't get leverage."

"Hang on," Rikku said. She cocked her head at Isaaru. "You've got white magic, right? Life too,
just in case?"

"Yes, milady. But I don't think—"

"Spirit stuff's your specialty; small explosives are mine. Take cover, everybody. Nooj, cover your
head if you can." She plucked a small metal cylinder out of her satchel and worked it into the crack
in the broken lintel. "You too, Gip. You don' wanna lose the other eye."

"You sure you know what you're doing, Rikku?" Gippal said, backing away. "We're running out of
replacement parts for this guy."
"I'm sure. Trust me, Gip. Get behind a statue."

She flipped a recessed switch on the end of the capsule with a fingernail and scampered backwards. There was a loud *pop*, a white flash, and the rattle of of falling rocks. A cloud of dust obscured the rear third of the room.

"Nooj!" Gippal said. "Nooj, you still with us?"

Shinra started forward, trusting his mask to filter out the dust. "Someone give me a hand."

Expressionless, Auron followed him into the gray haze. They emerged dragging a barrel-chested man between them, his metal limbs rasping across the flagstones. Nooj's artificial leg was bent, crushed, and snapped off below the knee. Dried blood obscured his face.

Auron suddenly lurched and dropped Nooj's shoulder with a clang. He staggered, swatting at the pyreflies weaving around them like hungry mosquitoes.

"Hey, watch it!" Gippal said, hurrying forward to help lower Nooj to the floor.

"Sir Auron," Isaaru said. "Focus. Sin awaits, remember?"

"There's someone here," Auron said through clenched teeth. "Unsent."

"Nooj?" Gippal said. "Dammit, Rikku, if you've killed him—"

"No, it's the fayth," Isaaru said. "It's been damaged. I've never sensed such pain! Don't listen to it, Sir Auron." He hurried over and dropped to one knee beside Nooj, compassion in his eyes as he surveyed the battered shell of a man. "Well, now. I must defer to your people's art for mending that leg. But as for the rest—"

"Point that thing somewhere else!" Elma barked, launching herself through a stream of pyreflies at the Al Bhed by the door. The guard's gun was off his shoulder. As heads turned, he shifted his aim towards the Crusader.

"*Fayd!*" said Rikku.

Elma did not wait. She dropped a sweeping kick that cut the man's legs out from under him as he fired. A bolt of energy struck the ceiling, scattering slivers of rock. Elma fell on him with a yell and wrenched his gun away, slamming the butt of it against his chin. The guard went limp under her.

"Elma!" Maroda said. "Stop!" He reached her an instant before Gippal, grappling the gun out of her hands. "What the hell are you doing? Calm down!"

"Calm down?" she said, mashing Gippal's instep as he wrestled her off her victim. "Machina everywhere, Yevon a lie, Sin about to wipe out Bevelle, my troops decimated, Pacce and Lenne dead for all we know—"

"Lenne?" Shinra said, looking up. "Nooj mentioned her."

"Who?" Elma bristled. "I said Lucil! Maester Lucil."

With Maroda's help, Gippal had managed to pin her arms behind her back. "Ow. Sorry life sucks, lady, but what the *vulg* gives you the right to take out your troubles on us?"

"Your guard was taking aim at our summoner!" Elma said, heaving against his grip. "And if you
weren’t so busy — oof! — fraternizing with these machina-lovers, Maroda, you’d have noticed he was about to blow your brother's head off!"

"Oh, great, now she’s got the toxin," Rikku said, checking the unconscious guard. "It's Lulu's PMS Overdrive."

"Commander Elma," Isaaru said. "Forgive me, but you must be mistaken."

"Isaaru," Auron said. "We need to leave. Now."

"And go where?" Cid appeared in the doorway, dressed in an ugly orange jumpsuit grimed with oil and soot. He surveyed the tableau with a scowl. "Gippal. I thought I told you to keep our 'guests' secure until I got here."

"Pops!" Rikku said, springing to her feet.

"Good to see you, too, kiddo," Cid said, glaring at her exposed midriff. "Put some clothes on."

She stuck out her tongue. "You like it when Nhadala dresses like this."

"Excuse me, but..." Gippal's voice cracked. "Nooj is dyin' over here!"

"Thought that's what he wanted." Cid said. He glowered at Isaaru. "Don't suppose you know why Sin suddenly decided to pulverize Home right before you lot showed up, eh?"

"Elder Cid," Isaaru said, rising with a bow. "Sin is targeting the temples, securing itself against the aeons' threat. I am Isaaru. Some years ago, you hosted me and my brothers in your Summoners' Sanctum. I shall never forget how your people protected us. It is a debt I must repay. Please, allow me to help this man."

"Isaaru?" Cid said. "I remember you. Grand Maester o' Yevon, now, eh?"

"No longer." Isaaru said. "I abdicated. A summoner's first duty is to fight Sin."

"Bilge." Cid shook his head. "You Yevonites never change. And as for you," he growled, staring murderously at Auron, "what've you got to say for yourself, eh? Where's my niece?"

"I'm sorry," Auron said. "Yuna was...determined."

"Sorry?" Cid's scalp and ears flushed crimson. "You sent her to her death, and now you're sorry, eh? I'll show you sorry!" He took a step towards the man, hands balling into fists.

"Augh!" Rikku stepped between them. "Can't you guys hold off pummeling each other until we've dealt with Nooj and Sin?"

"Sin?" Cid said. "You're playing guardian again, is that it? And now you and these bungling Yevonites lead Sin straight to Home, and we have to rebuild all over again!" He broke off with a violent fit of coughing, face contorting as he doubled over.

"Pops?" Rikku slipped an arm around him. "Whoa. Deep breaths. Home's gonna be fine. We'll fix it! And I'm not guarding anybody 'cept family, okay?"

"Family? Don't talk to me about family! You all marry Yevonites, and as for that cradle-robbing husband of yours—"

"Who pulled you out of a sand worm last month!" she said. "Leave Wakka alone. What's gotten
into you, Pops? The damage to Home isn't that bad."

"Isaaru," Gippal pleaded.

Isaaru nodded and hurried over, setting his hands on Nooj's chest.

"Great. Just great. 'We'll fix it.'" Cid wheezed with bitter laughter, his voice taking on a strange timber. "Yeah, that's right. I'll...fix it." Moving with startling agility, he jerked away from Rikku, yanked the gun from Maroda's hands and trained it on Auron.

"Hey!" Maroda said.

"Rikku!" Auron said, stepping away from Isaaru. "Stun him."

Rikku darted around Cid to block his line of fire. "Pops!"

Horror flooded Cid's eyes as he pulled the trigger. Howling as she collapsed, he fired point-blank at Auron lunging to shield her.

The guardians' chamber exploded into madness. Sobbing and bellowing in Al Bhed, Cid fired blindly. Bolts of energy and shrapnel ricocheted off statues, walls, floor tiles. The others charged him, but their initial moment of shock proved costly. Maroda, Elma and Gippal were mowed down before they could reach him, and Shinra was caught diving for cover. Taking aim at Isaaru, Cid stumbled over his daughter and glanced down. His face contorted in anguish.

"Elder Cid." Isaaru rose to face him, voice soothing, reaching out to him as a summoner might pray to a fiery-tempered fayth. "Stop. You are not yourself. Please, let me help you. Let me heal her. There is still time."

"Time?" Cid gave a broken laugh. "An eternity. She died, and I couldn't save her. I'll avenge her. With Vegnagun and Sin." His lip curled in a sneer, noting Isaaru's hands making the sign of Yevon over his heart. "A follower of Yevon, eh? See you on the Farplane."

It was a tribute to a summoner's training—or folly—that Isaaru's smile did not falter until the bolt struck.

Chapter End Notes
(Drawn while fighting a severe dry eye flareup, so artist couldn't bally well see what she was doing.)

Chapter renumbering: This will become Chapter 19 in the new version.
Anima Sola

Chapter Summary

The Story So Far: While helping the Al Bhed in the wake of a Sin attack, Isaaru and his companions are shot by Elder Cid, who appears to have gone mad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

My dear son.

(Nay, lady, I am a son of Spira. Yet I would be honored to bear your pain.)

My dear, brave son. This time of the spiral, we shall not be sundered. Do not weep, Seymour, for soon all Spira shall recognize you for what you truly are...

(...a monster!)

(The memory flashed from Isaaru's mind to hers with the unshrouded immediacy of fayth's communion—no smile, no politic speech, no polished gesture to soften the blow—a field of blood-red snow, mangled heaps of Ronso warriors tossed like broken trees in an avalanche. The bodies were gutted and limp as if Seymour had spirited away their very bones, not just their souls, to fashion ghastly armor. Surely, Sin was built in this way. There had been precious few to send, and none to save.)

A banshee scream tore through coherent thought. No, no, no, you must live, you must die, you must be Spira's savior! Redeem us, avenge us, atone for our sins! All shall love and weep for thee, Yevon's true son!

(Isaaru felt arms of steel tightening around his neck, chains digging into his throat. Burning feathers flared and fell, prickling his skin.)

"Mother!" Isaaru's eyes snapped open. He found himself weeping.

"Er, not exactly, sir." The anguished face whose eyes brimmed with blood transmuted into Elma's.

Isaaru wiped his eyes, dismayed to see red soaking the cuff as he drew his hand back. The world was red, too, but that was only the dull glow of a solitary Kilika sphere, pulsing weakly. The rest of the chamber was dark. The other spheres must have been damaged by gunfire.

"Phew. It was phoenix down." Elma brandished a phial. "I always wonder who has to pluck the bird that this comes from."

"What did you think I used on you?" said a dry voice. "Motor oil?"

"Sorry, sir. I don't trust anything I found on an Al Bhed ship."

"Stole, you mean." Nooj laughed. "Yevon hasn't changed a bit, has it?"
"Somewhat." Isaaru found the strength to smile, despite the howling wraith in the back of his mind. "You have my thanks, Commander."

"Don't thank me, sir. Thank Nooj. He had the sense to lay low after you revived him." She nodded the man sitting propped against a statue, watching them over the rim of his spectacles. "He found my field kit."

"And appropriations," Nooj said.

"Right." She blushed. "I'll see to the others now, sir."

"Please do." Isaaru surveyed the bodies scattered around the dark chamber, fallen friends and allies lying in the shadows of Guado demons graven in stone. "I pray to Yevon we're in time." He crawled to the nearest victim, Shinra, whose shallow, rasping breaths sounded like sandpaper through his respirator.

"Take good care of him," Nooj said. "Kid's a genius, except in choosing his friends."

"Says the friend who saved us all," Isaaru said, removing the young man's mask with care. Apart from pale skin the color of shell, hair white as snow to match, there was no obvious impairment to explain his protective suit. Thrusting curiosity aside, Isaaru placed his hands over Shinra's forehead and heart, invoking Yevon's blessing for one who stood outside its spiral.

Elma and Isaaru executed triage in tandem, fighter's and priest's paths converging in the aftermath of slaughter. The Crusader dispensed phoenix down, while the summoner attended to burns that the restorative left half-healed. The murmur of summoner's prayers and the faint crackle of sparks were soon masked by expletives and staccato conversation.

"Th' hell? Isaaru, are you all right?"

"Vilgehk cred fedr y puucdan bylg… Aaaah. Thanks, Yevon-babe. Hey! Just a dang second! You swiped that from my cargo hold, didn't you?"

"Kad yfyo vnus sa!"

"Er, yeah. Sorry I hit you earlier. Whoa! No punching the medic."

"This is bad, Nooj. Servos fused. I'll have to replace the whole joint."

"Just splint it, kid. Give me a pin to stand on. Save the engineering miracles for later."

Elma saved Auron and Rikku for last, enlisting Maroda and Gippal to help her roll him off the woman. Elma pressed a phial into Auron's hand as he stirred.

"All clear, sir. Wanna help your friend?"

Auron grunted and sat up, popping the cap and shaking out wispy feathers in an economical gesture that spoke of years of practice. Glowing filaments rained down on Rikku's face, flared brightly and winked out. After a few seconds, she gasped and rolled over, wrapping her arms around her stomach.

Isaaru hurried over. "Allow me, milady." He spread his hands above hers, gently coaxing her to uncurl.

"Rikku," Auron said. "Your father wasn't in control of his actions."
"Gee, ya think?" she said. "Ow ow OW I think there's something I hate more than lightning."

"I hear ya, Rikku," Gippal said, rubbing his shoulder. "Yo, Shinra, wasn't that energy blaster one of your inventions?"

"Don't look at me. I'm just a kid."

A Curaga or two later, Rikku scrambled to her feet using Auron's coat as a ladder. "Well, that sucked. Did anyone see which way Pops went?"

"No," Nooj said, "but I heard an airship's engines fire fifteen minutes ago. It sounded like the Fahrenheit."

Rikku pressed a fist to her forehead in a gesture reminiscent of Lulu. "Oh, great. Well, um...eh...heh. Gippal, you goin' anywhere? We could use a ride. Like, pronto!"

"Oh, sure," Gippal said. "So we can get blown out of the sky? Remember, Cid's got the big guns."

"But we can't just let him get away!"

"We can't go after him." Maroda spread his hands as several pairs of green eyes turned towards him. "Rikku, look. I know you're worried about your dad. I'd be worried sick. But there's thousands of other lives at stake. If we don't get to Bevelle before Sin gets there—"

"We follow Cid," Auron said.

Maroda was not the only one who gaped. "You've got to be kidding."

Auron stooped, raising Nooj onto his good leg with a scrape of metal on stone. "Family comes first. Let's go."

"Awww," Rikku gave a little hop and tagged after him. "So you can teach an old Yevonite new tricks."

"I've got an ugly feeling about this," Gippal said, following them out.

"Damn him," Maroda said, picking up his spear. "I swear, sooner or later, I'm going to take this and just—"

"First you'll have to remove the one that's there," Gippal called back.

"Sir?" Elma said in a low voice, seeing Isaaru hesitate. "What's wrong?"

Maroda turned. "Isaaru?"

"It's all right." The man wiped away blood pooling in the corners of his eyes. "A moment." He waited for the others to clear the room, then broke into a beaming smile. "We have a weapon, my brother. Seymour's Final Aeon. At last, I have the means to finish our pilgrimage."

"Final Aeon?" Maroda frowned. "That doesn't make sense. How can you have a Final Aeon without a High Summoner?"

"Little about Lord Seymour made sense," Isaaru said. "But my suspicions were correct. He had completed his pilgrimage, but he refused to face Sin. Whether through fear or greed for power, I do not know."
"You don't look well, sir," Elma said.

"Yes." Isaaru grimaced. "The fayth: his own mother. Erinyes, or such is the name she gave me. Half-mad with pain. So long as she thinks I am Seymour, the bond between us may be strong indeed. As strong, perhaps, as a true Final Summoning."

"A lie to fight a lie?" Maroda said.

"Exactly. Fitting, no?" Isaaru said. "But I must ask both of you to keep this a secret."

Maroda nodded. "Yeah. We sure don't want Auron telling Sin about this."

"Sounds risky," Elma said. "What if Erinyes figures out you're not Seymour?"

"I do not know, Commander. But one thing I do know is that we need to get off this island. Our ship is leaving. Come."

They caught up with the others at Gippal's freighter, where Auron and Gippal were lugging Nooj into the hold. Rikku stood at the foot of the ramp, giving orders to a cluster of Al Bhed who had emerged from the tower. She waved at Isaaru. "So, are you guys coming or not?"

"We are," Isaaru said. "Maroda, help with Nooj. Captain Gippal, we beg leave to fly with you again."

"Yeah, sure, just hurry up," Gippal said, swapping out with Maroda. "Nooj, there's a freight elevator behind those gun-racks. Show these flanbrains how to use it. Everybody else, follow me. Let's move, people. Cid's got a big lead. We don't want to lose him." So saying, he jogged to the ladder, disappearing into the darkness overhead.

Rikku scurried up the loading ramp behind the rest of the party as the cargo bay doors began to close. "Shinra!" she said. "You almost squashed me!"

"You're always boasting how quick you are. Come on. Gippal needs us on the flight deck."

Elma and Isaaru trooped after them, while Maroda and Auron wrestled Nooj into the elevator. No explanation proved necessary. Auron had not spent ten years in Zanarkand hiding on Jecht's houseboat.

Nooj watched curiously as Auron operated the illuminated keypad, turning on lights in the dim compartment as it began to creep upwards. "One would think you knew something about machina, Sir Guardian."

"Something."

Maroda shook his head. "Give up, man. He's already said his three words for the day."

The intercom sizzled to life. "Yo. We've got Cid on the scanner. Brace for liftoff." The painful pop as the speaker cut out had barely faded before the ship lurched forward, throwing them against the rear wall. Light panels dimmed momentarily. The lift hesitated as if it might stick, then resumed its slow ascent.
Maroda cursed, taking the brunt of Nooj's metal arm in the ribs. "That guy drives like a maniac."

"This does not surprise me," Nooj said.

Auron shifted his feet, hitching Nooj's arm around his shoulders more securely.

"Don't strain yourself, old man," Maroda said. "You want me to take over?"

Auron said nothing.

Nooj lowered his voice. "It's Sir Auron, isn't it? I seem to have fallen into the company of legends."

"Legendary failures, more like," Maroda said.

"Then I'll fit right in." Nooj shifted his attention to the younger man. "I don't think we've been introduced."

"Oh. Sorry. Captain Maroda, Yocun Lodge, normally stationed in the Calm Lands." He raised his fist in a salute. "Currently on leave for my brother's pilgrimage."

"Maester Isaaru?" Nooj said, putting subtle emphasis on the title.

"Yeah. Well, no, actually. The maester gig is kind of on hold until we knock out Sin. Speaking of which..." Maroda glared at Auron. "What the hell gives you the right to override our pilgrimage? You're a guardian! Your duty is to obey your summoner!"

"Isaaru trusts my advice. You would do well to follow his example."

"My brother is naive. It wouldn't occur to him that you might be buying your lady friend time to blow up the other aeons."

Nooj arched an eyebrow, listening with feigned detachment.

"I yielded to Yuna and Braska," Auron said, impatience seeping out in a growl. "They died. It changed nothing. This time, we do it my way."

"Which is...? Why are we going after Cid and not Sin?"

"A hunch." Auron's stern manner evaporated into a chuckle. "Because it's the right thing to do."

"Like hell it is!"

"Gentleman," Nooj said. "Sin is the least of your problems. If Cid gets his hands on Vegnagun, he'll blast Bevelle off the map."

"Vegnagun?" Maroda said.

"A weapon?" Auron said, suddenly intent.

"I'll explain when we're topside. Everyone needs to hear this. Especially Gippal and Shinra. I owe them an apology," Nooj said. "Once you know what I know, you'll have bigger things to worry about than your quaint little custom of pilgrimage."

Chapter End Notes
Art: Once again, BEHOLD AMAZEBALLS ART by Mintywolf:

Meta: Anima Sola, a "lonely soul" burning in purgatory, is a minor figure in Roman Catholic folk tradition. FFX's Anima seems to be drawing on her iconography.

Chapter Renumbering: this will eventually be Chapter 20.
Family Matters

Chapter Summary

*The Story So Far: Isaaru, Rikku and friends pursue Cid on Gippal's airship. Nooj explains what they're up against, and Rikku makes a call home to check in with Wakka.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Half-carrying Nooj, the two guardians squinted as they emerged onto the sunlit flight deck. Elma and Isaaru turned at the sound of the doors opening behind them, the Crusader flinching at the hiss of pneumatics.

"What's our status?" Auron said.

"Hurry-hurry-he's-getting-away-and-this-bucket-can't-go-any-faster-rific," Rikku said, fidgeting on her feet next to Shinra at the nav console. She pointed through the clear nose of the ship, where a star that was no star flashed above the horizon.

The blue sphere floating at Shinra's elbow displayed two yellow dots creeping across the map. "The Fahrenheit is forty miles ahead, bearing north-northeast," he said.

"Take over for me, Rikku," Gippal said, hopping down from the pilot's seat and jogging back to relieve Auron of his burden. "Thanks, old man. I was beginning to wonder if you'd had a heart attack hauling him up here."

The Al Bhed slipped under Nooj's arm, catching Maroda's eye and jerking his chin towards the ops station. Together they guided Nooj to the chair and strapped him in. A tense semaphore unfolded between old friends: Gippal's gestures zealously casual, Nooj politely impassive, distancing himself from the men manipulating his limbs.

"Nice spread," he said, eyeing the four stations that seemed to be soaring through the sky in formation.

"Didn't quite turn out the way we'd planned, did it?" Gippal said. He jabbed a thumb towards Rikku. "That seat's yours once Shinra's fixed you up, Nooj."

"You'd make me the pilot?" His mouth tightened. "What about Paine?"

"Well, I reckon she'll want the gunner's station." Gippal smiled. "She's alive, Nooj. I haven't seen her in years, but Baralai says she's okay. I was kinda afraid to tell you."

"Thanks. I was afraid to ask, for fear I might—" He stopped, shook his head. "But that's in the past. Once this is over, I'm going to look for her."

"You still have a death wish, man. So, you gonna explain what this is about? And give me some reason to stop watchin' my back every time I check on you?"

"And I thought you were being naive," Nooj said. "But first, let me apologize. To you and Shinra."
And to you also, Rikku. I fear your father's in for a rough time."

"But what's happened to him?" she said. "I didn't think psycho-Noojie-vibes were catching!"

"Not that, at least. Your father has been possessed by Shuyin, a man from Zanarkand killed in the machina wars a thousand years ago, whose soul cries out for vengeance."

"Come again?" Elma said. "Hasn't Sin already sewn up the market on vengeful spirits?"

"A ghost?" Rikku said.

"Unsent," Auron said.

"With a taste for melodrama, looks like," said Gippal. "No wonder it hung out with you, Nooj."

"Shut it."

"So what's Vegnagun?" Maroda said. "Another unsent?"

"Let me start at the beginning." Nooj's expression hardened, eyes locking with Isaaru's. "Thirteen years ago, just before the last Calm, Yevon hatched an ingenious way to rid itself of undesirables: Operation Mi'ihen."

"For which we are still atoning," Isaaru said. Elma's hands tightened into fists.

Nooj's eyes flicked to the Crusader, measuring. "You know of the Crimson Squad, then."

"We've... heard the name," Isaaru said. "I do not know the whole tale, but it is a shadow which haunts Maester Baralai. I gather his whole squadron was massacred. You were there?"

Nooj nodded. "Baralai, Gippal and I. The Crimson Squad was an elite corps trained to assume command of Crusader lodges."

"What?" Elma bristled. "We had excellent officers. It was the maesters who were incompetent!"

"Incompetent, or corrupt?" Nooj said. "Yevon wanted to break you, then control you. I suspect our mission's true purpose was simply to eliminate those who did not fit Yevon's mold. Again he stared at Isaaru, a note of challenge in his voice. "Like the pilgrimage."

"Jackasses," Gippal said under his breath.

Rikku jiggled impatiently. "Um, I get that you guys hate Yevon and all, but what's this got to do with Pops?"

"I'm getting there," Nooj said. "On our last training mission, we were assigned to explore the catacombs under Mushroom Ridge. That's where the entire Crimson Squad was cut down... by one another."

"What?" Isaaru paled. "In Yevon's name---"

"In Yevon's name," Nooj shot back, "we were pitted against an unsent with the power to drive us mad. And Yevon furnished us with machina weapons to make us more lethal than fiends."

Elma groaned. "Maybe the Cult of Sin's right. At least they know their god's out to get them."

Auron gave her a wry look.
"All those pyreflies. That was Shuyin?" Gippal said. "I remember, back in that cave, it felt like somebody else's feelings came crashing over me. I always figured that's what made you short out, Nooj, but I could never work out what the heck it was."

"Shuyin," Nooj said. "An unsent so obsessed with revenge that it's kept him from becoming a fiend for a thousand years. Or rather, he's become something worse."

"Damn," Maroda said. "How did you three survive?"

"Four."

"Four," Nooj's eyes went distant. "We almost didn't. Paine— the sphere recorder assigned to monitor our team— stopped us from shooting each other. But it was too late. Shuyin had already claimed me, although I didn't know it. By the time I became aware of him, I was too weak-willed to fight him off."

"'Cmon, Nooj," Gippal said. "It's not like Elder Cid's a pushover. Seems to me this Shuyin guy targets major buttheads."

"Not quite," Nooj said. "Shuyin feeds on anger and despair."

Rikku drummed her fingertips on the steering yoke. "Pops was pretty pissed, with Home getting blown up and all. D'you think Shuyin would let him go if we could, y'know, cheer him up?"

Nooj laughed. "It won't be that easy. I'm afraid the best way may be to fight your father, disable him, and present Shuyin with another host. Someone expendable."

"I'm not liking where this is going, Nooj," Gippal said.

Auron watched the exchange impassively. "What about Vegnagun?"

"A doomsday weapon built by Bevelle, which Sin— contrary to the fairy tales we're fed in temple — was summoned to counter. Bevelle demanded unconditional surrender, threatening to use its ultimate weapon. Zanarkard's ruler responded by unleashing Sin as a final, suicidal act of defiance. That ruler was named... Yevon."

"Yu Yevon," Isaaru corrected.

Elma sighed. "Not this again."

"You knew?" Nooj's eyes narrowed. "That's right. You're a maester."

"I did not know," Isaaru said, "although I had begun to piece together clues from the archives. Sir Auron confirmed my suspicions about Yu Yevon and Sin—"

Maroda snorted.

"—but this is the first we've heard of Vegnagun."

"For thirteen years, I've searched for it," Nooj said. "There's no sign of it under Lightning Mushroom Rock, in the hidden base where it was constructed. But Shuyin is convinced it survived. He means to use Vegnagun to avenge himself and the woman he loved, shot down by Bevelle's soldiers."

"It's in Bevelle," Shinra said, getting up and moving to the ops station next to Nooj. "Beneath the Tower of Light."

"Under the temple?" Maroda said. "No way."
Nooj chuckled. "I see I wasn't the only one with secrets. Well done, Shinra."

"Don't look at me." He drew out a sphere and slotted it into the console, calling up a schematic. "Baralai sent Cid all his notes on Vegnagun about two weeks ago. He asked us to help him find a way to disable it." Nooj leaned forward to look.

"So that's what Baralai's been hiding," Isaaru said. "A pity he could not trust us in this matter."

"And now Shuyin knows what Cid knows," Nooj said. He gestured towards the navigation scanner. "He's heading to Bevelle. Count on it. If we don't stop him before he reaches Vegnagun, Sin won't find anything left to destroy."

"Maybe we don't want to disable it, though," Maroda said. "Maybe we could use it to fight Sin without anyone getting killed."

"Except Lulu," Rikku said, giving Auron a pleading look.

"Are you crazy?" Elma said. "Even if the teachings are a great steaming pile of chocobo chips, we shouldn't be messing with machina we don't understand! Baralai probably kept this to himself to make sure nobody was stupid enough to try."

"First things first," Rikku said. "If an Al Bhed ship shows up in Bevelle, they're gonna super-freak. And Shuyin might start shooting people if they get in the way, right? So we could have an Al Bhed-Yevon war on our hands! Shinra, can you contact Maester Baralai?"

"Negative. He and Cid communicated by courier."

"That'd be me," Gippal said. "And we're already pushing this rig as fast as it'll go. Cid's a tough guy, Rikku. Hopefully Bevelle's defenses can keep him occupied until we catch up with him."

"I will vouch for you to the other maesters," Isaaru said. "My colleagues have no wish for conflict between our peoples. Shelinda does not trust the Al Bhed, but Baralai does."

"Or did," Nooj said.

"Yeah." Rikku sighed. "Well, anyway, I can knock Pops out with a nightcap when we find him. If it worked on Sir Grumpypants, it'll work on anybody."

"That still leaves Shuyin," Nooj said.

"If he's an unsent," Auron said, "he can be sent."

Isaaru turned to him, a smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. "Are you sure about that, my friend?"

"You're not much of a summoner," Auron said. "But you've performed more sendings than anyone in Spira."

"He has a point, actually," Maroda muttered.

Isaaru gave his brother a warning glance. "Indeed."

"Sounds like a plan." Nooj said. "Assuming any of us survives this, we can argue over what to do with Vegnagun afterwards. If Cid's attack doesn't start a war, that just may."
With many hours before they reached Bevelle, there was nothing to do but secure a meal—requiring some haggling with the ship's captain—and snatch what rest they could. Before turning in, the Crusaders retired to the ship's hold to spar. Elma said she needed to punch something the captain wouldn't charge for breaking, and Maroda had rashly volunteered. Meanwhile, Gippal had taken Nooj and Shinra down to his onboard machine shop to jury-rig something for Nooj's artificial leg. That left Isaaru to meditate in the relative peace of the flight deck, facing the sunset with hands folded and eyes half-closed.

Leaving the autopilot in charge, Rikku puttered at the ops station. "Hey, Auron. Keep an eye on the scanner, will ya? Make sure Pops doesn't stop off in Luca for take-out. I gotta make a call."

Auron came forward, watching the two lights inching over the scanner's sphere. They were flying over open ocean now, with Bikanel creeping past on their left.

Rikku muttered about Wakka leaving the sphere off the charger again. At last the forward canopy turned semi-opaque, projecting an image of Rikku's living room. The view was blocked by a large hand setting the sphere on its stand. Then the picture stabilized to reveal Wakka sitting on the floor, three of the children clambering over him, and a pair of bare feet just visible in the window behind them.

"Hey, Rikku! We were gettin' worried. What's up?"

"We are, Rikku said, eliciting squeaks of laughter from the children. "Bad news, Wakka. You know how Nooj kept going on the fritz? He's given it to Pops."

"Huh?" Wakka leaned forward, peering anxiously. "You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Pops shot things up, but we're all fine. He took off on the Fahrenheit. We're going after him."

"Can't your brother go?" He frowned, peering past her shoulder. "And what are they still doin' there?"

"Pops is headed for Bevelle, so we're giving them a ride. He's got a big head start, Wakka. The Celsius would never catch up. Anyway, Brother's a doofus. He'd totally screw this up."

"But."

"Etta ate some kak-tar seeds!" Mbela interrupted. "He's gonna be a kak-tar!"

The feet in the window behind her wiggled. "Zap zap zap!"

"Then Mum's gonna have to give him tummy-medicine when she gets back," Rikku said.

"Told ya," said Vidina, sprawled across his father's legs.

"Wakka," Rikku said. "We can handle it. Long story, but basically, some crazy unsent has been riding around in Nooj's head like a big fat flea. A ghost flea. Now it's jumped to Pops. We're trying to catch up to him so the summoner can send the ghost and de-Nooj-ify Pops."

"Oh," Wakka said, nonplussed. The chatter of the children rained around him while he digested
this. "Yeah, you gotta take care of your dad. You be real careful, ya?"

"Promise." She winked. "I'll stand behind Auron, okay?"

"Right. Just as long as he's not takin' on something you shouldn't."

"Is Auron there?" Yunie said. All that could be seen of the child was a thistle-top of orange hair sticking up behind Wakka's shoulder.

Auron moved over to stand behind Rikku. "I'm here."

Yunie peeked around her father shyly. "The Lady says she's gonna go talk to the birds and the bees. After that, she's gonna go visit the dragon boy. But you'd better hurry up, 'cause she's running out of ice cream."

The corners of Auron's mouth twitched. "Understood," he said, after a moment's pause. "Thank you, Yuna."

"Okay!" she said, diving out of sight again.

Wakka folded his arms, his glare magnified to alarming proportions by the ship's forward projectors.

"Kids," Rikku said, "Mummy loves you tons, but I've gotta be gone a few days to help Pop-pops. You listen to Dad and pitch in with chores, okay?"

A chorus of mumbles seemed to satisfy her.

"Rikku," Wakka said, cheeks reddening. "I love you lots and lots. Come back soon, ya?"

"I love you too, hon," she said. "Try not to worry too much." She cut the connection and leaned back, slumping after the image of her family had been replaced by empty sky.

"The birds and the bees?" Isaaru said.

"Remiem Temple," Auron said.

"Oh!" Rikku said. "The chocobos and those weird bug sisters."

"And then to Bevelle, no?" Isaaru said. "I suppose your friend is sending us what warning she can, without alarming the child."

"Or alerting Yu Yevon."

The summoner's brows lifted. "I see. Then we must use the time she has given us wisely. So, what is your counsel? Is Vegnagun the answer?"

"It will have to be," Auron said. "Once the aeons are gone, there will be nothing left to stop her."

"Auron!" Rikku said, swiveling in her chair. "Lulu's family too, y'know? You can't just give up on her!"

"I haven't." Auron met Rikku's pleading eyes. Without the armor of his glasses, the haunted strain in his face was more obvious. "Rikku. Understand this. I guard Lord Isatu. But Lulu guides our pilgrimage, just as she guided Yuna. She knows more of Sin and Yu Yevon than anyone. We have to solve the puzzle she's set for us."
"Are you certain it's your friend, not Sin's master, who steers her course now?" Isaaru asked gently. "The Lady is a prisoner, just as Nooj was. Who knows what part of her mind remains her own, after thirteen years?"

"That message did not come from Yu Yevon," Auron said stiffly.

"Yeah, maybe," Rikku put in, "but that doesn't mean she wants you to go chasing after Sin with a whopping thousand-year-old machina. Betcha you're a worse driver than she is."

"Her story can't end here, Rikku. We have to free her, one way or another."

"You know, maybe Maroda was right about you two, kinda." Rikku said, tapping her teeth thoughtfully. "You and Lulu were always on the same wavelength: grump point cynic two five. But you were so busy being badass know-it-all uber-guardians that you never stopped to realize there's more to life than boom and smash and self-sacrifice. It's too bad. You two would've absolutely owned Spira's Hottest Celebrity Couples spherecast."

"Hmph." At least Yunalesca had spared them that annoyance.

"Auron." Rikku cocked her head with that same focused look she got just before darting in to disable a machina. "You miss her too, don't you?"

He stared past Rikku's scrutiny to a horizon that was darkening to lavender. He had never been sentimental about sunsets, but the shade was a reminder of other things he had not permitted himself to be sentimental about. Almost he yielded to Rikku's strategic pestering. Whatever answer he might have given, however, was curtailed by the presence of the summoner behind them.

"We'll get her back, Auron. Pops first, then Lulu. I know we will." Rikku reached out to pat his hand. "I promise."

Chapter End Notes
Chapter renumbering: this will be chapter 21.
Chapter Summary

Isaaru's pilgrimage has hit a few snags: Sin is destroying the temples, Elder Cid of the Al Bhed is about to attack Bevelle, and a sphere left behind by Yuna has revealed the lies of the pilgrimage and Yevon. En route to Bevelle, Auron grapples with his private demons and helps another soldier with hers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The airship soared on through the night sky. There was no sign of Sin, save a thin stripe of corded cloud marching off towards Macalania. The flight deck had emptied two hours ago, after Shinra reprogrammed the autopilot to track their quarry. Now the running lights had dimmed, leaving no visible barrier between its sole occupant and the endless sweep of stars. Sir Auron sat with his back against cold glass, keeping vigil with only his jug of nog for company.

He had spent many such nights on Mt. Gagazet, gazing out across a black abyss just a step beyond the edge of a precipice. Even in Zanarkand, where depth was an illusion and city lights masked the stars, he had found solace on the heights. There, the unsettling tug of the Farplane was ever-present, save when subsumed by ordinary vertigo. It was like fasting: deny simple cravings (step off, the pyreflies would sing; your life is void; run, leap, and go!) and stronger urges could be denied.

Somewhere beyond sight, Lulu (who had been another precipice) was flying blind in a cavernous belly of bone and rot and darkness. Could the Lady see stars from her vile cocoon?

This was the watch they had once shared, the chill midnight hours, guarding younger guardians with a bleak sense of destiny on their shoulders. On most nights, they had barely exchanged a word. Yet there had been a texture and a weight to that silence as solid as a sword's grip.

Until the witch-woman who seemed almost colorless had changed the color of silence itself. Drawn by his difference, she had made an alluring offer. He, to his own surprise, had stepped off. There was something about Lulu's challenge (and not only the enticements of Venus, for he had been propositioned before) that tickled his sense of irony. A woman who meant to die with her summoner, and a man who already knew what death meant: they were the last people who should be trifling with life's distractions. Yet there was a bittersweet pleasure in cheating death for a little while, as she had promised.

They had observed strict rules of engagement, of course. Never on duty, and never unless their summoner was somewhere safe, such as an inn with a Ronso guarding the door. Which meant, for the remainder of the pilgrimage, their silent watches had become an agreeable form of fasting.

The game had nearly been given away when that old coot at the Monster Arena handed over the Mars Sigil. Rikku had snatched it and the Venus Crest from the mage's hair to demonstrate. "Hey, lookit, they fit together!"

"Whoa-ho," Tidus had said. "Hey, Auron—"
Auron's brusque *give me that* had triggered a half-hour sulk from the Al Bhed girl, but he had been trying not to laugh. The prim look on the mage's face had been worth the aggravation of the sigil-quest.

Lulu had caught the glint in his eye, and had spent the rest of the day tormenting him during combat with blatant flirting under the guise of sending fiends to death's loving arms. "Hope you like it hot..." she would purr, scorching a malboro to a husk of withered leaves. Or, "Thirsty?" while quenching the raging fires of a chimera. It was a game she played, and a silly game at that, but it had helped keep him sane.

*Yes, Rikku. I miss her.*

He allowed himself to admit it now, having escorted Rikku to a cabin an hour ago. She had gone without protest, not like the old days, jesting that she'd herded enough cactuars to bed to know better.

"Although I doubt I'll sleep much," Rikku had said. "Really, Auron, it's amazing how trouble follows you around like a bit of toilet paper stuck to your boot."

"*Rikku. We'll find your fa—*"

"*Don't say it.* She'd stuck out her tongue, but the words were too quick and sharp for teasing. "No more promises, 'kay? Although I guess you never gave Tidus any promises."

*The door had cut the space between them while he was still seeking a retort, or adequate words for atonement.*

Isaaru had retired earlier, too. Something was wrong with the man. Auron was hardly in the mood for summoner's games, but he would need to find out what ailed him before they faced Sin. Most likely, Isaaru was suffering from the effects of Sin's attacks on the temples. A part of his soul had been wrested away with every aeon's loss. It was a strain with which Auron could empathize.

*Sleep sharpens swords.* Any soldier past cadet knew the wisdom of that proverb. Yet here Auron was, staying up late with a jug of nog at his knee, sailing through memories to stave off sleep. Would he remember to wake up again? What fee would dreams charge for another day of existence?

Pyreflies danced at the edges of his vision, seeping away when his attention wandered. There were bone-aches in his flesh, bones that throbbed like torn muscle, ghosts of every wound he had ever sustained— before or after death, he could no longer tell. Nor could he remember whether the ale on his lips came from this side of the Farplane.

Lulu was not the only one "running out of ice cream."

"*Enough.*"

Auron set the jug down and pushed it away. Despair made the whine of the pyreflies louder, audible above the ship's engines. It was time to focus.

The next stage of the pilgrimage was clear enough. Fight Cid. Banish Shuyin. Keep away from Isaaru, whose sendings had been giving him headaches. Reach the next treasure chest. The weapon inside would prove useful against their next foe. (*Lulu in that irrevocable moment of despair, sheathed in ice and metal and a tree of lightning six hundred feet high, towering over a Yuna-sized shadow painted onto scorched bedrock.*)
"No. Don't think of that. Keep moving forward. Keep alert for the next opening. There would not be many more.

Using Vegnagun was risky, but Auron had almost given up trying to save the world. He'd settle for satisfying one damned oath before the pyreflies won.

Approaching footsteps yanked him back to the here and now. The aft doors whisked open. A wiry figure stepped out. It was not Rikku, as he thought for a moment, but the Crusader woman still dressed in Al Bhed garb, silhouetted against amber light spilling out from the corridor. He shielded his eyes with his glove until the doors closed.

Elma halted, waiting for her eyes to adjust. There was a sag in her stance that he had not seen before, not even after the first Operation Mi'ihen. He heard the release of a held breath.

Then she caught sight of him. "Oh! My apologies, sir!" She straightened at once, squaring her shoulders to parade attention. "I can go, if—"

"It's fine." He gestured to the floor next to him, a silent challenge. "Sit."

"Er...thank you, sir." She hesitated at the joint between metal deckplates and textured glass. Tiny blue safety lights on the floor were the only sign that she was not stepping out over a void. "I still don't know whether to atone or beg for a tour of duty as Al Bhed liaison. I wonder what the general would think."

When she had settled against wall and pulled her knees into her chest, Auron pushed the jug towards her.

"Heh. That obvious, eh?" She leaned over to take the offering. "You know, I was starting to think this was just for show. Lady Rikku said you never had much use for R&R."

"Not much time."

"Next Calm, maybe?"

Auron shrugged. "Maybe." Whatever the Farplane was really like, he was certain Yevon's paradise of wildflowers and waterfalls was a lie.

"Yeah. Gotta admit, I'm not in the mood for blitzball myself right now." She raised the jug, composed herself, and began a rhythmic chant that petered out all too soon. "Luzzu. Kyou. Kento. Velitz. And... whoever the hell else we've lost." Anger capped the prayer instead of the customary Yevon guide them. She tossed the brew back. Then she was gasping, laughing as her eyes teared up. "Whoa! Kulukan's ale. I'd almost forgotten the stuff, since shipments got scarce."

Silence fell. Auron supposed the woman was pondering how to pose the question that was gnawing at her. That, or she was mentally cataloging corpses. There would be forms to file, letters to write home, posthumous awards to be pinned to empty shrouds. Unlike Kinoc, she did not seem the sort to delegate those duties.

"I should apologize," he said.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Djose."

"Oh. Phllltt. Don't even." She waved a hand. "We're soldiers, sir. We know missions may fail. I
just wish I hadn't abandoned them like this. They probably think I'm dead, too." Fingernails dug into her knee, and she took another drink, longer than the first. "At least the general's there to look after 'em."

Another story dangled in the gaps between her words. An old story, as old as war itself, which the temples had been trying to hush ever since Lady Yocun and Lilith had turned their bond into another heretic summoner's triumph. Auron wondered if Maechen included their tale in his ramblings.

"There is one thing, sir," Elma said. "Would you mind a nosy question?"

"Go ahead."

"Thank you, sir." Elma laid down a screen of words while she collected her thoughts. "It's funny. I used to be the go-to officer for the cadets, the night before their first battle. They'd call me 'Mom' behind my back. You know, those islander kids... never handled anything more dangerous than a blitzball before. And now... here I am." She snorted. "So, anyway. How did you keep going, after you found out Yevon was a flat-out lie?"

"It was... difficult." Particularly the getting-killed part.

"No kidding." She gave him a look that was two parts admiration, one part exasperation. "Come to think of it, Yevon stabbed you in the back coming and going on Lord Braska's pilgrimage, didn't it?"

"You could put it that way."

"Ugh." She shivered. The tank top and cargo pants Rikku had given her were no protection against the chill seeping through glass. She took another sip and scooted away from the wall. "The Four Maesters tried so hard to restore our faith in Yevon, after Lord Mika's passing. Now..."

Auron leaned forward, suddenly alert. "How did he die?"

"Who? Oh, Lord Mika." She gave a tight, mirthless grin. "Yeah. Sometimes I wonder about that, too. The official word was that he died in his private chapel, praying for peace, but I think he committed suicide. When Lord Isaaru got back from Mt. Gagazet with news of the Ronso massacre, there was rioting in the streets. Monks firing on civilians, Crusaders fighting with warrior monks, priests holed up in the temple refusing sanctuary to anybody...it wasn't exactly Yevon's finest hour. The shame was probably too much for him."

Yevon, business as usual: shameless leaders supported by the ignorance of the honorable.

"So Lucil got recalled to St. Bevelle to help sort out the mess. I thought we were gonna be executed for treason like poor O'aka. She and I had gone to protect the rebels in Besaid after the order came down to kill Lady Yuna." She smiled crookedly. "We didn't know what to do, sir, but we couldn't do that."

"Thanks." Another irony: Lulu had wiped out the one village that had defied Yevon for Yuna's sake.

Auron noted this story's discrepancies with Isaarur's and Pace's accounts. It might have no bearing on Spira's current problems, but clearly, someone was being less than forthcoming about the manner of Mika's "death." He needed to make sure they were actually lying, and not merely mistaken. Already there were too many unsents causing headaches for the living, and he did not exclude himself.
"So, anyway." Elma pressed her fingertips against her forehead, massaging in small circles. "I don't know what I'm going to tell my troops. 'Sure, go ahead, use forbidden machina. All that Yevon stuff was only hazing.' Like when they make recruits eat gysahl greens until they throw up."

"What did you tell your cadets before battle?" Auron said. "The teachings, or lessons based on your own experience?"

"Oh." Elma pondered. "Both, really. But more the latter, come to think of it."

"The church wanted you to forget that 'teachings' are only lessons, a manual written by priests. The true test comes on the battlefield. Keep what works, discard the rest."

"Hmm." She mulled this over. "I think that works. Thank you, sir."

He nodded, sinking back behind his collar.

Elma took a final swig, capped the jug and pushed it back across the floor to him. Trying not to look down, she stood carefully and moved towards the doors, flinching as they slid open. There she hesitated. "Er. If you don't mind answering, sir, what did you keep?"

There it was: the only answer that really mattered, the phylactery that kept fiend's madness at bay.

"Loyalty."

Auron would have left it at that. However, there might be grim tidings waiting for them in Bevelle. Better for her to face that battle now. "To friends. And to the fallen."

She stiffened. It might have been kinder to remind her of unspoken fears while she was still holding the jug. "I... I think I can manage that, sir."

"Good."

The woman drew herself erect and clenched a fist over her heart in a salute. "Goodnight, sir. Get some rest."

Three ships cut through Spira's sky, steered by a madman, a goddess, and no pilot at all.

Auron did not sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Illustration by author: "Tatehiza"
(Chapter 22 in the remaster.)
Chapter Summary

The Story So Far: Elder Cid has been possessed by an angry spirit bent on revenge, and launches an attack on Bevelle. Isaaru and his Al Bhed allies give chase, but their arrival in Yevon's capital is not welcomed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"May I have your attention, guys and garudas! This is your wake-up call. Rise and shine! We hit Bevelle in twenty minutes."

"Hopefully without leaving a crater," Maroda muttered as he and his brother stepped onto the bridge.

Gippal, slouched in the pilot's seat, tossed a vague wave over his shoulder. "Yo, Yevon-dudes. Prepare for Operation Freak the Hell Out of Bevelle."

"It's already started," Shinra said, hunched over his console. "I'm reading energy discharge."

"How bad?" Maroda said.

Ruby light splashed the northern sky, stamping the shapes of towers and terraces upon the horizon. In the blackness that followed, scattered orange splinters remained, twinkling like stars of ill-omen. The real stars had vanished, veiled by a skin of cloud thickening into thunderheads to the east: Sin's tracks, an even more ominous reminder.

"Hard to say," Shinra said. "The causeway's on fire. Some rooftops and towers."

There was another soundless explosion, this time spraying the clouds with lime-green light as well as red. A flower of orange and gold blossomed from some high point over the city and began to burn like a beacon-fire.

"The Tower of Light," Isaaru guessed, cupping his hands in prayer. "Yevon grant that we may be in time."

"Macalania," Auron said, moving back to join Isaaru and Maroda. "Tell them."

"Oh, right." Shinra pointed down, where the gloom seemed more gray than black. There was a moving shimmer far below them, the airship's reflection. "It's frozen solid."

"That's how it's supposed to be," Maroda said. "It's always frozen."

Isaaru nodded. "I hope to visit the temple after we've dealt with Cid."

"Unlikely," Shinra said. "The temple's embedded in the ice. My best guess is that Sin thawed the lake, flooded it, and re-froze it. You'd need mining equipment to get down there."
"No!" Isaaru's face contorted in a fleeting spasm. "Captain, we have to help them. Your weapons: have you any with the power to—"

"Belay that," Auron said. "They're already dead."

"It wouldn't work, anyway," Shinra said. "We'd just pulverize the temple."

The summoner wiped his eyes, struggling to master himself. "There was a monastery," he said, "and a score of acolytes. I sent two orphans there just last month to begin their training."

"Sorry, man," Gippal said. "Heck of a way to go."

"Dammit!" Maroda turned on Auron. "You'd better hope your friend dies when we take on Sin, mister. Everyone in Spira's gonna be calling for her execution!"

Auron gave him a stony look.

"Maroda," Isaaru said. "Please. The Lady has no choice about Sin's predations, whatever the Cult of Sin may say."

"Like hell she doesn't! She chose to become Sin, right? Now she's choosing her targets! And if you don't think—"

The doors whisked open again. Elma marched onto the flight deck. Nooj, whose new artificial leg looked like a modified gunstock, was leaning on her shoulder. If the Crusader felt any discomfort from the grip of cold machina, she concealed it with a wink at Isaaru.

"Report," Nooj said, ignoring the one-sided shouting match between Maroda and Auron.

"Cid took some shots on the way in. Fifteen minutes to intercept." Gippal slapped the intercom again. "Yo, Rikku, the party's leavin' without you."

"Mmmrph," came a sleepy reply. "Vilg oui, Gip."

"Love to, babe, but Wakka'd use my head for a blitzball. Hurry up. Meet the landing party in the hold."

As they streaked towards the Tower of Light, it rose high above the citadel, living up to its name in dramatic fashion. Its crown of aerial walkways, where Yuna had once wed in unholy matrimony, was now one vast torch. Flaming debris rained down on the palace below, showing fleeting glimpses of domes, flying buttresses, promenades and piazzas.

"Where's Cid?" Nooj said.

"Crash landed," Shinra said. He pointed towards a cluster of green flames and smoke on the far side of the tower. "Northeast sector, right near the temple."

"Crashed?" Elma said, with a rising squeak that betrayed her fears. "You don't think Cid is—"

"It doesn't matter," Nooj said. "Shuyin will seek a new host."

"Doesn't matter?" Gippal said. "Hey, Nooj, Vegnagun may be your first priority, but mine is getting Elder Cid back in one piece."

"Let's hear it," said Nooj.

"It's using a pyrefly interface. It can read minds at close range. If anyone approaches it with intent to disable, a robust cascading self-defense program kicks in. It may take aggressive countermeasures or even retreat to the Farplane. That's probably why Maester Baralai wanted someone working on the problem remotely."

"Not just because you're a genius?"

"That too." Shinra said. "But I need more time. I'm still analyzing the sphere data he sent us."

"We'll try and buy you that time, kid."

"Translation?" Elma said.

"Don't even think about trying to disable it," Shinra said. "Avoid using weapons near it that could damage it. No high-powered guns. No explosives."

Elma snorted. "No problem there."

"Someone had better sit on Rikku," Gippal said.

The airship had reached the open water southwest of the capital, where Bevelle's merchant fleet was moored. Gippal eased the ship down, following the burning Highbridge across the bay. Ahead, Bevelle reared up behind mighty sea-walls, a manmade fortified mountain. By night, the city gave only a vague impression of looming mass.

"Something's wrong," Maroda said. "I can't see any lights."

"That burning tower works pretty well," Shinra said.

"That's not what I meant," said Maroda.

"Captain Kiyuri," Isaaru said with sudden hope. "If she risked Sin's waters to take the direct route to Bevelle, she could have conveyed my warning by now. Baralai and Shelinda may have evacuated the city prior to Sin's arrival."

"Seven minutes," Gippal said, banking the ship as a warning sensor gave a shrill chirp. The view around the cockpit vanished as they plunged into a curtain of smoke. "I'm gonna try to put down in the plaza behind the tower, near Cid. Get to the hold and find something to hang onto."

"Thank you, Captain," Isaaru said. "Good luck."

"And you. Oh...Auron? Almost forgot. Your sword's in the first gun rack to the left of the ladder. Sorry I didn't give it to you yesterday: Cid's orders. You guys are so friggin' clueless. Didn't you realize I'd taken you all prisoner?"

"Yes," Auron said.

"Heh. Guess that's one way to see the boss. Now hurry up and go find him!"
onto its frame as the ship lurched. "Here we go again."

Auron set his hand on a grip protruding from the shadows. He drew out the blade whose weight and balance were almost a part of himself. A new sheath had been tooled to match it, two strips of black metal bolted around an inner leather sleeve. The sheath bore no glyphs or decoration, but a crude talisman was bound to the sword's hilt.

"Well, I'll be," Maroda said. "Looks like Auron's girlfriend left a love token."

"Play nice, boys," Rikku said. "I gotta save my stun grenades for Pops."

"It's a sign, no?" Isaaru said. "The Lady blesses our endeavor."

Stiffened by seawater, a leather thong had tangled around the hand-guard in a crisscross pattern. A triangle of bone peeped out from the webbing, held fast against the scrollwork that was the sword's only ornamentation. Auron touched the crude likeness of Lulu's face in mute greeting, then slung the sword over his back, anchoring the straps to his belt and gorget.

Elma and Nooj emerged from the freight elevator just as the floor gave a violent shudder. The Crusader heaved him against the wall to keep him upright.

"Thanks," Nooj said, wedging his metal arm into a gun rack to steady them.

"Is he trying to get us killed?" Maroda said, staying on the floor where the jolt had thrown him. "This is some ride."

There was a loud bang. Air began to whistle loudly through the seals around the loading ramp in the floor.

"Um," Rikku said. "I don't think that's Gippal's fault. That's coming from outside."

"Machina weapons," Nooj said. "Typical Yevon piety."

"Can we take cover somehow?" Elma said. "I don't fancy getting my toes blown off by Maester Baralai's cannons."

"Get in the flyer," Rikku said. "It may not help much, but it's a few more layers of metal."

They staggered and crawled to the small craft clamped to the floor. Auron heaved them over the side as the buffeting worsened.

The final minutes of descent were an escalating nightmare. Spilling out of equipment racks, weapons and supply canisters bounced around the hold like pebbles in a child's rattle. The light panels wavered and failed, plunging them into darkness. The party clung to one another as the flyer shook loose from its moorings and began to skitter around the floor. The hull groaned and boomed under the hail of heavy artillery as if Sin were trying to hammer its way in with its tail. As the shaking intensified, the loading ramp dropped partway open, twisted with a ponderous shriek, and peeled away. Orange light flickered against the ceiling through the breach. From their current position, the helpless passengers could not tell the size of the rupture, but the squeal of wind and metal suggested it was growing larger by the second. They had no way to know whether the ship's violent pitching was the pilot's attempt at evasive action, or loss of control as the vessel began to tear itself apart.

At last, with a wallowing shudder, the ship came to a stop, miraculously still aloft. The barrage of weapons fire continued, but it had changed from the thudding of shells to the pop of bullets, some
of them rattling around the hold.

"Will you guys cut it out?" Rikku shouted, her shrill voice piercing through the din. "D'you want to get your own maester killed? We've got Isaaru!"

Gunfire died away. Groans, curses, and the creak of the ship's joints filled the silence as the battered group lay in the bed of the flyer, too stunned to move or speak.

A woman's voice boomed out from below. "You have five minutes to surrender, or we'll kill Elder Cid."

"Paine?" Nooj said, stirring under the ceiling panel that had fallen across him. "It seems Fate is toying with us."

Chapter End Notes

"Bevelle Burning" by author

Chapter renumbering: this is Ch. 23 in the remaster.
The Story So Far: Isaaru's pilgrimage against Sin has been put on hold to deal with a new threat: Elder Cid has been possessed by a vengeful spirit bent on using a doomsday weapon against Bevelle. Isaaru's party receives a prickly reception from the warrior monks and Maester Baralai.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Paine?" Isaaru said. "Nay, that is Juno, Captain of the Guard."

"That's all we need," said Elma.

"Lemme go, you big lunk!" Rikku said, squirming under Auron's coat. "They've got Pops!"

"Rikku, he's right," Maroda said. "They're bluffing. But they might shoot you."

Some kinder god than Yevon had kept anyone from tumbling through the gaping rent in the floor. The only serious wound among them was a bloody gash in Maroda's forehead. Isaaru was patching him with *Cura* and providing a patient ear to his swearing. A burst of static from the intercom suggested that someone, at least, was still alive on the flight deck, but whatever Gippal or Shinra had to say was unintelligible.

Auron released his grip on Rikku and stood, shouldering away fallen gratings and pipes. "Wait here."

"Sir Auron!" Isaaru said, attention divided between white magic and wayward guardian.

"Let your guardians handle this," Auron said. The flyer shifted under his weight as he vaulted over the railing, giving Maroda something else to grumble about.

"I'll go too. Captain Juno knows me," Elma said, shaking off the terror that had reduced hardened soldier to a knot of limbs wrapped around a seat for the last three minutes of descent. "We'll get this sorted out, Rikku, don't worry."

Despite her agility, the Crusader lagged behind, laboring over the alien landscape of crates and fallen racks reduced to confusing heaps of shadow. Auron hopped from one precarious foothold to the next, careless of jagged metal. He halted at the buckled edge looking down, put out a foot and stepped off. They saw his coat fly up, flapping, as he dropped from sight.

Hitting the ground hard, Auron crumpled to his knees in a semicircle of warrior monks he had surveyed from above. The muzzles of their rifles lowered like booms, tracking him as he came down. So far so good. The hiss of drawn steel on his blind side, less good. That meant another gamble. Auron resisted the urge to draw and parry. A sword almost as large as his own flashed out in an arc that ended with the sharpened edge resting against his collar.

Finding his head still attached, Auron played out his hand. "We surrender," he said. "Where's
"Who's we?" the woman demanded, setting her left hand under her right and doubling her grip in a silent message whose language he well understood.

There was a crash and spray of sparks on the pavement behind her. Another section of the tower's high walkways had fallen and shattered on impact. Warrior monks scattered, dodging flying embers. Their leader did not budge.

"Auron," he said. "Guardian to Summoner Isaaru. We've come to stop Cid."

Crimson eyes narrowed behind the slit of the woman's helm. That minute gesture threw him off-balance as the sword had not. The world flipped inside-out. It felt as if he were a Farplane ghost gazing up (or down?) at one of the living. Monk's armor masked her features, yet the lean woman who spoke with a sword could have been his own child challenging him with Lulu's calculating gaze. There was even a silver ponytail curled on her shoulder, mirror to his. What was it Nooj had said? Fate toying with us. But no, this was no girl-child of thirteen. Auron purged his mind of ridiculous thoughts before the pyreflies came nagging.

"On an Al Bhed ship?" she said.

Several rifles swung away from him. Elma had used the brief distraction of falling debris to cover her own jump. She rolled and came up in a crouch with her hands raised. "Tell your men to hold their fire, Captain," she said. "He's telling the truth. Let us pass. Bevelle's safety depends on it."

"Commander?" The captain's shock was subsumed in a frown. "You were last seen at Djose, presumed dead, leading a forbidden operation against Sin. You return in an Al Bhed ship, wearing Al Bhed issue, on the eve of an Al Bhed attack. I repeat, who is 'we'?"

"Lord Isaaru, his guardians, and Cid's people, who aren't any happier about this attack than we are," Elma said. "Come on, Captain. You know I'd never sell out my own troops."

"Then...why?"

"We don't have time for a full debriefing!" Elma snapped. "Look. We were trying to save the fayth statue at Djose, got caught in Sin's backwash, and it chucked us out in Al Bhed territory. When we arrived, Elder Cid went berserk. He shot us— even shot his own daughter— and took off for Bevelle. He's not in control of his actions, Juno. Some kind of spirit's possessed him. I know it sounds crazy."

"Yes," the woman said, voice and mouth going flat. "Yes, it does." She stepped back, lifting her sword up and away. "Cid's in custody. Tell Isaaru to get down here."

"You'll vouch for his safety?" Auron said.

She shrugged. "That's up to Maester Baralai. He'll be along shortly."

Stalemate, but at least it was one step further. Auron waited until her followers had lowered their weapons, then raised a fist.

"Whoa, whoa!" Rikku's voice drifted down from above. "Lemme open the emergency chute. We don't all have to be showoffs."

There was a brief delay while an inflatable ramp unfurled, to the consternation of the palace guards. Rikku bounded down first, running smack into Auron's arm as the row of rifles came back
"Pops," she said, going white.

On the far side of the plaza from the palace, lying across the broken spires of the College of St. Bevelle, a dark hulk lay smoking like the bones of a whale carcass silhouetted against the ruddy sky. Green flames danced over the ruptured bulbs of exploded fuel tanks. A reek of burning fuel and metal hung in the air, reminding him of Zanarkand's death-throes. Fate had finally caught up with a thousand-year-old-relic from that ancient city.

"He's alive," Juno said. "We found Cid unconscious on the street. No sign of other survivors."

"Yeah, he took off without a crew." Rikku exhaled. "Look, I know you're pretty pissed at him and all, but he's still my dad. I've gotta see him."

She might as well have petitioned a streetlamp. Juno had gone rigid, staring at Nooj disentangling himself from the ramp's fabric, which had snagged on his artificial leg. Eyeing her, Auron moved to shield Isaaru.

"Paine," Nooj said, meeting her scrutiny with a melancholy smile. "Good to see you're all right."

Coolly, she turned away from him and addressed the rest of the party. "Lord Isaaru. If you and your guardians would come this way, please."

"Juno, wait!" A man too young for his white hair had emerged from the palace along with a ragged group of clergy. Stumbling, coughing, some were barely moving under their own power. He passed off the young acolyte he was carrying to two monks and hurried towards Juno. "We need to get the injured to safety. Can you spare some of your squad?"

She nodded. "Lassen. Virocha. Rand. Escort the wounded to Yuna's Cloister." Three warrior monks saluted and shouldered their rifles, moving off to join the evacuees.

"Good work." Baralai halted beside her, breathing hard. His face, hair and clothes were sooty, and the hem of his coat was burnt. "Is this all of them?"

"There may be more on the ship."

"Maester Baralai." Isaaru bowed deeply in Yevon's prayer. "Are you hurt? Please allow me to—"

"Summoner Isaaru." Baralai's hand dropped to a compact sidearm, twin to the one that hung on Juno's hip. "I must compliment you on a brilliantly-executed pilgrimage... or, should I say, a coup?"

"Baralai, you misunderstand—"

"Do I?" He took a step to one side, smiling grimly as Auron moved to mirror him. "A mock pilgrimage to win the people of Spira to your side. A new Operation Mi'ihen, expressly against the oath we swore when we four took office. The southern Crusaders and Maester Lucil neutralized at Djose. Orders sent to Bevelle for mass evacuations, ensuring that Shelinda and I would be distracted, the city plunged in chaos. And Sin, after two years in which it has been a threat to no one, targeting vital centers of Yevon while sparing the Al Bhed. I'd like to know what you're using to control it."

"Neutralized?" Elma said, facing off with Juno. Elma and Maroda were shoulder to shoulder with Auron now.
"Hey!" Rikku said. "For your information, Sin just attacked us!"

"So you say." Baralai gestured to the palace complex, whose roofs were starting to catch fire. "But this isn't Sin's doing, is it? You probably thought we'd have evacuated by now. The perfect cover for Isaaru to seize Vegnagun with his Al Bhed friends."

"Baralai!" Gippal called. He was skiing down the ramp behind Nooj. "Come on, man. You think I'd go along with that kind of double-faced Yevon crap?"

"You tell me," Baralai said. "Three weeks ago, I entrusted you with a classified sphere to deliver to Elder Cid. Now he launches an attack. You arrive right behind him with Nooj, of all people. Something doesn't add up."

"That's what we're trying to tell you!" Rikku said, waving her hands in frustration. "My Pops is out of control! We've got to stop him!"

"Baralai," Isaaru said. "I understand your doubts. But something has happened to Elder Cid. The same thing that happened to your friend Nooj thirteen years ago, when your squadron was destroyed by something that seized men's minds."

"He's right," Nooj said, stepping out from behind the wall of guardians. "If you want to shoot someone, shoot me. But let them pass. If Cid reaches Vegnagun, Spira doesn't stand a chance."

"I don't take orders from you anymore, Nooj," Baralai said. He raised his gun. "But maybe I'll make an exception, for old time's sake."

Gippal made an abortive move towards his own weapon, scanning the ring of warrior monks whose rifles were already raised. "Not cool, Baralai. You know that's what he wants."

"Is it?" Baralai said. "Whose death are you seeking, Nooj? Yours... or ours?"

Nooj gave a thin smile and raised his empty hand, palm outward. The other gripped a metal pipe he was using as a cane.

"Don't." Juno flicked up her sword, blocking Baralai's aim.

"He shot us in the back, Paine," Baralai said. "He shot you in the face."

"Paine's dead," she said. "But they might be telling the truth."

A commotion had broken out on one of the terraces ringing the College. "What now?" Baralai sighed and lowered his weapon. "All right. Lock them up, Captain."

"Maester Baralai!" a soldier shouted, running towards them. "The prisoner's escaped! We're searching for him now, sir!"

"What?" Baralai said. "Juno, have your men seal off the—"

"Don't breathe!" Rikku shouted.

A handful of pellets showered down, exploding in bright yellow flashes. Bullets skipped harmlessly against the pavement when the arms holding rifles slackened. In surreal unison, the entire circle of warrior monks slumped to the ground along with Baralai and Juno. Most of Isaaru's party managed to stagger clear, eyes streaming.

"Yeah!" Rikku jabbed her fists in the air. "Oh, whoops. Remedies on Isaaru and Machina Man. 
Hang on, Maroda, let the pollen settle a bit, or you'll need one too. Gippal, is Shinra okay?"

"Mm-hm. He's just minding the shop. Yo, Elma, gimme one of those." Gippal waited for the cloud to dissipate, then trotted back to rouse Nooj while Elma and Maroda tended Isaaru.

Leaning on them, Isaaru peered groggily at the semicircle of prone monks. "Oh, dear. I do hope they're all right."

"No time." Auron turned towards the palace. "Look."

Dodging smoldering wreckage, a blocky figure had emerged from the side-terrace and was dashing across the plaza. Armored soldiers rattled in pursuit. All but one of them balked outside the palace entrance, craning their necks and pointing at the flames and smoke curling over the roof. One kept going, disappearing through the open doors on Cid's heels.

"Come on!" Rikku said.

"Hey, Nooj, you coming?" Gippal held out an arm. "Ferry's leaving the dock."

"No," Nooj said. "I'll slow you down. Get going."

"In that case, I'm staying too." Gippal waved a hand. "Remember what I said, Auron. Cid'll take it out of my hide if you kill him."

"Understood." Auron followed Rikku, who was already pelting after her father. The others hurried to catch up.

"Good luck," Elma called over her shoulder.

"You too, babe. Hey, after this is over, I know this great restaurant in Luca—"

Nooj gave a soft snort. "Save your breath."

"What?" Gippal retrieved Nooj's prop and set it under his hand. "Okay, so, Vegnagun and Sin are about to blow this joint to smithereens. But just in case—"

"Forget it." He looked down at the sprawl of bodies around them. "Nightcap. About ten minutes, right?"

"You sure you wanna be here when they wake up?" Gippal nudged Baralai with a foot. "This isn't gonna be pretty."

"Juno."

"Yeah, I noticed. Bar said she'd changed a lot." Gippal stooped to pry Baralai's pistol out of his fingers and tossed it away. "Your call. I could still use a navigator, after all."

Chapter End Notes
Meta: Posting Maester Lucil in Luca and Maester Baralai in Bevelle, with the Grand Maester traveling frequently between the two, solves the problem that the two main power/population centers of Yevon are widely separated. But it reprises old regional and political tensions between warrior monks and Crusaders. (See my geopolitics in FFX post). There's always the fear a maester and/or populist leader trying to seize power might use one branch of the military or the other as pawns, or tip the balance of power between them.

Chapter Renumbering: This is Ch. 24 in the remaster.
Chapter Summary

The Story So Far: Isaaru's party pursues Elder Cid inside the palace, trying to stop him from reaching Vegnagun. Nooj and Gippal stay behind to deal with old friends.

Chapter Notes

"The illusion which exalts us is dearer to us then ten-thousand truths." -- Alexander Pushkin

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Um... you should know, I can knock all of you down," Rikku said, wedged behind one of the ornamental buttresses flanking the entrance.

Grim-faced warrior monks closed on her position with raised bayonets. There was no answering explosion, despite Al Bhed bravado. She must be running low on Funguar pollen capsules.

Charging towards them, Auron was reminded why he had resisted standard warrior monk issue. Only one man turned at the sound of footsteps before he barreled into them.

Two went down. Auron swept an arm out, scooping Rikku from her hiding place and hustling her bodily across the threshold. She gave an indignant yelp, but had the sense to start running as soon as her heels struck the ground instead of his knees. Together they plunged into the darkness beyond the open portal. Soldiers fired wildly after them.

"Some guardian," Maroda said.

"Rikku's more of a target than Isaaru," Elma said, marching shoulder to shoulder with him in front of his brother.

"You're dressed like her, you know," Maroda said. Any moment, the warrior monks would turn and see them.

"Well, good! Then they won't aim at Isaaru!"

"Stop!" Isaaru shouted. "In Yevon's name, stop! Isaaru commands you!"

It seemed these warrior monks had not yet heard of his apostasy.

"Lord Isaaru!"

"Grand Maester Isaaru!"

The gunfire died away, leaving silence in a vast plaza usually buzzing with life. Heaps of wreckage from the Tower of Light lay piled up around the palace gates like burned-out bonfires. Every
window and streetlamp was dark, save for flickering orange reflections. Overhead, a low ceiling of lumpy smoke had taken on the texture of a glowing bed of coals, growing brighter as the fires began to spread. Proud Bevelle was bleeding flames from many small wounds, and there were few inhabitants left to witness its creeping ruin.

The warrior monks swarmed around Isaaru, touching his robes as if they conferred a blessing. Several bayonets swung in Elma's direction.

Exuding calm, Isaaru moved easily among them, clapping the shoulder of a man who had his gun trained on Elma. "Easy, old friend. That was Sir Auron and Lady Rikku, former guardians to High Summoner Yuna. These two you know: Captain Maroda and Commander Elma."

Stunned murmurs of Sir Auron rippled from lip to lip, prompting a snort from Maroda.

"Your Grace!" The man he had addressed spoke gruffly, fighting tears. "Why, you've got the nerve, breezin' back in the dead o' night in the middle o' bedlam, with no one the wiser! Your brother said you'd died at Djose!"

"Pacce?" Maroda said, suddenly animated. "He's here?"

"Aye, sir, you just missed him! He chased the prisoner inside!"

"Then so shall we," Isaaru said. "Sergeant, do you know Lady Shelinda's whereabouts?"

"Aye, milord. Northgate, overseeing the evacuation. But Maester Baralai—"

"Lord Baralai and Captain Juno have evacuated the palace and taken the wounded to Yuna's Cloister. Collect your squad and report to Lady Shelinda. I and my guardians will recapture Cid."

"But, Your Grace, the tower's a-fire!"


"Sergeant Wedge?" Elma said, her hesitation a minor but uncharacteristic breach of duty.

"Commander?" The man peered. "I thought you were one o' them heathen Al Bhed."

"A disguise. Do you know if—" She stopped short, grimaced, and held out her hand. "Oh, forget it. Give me your nightstick. I left my sword in Djose."

"Ma'am." He unclipped the metal baton from his belt and handed it over.

"Sure you don't want to borrow a rifle, Commander?" Maroda teased.

"Choke on a chocobo chip, Captain," She nodded to Wedge. "Thanks. Get your men to safety, Sergeant."

Maroda led the way into the cavernous entrance hall. The only illumination came from ruddy light beating down through clerestory windows. Despite the haze of smoke hanging in the air, the fires had not yet penetrated this section of the palace. The trio's footsteps echoed between massive columns, unseen tapestries and dead sphere-torches hanging in sconces.

Isaaru turned to Elma. "Commander, if it would ease your mind, go back and ask about Lucil."

"Nah, they're warrior monks. Can't expect 'em to know a thing," Elma said, clinging to a dogged
grin. "Anyway, I know the general's alive. Pacce can fill me in when we find him."

"He's a warrior monk too, remember?" Maroda said.

"That explains why he got MIA and KIA mixed up."

"He believes us dead," Isaaru said. "We must relieve the burden of his mind as soon as possible."

They caught up with Auron and Rikku at the first junction. Auron was waiting like a stump. Rikku prowled around him in a restless orbit, using a lightning marble as a lantern.

As the others drew near, her whispers resolved into words. "...and enough with the smug-and-cryptic routine, already! You were a monk here, weren't you? You've got to know which way leads to the temple! We can't afford to wait for those—" She broke off, reverting to a normal volume. "Oh, hey, there you are. Did you guys stop off in Lulu's leather emporium to do some shopping, or what? Let's scoot!"

"Sorry, my lady," Isaaru said. "I needed to put off pursuit. But fear not. Your father and Shuyin are strangers to St. Bevelle. Yevon willing, we shall reach the Cloisters first and waylay them there."

"Assuming we don't get roasted," Maroda observed, pointing his spear up at the clerestory windows showing the nearby Tower of Light, its shaft now fully engulfed in flames. "Temple's right under that."

"Then it's fortunate I've a spell against fire, no?" Isaaru said. "Lead on, my brother."

As they penetrated deeper into the palace, the threat from above grew greater. Several times, they were forced to divert around smoke-filled passages. The ceiling of one room was beginning to smolder. Isaaru lagged behind, letting Auron overtake him. The summoner's breathing was labored, although he made no complaint. He seemed to be fighting the weight of his robes as they hurried through the palace.

"Problem?" Auron said, eye fixed on the others marching ahead.

"Perhaps." Isaaru lowered his voice. "Elma. I fear she is a target for Shuyin in her current state."

"If you send Shuyin, it won't matter."

"Of course. But the sending of an unwilling spirit is difficult, as well you know. I must draw close to Cid, so there will be no error. Then you must stand well back."

Auron gave him a sidelong glower.

Isaaru winked. "Your task will be to draw her away, no?"

"You should trust your guardians."

"You should trust your summoner," Isaaru said. "Please, humor me."

"As you wish."

"Well, here we are," Maroda called, standing at the head of a shallow flight of curving steps that ended at an ornate portal surmounted by Yevon's glyphs. "You two coming?" he said, turning back to glare at Auron, as if he were the cause of Isaaru's dawdling.

"Finally," Rikku said, putting her hands on the wide metal bars that served as handles. "Ow!" She
jerked away, blowing on her fingers. "Hot!"

"Stand back," Auron said. Mounting the steps between them, he set his gauntlet against one door and pushed. Sparks and embers swirled through the gap with an angry roar. Auron had a glimpse of the circular great hall lit as if by Ifrit in full frenzy. The rear half of the chamber was an inferno. The overhead portraits of Zaon and Yunalesca were boiling figures of flame. He could not but feel a twinge of bitter satisfaction as he heaved the door shut.

"Now what?" Rikku said. "I don't think _NulAll_ can cope with _that_.

"That is the only way into the Cloisters, milady," Isaaru said. He smiled and opened his arms, palms tilted towards them in a priest's blessing. "I'm afraid you have but one choice: trust in Yevon."

Gippal, flattened against the pavement, raised his head as Wedge's squad jogged away. "Whew. They've gone. Up you get, Nooj."

Nooj levered himself up with his cane, ignoring Gippal's hand. "We'll have eleven more of them to deal with shortly," he said, nodding towards Juno's squad scattered around them like chaff. "Some of them may wake first. Can you drag Baralai and Paine into that alley? It may buy us time."

"Aw, man. Baralai's not too bad, but I think Paine's put on weight." He rapped her armor with his boot.

"You have five minutes."

Dragging them out of sight of the plaza, Gippal needed the full five. Baralai and his maester's robes were nearly as cumbersome as warrior monk's mail. Nooj limped beside him, tightlipped.

"You okay up there, boss?" Gippal said.

"Oddly, yes. It takes some getting used to, being in charge of myself again."

"I bet." Gippal swore as Paine's armor rang out, colliding with the corner of the building. "Why'd she have to — _unh_ — go and join the warrior monks, anyway? I'd love to peel her out of this fuel tank, but she'd—" Gippal caught Nooj's frown out of the corner of his eye, and grinned— "you'd take my head off. Doesn't suit her, though."

"Doesn't suit _Paine_," Nooj said, struggling to lift her sword and lever it onto his shoulder. "But she's dead. Thirteen years ago, I suspect."

"You don't have to buy into that crap," Gippal said. "People make their own choices, Nooj."

"I should have found a way to tell her. Apologized."

"Well, yeah, but _could_ you?" Gippal dropped her arms with a clank. "Not like you ever told _us_."

"Probably not, but at least—"

"You could try now." Juno's face was shadowed by the helm, but her voice sounded crisp and lucid.
Nooj broke into a slow smile. "Perhaps I just did." Bracing on his cane, he unshouldered the sword, set it on its tip, and tilted the hilt towards her, stooping with understated gallantry to bring it within reach. "But let me say it to your face. Juno, I'm sorry. I failed you. My hand, not my heart, pulled the trigger that day, but you've lived with that betrayal all this time. I'll do whatever it takes to make amends, now that I'm free."

Her gloved hand closed over his. Holding his eyes, she rose to her feet, taking care not to pull him off-balance. Suddenly she shifted her grip, locked her fingers around his wrist, and drew her sidearm with her free hand. "By dying?" she said, pressing the gun against his stomach.

"Paine!" Gippal said, scrambling to his feet. "You stupid—"

"That would be somewhat ironic, don't you think?" Nooj said. "But yes, of course."

"Gippal. Don't try it." Juno stepped around Nooj, pistol sliding around his ribs, using him as a shield. "What have you done with Maester Baralai? My squad?"

"Hey, that was Rikku!" Gippal said. "Sleeping powder, same as what hit you. We don't like getting shot at!"

"Baralai's right here," Nooj said. "It should be wearing off any time now."

"Gippal. Wake him," she said.

"Damn, c'ran cdemm y pedlr," Gippal muttered, moving to Baralai to give him a firm shake.

"Yht oui'na cdemm yh ycc," she shot back.

Baralai awoke to the unusual sound of Nooj's dry laughter. The maester stood and stepped backwards, hand smacking against his empty holster. "Juno, are you with me?"

"Yes," she said, reclaiming her sword. Nooj offered no resistance. She stepped to Baralai's side, passing him her gun. He kept it trained on Nooj.

Gippal groaned. "C'mon, Bar."

"Shut up," Baralai said. He raised his eyes, expression bleak. "Bevelle's burning, and I don't have the resources to stop it. All we can do now is head off Cid and Isaaru before they reach Vegnagun. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise, Vegnagun may activate, perceiving them as a threat," Nooj said. "Baralai, we know. They know: Isaaru and the others who went after Cid. Don't worry. They won't use any weapons that might provoke it."

"Don't you get it?" Baralai said. "You think our cannons have the range to strike an airship? That wasn't Bevelle firing at you. That was Vegnagun. Cid's attack roused it. You're lucky your ship isn't as well-armed as his. It would have obliterated you before you reached the ground."

His last few words were drowned out by the roar of engines. They ducked as the airship swooped overhead, headed towards the bay. "Shinra!"

There was a faint tinny pop from Gippal's overalls. He fished out a sphere and shook it. "Shinra, where the hell are you taking my ship?"

"Away." Shinra's voice was hard to make out through the static. "Soldiers trying to board. Sensors
show Sin's on its way. Want me to pick you up somewhere?"

Gippal shook his head. "Nope. How long until Sin gets here?"

"Forty minutes, maybe an hour."

"Shinra," Nooj said, "have you figured out how to deactivate Vegnagun?"

"Negative. If Sin attacks—"

"Yeah, we know, kid," Gippal said. "Get going. Get out of the blast zone. I'll call you after it's over, assuming we're still here."

"Affirmative. Be careful. Crimson Avenger out."

Nooj's mouth twitched. "Crimson... Avenger...?"

"Yeah, well." Gippal ducked his head. "Normally I just call her The Gippal Express. So, Baralai, what's the plan?"

"I'm going back to Vegnagun," Baralai said. "I'll move it out of Bevelle, if I have to. Juno, collect your squad and warn the healers in Yuna's Cloister to prepare for Sin's arrival. Move everyone into the bunkers."

"I'm coming with you," she said. "If Isaaru's false, you'll need backup. I'll order my squad to the Cloister."

"And us?" Gippal crossed his arms. "We came to help, Bar."

"Baralai," Nooj said. "That... thing... that's possessed Cid was in me for thirteen years. I'd like to help bring it down. Vengeance for all of us, if you like. And if Isaaru fails, and Cid reaches Vegnagun, I'll give my life to stop him. You have my word."

"Your word doesn't hold much weight with me, Nooj." Baralai shifted his attention to Paine. "But hers does. Juno, what do you think?"

"Let them come." Sighing, she peeled off her helm. "I'd like to believe him."

Nooj drew a sharp breath. Her face was in shadow, but a deep scar ripping through one cheekbone was visible even in the dark.

"All right," Baralai said. "Stay alert. Be prepared to kill him if he tries anything. Bevelle, maybe all of Spira, will pay the price this time if he betrays us."

"Man, it's so nice getting back together like this, y'know?" Gippal said. "You're the navigator, Bar. Lead the way."

Chapter End Notes

This will be Ch. 25 in the remaster.

(For those wondering, I renamed Paine to correct a minor continuity glitch when I originally this story. Several chapters ago, when Nooj and Gippal were discussing
Paine on the airship en route to Bevelle, Pacce and/or Isaaru should've recognized her name and joined the conversation. Unless she'd assumed yet another alias. Her new alias, "Juno," sounds like "Nooj" reversed.)
**Chapter Summary**

The Story So Far: Cid, possessed by Shuyin, has attacked Bevelle, and now seeks the doomsday weapon beneath the Tower of Light. Summoner Isaaru, his guardians and Rikku give chase.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Soot lay in eddies and glyphs about their feet. The stout doors creaked, their stone bulk dampening the roar of the maelstrom beyond. The floor quivered as if Ifrit might burst through to demand a new statue.

"Wait!" Rikku said. "There's another way in! Remember, Auron? When Kinoc and his goons caught us, they didn't take us back through the Cloisters. Those creepy tunnels—"

"The Via Infinito, used by the Elite Guard for initiations, interrogations, and executions." Auron's face went blank to mask bitterness: not at the memory of Kinoc's betrayal, but for a darker crime. He could no longer remember the name of the lowborn monk executed without a sending, but Auron would have been named the father of the dead man's child, had Auron not refused to marry the mother. "Too far, and I don't know the lower levels. I'm sorry, Rikku."

"For all we know, they've already gone up in smoke," Maroda said.

"We're running out of time," Auron said, turning to Isaaru. "Can you shield us?"

"I believe so." Isaaru drew his hands together in Yevon's prayer. "Lady Yuna's sacrifice gave me many more years to train. Yet I have never put the spell to such a test. I shall not fault any of you for turning back."

Maroda stepped to his brother's side.

Rikku hugged herself, staring unhappily at the doors. "I can't abandon Pops."

"Elma?" Isaaru said. "If Pacce is here, it's possible Maester Lucil may also be in the city."

"What, you think I can face her after pulling a Clasko?" She gave a strained laugh. "I'm not bailing on you guys."

"Very well. Keep close, all of you. The effect extends only a few paces around me." He placed his hands on Maroda's and Elma's shoulders. A shell of bluish-white light sprang up around them. The soot on the steps whisked away as if struck by a hurricane blast. Auron's hanging sleeve began to flap violently, falling limp when Isaaru stepped up behind him. "Tread in my footsteps, Lady Rikku. Take care not to trip on my robes. Sir Auron, we are ready."

Auron set his palms against heated stone and pushed, nearly stumbling headfirst when an unseen force wrenched their weight away and flung them them wide open. Rikku shrieked as whirling embers and flames billowed towards them. At the last second, the debris was deflected by an
invisible wind, streaming away in a fiery fan.

"Go!" Isaaru said, shouting to make himself heard above the roar. "We don't have long!"

Auron strode forward, barely glancing at the statues of pious donors being consumed like a forest. Near the center of the chamber, the inferno's eddies had drawn together in a spiral, forming a fire tornado. Not daring to deviate lest those behind him move out of sync, Auron marched straight through it, feeling searing heat on his face for an instant before the writhing pillar of flame exploded outwards.

Elma caught Auron's cowl and shouted something. He stopped, looking back. Maroda was lifting Rikku onto his back. Her face was knitted with pain. For a moment Auron could not tell why, then he noticed the soles of her shoes dripping like wax. He had not registered the heat of the floor beating through his thick leather boots.

"I've got her!" Maroda shouted. "Go!"

"Faster!" Elma added. She, too, appeared to be suffering, her thin riding boots no match for the stovetop floor.

They moved. The burning statues of Yocun and Braska were before them now. Auron adjusted his course to the left. The flower-like pedestal on which Yuna's statue danced had transformed from faux water to living fire. Her arm and staff came crashing down on top of them as they passed beneath. Isaaru gave a cry as some of the molten steel from her staff dripped through the barrier. "Run!"

Auron reached back, grabbed Isaaru's collar, and lunged forward. A stairwell opened at his feet. Burning timbers and cracked stone were falling now, and Isaaru's magical shield was failing. Auron threw himself headlong, hurtling into darkness. How far was the nearest landing? The noise grew to a thundering tumult. The whole dome of the great hall sounded like it was imploding. Auron grunted as his shoulder struck a stone floor, mercifully cool. The summoner landed on top of him, partly extinguishing his burning coat. More thuds meant at least two of the others had followed. Before Auron could catch his breath, a massive fist of water came sluicing down, striking blistered flesh like a battering ram, snuffing out anything that had caught fire.


"Good thinking," Elma said, coughing for breath.

"Steady, my friends," said Isaaru. Soothing white magic poured over them. The pain receded.

Auron stood and assessed their status. A few dying embers lay steaming on the wet steps above them, but it appeared that the head of the stairwell had been blocked when the great hall's roof collapsed. The party was all here, singed and caked in dust like wet concrete, but more or less in one piece. Maroda was cutting Rikku's rubber shoes away with a field knife. Auron moved to her side, holding her and letting her bite his gauntlet while the brothers tended her feet. Maroda had to slice through burnt skin along with her shoes, but Isaaru worked quickly to repair the damage.

When he'd finished, Rikku raised her head and blew her nose on Auron's sleeve. "Ow and more ow. I don't think I could've done that if I'd known it was gonna hurt so bad."

"Forgive me, milady," Isaaru said. "I did not think it would."

Tears were trickling down her cheeks. "Enh, well, I needed another phobia."
"Can you walk?" Auron asked, in that gentle tone he used to reserve for Tidus.

"Uuuum..." She wiggled her bare toes. "Looks like it."

"I hate to say this," Elma said, surveying the debris-choked stairwell, "but if Cid was behind us, he's not going to be able to get through that."

"Great time to mention it," Rikku said. "Come on. We know where Pops is headed, anyway. I doubt that creep's gonna let him turn back."

Ten levels down, they reached the depths where sanctimonious Yevon architecture gave way to secrets and blasphemy. Beams, conduits, and empty space spread out before them, etched with pulsing geometric designs. Maroda groaned, but Rikku brightened at once. Plucking a sphere from an ornate wall panel, she waved them towards a stone pillar on a dais at the bottom of the stairwell. "Come on! This is the fun part." She popped the sphere into a socket on the pedestal. A glowing white glyph appeared under its base, covering most of the dais.

"Fun?" Elma said as they crowded around her. "What the heck is this?" She gave a squawk as the glyph shot sideways, then plummeted, carrying them with it.

To a Yevon-trained eye, Bevelle's Cloister of Trials was an incomprehensible landscape, like writing to a blind person suddenly cursed with sight. They were traversing a bizarre lattice of light-paths rushing up, down, sideways, and diagonally. A disc-shaped forcefield marked by Yevon's sigil carried them along. Step off that narrow foundation, and one would plummet into the abyss.

"Whoa!" Rikku said. "Everybody off." She stepped onto a passing landing, one of several small balconies fixed on either side of the streaming paths. The transport pad slowed, backed up a few inches, and came to a halt.

"What's wrong?" Maroda said.

"Oh, nothing. There's just a break down there." Rikku pointed to the nearest junction, where a slanting pathway dropped away to the right. A metal strut had fallen across the ramp partway down. Moving patterns of colored light pooled above it like water piling up behind a dam. A single line of green flowed across the gap to the next lit section. "If we cross that, the transport pad could fritz out."

"Can't we just climb down there and jump over it?" Elma said.

"The floor's not solid." Rikku waved a hand at the white glyph they had been standing on. "This is. That's it. I'll have to reroute the program. There's another ramp farther on, but right now it flows up." She retrieved the Bevelle sphere and inserted it into the base of a control panel anchored to the railing. Flipping up the lid, she pulled out a probe from a pouch and peered into the box. "Ooo, what a mess. No wonder Yevon never goes in a straight line." She began fiddling with toggle switches.

"Machina at Yevon's heart. Is it too much to ask for a little consistency?" Elma said, drooping over the guardrail.

"Maroda began to question, too, when we first saw this place," Isaaru said. "I took longer. I did not
wish to see. It's one of the reasons that I loosened our interpretation of scripture. I debated whether
to show this to the other maesters."

"I'm glad you didn't," Elma said. "The general breaks a drill sword after almost every Council
meeting. Last time she broke my arm." Suddenly she stood and pointed. "Wait, I see them! Six
levels down!"

Isaaru turned. "Pacce!" he called. "They're fighting!"

There was a flash as Rikku jerked away from the control box. "Shoot. We'll have to go around for
another pass. Auron, gimme a push! Follow me, folks!"

He shoved the stone pillar out onto the transport pad. Everyone but Elma piled onto it.

"Come on, Commander," Maroda said. "It's still Yevon, y'know."

"I'll delay them," she said, climbing onto the guardrails running parallel to the track.

"You'll fall!" Rikku said.

"Already did!" Elma called after them with a shrill laugh. As they sped away, she edged sideways
along the rails to the nearest junction. There she threw one leg over the bannister of the
malfunctioning ramp and slid down, disappearing from sight.

"Idiot!" Maroda said.

"Maroda, watch her," Isaaru said. "She bears up bravely, but I sense her despair. So may Shuyin."

"Folks, I need you to watch for more spheres," Rikku said.

"What are you trying to do?" Auron said.

"Trick it into—no, no, left! Aaagh! I hate Yevon!"

"Calm down," Auron said. "Your father's as trapped as we are. Pacce's keeping him busy."

"But if one of them pushes the other off—" Maroda said.

"Have faith, my brother," Isaaru said.

"In what?" Maroda said. "Dammit, Rikku, can't you stop this thing? I've got to get down there!"

"No room," Auron said. "Trust his training."

The moving patterns, scaffolding and crisscrossing pathways afforded only brief glimpses of the
duel rushing past on a track several levels below. Cid and Pacce were circling on a treacherously
narrow platform, the boy whirling his sword with upward sweeps that he must have learned from
Juno. Cid, wielding a rifle like a quarterstaff, was relying on darting slices, spry leaps ill-suited to
his large frame. Shuyin's moves, no doubt, but why did they seem so familiar?

Irrelevant. The party had circled back to its starting point without passing a single sphere. They
needed a fallback plan, quickly.

"Rikku," Auron said. "Would a memory sphere work?"

"Nah. We need a glyph sphere, 'cuz... uuum... hey. You know, it might. For a little while, anyway.
"Only problem is, the floor'll go 'poof' when it shorts out." Rikku tensed, gathering herself for a spring. "Gimme a count, Auron. Any stop'll do."


"Yaaah!" She pushed off, landing on the same siding where they had stopped a before. The transport pad glided to a halt. The stone pedestal rose out of it. "Here goes!" Rikku said, snatching the sphere from the top of the pedestal and inserting it back into the control box. From her satchel she drew out a larger sphere. Despite her urgency, she hesitated, cupping it in both hands like a rare egg.

"Will it fit?" Maroda said.

"You can only save the living," Auron said.

"Wakka's gonna kill me." Biting her lip, she jammed Yuna's sphere into a socket beside the first. Several lights on the box's lid blinked on. Sparks began to dance over the memory sphere's surface.

"Okay," Rikku said. "Keep your feet on this balcony 'til I give the word. If I screw up, the transport pad could vanish too." Flipping the lid up, she fished out another tool and frantically began laying down lines of solder. "Pops' Rule Number Two: never rewire when the power's on."

Smile fraying, Isarau turned to gaze down towards the lower levels. He cupped his hands to his mouth. "Pacce, we're coming!"

"Don't distract him," Maroda said.

"Don't distract me," Rikku said, wincing as a spark arced across her knuckles.

Auron looked down. Pacce was parrying Cid's hammer-blows, but weakly. The boy's speed was the only thing saving him, and he seemed unable or unwilling to take advantage when Cid left his flank or torso wide open. He doesn't want to kill, Auron realized, having faced the same dilemma from time to time. Fortunate, but it left Pacce vulnerable. He dropped to one knee.

Maroda made a despairing sound and drew back his spear. A futile gesture: it was a thrusting weapon, and there were too many obstacles for a clean cast. Then a banshee scream echoed up the shaft. Elma tumbled from above, landing on Cid's back and bringing him crashing down across Pacce. Cid rose with a roar, nearly throwing her over the side. Suddenly the odds were even. Pacce grabbed the rifle and slammed its butt into Cid's stomach. The larger man crumpled between them.

"Can you send?" Auron asked Isarau.

"Not at this range."

"Done!" Rikku said, brandishing the soldering iron. There was a white flash, a whiff of burnt plastic, and every floor-segment of the maze was suddenly anchored by motionless glyphs and a fence of stone pedestals. "Let's go!"

Skidding on the glassy surface, they raced along the walkways. Clouds of pyreflies were wafting up from Cid's prone form. Elma was helping Pacce to his feet. Suddenly she twisted, wrenching his sword-arm behind his back and setting the metal truncheon across his throat, lifting him off the ground.

"Rikku!" Maroda said. "Nightcap, quick! Shuyin's got Elma!"
"Last one," she said. "Here goes!" She reared back and lobbed a pellet across the gap to the path two levels down. Elma crumpled. Pacce rolled a few paces away.

Auron gripped the railing and vaulted over it, putting the forcefields to the test where he landed. Pyreflies surged around him, coyly greeting Yuna's guardian and Braska's guardian and Captain of the Guard and all his other past, failed selves. Ignoring the insidious chant, he seized Cid by the shoulders and dragged him towards the nearest solid ground. There was another landing just ahead, and the welcome sight of an ordinary staircase beyond it.

"I saaru!" he called. "Send!"

"Sir Auron!" Isaaru said. "Please, step away from him, before I—"

The pedestals around them began to flicker in and out of sight.

"MOVE!" Rikku said. "The field's coming down." Skidding down the last ramp, she dashed towards Elma, struggling to pull her out from between the pedestals where she had fallen. Auron turned back, slinging the Crusader over his shoulder and sprinting for the exit. The brothers were dragging Pacce after him. As Maroda tripped and sprawled over the edge of the landing, all the glyphs and pedestals winked out. The colorful river of lines and patterns resumed its dizzying current.

Cid was coughing, pushing himself onto his hands and knees. "Dryd inywo meddma bihg— ra'c kud ed—"

"Pops!" Rikku hurried over, dropping to her knees and patting his back. "Pops, you in there?"

"Send," Auron said again, drawing his sword and bracing it against the floor.

"Sir Auron?" Isaaru said. "Very well." He raised his hands, sweeping them together in Yevon's sign to begin a stately dance.

The floor under Auron's feet seemed to melt away. Not much of a summoner, the pyreflies whined, his own voice ringing in his skull. Not much of a summoner. How much of a guardian? He gripped the sword— his sword, the one he had carried on every pilgrimage— and hung on.

Maroda, bent over his little brother, gave a cry and crumpled. Pacce exploded past him. Auron's swipe went wild as the boy sprinted by. He disappeared down the steps and through an open archway, running with long, loping strides. A trail of pyreflies floated in his wake.

"He... he didn't even know who I was!" Maroda gasped, doubled over.

"Tried to tell ya," Cid said. "Little punk said somethin' about avengin' his brothers. That's when Shuyin jumped him."

Chapter End Notes
Artwork by Mintywolf.

This is chapter 26 in the remaster.
The Cloister of Trials groaned and shuddered like a sinking ship. Bursts of sparks rained down. Auron cast a wary eye upwards, surveying the lattice of struts and moving light-paths.

Maroda, still squirming from his brother's parting shot, snatched up his spear and pelted towards the exit. "Pacce! We're right here! Pacce, wait!"

"Wake Elma," Auron said, blocking Isaaru's path.

Isaaru tried to shove past him, a rare, shrill note of anger in his voice. "While my brothers try to kill each other?"

A distant concussion rocked the tower's foundations. High above, a long span twisted loose with a squeal of shorn rivets, banging off others all the way down until it crashed to a halt just overhead, wedged between the wall and a support beam. Most of the pathways winked out, leaving them in near-darkness.

"You'd leave her here?" Auron stepped away from him with a scowl. "Rikku. Hurry. This place isn't safe." Then he began to run, vaulting most of the stairs and vanishing through the archway.

"Gee, thanks," she said, crouched by her father with her first aid kit. Soot concealed the extent of his injuries, but his limbs were slashed and bleeding, and his face was burnt. He spluttered curses as she applied Al Bhed ointment to his blistered scalp.

Isaaru took two steps towards the exit before Auron's words penetrated. His hands moved in a feeble prayer before he shuffled back towards the crumpled Crusader.

Rikku looked up. "Oh, for goodness' sake. Go on! Find your brothers! I'll take care of choco-lady!"

"Nay, milady, tend to your father." His voice steadied as he poured himself into the soothing mantra: *Esuna, Esuna*, a timid lullaby in that vast, alien hall.

Elma stirred and rolled onto her side, planting her face in the summoner's robes. "Huh? Oh!" She popped to her feet with a woozy salute. "Orders, sir?"

"Follow me. Sir Auron and Maroda are on Pacce's trail. Elder Cid, can you travel?"

"We're right behind ya," Cid said, slinging an arm around his daughter. "I don't fancy getting flattened by your damned temple."
"Manners, Pops!" Rikku said. "Yevon just saved your butt, you know."

"I'm tryin' not to think about it, kiddo."

They fled none too soon. As they reached the archway, all the lights failed. They were forced to feel their way along a dusty tunnel. Ominous creaks and bangs echoed down the narrow passageway, magnified by the great drum of the cloister. They hurried away from the sounds of the tower settling, towards an archway of light at the far end.

Cid was wheezing as they stumbled along. "Hell. I shot up Bevelle pretty bad, didn't I? I don't care what you do to me, Isaaru, but don't take it out on the Al Bhed. They had nothing to do with this."

"The blame is Shuyin's," Isaaru said. "And the toll is less grievous than it could have been. Bevelle was evacuated ahead of Sin. Homes, as you say, can be rebuilt."

"You got that right." Cid harrumphed in oblique apology. "After this is over, my people could help with repairs."

"I fear Shuyin's attack may rekindle Yevon's suspicions of the Al Bhed," said Isaaru, sounding drained. "But I pray the maesters accept. Thank you."

"Oh!" Rikku said. "Hey, Elma. Speaking of suspicions. Sorry I smacked you with a nightcap. We thought Shuyin was getting to you!"

"'S'okay. He almost did, actually." The Crusader gave a ragged laugh. "I told him to piss off. Maybe Lucil really is dead, but no way is some crazy unsent gonna tell me what to do about it!"

Emerging into the guardians' antechamber, they found that Pacce's pursuers had not gotten far. Auron was on his knees and Maroda on his face, both lashed by a flurry of sword-cuts. Blood pooled in the cracks in the floor around them. The stone portal of the Chamber of the Fayth stood open, its fanlike inner barrier torn to shreds.

"In Yevon's name." Isaaru hurried over to Maroda, raising his hands to cast Curaga.

"Don't waste magic," Auron rasped. "You'll need it for sending."

"What the heck was that?" Maroda pushed himself up with his spear. "He didn't learn that move in basic training!"

Auron frowned. "Tidus called it 'Slice and Dice.'"

"Tidus?" Rikku said.

"I don't know, Rikku." Hefting his sword, Auron trudged towards the entrance to the Chamber of the Fayth. "He went in here."

Maroda followed, but stopped short just inside the doorway. "Dammit. Where'd he go?"

"Inside, all of you," Isaaru said, noting Elma's double-take. "You, too, Commander."

The heavy door of the Chamber of the Fayth dropped behind them. They halted to catch their breath, bemused to find themselves in a bubble of calm after the chaos of the past several days. Beneath the glassy floor sprawled a titanic form bathed in golden light, its outspread pinions forming a swirling mandala. A disembodied child’s voice soared above, piping out the Hymn of the Fayth with heartbreaking purity. Hanging tapestries bearing Yevon's crests seemed crafted to evoke
epiphanies. Despite the party's urgency, they found themselves lulled by a false sense of peace, insulated from the struggles taking place outside.

"Well, I'll be," Cid muttered. "It's not half as creepy as Baaj."

"What now?" said Maroda.

"Search," Auron said. "There must be a hidden exit."

While his guardians circled, Isaaru knelt and prayed. The tension in his posture bled away. "Lady," he said, inclining his head to Rikku. "The fayth says you and your father may rest here. The warrior monks dare not profane his sanctuary, although they may barricade the door."

"Um, tell him thanks for us, okay?" Rikku scratched her cheek. "You're bustin' all kinds of rules for us, aren't you?"

Isaaru gave a wan smile. "I learned much from your cousin, milady."

"What the—?" Maroda said. "Yo! I've found it!" His spear had disappeared halfway into the wall behind a tapestry.

"Let's go." Auron looked at Rikku, brows knitting. "We'll come back for you."

"But—" Rikku's eyes darted between her father and friends disappearing though the illusory barrier. She raised her voice. "No getting yourself killed, Auron, you hear? Wakka's gotta whup you for making me break Yuna's sphere!"

After they had gone, Cid scooped Rikku into a fierce hug, face puckered with the effort of holding back tears. "Dammit, kiddo, I've never been so glad to see you! That creep had me convinced I'd sent you to Mother."

"Nope! All better, see?" she said, patting her stomach. "Isaaru's pretty good with white magic."

"He'd better be." Cid shook his head. "That Shuyin's liable to carve them into scrap metal. Good thing you're stayin' here with your old man."

Despite thirteen years and three gunshots, the former Crimson Squad members quickly slotted back into their customary orbits. Baralai shortened his stride to match Nooj's limp. Gippal kept pace beside Nooj so casually that it seemed an accident when he was there as a brace against the tower's death-throes. Juno, guarding the rear, observed them in keen silence.

Baralai threaded a path through the warren of barracks and prison blocks beneath the Court of Yevon. When he entered a cell, Gippal balked until he spotted the crack between the floor and the threshold. Inside, Baralai tabbed the keys of an ancient control pad. He pressed his pistol against Nooj's hip as the room began to descend.

"C'mon, Baralai, put that thing away," said Gippal. "What if you sneeze?"

Baralai shrugged. "Then we're even."
"Not quite," Juno said. "Three sneezes."

"Hey," Gippal said. "That's not funny, Dr. J."

Nooj's gravelly laughter rolled out. "I see. If I'd known all I had to do for forgiveness is serve as a maester's handkerchief, I'd have come back sooner."

"There may be a few other requirements," Baralai said.

"If you think of any, let me know." Nooj was smiling— by his standards, the man was practically giddy— but quickly sobered. "About Vegnagun. Are you sure you know how to operate it? There's no margin for error."

"I'm well aware of that, Nooj," Baralai snapped. "With Sin on its way, we have little choice. I've worked out the basics using its training program, but there's a lot I don't understand, and a lot more I haven't dared touch. Gippal, I'm counting on your expertise."

"It sounds pretty advanced," Gippal said. "I may not be able to help much."

The elevator lurched. They leaned against the walls for a sickening moment of free-fall before it resumed its downward crawl.

"Damn." Baralai glanced at Juno, but her expression was masked once more by her helm. Reluctantly, he turned to Gippal. "Nooj was working in salvage operations, right? You said he had a knack for ancient machina."

"Correct," Nooj said. "But most of that was Shuyin. Now that he's not inside my head—"

"Shuyin?" Juno said, suddenly intent.

"An unsent," Nooj said, "killed in the Machina War when he tried to hijack Vegnagun. His lust for vengeance was the only thing keeping him from turning into a fiend. He touched your mind, too, Baralai. That's the vision of Vegnagun you saw."

"It's true, Bar," Gippal said. "I was there when Shuyin popped out of him. Pyreflies all over the place. Everybody was acting twitchy. Then Cid walked in, freaked out and started shooting us. Just like in that cave."

"An intriguing story," Baralai said. "If that's true, how do we know Nooj is free of this 'Shuyin'? Most of the Crimson Squad was affected."

"You don't," said Nooj. "He could be influencing you, too."

"Hm." Baralai lowered his pistol, but did not holster it. "Touché."

"Nooj," Juno said. "If Shuyin's been haunting you all this time, what made him leave you?"

"Guess." Nooj gave her a wry look. "When Sin attacked Home, I saw a chance to be free of him. I made sure to be left behind when the Al Bhed evacuated. I hoped no one would find my body. Unfortunately, I still have friends."

"Sucks to be you, Noojster," Gippal said.

A chime sounded. Juno steadied Nooj as the elevator shuddered to a halt. Baralai shot her a perturbed glance. Gippal let out a whistle, but not at them.
The doors had opened on an enormous shaft with ribbed walls stretching out of sight. Spanning the abyss was a metal bridge, widening to a circular platform near the middle of the chamber. Looming over it was a monstrous horned head, its sweeping tusks forming a sort of balustrade around the platform's perimeter. Below, the bulk of Vegnagun's body clung to the platform's central pillar with squat legs the size of sand worms.


Baralai exhaled. "Nooj? I could use your help as well."

"You've got it."

A low, throbbing hum began to build. Floodlights came on and swiveled towards them, blinding them. Baralai strode forward, raising a hand and speaking in the reassuring tones of a chocobo handler. "Easy. It's me. They're friends. Don't be afraid." The lights dimmed slightly. The behemoth trembled, sending vibrations through the platform where they stood. Wisps of dust rose in the gloom.

"Looks like Baralai's got a friend," Nooj said.


"Hot damn." Gippal sauntered after Baralai. "Shinra'd give his left nut to see this thing."

Juno looked back at Nooj. "You coming?"

"Sorry." Leaning on his cane, he limped after her. "I've dreamed of this thing for thirteen years. The nightmares didn't do it justice."

Baralai scaled a short ladder and swung himself into the cockpit in the crown of Vegnagun's head. "All right, gentleman, let's get to work. Juno, keep watch. We may have visitors."

"Understood." She drew her sword and rested the point on the floor, facing the elevator. "They won't get near you guys."

Gippal helped Nooj up the ladder, and they squeezed in on either side of Baralai. "Man." The Al Bhed stared at the curving bank of blank keys and translucent tubes rising in a curtain behind them. "I don't even know what I'm looking at. Is this a dashboard or a pipe organ?"

Baralai took a steadying breath, spread his fingers, and set his hands to the keys with a gentle caress. Colors rippled to life, blue-white bars of light spreading out from his fingertips, mirrored by the pipes above. Lonely notes in a minor key began to spiral outward as his fingers wandered, molding motion into chords, phrases, scales. The drone of engines grew louder. Leaning forward in rapt concentration, Baralai launched into a wild skirl of notes, arpeggios chasing each other in a rising tide.

Gippal's jaw dropped open. "Holy..."

"It's both," Baralai said in a reverent whisper. "Don't look at the light panel. Look through it, the way you'd look into a sphere."

"Unbelievable," Nooj said. "Armageddon delivered by music without a soul."

"No, that's just the bridge." Baralai was having trouble speaking as he played. "Relax your minds. Listen. Watch. You can't control Vegnagun. You have to let it control you."
Nooj stiffened. "That's asking a lot."

"I see it!" Gippal said. "I've got it now. It's like... Vegnagun's my own body. I can see the whole
city. Man, the Fahrenheit got utterly trashed. Will Vegnagun get confused, with three of us linked
in like this?"

"Juno and I... used to practice together. I'm bringing up the navigation simulator. That's where I'm
stuck. Flying's easy. But there's some way to... cut through the Farplane. Jump in, jump out.
Otherwise the launch will tear Bevelle apart."

"You in here with us, Nooj?" Gippal said.

"Not yet," Nooj said, jaw clenched. "Go on. I'll try and catch up."

Gippal flinched away from the viewscreen. "Um... Baralai? Company."

"I see it." Baralai was sweating. "Take over flight controls."

"What is it?" Nooj said.

"Sin," Gippal said, reaching for the lower bank of keys as Baralai shifted to the upper. There was a
painful discord of clashing notes. "Dammit. I can't do it, Bar. I don't have the foggiest clue what
you're doing with the keys."

"Don't try to play anything," Baralai said. "Just relax. Vegnagun guides you as much as you guide
it. I'm switching to weapons. I've got to keep overriding them manually, or we'll drop out of
training mode into active combat. See if you can get through the simulation without crashing or
triggering the self-defense systems."

"I'm already dead," Gippal said. "Touchy, isn't it?"

"Try again. If it decides it's being hijacked, it'll kill us."

Juno listened with silent longing to the rise and fall of old, familiar voices: Gippal's irreverent
banter and Nooj's incisive remarks, Baralai's soft-spoken earnestness. When Baralai began to play,
it was difficult not to turn around, climb up to watch them together. It was easy to picture Gippal
agape, but Nooj— no, she dared not look, nor even to imagine his expression.

Vegnagun's clashing music drowned the elevator's chime, and she missed the indicator lights until
the doors opened. Chiding herself for carelessness, Juno strode towards them. A stocky figure
stepped out. The tufts of black hair bristling around his ear-flaps were instantly recognizable. Soot
streaked his armor, and there were tear tracks below his cheekguards.

"Pacce. This is a restricted area," she said. "Why aren't you with Sergeant Wedge?"

"C-Captain Juno!" Pacce snapped a salute. "The prisoner's escaped! The rest of my squad turned
back. I-I lost him in the temple. I'm very sorry, ma'am."

"Did you see anyone else with him?"

"N-no, ma'am."

"All right." She lowered her weapon. "Help me keep watch."

"Aye, Captain." Drawing his sword, he raised his eyes to the behemoth pounding out unearthly
music. "I don't suppose you can tell me what's going on?"
"Absolutely not," she said. "And you are forbidden to tell anyone what you've seen here. Not Wedge, not your own brothers."

"Paine!"

Nooj's shout gave just enough warning for her to turn into Pacce's attack, taking the brunt of the strike on the front of her shinguard instead of the back of her knee. She barely had time to think Idiot before her chin struck the floor. The world went white. Her awareness narrowed to ringing pain and the taste of blood.

When her vision cleared, Nooj was lying on the deck beside her, metal arm warding Pacce's sword away from his own throat by failing inches. The belts securing Nooj's artificial leg had been sliced through. It lay twisted under him at a distressing angle.

"Trying to save her this time?" Pacce laughed. "Pathetic. To think I was forced to wear you for thirteen years."

Turning her head, she closed her fist over the hilt of her sword. Pivoting the blade upwards, she set the point against Pacce's stomach, finding the seam under his breastplate. "Leave him alone."

"Go ahead," he said. "Kill the boy. Your student, isn't he? I'll find someone else. One of your friends, or..."

"No!" Baralai shouted behind her. "Gippal, put the gun down!"

Vegnagun growled and lurched, driving Juno's sword-point an inch into the leather. Pacce jerked back with a snarl.

"Baralai!" she called. "Hurry!" She rolled to her feet, parrying a flailing blow as he whirled to face her.

"So, you're Paine." The youth's chubby features twisted in an alien smirk. "I should thank you."

She swung at his legs, forcing him back a step. "I don't think so."

"Nooj thought about you often." A swipe sent her skidding sideways. "It made it easier to control him, ride his pain."

"Don't listen," Nooj said, furiously impotent. "Anger is his path into your mind."

The mocking laughter in Pacce's voice was jarring, a wild braying above Vegnagun's ocean of sound. "Anger, despair, love: in the end, they're all the same. Aren't they, Juno?"

"Shut up." She smiled grimly as he spun away from her slicing blow and pivoted to strike back. "All right, Shuyin. Let's dance."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title reference: "Nightmare in a Cave", piano arrangement of "Vegnagun Awakens" from FFX-2 OST.
"Vegnagun's Lair" by author.

Chapter renumbered 27 in the remaster.
Otherworld

Chapter Summary

The Story So Far: Isaaru's pilgrimage derails when the unquiet ghost Shuyin shows up, possessing one host after another in his quest for vengeance. They chase him into the depths of Bevelle, where the Crimson Squad members are trying to keep Vegnagun out of the wrong hands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Beyond the Chamber of the Fayth, the secret tunnel ended in a wall of rusted metal. The only light came from a violet Destruction glyph pulsing balefully on its streaked surface. Scowling, Maroda reached forward to tap the glyph with his spear. "Wait." Auron caught his elbow. "Touch that and we may not catch him."

"Huh? He went in here, didn't he?"

"Unless it's a trap for idiots," Elma said. "Maybe it's rigged to explode."

"It's a lift," Auron said. "Once you activate it, we won't know where Pacce got off."

"What else can we do, sir, force the door open and jump?" Elma said. "Could be a long drop."

"Vegnagun's gotta be at the very bottom, right?" Maroda said, trying to shrug him off.

"Not necessarily," Isaaru said behind them, pained. "The Via Purifico, where I fought Lady Yuna, is said to be the uttermost dungeon. Yet who knows if that is truly the bottom? In Yevon, something always lies beneath."

"Like Vegnagun, maybe?" his brother said. "Come on, we're wasting time!"


Maroda gaped. "You've got to be joking!"

"Let us do as the heretic suggests." With a strained smile, Isaaru sketched Yevon's prayer and began to sing. "Ieyui nobomeno..."

Elma joined him, wavering in and out of key.

"Don't stop," Auron said, hand hovering over the glyph until they had cycled around to a new verse. Touching it, he started counting. Two verses. Three. Five. Just where was Vegnagun docked, under the harbor? Seven and a half—

"Keep going," he commanded as the door slid open. "Get in." Again he waited for the start of a verse before pushing the lowest tile on a corroded panel embedded in the wall.

Maroda's sullen tenor joined theirs as the room began to descend. The Hymn sounded oddly
ordinary in close quarters, meant as it was for soaring domes and monumental halls. Nor was Elma much of a singer. Nonetheless, the shared mantra seemed to steady them. That was all to the good. Will, not just weapons, would be needed in the coming battle.

Auron freed his left arm from his sleeve. Another sound was booming up the elevator shaft: an alien, jangling music churned out by some kind of machina. It sounded like Zanarkand Stadium's halftime show with a drunk at the keyboard. No, two drunks. The pyreflies in his veins stirred in response, an itch within his flesh that he had to resist clawing. *Lost your way, a fallen knight...* they whispered, latching onto the music's insistent rhythm.

*Not now,* he told them.

Oblivious to the eldritch summons, the others continued the soothing refrain. "*Renmiri yojuyogo...*"

Seven and a half. Auron pressed what he hoped was the emergency override. The car squealed to a halt. The doors opened. A wave of sound broke over them. He leapt, hit the bridge a few feet below, and launched into a dead run.

What in Spira was that racket? Auron had never entered the Farplane, but he knew with a wrench he was hearing its heartbeat. Pyreflies surged in his ears, buzzing in time to the acoustic barrage. A behemoth loomed on the bridge's far side, a monster with tusks and teeth and gigantic legs clawing the void and *wings,* gods, why did the big ones always have wings? Roving blue spotlights sent out feelers. One of the men in its skull was shouting, his words overwhelmed by the musical torrent. Below, Nooj stood under Vegnagun's jaws, tottering, furious, brandishing his artificial leg like a club. His target was well out of reach, but as Auron approached, he took aim for a throw. (*No better plan than to do or to die.*)

A frenetic duel raged in the midst of the span, accented by flashes of magic and blood. Juno staggered, warding off Pacce's darting attacks with dogged economy, wielding her sword as a shield. A whirlwind wrapped the blade, obscuring its edges. Her left arm hung limp. She was giving up ground, slashed by the dervish assault that had shredded Auron and Maroda a short time ago. Blood slicked the deck. Slipping, she caught sight of Auron, raised her weapon and rallied in a burst of strikes. Pacce redoubled his blows, baleful laughter cackling over Vegnagun's uncanny chords.

Auron slammed his weight into the boy's back. Pacce's body flew from the point of impact. For a beat, Auron feared he would hurtle over the edge. Then he executed an aerial flip, a blitzer's move so familiar that Auron nearly skidded off himself, distracted. By the time he had checked his momentum, Pacce had rebounded and was springing towards him, laughing shrilly with sword weaving in a maddened hornet's dance.

"Wondered if you were going to show, old man." The blade sliced into Auron's upper arm too swiftly for him to block with his bracer. "I hear we've met before... or is it since?"

The nagging pyrefly chorus was growing louder, building in strength with the machina's din. Auron gritted his teeth and pressed forward. Shuyin bent around his swing and and pierced his side with a jab before whirling away.

"You're slowing down," Shuyin taunted. "What are you doing here, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be on pilgrimage?"

What *was* he doing here? It was a dangerous question, with Farplane energies crashing over him in waves of sound. Auron's vision blurred. The ribbed walls of Vegnagun's vault were transmuting into Zanarkand's skyline. (*Memories of it cloud your sight.*) Soaring towers and girders blossomed
around him like the bones of a dream.

"It's… the right thing to do." He swept his sword in a wide orbit, using its counterweight to help him circle his opponent. Again, Shuyin was too quick for him. He jumped and landed on the blade, smashing Auron's knuckles to the floor.

"Saving Bevelle?" Raucous laughter struck another chord of memory. "Is that what's keeping you? Pathetic!"

"Pacce!" Maroda pelted into the fray with spear reversed. "Shake him off, Pacce! We're here!"

"I'm so glad, dear brother." Shuyin sidestepped him and sliced downward, chopping the spear in two. Maroda staggered. Auron dragged him back from the edge.

Elma seemed to have better tactical instincts. Waiting for an opening, she darted past the melee to reach Juno. "Potion," the Crusader shouted, pressing a phial into her hands. "Fork attack?"

The percussion of Vegnagun's engines obscured the clash of steel. The bridge was quaking. Pyreflies were swarming now, sliding over Vegnagun's exoskeleton in a pulsing web. The machina was growing translucent, or else fiend's madness was mazing Auron's sight. The dream of Zanarkand Stadium still roared in his ears. (*Fight fight fight fight*). Vegnagun's floodlights painted Pacce's spinning body in a sphere-pool glow.

Auron caught up his sword and lunged, drawing Shuyin's attention as the two women split in a pincer movement, attacking with sword and truncheon as the young man landed between them. Barely registering their blows, he flung his arms wide to shove them aside, leapt high, and raised his sword in a triumphant pose.

"Let's blitz!"

Two simple words, but Auron was staggered by them. He failed to shield himself from the burning trails of fire and sparks raining down. Looking up, he saw not Pacce's chubby features, but the elfin face of another he had failed to protect. He glimpsed blond hair, blue eyes, a cheeky smirk that was crueler, older than he remembered.

"Tidus?" he said, choking on the name.

Zanarkand. He had forgotten how much he hated it. Pyrefly spectators cheered with bloodthirsty glee as Auron began to cough, drowning, his blood diffusing into the sphere-pool as he thrashed.

"Isaaru, send! Send now! He's taking Sir Auron!" Maroda cried.

The referee's bellow made no sense. Auron released his sword and pressed his hands over his heart, fighting to stem the spill of pyreflies. The referee leapt in front of him, reaching for the dropped weapon, but the gesture left him exposed. A scalloped blade darted in like a fish. There was a scream, a moment's struggle—the women were grappling with Tidus, yanking him backwards in a double tackle—and the referee went down writhing, clutching his stomach.

An anguished cry rang out. "Maroda!"

Auron grabbed for him, catching the straps of his armor as he rolled off the bridge. In his mind's eye, Auron saw another, younger face, another body dangling below him, another voice shouting his name. His fingers were melting through the straps, losing hold. (*Hopes dies. Dreams, they rip asunder...*)
Maroda plummeted through the bottom of the sphere-pool with a cry, disappearing from sight. Auron was falling, too. One of the women's voices cut through the water above him, distorted and desperate: "Please, sir, you've got to send, or we'll lose Pacce too."

The pipe organ's blaring tumult suddenly ceased. All lights went out. Auron felt himself floating down, down, swathed in an unraveling shroud of pyreflies that had no color, no sound, no taste, no sensation. The last embers of his will almost wept with relief. At last, he would allow himself to strike bottom.

(The otherworld, it takes you.)

In dream or Farplane or somewhere in between, two warriors sank through a void with pyreflies for stars. The second was no more than a red haze. The first was substantial, not yet reconciled to death. Maroda raged in denial of the nothingness they had become, haranguing his mute companion.

Dammit. You know, if Isaaru hadn't been sending Shuyin, someone coulda slapped me with a phoenix down.

...Or not, I guess. What the hell did you have to go and drop me for?

"No comment," eh? Death hasn't changed you a bit. And why are you dead? I'm the one with the great big hole in my gut.

Oh, no. Don't tell me. That's what you were hiding? And the sending got you, too? Jeez, man. I don't know what to say.

…Dumbass, maybe. Wasn't sending Shuyin your clever plan? And now Isaaru's short two guardians.

Poor Pacce. He's gonna be a complete wreck.

So, hey. You're unsent, right? You pulled it off once already. Why can't we both go back? It's just killin' me, leaving 'em like this.

A woman's voice cut through the one-sided conversation. "All you need is determination."

Huh? I'm pretty damned sure I don't want to die, lady!

"None of us wants to die. But existence is more than negating a negative. What is it you cannot forsake? What drives you, warrior, that you would endure a waking death, forgoing the Farplane's peace?"

My brothers! I've got to get back to them. This totally sucks, you know?

"Such bonds may be strong. But they are not you. Who are you? What is you?"

Huh? Who are you, for that matter?

"One who exists on the boundary between life and death. The living fear me. The dead ride me."
Whatever. Look, lady, just show me the way—

"As you wish. But for you, the path goes only one way."

In the uttermost depths of the Via Purifico, two corpses struck water hard enough to fracture bones. One kept falling, in this world and the next.

The other was not so lucky.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 28 in the remaster.
Chapter Summary

The Story So Far: Maroda and Auron have fallen in the fight against Shuyin. It's up to Paine, Elma and Isaaru to vanquish him now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vegnagun had vanished, taking with it almost all light and sound. Two distant splashes offered bleak testimony to ears that strained to hear. The only remaining illumination came from the elevator's lights and a swarm of pyreflies, drifting hungrily towards the remaining combatants.

The fight had ebbed but not ended. With Elma's help, Juno had finally pinned Pacce to the deck, kneeling on him with the shaft of Maroda's spear laid across his throat. Elma had seized his shoulders. He fought back in a snarling frenzy, thrashing and biting their arms. Nooj was crawling towards them on hands and knees. He balked at the edge of the pyrefly cloud, took a deep breath and waded in.

On the far end of the bridge, Isaaru kept vigil. Weeping as he prayed, he was dancing for both the fallen and the foe.

Shuyin's madness was spreading. Juno was bearing down her full weight on Pacce's throat, choking him. With a startled "Hey!" Elma released him to intervene. She wound up grabbing Juno's helm, twisting it like a cork. Pacce redoubled his efforts, writhing and twisting and flailing at their eyes with fingers curled into claws. All three were sucking in pyreflies with every breath.

"Don't listen." Nooj had reached them now. "Elma. Juno. Focus. Think of something you love. Shuyin's trying to control you."

Elma let go with a gasp. "Son of a—!"

Her oath was cut short by Junob punching her in the face. She crumpled with a yelp, clapping her hands over her nose.

Taking advantage of their distraction, Shuyin gave a violent heave and broke free. Pyreflies streamed from his shoulders as he snatched up his sword and charged towards Isaaru.

"Dammit!" Cupping her nose with one hand, Elma grabbed at empty air. "Sir! Watch out!"

For a moment Isaaru seemed unaware, twirling in a sluggish dance that mimicked the lazy arcs of the pyreflies. Then he raised his hand. "In Yevon's name," he said with strained conviction, "You will release my brother. Begone. You have no place in Spira!"

Pacce stumbled, hunkering down with fists clenched and head lowered. "Yevon? That old conjurer won't help you." He took another step forward. "You've been praying to a lie, summoner."

Juno rose silently and stalked him, poised to spring.
"Faith is no lie." Isaaru drew dignity about himself like a cloak and began to dance again, wet cheeks gleaming under the pyreflies. "What kind of a man were you, Shuyin, that you would destroy the world for love?" His voice rose and fell, swinging between bitter anger and quiet, gentle sorrow. "What kind of a woman was Lenne, to deserve such a memorial? Would she take joy in causing a lover's betrayal? Daughter's blood on father's hands? Brother turned against brother? Was Lenne such a monster, to condone such cruelty?"

"No!" Pacce was trembling now, barely struggling when Juno clamped onto his wrist and twisted his sword-arm behind him. Pyreflies boiled upwards from both of them like clouds of steam.

"Yes, you can, kiddo." Elma sat up, still covering her face with her hand. "Nobody could fight Shuyin alone: not Elder Cid, not anybody. It wasn't your fault you couldn't. But Isaaru's here now. He's the best summoner around, eh? He can kick this guy's ass."

A luminous form began to emerge from Pacce's body: taller, leaner, older, a golden figure advancing on Isaaru with drawn sword. Shuyin was growing more transparent with every step, but still he came.

Juno wrenched the sword away and started forward, although the battle was squarely in the summoner's hands now. But before she could overtake Shuyin, a second glowing figure coalesced in front of Isaaru. A slender woman stood there with arms outstretched, barring Shuyin's path. Her clothes were of a style unknown to them, a short ruffled dress of sparkling blue.

"You must stop!" she said.

"Lenne?" Shuyin froze. "Lenne. Is it really you?"

"You called me, Shuyin. I am here."

"But I searched. I searched for so long—"

"Shuyin, it's time to rest. Leave vengeance to the Lady."

Isaaru, still performing the sending dance, lost a step to astonishment. He stared doubtfully at the pyreflies cloaking the woman, wafting up from below. Something enormous rumbled down there in the depths, a hair-raising groan at the edge of hearing.

"They deserve it," Shuyin said. "They—"

"I wrote a song for you, Shuyin." She stepped forward, drawing him into her arms. "Maybe you've heard it. Listen." Soft and low, she began to purr into his ear. "Ieyui nobomeno..."

Pyreflies converged on the pair as they embraced. Unearthly cries on the edge of hearing merged into the Hymn of the Fayth. The lovers faded one spirit-light at a time, waning into darkness.

Isaaru brought his hands together to seal the ritual and fell to his knees.

Hurrying over, Juno offered him a hand up with a gruff, "Isaaru, I'm sorry."

Pacce was sobbing on Elma's shoulder. As Isaaru started towards him, a dim shape of light and shadow caught his attention. Another figure stood where Shuyin and Lenne had been a moment before, head bowed, hands folded. This woman had fuller curves, darker hair, bone-pale skin, a long black gown that fell to her feet.

"Milady?" he said.
The stranger raised a finger to her lips, then turned and glided away, pyreflies in her train. The others seemed oblivious to her presence. Isaaru gave a cry when she reached Pacce and planted a light kiss on his forehead. Then she was gone.

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"You'd give up on me?" he snarled.

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Auron sat up, becoming aware of every aching, bleeding limb, countless breaks and fragments of bone within. The rich greens, reds and blacks of his birthplace faded away. He found himself back in Sin's garden, the ghost of Djose's shore. The only trace of his childhood home was the spray of ohia berries spilling over the black pillow of lava behind him, its surface unmarked. All around him stretched Lulu's overgrown bower: roses and Macalania trees, orchids and moon lilies, driftwood and skulls and the endless teeth of tombstones.

He glanced down at his hand. It was branded with two glyphs, the signs of his own name.
"Thanks."
"You almost forgot yourself. That young man—"

"Was it Tidus?"

"No. An angry echo of an ancient war. Or rather... Tidus was the echo. Perhaps Lenne's love
graced him with more nobility than the man he mirrored."

"Zanarkand." The word was a curse and a dismissal.

"Yes. Zanarkand." Her voice sharpened. "Yu Yevon is very curious what is going on in Bevelle."

"More echoes. We may have an answer for you, Lulu."

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himself was tenuous at best just now. But her indrawn breath drew his attention.

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There were too many of them. As he took hold of the briar tightening around her throat, it
transformed into barbed metal, digging into her skin. She averted her eyes, abandoning the
pretense of speech. I think you had better go. Her lips twisted into an impish smile. I believe I may
have annoyed him.

Auron growled in frustration. "Don't take risks, Lulu. Put me down."

Another belt was unfurling across her face, covering her eyes. Are you sure you want to go on?
Others can write my story, you know.

"No," he said to both statements. "Lulu, hurry."

Very well. Soft lips brushed his cheek.

The vision of Sin's garden tore like cobwebs, catapulting him back into a body that was screaming
with pain in so many places he barely noticed his burnt hand. He found himself lying in a shallow,
stinking puddle at the mouth of a sewage pipe. Blood stained the fetid water the color of rust.
Quiet drizzle was falling upon the smoldering city in the gray dawn.

As he groaned and rolled over, her voice came to him in the susurrus of rain. I'll see you soon,
Auron. Tell Zaon when you're ready.

Vegnagun had vanished, taking with it almost all light and sound. Two distant splashes offered
bleak testimony to ears that strained to hear. The only remaining illumination came from the
elevator's lights and a swarm of pyreflies, drifting hungrily towards the remaining combatants.

The fight had ebbed but not ended. With Elma's help, Juno had finally pinned Pacce to the deck,
kneeling on him with the shaft of Maroda's spear laid across his throat. Elma had seized his
shoulders. He fought back in a snarling frenzy, thrashing and biting their arms. Nooj was crawling
towards them on hands and knees. He balked at the edge of the pyrefly cloud, took a deep breath
and waded in.

On the far end of the bridge, Isaaru kept vigil. Weeping as he prayed, he was dancing for both the
fallen and the foe.

Shuyin's madness was spreading. Juno was bearing down her full weight on Pacce's throat, choking him. With a startled "Hey!" Elma released him to intervene. She wound up grabbing Juno's helm, twisting it like a cork. Pacce redoubled his efforts, writhing and twisting and flailing at their eyes with fingers curled into claws. All three were sucking in pyreflies with every breath.

"Don't listen." Nooj had reached them now. "Elma. Juno. Focus. Think of something you love. Shuyin's trying to control you."

Elma let go with a gasp. "Son of a—!

Her oath was cut short by Junob punching her in the face. She crumpled with a yelp, clapping her hands over her nose.

Taking advantage of their distraction, Shuyin gave a violent heave and broke free. Pyreflies streamed from his shoulders as he snatched up his sword and charged towards Isaaru.

"Dammit!" Cupping her nose with one hand, Elma grabbed at empty air. "Sir! Watch out!"

For a moment Isaaru seemed unaware, twirling in a sluggish dance that mimicked the lazy arcs of the pyreflies. Then he raised his hand. "In Yevon's name," he said with strained conviction, "You will release my brother. Begone. You have no place in Spira!"

Pacce stumbled, hunkering down with fists clenched and head lowered. "Yevon? That old conjurer won't help you." He took another step forward. "You've been praying to a lie, summoner."

Juno rose silently and stalked him, poised to spring.

"Faith is no lie." Isaaru drew dignity about himself like a cloak and began to dance again, wet cheeks gleaming under the pyreflies. "What kind of a man were you, Shuyin, that you would destroy the world for love?" His voice rose and fell, swinging between bitter anger and quiet, gentle sorrow. "What kind of a woman was Lenne, to deserve such a memorial? Would she take joy in causing a lover's betrayal? Daughter's blood on father's hands? Brother turned against brother? Was Lenne such a monster, to condone such cruelty?"

"No!" Pacce was trembling now, barely struggling when Juno clamped onto his wrist and twisted his sword-arm behind him. Pyreflies boiled upwards from both of them like clouds of steam.

"Yes, you can, kiddo." Elma sat up, still covering her face with her hand. "Nobody could fight Shuyin alone: not Elder Cid, not anybody. It wasn't your fault you couldn't. But Isaaru's here now. He's the best summoner around, eh? He can kick this guy's ass."

A luminous form began to emerge from Pacce's body: taller, leaner, older, a golden figure advancing on Isaaru with drawn sword. Shuyin was growing more transparent with every step, but still he came.

Juno wrenched the sword away and started forward, although the battle was squarely in the summoner's hands now. But before she could overtake Shuyin, a second glowing figure coalesced in front of Isaaru. A slender woman stood there with arms outstretched, barring Shuyin's path. Her clothes were of a style unknown to them, a short ruffled dress of sparkling blue.

"You must stop!" she said.

"Lenne?" Shuyin froze. "Lenne. Is it really you?"
"You called me, Shuyin. I am here."

"But I searched. I searched for so long—"

"Shuyin, it's time to rest. Leave vengeance to the Lady."

Isaaru, still performing the sending dance, lost a step to astonishment. He stared doubtfully at the pyreflies cloaking the woman, wafting up from below. Something enormous rumbled down there in the depths, a hair-raising groan at the edge of hearing.

"They deserve it," Shuyin said. "They—"

"I wrote a song for you, Shuyin." She stepped forward, drawing him into her arms. "Maybe you've heard it. Listen." Soft and low, she began to purr into his ear. "Ieyui nobomeno..."

Pyreflies converged on the pair as they embraced. Unearthly cries on the edge of hearing merged into the Hymn of the Fayth. The lovers faded one spirit-light at a time, waning into darkness. Isaaru brought his hands together to seal the ritual and fell to his knees.

Hurrying over, Juno offered him a hand up with a gruff, "Isaaru, I'm sorry."

Pacce was sobbing on Elma's shoulder. As Isaaru started towards him, a dim shape of light and shadow caught his attention. Another figure stood where Shuyin and Lenne had been a moment before, head bowed, hands folded. This woman had fuller curves, darker hair, bone-pale skin, a long black gown that fell to her feet.

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Chapter End Notes

"*Lulu's Garden*" by CirrusCastle

Chapter 29 in the Remaster.
Chapter Summary

*Bevelle palace is in ruins and one of Isaaru's guardians is dead, thanks to a vengeful ghost. Now the survivors of the battle with Shuyin regroup at a house of healing.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Ah! Sir Auron, there you are."

A drainage ditch was an unlikely destination for morning prayers. Yet there was no mistaking the green robe, high collar, and ceremonial band stitched with Yevon's signs from throat to knees. *Yevon's toilet paper*, Kinoc had called it, and died in it.

The priest climbed down into the muck. "Goodness gracious. I suppose even legendary guardians are mortal, aren't they? Not too mortal, though, I hope. Let me see." Humming to himself, he began to circle Auron, ignoring the stagnant water and blood wicking up the hem of his robes.

Healing magic lapped out from his hands. A light drizzle pattered down, glazing the priest's bald head. The damp tasted of salt, not only from the breath of the harbor: there were tears in that rain, tears never shed by their owner when she had eyes to weep. The sour odor from the outflow pipe reeked of Sin and the living.

Auron gritted his teeth as bones shifted back into place, following the ley lines of the pyreflies. Breathing became easier, but his ribs still ground together like a sack of charcoal. Auron stared at the man shuffling around him. "Do I know you?"

"Zuke. A failed summoner. A madman too, perhaps. I dreamt I was to meet you here."

Auron's hand still burned as if he were gripping molten metal. What had Lulu done to him, *Flare* crossed with *Bio*?

"There. I fear that's the best I can manage. Can you stand? I must get you to Yuna's Cloister."

Auron groaned as Zuke helped him up. The priest's spell had not mended everything. "I need to reach the Chamber of the Fayth."

"I beg your pardon, Sir Guardian, but I was instructed to—" he coughed—"*Thundaga* your ass' if you did not come willingly."

"I... see." Auron glanced up at the sky, squinting. Did Lulu know about Rikku trapped in the bowels of Bevelle?

*There. Sin was lurking in the thunderheads, a dark shape embedded in a gray wall of cloud over the gutted husk of the palace. The tower was gone, but its image seemed to hang in midair, projected like a sphere recording onto the canvas of falling rain.*

"Yevon preserve us!" Zuke drew Yevon's prayer over his heart.
The sun began to break through, sending feeble shafts towards the phantom tower's peak. They pointed towards a gleam of white poised on the edge of a high balcony. Abruptly it dropped. Glyphs of light exploded outwards, magnifying the tiny human figure to aeon's size. They glimpsed a girl in a fluttering gown like a comet's plume, serene in her headlong plummet with her hands outstretched towards heaven.

"No!" Zuke took a step forward, rapt with horror.

Even Auron found himself spellbound. At the time, he had been too busy herding the rest of the party away to see Yuna's masterful performance. So had Lulu, for that matter, but she commanded an army of pyreflies now. They doted on memories.

The finale was brief but spectacular. An aeon came whirling down out of the clouds, a phoenix shape with wings the color of flame and shell. It swooped under the girl, catching and cradling her like a pearl on a velvet bed. They glided off together. The vision expanded, blurring at the edges, focused on the gazes of girl and aeon locked in soul's communion. As the mirage began to fade, Yuna turned and looked down upon the battered city with a solemn, cryptic expression that Auron suspected would soon find its way into temple portraits. The drizzle dwindled to a pale mist, then ceased. Sin vanished, taking the pyrefly-vision with her.

"It is a sign," Zuke said, wiping his eyes. "Did you see it? Did you see the Lady?"

"I saw Yuna." He could already hear it in the man's voice: In fifty years, half of Spira would be praying "in Yuna's name." Lulu, what are you doing? You've been playing Yu Yevon's game too long.

"Yes. Lady Yuna. They say the Lady intercedes on our behalf, blunting Sin's wrath—"

Auron hunched behind his collar. "And Lulu?"

"Guarding her still, I suppose... and troubling an old man's sleep." Zuke gave a weak laugh. "Forgive me, Sir Guardian. You are hurt, and I'm sure these reminders of old friends are no great comfort."

He nodded, bracing himself against shooting pain as he reached for his sword lying in the muck. Perhaps one of the warrior monks would know the route to the lower levels of the palace. Auron needed more than Cura, but he had to find Rikku. Promises were all he had left.

Auron's head swam as he bent. He realized his error just before his knees gave way. Dirty concrete rushed up to meet him. There was no aeon to catch him, but he barely felt it when he struck the ground.

"Nooj is a Crusader who sacrificed his own limbs in defense of Spira! You will give him the care due our honored veterans. Do I make myself clear?"

Soft-spoken as a rule, Isaaru turned heads as his grief-hardened voice cracked through the buzzing murmur of monks, nuns, and patients being escorted back to their rooms from the underground shelter. For a moment, the unpaved courtyard of Yuna's Cloister resembled a temple great hall with its rows of wooden saints. Every figure stopped, standing mute and astonished among topiaries, marble benches and ordered flowerbeds. Only the central fountain danced and chattered.
"Y-yes, Your Grace." The chastened monk bowed. "Captain Juno, if you'll follow me, please?"

"You'd better post a guard on Cid's room," Nooj said, leaning on Juno. "It sounds like they're looking for scapegoats."

"They're monks, not murderers, Nooj," Isaaru said, falling back to a lifeless whisper. "And I'm sure Lady Rikku is more than capable of defending her father. She, too, is a guardian."

"Isaaru," Juno said. "Get some rest. I'll survey the city and check in with Maester Shelinda, then report back. There's nothing more we can do until we hear from Baralai. And... Pacce?"

The youth raised his head. He had not spoken since Elma dragged him into the elevator from Vegnagun's vault.

"Guard your brother."

His eyes welled up again, but he drew himself up in a passable salute.

"Oh. One other thing." She hitched Nooj's arm around her shoulders again and turned to Elma. "Speaking of maesters. You lost one, didn't you?"

The Crusader stiffened. "Yeah, why?"

"She's here. Bad dose of toxin, but alive. The S.S. Konna found her and Pacce on the tip of Western Isle. You're lucky the ship's captain was stupid enough to risk Sin's waters to bring Isaaru's evacuation order here faster."

Pacce stirred, jarred out of his stupor. "I'm sorry! I forgot to tell you. S-sin dropped us. I pulled Maester Lucil out of the water, but I couldn't wake her."

"Sorry?" Elma seized his shoulders, beaming. "Don't be silly! You've just earned yourself a promotion. Just tell me where she is!"

"Um." He shook his head. "I'm s-sorry, I don't know which room—"

"Nevermind, kiddo, I'll find her." She turned to Isaaru. "Sir, permission to—"

"Granted." The drawn lines of his face eased for a moment. "Go on, Commander. I'll check on her later, if you wish."

"Sir!" She gave Juno a nod and dashed off, flagging down one of the senior nuns and grilling her before rushing through an archway.

Juno snorted and turned back to the monk who had been waiting on her and Nooj with mounting desperation. "All right. Lead the way."

As she navigated the vaulted passageway around the courtyard, Juno was trailed by warrior monks eager to report in, covertly checking on their captain. Some were trying to catch a glimpse of her unusual charge. One veteran saluted "Deathseeker" as well as Juno. Nooj said nothing, content to watch her as she dispatched subordinates with clipped orders to different parts of the city.

There was a moment's awkwardness when she deposited him in a room, accompanied by the wide-eyed monk who stared fearfully at the artificial leg he chucked onto the bed.

"I'm not going anywhere," Nooj said with a tight smile. "If you bump into Shinra or Gippal, would you tell them to bring me some baling wire?"
Juno gave a curt nod, expression masked by her helm. "I'll... see you later."

His eyes softened. Juno left briskly.

Isaaru, meanwhile, had stayed rooted in place as the party dispersed. Healers, warrior monks and the wounded swirled around him and Pacce like two snags in a river. Isaaru set his hands on his brother's shoulders, steering him gently towards the central fountain. It contained yet another statue of the High Summoner, a figure of marble and glass poised atop a flowering pillar of water. Innocent, ethereal, blissful, Yuna seemed suspended in a Calm that she had not lived to see. The brothers contemplated her in silence, feeling cool spray on their faces.

"Lady Yuna," Pacce said finally. "D-do you think she came to send Maroda? Everyone saw her."

"I sent him myself, Pacce. Yet I do not doubt she helped guide him. That vision we saw, however — I believe it was Sin's doing. Sin is the Lady. And she, too, mourns one who is gone."

"Huh?"

"I'll explain later." Isaaru collected himself with a sigh. "Come. I think we should heed Lady Rikku's example: find food, beds, and rest until there is news of Lord Baralai. Yes?"

"O-okay."

"Your Grace! Your Grace!" A nun flying from the main entrance tripped over a planter and stumbled towards them. "Lord Isaaru, come quickly!"

Isaaru clutched at Pacce's shoulder. "What is it, Sister?"

"Word from Father Zuke, my lord! He's found Sir Auron down by the Purifico Gate. They're bringing him in now!"

"What? He is... alive?"

"I think so. Father Zuke sent for a wagon, so either the guardian's badly wounded, or..."

Pacce choked back a sob. "Was there anyone with him?"

"The message only mentioned Sir Auron."

"Very well. Take us to him." Isaaru lowered his voice as his brother surged ahead. "Pacce, I wish I could affirm your hopes, but I dare not. Sir Auron is cursed with a gift that lets him endure what would kill another. I fear he is alone. Yet at least he may know our brother's fate."

Dripping, Elma leaned against the doorframe, casually barring the room. "Thanks, hon. I'll take it from here." She took the tray from the acolyte and nodded towards the Do Not Disturb tag swinging from the door-handle. "That isn't a suggestion. If you come back, it'll be for one of three reasons: Juno's orders, Isaaru's orders, or a Sin sighting. Anything else will have to wait. Understood?"

The girl shrank back, wringing her hands. Evidently Elma's reputation as Maester Lucil's guard dog had reached all the way to Bevelle. "Yessir, I mean, yes, ma'am."
Elma pushed the door shut and slammed the bolt with her elbow, moving back to the bed and setting the tray on the nightstand. "Help yourself," she said. Then she crossed the room to a copper tub. The steaming bath had already begun to cool. She picked up an ewer and added more hot water, eased back into the water and grasped a sponge, chattering away as she sloughed off the grime of battle.

"So, where was I? Oh, right. Well, Captain Juno led us back up through the Court of Yevon. We picked up Rikku and Cid on the way out. The palace is in pretty bad shape, ma'am. The tower's collapsed and most of the temple wing's burned. But the Court of Yevon's intact, so hopefully the archives are okay. And no fatalities, that's the important thing. Most of the palace was evacuated before Cid got here.

"Sin was waiting for us outside. It pulled some moon lily loopiness so everyone saw a vision of Lady Yuna. The priests are still yapping about it. Then Sin vanished, and we came here. Juno's gone off to assess the damage and check in with Maester Shelinda at Northgate. The rest of us are on standby. No word yet on Baralai. That's about it."

Elma looked up, waiting. After a moment she sighed, clambered out of the tub, and towed herself off. "Dammit. Forgot to ask for a fresh uniform." She slipped back into the Al Bhed garb, now sweaty and bloodstained. It should have been grounds for a jibe, but Lucil lay staring at the ceiling.

Elma plopped back into the chair by the bed and took her hand. "I can't believe it's only been—what, four days? since we got separated."

There was no reply. Lucil blinked, she breathed: beyond that, she was unresponsive. Sin's toxin, the healers said, but they had skirted Elma's questions when she reminded them of the general's old injury.

Elma exhaled. "Sorry to start without you, ma'am, but I'm starving. Tell me if you want anything." She selected a rice ball from the tray, wrinkling her nose after popping it in her mouth. "Ugh! What is with the fermented fish glop on everything? I can't wait for us to get back to Luca."

There was a brief lull while she picked over the food. "So. I'm considering whether to head back tomorrow. Yevon willing—" she made a face, catching herself too late—"I could reach Moonflow Village by the end of the week, Luca in ten days. That's a long time for our troops to hang on with both of us MIA, but there's no help for it. Unless I can hitch a ride on that airship when it comes back. Either way, our troops need us, especially with you... here." Her voice frayed. She took a long drink of wine before continuing. "But here's the thing. Isaaru's lost Maroda and Sir Auron. Pacce's not fit for duty. If Isaaru's still determined to take on Sin, he's going to need another guardian. Juno might do it, but she's got all of Bevelle to look after, especially with Maester Baralai missing. So, should I get back to Luca ASAP, or serve as guardian for one more mission?"

A prodigious yawn interrupted her musings. "Oof. Sorry, ma'am. I didn't sleep much on the airship." She sprawled back in the chair. "You know one good thing about finding out that Yevon's a big pile of shoopuf crap? Al Bhed showers. First thing I do after this is over: hire one of Cid's smiths and get a shower installed at HQ. It'll be great for your back."

Elma wilted as she began to run low on words, stroking Lucil's wrist with her thumb. "Hey. If I drop off, you poke me, okay?"

There was a faint croak. "You're out of uniform, Commander."

Elma sat bolt upright, eyes flying open. "I... uh... the sinscales—" She squeezed Lucil's hand,
struggling to keep her voice steady. "Reporting for duty, ma'am. Orders?"

Lucil flexed one leg beneath the sheets and then the other, movements jerky. Finally she breathed out. "Lord Isaaru is safe?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's here in Yuna's Cloister. Sergeant Wedge and the palace guard are here too, keeping watch."

"Lord Baralai is missing. Lady Shelinda...?"

"Northgate, ma'am. She's been overseeing the city's evacuation, setting up camps on the south rim of the Calm Lands. Captain Juno's gone off to inspect the city and meet with her, so we should get a status report from Shelinda in a few hours."

"Very good. Lock the door."

"Already done."

"Excellent." Lucil raised herself on one elbow, voice firming as she spoke. "I'll need to review your report to fill in what I missed. After Juno returns, we'll confer with her on the city's defenses. We should place the Yocun Crusaders at her disposal for the remainder of the crisis. We'll convene an emergency council session this evening with Lord Isaaru, Captain Juno and Elder Cid. Hopefully we'll have tidings of Maester Baralai by then."

"Yes, ma'am." Elma released her hand and stood, a slight hitch in her salute. "Anything else?"

"Yes." Lucil seized the bottom of her tank top, tugging her towards the bed. "You are officially off-duty. Juno's errand should take at least three hours to complete."

Lucil's legs might be hampered by old injuries, but she had developed upper body strength to compensate. There was a moment's wrestling as she dragged Elma under the covers, jockeying for blankets and pillow, a surfeit of riches compared to a sleeping bag spread on Djose gravel. Elma wound up wedged against her side, clutching Lucil's shoulder, mouth jammed against her own knuckles to bite back laughter that had abruptly turned to sobs. Lucil held her, combing her damp hair.

"Sorry, ma'am," Elma said finally. "I guess overtime finally caught up with me."

"I know." Lucil slipped a finger under her chin and coaxed her to relax. They drew together in a lingering kiss that was almost a match for one three years earlier, when Elma had vowed to carry Lucil until she could walk again.

Elma snuggled against her, drowsy and plaintive. "Hey... didn't you order me to report to you for debriefing after the operation was over?"

"Tonight." Lucil smiled, lips curling against Elma's cheek. "You need a few hours' rest, Commander. Otherwise, I'm not sure you'll last through a full session. Sleep now."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 30 in the remaster.
[Full-sized] illustration by mintywolf
The Council of Yevon

Chapter Summary

Sin has destroyed most of the temples and their fayth, putting Isaaru's pilgrimage in jeopardy. The maesters convene an emergency meeting to plan a radical new strategy for fighting Sin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Weary as he was of piecing himself back together, Auron still resented unsolicited aid.

Gravity had been hijacked. A subtle realignment of currents had swapped Spira's core with his own heart, drawing bone and sinew and spirit towards it like so many nested shells. The prayer was a variant of the Hymn of the Fayth, the one recited in temples to renew the bonds of fayth to statue. Two voices rose and fell in a plodding chant, weaving the binding prayer around him: once for Yevon, once for Spira, once for the end of Sin.

Auron wondered whether Yojimbo had gone mad before or after the priests stopped coming around to burnish his chains.

His body was no statue, but the pull of the Farplane lessened, as if he had fetched up on a sandbar in the midst of a torrent.

The binding ceased, as did the stronger voice. The ritual shifted to healing magic, a deeper, more potent strain than Zuke's. Damaged organs and fractures missed by Cura were patted back into wholeness like clay wetted, shaped, and baked anew. All pain vanished except for the brand in his palm, and that was now bearable. Finally, a simple cleansing spell— petty magic, but useful on pilgrimages— sloughed off the stench from the gutter where Lulu had dropped him.

Auron sat up and gave a grudging nod of respect. "Thanks."

"Thanks be to Yevon," Zuke said, helping Isaaru into a chair beside the cot. The cramped space suggested a monk's cell.

Isaaru's face was ashen. Disturbingly, blood had pooled in the hollows of his eyes. "Welcome back," he said, reaching for a washcloth to wipe his face. Then he shouted, voice cracking. "Pacce!"

The door opened with a jerk, and the room became even more crowded when then boy darted inside, slamming it in the faces of a press of spectators. "S-Sir Auron?"

He nodded a greeting.

"Our brother?" Isaaru said.

"Sent."

Pacce made a choking sound, trying to keep from breaking down in front of his idol.
"As I feared." Propping his head against the wall, Isaaru gave Zuke a weak smile. "Father, we deeply appreciate your help...and your understanding."

"Eh, well, I doubt the Grand Maester will excommunicate me," Zuke said. "Your chambers are ready, Isaaru. I expect to find you there shortly. If you need to talk—"

"Thank you, old friend. Perhaps later."

"Sir Auron, it has been...a most unusual honor. I pray you find what you seek." Zuke bowed and slipped out.

"Forgive me for enlisting Father Zuke's help, Sir Auron," Isaaru said. "Your...condition...presented a challenge, and I am rather spent."

"Understandable." Auron gave Pacce a measuring glance, but his eyes registered no comprehension. In fact, they registered very little. Auron had seen that look before: Braska after Anna's death, Lise pining for Jecht, Yuna cupping Tidus' head in the snow. Auron's track record in consoling the bereaved was dismal, but the boy reminded him enough of Tidus to try. "Pacce. I have a message."

"S-sir?"

"The blade is not to blame for the hand that wields it."

"I'm sorry?"

Isaaru's expression softened. "He means you should not assume guilt for Shuyin's crimes."

"Oh." Pacce's chin trembled. "I know, but—"

"Your brother doesn't blame you. He feared you'd blame yourself."

Pacce's eyes widened. "That's from Maroda?"

"Yes." Auron swung his legs over the side of the cot.

Isaaru, watching his brother's face, relaxed slightly. "So. By your leave, Sir Auron, we should avail ourselves of the guestrooms prepared for us. Assuming I still have two guardians?"

"You intend to keep going?" Auron said.

Pacce looked stricken.

"You're a hard man, my friend." He passed a hand over his eyes. "I know I must, but I do not know if I can. Allow me to defer my answer a day. Unless you have cause to think Sin will return tonight?"

Auron shook his head. "No." He frowned, recalling Lulu's puzzling reference to Zaon. "She's gone off to give us more time."

"The Lady is kind."

Threading their way through a stream of healers and patients being shuttled back to their rooms, Isaaru leaned close to Auron as they pressed against a wall to allow a stretcher to pass. "Maroda never had your way with words. But thank you. Losing one of them is enough."
Sin might grant a day's grace, but Yevon would not. Following Baralai's return via airship—
greeted with gunfire from the warrior monks until Juno ordered them to stand down— Lucil called
for a council in the cloister refectory.

Lucil was already seated when those she had summoned began to trickle in. "Elder Cid, Lady
Rikku. Thank you for coming. We may not have time to discuss it today, but be assured that the
maesters will not allow Shuyin's deeds to trigger retaliation against your people. We know you
were not to blame."

"Uh...well, good." Cid harrumphed, taking a seat at the large circular table. "Makes a nice change."

Rikku rolled her eyes. "He means, 'Thank you.'"

"My Lady," Shelinda said, rushing in. "I'm glad to see you well!"

"And you, my lady." Lucil waited for the others to arrive, then motioned to Elma.

"Ma'am." She locked the doors behind Nooj and activated a recording sphere. As the gathering
took their seats, she moved to stand behind Lucil.

"This emergency Council of Yevon is now in session." Lucil's eyes rested on each face as she
greeted them, starting on her left and circling the room. "Lady Shelinda. Lady Rikku. Elder Cid.
inclined her head towards the empty chair between Rikku and Shelinda. "The day began with
sorrow, for there is another who should be among us. But I give thanks to fate— or, dare I say it, to
Sin— for making possible such a roll call."

"Praise be to Yevon," Shelinda insisted.

"As you will." Lucil looked grim. "In truth, this is a Council of Yevon in name only. For today we
do not speak only for Yevon, my lady, nor does Elder Cid speak only for the Al Bhed. We must
take thought also for the Hypello and for the few Guado and Ronso that remain. Our choices may
dictate Spira's fate for the next thousand years. Therefore I urge you and Baralai to set aside titles
in this room, consider this a Council of Spira, and regard all votes as equal to our own."

Baralai said nothing until he had scanned the room, lips moving as if he were making a tally.
"Agreed."

Shelinda darted an uneasy glance at Nooj's metal limbs. "But I don't even know these people!"

"Nooj," Juno said. "Former Crusader. He and Baralai served together. I mentioned him when I
briefed you about Vegnagun." She took a deep breath. "I'll vouch for him."

Baralai's shoulders hunched, but he nodded. "So will I."

Nooj shook his head. "I don't deserve you people."

"And I'm Rikku!" Rikku waved. "Ex-guardian to the High Summoner. Yuna's mom was my Pops' sister."

"Oh!" Shelinda said. "Oh, yes. Hello again! All right, I agree."
Lucil steepled her hands. "Baralai, what is Vegnagun's status?"

"On standby," he said. "Gippal is guarding it on Lake Macalania. His crewmate, Shinra, met us and flew me back in their airship. They've got special spheres that broadcast to one another. We can call Gippal from here."

"Very good. Lady Shelinda, how goes the evacuation?"

"Fairly well, thanks to the warrior monks," she said, nodding to Juno, "but we're short on tents and rations. Some are waiting in line for hours for food and water. Several fights have broken out. I'd like to start moving the people back into the city as soon as possible."

"The city is not yet safe," Lucil said. "Sin could return to attack Bevelle at any time."

"I'm not sure the camps are any safer than Bevelle. Sin's been circling us like a shark. Everyone's terrified."

Auron, half-dozing in his chair, sat up with a jerk.

"Sin!" Isaaru said. "Where is it now?"

"Please," said Lucil, "describe exactly what you saw."

"It's flying," Shelinda said. "I've never seen anything so awful. The first time was just before midnight: a big dark mass in the sky howling in from Bevelle. I was afraid Isaaru's warning had come true. We all started praying for those left in the city. Then it swooped over us and headed out across the Calm Lands. About five hours later, just after the watch reported fires in the city, Sin popped out of nowhere, right on top of us! It flew back towards Bevelle. We lost sight of it in the smoke. Just after dawn, it passed us a third time, heading northeast. It's like it's hunting for something!"

"Isaaru?" Lucil said. "What do you make of this?"

"I'm not quite sure," he said. "Shortly before Lady Yuna's festival, Sin began a pilgrimage of its own, destroying temples and eliminating the aeons. That's why I sent warning to Bevelle. Sir Auron guessed Sin's next target would be Remiem Temple, beyond the Calm Lands. Something...or someone...must have caused it to turn back."

"Maybe it decided to target the temple of Bevelle during the confusion," Baralai said. "Isaaru, have you been down there since—"

"Nope!" Rikku said. "Pops and I were in the Chamber of the Fayth. It's a-ok!"

"You?" Shelinda said. "What were you doing in there?"

"I hid them there," Isaaru said. "I feared Juno's troops might be hunting Elder Cid. If he had died at our hands, it would mean war between the Al Bhed and Yevon."

"Wise move," Juno said.

"Sir Auron," Lucil said. "How do you read Sin's movements?"

"It was heading for Remiem until the attack on Bevelle drew its attention. It turned back to investigate. Now it's resumed course."

"Whose attention?" Rikku said. "Lulu's, or Yu Yevon's?"
"Probably both."

"Investigate?" Nooj frowned. "That's bad. Depending on how much Sin 'sees,' Yu Yevon may have spotted Vegnagun before Baralai moved it away."

"Yu Yevon?" Shelinda said.

"Lulu?" said Juno.

"Blast it." Baralai pinched the bridge of his nose. "I should have stranded Vegnagun in the Farplane before it was too late."

"Or I should," Nooj put in.

"Don't you dare," Juno said.

"Hold." Lucil raised her hand. "Elma has explained Yu Yevon to me, but this is something that everyone needs to hear. I myself find it difficult to accept. Isaaru, explain."

"If I must." Isaaru rubbed his eyes with his sleeve, collecting himself. "Yu Yevon, father of Lady Yunalesca, was the ruler of Zanarkand a thousand years ago. When Bevelle threatened to use Vegnagun to end the war in one stroke, Yu Yevon countered with Sin, the most powerful aeon ever summoned. Yu Yevon became eternal, wielding Sin as weapon, armor and dwelling.

"The teachings of Yevon were not written by Yu Yevon, but to appease him. The rites worshiping Sin outright were suppressed long ago, but now and then the Cult of Sin crops up in a new form."

"A form like, say, five foot six and a pair of blitzballs?" Elma murmured.

"Elma!" Lucil said.

"Sorry, ma'am." The blush in the Crusader's voice was audible. "You can't help seeing her, if you patrol Djose's shore. I assumed it was just toxin."

"Isaaru, this story—you found it in the archives, yes?" Shelinda said. "It must be a forgery, a heretical lie meant to shake our faith. Didn't Lady Yunalesca and Lord Zaon sacrifice everything to defeat Sin?"

"Except they didn't defeat it, did they?" Nooj said. "More Yevon propaganda."

"Exactly," said Isaaru. "Shelinda, I found most of this in the archives, but a sphere left by Lady Yuna confirms it."

"Um," Pacce said. "Isn't Lady Yunalesca the Lady?"

Isaaru placed his hand over Pacce's. "That was my guess before we set out, but I was mistaken. Listen. The fayth of the Final Summoning is drawn from a guardian who sacrifices herself for her summoner. But when Sin falls, Yu Yevon endures. He possesses the Final Aeon, and from that unwilling host he conjures a new Sin."

"Her name's Lulu," Rikku said. "She was, like, Yunie's big sister. She was always the smart one, you know? But when Yunie wanted to try the Final Summoning, she...she just...augh! Auron, you should've stopped them."

Cid snorted. "Yevon's the real toxin. Makes 'em act like idiots, every last one of 'em."
"It doesn't matter who she is," Juno said. "Right now, she's the enemy. How do we fight her?"

"Lulu has some freedom to steer Sin's course, provided she plays her part. That may give us an opening." Auron frowned. "There was something she said—"

"You speak to Sin?" Baralai said, eyes narrowing.

Shelinda made a despairing whimper.

Auron ignored him. "'Tell Zaon when you are ready,' Lulu said."

"Anyone here got a commsphere to the Farplane?" Cid quipped.

"Ugh," Rikku said. "Don't tell me we gotta go to Guadosalam. Those ruins are creepy."

"No." Isaaru gave an odd laugh, drawing a raised eyebrow from Auron. "She means the fayth of St. Bevelle. Their true names are usually forgotten. But that child...he was a prodigy, worthy of the father he was named for. The war began when Yu Yevon's grandson was taken hostage."

"And when Zanarkand refused his ransom, Bevelle's priests ripped out his soul?" Nooj said. "Typical. I always wondered how the temples came by their 'willing sacrifices.'"

"So, like, if you talk to Zaon, he can signal her?" Rikku said.

"I find all this very difficult to believe," Lucil said. "But if Sir Auron is not suffering from Sin's toxin, it comes to this: he is proposing we call Sin to Bevelle, inviting it— or rather, her— to complete the city's destruction."

"What happens if you don't call her?" Baralai said.

"She'll continue attacking Spira," Auron said. "And we forfeit our chance to choose the battlefield."

"She's dictating the battlefield," Juno said. "I don't like it. Whoever she was, she's Sin now. Slave to another Shuyin."

"Um..." Pacce stammered.

"Won't she come back for the last fayth anyway?" Rikku said. "Sooner or later, Bevelle's gonna get clobbered."

"Um..." Pacce said again.

"Vegnagun," Nooj said.

"No!" Baralai and Juno snapped in unison.

"Pacce," Lucil said. "Have you a suggestion?"

He blushed. "Well...um...we moved a fayth before, right? We hoped the Lady wouldn't find it. But she did. So..."

"Get it away from Bevelle, then use it as bait!" Elma said. "Good thinking, kiddo!"

Isaaru sighed. "A clever idea, Pacce, but I fear it may be impractical. The Chamber of the Fayth is deeply buried. Moving Djose's statue was challenging enough. How could we raise Zaon's, let alone carry it down and away from the citadel?"
"That glorified conveyor belt's a start," Cid said. "I reckon that's how the builders got it down there in the first place."

"Yeah!" Rikku grinned at the others' blank expressions. "The Cloister of Trials, you ninnies! It doesn't just move people. It got a little banged up, but it's mostly intact. We could fix it, couldn't we, Pops?"

"Only trouble is, the temple's fallen over the entrance," Elma said. "Work crews could clear it, but that'll take weeks."

"Gippal's got heavy lifters," Nooj said. "Cutters, excavation equipment for salvage operations. So we could clear the temple, pick up the statue and ship it wherever you like."

"Then fire up Vegnagun, and boom! No more Sin," Cid said. "Hot damn, I think you've finally hit on a plan with all this yapping."

"Just one problem," Baralai said. "We can't use Vegnagun. It's more dangerous than Sin."

"And a machina," Lucil said with distaste.

"I don't care what you say about Yevon, we can't use that!" said Shelinda.

"So let me get this straight," Cid said. "You've got a weapon that can blow Sin out of the sky, and you're too damned chicken to try it?"

"Pops," Rikku scolded.

"Didn't you hear Baralai?" Juno said. "If we lose control of Vegnagun, it could start wiping out cities—whole islands—the way Sin eats villages."

"Yes." Lucil leaned back in her chair. "Sin was foe enough. But if not Vegnagun, then what? Isaaru, I should like our summoner's counsel."

"I...I do not know, my lady. I tremble at the thought of using Vegnagun. But we are running out of weapons. Three of my aeons are gone. Sin is destroying another temple as we speak."

"Then let it," Baralai said. "Isaaru, think. The Calm never lasts more than a dozen years. What makes you believe Vegnagun will be any more effective than the Final Summoning? Maybe we should stop lying to the people and to ourselves. Sin isn't going away. We just have to learn to live with it. We've survived with it for a thousand years, after all."

"Chickabos," Cid muttered. "Every one."

Rikku looked troubled. "No, he's right, Pops," she said. "It's why you were protecting the summoners, remember? The pilgrimages were just a fancy way to knock people off. This'll kill Lulu for sure, and it could blow up in our faces. We've got to put up with Sin until we can think of something else."

"Rikku's right," Elma said.

"Sir Auron?" Lucil said.

"There's another voice at this council you aren't hearing," he growled, "although she's burned her message from one end of Spira to the other. Lulu says it's time for this farce to end. Now. If we wait, she'll no longer have the will to help us at all."
"In that case," Isaaru said with a hint of temper, "What does the Lady suggest?"

"She has no answer," Auron said. "If she had one, Yu Yevon would read her thoughts and put a stop to it. But Lulu's destroyed the aeons because she still has faith. In Spira. In life. In us. She's challenged us to find a new way to fight Sin, one that doesn't involve the Final Summoning. Baralai has found one. If you refuse it, Yu Yevon has won."

"Sin," Isaaru said, "Spira's sorrow…is asking us to hope?"

"So you say," Baralai said. "I'm sorry, but I could just as well say that Vegnagun votes no because it doesn't want to die."

"Pacce," Lucil said. "Your voice has not been heard. You are a part of this council."

"I...I don't know." He swallowed, avoiding everyone's scrutiny. "But…Maroda would say we should fight. So I do, too."

Baralai's expression hardened. "Ten votes, Lucil. Five for, five opposed. So what do you say, General? Shall we gamble with every life in Spira, use a machina we barely understand, and hope Sin and Vegnagun annihilate each other without taking Spira along?"

"It's Mi'ihen, all over again," Lucil said, eyes going distant. "Three thousand Crusaders perished the last time we counted on machina to do what summoners cannot. The Al Bhed paid the price as well, Cid. I buried some of them with my own hands. Baralai nearly died there. Shelinda tended the wounded. Isaaru tended the dead. For thirteen years, their ghosts have haunted us. So the Four Maesters of Yevon swore never to repeat our predecessors' mistakes. Yet seven days ago, I ordered an operation at Djose to preserve an aeon needed for the fight. We failed, and more Crusaders paid the price."

Elma gripped the back of Lucil's chair.

"And yet Sir Auron is right. If we refuse this battle, we surrender. The summoner's art will die. Even if we could find brave new souls to volunteer as fayth, Sin would destroy them. Spira's sorrow will be eternal. And sooner or later, another Shuyin, another Seymour will lay hands on Vegnagun. Then all Spira will pay for our prudence." Lucil raised a hand as Baralai started to rise. "I heard you the first time, Baralai. You propose to fly Vegnagun into the Farplane, sacrificing yourself like a summoner. In the end, that may be our only option. But I shall not surrender Spira to Sin without a fight."

"Sir Auron, I accept the Lady's challenge. Vegnagun is our weapon. The ruins of Guadosalam will be our battlefield. This war began a thousand years ago. It is time for us to end it, once and for all."

Chapter End Notes
They were silent for a while. At length Aragorn spoke. 'As I have begun, so I will go on. We come now to the very brink, where hope and despair are akin. To waver is to fall. Let none now reject the counsels of Gandalf, whose long labours against Sauron come at last to their test. But for him all would long ago have been lost.' ~ "The Last Debate", Return of the King
Chapter Summary

_Sin has destroyed most of Isaaru's aeons, leaving him with no choice but to use a fearsome weapon from a thousand-year-old war. Now allies and estranged friends prepare for the final showdown._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Juno pulled the old Crusader's blanket tighter around her shoulders. Night had fallen. Snow was beginning to collect in the nooks and seams of Vegnagun's pitted skin. A low tremulous hum hinted that the machina was not quite dormant. Far below, the lake creaked under the weight of its feet slowly settling into the ice. Pyreflies drifted up from the frozen surface, mingling with the fog.

A drone of engines rumbled across the lake and faded. Juno raised her rifle and peered out. Minutes later, Nooj emerged from the darkness, passed her parked snowsled, and limped across the broken ground. He halted under Vegnagun's head. "May I come up? I'm unarmed."

"Fine." Juno lowered her rifle.

Nooj's limbs clanked against the hull as he pulled himself up. Juno tensed with every sound, but left him to find his own way. At last, he rolled over the top and into the cockpit beside her feet, chest heaving. Dusted white, the ropes of his hair rattled against the deck.

"Does Baralai know you're here?" she demanded.

"No."

"So. What are you doing here?"

"Wanting to talk." He raised his eyes. "If you still want to talk."

She hesitated, then held out the edge of the blanket. The lumps sewn into its layers were fire marbles, shining through the fabric like glow worms.

The simple gesture triggered a flood of emotion behind his eyes. Hitching around in the cramped quarters, Nooj leaned back against her legs. Metal armor regulated the contact in a way her old leathers had not. She drew the blanket around them and resumed scanning the fog.

"Why didn't you ever try to contact me?" she said.

"I thought you were dead."

"Don't lie, Nooj. I heard what Shuyin said. You weren't sure."

"And if I had sought you out, don't you think he would have made sure?" Years of pent-up frustration lanced through Nooj's voice like a fish-hook. "If you lived, you were a threat to him. Gippal and Baralai, too, but you most of all. Sooner or later, you would have realized I wasn't
myself." His hands clenched. "I nearly killed Shinra a month ago, and he's just a friend."

Juno exhaled, breath frosting over his head. "Nooj. I'm sorry I stopped looking for you."

"You **looked**? Gods, I'm glad you didn't find me."

"I suppose I am too. Pacce caught me offguard, but you—" She grimaced. "So. You've been with the Al Bhed. Doing what?"

"Salvaging machina. Not entirely my idea, but it was fascinating work." He tipped his head back, a hint of regret in his eyes. "'Friend' is the wrong word. Shinra's almost a son to me. I gather you've also picked up a protegé?"

"Eh?" She frowned. "Oh, Pacce? It's not like that. Maroda asked me to help whip him into shape for their next pilgrimage."

"And Baralai?" His voice softened. "You two seem close."

"Nooj—"

"Juno, I don't mind. It's been thirteen years. I wanted you to be happy."

"So did I." She snorted. "Baralai wasn't the answer."

"**Oh.** I'm sorry. In that case, I'm glad you two are still speaking to each other."

"I left for a few years. Did some exploring. I worked on a cargo ship for a while, but..."

"It didn't fly."

"Exactly."

"Maybe we can get you up in Gippal's airship."

"I'd... like that," she said. "But I have duties. Baralai needs me."

"Which is why he posted the captain of the guard in a snowbank eight leagues outside the city?"

"Someone has to keep an eye on this thing." She glared at the darkened keyboard. Vegnagun shifted uneasily.

"I gather there's no love lost between you and Baralai's pet." Nooj's chuckle died away. "You know what he's planning, don't you?"

"Protect Vegnagun," she said bitterly, "at any cost."

"Another Deathseeker. I suppose I set a bad example." Nooj closed his eyes. "We can't let him throw his life away, Juno. Which is why... I know this is much to ask, but I need you to teach me how to fly Vegnagun."

"Is **that** why you came out here?" She stiffened. "So you can take his place?"

"I came here to start getting to know **Juno,**" Nooj said. "But Baralai needs our help. Someone has to keep him from diving into the Farplane."

"No."
"Juno—"

"I already asked. He said no. If he doesn't trust me, he certainly won't trust you."

"Then we'll have to make it worth his while. Listen. Unlike Baralai, I have piloted machina, not only in simulation. And while the interface is like nothing I've seen before, I'm familiar with how machina think. My experience may be the edge we need to win."

"Maybe." She mulled over his words, expression masked by her helm. "On one condition."

"Name it."

"Survive. You can't atone for what happened by sacrificing yourself in his place."

Nooj gave a wry chuckle. "You know me too well. All right. Going into a battle with Sin and Vegnagun, we could all be killed, but I'll do what I can to avoid it. is that enough?"

"Almost." She gazed down at him, measuring. "You do realize that you'll have to lower your guard completely for this? Vegnagun's interface only works if you allow it access to your mind."

"If you can do it, I can do it."

"Baralai's going to kill me." She peeled off her gloves. "Get up here."

Pacce had finally succumbed to sleep just before dawn. Leaving him to rest, Isaaru and Auron had returned to the citadel, retracing the path that Juno had used to lead the others back to the surface. Auron recalled the last time it had been just one guardian and one summoner, seeking Bevelle's fayth over a lifetime ago. Guardian and summoner, fayth and faith: these had been simpler relationships once.

The doors of the lift opened. Auron peered out, then closed the doors and keyed the next floor.

"I'm sorry," Isaaru said. "I should have memorized what floor it was."

"You had other things on your mind." Auron frowned, noticing how Isaaru swayed each time the elevator moved. "You are unwell. We should return later."

"No!" His lips peeled back from his teeth in a frantic smile. "I must see the fayth. I'm fine, Sir Auron. It's merely fatigue."

"I see," Auron said, unconvinced. Grief would explain Isaaru's lethargy, but his symptoms had begun well before Maroda's death. Auron guessed one cause: loss of his aeons had taken a heavy toll on the man's spirit. But something had happened to him during their stay with the Al Bhed. Perhaps Sin's toxin had aggravated grief and loss, but Auron could not shake the feeling that Isaaru's inner keel had snapped.

Isaaru watched him operate the controls with vague curiosity. "You still don't trust me, do you?"

"I trust no one, Isaaru. Myself included."

"Liar." The summoner's chuckle did not reach his eyes. "You trust Sin, don't you?"

"Sometimes."
Several floors down, a Tonberry crouched outside the doors as if waiting for a ride. Isaaru lunged for the controls as its lantern bathed Auron in yellow light. Even that brief exposure was enough to leave the guardian in a sweating heap on the floor. Isaaru applied *Cura* as soon as the doors closed.

"Maroda always hated those creatures," Isaaru said.

"So did Lulu."

Isaaru staggered again as the lift dropped. "Sir Auron? There is something I should tell you. I have not been quite frank with you concerning Lord Mika."

Auron tensed. Since the beginning of his pilgrimage, Isaaru had been lying about his predecessor's fate. Any unsent was a rogue factor, liable to turn up anywhere. Shuyin's ability to possess others had raised an unsettling possibility. "What about him?"

"I sent him, Sir Auron. Yevon forgive me, I sent Lord Mika, the most revered maester in history."

"You are sure?" Auron relaxed. "Impressive."

"Thank you." Isaaru said. "I suppose you have no reason to rue his passing. But for Yevon, it is yet another secret shame. Despite our good intentions, Baralai, Shelinda and I came to power via a coup."

"Not Lucil?" Auron had little interest in politics, but he wanted to confirm Mika's removal.

"No, her hands are clean. She was in Besaid, protecting the rebels. We never told her the true story."

"Which is?"

"Well." Isaaru hesitated, but his eyes brimmed with confession. "After my duel with Lady Yuna, I vowed to quit Bevelle and resume my pilgrimage. I thought you a traitor, so your words had no power to dissuade me. But the farther we travelled, the more difficult it was to walk with eyes closed. The Crusaders, excommunicated by Yevon, were rallying to protect the people. The warrior monks had imposed martial law in Bevelle, venturing forth only to punish Lady Yuna's sympathizers. And then we reached Mount Gagazet."

"Ah," said Auron. "So it was you that tended the Ronso."

"Yes." Isaaru passed a hand over his eyes. "I have never sent so many, not even after Operation Mi'ihien. We found Elder Kelk just before he died. His will for justice had kept him alive just long enough to pass on what he knew: Seymour's patricide, his murder of Kinoc, Lady Yuna's forced wedding, his plots against the Al Bhed, Ronso and Crusaders—all condoned by Grand Maester Mika. Worse still, both were unsent. My faith almost died that day.

"From Gagazet my brothers and I witnessed Lady Yuna's battle with Sin. I vowed on her memory that I would deliver Yevon from those who had corrupted it.

"On the way home, we fell in with Baralai, a young Crusader on the run. He advised us to flee the reprisals that were coming. But I could not leave Spira to her fate. Would Sin not return all the sooner, unless we atoned for Yevon's crimes? So I pressed him to accompany us back to Bevelle.

"There we found an ally in Shelinda. She had heard of Kinoc's murder from O'aka before his execution, but had dismissed it as the ravings of a trickster desperate to save his own skin. She could not discount a summoner's word so easily. Despite her misgivings, she arranged an audience
with Lord Mika. We laid bare what we knew, begging him to step down with honor intact, repudiate Seymour's vile deeds, and entrust Spira's welfare to a new generation." Isaaru shook his head. "The interview did not go well."

Auron snorted. "Yuna tried something similar."

"Summoners do not easily deviate from the path set by Yevon," Isaaru said. "My brothers, Baralai and I were arrested, held for trial and execution. But that night, Shelinda released us and diverted the palace guards long enough for me to perform the sending."

"And then you claimed Mika's position."

"Not by design, whatever Baralai may say." The summoner gave an odd, strained laugh. "He sees too much of Seymour in me."

"So." Auron arched an eyebrow. "Why tell me now?"

"I needed to ask my fellow maesters."

"Isaaru." Auron glanced out and locked the door controls, sealing them in. "If you want my trust, there's one more thing I must know."

Isaaru wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "Yes?"

"What's wrong with you. The truth."

"Me?" He pushed away from the wall with a lurch, gesturing emphatically. "My brother dead, Yevon in shambles, my oldest aeon slated for sacrifice, and you ask what's wrong with me?"

Auron caught Isaaru's wrist, turning it over to show the underside of his cuff. The edge was was stained with a fresh red smear over brown.

Isaaru glanced down and blanched. "Erinyes," he said in a low voice. "The aeon Seymour used to massacre the Ronso: I have it now. But it was damaged during Sin's attack on Baaj. It's half-mad. It thinks I am Seymour."

"What?" Auron stared. "You can't use it, Isaaru."

"But if we must sacrifice Spathi, it's the only aeon I have left!"

"Which Yu Yevon could turn against us."

"You don't know that!" Isaaru's face contorted. "Dammit, man, why do you believe in Sin and nothing else? She's been Yu Yevon's slave for thirteen years. Who knows what thoughts are her own? Or are you telling me she destroyed the temples, Djose's Crusaders, Besaid Village of her own free will, just to avenge Lady Yuna? What kind of fiend is she? I cannot think you would cherish such a person, nor that Lady Rikku would vouch for a cold-blooded murderer!"

"That's enough." Auron's fingers tightened until Isaaru hissed in pain.

"There, you see? You love, whether or no you'll admit it! Else you would have abandoned this poor excuse for a summoner and sought the Farplane already. Your love helps you endure, Sir Auron, but it blurs your wisdom. The Lady has given you different answers, has she not? Which should we choose to believe? I say the aeons are a threat to Yu Yevon. If we cannot destroy Sin with machina, Erinyes is our last hope! Mad she may be, but Seymour's mother was a Final Aeon, misused as a
means to power. I shall turn her to her proper purpose."

"Then Pacce will be brotherless." Auron regarded him sternly until he saw the words sink in. "Come."

Massaging his wrist, Isaaru followed him out to the guardian’s antechamber, where Maroda's dried blood stained the floor. They crossed quickly and entered the fayth's inner sanctum. The summoner shuffled to the edge of the dais and knelt. Meditation might be beyond him, but the fayth was waiting.

"Isaaru. I'm glad you came." The hooded figure was sitting cross-legged upon the glassy lens that housed his statue. "I'm sorry about your brother."

"Thank you, old friend."

"Hello again," the spirit added to Sir Auron.

He nodded, planting himself by the door.

"Spathi—" It was the name the fayth had whispered to Isaaru when their souls merged; he did not flatter himself that he knew Zaon— "Do you know what we intend to do?"

"In part." The child tilted his head. "Do you?"

"In part," Isaaru said, rueful. "The Lady will come for you soon. Since we cannot turn her, we must move you away from the city to save it. Then we lay a trap. Baralai has salvaged a machina from the ancient wars which we hope will be powerful enough to destroy Sin once and for all."

"Once," the fayth said. "But not for all."

"What?" Isaau's voice quavered. "Is there no way to end this?"

The fayth turned his head, contemplating Sir Auron.

Auron stared back, frowning. "Yes?"

The fayth recited in a lilting singsong, "There he waited for her, and for one night only war was in abeyance. For then did Mars put off his shield and panoply to help renew her—"

Auron cut him off. "Venus and Mars." It was the pagan text which Lulu had read aloud on that sultry night in Besaid, when their thoughts kept straying from the astrological keys needed to unlock certain weapons. It was unsettling to hear it from a child's lips, but then, Zaon's childhood had ended a thousand years ago, along with innocence.

There was something else. What was it Lulu had said? "There's just one way I've found to keep Yu Yevon out for a while. One way... and it is a momentary diversion at most."

"So, I distract her," Auron said gruffly. "Then Vegnagun can strike."

"But if destroying Sin won't end Yu Yevon—" Isaaru began.

"Where is Yu Yevon?" Auron said.

Isaaru's eyes widened. "Inside Sin? We must penetrate its shell?"

"Vegnagun can breach the hull. The rest is up to us. Find Yu Yevon. Break the cycle. Your skill in
sending may prove useful."

"Not if I send you again!"

Auron shrugged. "Get Yu Yevon, and it won't matter." It did matter, actually. He had unfinished business with Yunalesca. But if he could not stay to fulfill that task, he had a suspicion that someone else would see to it.

"A good plan." The fayth began to fade. "Don't take too long, Isaaru. Yu Yevon nearly controls Sin now. It will be difficult to fight him without her aid."

"I would rather have yours," Isaaru said. "I don't want to lose you, old friend. Isn't there some way to—"

"Please, Isaaru. Let us go." The fayth was no longer visible. "The Lady promised us an end. We're very tired. Will you release us?"

"Forgive me, old friend. I was not thinking. We'll set you free."

Auron helped the man to his feet. His cheeks were damp, but there was no fresh blood on them. They filed out of the chamber without a word.

Any chance for reflection was shattered by Rikku barreling across the room to pounce Auron. "Sooo-oooo, what's the plan?"

Isaaru blinked. "Lady Rikku, what are you doing here?"

Rikku tugged on Auron's coat. "Don't play dumb, Auron! You were up to something at the Council. You're always up to something. And you'd better be up to something, because if this is just an excuse to vaporize Lulu, you're gonna be doing it without Al Bhed help!"

"I believe we may have a plan to your liking, my lady," Isaaru said with a threadbare smile. "Sir Auron proposes to penetrate Sin's armor with Vegnagun, then confront Yu Yevon within. I take it this will be a rescue operation?"

"Oops." Rikku's eyes darted towards Isaaru. "He wasn't supposed to know, was he?"

Auron looked grim. "It's the only way to defeat Yu Yevon, Isaaru. You heard the fayth. Free Lulu, and she'll help us finish him off."

"Fear not," Isaaru said. "If saving your friend helps save Spira, why should I object? Although I fear we'll find little left to save."

"Nah. She's still in there. Yunie got a message from her, remember?" Rikku brandished a spanner. "All right. Let's get to work! Operation Mage Extraction, here we come!"

Half frozen, mashed into the cockpit hip to hip, Juno and Nooj had lost track of time, soaring in a thousand-year-old bubble. Juno's numb fingers beat out a spare melody of two-note intervals. Nooj was flying. Maimed limbs forgotten, he spun in a barrel roll over the smoking remains of Bevelle's armies and bellowed in triumph.
The simulation faded, leaving only the gray fog of dawn.

"I enjoyed that far too much," Nooj said. "I hope Shuyin didn't leave a residue."

"Don't be modest." Stretching, she started to remove her helm, then stopped.

"I'm hardly going to avert my eyes at a scar," he said. "I need to know what I did to you."

"Shuyin. It was Shuyin." Peeling it off, she shook loose a mane of silver-gray coming loose from her ponytail. The arch of one cheekbone was shattered, gouged by a deep furrow that showed bone at the back, scar tissue buckling at the edges like the weathered rim of the Calm Lands.

He reached out and traced her cheek below the scar. Her face tightened.

He withdrew his hand at once. "Sorry."

"No. I just need you to promise me something." She picked her words with care as Vegnagun trembled. "Once this is over, we find a way to send Vegnagun away. The Farplane. Anywhere."

"Agreed." He regarded her steadily. "Juno. I'm Al Bhed now. Machina are just tools. Not alive, and certainly not our friends."

"That's what I needed to hear." She leaned towards him, gripping the straps across his chest. Their lips were cold when they met, but neither seemed to mind.

Chapter End Notes

Ch. 32 in remaster.
The Summons

Chapter Summary

Spira's forces are gathered for an epic showdown. Sin has received her invitation as the Guest of Honor. Old lovers will soon be reunited as adversaries on the field of battle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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"And leave you alone with this thing? Not a chance." Baralai leaned forward, playing a somber series of notes to weave a protective bubble around them. "Punch it."

"All right." A low bleeping started when Nooj pressed the switch. He hunkered down, bracing himself. "You still don't trust me, do you?"

"I've gotten out of the habit, Nooj. Even those I trust go behind my back."

"She'll watch your back even when you don't want it. Especially then."

"I suppose you would know better than I."

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"Hang on," Nooj said. "Phase in ten seconds... five... four... three... two—"

There was a roar, a downwards lurch, and the sickening sensation of plunging through solid matter. Nooj and Baralai were enveloped in a sphere of unreality, seeing through Vegnagun's sensors. Pyrefly plumes wailed around them with the voices of lost souls. Spira's surface unrolled overhead at a furious pace. They dodged the deep roots and bottomless pools of Macalania Forest.

"Sin!" Baralai shouted, or thought: they were the same thing in this in-between state.

"What! Where?"

"This must be what it's like!"

They had reached the vast stony expanse of the Thunder Plains. Swimming under the iron foundations of lightning rod towers, Vegnagun began to pick up speed as if some tidal force were sweeping it forward. Nooj and Baralai sensed a yawning chasm rushing to meet them, a hole ripped in the very fabric of space. Rafts of pyreflies seemed to be flowing into it along invisible lines of force.

"Not yet," Nooj snapped. He strained against the mental interface, trying to regain control of navigation. Before he could wrest back the helm from Vegnagun, the machina exploded upwards through rock and vegetation into open air, stinging rain. A titanic bolt struck just behind them.

Then they were out of the storm, plunging into a sickly green haze at the southern rim of the Thunder Plains. Shadowy forms hurtled past, shattered trunks and masses of vines piled into mountainous heaps like driftwood after a storm. There was a splintering crash. Vegnagun ground to a halt, claws plowing through spurs of old trees. With a final shudder, the machina hissed and settled. The fog reduced its lamps to dim, bilious spheres of light.

Visibility was almost nil, but they seemed to have landed in a humpy wasteland of deadwood and treestumps of tremendous girth. Above, the fog thinned to drifting clumps. Behind them, the ground dropped away into a vast bowl filled with soupy brownish-green haze. Gnarled creepers the size of Shoopuf legs spilled over the crater's rim and disappeared. Pyreflies kettled up from below. There was a musty stench of fungus and rotting wood, but unlike a living jungle, there was no scent of green, growing things. Here and there, the pyreflies reflected off bits of colored glass strewn across the landscape. Those shards were the only trace of the Guado's ancient home.

"Charming spot," Nooj said. "Any idea why Lucil chose it?"

"It's uninhabited now, thanks to Sin. Better than risking the evacuation camps in the Calm Lands."

Shinra's disembodied voice reached them through a crackle of static. "The fog may conceal our operations. Plus, there's easy access to the Farplane."

"You still with us, kid?" Nooj said.

"Affirmative. My sensors show you've parked right on top of my homing beacon."

"You're a genius," Nooj said. "The autopilot worked perfectly."

"Of course."

Baralai played a few sharp notes. A bowl-shaped map of the area materialized around them, complete with miniature flashes of lightning spattering the plain to the north. "Shinra. Have you dropped a beacon through the Farplane portal?"

"Yes, but I haven't activated it yet. Didn't want you locking onto the wrong one."

"Good thinking," Nooj said.

Gippal piped up. "You two playin' nice? Nobody shooting anybody?"

"Not funny," Nooj and Baralai said in unison. They eyed each other as Gippal's laughter blasted out the comsphere.

"What's your status?" Baralai said.

"We've dropped off the statue," Shinra said. "Elder Cid and Rikku are stowing the loaders in the hold. We'll move out as soon as the summoner's aboard."

"I'm parked outside," Gippal said. "I'll swing by when you two are ready to bail."

"There will be little margin for error," Baralai said. "Please be careful."

"Trust me, Bar, I'll be in and outta there faster'n Sin can sneeze," Gippal said. "By the way. Juno
told me to tell you guys to watch yourselves. She expects you back in one piece. And you know better than to cross her."

"Thanks," Nooj said. "I hope we can oblige."

Baralai said nothing, suddenly preoccupied with the scanners.

Gippal listened to dead air for a few beats before closing the link. He leaned back and propped his feet on the hover's windscreen. "I think Bar's still pissed at you for letting Nooj handle that junk heap."

"He'd be even more pissed if he knew I was here." Juno peered through the murk. The dingy glow of Vegnagun's lights shone some distance away, on a level below the sheared-off stump where they were perched. A bent, white-haired woman began to coalesce from the pyreflies overhead. Juno averted her eyes with a scowl. Guadosalam was gone, but the Farplane ghosts lingered.

"Tellin' me. I'm surprised you and Lucil and Commander Choco-buns all came out for the party, leaving no one to mind the store. No offense, but I've known Hypello potions with more wits than Shelinda."

"Don't underestimate her. We'd never have gotten the city evacuated in time if she hadn't spent the last five years prepping us for a Sin attack."

"Okay, okay." He raised his hands. "I'm just sayin'. Who's gonna keep Yevon together— and off our Al Bhed asses— if Sin takes out all of you?"

"Maester Lucil will be observing at a distance with Elder Cid. That should minimize the danger to essential personnel." She frowned. "Except for Baralai, and we need him to control Vegnagun."

"Essential, eh? Gee, thanks." Gippal cocked his head. "How'd you talk him into letting Nooj drive, anyway?"

"I gave him three choices: bring Nooj, bring me, or fight me... and if he lost, I'd smash Vegnagun into a cliff."

"Ha." He grinned. "Same old Dr. P."

"It's Juno."

"Yeah, whatever. C'mon, lighten up! This is what we trained for with the Squad, remember? Beat Sin, save the world, win everlasting glory, get laid—"

"End of discussion."

"Hey, I saw you and Noojster makin' eyes at each other—"

"End. of. Discussion."

Gippal groaned. "Man, I knew I should've brought Rikku along."
"Don't do anything stupid, okay?" Rikku cringed at a thunderclap but stood her ground. "You won't be much help to anybody if you're dead!" She glared at Auron as he began to chuckle.

"Rikku, get your butt in here, now!" Cid's bellow echoed down through the airship's cargo doors.

"You should go," Auron said. He met her eyes, remembering their first encounter. This one would be farewell. "Sin may strike at any time."

"Yeah, well, if she takes too long, we'll drop off some sandwiches for ya." She stood on tiptoe, giving him a peck on the cheek. "See ya soon." With a parting wink, she trotted off towards Gippal's airship.

He returned his attention to the two brothers. Pacce was keeping watch while Isaaru prayed. The fayth's statue lay on its side in a shallow crater filled with rainwater, illuminated by a golden glow. Ferns and dark leaves spilled around it. Tendrils of fog oozing from the dead forest seemed to shrink from its aura.

Pacce noticed Auron's scrutiny and straightened. "Sir?"

"Guarding Isaaru is your responsibility." He drew his sword, resting its point against the ground. "My focus will be on Sin. Understood?"

The boy nodded, hollow-eyed but determined. "Yessir."

Pacce did not know it, but his presence here was due to Auron's intervention. He hoped he would not have one more death weighing on his conscience, but he could not leave the boy behind, any more than he could have left Tidus to his faux existence in Zanarkand.

"If you order him to stay, Isaaru, he will live the rest of his life knowing that you had faith in Maroda, not in him."

"But he could be killed!"

"Do you think he could live, blaming himself for one or both your deaths?"

Auron raised his voice. "Isaaru. It's time."

Pacce had to shake Isaaru to rouse him. The summoner rose stiffly, wiping mud from his knees. Blood mixed with rain trickled down his cheeks, but he was smiling. "Forgive me. My first fayth. I needed to say goodbye."

"You need to leave."

"Yes." Isaaru bowed in Yevon's blessing. "Good luck, Sir Auron. When Sin falls, wait for us. This is one battle you cannot fight alone."

Auron grunted a vague assent.

Draping an arm around Pacce's shoulders, Isaaru turned and trudged towards the airship. Suddenly Pacce gave a choking cry. A dark figure was standing in the shadow of the ramp, leaning on his spear.
"It's an illusion," Auron said. "He's not there. The pyreflies are mirroring your thoughts."

"But—" Pacce stared longingly.

"Come." Isaaru's voice was steady. "We'll take it as a sign. Our brother is watching over us from afar." Patting Pacce's shoulder, he marched up the ramp, right past Maroda's ghost. Echo or mirage, it took no notice of them.

Auron turned back to watch the northern horizon. The jury-rigged ramp slammed shut with a bang. Engines roared to life. Rain blew sideways, then resumed its steady patter as the airship lifted, wheeled and headed south over the ruins of Old Guadsalam. Auron was left alone in the rain, listening to the constant rumble of thunder.

Here, too, the Lady's handiwork was evident. Behind him were the looming eaves of the dead forest. Beyond its stranglehold of groping roots, a carpet of ferns and ivy spilled out across the Thunder Plains, pocked by fresh lightning scars and patches of ash. Even the bases of the towers were sheathed in scorched vines and living leaves.

A child's voice brushed his mind. Isaaru. He's a good man.

Auron was not alone after all. A small, ghostly figure was sitting on the lip of the crater, legs dangling in the pool where its statue lay.

Auron shrugged. They needed a strong-willed summoner, not a kindly soul. In retrospect, Dona might have been the better choice.

Believe in him. He believes in you.

"Naiveté is common among summoners."

Perhaps. The fayth kicked its heels, feet making no ripples. What did the Lady give you?

For a moment, the non sequitur did not register. Then Auron drew his left hand from his coat. The brown scar was still there. In Sin's dream-world, the burnt flesh had formed the signs of his own name. Out here, the glyphs branded into his palm spelled two words: Oath Keeper. Rain soothed the burn but could not quench it. Pain's clarity cut through the stupefying chant of the pyreflies whispering in the back of his mind: Faithbreaker. Friendslayer. Fallen Knight...

"Auron," he said, clenching his hand into a fist. It hurt, but it was a useful reminder of body and purpose.

Precisely.

Ten, fifteen minutes ticked by. Auron scanned the clouds, letting his mind rest on the gentle susurrus of the rain. It might be the last time he heard it.

She is coming.

"How long?" Tucking his hand back into his coat, Auron searched the northern horizon. Lightning fit for Sin's current mistress laced half the sky.

Soon.
The *Crimson Avenger* launched into motion just as Isaaru and Pacce reached the flight deck. Cid swore and threw the steering yoke hard over, banking sharply to miss a lightning tower. The brothers were flung against the wall. So was Elma, standing in the nose of the cockpit next to Lucil.

"Easy there, Pops," Rikku said, tucked into the gunner's bubble. "This rig doesn't have seatbelts."

"Y'all in one piece back there?" Cid said, leveling out.

"Ow." Elma picked herself up, massaging a shoulder. "You okay, ma'am?"

"Yes." White-knuckled, the maester was gripping the sides of the navigator's console. It had saved her from a fall. "Isaaru?"

"Undamaged, milady." Isaaru gripped Pacce's shoulder. "What news?"

"V-Team is priming weapons," Lucil said. "G-team is on standby. I gather Sir Auron refused to join us?"

"Yes. He's convinced he can distract Sin for a short time. That should give Baralai one clear shot."

Cid snorted. "More guns, less guesses."

"He did it in Kilika," Pacce said.

"Very well." Lucil clung tightly to her station as Cid executed another shallow turn, rising up over the fog. "Meanwhile, Commander Elma has a request."

Elma saluted. "Reporting for guardian duty, sir!"

Isaaru blinked. "I thought you were returning to Djose, Commander."

"Yeah, well." She raised her eyes. Past the dead zone of Guadosalam, past the green forests beyond it, the broad silver ribbon of the Moonflow meandered southeast, spanning the horizon. Somewhere on the far side lay the Djose coast. "Gippal's offered to give me a lift home when this is over. I can't let the warrior monks get all the glory, now, can I?" She winked at Pacce.

"The Crusaders have opposed Sin for eight hundred years," Lucil said. "It seems fitting that one of us should strike a blow on behalf of all those who have fallen."

Isaaru hesitated, then bowed. "We would be honored, Commander."

"Cool!" Pacce sounded relieved.

"Thank you, sir!" said Elma.

"We've got contact." Shinra poked a button, projecting his scanner's display onto the forward screens. "Sin sighting. ETA fifteen minutes."

Rikku craned her neck, watching the red diamond streaking down the map. "Whoa. Looks like she's in a hurry!"
"Good." Cid set the ship into park and folded his arms. "Time to see what this Vegna-whoosit can do."

Auron waited. His sword-hand was tingling. The blade's edge was limned by a faint blue nimbus, the sailors' sign that Sin was near.

Above the plain, black thunderheads were churning in a boiling vortex. Pillars of lightning were leaping skywards from Bilghen's towers, converging on the turbulence in vibrating spokes. They began to weave a spherical cage, merging into a bubble of white light. Inside, a menacing shape was descending rapidly through the clouds.

*Goodbye, Sir Auron,* the fayth said with Braska-like serenity.

The world exploded.

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"I'm parked outside," Gippal said. "I'll swing by when you two are ready to bail."
"There will be little margin for error," Baralai said. "Please be careful."

"Trust me, Bar, I'll be in and outta there faster'n Sin can sneeze," Gippal said. "By the way. Juno told me to tell you guys to watch yourselves. She expects you back in one piece. And you know better than to cross her."

"Thanks," Nooj said. "I hope we can oblige."

Baralai said nothing, suddenly preoccupied with the scanners.

Gippal listened to dead air for a few beats before closing the link. He leaned back and propped his feet on the hover's windscreen. "I think Bar's still pissed at you for letting Nooj handle that junk heap."

"He'd be even more pissed if he knew I was here." Juno peered through the murk. The dingy glow of Vegnagun's lights shone some distance away, on a level below the sheared-off stump where they were perched. A bent, white-haired woman began to coalesce from the pyreflies overhead. Juno averted her eyes with a scowl. Guadosalam was gone, but the Farplane ghosts lingered.

"Tellin' me. I'm surprised you and Lucil and Commander Choco-buns all came out for the party, leaving no one to mind the store. No offense, but I've known Hypello potions with more wits than Shelinda."

"Don't underestimate her. We'd never have gotten the city evacuated in time if she hadn't spent the last five years prepping us for a Sin attack."

"Okay, okay." He raised his hands. "I'm just sayin'. Who's gonna keep Yevon together— and off our Al Bhed asses— if Sin takes out all of you?"

"Maester Lucil will be observing at a distance with Elder Cid. That should minimize the danger to essential personnel." She frowned. "Except for Baralai, and we need him to control Vegnagun."

"Essential, eh? Gee, thanks." Gippal cocked his head. "How'd you talk him into letting Nooj drive, anyway?"

"I gave him three choices: bring Nooj, bring me, or fight me... and if he lost, I'd smash Vegnagun into a cliff."

"Ha." He grinned. "Same old Dr. P."

"It's Juno."

"Yeah, whatever. C'mon, lighten up! This is what we trained for with the Squad, remember? Beat Sin, save the world, win everlasting glory, get laid—"

"End of discussion."

"Hey, I saw you and Noojster makin' eyes at each other—"

"End of Discussion."
Gippal groaned. "Man, I knew I should've brought Rikku along."

"Don't do anything stupid, okay?" Rikku cringed at a thunderclap but stood her ground. "You won't be much help to anybody if you're dead!" She glared at Auron as he began to chuckle.

"Rikku, get your butt in here, now!" Cid's bellow echoed down through the airship's cargo doors.

"You should go," Auron said. He met her eyes, remembering their first encounter. This one would be farewell. "Sin may strike at any time."

"Yeah, well, if she takes too long, we'll drop off some sandwiches for ya." She stood on tiptoe, giving him a peck on the cheek. "See ya soon." With a parting wink, she trotted off towards Gippal's airship.

He returned his attention to the two brothers. Pacce was keeping watch while Isaaru prayed. The fayth's statue lay on its side in a shallow crater filled with rainwater, illuminated by a golden glow. Ferns and dark leaves spilled around it. Tendrils of fog oozing from the dead forest seemed to shrink from its aura.

Pacce noticed Auron's scrutiny and straightened. "Sir?"

"Guarding Isaaru is your responsibility." He drew his sword, resting its point against the ground. "My focus will be on Sin. Understood?"

The boy nodded, hollow-eyed but determined. "Yessir."

Pacce did not know it, but his presence here was due to Auron's intervention. He hoped he would not have one more death weighing on his conscience, but he could not leave the boy behind, any more than he could have left Tidus to his faux existence in Zanarkand.

"If you order him to stay, Isaaru, he will live the rest of his life knowing that you had faith in Maroda, not in him."

"But he could be killed!"

"Do you think he could live, blaming himself for one or both your deaths?"

Auron raised his voice. "Isaaru. It's time."

Pacce had to shake Isaaru to rouse him. The summoner rose stiffly, wiping mud from his knees. Blood mixed with rain trickled down his cheeks, but he was smiling. "Forgive me. My first fayth. I needed to say goodbye."

"You need to leave."

"Yes." Isaaru bowed in Yevon's blessing. "Good luck, Sir Auron. When Sin falls, wait for us. This is one battle you cannot fight alone."

Auron grunted a vague assent.

Draping an arm around Pacce's shoulders, Isaaru turned and trudged towards the airship. Suddenly
Pacce gave a choking cry. A dark figure was standing in the shadow of the ramp, leaning on his spear.

"It's an illusion," Auron said. "He's not there. The pyreflies are mirroring your thoughts."

"But—" Pacce stared longingly.

"Come." Isaaru's voice was steady. "We'll take it as a sign. Our brother is watching over us from afar." Patting Pacce's shoulder, he marched up the ramp, right past Maroda's ghost. Echo or mirage, it took no notice of them.

Auron turned back to watch the northern horizon. The jury-rigged ramp slammed shut with a bang. Engines roared to life. Rain blew sideways, then resumed its steady patter as the airship lifted, wheeled and headed south over the ruins of Old Guadsalam. Auron was left alone in the rain, listening to the constant rumble of thunder.

Here, too, the Lady's handiwork was evident. Behind him were the looming eaves of the dead forest. Beyond its stranglehold of groping roots, a carpet of ferns and ivy spilled out across the Thunder Plains, pocked by fresh lightning scars and patches of ash. Even the bases of the towers were sheathed in scorched vines and living leaves.

A child's voice brushed his mind. Isaaru. He's a good man.

Auron was not alone after all. A small, ghostly figure was sitting on the lip of the crater, legs dangling in the pool where its statue lay.

Auron shrugged. They needed a strong-willed summoner, not a kindly soul. In retrospect, Dona might have been the better choice.

Believe in him. He believes in you.

"Naiveté is common among summoners."

Perhaps. The fayth kicked its heels, feet making no ripples. What did the Lady give you?

For a moment, the non sequitur did not register. Then Auron drew his left hand from his coat. The brown scar was still there. In Sin's dream-world, the burnt flesh had formed the signs of his own name. Out here, the glyphs branded into his palm spelled two words: Oath Keeper. Rain soothed the burn but could not quench it. Pain's clarity cut through the stupefying chant of the pyreflies whispering in the back of his mind: Faithbreaker. Friendslayer. Fallen Knight...

"Auron," he said, clenching his hand into a fist. It hurt, but it was a useful reminder of body and purpose.

Precisely.

Ten, fifteen minutes ticked by. Auron scanned the clouds, letting his mind rest on the gentle susurrus of the rain. It might be the last time he heard it.

She is coming.

"How long?" Tucking his hand back into his coat, Auron searched the northern horizon. Lightning fit for Sin's current mistress laced half the sky.

Soon.
The *Crimson Avenger* launched into motion just as Isaaru and Pacce reached the flight deck. Cid swore and threw the steering yoke hard over, banking sharply to miss a lightning tower. The brothers were flung against the wall. So was Elma, standing in the nose of the cockpit next to Lucil.

"Easy there, Pops," Rikku said, tucked into the gunner's bubble. "This rig doesn't have seatbelts."

"Y'all in one piece back there?" Cid said, leveling out.

"Ow." Elma picked herself up, massaging a shoulder. "You okay, ma'am?"

"Yes." White-knuckled, the maester was gripping the sides of the navigator's console. It had saved her from a fall. "Isaaru?"

"Undamaged, milady." Isaaru gripped Pacce's shoulder. "What news?"

"V-Team is priming weapons," Lucil said. "G-team is on standby. I gather Sir Auron refused to join us?"

"Yes. He's convinced he can distract Sin for a short time. That should give Baralai one clear shot."

Cid snorted. "More guns, less guesses."

"He did it in Kilika," Pacce said.

"Very well." Lucil clung tightly to her station as Cid executed another shallow turn, rising up over the fog. "Meanwhile, Commander Elma has a request."

Elma saluted. "Reporting for guardian duty, sir!"

Isaaru blinked. "I thought you were returning to Djose, Commander."

"Yeah, well." She raised her eyes. Past the dead zone of Guadosalam, past the green forests beyond it, the broad silver ribbon of the Moonflow meandered southeast, spanning the horizon. Somewhere on the far side lay the Djose coast. "Gippal's offered to give me a lift home when this is over. I can't let the warrior monks get all the glory, now, can I?" She winked at Pacce.

"The Crusaders have opposed Sin for eight hundred years," Lucil said. "It seems fitting that one of us should strike a blow on behalf of all those who have fallen."

Isaaru hesitated, then bowed. "We would be honored, Commander."

"Cool!" Pacce sounded relieved.

"Thank you, sir!" said Elma.

"We've got contact." Shinra poked a button, projecting his scanner's display onto the forward screens. "Sin sighting. ETA fifteen minutes."

Rikku craned her neck, watching the red diamond streaking down the map. "Whoa. Looks like she's in a hurry!"
"Good." Cid set the ship into park and folded his arms. "Time to see what this Vegna-whoosit can do."

Auron waited. His sword-hand was tingling. The blade's edge was limned by a faint blue nimbus, the sailors' sign that Sin was near.

Above the plain, black thunderheads were churning in a boiling vortex. Pillars of lightning were leaping skywards from Bilghen's towers, converging on the turbulence in vibrating spokes. They began to weave a spherical cage, merging into a bubble of white light. Inside, a menacing shape was descending rapidly through the clouds.

*Goodbye, Sir Auron,* the fayth said with Braska-like serenity.

The world exploded.

Chapter End Notes

*Illustration by author*
Meta: In FFX, some "letters" do double duty as phonetic signs and idiograms for concepts. Again, I've posited that in-universe, Yevon script represents syllables, not the English alphabet. (I'm not saying that the signs for "Auron" also translate as Oathkeeper, because we probably would've heard of that before. Rather, the glyphs he saw in the dream were his name, but in the waking world they're slightly different, spelling out an epithet.)

Chapter renumbering: Chapter 33 in the remaster.
Chapter Summary

Our Story So Far: Sin has destroyed the fayth, and now only one thing can oppose it: Vegnagun, doomsday weapon from an ancient war. Auron and friends lure Sin to the Thunder Plains for a final showdown, where Auron hopes to distract Sin long enough to give Vegnagun one clear shot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

No one on the flight deck had spoken since Cid's low whistle. All eyes were fixed on the forward windows, where Shinra's scanners projected a grainy image of Auron and the fayth's statue through a film of rain and static. Past the display, they could see rank upon rank of thunderheads massing to the north. Sin was hidden by the clouds, but barbs of lightning were leaping towards it from the spire of every tower, forming a vast sizzling canopy.

Lucil had risen from her seat, one hand braced against the console, the other digging into Elma's arm.

Elma surreptitiously cupped her hands in Yevon's prayer, drawing a thin smile from Lucil.

Rikku was leaning forward, nervously drumming her fingers on the gun controls.

Inexorably, all the strands of lightning contracted together like the spokes of Thundaga magnified a thousandfold. The scanner's display went white. A blinding flash lit the Thunder Plains from end to end. Even at this distance, the gash of lightning splitting the sky from Sin's nose to the ground looked enormous.
Rikku gave a cry. "Auron!"

Isaaru blanched and pressed a fist over his heart. "Spathi."

On the viewscreen, the results of the strike were all too clear, even through the static. There was a new blackened crater where the statue had been. Steam curled up from the smoking ground. Auron was nowhere in sight.

"Damnfool thing to do," said Cid.

"Not Sir Auron," Pacce breathed.

"Shinra," Lucil said. "Signal V-team to begin their attack."

"Wait!" Isaaru said. "Sir Auron knew what he was doing. Give him time."

The prolonged crash of thunder finally reached them. The bridge shook. Several displays flickered. It felt as if the sky itself had quaked.

"Are you crazy?" Cid twisted in his seat, scowling at the summoner. "The man's a cinder. I reckon there ain't enough left to fill a lug nut."

"Shut up, Pops." Rikku's voice was muffled. Her face was buried in her hands.

"I shall believe it when I see it." The summoner raised his voice. "Lady Rikku. Sir Auron has survived encounters with Sin before. This is what he expected to happen."

"He's a doofus."

"Vegnagun's main cannon takes a while to fire anyway," Shinra said. "There's a twenty minute lag to build up the power."

"Oh, great. And you were gonna mention this when, exactly?" Elma said.

"I just did."

"Very well. Tell Lord Baralai: begin." Lucil released her vice-grip on Elma's arm, patting it in apology. "And may Yevon have mercy on us all."

Lightning's wrack was already fading when Auron awoke on a bed of wet leaves. The lush scents of jungle plants and sea-tang were overpowering. Thick flowering vines netted the trees around him, forming a living waterfall of azure blossoms larger than his head. Beyond this canopy, the trees ended. Root and vine and damp earth changed to sloping sand. Rising, he blundered towards open ground.

The beach was gray and colorless in the pre-dawn. Yet this was Spira, the true Spira they had loved and died for, and very little of it was colorless.

The sky was dusky lavender, with fingers of pink and saffron streaking the horizon. Besaid's harbor spread out before him, glittering and undefiled. Beyond its fringe of foam-crested breakers, the water was an astonishing dark green. Its depths held other jewel-tones: carmine, pale yellow and
purple corals still glowing faintly where night's shadows had not yet lifted. Darting flashes were fish.

The forest sang with crickets and waking birds. Surf breathed and sighed.

Lulu's extravagances tended towards *flare* more often than flowers. Auron felt for his sword.

As if following a preordained path, he walked down the sand and into the ocean, ignoring the warm water seeping into his boots. Sand became broken shells, then reef. Coral and mussels crunched underfoot. Seaweed dragged at his legs. The air was clean, salt-kissed, as pure as if Yevon and Sin had never been born. He forced himself to go slowly and mind his footing, although his pulse quickened for the sight he expected to find.

Lulu was not there. Her chains remained, rooted in a bed of anemones, but the manacles were sprung. Seawater was already beginning to reclaim them. Barnacles crusted the links. The metal was corroding fast.

*Pyreflies began to chuckle and whine in the back of his mind, but Auron was too close to his goal to heed them. His palm was itching again. On a hunch, he opened his hand and glanced down to see what the glyphs might show.*

*Mars.*

Of course. It was the part he had come to play, after all. So where—?

*And Venus born of sea-foam renewed her virginity each year, bathing in the waves by the grotto where first she had come ashore.*

"Ah." He lifted his eyes, scanning the shoreline.

There. Veils of mist were drifting over the entrance of a small inlet to the right of the main lagoon, separated from it by a heel of land jutting out from the bluffs. He was no swimmer, and saw no way to reach it save by toiling back to shore and making a laborious trek inland to find a way down. But this was not Besaid, only its echo, subject to the Lady's whim.

Auron raised his left hand in salute, displaying the sigil etched in his palm. "Mars seeks an audience," he said, voice ringing across the water.

There was a quiet splash. Out of the mist glided a low wooden boat, its beams bleached bone-white. It turned towards him, barely rocking on the gentle waves. Auron stepped aboard as it skimmed past. The vessel wheeled slowly on an invisible eddy and turned back whence it came.

The mist changed to a pale golden-pink as the boat plunged into it. Auron glimpsed rose petals bobbing on the water, flowering vines floating out onto the surface in dark green rafts. Then the mist cleared to reveal a small, secret cove walled in on three sides by limestone cliffs. The keel slid up onto white sand and stuck fast. Auron stepped out. A trail of small, fresh footprints led up the beach. Giant conches, clams, and huge butterfly-winged shells were cast here and there like driftwood. He started walking.

At the back of the cove, the bluffs had been undermined to form a grotto. Creepers of fragrant jasmine came tumbling down across its mouth in a living curtain of white flowers. They matched the gleaming figure within. His breath caught, as expected.

Teasing was also expected. "Should I be honored, or do you wear this face for all Sin's favorites?"
Lulu was reclining on a shell-shaped throne of horn and ivory, seated sideways with one leg draped over the rim. A diaphanous gown fell from her limbs in cascading folds, still dripping from her dip in the sea. Dark hair spilled everywhere, pink coral and bits of sea-glass tangled in its waves. Her fishnet stockings were no longer black, but silver. Her necklaces had become strings of pearls and abalone. Garlands of flowers were strewn about with artful carelessness, the one across her lap providing more modesty than her dress. There were living flowers, too. Blood-red roses, poppies, orchids and bleeding hearts filled the grotto around her, sprouting from bare rock and barren sand. It occurred to him that whoever had coined the term "bed of roses" must not have tried sleeping on them.

Lulu raised a finger and beckoned him with a haughty come hither smile.

He shook his head and came forward, ducking under the hanging canopy and dropping to one knee. Gathering her hands and raising them to his lips, he glanced down to inspect them more closely. Her wrists were red, rubbed raw, the only blemish on goddess-like perfection, but the shackles had vanished.

Foreboding prickled the back of his neck as she reached for the clasps of his breastplate. Auron pushed her hands away, ignoring the enticing distraction as she leaned forward. "Your chains?"

Smiling, she slid her fingers into the openings of his armor and drew him towards her, lips parted in silent invitation.

Auron stiffened. Thirteen years they had waited, and yet he found himself temporizing. "Lulu. Talk to me."

Her voice stole into his mind, an alluring caress. "...and for one night only war was in abeyance. For then did Mars put off his shield and panoply..."

Smooth fingers stroked his bare shoulder and arm. Auron flinched. Her touch burned. She had sometimes used magic in devious ways to tease bare skin with ice and heat. This was painful even without magic's kiss behind it. Auron felt a wave of heat flood through him as if life's blood had actually poured back into his veins. He had expected a courtly ritual, another of Lulu's coy games to thwart Yu Yevon while they enjoyed a bittersweet reunion, but suddenly fiend's primal urges were gnawing at his self-control.

He wrenched away just as magenta lips brushed his own, awakening cravings he had thought dead. "Stop. Enough."

She arched an eyebrow at him. Auron gripped her jaw with his gauntlet. Even that protection could not entirely fend off the siren's call of her flesh through metal and cloth.

"I did not come here for Yevon, Sin, Venus, or any other lie! I came here for Lulu. Where is she?" Even as he snarled the question, despair crept over him. Most likely, this was Lulu, all that was left of her. He had simply come too late.

Her eyes flashed. Auron backed away, leaping to his feet. As he drew his sword, she rose from her chair like Sin bursting from the depths, towering over him, an implacable figure of feminine beauty shorn of the greater beauty within. Black ribbons of hair snaked around his arms and legs. Cursing himself for carelessness, he hacked at groping tendrils. More kept coming faster than he could slice through them. The wind was picking up. A helmet-sized shell whirled past his ear like a blitzball and smashed against the cliff. Yu Yevon had laid a trap. He needed to get away.
There is no escape. Our fates are bound. Her voice in his mind was chilling, remote, hypnotic. Mars and Venus shall join. The Three Sisters shall be as gnats compared to the might of the Lord and Lady. We shall be Sin Eternal, in Yevon's name.

Suddenly he was in two places at once. In the Lady's grotto, he was struggling against dark thongs wrapping around his arms, legs and neck. A green wave was building, thundering towards the narrow cove. Out on the Thunder Plains, lightning was leaping to meet him. A shield of energy was building around him— it— Sin— for a cataclysmic shockwave aimed at a knot of menace skulking in the fog-lands to the south. Was this the power Seymour had coveted? He was Sin, he was a fortress, he was Spira itself, the axis around which the spiral turned—

Auron, break free! Go. I'll hold back as long as I can."

Dimly he became aware of another will beside his own, struggling like a fish in a net. Relief washed over him. "No. Help me find you. You don't have to fight this battle alone."

With an effort of will, Auron freed his arms for a swing. The sword crashed down on the Lady's throne, cleaving it in two. The ground broke beneath it. Sin's vision of the Thunder Plains vanished. The false Venus burst into seafoam, blinding him just before the crushing wall of water rolled in, picked him up and flung him against the back of the grotto. He was drowning. With his last coherent thought, he wondered whether unsent could die in dreams.

"Hey, Bar, how's it coming?" Gippal called over the link.


"Well, tell him to hurry up!" Cid said. "Sin's moving this way, and that energy shield it's got is fixin' to blow!"

"Shut up." Sweat shone on Baralai's brow as his fingers swam across the keys, pounding out a chaotic scale. The volume was building. So too were the vibrations in Vegnagun's frame. Arcs of energy circled the outside of the cockpit like a dynamo, skittering along the barrel of the main cannon extruding from the machina's torso. "Nooj, raise the nose ten degrees."

The air quaked around them. The fog flashed white and sheared away. Laid bare to the sky, they could see Sin's monstrous shadow bearing down on them through the clouds. The globe of energy around it was coalescing into a pulsing fist.

"Baralai," Nooj said, easing Vegnagun back on its haunches, tracking the enemy's approach.

"I know," he said. "Nooj, fall back to the south side of the crater. Cid, Gippal, get out of the way. Seven minutes."

Chapter End Notes
See Mintywolf's masterful portrait of Not!Lulu at [full-size](Chapter 37 in the remaster)
Eight of Swords

Chapter Summary

The Story So Far: Auron and his allies lure Sin to the Thunder Plains, where he seeks entry into Sin's dream-world hoping to distract it long enough to spring the trap they've prepared.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ice needles pricked Auron back to consciousness. His trousers, his gauntlet, even his hair were frozen and stiff. His face was numb. He was lying on his back in a snowdrift, deeply buried. Even so, his spirits lifted. He half expected Ronso pups to start dragging him out by the boots for another round of lessons, one more bout with their all-too-breakable guardian. His lungs ached when he inhaled frigid air, but it was an ache as familiar as the scar on his face. He trusted it more than Besaid's perfect blue skies.

Thrashing onto his side to free himself, he fetched up against a sword thrust into the snow. Heavy chains linked it to another sword standing nearby, and another, and another, all linked in a circle like the posts of a child's carousel. More chains formed spokes radiating from a central hub, which was...

*Lulu.* She stood like one more blade, straight and defiant, buried to the knees. A tangled mesh of black straps, barbed metal and rusted buckles encased her from the neck down. A leather band
covered her eyes. Another twisted her arms behind her back. Her wild mass of hair was hopelessly
snarled in the eight chains stretched from sword-hilts to iron hoops cutting into her upper arms,
wrists, thighs, ribcage and throat. The snow around her legs was stained red. To add insult to
injury, the weapons staking her to the mountainside were swords that he had once wielded: *Chaos

Auron knew the cruel vision might be another trap, but if so, this lure was more effective than the
last.

"Lulu." He hurried towards her, stepping over the chains. Fleeting contact with one made him
stumble. A powerful jolt of electricity had shot through his ankle. He snatched his hand away from
another chain that burned.

*I believe I may have annoyed him.* So she had said during their last encounter in the Via Purifico:
how many days ago? How many hours, minutes, seconds? Realization struck with the same bitter
rage that had engulfed him when he saw Yu Yevon sinking into Braska's final aeon. Then as now,
he wanted to lash out, but a friend's body stood in the way.

It took nearly a minute to edge his way into the center of the web. He wasted more time fumbling
with her blindfold. The buckles were coated with rime. His fingers numbed instantly. The ice-
caked seal would not break.

Lulu shook her head and leaned against him. Auron could feel every quiver and jerk of her taut
muscles resisting unseen blows. Her breaths came in ragged gulps, then stopped altogether. She
stiffened, waited, and exhaled slowly through her nose. It was the only thing she could still control.
He realized: she was refusing to make a sound. He held her, swallowing anger while he surveyed
her prison cell for weak points.

*Remember, guardian, your power is to break things... and to free them.*

The fayth who gave him that advice perished soon after, but there was no better plan. Auron bent
to her ear to whisper, "I'm ending this. *Now.*" It was vital that she believe.

Even simple promises were difficult. Severing her chains with a blade would yank her like a fish
on a hook. He would have to shoulder some of the burden. Bracing himself, he knelt in the snow
by one of the swords, leaning the hilt against his shoulder and grasping the links firmly in both
hands. It burned like hot iron. A downward snap broke the chain across the sharp edge like a wire-
cutter. Pulses of dark magic scourged him as he moved around the circle: *frostbite, poison, flare...*
One spell ceased each time he broke a segment, but the pain was quickly sapping his strength, his
will. It grew harder and harder to make himself take hold of the next chain. The rushing in his ears
drowned out Lulu's harsh breaths. His vision tunneled.

A memory gripped him: crawling down Mt. Gagazet, broken and dying. After twenty-three years
of putting one foot in front of the other, he was almost back where he had started.

Blinded, he found Masamune's outlandish shape by feel. *Ultima's* shockwave wrenched him from
the inside out. He endured a second wave and a third as he struggled to snap the last tether. On the
fifth try, the chain exploded, scattering links like shrapnel. Panting, he sank to the snow until the
poison and his vision cleared. His voice rasped. "I don't think much of your tailor."

A strained smile touched her mouth and faded.

He crawled to her side and set a hand over hers, the only bare skin within reach. "Your garden," he
said. "It's warmer. Take us there."
There was a sharp clack. The shackles around her wrists popped open.

Auron’s expression softened. "As you wish." Not idle words, here.

He peeled off the manacles with hands too clumsy for the job, wincing at the blood welling up through crusted scabs. Then he was able to unwind the leather strap binding her arms. To reach her legs, he had to dig down into the snow. She clung to his shoulders when he lifted her out and laid her on his coat. Then he prowled over her in a wordless ritual, peeling away chains and fetters that burst apart at his touch. When he reached her neck, there was a shimmering jingle as all the links caught in her hair let go at once. Sighing, she raised a hand and pressed two fingers against his mouth.

He nodded understanding. She reached back to unbuckle the straps around her head. The leather stuck to her skin, but he waited for her to pick it loose with her fingernails. Beneath the blindfold, there were bruises under her eyes. Her complexion was almost sallow without cosmetics. Yet the relief in her face as she flung away the last restraint was beautiful.

"Well done," he said.

"I had help."

"You're welcome."

Doubt or disbelief had her staring up at him, searching. She lifted a finger to stroke his forelock, mute acknowledgement of the burdens that had turned it white. "Foolish," she whispered. "You shouldn't have come alone. I might have—"

"Killed me?"

"Well. Not that, at least."

She tugged weakly at his collar, pulling him down. This time there was no siren's allure, and he was glad to surrender. It was hardly a fairy-tale kiss. Her lips were cold and chapped, and he was more monk than prince. But there was magic in a weary embrace—elation and despair and old passion and fond regrets—power enough, perhaps, to make Sin stand still. For once, there was no greater duty demanding their attention.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a change in their surroundings. The snow was melting. Tilted gravestones, tattered ferns and brambles covered with rose hips were pushing up through it. Reluctantly, she pulled away. "You've got to leave. Yu Yevon wants to collect you. I almost gave in."

"But you didn't."

"Not quite." She sat up, gripping her face as if she wanted to tear off her own cheekbones. "But I will. Soon. Please, go." She spoke with resigned calm. "It was good to see you again, Auron."

"Hush." He slipped his hands under hers, stroking her cheeks with his thumbs. "There's one way to keep Yu Yevon out of your mind, correct? We need to put it to the test."

"What, now?" She gave a weak laugh. "Auron, this is hardly—"

"It's time." His chest tightened. This was too much like one of Yevon's deceits, using her faith in him as a trap. He leaned close, planting a kiss between her brows. "Trust me."
The Avenger was diving in a last-ditch attempt to avoid Sin's shockwave. Its passengers were clinging to whatever support they could find, blanching at the ground rushing up to meet them. Shinra's clipped report was nearly lost in the engines' roar.

"Sin's shield is failing."

A looming image of Sin appeared on the forward displays. The wavering ball of energy around it was collapsing like a pricked balloon. When it vanished, Sin slowed to a halt over the edge of the dead forest. The only sign of movement was the loathsome cluster of eyes swiveling wildly on its snout.

"Auron's done it!" Pacce said.

"They've done it," said Rikku.

Cid leveled off and slapped a button. "You boys see that? There's your clear shot!"

"Stand by," Nooj said. "Preparing to fire."

Ferns and clumps of asphodel had sprung up around them in a somber canopy, as if Lulu were trying to draw a blanket over them. The darkness deepened as Auron applied his remaining potions to the lacerations and welts mottling her skin. Wasteful, perhaps, but it was easier to couch calculated seduction in soothing touches. Mending a serrated red line around her throat, he tried not to imagine what Vegnagun was about to do to her.

She stretched under him, almost relaxed. "You've still got your sword handy, right?"

His eyes narrowed at the question. "Yes."

"Good. I woke up to find a marlboro on my head!" She tugged at the snarls of hair twining around her shoulders. "I must look frightful."

"Hmph." Glimmers of vanity were probably a good sign. "Sin doesn't need a hairdresser."

"Yes, but I am trying to be Lulu," she said. "It's hard to remember, you know."

"I know," he said. A light kiss sealed the work half-finished. Yuna's magic would not have left a scar. "Which reminds me. There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Hm?"

"What's a panoply?"

Lulu's ripple of laughter felt like a victory. "Oh, Auron. It's this." She rapped her knuckles against his chestplate.

"I read somewhere that it's supposed to come off."
Her breath caught. "Then I had better do it, because I doubt you remember how." She reached for
the seam under his left arm, flipping catches she did not need to see.

Abruptly she tensed. There was no time to ask why before she gave a hoarse cry, reared back and
punched his chest with both hands as if she were trying to push him straight through the ground.

Which, in fact, she was. He was falling again, plunging through earth and metal and bone and
some foul substance that smelled like viscera. Expelled from Sin's carapace, he hurtled through
open sky. He just had time to curl into a ball, dimly aware of a silver bubble of energy around him,
before he struck the ground. The impact should have shattered bones, but Sin's gravity shield had
cushioned him. He was bruised, but not broken.

Auron lay on his back trying to make sense of what had just happened. Directly overhead, Sin's
bulk stood starkly against the sky, a horny mass of ridges and scales bathed in a searing glare like
the sun. The world went white in a thunderous roar. A horrific scream tore the sky, as if every
fiend from Baaj to Zanarkand was wailing in unison. He shielded his eyes. The lower third of the
monster had vaporized, two haunches and most of the tail. What was left of Sin canted slowly on
its side, writhing and howling as it began to sink. Sinscales started raining down. Scooping up his
sword (and thanking the Lady that she had remembered it, even in that split second), Auron began
to run.

"Perfect," Nooj said, standing to survey the devastation. "It's a good thing there's nothing in that
direction. That blast tore through Sin like it was paper."

"It's not dead, Nooj," Baralai said. "We wounded it. That's all."

"That's enough. Sir Auron said we only need to breach the hull. He and Isaaru can take it from
here."

"So they say. But there's no guarantee they'll—"

There was a groaning upheaval. Nooj fell backwards, nearly toppling over the back rail. The
ground began to fall away as Vegnagun rumbled towards Sin, slowly at first, but rapidly gaining
momentum.

"Vegnagun seems to agree with you," Nooj said, climbing back into the makeshift seat bolted next
to Baralai's. "What's the plan?"

"Guys?" Juno's voice crackled over the link. "Don't do this."

"Juno?" Baralai's head snapped up. "You're supposed to be protecting Bevelle!"

"I am. Bevelle's in big trouble if we lose you. Fall back and recharge the main gun. If Vegnagun
decides it's in danger—"

"It already has," Nooj said. "It's initiated an attack run. I've got to take helm now, or the autopilot's
going to shut me out. Talk later."

"Dammit," Baralai said. "I should court-martial her when this is over."

"I'm sure she knows that." Nooj banked to one side, altering their head-on course for a wide pass.
"Now focus. Bring the secondary guns online. When you're ready, I'll try a strafing pass." He smiled. "Here's your chance, Baralai. Make the most of it."

Chapter End Notes
Eight of Swords by Mintywolf
Dust in the Sky

Chapter Summary

The Story So Far: Auron and his allies lure Sin to the uninhabited ruins of Old Guadosalam, hoping that the firepower of an ancient weapon will be sufficient to disable the foe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Thunder Plains were becalmed while Guadosalam rocked with thunder.

No living person in Spira had ever seen Sin like this: sinking, impotent, flailing in sluggish rage, lashing out with lightning and shockwaves that buffeted but could not shake pursuit. Vegnagun proved surprisingly agile, harrying Sin as it fell. Fiends rained down on the deadlands.

Baralai was locked in a lover's embrace with Vegnagun's controls, miming every attack. He drew a rolling scale up the keys, and a white-hot barrage peppered Sin's upper hull. A cluster of base notes sent Vegnagun's tail swiping across its eyes, following the blow with a red beam that pierced shell and bone. Even Thundaga was turned against its mistress. Lightning leapt from Sin to Vegnagun and back again.

Nooj was piloting. Diving past Sin's flank, he dug into a steep turn that pressed them against their seats. Vegnagun roared back up through the haze in a corkscrew spin, bursting out behind their prey. Baralai whooped and emptied the missile bank into the breach left by the main cannon.

"Don't forget it can kill us," Nooj said, but he was smiling.

"First it has to catch us," said Baralai.

"Good going, guys!" Rikku called over the open channel. "Now break off. We're coming to deliver the package."

"Negative. We've not finished," Baralai said, sweeping his hands together. A sphere of energy began forming between Vegnagun's tusks.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Rikku said. "If you blow up Sin, Yu Yevon could jump anywhere! Let Isaaru and Auron tackle the guy inside."

"If you find Sir Auron alive, please let us know," Baralai said. "Otherwise, we're taking Sin out."

"Stupid Yevonite." Rikku kicked her feet against the glass. "Hey, Lucil, talk sense into him. He's sucking fumes."

"Maybe so, but it's working." Elma raised a fist. "Yaah!"
Nearing the ground, Sin plunged into greenish-yellow haze like an anchor. A massive cloud of dust and debris billowed up, obscuring the battered leviathan from view. Shockwaves rippled out through the fog in all directions.

Lucil raised her arm in salute, eyes glittering. "Vengeance."

"Now that's a machina. What did I tell you?" said Cid.

Vegnagun hung over the impact plume like a monstrous dragonfly, pawing the air as if itching to trample its prey. The globe of energy between its horns swelled to bursting and catapulted downward. There was a white flash. The beam punched through the fog to reveal Sin lying on its side in a fresh crater, bleeding pyreflies. Around it, most of Old Guadosalam was ablaze.

"Isaaru?" Lucil said. "Assessment?"

"Sin may fall, but what of Yu Yevon? Even if Vegnagun can strip away his armor—"

"Augh!" Rikku squeezed her fists against her forehead. "Shinra. Scan for Auron. Should be easy to spot. He's got a sword bigger'n Gippal's ego."

"We're already on it, cupcakes," Gippal said over the link. "And we survived the blast wave, if anyone asks. G-team out."

"Um," Pacce said. "What's Sin doing?"

The fog had started to circulate around the point of impact in a slow-moving vortex. Sin's mottled surface crawled like melting wax. The yellow bowl of fog to the south, shrouding the rupture that had once been Guadosalam's portal to the Farplane, was rising in a churning dome.

"The Farplane!" Isaaru said. "Shinra, what do you see?"

"Scanning." Shinra pulled up the impact zone on the forward displays. The magnified view showed ribbons of light spiraling inwards towards Sin. Other pathways snaked between the whirlpool's perimeter and the Farplane crater to the south, forming a double spiral. "Looks like it's pulling in all the pyreflies in the area."

"Yu Yevon," Isaaru said, and somehow it was still a prayer. "He's rebuilding Sin's armor. Elder Cid, you've got to put me down before it recovers its strength."

"Put you down where?" Cid said. "From what I'm lookin' at, the whole danged forest is on fire."

"Wherever you can. Shinra, find us a landing spot. Keep scanning for Sir Auron."

Auron had found high ground on a gargantuan treestump that jutted through the sea of smoke. He was harder to spot without his coat, but his blade reflected the burning forest. Right now, the sword was also a prop. Auron bent as if fighting a gale, his back to Sin. He seemed unaware of the sinscales creeping up the sides of his refuge. One went up in a gout of pyreflies, struck by a flying chunk of debris blasted off from Sin's carapace. Others were on fire.

"Heeeeeeey, LJ!" Gippal eased as low as he could over the flames and smoke. "Need a lift? You get one more free ride, then I start charging you triple!"
Auron vaulted across the gap. His gravity-defying leaps were part of his legend, but he stumbled upon landing and went crashing to the deck. The hover tilted dangerously. Twisting in her seat, Juno seized his belt to keep him from tumbling out. Auron ignored her, doubled over with face contorted. "Away."

She scowled, mistaking his meaning, but did not loosen her grip.

"You got it, boss," Gippal said. He arrowed towards open sky, fleeing the bombardment raining down behind them. "Wow, Bar's really getting carried away."

"Are you injured?" Juno said. Pyreflies drifted past her knuckles.

Auron shook his head.

"Heh. He's kinda like Nooj," Gippal said. "Ask ten questions, and you're lucky to get one answer. Auron, what the heck happened back there? First Sin's using you for target practice, then it chucks you out like a sand worm with a bellyache. You give Yevon indigestion, or what?"

As the flyer put distance between them and Sin, Auron uncurled like a wary crab, flexing his left hand. He nodded to Juno and stood, gazing south. Vegnagun's shadow floated on the clouds like a vulture riding thermals. He closed his eye and turned away as the machina unleashed another deluge of destruction. "What's our status?"

"See what I mean?" Gippal said to Juno.

She shrugged. "Sin's down. Vegnagun isn't. Baralai's pulverizing whatever's left. However, there's a problem."

"It's regenerating the exoskeleton at a tremendous rate. Also, it's starting to modulate its shield to match your energy weapons," Shinra was saying.

"How long have we got?" said Nooj.

"You're barely keeping up with it. I estimate half an hour before it's repaired most of the damage. Sin will probably be mobile before that."

"Wonderful." Nooj gazed through Vegnagun's eyes at the shipwrecked foe. Every time he settled too deeply into the mental interface, he had to fight the urge to struggle free like a panicking swimmer. "Recommendations?"

"Don't ask me. I'm just a tech."

"Half an hour?" Baralai frowned. "I'll need five minutes to power down secondary weapons, twenty to recharge the main cannon."

"Too long." Lucil said. "V-team, fall back. G-team, stand by. Avenger will drop the summoner's party near Sin. We knew machina alone would not win this battle."

"With respect," Nooj said. "That's the sort of cockeyed plan I'd expect from a maester of Yevon. If Sin's rebuilding its outer shell, you can bet it's shoring up internal defenses. If we don't drive it away from the Farplane portal, it's going to be impregnable. Your summoner and guardians won't
stand a chance."

"As a maester of Yevon, I concur," Baralai said, giving Nooj a wry look.

There was a brief pause. "Very well. Cut its supply lines. Then Lord Isaaru can move in. We will continue to monitor your situation. Avenger out."

"Well." Baralai exhaled. "I guess it couldn't be that easy."

"It never is," Nooj said. "Speaking of which, Shinra's autopilot shorted out."

"What?" Baralai's eyes narrowed. "So. We can't send Vegnagun to the Farplane remotely. Very well. Nooj, start moving us away from Sin. Gippal, are you there?"

"Yo. What's the plan, boss?"

"Meet us at the edge of the Thunder Plains. I'll explain there."

"Got it. We'll be there in a few."

Nooj frowned. "Shouldn't we be going after Sin?"

"Yes. But first..." Baralai hesitated, waiting for Vegnagun to get under way. "Nooj. There's two things I should say. One: I apologize for doubting you. Once upon a time, I considered you the finest friend a man could have. I trusted you. I looked up to you as a role model. Later, I couldn't understand how I could have been so wrong about you. But I wasn't wrong, was I? After we learned the truth about Shuyin, I should have been able to accept you as the man I once knew."

"Trust doesn't pick up where it left off, after a thirteen-year hiatus. And I'm not the man I was, nor are you. I hope we can renew that friendship."

"You already have." Baralai drew his hands away from the keys and let the music ebb. He sat blinking and blind for a few seconds until ordinary vision reasserted itself. His voice dropped. "Two: Look after Paine."

"Baralai!" Nooj floundered out of Vegnagun's mental interface in alarm, causing the machina to list sharply until its guidance systems kicked in. By the time Nooj had settled into his own body, he found Baralai's pistol pressed against his breast. "This isn't necessary. After the battle—"

"For Vegnagun, there is no after the battle. I'd rather not emulate you this way, Nooj, but for Spira's sake, I must. Forgive me."

There was a loud burst of static over the commlink. Gippal frowned. "Uh...guys? What's going on over there?"

"Get up here immediately," Nooj said. "Baralai's hurt."

"Huh? What the— ow! Dammit, Paine, I'm going!" Gippal rubbed his elbow and set the flyer in motion.

Auron brooded behind them. He was no longer being wracked by the insistent tug of a summons
far worse than sending. Yet he knew the lull was an illusion. Behind them, Yu Yevon was weaving an armored cocoon, just as Auron had seen when Jecht's aeon vanished under layers of bone and hide. Their window of opportunity was closing. However, he understood loyalty, and held his peace.

Vegnagun was waiting for them, hunkered down like a spider on the edge of the Thunder Plains. Gippal negotiated the obstacle course of wings and horns to park on Vegnagun's neck. Before the flyer came to a stop, Juno jumped out.

"What happened?" She knelt next to Baralai, shucking her gauntlet and searching for a pulse. He was limp, head lolled back, eyes open.

"Electric shock," Nooj said, bent over the keys. His right hand drummed a monotonous rhythm, holding the machina steady. "Vegnagun decided to protect itself from whatever he was planning."

"Yeah, right," Gippal said. "You just knocked him out to play Deathseeker."

"Not funny," Juno said, hitching her hands under Baralai's armpits and heaving.

"You think I'm joking?" Gippal said.

"We're running out of time." Auron climbed out to help Juno extricate Baralai and lift him into the hover.

"I'll take Baralai's place," Juno said. "I can fly or operate weapons, Nooj. Your choice."

"No. Get Baralai to safety." Nooj had yet to look in her direction. His attention was fixed on the shifting patterns that served as the bridge between mind and machina. "Catch me later."

"Nooj!" Gippal said."C'mon, man, don't be like that."

Juno opened her mouth to protest, then stopped. She gave Nooj a long, searching look. "Understood." She hopped over the windshield into the flyer. "We're leaving."
"Dust in the Sky" by author

Chapter 36 in remaster
"You're kidding, right?" Gippal said. "You know damn well what Nooj is trying to do."

"Yes." She glanced at Auron, who was setting Baralai on the floor. "Hold him." Taking Gippal's seat, she threw the flyer into reverse. There was an instant of freefall before the craft stabilized. Vegnagun wheeled up and away from them, heading back towards Sin.

Gippal grabbed onto the guardrail. "Paine, have you lost your freakin' mind?"

"If Nooj intended suicide, Vegnagun wouldn't obey him." She tried an experimental turn. "How's Baralai?"

"Burns, erratic heartbeat," Auron said. "He needs a healer."

"Okay, great." Gippal hung on as the flyer tipped and straightened. "So now you're suicidal. Look, you've flown this thing exactly twice—"

"Plus two years piloting Vegnagun in simulation, two more working unloaders at Moonflow Port," she said. "Now shut up and let me concentrate."

"No offense, but this is a stupid time for a joyride. And it's my flyer."

"Get a phoenix down on Baralai. If there's an Al Bhed treatment for this kind of injury, do it. Help him." The flyer wobbled again. "We're not losing either of them."

"Here we go again," Rikku said, eyes fixed on the ominous whirlpool of fog and pyreflies shrouding Sin's bulk. "Hey, Isaaru, ya think Lu's still in there?"

"Very likely," he said. "But I fear the absorption of Farplane energies may further dilute whatever is left of your friend's spirit."

"Sin's moving," Shinra said.

A dark shadow began to emerge from the fog. Spines rose up like the spires of St. Bevelle. They jutted from a sloping mountain that was and yet was not the Sin they knew. Its upper hide bristled with enormous spikes, as did the bony tail. A fan of gills or fins spread out from behind its head, encircling its body. Purple sparks skipped along the vanes' edges. Chunks of exoskeleton sloughed off, crashing down as Sin ascended. Pyreflies dripped from its sides. Its eyes—
"Oh, gross," Rikku said.

Some eyes were as before, goggling inhuman orbs in bulbous sockets. Those damaged by Vegnagun had been replaced by eyes that looked almost human, with irises the color of blood.

"Yuck," Elma said. "I didn't think it could get any uglier."

A spear of red light pierced the fog, drilling into spongy gray flesh. More fragments dropped from Sin's hide. Bellowing, it swiveled towards its assailant. Vegnagun retreated, drifting back into the Thunder Plains.

"I've found Sir Auron," Shinra said. "He's with G-team, but they're not responding. They've encountered sinscales."

"Encountered?" Elma said. "Ya think?"

Shinra's magnified display showed the little craft lying at a precarious angle on the trailing creepers of Guadosalam's borders. The Thunder Plains' cloud cover shrouded the area in twilight, but red outlines on the scanner indicated a mass of fiends swarming the flyer like ants to sugar.

"How does he always manage to find trouble?" Rikku said. "Pops, can we get down there? Maybe Auron's figured out a way t'be a human lightning rod without getting zorched, but that's an awful lotta fiends even for him."

"I can reach 'em, kiddo, but it means going closer to Sin."

"I would prefer not to lose our captain of the guard and Maester Baralai," Lucil said. "How close?"

"Out of range for everything but Sin's new mana beam," Shinra said.

"Mana...beam?" said Isaaru.

Shinra pointed. "That."

A crackling cone of energy had coalesced around Sin. The fan it had sprouted was focusing the power like a lens. A thick, corded beam of energy burst from the focal point and rammed into Vegnagun. The machina swerved, staggered. A leg and a half were sheared away.

"Ouch," Elma said.

"Ah, what the heck," Cid said. "That bastard saved my life. Guess I owe 'im one."

"Gippal, too!" said Rikku.

"Perhaps we can assist the legend for a change," Isaaru said.

Pacce's face lit up. "Yeah! Let's go rescue Sir Auron!"

Isaaru and his guardians waited in the cargo bay, fighting nausea during descent. The empty hold was a drum for the din of battle between clashing giants. The clamor grew louder and nearer. Isaaru began to worry that Cid had gotten the mad idea to fly into Sin's open jaws. At last, the ship slowed to a stop, and the loading ramp started to deploy.
"Okay. Isaaru, wait here," Pacce said, prompting a smile from Elma. He sounded like Maroda.

The two fighters pelted down the ramp, swords drawn. They turned to see the flyer lying under the Avenger's bridge. With a yell, they charged into the seething pack of sincscales. A bolt of green energy whizzed past them, cutting down one of the fiends.

"Nice of you guys to join us!" Gippal called. He was crouched under the front of the flyer, banging on the forward rotor with a wrench. Auron was planted in front of him, fending off sinscales. Juno was beating back those trying to overrun the rear of the craft. Baralai, propped against one of the center seats, had a gun braced between his knees, and was firing into the swarm.

"Stay close to the flyer!" Elma called, carving a path towards them. "As close as you can!"

Gippal swore as the craft teetered, knocking him in the head. "Yo! Quit hopping on the bed, Bar!"

"Maesters of Yevon... don't... hop."

"Or use machina?"

Pacce and Elma positioned themselves in front of the stubby wings. A deafening crackle of gunfire erupted directly overhead. Bullets swept around the flyer in a curtain like a clock-hand. Most of the fiends in the area were mowed down. Auron glanced up to see Rikku grinning and waving madly in the gunner's bubble. The fighters easily dispatched the remaining stragglers.

"You guys okay?" Pacce said. "What happened?"

"Miss I-wanna-be-a-pilot crashed my ship," Gippal said.

"We hit a piece of Sin coming down," Juno said. "Fetch Isaaru. Baralai's hurt."

"I'm fine," Baralai protested. Willing hands carried him to the foot of the airship's ramp. Baralai's face was nearly as pale as his hair. Juno embraced him, then headed back to the flyer.

"How is it, my lord?" Isaaru said, placing his fingers on Baralai's hands, where traces of half-healed burns disappeared into his sleeves.

"I'm not sure whether to court martial or kiss her," Baralai muttered. "Vegnagun?"

Elma glanced up. "Giving Sin a hell of a beating, sir."

The Avenger's hull blocked their view of the sky, but Sin's ghastly wails and the crash of energy discharges gave some clue what was happening. Flashes of red, green and purple were interspersed with the stark white of natural lightning. Luminous blue coronas glowed on the flyer's railings and windscreen.

Its engines coughed to life. Gippal dropped his tools and jogged towards the group under the cargo bay. "You okay, Bar?"

"Captain!" Pacce shouted.

There was a rising whine behind Gippal. He spun, waving his arms. "No, waaaaait!"

They had a glimpse of Juno in the pilot's chair, head craned towards the sky. The flyer lifted and zoomed away.

"Paine!" Baralai lurched to his feet, pushing Isaaru aside and stumbling out from under the airship
to get an unobstructed view.

"So help me, if she puts another dent in my baby..." Gippal said.

They lost sight of her in the rain, but her destination was clear. Over the heart of the Thunder Plains, Sin and Vegnagun were circling each other like titanic coeurls. The machina was trailing smoke. Sin had surrounded itself again with a bubble of light. The thunderheads over them were churning, sending down forks of lightning that skittered over the skin of one or the other before leaping to the tops of the nearest towers. Vegnagun fired, bathing Sin in an ominous black and red miasma, but it splashed harmlessly off Sin's shield. The machina banked sharply, barely avoiding a point-blank hit by Sin's mana beam.

There was a patter of feet down the ramp. Rikku darted towards Auron, flinging her arms around him as he swung his sword out of the way. "Hey, you," she said. "So, what's going on? Thought you were gonna use the flyer to get over there once Sin's down."

"We've failed," Baralai said, bitter and dazed. "It's Operation Mi'ihen all over again."

Vegnagun was dropping fast, transforming in midair. The main gun burst from its chest and telescoped outward. The barrel nearly scraped the ground as Vegnagun swooped low, clipping one of the lightning rod towers before slingshotting back into the sky. Another bolt of lightning jumped from Sin to Vegnagun to the ground, branding their silhouettes against the clouds for a blinding instant. Then Vegnagun drove straight into Sin's belly, bayonetimg it with the cannon.

Rikku gave a little scream and shrank against Auron. "Oh, Lulu."

Rigid, Auron laid an arm behind her shoulders.

"In Yevon's name," Isaaru said, cupping his hands in prayer.

"Not any more," Baralai said.

Sin's energy shield fizzled out. Machina and monster began to fall.

Juno was flying directly into the storm. Spatial orientation was scrambled by the dark wall of Vegnagun's wings dropping before her eyes like a clipped sail. Bewildering blue patterns on their surface writhed like tormented pyreflies. One thing was clear: Sin was coming down on top of Vegnagun, the latter almost perpendicular to the ground.

A stray sinscale banked off the flyer's windshield, sending it careening. Juno fought for control. When she leveled out, Vegnagun's head was right above her.

A quick glance upwards showed a patch of red and brown, Nooj's hair streaming. He was hanging on, barely, spread-eagled in the cockpit. Juno killed the flyer's forward momentum, struggling not to collide with Vegnagun or stop too soon. She tried to pretend she was aiming a sphere camera, zeroing in on a fast-moving target.

Nooj pushed off. There was a panicky moment of flailing limbs.

He hit the deck with a bang. The flyer sagged. Juno gunned the engine in reverse.
A few seconds later, Sin's head roared past, so near she could see every vein in its eyes. The stench wafting from its maw was appalling. Once it had fallen past them, she kicked the parking brake and turned. "Nooj?"

He was lying flat on his back, gasping for air. She dropped to the floor and crawled towards him, falling across him in relief.

"The High Summoner," he rasped, "made that maneuver look easy."

"Aeons don't have rivets."

Nooj's breathless laughter rolled out across the sky. Below, a thousand tons of machina and fiend plowed into solid rock. Vegnagun, crushed beneath Sin's mass, exploded in a fireball whose heat they could feel a mile above.

"Let's move," he said. "I'd hate for us to get struck by lightning after surviving that."

"Are you hurt?"

"Does it matter?" He smiled. "I'm alive."

Chapter End Notes

"Titanomachy" by author

Chapter 37 in the remaster.
Sea of Sorrow

Sin lay like a split anvil, a mountainous ruin. Lightning painted it in stark relief against the clouds. Below, the flicker of energy weapons answered with feeble red fire. Cold rain pinged against acres of cooling shrapnel hurled from the Thunder Plain's newest crater.

A thunderclap and a muffled shriek pierced the air.

"You should go back," Auron said gently.

"I'm not scared!" Rikku said. "I'm just worried about you guys. All of you, you know?"

"I know." His hand tightened around the brand across his palm that was, finally, beginning to cool. Lulu's time was running out.

Another explosion blossomed to their left. Auron had needed to swing his sword only once since they left the cover of the airship's guns. Baralai and Gippal were providing an efficient escort across the fiend-infested plain. Rikku was less than helpful, hampered as she was by borderline terror, but Auron was secretly touched by her dogged presence.

He returned his attention to the scabrous gray slope rising before them like a cliff. Raw fissures in Sin's armor vented wisps of steam from the smoldering machina crushed beneath it. Drizzle sifted down through the cracks. Most of the monster's eyes were hidden from below. Those that were visible seemed glazed, unfocused, barely twitching. The only other hint of movement was the slow flex and heave of broken ribs. That, and the gleam of sinscales crawling over the broken skin like maggots, shining when the lightning flashed.

There was a sizzling crackle and a shout at his back. Auron checked his stride and pivoted. Elma and Pacce were bracketing Isaaru, facing outwards with blades drawn. Pyreflies eddied at their feet.

"Hey, watch where you're pointing that thing!" Elma said.

"Wasn't me, babe." Gippal sauntered to the left and slightly behind the summoner party, hefting an ungainly shoulder cannon. "I think Bar wants to be Grand Maester real bad."

"Thank you, my lord," Isaaru called to Baralai, trailing them off to the right. "Any sign of Nooj or Juno?"

Baralai shook his head. He had barely spoken since Sin and Vegnagun rammed into the plain.

"Nope," said Gippal, halting to blast a dark shape scuttling between piles of debris. "But the good news is, I haven't seen a single scrap of wreckage. From the flyer, anyway."

"It was pouring a minute ago," Rikku said. "They're probably just laying low unt—" A deafening crack of thunder triggered a scream. She hunkered down until Gippal's laughter brought her to her feet, glaring. "Yeah, yeah. Someone's getting sand wolf doots in his air recycling system."

Conversation tapered off as they approached the buckled edge of the crater. There were more pyreflies here, streaming towards Sin in a last-ditch effort to repair it. Auron was forced to contribute a few more, clearing away sinscales while he waited for the group to assemble on the rim.
Hugging herself, Rikku pressed close to Auron and surveyed the impact zone. The crater's basin was filled with a carpet of oily black smoke, pyrefly-flecked, churned by unseen forms. A charnel reek hung in the air. Sin's craggy bulk towered over them like the eroded heart of an ancient volcano. They could hear the groan of its labored breathing, booming like sluggish surf.

"Do you think she knows we're here?"

"She knows we're coming," Auron said, scanning for entry points.

One by one, the rest of the party reached the rim and looked down.

Isaaru closed his eyes and bowed in Yevon's prayer.

"Hoo boy," Gippal said. "Good luck, guys. Glad I'm not going in there."

"Gee, thanks," Elma said, jabbing at a pile of scrap metal that snapped back, recoiling when Gippal blasted it point blank. "Hey, leave some for us!"

Pacce tried to sound nonchalant. "So, uh, we gotta get inside, right?"

"There." Auron pointed. Behind the nearest fin, there was a rupture broad enough for a hover to use as a garage. "Gippal."

"On it, boss." He adjusted a dial and laid down a wide ribbon of fire, playing over the smoke-shrouded terrain between them and Sin. Pyreflies went up in gouts.

"Isaaru," Baralai said.

The summoner wrenched his attention away from their adversary. "My lord?"

Baralai bowed low, hand over his heart. "Our prayers are with you."

Isaaru returned the gesture, adding Yevon's sign. "And mine with you and your comrades, my friend. Please convey my thanks, when you find them." He took a deep breath as Gippal's covering fire died away. "Sir Auron, we are in your hands."

Auron paused, glancing at Rikku.

"Yeah, yeah." She batted at his elbow. "Don't strain yourself. You said goodbye once already. Scoot."

He smirked and set off. Isaaru followed with a curious joy animating his features, despite his burdens. Pacce trotted along beside him, eyes darting towards every shadow. Elma took over Auron's post as rearguard.

Gippal, Baralai, and Rikku watched from the lip of the crater. The summoner party's progress was slow, hampered by the noxious fumes of burnt machina that choked them and set their eyes streaming. Isaaru had to apply Esuna. At last, Auron clambered up a jagged metal spur protruding from Sin's side. A cluster of sinscales hissed just in front of the breach. He stepped aside to let Elma and Pacce finish them off.

Auron reached up to touch gray, putrid flesh sagging over the entrance. A feeling of...expectancy? Dread? Denial? brushed his mind.

*It's time, Lulu. Stay with us.*
The last of the sinscales was sputtering into pyreflies. Squaring his shoulders, Auron strode into the pitch-black opening. Isaaru followed without hesitation. Pacce had to steel himself before making a run at it, dashing through like a child trying to dodge raindrops. Last of all, Elma halted on the threshold, turned, and raised her sword in a high salute, catching the lightning’s flash. Then she, too, vanished inside.

"See what I mean?" Gippal said. "Captain Choco-buns is all over me. I'm telling you, Bar—"

"Shut up, Gippal," Baralai and Rikku said in unison.

"It's a good thing your shop doesn't sell clues," Rikku added, "because you're always out of stock."

"For your information— hey, did you swipe that from my stores?" Gippal frowned at a talon-shaped knife strapped to her hip. "That's custom work, you thief! No freebies."

"Ku du ramm, Gipp."

Gippal lowered his gun with an exasperated sigh and propped it against his knee. "Great, now it's both of you. Bar, stop worrying. Rikku, what's eating you? What happened to Princess Sunshine?"

She hunched her shoulders, flinching at another peal of thunder. "Three guardians," she said. "Yuna had six— five, I mean, at the end."

"Yeah, well, your uncle only had two, right? And Auron gets the red carpet from…"

"Hey, do you hear something?" she interrupted.

Baralai's head snapped up. There was a faint, chugging drone in the distance, growing louder.

Gippal broke into a grin. "Yes! What did I tell you, Bar? Juno's a great pilot!"

At last the flyer skimmed into view over the ruins of the abandoned Agency. The little craft was hugging the ground like a ferret. A lightning strike on one of the nearby towers showed why the pilot was risking a crash by flying so low.

Baralai exhaled. "Nooj is driving."

"Well, good. Her landing could use work."

They waited impatiently for the flyer to put down. Baralai sprinted across the gap and scrambled into the back. He engulfed Juno in a fierce hug. "Dammit, Paine, that was a direct order."

"Take it up with the maesters." She met his embrace firmly, checking him over. "And look who's in fiend territory without an armed escort."

"Armed escort, eh? What do you think this is, an accordion?" The flyer bounced as Gippal slung his cannon onto the deck, then climbed up to join them. "Man, it's good to see you guys."

Baralai rested his chin on Juno's shoulder, burying his face in her rain-matted hair. At length, he opened his eyes, meeting Nooj's neutral but intent scrutiny. The younger man took a deep breath and released her. Stepping forward, arms stiff at his sides, Baralai bent at the waist in a deep bow. "Nooj."

"I'm glad you're all right," Nooj said smoothly, holding out his hand. "Sorry about Vegnagun."

Gratitude flooded Baralai's features. "Like Juno always said, it's only a machina." He stepped
forward and gripped Nooj's hand. "Not a friend."

"Finally," she muttered.

The intercom on the dashboard bleeped. "Welcome back, kids," Cid said. "Rikku, you there? We're getting a call from the Celsius."

"The Celsius?" Nooj said. "Impossible. There's no way it could send a signal this far."

"Beats me," said Cid. "Get Rikku on the link, pronto. I'd like to know what that damn fool son of mine needs to tell his sister that he won't tell his old man."

"Roger that. Hey, Rikku—" Gippal broke off, looking around the flyer. "Where'd she go?"

"She was right next to us," Baralai said. "Maybe she kept going towards the ship?"

"Sin," Juno said.

A splash of lightning blinded them for a few seconds. When darkness returned, they spotted Rikku as a tiny speck of orange and gold scrambling up Sin's flank.

Gippal groaned. "Oh, no. Rikku!" His bellow went unheard or ignored. The tiny figure ducked into a crack and vanished. "Vilg. If Cid doesn't kill me, Wakka will."

Every brush with Sin was a journey into darkness. Auron kept moving, ignoring the stench of scorched, rotten flesh until all odors faded. Isaaru walked behind him, resting a hand against his back. Pacce and Elma followed. They could hear distant howls, screams, the eldritch wails of pyreflies at the edge of hearing, but the only ghost-lights they saw were their own eyes playing tricks on them. The footing was yielding, spongy, wet. The damp air tasted of salt.

"So...is there like guts and all in here, or what?" Pacce said, clinging to Elma's belt. "How are we gonna find Yu Yevon?"

"You'll see."

"I can't see a thing, sir," Elma said. "Bet the fiends can smell us, though. Anybody got a light?"

"Save it," Auron said, halting as Isaaru lifted his hand away for spellcasting. A dim spark of light sputtered out almost before he had finished conjuring it. Auron waited again for the pressure of fingertips against his spine before moving on.

At last, he felt the subtle resistance of a membrane barring their path. He bent his head and pushed through. There was a blinding flurry of light and color. They found themselves in a vast plain of dark blue ice, clouded over by a thin layer of slush. Spiraling bands of glyphs formed eerie tunnels in mid-air, slowly rotating into the ground and rising up overhead. The sky was awash in all the colors of sunset, but no sun, only rafts of motionless clouds stretching to infinity.

"Stay alert," Auron said. "Anything can happen in this place."

"Um, yeah," said Elma. "It's bleeding architecture."
Here and there, the icy surface was broken by broad, sluggish streams of dark red liquid. A logjam of bizarre shapes was bumping along these arteries: metal cubes, modular blocks, windows and doorframes and huge chunks of superstructure, slowly deforming and conforming to the shape of the channels carrying them along.

"Is it the Farplane?" Pacce said.

"Close enough," Auron said.

"A dream of the fayth," Isaaru said with hushed reverence. "We're inside an aeon's shell, instead of viewing it from without."

"Or a nightmare," Elma said.

Something was whipping the fog into eddies overhead. Auron barked a warning as a trio of winged eyes swooped down and spun towards them, leering. "Ahriman," he said, drawing his sword. "Don't meet their gaze."

Unfortunately, his reflexes were slower than Elma's. She had sprung forward, sword and eyes raised to meet their attackers. Her face went slack. Turning, she made a wild slash at Pacce's head.

"Commander!" he said, backpedaling.

"Hit her," Auron said, waiting for a fiend to dip within sword's range. This could be bad. Jecht or Wakka would have handled these easily, but without a mage or air specialist—

"Don't breathe!" came a familiar call. A green canister arced over their heads, striking a brassy wing and exploding on contact. The monsters went rigid, turned the color of clay, dropped and shattered.

Pacce smacked Elma's cheek with the flat of his sword. "Elma, wake up!"

She came to with a jerk. "Whoa. Sorry about that."

"I-it's okay," he said. "Maroda warned me about those things."

"At least it wasn't Auron!" Rikku said, sauntering up. "He practically cut me in two, once. Lulu always kept a doll handy to bop him." She set her hands on her hips, surveying the bleak dreamscape. "Yuck. So much for the garden Yunie told me about."

"My lady," Isaaru said. "How did you—?"

"You should go back," Auron said. "It's not your pilgrimage."

"Look, Mister High-and-Mighty-Pants." She wagged a finger. "You and Lulu aren't our chaperones anymore! I'm here to make sure you don't screw up."

"Hey!" Pacce said, bristling. "This is Sir Auron you're talking to! Best guardian alive! Best—" He broke off, perplexed.

Sir Auron was laughing. It was a quiet chuckle, at first, but it built into rolling guffaws that had the summoner and guardians grinning, too, staring at him incredulously.

Rikku smirked. "So, is that an I'm so happy Rikku is coming along with us' laugh or an I'm laughing so I don't have to give a straight answer' laugh?"
"It's up to the summoner."

Isaaru's tentative mirth drained away. "Elder Cid will not be pleased." He raised a hand, fending off her retort. "I have no wish to endanger any more lives than necessary. But you are a guardian, no? And Lady Yuna's cousin, as well." He paused, looking towards Auron for a sign, but the man had turned his back on them. Finally, Isaaru nodded. "Very well. If you are willing to risk it, I would be honored by your presence, milady."

"It's Rikku. And I'm just here for Lulu, okay? I couldn't care less about your dumb pilgrimage, especially if he's got anything to do with it."

"Dumb?" Elma said.

"It's all right, Commander," Isaaru said. "Lady Rikku, I understand your position. Let us continue."

The plain mocked them. There seemed to be no end to it, nor to the fiends that lurked where the mist thickened. Elma's sharp nose steered them around crystalline beds of fungi, whose sickly-sweet odor she recognized from patrolling the Djose Highroad. Roving packs of scorpion-like fiends proved more troublesome.

Rikku was a welcome addition. She had a knack for guessing unknown fiends' weaknesses, and carried custom explosives for the more common ones. Elma proved a formidable fighter, complementing Auron's devastating but slow attacks with leaping strikes, snap-thrusts and circling slashes that reminded him painfully of Tidus. Extra guardians meant Auron could leave Isaaru a few steps back with Pacce, to the young fighter's chagrin. Once, at least, Pacce got to save his hero by punching a blade scorpion after Auron's legs went out from under him on the slick ground.

At last, just when Rikku's third *are we there yet* had reminded Auron that Yuna's pilgrimage was filled with annoyances as well as laughter, Pacce spotted a monumental stone cupola in the distance.

"Finally!" Rikku said. "Come on, Isaaru, let's see some hustle! This is your big day, right? Hup-hup-hup, we're nearly there!"

He gave a weak laugh. "I beg your pardon, milady. It seems priest's robes were not meant to keep up with Al Bhed enthusiasm."

"Well, take them off, then! At this rate, Yu Yevon could put Sin completely back together and make souvenir knock-offs before we find the bastard." She skipped ahead, disappearing into the fog. Auron tensed and started after her.

"Uh, guys?"

*Damn.* He glanced at Elma, who winked and charged forward, angling away to give him room to swing.

A behemoth materialized above them with a roar, flattening the pair with fists the size of wagon wheels.

"Oops," Rikku said, popping out of the fog and throwing up a glittering wall of sparks. It caused little damage, but blinded the beast long enough for Isaaru to whip off a *Cura* or two. "What the
"What is that thing?"

"Purple!" Elma said, bouncing up with a shaky grin. "Looks like we get to play tag with a thunderstorm. Yaaa!" Sprinting past Auron, she launched herself at the creature's tail with a banshee shriek.

Auron had no time to debate tactics. He was fully occupied with dodging swipes that flung him dozens of paces every time one connected. This time, the slippery footing proved a blessing: skidding absorbed some of the impact. Rikku was fast enough to avoid being crushed. She came to the rescue when he went down, splashing his throat with an Al Bhed restorative that seemed to quicken his reflexes. He suspected he would pay for it later, but for the moment, the rush of adrenaline was keeping him between Isaaru and the enemy.

He charged in for another attack, trying to hamstring the creature. On his second blow, the treetrunk leg buckled. The fiend came down on all fours, bellowing in pain. Auron rolled out from under it. He missed Kimahri, who would have ended it right then with one spear-thrust.

Meanwhile, Elma had reached its head. Clinging with both legs and an arm wrapped around one horn, she appeared to be at an impasse, sword-arm flailing. Then the beast hunkered down and roared. One moment of relative stability was all the Crusader needed. She twisted and buried her sword to the hilts in the nearest eyeball. The behemoth convulsed, flung her loose, and toppled chin-first into the ice. Auron was hurrying over to where she had landed when Rikku shouted.

"Above you!"

He looked up. Apparently the death-throes of this particular fiend included a magical component. Enormous boulders were falling like hailstones. He dropped his sword—it was more likely to survive lying flat—and braced for impact.

It never came. Somehow, nothing land on him. He stared in fascination as a slab of rock suspended over Elma's prone form slowed, rolled to one side and hit the ground next to her with a boom. Then the bombardment was over.

By the time he reached her, she was sitting up and gripping her left shoulder in pain, but triumphant. "Ow. That thing had quite a finishing move, didn't it?"

Shouts of Sir Auron and Hey, Choco-lady! assured him the others were unscathed, so he knelt to examine her injury. Elma kicked him in the gut when he gripped her upper arm and gave a quick jerk, setting the bone back in its socket. Auron waved off her mortified apologies as the other three came running over.

"Oh, man, I thought we were gonna find a couple of legendary floormats over here," Rikku said. "Who needs a medic?"

Elma wriggled her toes. "Me."

"That was totally cool," Pacce said, awe tinged with envy. "Commander Elma, legendary knight!"

"Nah. Only one legend here, kiddo, and it ain't me." Elma submitted meekly to Al Bhed curatives. "Used to be, you couldn't call yourself a real Chocobo Knight until you'd wrangled your first basilisk. Please don't tell the general, though. She banned that stunt a couple years ago."

Pacce's dazzled grin held a hint of mischief. "No way! This'll make all the spherecasts in Luca!"

"Impressive," Auron murmured to Isaaru, standing off to one side.
"I beg your pardon?"

"That wasn't an ordinary Protect spell."

The summoner glanced at the nearest boulder. "Ah, no. NulEarth, I suppose you would call it. Once again, I owe a debt of thanks to Lady Yuna for allowing me to continue my studies." He gave a rueful nod towards Pacce. "I was far too rash on our first journey."

"So. Everybody okay?" Rikku offered Elma a hand up. "C'mon, there's a treasure chest over there, and I didn't dare pop it until I had backup!"

"A treasure chest?" the Crusader said, bewildered. "Inside Sin?"

"Hey, it's no weirder than anything else."

Auron, customary backup in Rikku's treasure-hunting operations, gave her a jaundiced look and followed.

The chest did not explode or turn into a pile of animated junk when Rikku popped the lid. "Woohoo! Thanks, Lulu!" She lifted out her prize. It was a pinwheel-shaped shield with a sunburst pattern of copper alloys.

"Wow." Elma said. "That's sure not Crusader issue."

"Yep!" Rikku strapped the targe to her left arm. Tugging on it to make sure it was secure, her face fell. "Oh."

"What's up?" said Pacce.

"Is there a problem, milady?" Isaaru said.

"N-nope! Now I've got a gift from the Lady, too!" She spun around, showing it off. "She only gives them to heathens, so neener!"

They resumed course for the temple-like structure whose dome floated over the mist. Once again, Isaaru began to fall behind. Halting to let him catch up, Auron leaned close to Rikku. "What did she give you?"

"Oh, um..." She touched a copper wire on its edge, voice faltering. "Ochre Targe. Lightning Eater."

"You knew what Lulu's Final Aeon was like. You should have thought of that before following us."

"Yeah, but I thought she'd turned into Sin! I thought we'd already beaten her with Vegnagun. So all we gotta do is knock out Yu Yevon and steal her back, right?"

"It won't be that easy." Seeing the fear growing in her eyes, he added, "If you panic, I won't stop to help you."

"Oo-oo! You're still the biggest meanie in Spira. Remind me to hit you after this is over. With a forklift." She stuck out her tongue and danced away, as he had intended.
Chapter Summary

Thirteen years after Yuna falls in the Final Summoning, another summoner and his guardians penetrate Sin's inner sanctum.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yu Yevon seemed to have called a truce. The fiends had disappeared back into the mists. Auron wondered where they had been diverted. Sin had gulped down half the pyreflies of Guadosalam, and he doubted Yu Yevon had applied them only to Sin's outer hull. But that was a matter for later. Now...

Now he had to resist the gnawing regrets that threatened to add him to the local fiend population.

Rearing out of the fog, an enormous dome rested on four piers of stone. Yevon's banners, tattered and begrimed, hung from it like cobwebs. Below it lay a wide circular mosaic, scuffed as if from centuries of ordinary foot traffic. Lulu's memory was as meticulous as ever. She had copied the floor of Besaid's shattered temple to the last tile. Around the perimeter stood four monumental sculptures, twice the height of ordinary summoner statues. Reversing the usual arrangement, they faced outwards like sentinels, each one framed by a vaulted archway.

Only one was a summoner.

As always, Yuna danced on her pillar of water. It was real water, as much as anything in this place was real. Her portrait's details were picked out with colored shells and petals. To her left was a garish figure molded in plastic: Tidus, captured in mid-lunge with sword drawn, articulated like an action figure from Zanarkand's souvenir stands. To Yuna's right was a rough-hewn mass of quartz and granite, vaguely Ronso-shaped, its fist wrapped around a pillar of ice. Completing the memorial was a traditional temple portrait carved out of varnished, dark-stained wood. The black sword, red coat, dark glasses and gray hair of thirteen years ago were painstakingly rendered in Bevelle's classical style.

Rikku, kneeling at the foot of Yuna's statue, gazed up at her cousin with tears trickling down her cheeks.

Privately agreeing with the sentiment, Auron said, "Mourn later. We need to find a way in."

"They shouldn't have had to die." She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes, sniffed, and got up to join Elma and Pacce in scouting the open-air chamber. Its floor drew her attention. When she approached the center, the mandala at the heart of the design rose up, dividing into four pedestals with recessed sockets on their upper faces.

"Hey," Pacce said, hurrying over. "They're like in the Cloister of Trials, right? So it's a puzzle. There should be spheres."

"Oh, right." Rikku wiped her eyes and looked around. "Ummm..."
"With the statues, maybe?" Elma said. "And what's Sir Auron doing here? His statue, I mean."

"Well, he is a stiff," Rikku said. "That's weird. It should be Wakka's brother. Maybe she thought Auron got killed in the Final Summoning, and now it's too late to redecorate?"

"Stay focused," Auron said. "Rikku, look." He brushed his gauntlet over a glyph etched on one of the pedestals. Each of the four bore a different sign.

"Huh? Oh! Four elements. 'Cept there's no lightning—" she screwed up her face— "just fire and ice and water. What's that one?"

"Air," Isaaru said, joining them. "But aren't these holes rather small for spheres?"

"Yeah. Come to think of it..." Rummaging in her satchel, she produced a handful of glowing marbles and popped one into the socket. A plume of ice shot up. "Score! Okay, everybody. Grab a marble and— whoa, Pacce, don't touch that one, it's a dud. Here's fire, and that's water, and that one's zu poop. No, really. It's a pocket tornado."

"I'm lost," Elma said. "Just tell me what to do."

"Maybe we have to activate the glyphs, then push them in front of the statues," Pacce said.

"Sounds like a plan! Let's try— unh— dragging this one over to Kimahri. He's gotta be ice."

Exchanging glances, Isaaru and Auron drifted away from the bustle. Isaaru lowered his voice. "Beyond the Trials, the Final Aeon awaits, no?"

Auron nodded. "Prepare yourself for the sending. Yu Yevon won't go willingly."

The whispered question was kind. "Will you?"

"Lulu and I have unfinished business." He shook his head at Isaaru's pained expression. "But whatever happens, don't stop. Our goal is to eliminate Yu Yevon. If we fail, there will be no more chances."

"Understood." Isaaru's shoulders slumped. "Sir Auron, I am in your debt, such that any words of thanks would fall short of the mark. I wish you peace, wherever your journey takes you."

"Thanks."

"Hey, lazybones," Rikku called. "Come take a look at this. It's not working."

"Water goes with Tidus," Auron said, noting a pedestal topped with a tiny fountain behind Yuna's statue.

"Oh, now he tells us. Get over here and help us push these things around."

He joined Pacce in rearranging the pedestals. When the last one clicked into place, there was a chime and a flash. The center of the floor vanished, replaced by a glowing design. Rikku gave a squeak, recognizing the fan-shaped symbol of Lulu's Venus Crest. A swelling globe of pyreflies started to coalesce above it.

"Uh oh," Elma said.

"Yeah!" Pacce said, so engrossed in puzzle-solving that he failed to look up. "We did it!"
"Oh, no fair!" Rikku said, turning and bolting.

Auron grasped Pacce's arm and dragged him out from under the enormous malboro ballooning out of the fog. It dropped to the floor with a disgusting squelch. Stout green tentacles scattered drops of acid that smoked where they struck the tiles.

"Pacce," Auron said. "Protect Isaaru."

"Sir." The boy hurried to his brother, herding him towards Kimahri's statue for cover.

Auron took a breath of clean air and charged. To his surprise and irritation, his sword bounced off the toxic vegetable's rubbery tentacles. Elma was discovering the same problem, to judge by the curses coming from the other side. They needed fire. Pure magecraft was alien to his being. However, there was one sword-invocation that might suffice, if he could remember it.

"Get back! NOW!" Setting his feet, he whirled the heavy blade like a hammer, drawing the nearby fog into a spinning column. The malboro began to spin too, caught up in the tornado. When it had nearly reached the ceiling, he unclipped his jug, took a swig, and flung it into the midst of the maelstrom. The tornado burst into flames. The marboro came crashing down. So did part of the dome.

"And we drank that stuff?" Elma said, crouching behind one of the pedestals. Apparently she had a few tricks of her own. As she stood, flames ignited along the edge of her sword. With a war-whoop, she renewed her attack, blade searing tough hide. The malboro thrashed, opened a toothless maw like the rind of a rotten fruit splitting open, and emitted a yawning hiss. Both guardians were engulfed in a choking black cloud.

Poisonous fire invaded Auron's mind and sinews. He barely felt the monster's rasping gums close around him.

He came to with the crackle of phoenix down prickling his eyelids. Rikku slapped a hand over his sword when he reached for it. "Let Isaaru deal with this one," she said, a quaver in her voice that had him on his feet even faster.

A scorched malboro was hideous enough, but the creature looming over it was worse. Seymour's aeon stood there, chained and keening, swathed in mummified flesh and a furled bony shell like a living coffin. Its head snapped back with a cry. The malboro reeled. Then it sank into the ground, dragged under by a reddish-black miasma that smelled like bile. It did not come up again.

Erinyes surveyed its surroundings, weeping blood from its single eye. The vestigial pair of arms around its neck struggled against its bonds. It gave another furious screech, head jerking like a whip-crack.

"Isaaru!" Pacce cried. Auron saw the creature convulse again, and Elma toppled. Then it was his turn. He raised his sword, staggering under the burning glare of hate and malice. His skull pounded as if every mother who had ever lost a child was screaming into his mind. Then, mercifully, the aeon began to dissipate, growing translucent and fading away.

Pacce was standing over Isaaru, wide-eyed and pale, sword braced for anything else that might come hurtling out of the mist. Auron nodded approval, falling into a watchful stance beside him.

"Tend him."

Kneeling, Pacce sprinkled phoenix down over Isaaru's face. The man's eyes were leaking blood again. He came to with a mindless snarl, fists striking the air until Pacce caught his arms and held
him with a tearful, "Isaaru?"

"Is everybody okay?" Elma said, jogging up with Rikku. They pulled up short, staring at the usually self-composed summoner.

"Isaaru," Auron said. "Are you still with us?"

Isaaru rolled onto his hands and knees. "Not... entirely. It seems that Erinyes has realized that I am not her son."

"Eh?" Rikku said. "Wait. That was Seymour's creepy-ass aeon, wasn't it?"

"A bad aeon?" Pacce said. "It's inside you?"

Isaaru closed his eyes. "Yes, Pacce. Do not fear. She is angry and full of grief, but she is not evil. Father Zuke can help me release her, when we return." He offered a haggard smile that was probably meant to be reassuring. "I begin to have some inkling what being Sin is like. Let us hurry. Was that a gateway, or a trap?"

"Both," Auron said, nodding towards the ghostly sigil pulsing over the hole in the floor. "Come."

There was no sign of a bottom, no way to tell its depth. It was a black pit. Isaaru, who had followed Auron into darkness already without a qualm, did not hesitate. Mimicking the guardian, he stepped out and disappeared with snapping robes.

"It won't kill us, after all," Rikku said to Pacce, who stood looking down in shame and misery. "They would've dropped the temple on us, if they wanted us dead."


"They dropped a malboro," Elma said, swinging her legs over the edge. She grinned at Rikku. "So, time for a rematch."
In dreams, one might trip over a Luca balcony and die on the pavement below, or leap from the peak of Mt. Gagazet and alight on the ruins below with barely a jolt. This was no featherless glide, but at least it was not fatal. Icy boughs tore and broke, skinning flesh and slowing their descent. Tangled vines caught and gave way. Roots and gravestones made a hard landing. Winded and blinded, the party lay waiting for their eyes to adjust to the darkness while Isaaru healed them.

When he was finished, Auron pressed a vial of *ether* into his hand.

Accepting it meekly, Isaaru crushed it against his throat and looked around. "I could swear I've seen this place before."

"It's Djose," Elma said, voice tight. "Almost. What's with these rocks?"

The darkness of Lulu's garden had assumed a more specific color, blue-black to match the trunks of the Macalania trees. Golden light filtered down from the great crystalline moons of seedpods snagged in their branches. Dark vines and creepers curtained everything. There were fewer flowers than Auron remembered: a solitary orchid, a spray of jasmine with just a few waning stars left, a dusting of withered rose petals clinging to spiderwebs.

"It's beautiful," Pacce said.

"Yeah." Rikku reached out, brushing her knuckles against a hibiscus. "Guess this is the garden Yunie dreams about."

"It's pretty and all," Elma said, "but I smell an ambush. Let's move to open ground."

Auron turned to the fence of young trees penning them in. Brutal overhand swings made short work of their trunks. With fleeting glimpses of the bluffs to orient him, he started clearing a path uphill.
"Hey!" Rikku said. "Bad enough you stomped my tomatoes!"

"If all goes well, my lady, I think your friend will be glad to leave this garden," Isaaru said.

They emerged onto oceanless beach, a vast spreading wilderness of dark vegetation spilling over gravestones, bathed in a wavering mirage of blue flames that consumed nothing. Ignoring the others' awed exclamations, Auron scanned the bluffs for any sign of white.

"There's Al Bhed writing on this one," Pacce said.

"Huh? Let me see." Rikku crouched, pushing aside aloes to peer at the block of sandstone. "It says…" Her voice hitched. "'Anna.' My Pops' sister."

Gazing out where the sea should have been, Auron spotted a thin blush of salmon-pink on the horizon. Below it was a streak of the same hue, tremulous as a tongue of flame licking along the edge of a scroll.

Rikku began to shout. "Hey, Lu! We made it! Come and get us! Come out, come out, wherever you — aaah!" She gave a startled scream as a plump fruit let go from one of the vines, striking her between the eyes and bursting open. "Ew! Thanks a lot, Lulu!"

"Shouldn't we keep quiet?" Pacce said, eyes darting from shadow to shadow.

"Heh-heh." Rikku's face looked pale when she wiped the glop and seeds away. "Just trying to get it over with."

Tearing his eyes from the horizon, Auron sheathed his sword and seized Isaaru, heaving him over his shoulder. "Run." He started blundering towards the cliffs, trusting the others to obey. This was no open field. The trees and vines that had broken their fall were suddenly a deadly obstacle course, concealing rocks and boulders that could send them sprawling.

Baffled but unquestioning, Elma caught up with him quickly. "Higher ground, sir?" She pointed towards the slope at the back of the "beach" that narrowed as it climbed. Hundreds of Crusaders had perished in its real-world counterpart, trapped in the bottleneck. Yet a small group might use it to reach a broad shelf partway up the bluffs. Auron nodded and followed her, ignoring Isaaru's gasping questions.

The onrushing wave was eerily silent. Had that streak of dawn not reflected off its crest, he might not have spotted it until too late.

Laden as he was, Auron reached the level ground well behind the others. Elma was making for an outthrust leg of the cliff forming an arch. Inadequate, but it would break the full force of the water. Auron set the summoner on his feet behind it and turned to face the menace rumbling towards them. They could hear the roar of the ocean now, crashing as it overtopped trees, bushes, gravestones.

"What's she doing?" Rikku said.

"Yu Yevon's taking no chances," Auron said.

"A trap," Elma said, stoic. "Is there anything we can do, sir?"

"Everyone, stay close," Isaaru said. "I can buy us time, Sir Auron, but no more."

"Understood." Auron said. "Pacce. Guard him well."
"Aye, sir." The young man moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with his brother, planting himself on the outside of the arched overhang facing the sea. Elma and Rikku wedged themselves in on the other side, bracketing the summoner. Rikku, more trusting, threaded her feet into the old vines lacing the rock. Looking out, they could see a vast ridge of muddy water devouring the beach they had just vacated. Isaaru began to pray. A faint green membrane of light sprang up around them. Stepping away from NulTide’s flimsy barrier, Auron strode to the edge of the natural balcony and raised his hand, displaying the brand she had given him. "Summoned, we have come! Lady, heed my prayer. I bring you Grand Maester Isaaru, High Priest of St. Bevelle, to answer for Yevon's crimes!"

"What the hell?" Elma said.

"What's he doing?" Pacce said.


"Making her mad," Rikku muttered.

Auron's booming voice echoed off the bluffs, trumpeting above the sea's thunder. "Now is the time to break the spiral, Lulu! No more Yevon! No more pilgrimages! No more teachings! No more cages! No more lies!"

The tide reached the rocky shelf and spilled over. It flowed as a river, not as a wall, forcing Auron back step by step until it lifted him off his feet. His head struck the cliff. Held there by tremendous pressure, he could see the others huddled together a few paces away, surrounded by a faint sphere of light that was trembling like a soap bubble. The water rose to his shoulders, then began to recede, drawing him with it.

"Auron, you dummy!" Rikku's outburst had him smirking even as the water dragged him towards the edge.

There was a splitting thunderclap. The bolt struck where he had been standing, but instead of fading, it opened like a fan. A blinding white figure stepped out of it. Chains and straps of leather whipped around like angry snakes, plunging into the waves and coiling around his arms, his legs. They held him fast in a bizarre tug-of-war with the sea. The current pulled him down, down, draining through the mesh. He hung suspended against the bluff, waterlogged and half-drowned. When he could collect his wits, he climbed up using straps and chains as a ladder. Heaving himself over the edge, he rolled onto his side, retching saltwater.

Yuna's Final Aeon stood over him, implacable, a figure of glass and steel and white fire whose head and shoulders rose above the heights of Mushroom Ridge. Ropes of hair flared out like Shiva's, forming the butterfly fan of the Venus Crest against the sky.

The lightning began to fall. Its forked fingers spiraled around the rock sheltering the summoner and guardians. Pacce took the brunt of the first attack and fell, mail smoking. There was a shimmer, and Isaaru's barrier shifted from green to gold. The bolts began to flow around them. Assured that they were safe for the present, Auron slashed through his bonds and advanced upon the aeon, bracing himself for the first kiss of lightning. It staggered him, but he could bear it.

Maybe.

Chains battered him, sending jolts along the links. Heavy straps scourged his head and arms, biting
with edges fringed in slivers of glass, scoring bloody welts. The electrical barrage was relentless. Clothed in a sheath of living lightning, the aeon mauled him with pitiless elemental talons, searing nerves and flesh again and again.

The sheer futility of Lulu's old plan reasserted itself as he fell to his knees.

Healing washed over him. Lifting his head, he saw Rikku on the other side of the aeon's glass calves. She was cowering, struggling to keep the targe up and not clap her hands over her ears. Some of the thongs and chains had wrapped around her legs, pinning her to the ground. None of the aeon's blows fell directly where she was crouched, but the recoil of the lightning strikes upon Auron splashed over her, sinking into the wires of her upraised shield.

Auron rose and moved forward, gritting his teeth in anticipation of the next lightning strike.

The pain was less. Rikku must have conjured a magic barrier from her alchemy kit as well as a restorative. Angling around so that he would be an easier target for her missiles, he closed in, throwing every *Break* he knew against the aeon's treetrunk legs. Jangling bolts and elixirs crashed over him in a disorienting shower.

This, too, was a lie. Lulu had to be here, just inches away, locked inside that murderous shell. Raising his eyes, he willed himself to see her. If he could just bend the pyreflies to his will as she had done many times since she gained Sin's powers and chains, he might twist Yu Yevon's lies back to the truth. Could he still find it in himself to believe?

Another bolt lashed him with biting words. *Auron, really. Stop pretending you're a cynic.*

Yes. For one moment, the mage was there, reflected within the aeon's glassy shins. She stood before him with arms raised in equivocal greeting, calling down the storm.

His sword went through.

The aeon's chrysalis shattered. Shards of silvered metal and black steel and ice and crystal came raining down, smashing and sparking and skittering across the ground. His sword went through, piercing metal and glass, burrowing into fabric, flesh and bone. His sword went through her. He felt sick.

Lulu crumpled— black— white— red— was she still wearing his coat, or was all of that blood? The lightning ceased.

"Auron, you didn't!" Rikku rushed forward. He grabbed her as she tried to push past him.

The mage was lying in a bed of salt-covered roses, knee-length black hair and white limbs falling in a graceful spiral as if she were still a symbol. Lulu might have appreciated the imagery, blood staining white roses red, but he was no poet. They were just damned weeds, and she was really lying there, blood pumping from a huge gash through the fourth and fifth rib (breasts, you fool, they don't grow any finer) and he hoped he had missed the heart.

If she still had one.

"Wait," he said.

"Let me save her!"

"Wait."
The body shimmered with blackness. A boiling cloud of red and black, viscous and foul, began to bleed upwards from Lulu's pale flesh.

"Auron, come on!" Rikku struggled against his grip.

The demon burst free and catapulted into the sky, veering wildly, searching, a churning knot of hate.

"Hurry," he said, releasing her. Then he turned. "Isaaru. Send."

Isaaru, supported by his two guardians, stepped out into the open. Curling his hands together in that accursed prayer, he began to dance.

Pyreflies lifted from Auron's collar. He turned back to Lulu. Rikku was kneeling over her, crying and shaking out two phoenix downs at once, spitting Al Bhed curses at the mage and at him. Lulu's face was bone white, that familiar spill of black hair falling across one side of her face with artful carelessness: the Lady, even now. He wanted to hold her, to press that dire wound closed, to weep like the passionate young monk who had died long before she knew him. He wanted to stay long enough to see shadowed lids open, a true smile of freedom, Rikku beaming with triumph before she turned to glare at him through snot and tears and really let him have it. He had waited too many years to miss this. But there was a god to kill.

The fayth had been right. Isaaru was stronger than Auron had given him credit for. His sorrowful, reverent, insidious prayer was paring away Auron's pyreflies like waves lapping at a sandcastle.

"Sir Auron!" The sending slackened.

Auron thought Isaaru had yielded to misplaced sentiment. Then he saw Yu Yevon bearing down on him. He moved away from the two women as the seething cloud exploded overhead. It engulfed him in a vortex of desperation, hunger, madness, cold fury and implacable will. Auron was no fayth, but he was unsent, halfway there, a last-ditch prop to latch onto. Shouting defiance from every last fiber of his being was not enough. It had not been enough for Jecht or Lulu. Yu Yevon was consuming his soul.

"Keep sending!" There was a reason why Yunalesca had rejected him at the Hall of the Final Summoning— or so Auron hoped.

Then the world was pain.

Chapter End Notes

Here's Mintywolf's stupendous illustration of Lulu's aeon. (If it takes too long to load, here's a compressed jpg version).
Chapter renumbering:

In the "remastered" edition, this chapter is divided into Chapter 39 "The Cloister of Guardians" and Chapter 40 "The Lady," with my illustration of the Venus Crest as the end of Chapter 39.
Our Story So Far: Thirteen years after Yuna falls in the Final Summoning, Isaaru and his guardians have brought down the Final Aeon. Yu Yevon pounces Auron as a last-ditch substitute.

The Farplane promised longed-for release. Auron was so tired, a husk of secondhand pyreflies glued together by phoenix down and scars. Rest, sang the sky beyond all skies. Your journey is at an end. Yu Yevon promised nothing, but its dissonant, teeth-cracking whine turned every thought to despair, to the frenzied attack of the maddened hive. Defend, defend, defend, destroy, came the mantra, and he wanted to lash out at something, at anything, as if the violence he had just committed on Lulu's body had unleashed the raving fiend within. All that held him back was pain, the pangs of childbirth magnified a hundredfold. Why was Erinyes screaming into his mind?

A pressure on his hand, light as the swish of a braid on bare skin, was proof against chaos. Choose, Auron. Choose. This is your story.

A fiend was still a man, as long as he remembered his name.

Auron jammed himself back into his body like an ill-fitting shoe. Rikku, shaking him frantically, gave an indignant, "Hey!" as he elbowed her aside and stood, feeling the weight of sword against callouses.

Lulu's garden was lost. In its place, brackish waters lapped from horizon to horizon, flooding the ruins of a ghost city under a bruise-purple sky. Jumbled stone blocks were scattered, patternless, a puzzle that could never have formed a coherent whole. Bolted to them were rusted pylons and transformers, a maze of drooping cables and catwalks leading nowhere. Bleached, coralline huts teetered on rotting piers, side by side with soulless skyscraper façades. A few dying Macalania trees glowed pale and dim in the shallows. Over the dome of Baaj Temple, carrion birds wheeled in an endless gyre.

No, not Baaj. Erinyes.

Seymour's aeon had sprouted from the temple foundations like an unholy mushroom, its flesh stained and gangrenous, its reflection mirrored on stagnant water. Around it orbited a pair of misshapen monoliths, last remnants, perhaps, of Lightning Mushroom Rock. At the aeon's foot stood a small figure in an old red coat.

Auron began to run. Leaping, skidding from rock to algae-covered rock, he tore a careening course across the sunken city. A blunt snout and long neck burst from the water, arching across his path. He hewed it and kept going. Crackling explosives on his heels told him that Rikku was following. There were more dark forms moving in the water around them. He should wait, make sure she was safe. But others needed him more.

"Let him go." It was Lulu's voice, hoarse with disuse. "Release the summoner. He did not kill your son, Keta. I did."
There. Between the feet of a sheared-off summoner’s statue, Isaaru lay unseeing, his body arching and falling back in fierce convulsions. Pacce held him, weeping. Elma stood guard, glaring down at black fins cutting the water around them. Her sword dripped pyreflies.

They would have to hold on.

So would Lulu, sinking down with one arm cast across her face in a warding gesture. Flying past her, Auron braced his sword against his hip for a full-body ram. Spray went up as he hit a thin sheet of water. A Flare spell curtained ahead of him in a rolling barrage. Puddles flashed to steam. Blinded and scalded, he crashed into the aeon at full speed, knocking the breath from his lungs. The sword plunged deep. Erinyes screamed, straining against its chains.

Any pity he might have felt for its fayth, Yevon’s newest prisoner, had been negated by the sight of what it was doing to Isaaru, what it might be doing to Lulu behind his back. "We killed Seymour," he said, when he had breath to speak.

It took all his strength to yank the blade free. With the follow-through, he swept it around in a Break, softening steel to lead and bone to sinew. Erinyes fought back, screeching into his mind. My son, my sin, my beloved! Acid waves washed over him, chewing through his body like a plague of insects. He stumbled, pitched face-forward against the aeon’s armor, and felt the cold smack of a Hi-potion across the back of his neck. Lulu must have raided his coat.

Retreating, he risked dropping his guard for a glimpse of her. Scarred wrists, snarled coils of hair, the hem of his coat staining the water around her ankles red— another spike of rage threatened to snap his control. "Sorry I’m late."

"Nonsense." Holding another potion, she mimed drawing it from her bosom with a flourish. "You’re just in time, Auron. If you would?"

"Hmph." Smiling faintly, he took the potion and tossed it back. Cool healing soothed the burning needles of pain burrowing under his skin. Then he sprang forward, throwing out his left hand in another Break that he had not needed in thirteen years. "Peeling the fruit for her," Lulu used to call it: stunning fiends’ pyrefly-bonds so spells hit twice as hard. Blue sparks showered around him. Pivoting away, he braced as Lulu swept up her hand in an emphatic command. The air quaked. Ultima’s black jaws closed around the aeon, pinching it down to a point before exploding outwards in a bubble of insanity. Just before the shockwave reached them, it reversed, crushing the aeon in torturous slow motion.

"I’m sure I told your summoner not to bring any aeons," she said, observing the spell’s progress with detachment.

"Summoners are stubborn."

"Well." She half-turned. Across the water, Isaaru was sitting with his head between his knees, but at least he was no longer being jerked like a puppet. "I suppose I cannot fault him. I’d rather fight her than you."

"Hey, guys," Rikku said, popping over a stone curb and landing next to the mage. "The flirting’s kinda cute, but can we go now?"

"Go?" Elma called over. "First we kick Yevon's ass!"

Twice, three times space ruptured and folded, buckling the pavement almost to their feet. Puddles of water drained away, streaming into infinity. When the aeon snapped back into focus, Lulu
rotated behind Auron, drawing Rikku with her. Striding forward, the swordsman renewed his
attack with a flurry of hammer-blows before the aeon could recover.

"Augh!" Rikku reached for a grenade clipped to her belt. "Guardians!"


"But we need you, too!" Rikku's voice rose to a frustrated squeak. "I came to rescue you, not watch
more friends die!"

"I know. Thank you." She brushed a few strands out of Rikku's eyes as once she had clucked over
her summoner. Her words, too, recalled Yuna. "Go, now. Please...believe."

"That's not funny, Lulu."

"Not in us. In him." The mage gave a gentle push. "Just a little longer."

Rikku might have stayed to argue, but Lulu summoned a portcullis of lightning that slammed down
on the aeon and arced along its chains. Whining about black mages playing dirty, Rikku fled. She
scrambled back over the wall and tumbled into waist-deep water, sloshing towards the others.

"Watch out!" Elma said, spearing a dark shape swimming below. "Super-sized piranhas down
here."

"Eeee!" Flinching, Rikku tossed a grenade. The ensuing geyser drenched Isaaru and his
companions, but several eel-like fiends floated to the surface and dissolved into pyreflies. The rest
scattered.

"Come on," she said, wading out to the trio. "They won't stay away long."

They shuffled Isaaru to dry ground, fighting his sodden robes. Taking refuge behind the ceramic
ribs of a stripped machina, they hunkered down to watch the struggle taking place on the temple
platform.

"Pacce," Elma said. "Think you can watch Isaaru's back without me?"

"No. I beg your pardon, Commander," Isaaru said, his voice a papery whisper. "Erinyes fights with
talons you cannot parry. Sir Auron and the Lady...may have one advantage."

"If anyone gets killed, I'm holding you responsible," Rikku said, folding her arms.

"Grant them this battle, milady." He smiled, wan but composed. "Never again will Spira have such
a chance."

"Oh, great. That's what Lu said last time."

Meanwhile, the swordsman and mage were rediscovering their old dance. Auron was always fore,
attacking with ruthless overhand blows, the disciplined savagery of Ifrit's hellfire. Lulu glided
behind him, fingertips whispering annihilation. Sometimes the slivers of ice and fire that fell
splintering on Erinyes stung him too, but he barely noticed such love-bites under the aeon's
scourges. These came at lengthening intervals. The aeon must be tiring. Unfortunately, so was
Lulu. She had exhausted her magic too quickly in triplecasts, then burned through all the ethers he
had bought from Gippal two weeks ago on the slimmest of hopes. Now she was forced to fall back
on weaker elemental spells.
"Was I always this feeble?" she said, contemptuous. "No more Ultima, I'm afraid."

"Good." He carved another gash in the aeon's flank. Hadn't he hit that spot earlier? "You're not Sin anymore."

Even for Sin, the battle was surreal. Their foe stood rooted like a quintain on the warrior monks' training grounds, yet they were the ones rocked by unseen attacks. Twice the aeon's mind-rakes felled Lulu. Twice, Auron dodged an unsteady **Thundara** while setting her back on her feet. Black ichor flowed, spattering his face and arms. He struck and struck and ceased to feel any pain. It might be their final battle together, but at least they were free, fighting for vengeance and lost chances, fighting for each other and for old comrades, staking everything on one last tryst of havoc and destruction.

It was not enough. It should have been enough. The damage they had inflicted should have vanquished Sin itself, let alone an aeon. But Erinyes fed on pain like a leech. Auron wanted to warn Lulu away, shield her from what was coming, but he needed her spells to keep the foe off-balance. If they could just beat it down before...

Reality began to tatter and warp. The ground melted. The aeon dragged them down and down, deep into the bloody heart of hell where the pyreflies of lost fiends fetched up at last, a wailing void of anger and despair. There was a second Erinyes down here, inverted, crowned and horned and maned with strips of desiccated flesh. It knotted its fists, roared, shattered its chains, and began to pummel them. Auron parried the first punch and the next, but blows came thick and fast, turning armor to anvil. At last, with a fiery explosion, space flipped like an hourglass. He fell, struck ground and lay in a bloody welter of pain. Lulu landed beside him, limp.

Isaaru's profound healing washed over both of them with the force of **Holy**. Ignoring stabbing protests from half-knitted bones, Auron rose. Elma crumpled a few paces off. The Crusader must have attempted to take his place in a head-on charge to distract the aeon. Moving like a sleepwalker, Isaaru headed towards her.

*Failure.* Auron felt the same sick numbness that had gripped him when he woke to find Kimahri's corpse and a blasted plain. Thrusting it aside, he dropped to one knee next to Lulu and offered his arm. "Can you find the exit?"

"No!" Lulu's eyes blazed as she levered herself up. "We're not letting him get away, Auron. I swear to you—"

"To hell with Yu Yevon," Rikku cried, scurrying towards them. "We can figure out how to beat him later. We're getting you out of here!"

"There are lives at stake, Lulu," Auron said.

Looking at Rikku, Lulu drew a sharp breath. The last of the Lady's inhuman cruelty bled from her face. "Yes. All right. Let's collect your summoner."

"Pacce!" Elma said, reorienting herself after a heady dose of Isaaru's white magic. "Wait!"

The boy had darted towards the monoliths orbiting the field of battle. Auron had barely registered them: grotesque pillars like fossilized excrement suspended above the ground. An apt symbol for Yevon, he noted sourly. Pacce had leapt on the highest block of stone he could reach and was blunting his sword against one monolith as it glided past. It slowed, then moved on. Erinyes gave another shriek, and Pacce toppled off his perch.
"Keep back," Auron commanded, catching Elma's eye. Still woozy from a Life spell, she nodded and tackled Isaaru, hooking her arms around his elbows to pin him. Striding over to Pacce, Auron seized him by the collar and started dragging him towards his brother. "Guard your summoner," he snapped, as soon as they came within range and Pacce's eyes fluttered open.

"Sir! Th-the stone things. Isaaru says we've got to stop them!"

Auron's brow furrowed. "What?"

"They're healing Er—" Isaaru began, but it was his turn to collapse under Erinyes' baleful glare.

"Of course!" Lulu said. "I should have known. Rikku. Disable them."

"Uhhh...okay." The Al Bhed unclipped another grenade. "Don't breathe!"

A cascade of orange, purple, and shocking pink explosions engulfed both monoliths. One by one, their spinning segments ground to a halt like jammed millstones.

"Lulu, now," Auron said.

"Keta," Lulu said. "Let go. We've both lost. Let Yu Yevon lose with us."

Flare's inferno went off like a bomb. Elma whooped and sprinted towards the aeon before the flames had completely sputtered out. Auron followed. The Crusader's blade ignited as she leapt—the woman was a lunatic, running up one of the chains to stab at the eye—while Auron pounded the aeon's trunk. Bones pulverized. Pieces of carbonized flesh and clotted blood came raining down. With a final gurgle, the aeon exploded, leaving behind a pile of fused chains and a blackened ivory pendant etched with a woman's full-length portrait. Elma fell and rolled, snuffing out flames beginning to scorch her uniform. Something black and billowing catapulted up into the sky.

For a moment, Auron feared Yu Yevon might escape, taking refuge in some back pocket of the Farplane that he and Lulu might never find. Then he looked up and realized there were other reasons why they might never find him. Lots of them.

"Augh!" Rikku said. "Incoming!"

The air rocked with sonic booms. Featherless wings and claws came swooping down, covering Yu Yevon's flight. It was not one garuda, but many. At the same time, an army of fiends burst from the sea, surging over the platform from every side. Sinscales, tentacles, water serpents, tusked maelspikes engulfed the party in a heaving mob of fins and teeth and spines. Auron scythed through a scaled hide, reaching Rikku and Lulu just before the mass of foes grew impenetrable.

"Circle," Elma shouted, shoving Isaaru behind her and closing ranks with Pacce. "They're not getting this summoner!" They were cut off, too far away to provide mutual support to Yuna's ex-guardians.

Lulu drew back her hand and gasped, sweat beading on her skin.

"What is it?" Auron said, slashing at blue-flickering wings over her shoulder.

"Yu Yevon."

"Fight. Don't let him back in."
"No, not that." The tremor in her voice was close to panic. "He's sucked me dry. I couldn't light a candle!"

A cluster of spines drove into Auron's arm. He doubled over for a split second, clutching the wound. That was all it took for a leaping sahagin to shove past his guard, wedging itself between him and his friends. The amphibian reared back and spat digestive fluids in his face, delaying him further. For every foe he mowed down, two more pushed him farther away from his friends.

"Lulu!" Rikku's cry was another jolt of pain, but Auron could do nothing more than keep hurling himself at the growing wall of fiends. A tumult of pyreflies swirled around him, tokens of petty victories. He was losing ground. He was losing them. The lack of pyrotechnics was an ominous sign. Either Rikku was out of explosives, or...

Red lines of focused energy stabbed down, taking out two of the maelspikes looming over him. They tipped belly-up and faded away. Before he had had time to process what that meant, there was a whining roar of braking engines, a loud chuff, and a detonation on the temple platform immediately behind him. Heat blistered the back of his arms and legs. The tide of pyreflies streaming past his shoulders told him just how close he had come—to what?

A hefty figure leapt down beside him, lugging a shoulder cannon even larger than Gippal's. "Legendary jackass is right. Rikku, you okay?"

"Wakka!" Rikku hurtled out of the chaos and snuggled against him, back to back, brandishing a knife. "The Celsius?"

"Yeah. Buddy's watching the kids at the Moonflow. Where's Lu?"

"Over here! Come on!"

Wakka's gun was cumbersome for close combat, but useful as a ram. Auron followed them, dispatching the fiends it knocked down. Off to their right, Elma and Pacce had been joined by Juno, forming a triangle of swords around Isaaru. More fiends fell to lances of red light from above. Looking up, Auron saw the flash of Baralai's white hair. He was leaning over the side of Gippal's flyer, picking off fiends with a marksman's precision. Nooj, braced against the opposite railing, was shooting down garuda.

"Orders, boss?" Gippal called, waving through the windshield. "Hope we're not too late to the party!"

"Clear the fiends," Auron said. He turned, searching for Lulu.

There. Wakka's orange crest nodded on the other side of a pack of sinscales. Cutting his way through, Auron found him stooped over Lulu, tenderly applying potions while Rikku danced around him fending off fiends with knife and targe. Baralai's sniping kept her from being overwhelmed, but a few sword-strokes cleared the area.

"You stay back," Wakka growled, not looking up. "This was your boneheaded plan, ya? Trying to get Lu and Rikku killed this time."

"Hey, I came on my own," Rikku said. "They needed someone with brains."

"The plan was mine, Wakka," Lulu said. "And now that you are here..." Opening her eyes, she raised a finger, pointing weakly at the sky. "That is the true face of Yevon. Have you brought Atonement?"
"Lu!" Wakka broke into a teary-eyed grin. "Yeah, she's right here. Glad I didn't have to use her on you this time." He squeezed her hand, then turned to retrieve his ungainly cannon. "That's Yu Yevon? Hard to believe we ever prayed to that thing."

Stepping away from her, he propped the gun against the ground and his shoulder, tilting it up like a mortar. The fiends had thinned enough for Auron to look away. Yu Yevon was no more than a flickering inky blot against into the clouds.

Wakka was muttering to himself. "Tryin' to play cactuar tag, huh? Dodge this." A shaft of blue-green light as thick as his arm shot from the barrel. High above, Yu Yevon swerved right into the beam. There was an eerie black explosion. Ribbons of shadow began to peel away from Yu Yevon's bloated shape. Nooj turned, aiming his smaller energy weapon at the twisting mass as it began to fall, writhing, towards the leaden sea.

"Yeah!" Rikku crowed. "Machina power!"

A sinking heaviness seized their limbs. Air, blood, bones: everything suddenly seemed impossibly heavy, pulling them down. They could not breathe. There was a clang as Juno's heavy blade dropped, a louder clank as Wakka collapsed under the weight of his gun. The flyer's engine strained, whined, and coughed to silence. Gippal gave a shout and wrestled the stalled craft to a messy landing as it tilted and plowed nose-first into the water. Even Rikku tripped and went sprawling.

"Gravija," Lulu whispered.

The weight of his sword dragged Auron to his hands and knees. Crawling towards the mage, he saw the frustration in her eyes, the aching powerlessness of one grown used to godlike powers.

"End this," he said, pressing his palm against hers.

She stiffened. The pyreflies whined loud in his ears as he willed his will to her: his slow simmering anger steeped in two decades of failure and betrayals, his lost faith, his grief for the fallen, his loyalty, his broken oaths, his stubborn sense of justice, his deep-seated compassion veiled under a cynic's mask, his laughter at life's follies (especially his own), a burning love never named that kept him here, here, here— everything that drove him, Entrusted to her like fire leaping from one dead tree to the next—

Her fingers laced with his. He was uncertain whether he heard her voice aloud or in his mind. "For Yuna." Ultima's first salvo exploded outwards. Had the hover not fallen, it would have been ripped apart. "For Chappu. For Tidus. For Kimahri. For Ginnem. For Braska—"

Again and again the sky ripped inside out and outside in, worrying the shapeless mass of Yu Yevon like a chocobo in a fiend's jaws. The two inert pillars of stone were drawn up and into the vortex, spiraling faster and faster until they slammed together with Yu Yevon crushed between them. Brilliant spokes of white light spurted out, speckled by fine black grains like charcoal sifting down. Solid rock began to unravel.

"For you."

With a shattering roar as if all of Spira had been dissolved by the force of her last spell, Sin's nightmare burst. Sky and water, stone and fire flew apart. Light and darkness, sound and scent, every form of sensation ceased.

Slowly, slowly, their senses returned.
Thin and remote, a solitary lightning bolt struck a tower beneath a very ordinary bank of thunderheads.

They lay on solid ground. A light rain was falling through a net of pyreflies drifting as far as the eye could see.

Auron looked down. Lulu's eyes were closed. He bent and kissed her temple with a gruff whisper that he hoped she could hear. "Welcome home."
Chapter Summary

Against all odds, Auron, Isaaru and their allies have not only defeated Sin, but delivered its fayth from Yu Yevon's bonds. And what now? Friends and comrades regroup on Brother's airship.

The lounge of the Celsius was ruddy and warm with laughter, with drink, and with song. Old friends and new had gathered there for the flight back. There was mud on the deck and chocobo down spiraling overhead, souvenirs of the airship's stopover in Moonflow Village. No one begrudged a few feathers in Hypello ale.

"It's not a gun, he says it's a sphere
and the teachings of Yevon are perfectly clear,
so that's what he carries beneath his robes,
and the maester's got nothing beneath his robes,
but a pair of very small spheres."

Nooj leaned back. "At least, that's a rough translation. I'm still not quite fluent in Al Bhed."

"I've heard something like it in the barracks," Lucil said, matching his deadpan.

Baralai and Juno stared as if he had sprouted fluffy yellow wings and pranced along the bar singing the latest show tunes from Luca.

"I'm still not sure I've heard it," said Baralai.

"Sin's toxin," Juno said. "Sometimes it takes a while to wear off."

A tattoo of loud bangs jarred them from their drinks. Something like hailstones was pelting the other side of the cabin door. The ship's captain was also a target, to judge by the muffled screams. Lucil was the first off her barstool, seizing her cane. Baralai reached for his gun.

"It's not weapons fire," Nooj said, one arm slipping behind the back of Juno's chair nonetheless, putting his shoulder between her and the commotion.

"And if it is, I'm off-duty, so do me a favor and stay put," she said, taking a swig from her tankard. "I've already got one maester to worry about."

Baralai rolled his eyes. "Warning: nursemaid with sword," he said to Nooj. "You sure you want her back?"

"Absolutely." The frankness in his tone made Juno sit up straight.

"This Nooj," she said, "is going to take some getting used to."

The door lurched partway open, revealing four giggling children, Brother flat on his back moaning with theatrical pathos, and Cid standing stupefied at the far end of the corridor. A swarm of miniature rubber blitzballs were ricocheting off ceiling, walls and floor. Whooping, Vidina
grabbed up a handful and pitched them as hard as he could at the nearest wall, setting off another pinball frenzy. Some hurtled into the room and caromed off mugs, barstools, and the back of Nooj's head. Baralai's robes took an arc of ale from a tumbling drink.

"Ahuikr!" Cid roared. The door hissed shut. The hubbub began to subside.

Lucil eased back onto her stool. "I confess I had expected Lord Isaaru's Calm to be...calmer."

"Not if Lady Shelinda has anything to say about it," Baralai said. "She was plotting the parade route when we left."

"Honoring whom?" Juno sighed, leaning back against Nooj's arm. "You guys did half the work."

"Does it matter?" he said.

"You misunderstand Shelinda's tactics," Lucil said. "She feared a stampede into the city when we shut down the evacuation camps. We may, however, need to postpone festivities until the High Summoner has recovered." She nodded towards the door at the opposite end of the lounge, through which Isaaru's guardians had carried him earlier. "In any event, you may be sure credit will be given where due."

Nooj's dark eyes twinkled. "And court martials?"

"Possibly," Baralai said. "Or an honorable discharge. I haven't decided yet."

"Baralai!" Juno glared. "You wouldn't."

"Actually, I wondered if you might like to join the Al Bhed for a while."

"Oh." She stilled under Nooj's suddenly intent gaze. "The city's a mess. You need me. So does the Guard."

"We need someone we can trust as a liaison to Cid."

"Business later, Baralai," Lucil admonished. "Juno is right. We're off-duty tonight. Drink."

"In that case," Nooj said, "Has anyone informed Sir Auron that he's out of a job?"

They looked up at the lone figure on the mezzanine above them. His shock of white hair stood out like a torch, tinted by the sunset beyond the windows. He was still wearing his cuirass, and his sword-hilt jutted above his shoulder. He had not moved in over an hour. Already he seemed a relic, a statue for priests to dust and antiquarians to embalm in legends.

Oblivious to their scrutiny, Auron kept vigil. Outside, the last poppy gleams of sunset were swallowing the dwindling ranks of pyreflies spiraling up from Sin's—Yevon's grave. In the distance, a bristling shadow-carpet glittered with flecks of sapphire, emerald and topaz, the fringe of Macalania Forest.

He resisted the urge to look to his right. The room above Isaaru's cabin was off-limits for now. Through the door he could hear Wakka's grumbles, Rikku's banter. How many Trials had he spent like this, waiting on the wrong side of a portal? But they were friends, not fayth. (He was not angry at being shut out. He did not envy. He would not howl at the door like a fiend). Besides, he needed time to collect himself as much as Lulu did. He had come dangerously close to giving her too much of himself with Entrust, that soul-gift of life's fire. He wondered if she had retained a piece of it.
"Sir Auron," Maester Lucil called. "Will you not join us? This celebration is in your honor as well."

Almost he ignored the invitation. However, he could do with a drink. With a passing glower at the door walling him off from the lodestone of his thoughts, he descended the stairs, taking an unoccupied barstool.

"Is there any word?" Baralai said. "I'm not the healer that Isaaru is, but I am temple-trained. If you wish, I could—"

Juno's fingers tightened around her drink.

"Lulu needs rest and those she trusts," Auron said. "But thanks." Turtling behind his collar, he gave his full attention to the tankard Lucil pushed towards him.

"Gippal should be here," Juno said after an expectant pause. "He's going to miss the party."

"He's headed to Luca after he drops off Elma," Baralai said. "I'm sure the celebrations there will exceed Bevelle's."

"Still gunning for a date with the hot Commander," Nooj said, amused. "As I recall, he always wanted to join the Crusaders."

"Did he? Excellent," said Lucil. "I hope your friend has fortitude. Elma's breaking-in of potential officers can be quite strenuous." Her eyes crinkled as Baralai began to cough into his drink.

"Speaking of 'breaking in,'" Juno said. "Sir Auron, I don't know if you're aware, but during the upheavals at the end of your last pilgrimage, the warrior monks collapsed. There was a purge. The black scrolls burned. We had to rebuild the order. I don't suppose you would—"

"No."

"Your training helped you beat Sin. Three times. That's a legacy worth passing on."

"You don't need the past."

"Now look—"

"Now who's on duty?" Baralai said. "I would think Sir Auron has earned a vacation before he considers new career options."

The door swished open, alleviating the need for further diplomacy. Through it they could see Rikku's family dispersing into cabins on either side of the hallway. Cid, carrying the youngest in his arms, was using his knees to herd a sleepy Etta. An argument in Al Bhed had broken out between Vidina and his uncle. Yuna seized her chance and darted into the lounge. A plush shoopuf bumped along the floor behind her, dragged along by its snout. She made a beeline for Auron.

He shook his head when she tugged at his pantsleg. "Not yet."

She tugged again. The adults at the bar began to fall silent, exchanging smiles.

"She's asleep," Auron said.

By this time, Brother had discovered his missing charge. He poked his head into the lounge. "Yuna wants to see," he said, laboring over the foreign tongue, "Yuna wants to see the Woman."

"I'll take her to her parents," Auron said, rising to his feet. "Excuse me." Ignoring Cid's grumbling
from the hallway, he hoisted the girl onto his shoulder and carried her up the stairs.

His sword was in the way. Unclipping the sheath, he dropped it with a clank and propped it against
the wall by the door. Yuna scrambled down and placed her shoopuf doll beside it with solemn
care. The door slid open.

"Wakka stood filling the entryway like a Ronso, arms folded. "Go away. She's not up yet." He
faltered under Auron's unwavering gaze. "Look, Rikku hasn't done her face. You know how mad
Lulu gets if we—"

Auron snorted. "I'll risk it."

Yuna, less patient, uttered a plaintive wail. "Vedran!"

Wakka's eyes softened. "Okay, okay. Sorry. She's a little beat up, Yunie, but don't you worry.
Mum's taking real good care of her."

He retreated into the dim room, illuminated only by twilight's last gleam through the windows.
Lulu lay sleeping like a moth under a cocoon of blankets. Someone had washed away the grime of
battle, cleaned and bandaged her wounds, and dressed her in loose white pajamas. Her hair was
wet, dripping on the floor where it hung over the edge of the bunk. Auron's ripped and bloodied
coat hung from a peg by the door.

Rikku waggled a hairbrush at the visitors as they filed in. "Heya. I wondered how long it would
take you to get in here." She lifted Yuna into her lap, but her wink was directed at Auron.
"Summoner all tucked in?"

"Yes." He halted just inside the door. There was another stool by the bed, certainly not meant for
him.

Wakka collapsed onto it like a falling garuda. Yunie edged forward in her mother's lap, inspecting
the sleeping woman as if peering into a pool. Her outstretched fingers fluttered over sallow bruises,
the red stripe around Lulu's throat, the gauze bandages wrapping a shoulder. She cocked her head
sideways to peer at Lulu's shadowed face. At last, she turned to her father, eyes shining.

He beamed through his exhaustion. "Yeah. It's really her. That's Lu."

Rikku held up the brush, nodding towards the waves of hair hanging in a damp curtain.

Yuna set to work, applying the brush too gently to make much headway. "We're taking her home,
right? She's coming to live with us?"

Wakka cringed. "Uh, Mum and I need to talk about it."

"It's up to Lulu, honey," Rikku said. She smiled at the upwelling gratitude in Wakka's eyes. "Of
course, I'd love for her to stay. She's family. She's your auntie, after all." She nodded towards
Auron. "I'm not sure if Dad wants him underfoot, though."

"Uh..."

"That won't be necessary," Auron said.

"Oh, come on, don't be such a grouch. You too, Wakka. The salvage teams could use backup
against the sand worms when you've got the kids."
"Auron's a grouch," Yuna confided to Lulu. "And he came to find you. And we did too, only Dad made us wait while he went to fetch you and Mum. And—" she broke off, suddenly aware of the adults listening in.

"That's right, Yunie," Wakka said. "Tell Lu and Mum where you were today."

"We went to the Moonflow!" Yuna said. "It was like the sea, but it was all greeny-brown and flat. We saw real moon-lilies. And there's this big animal called a shoopuf, and it's not a fiend, and it's gray and it's got a long nose that rolls up. An old man with a pointy hat says it snuffles teenie-weenies. We crossed three times until Vidina threw a blitzball and they made us get off. And we saw Sir Clasko and the chocobos! Etta and I rode a yellow one, and Mbela and Vidina got a brown one, and Buddy fell in the mud and everyone jumped on him, but I didn't because..." She trailed off. "She can't hear me, can she?"

"She can hear you." It had grown too dark to see Wakka's expression, but there was a misty tenderness in his voice. "Lulu always hears you. Go on."

"Okay." The girl bit her lip. "Um..."

"Buddy fell off a chocobo," Rikku prompted.

"Right. And I didn't play because the flowers started making pyreflies, and I wanted to watch. The pyreflies were singing. Vidina said he couldn't hear them, but I could. They said you fell, and then they got really quiet. We heard the boom when you landed. The old man told me not to cry. Then the whole river glowed, and there were lots more pyreflies, and they started to sing again, and—" She was stroking the same tangle over and over. "I danced with them. I danced on the water, just like in your garden, but it wasn't a dream. I really did it! The water held me up."

Wakka exchanged glances with Rikku, half proud, half rueful. "Aw, man."

"I wish we'd seen it," Rikku said, squeezing the girl's shoulders.

"What did they sing?" Auron asked.

"The song," she said. "The dream song."

"Let's hear it."

She began to chant in a sweet, shy singsong. Everything seemed to stop except the rise and fall of Lulu's blankets in time to the hymn. Rikku rubbed Yuna's back, head cocked to listen. Wakka drew his seat forward with a scrape, curled an arm around Rikku and Yuna, and joined in with clumsy, tone-deaf devotion.

Auron prayed. He did not realize it until he heard his own voice, a croaking parody of a young monk's pure, pious tones. Rikku hid a grin behind one hand. Lulu should have woken up just to tease him.

There were tears trickling down Yuna's cheeks. Strange child. She could so easily reach out and shake the sleeping woman, as was clearly her desire (and Auron half wished she would). Slowly, her voice faded to drowsy mumbles. The brush slipped from her fingers. Wakka helped Rikku stand and with unspoken signals determined that she should carry the child to her room.

Auron stepped aside to let them out. Stirring as she passed him, Yuna reached out and bumped his chest with her toes. He started. Thus he and Kimahri used to exchange shifts—with fists, not feet, of course.
"You get some sleep too, Auron," Rikku said. "You're dead on your feet. Now behave, both of you."

The door closed. Auron moved to Rikku's chair. Wakka's scowl dissolved into a gape when Auron bent, picked up the brush and spread the mage's hair across his knees to finish untangling it.

"Man." Wakka passed a hand over his eyes. "What a weird day. I, uh...You really think Lu's gonna be okay?"

"She's strong."

"Yeah, but...I mean, she's Lulu and all, but still."

Auron said nothing. He kept brushing to keep his hands occupied, lest he raise Wakka's hackles by doing anything else.

"I can hardly believe it, you know?" Wakka said. "We've waited so long. I'm afraid I'm gonna wake up and find it's just a dream. I've spent years trying to think what I'd say to her, if we ever got her back. But what can we say? I mean...with Yuna and Kimahri and all."

"The truth," Auron said. "Or don't. Words can't change the past."

"You'd know all about that, huh?"

Prickly silence fell, leaving only the sound of bristles sliding through wet hair, so different from the rasp of whetstone on steel. Eventually, Wakka let out an explosive breath. "'Scuze me." Rising, he pushed around Auron, tapped a light-strip on the wall to activate it, and disappeared into a closet-sized bathroom opposite the door. He returned shortly with a tumbler of water. Auron ignored the shoving as Wakka sat down again.

Indulging in the pleasantly tactile task, Auron brushed until every last snag had been smoothed away. He started to sweep up her hair and divide it for braiding, then checked himself. Such a demonstration of familiarity with Lulu's routine might penetrate even Wakka's ironclad skull. Instead, Auron set his hands on his knees. Firmly.

"Hey, Auron." Wakka cleared his throat. "I...I guess I got kinda hot with you back in Bikanel, huh?"

Auron shrugged. "You had cause."

"I sure did. But Rikku's told me some things. You've been trying to get Lulu out all this time, haven't you?"

"Yes. I needed help."

"So that's why you showed up." Wakka circled around to his point on the third try. "Look, um...sorry I hit you, man."

"It's all right. Luzzu hit me too."

"He did? Ha. Good for him! How's the old dog doing?"

"He's dead." Auron inclined his head towards Lulu.

"Aw, man." Wakka's face drained. "Seriously. How is she gonna live like this? She'll blame herself, and so will everybody else. All of Spira will hate her."
"I've had some years to get used to that, Wakka," Lulu murmured.

"Lu!" Wakka popped out of his chair, practically knocking Auron over. A hug was impossible while she was lying down, but he rested a hand against her face. "Hey, you." Misreading Auron's blank expression, he strove for eloquence. "You...you look beautiful."

"Thanks." She opened one eye. "Rikku?"

"With the kids." He reached for the tumbler. "You thirsty? Hungry? I'll get you anything."

"Water." She pronounced the word slowly, tasting it. Pliant when Wakka helped her sit up, passive when he held the cup to her lips, she seemed half-asleep until he tilted it too far and spilled water down her front. That roused her with a growl. "Enough! I do not require spoon-feeding or diaper changing." She batted his hand away.

"Nope," he said, grinning. "But you can't scare me anymore, Lu, so you're gonna have to put up with a little pampering. We got a dozen years or so to make up for, ya?"

"I...see."

"My eyes." She flexed her fingers before her face, peering at her nails. Then she reached for a scar on the side of Wakka's neck. "That I can see. Did I—?"

"Yep. You got me pretty good, last visit."

"Oh, Wakka." Her breath hissed between her teeth. "That was too close. I'm sorry. I thought I still had enough control. I didn't want to miss the birth. Mbela, yes?"

"That's right! You really were watching, weren't you?" He smiled. "It's okay. I think Rikku's forgiven you. In fact, she wants you to come home with us."

"Mmm." She finished the drink and raised her chin, looking past his shoulder. "I...I don't know, Wakka. I need time to think."

Auron met her gaze. The thread between them pulled taut like a harpoon line.

"Same old Lu." Wakka took the cup back. "Take your time. But not too long, eh? We missed you."

"I know, Wakka. And I want to hear everything I've missed: you and Rikku, and this Al Bhed life you'd have scoffed at back in the old days. But first, you need rest. You haven't slept since you left Bikanel, have you?"

"I'm not tired! Not a bit."

"Well, I am." She smiled faintly, watching his brows knit at fleeting déjà vu. "Don't worry. I'm not going to vanish during the night."

"But, Lu—"

Leaning forward, she planted a light kiss on his cheek. "Now, Wakka. Please. I will see both of you in the morning, and then you can introduce me to the children. Was Yuna here?"
"Yeah. She wanted to see you real bad, Lu."

"Tomorrow," she assured him. "Give Rikku my love."

"All right. Hit that blue button if you change your mind and want company." He jerked his head at Auron. "You, too. Out."

"A moment," Lulu said. "There's something I need to speak to Sir Auron about."

"Oh." Wakka's expression darkened. "Well, just...go easy on yourself, okay? No point in dwelling on what's done, like you always used to tell me." He took his time in getting up and moving to the door, soaking up the sight of her. "Goodnight, Lu. I...er, I mean, we...I mean, I love you, too, ya?" Red-faced, he shuffled out.

Lulu laughed softly after the door closed. "Oh, Wakka. I do hope Rikku understands you better than you do." A tantalizing silence followed. For a time, she seemed preoccupied by the simple act of breathing. Then she let her hands fall open upon the blankets. "Auron."

He moved with alacrity. The bed creaked as he knelt over her, sweeping an arm behind her back and drawing her close with fingers knotted in hair he had just brushed smooth. Solid, warm, real kisses sheared through the agony of waiting. She held him, caressed him, touching everything: the callouses of his fingers, the knotted muscles of his arms, the new scars on his shoulders, his stubble, his cheekbones, the furrow drilling down his face. She even tugged his earlobes.

"Yes?" he said, breaking off kissing her with an amused rumble.

"Skin!" she said with such triumphant glee he suspected Rikku's medicines were making her giddy. "Ordinary, hairy, human skin. I'd forgotten what it was like."

He palmed her cheek. "How do you feel?"

"Small." Lulu looked down and frowned at wrinkles disappearing below her neckline. "I got old."

"It happens."

"Yes, but why?" She stroked the white tufts over his ears, wistful. "Arrogant of me, I suppose. I thought Sin was immune."

"Thirty-five is hardly old, or so you once told me."

"It feels like centuries. Which, I suppose, it would have been." She let her face fall against his neck, lashes tickling. "You. Here. I can't believe you waited."

His arms tightened around her. "Lulu. You're free. What do you want?"

"Not quite."

"What?"

"Ssh." She raised her head, laying a finger against his frown. "I am myself again. But I, too, have oaths. I want revenge, Auron."

"Ah." He relaxed, even as the pyrefly chorus surged in his ears: now now now is the time dare leap and go... "That may prove difficult. You're not Sin any longer."

"Oh, we'll find a way." Stretching, the mage raised her right arm, fingers curling around empty air
in a way he knew very well. "This time, Auron, you won't have to face her alone."
Chapter Summary

Against all odds, Auron, Isaaru and their allies have not only defeated Sin, but delivered its host from Yu Yevon's bonds. Now they return to Bevelle in triumph on Brother's airship.

Sin was dead, but for those who had passed through the eye of the spiral, old echoes kept returning.

Here, now: a quiet space. An airship cabin. Thrumming walls and floor. Not quite room enough for two on a narrow bunk. Blue-black light spilling through a glass window curving from floor to ceiling, emanating cold. Warm blankets, the warmer flesh beneath. The mage's flickering presence dreaming nearby like a sword in its sheath, her powers slumbering, all polished curves and steel. These things Auron remembered and savored, although he felt the irrevocable gulf between then and now like his missing eye. Still once again he sat meditating on the cold deck beside her bunk, contemplating journey's end and the gleam of one pale shoulder in the first light of dawn.

It seemed to him that Lulu's hair held a faint translucence like the boughs of Macalania trees. Or maybe he was dreaming. He was very tired.

A crash roused him. He must have dropped off after all. The sky and cabin were dusted in a pinkish-gray light. Beside him, Lulu sat bolt upright with a feral hiss and a flash that smelled of burnt feathers. Auron flicked the top blanket out from under her hands and clapped it against the floor, snuffing out sparks.

"My sword fell," he said. "Propped outside."

"Ah." She exhaled.

"Bad dreams?"

"Of course." Defiance drew her voice taut. "But they're my dreams."

He set his hand over hers, then rose and moved to the door. It folded back at his touch. Yuna stood there petrified in her pajamas, clutching her shoopuf doll over her mouth.

"Come." He leaned out past her to check for casualties. The lounge was deserted, but he could hear indistinct grumbles drifting up from adjacent cabins.

"S-s-sorry." She edged around him, skittish as a minnow. Then she spotted the seated figure silhouetted against the sky, barely a figure at all with head bowed and hair draping her in a veil of shadow.

Lulu failed to register the intruder before Yuna had hurtled up and into her lap, thrusting the doll into her hands and flinging small arms around her. Lulu stiffened. The girl nuzzled close, making small noises like Valefor with a favorite summoner. The mage's right hand lifted in self-defense.

"Hold," Auron said.
White fingers hovered, hesitated, settled on the girl's back. Time hitched. He saw the precipitous moment when shock and wonder burst over Lulu like a thunderclap just before she crumpled around Yuna and buried her face in the girl's hair, squishing the doll between them.

"We're on uncle's airship," Yuna said, muffled. "It's not the bad place."

"I know," Lulu said. "I hope I wasn't giving you bad dreams again."

"A little. I-it's okay."

"No, it's not." The mage was rocking her like a moogle. "I apologize."

Sleepy with trust, Yuna curled against her. Lulu continued to rock her, composed now, relaxed. Auron's skin prickled with a powerful pang of...something...not déjà vu, exactly, but thwarted possibilities, the ghost of a wicker cradle.

"You know who I am, right?" Yuna said.

"Of course. My little patch of sun." Lulu breathed out, ruffling the girl's red-gold curls. "Yuna." She cupped the name exactly as she used to address their summoner, a prayer after every other sacred truth had shattered. Auron had expected to hear some tremor of—grief? regret? But no, the child who bore Yuna's name should not be laden with guilt or ghosts. "You were singing to me last night, weren't you? Or did I dream that, too?"

"We did," Yuna said. "You heard! Dad tried too, but he can't sing."

"No." Lulu smiled. "But look at you now. So big! Let me see you properly."

"Hi." Uncurling, Yuna returned her inspection with shy awe. "You're smaller awake."

"I should hope so, Yuna." She raised misted eyes and looked across the room, seeking him out. "Both of you," she mouthed. He shrugged and drifted over.

Yuna touched a scar on Lulu's wrist. "It's all gone? You're not sick anymore?"

"It's gone. Forever, Yuna. Sir Auron helped me break my chains."

"And it won't come back?" She twisted around. "You killed it for real, this time? No screw-ups?"

He nodded, mouth twitching. "No screw-ups."

"Good. I told Vidina he shouldn't have stepped on you." Her forehead wrinkled. "But...no more gardens now, right? No more magic?"

"Well..." Lulu drew out the word in a purr, eyes unfocussing in a way that made Auron scan the room for flammable objects. "I filled your tanks before I left. That's plenty for a year or two, yes? And there's a new underground lake in Old Home's ruins that a clever Al Bhed could tap. As for magic, I can still do...this!" She wiggled her fingers over the back of Yuna's neck. A few splats of water fell.

Yuna squirmed. "Tickles!"

"The Lady never tickles," Lulu said, raising both hands high. Misunderstanding the gesture, Yuna dove towards Auron, squealing, "Safe zone!" Freed of her weight, the toy shoopuf stood up, teetering on its pudgy feet and lifting its trunk in imitation of the mage's spell-casting. There was a quite unnecessary crack of thunder. A fine caressing mist began to rain down, mild as a lullaby,
tinted by sunrise to the color of Yuna's hair. Yuna whooped and released Auron's belt, laughing and reaching for the ceiling. The shoopuf twirled comically. Moisture beaded on windows and walls, capturing the dawn in liquid gems.

"Machina don't like water," Auron said gruffly. He would never admit it, but the damp fabric of Lulu's white tunic was difficult to ignore.

Lulu gave him a coy look. "You looked thirsty."

"Hmph." He frowned for appearance's sake, secretly glad to find her peculiar adolescent streak intact.

"Auron's a grouch," Yuna said, getting up to dance with the shoopuf. "Shoopuf, shoopuf, grumpy umpy shoopuf! Shoopuf, shoopuf, scoop 'em up...aw, wait!" She caught the doll as it toppled over, released from Lulu's spell. "Do it again!"

"Outside." Lulu ruffled her damp curls. "Outside, I'll show you how grouchy he can be when I release a cloudburst on his head...by accident, of course."

The deck pulsed, and there was a subtle tug of deceleration. Tearing his eyes away from the pair, Auron looked out. The flare of a thousand mirrored points impressed even him. "Look."

Below, the forested shores of Macalania were sparkling with fire. The lake holding Sin's last victims was directly below them, safely out of sight. The Bay of Bevelle stretched out before them, bisected by the blackened sticks of the Highbridge jutting out of the water. Far away in the haze, the mountain-city of St. Bevelle rose up, a child's toy enameled in blue and scarlet. From this distance, the damaged tower and chipped skyline were invisible, but every eastern-facing window flashed as the ship turned.

"Wow," Yuna said.

"The city of St. Bevelle," Lulu said, falling back into travelogue so easily that Auron smirked. "Seat of the four maesters of Yevon. Sir Auron trained there among the warrior monks, and my first Yuna was raised there."

"Oh-h. But she was born in Bikanel, right?"

"I believe so."

"Lady Yuna." The girl spoke in a hushed voice. "I remember your dream-pictures of her. She helped you get ready in the morning, right? You liked that." Settling onto the pillow behind her, she combed Lulu's long mane and divided off a section with an air of solemn ritual. Her fingers twinkled through the black as she began to braid. The mage's lashes glistened.

Outside the window, Bevelle began to tilt, scrolling off to the left as the Celsius turned towards it. Sliding into view was a frozen headland. Beyond it lay the open ocean, steel-leafed with a broad avenue of white-hot gold leading to the sun peeping over the horizon.

It was a dawn. Sin had bathed in many of them, its hard hide unlovely in the sun's blaze. But Auron had not needed his brief, dangerous merging with the Lady, when Yu Yevon had tried to absorb him, to know that Sin was blind. It sensed only things outside its shell: densities, surfaces, energies, soul-sparks, but never light. Lulu shrank and shaded her eyes but would not look away.

"We'll get you some goggles," Yuna said. "Then you can be an Al Bhed!"
"That...that would be lovely."

"Mm-hm!" Yuna poked Auron. "Hey! You help too."

Auron looked at the mass of hair still blanketing Lulu's shoulders. Rules of engagement echoed in his mind: never on duty, never where others might see, never when someone might burst in and — Discretion be damned. It was not as if Wakka could kill him, and there was no longer an observant summoner who might balk at parting dear friends when it came time to send. Shucking his gauntlet, he plunged his hands into black waves. Lulu arched her back, leaning against his fingers as they moved across her scalp and down. The view from above was... gratifying.

Yuna beamed up at him. "Race you!"

"You win."

Lulu chuckled, the louder for Yuna's pleased giggles.

"So," Yuna said. "You're coming home with us, right? Back to Bikanel?"

"Hmm," Lulu said. "I should like to. But there are a few things Sir Auron and I must do."

"Like what?"

"Celebrate, for one." Lulu pointed towards the city. "When Sin falls, Yevon holds a festival to commemorate the new Calm. There will be parades and fireworks—"

Auron snorted.

"—and I hope your parents will let you stay for them. Would you like that?"

"Fireworks?" Yuna beamed. "Mum makes fireworks in the kitchen!"

"Bigger fireworks. Much bigger."

"Ooo! Yes, please." Yuna's face fell. "But after that, you're going away? Where to?"

Auron filled in when the mage hesitated. "Mount Gagazet. To check on the Ronso."

Lulu's voice softened. "Yes. To visit Sir Auron's family."

"Auron has a family?" Yuna looked from one to the other. "But I thought—"

"As you and I are family, Yuna."

"Oh, right. The Ronso!" She reached the end of the plait, licked the tip and made a neat knot before starting on the next. "And after that?"

"We shall see. Sir Auron and I are still guardians, Yuna."

"Awww." Her pout dissolved at a thought. "Hey! Since Sin's dead, I can be a summoner now, right? And would you be my guardians? Sir Auron, too?"

Lulu could not see the eyebrow Auron arched in her direction. "I'm sorry, Yuna. Even if your parents would allow it, there's no aeons left. The fayth asked me to free them. They've gone to the Farplane."
"All of them?" Yuna pressed. "But I wanted to meet them!"

Except Shiva, Auron thought, but did not say it. How many times now had Lulu undertaken one pilgrimage to head off another? "Summon dreams from the living," he said, "not the dead."

"But—"

"Sir Auron is right," Lulu said. "You know what it is to be a fayth, Yuna. Love them enough to let them go."

Yuna's face clouded over. The floor pitched, cutting off another protest. The bulkheads rattled as the ship descended, buffeted by warmer air from the bay. At first Auron thought the noise was due only to turbulence, but the racket grew louder as the ship steadied. Someone was hammering on the door.

"Daaa-aaad!" Yuna clapped her hands over her ears.

"Enter," Lulu called. "Wakka, I hear these Al Bhed have a magical device called a doorbell."

"Morning, Lu!" Wakka came in. "Hey, Yunie! Thought I'd find you up here."

"We're doing Lulu's hair!" she said, waving the fluffy end of a braid. "And look! Lulu made it rain!" Hopping down, she skated across the wet floor, crashing into his legs. "Wheee!"

"That's great!" he said, catching her. "But now you gotta hold on tight. We're landing. Grab a quick bite in Bevelle, then we'll go home. Ready for some real food, Lu?"

"I...think so?" She gave a rueful laugh. "I suppose I should be famished."

"But the fireworks!" Yuna wrapped around Wakka's leg, pleading. "We have to stay in Bevelle with Lulu!"

"Fireworks?" Wakka gave the mage an anxious look, then clapped his forehead. "Oh, the Calm Festival. I forgot. Well, uh..." Auron suspected that the mage's state of dress was affecting the man's vocal chords. Auron finished off a braid and moved to retrieve his coat while Wakka fumbled. "You wanna stay, Lu? In Bevelle?"

"Only for a little while." Lulu shrugged into the coat with more dignity than the tattered garment deserved. "It's not that I don't want to see your home, Wakka. I just..."

"...need some time to think, ya?" He smiled. "It's okay, Lu. You do what you need. Yeah, this'll work. Elder Cid has to run straight back to Baaj, but Rikku and I can stick around and bum a ride with Gippal when he comes back. The kids, too," he said, seeing Yuna's stricken expression. "Then we'll see how you're feeling."

"Isaaru," Auron said. "Is he awake?"

"Uhhhh..." Wakka's brow furrowed. "Hey, what's he still doin' in here, anyway?"

"Wakka," Lulu prodded. "The summoner. He was injured, wasn't he?"

"Oh, right." Wakka shook his head. "Haven't seen him since we came aboard. Guess he's still in his cabin."

"Go on," Lulu said. "We'll catch up later."
Auron gave her a blank look.

She smiled up at him, sad yet approving. "One of us, at least, should see a summoner home."
Emerging into a whirligig of tumbling children, Auron was glad that Lulu remained in her cabin's sanctuary. The seating area in the mezzanine was crammed with people. Cid, Baralai and Lucil had their heads together in a flurry of last-minute negotiations. Rikku had claimed the opposite sofa, bent over Auron's sword with a polishing cloth. The children were everywhere, squealing with delight when a pocket of turbulence parted them from the floor.

One pillar of quiet kept watch over the chaos from the corner by Lulu's cabin. "So who's guarding Sin?" Juno said as Auron stepped out.

"Sin's dead." He turned his back on her, but the staircase was blocked by a barrier of sofa cushions and stuffed animals.

"—Five years," Baralai was saying, oblivious to the ship's motion or rollicking children. "We'll wave docking fees for five years. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Lucil said. Her crisp battlefield cadences had an odd squeak. The speed at which they were skimming over the harbor seemed not to agree with her.

"Whoa!" Vidina said, mashing his face against the glass. "Look at that bridge! The steel's totally melted. Way to go, Pop-pops!"

"Get down, boy," Cid growled. "Now see here, Baralai—"

"Consider, Elder Cid," Baralai said. "The lake is composed of frozen pyrefly slurry. You could refuel your ships right there."

"Provided that," Lucil said, "Macalania Temple is left undisturbed, and Lady Shelinda concurs."

"It was an accident," the younger children recited in a sing-song, apparently practicing a new word. "Acci, acci, accident!"

"Kids," Rikku said, "Settle down, okay? Pop-pops is working."

"Deal," Cid said. "I'm down by one airship, mind, so don't expect a weekly ferry service. And Gippal may want compensation."

"Hey, Auron!" Rikku pushed up her goggles. "You dropped something. What's rule number three, kids?"

"Don't leave toys out where Dad can trip over 'em!" Vidina crowed, jamming one of the mini-blitzballs from last night's romp behind the sofa. "Where's Yunie?"

"With Lulu," Auron said, coming forward to reclaim his weapon. He spun the hilt as he lifted it,
letting sunlight play across the dark metal. All the nicks and scratches from the pilgrimage had vanished. "Thanks," he said, and meant it.

Cid grumbled something about too many damned passengers. Then the roar of the engines grew too loud for speech. His Yevon colleagues fell silent, gripping their armrests as the outer ramparts of the first circle whipped past the window. Auron planted his feet and braced. Rikku knelt and threw her arms around Etta and Mabela. Air brakes shrieked. The ship slowed and swung to a stop like a cart swaying in its traces. The maesters exchanged shaky smiles.

"Airships may not be blasphemy, but I shall stick to chocobos," Lucil said.

Nooj's voice filtered over the intercom. "Ladies and gentlemen, the Plaza of St. Bevelle. Our pilot cordially requests that all members of Yevon disembark. I'll see you below."

"We'd better," Juno said.

"Well, here we are!" Rikku said, hopping to her feet and snagging the two youngest as they started towards the stairs. "Al Bhed, sit tight. Mum'll be right back. Vidina, keep 'em out of trouble. Yevon folks, follow me. You guys need to come up with a new name for yourselves. How about Ogie Fogeys?"

"Sir Auron," Lucil said. "Does Lord Isaaru require assistance?"

"Probably not." Wading through the barricade of soft toys, he headed downstairs.

"Do send word, if he should need a healer," Lucil said, taking Cid's proffered arm with a gracious nod.

"Make sure you take Lady Whoosit when you leave," Cid added in a loud voice. "Yevon made her. Let them deal with her. I reckon Maester Baralai here's not too namby-pamby to see justice done for mass murder, eh?"

"Pops!" Rikku said.

"There will surely be an inquiry—"

The cabin door closed on Baralai's reply. Auron counted to ten, gritting his teeth as the pyreflies in his veins jangled to life. *Yevon eats his own, picks Zanarkand's bones, and Bevelle's vultures stoop for the kill. (Shut up.)* Not that he had expected a hero's welcome for Lulu anywhere in Spira. Sin's sins were hers, now, and her face was either unknown or notorious. But Cid had been Shuyin's victim. He should understand what it meant to have one's will violated.

"Sir?" Pacce scrambled up from the floor with one greave flapping. "Good morning, sir!"

Acknowledging his salute with a grunt, Auron addressed the gray-faced man gripping the edge of his bunk. "Isaaru?"

"Here." Isaaru looked like *Cura* stretched over a ruptured aorta, but his compassionate smile had returned. "Sir Auron? I was not certain we would see you again."

"We've reached Bevelle," Auron said. "Can you walk?"

"I—I am unsure. Flying seems to have robbed me of both legs and stomach." Isaaru gave a weak chuckle. "I beg your pardon. The loss of my aeons...but no matter. What of the Lady?"
"Erinyes, too?" Auron pressed. "Seymour's mother?"

Isaaru closed his eyes. "Gone," he said finally. "Torn from me, but for a few bloody dregs. I ought to journey to Baaj and send her."

"Later. See Zuke when we land." He turned to Pacce. "Break camp."

"Sir!" The boy hastened to finish suiting up and collecting their scant belongings.

"Come, friend," Isaaru said, lowering his voice as Pacce clattered about. "We shared a pilgrimage, you and I, although our ends differed. What of yours? Have you found what you sought?" His eyes flicked to the bone token bound to Auron's sword.

"Lulu is free," Auron said. "I should thank you."

"For my part, I am glad...or rather, grateful. A bittersweet victory for both of us, no? Ladu Yuna is gone, and Maroda is gone, and my heart is a hollow vessel where the Hymn of the Fayth echoes like surf in an abandoned shell. Yet I would thank your friend, were it not too painful a reminder. Without her sacrifice, Maroda would be worse than dead, with Pacce tasked to free him. I shall not forget, Sir Auron."

"Don't forget you're alive," Auron said. He held out a hand. "Up."

Auron himself girded Isaaru in his summoner's robes for the first and last time, feeling time slip as he tugged the stole straight. A memory came to him: Braska's soothing tones barely penetrating the proud dread of a young guardian preparing his summoner for departure. He could recall the very scent of the fresh-dyed fabric, its rustling layers, Braska's light laughter when he looked in a mirror and declared himself some distant cousin of an ochu. Auron remembered stepping out into the chill fog during dawn services, listening to the Hymn drifting down from the heights of the Tower. Bevelle. How many years ago had he quit its gates with Jecht grousing over the lack of fireworks? Auron's guardian duties would begin and end there.

"Sir Auron? Maroda was right about you, wasn't he?" Pacce said. "You've been looking for her this whole time. Why the big secret?"

"A summoner's duty is to destroy Sin, not save it."

"Maroda would have obstructed Sir Auron's quest," Isaaru said, grave and sad. "Yet I wish you could have trusted me sooner, my friend. I learned from Lord Braska and Lady Yuna that a true summoner must follow heart's guidance, even when it leads beyond Yevon's grace. Still...forgive me, Sir Auron, but I perceive that your own journey is not yet over. May I...?"

"No," Auron said. Noting Isaaru's concerned look, he added, "Not yet."

"Huh?" Pacce said. "What else is there?"

"To see a summoner to the end of his pilgrimage. Come." Auron's gruff tone was almost fond. "I expect you'll be wanting to make a speech."

They emerged to find Lulu descending the stairs with Yuna leading, Wakka shadowing. Only Lulu could have translated gauze bandages, Al Bhed pajamas and Auron's battle-stained coat into formal
attire, but she carried herself with her customary regal poise. Pacce drew himself up in a jerky salute.

Isaaru offered Yevon's prayer without a trace of mockery. "Lady Guardian."

"High Summoner." She inclined her head. "Congratulations."

Isaaru started: at the title, perhaps, or at the irony that Sin should be first to call him that. "Thank you, Lady, but you know as well as I that summoning had little to do with it."

Yuna listened with eyes wide and her shoopuf clutched over her heart. Wakka cleared his throat and sank to one knee, drawing her aside with a conspiratorial whisper. "Hey, Yunie. Get your things, but don't tell the others. I've got to talk to Mum."

"Oh!" The girl giggled, scampered around him and Lulu twice, and darted off, ignoring her siblings hooting to her from a castle of sofa cushions going up around the barstools.

Lulu watched the girl go with a love too raw lighting up her face. It was the first sign of change in her Auron recognized, although it was more a symptom of atrophy: her reserved self-control had been compromised for over a decade. To Isaaru, she said, "You played your part well enough to deceive my jailor. Nor do I think Sir Auron arranged my welcoming committee. An alliance of forces: that was your doing."

Isaaru bowed his head. "Your conveyance to Bikanel was timely."

"That machina...where in Spira did you find it?"

"Bevelle, I'm afraid," Isaaru said. "Another weapon from the Machina War, hidden beneath our feet all this time."

"All this time?" Her smile withered, and her right hand curled into a fist. Auron half expected to see sparks ripple down her braids.

Wakka paused in the act of getting to his feet. "Uh...Lu?"

"Of course," she said, voice brittle. "Sin was too convenient to destroy." Her features smoothed over so quickly that Isaaru and Wakka stood blinking at one another as if uncertain what had just happened. She shifted her attention to the youth at Isaaru's side. "It's Sir Pacce, isn't it?"

"Ma'am!" His skin glowed pink under his helm. "Pleased to meet you!"

"We've met several times now," she said gently, "and no, that was no dream. You have ridden Sin's wings from Djose Shore to Western Isle. This also was no dream: once upon a time, I caught a dying man who was very proud of you. That love sang clear in the pyreflies, through his sorrow."

"Maroda?" The color drained from his face. "You...you caught him?"

Isaaru's hand crumpled over his heart.

"As Djose's aeon was of lightning, so Sin was of death. It was my unhappy duty to bridge the long road between Spira and the Farplane. It is little comfort, but I can assure you that your brother made the journey in peace." She ignored the unease radiating from Wakka as he listened.

"Oh." Pacce swallowed.

The main doors swished open. Cid stumped in, trailed by Rikku. "Well? What're you lot still doing
here?"

Wakka hurried over to Rikku, whispering in her ear.

"This is goodbye," Isaaru said, smiling. "Elder Cid, thank you for all your help. Will you not stay for the festival? This victory is yours as much as ours."

"Sorry, got to get to Baaj and supervise repairs, or Rin's liable to turn Home into a theme park. But I owe you for Shuyin. And, uh..." He thrust out a hand. "I guess that summoner gig wasn't a total waste of time, eh? Gotta hand it to you for takin' care of Sin."

Isaaru grasped it warmly. "As was my duty."

"Hmph." Cid shook his head. "Look, I'll have my hands full for a while putting Home back together, but I'll send what techs I can spare to help with Bevelle's rebuild. And Gippal's adding Bevelle to his regular circuit. If you need a ride, ask Baralai to arrange a pickup."

"Thank you. I will."

Wakka had finished his mumbled petition. "Happy Festival Fireworks, you mean?" Rikku said aloud, eyes twinkling. "After Home just got blown up? Now where have I heard that before?"

"Uhhh." Wakka blushed. "Well, I mean, if you'd rather—"

"Dope." She pecked his cheek. "Hey, kids, how'd you like to stay in Bevelle for a holiday? There's gonna be music and dancing and a really big party, and maybe we can catch some blitzball!"

Two of the cushions fell outwards as Vidina jumped up. "Blitzball? Awesome! Will Dad play?"

"Femm drana pa ice cream?"

"Are there chocobos in Bebel?"

Cid's strained courtesy crumbled. "You are not taking my grandchildren on vacation in Saint Bloody Yevonville!" He jabbed a finger at Lulu. "And she is not allowed in Al Bhed territory, you hear?"

Wakka's hands balled into fists. "Excuse me?"

"Get your things, kids!" Rikku said, stepping between husband and father. "Clothes, shoes, and you can have one toy each. Wakka, help them." She waved airily to Isaaru as her father screwed up his face for an explosion. "Whatcha gonna do, Pops, banish me like Auntie Anna if I don't fall in line?"

Cid's teeth clamped shut on what he was going to say, but his face was purple.

"Rikku, there's no need," Lulu said.

"Oh, but it's fun," she said. "Catch you guys later."

They crept out as the argument escalated into an Al Bhed shouting match, enlivened by Etta and Mbela imitating Cid's mannerisms in exaggerated, hand-waving mime.
Chaos followed them all the way to Yuna's Cloister. Priests and nuns converged on Isaaru in a joyous tide, eager to be blessed by the High Summoner. Warrior monks mobbed Sir Auron as well, begging to shake his hand. Some dared to speculate on Lord Braska's or Lady Yuna's pride in his latest exploits. He fielded the adulation with fraying patience. As they reached the garden, Lulu melted away. Trapped by the crush, Auron finally spotted her beside the fountain, gazing up at the glass and metal statue of Yuna turning on toe-tip above the central jet.

She had not escaped notice, however. An acolyte was charging towards her across the lawn. "You!? But you're not real! I've atoned for my sins, I— I— Lady, let me go! I renounce you! I—"

He made Yevon's sign in a warding gesture.

"Your sins are your own, Treno, as is your will," Lulu said. "But there is no shame in dreams."

"No shame? I followed you. I loved you. I thought you were merciful. But you killed my son, my wife!"

Heads were beginning to turn. Isaaru touched Auron's elbow and mouthed, Go. By the time he had broken free of the scrum, a second priest was converging on Lulu. Auron nearly collided with the man, intending to throw both of them into the fountain if necessary to cover Lulu's escape. He stopped short at the sight of Zuke's bald head rising above his collar.

"Now, what's the trouble, my son? Why— well, well, there's a face I haven't seen in a while! The Lady? Gracious, no, this lady is one of my oldest students, a former guardian of mine, as a matter of fact. Nothing more extraordinary than a black mage with a quick temper, so I'd advise you to leave her alone. If you'll excuse us."

Zuke curled a solicitous arm around Lulu and steered her towards a side-door under the main archway. Auron shoved past Sin's devotee and followed them. Just inside, Zuke turned into an office and nearly closed the door in Auron's face. Zuke's jovial smile evaporated.

"Sir Auron?" He waved him in. "Come, come. I suppose I should not be surprised to see you here, since I've apparently gone mad. Or perhaps young Treno is right, and this is all a dream sent by Sin to test a priest's convictions." Eyes watering, he drew his chair out from his desk and gestured for Lulu to sit. "Either way, I'm delighted to see you, my dear."

She sat down like a sleepwalker. Auron hovered at her shoulder, fuming. This looked too much like an interrogation.

"Father," she said. "It's not Sin's toxin, I promise you."

"Then what?" Zuke's query held no hint of challenge, only bewilderment. "I don't believe half the stories I hear, but these dreams, now, they aren't something Bevelle's crafted to keep the people calm. Even I have dreamed of you, thankfully as yourself and not as...some pagan goddess, shall we say."

"I'm sorry. It's a long story."

"And I'm rather short on time, seeing as Isaaru's going to stand there until he gets sunstroke. I must deliver him to the maesters, who await him in the refectory. Well." Zuke puffed out his cheeks. "Whatever you've been up to, please allow me to undo some of the wear and tear?"

Lulu bowed her head. "Please." Her hands still gripped the coat over the spot where Auron's sword had gone in, although Phoenix Down and Al Bhed potions had knitted flesh and bone together. Zuke bent, placing his fingertips across the red line ringing her throat and the scars on her crossed
wrist. Auron felt the edge of the spell: a slow, uplifting rush of *Cura* flooding the body with tingling warmth. Lulu relaxed. "Thank you, Father," she said. "Would you teach me that, sometime?"


"Perhaps I've finally had my fill of destroying things."

The old man stiffened, hands moving in Yevon's sign. "Is... is there anything else I can do for you, my friends?"

"Clothing and lodgings. A room for two, if possible." Noting Zuke's brows making another bid for the ceiling, she added, "Sir Auron seems to think I need a guardian."

"A meal," Auron said. "In private."

"Hm. Yes, it might be best for you to avoid the feast." Zuke composed himself. "Very well. I'll have something brought to you while we prepare quarters. In the meantime, rest here, enjoy the garden, and pray, if you still can. Later, I trust, we can have a long talk."
War in Abeyance

Chapter Summary

Our Story So Far: Sin is defeated, Yu Yevon destroyed, and Yuna's old guardians assemble in the city of St. Bevelle for the Calm Festival.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's your fireworks, Jecht.

The display was excessive. It appeared that Bevelle's brand-new stadium was intent on expending a season's worth of fireworks in a single night. Gaudy team colors erupted amidst Yevon's greens, whites and golds. Fountains and streamers leapt from walls and towers at every level of the city, from harbor's fringe to the ruined Plaza of St. Bevelle. They were far more colorful than those which had inaugurated Braska's Calm. Auron remembered lying in the grass outside the city's gates, rage seeping away with his blood as Rin's makeshift bindings gave out, halved vision fixed on cold white fire overhead. Perhaps Yevon had been trying to reconsecrate its heretic summoner with white's purity.

A caress on his forearm recalled him to the present. Success was so alien that it was hard for him to remain focused on it. He needed focus now more than ever. More, he needed...this.

Surrounded by old friends, Auron stood on the parapet spanning Yuna's Cloister along the city's ramparts. The area was off-limits for safety reasons, but that had not stopped the Al Bhed from seizing a front-row view. The children shrieked with delight as a fan of fireworks splashed along the length of the ruined Highbridge like a dragon darting past in a sweeping scythe.

His hand rested on the small of Lulu's back, veiled by her braids. His sword's weight rested comfortably against his spine. Before them, the mountain-city's dizzying heights dropped away to the bay a thousand feet below. A constant barrage of fireworks lofted weightlessly to eye level with soft chuffs, hung suspended on their own potentialities, then exploded in noisy, exuberant death-throes. Now and then a spattering of warm soot dusted the watchers' cheeks or tickled their nostrils with the scent of gunpowder. The smoke was slowly turning to fog in the moist air, shrouding the higher explosions in a cocoon that flickered like drunken glow-worms. While the cannoneers were reloading, sounds of revelry skirled up from the streets below: horns and songs and spirit bells, drums and harps and raucous voices. For tonight, at least, Bevelle was the city that never slept.

Lulu watched the celebration with the detached air of an ascetic monk at a wedding, an appraising smile on her lips. The children had accepted her as an Al Bhed when she began to add her own pyrotechnics to the proceedings.

"Dad!" Vidina cried. "Throw another one!"

"Just a sec," said Rikku. "Etta, put your goggles back on, or you're going inside." Rummaging in her satchel, she passed a tightly-packed paper sphere to Wakka. He grinned at her, reared back and lobbed a high pass. Pink starbursts and orange streamers darted in every direction, screaming only slightly more loudly than the children.
Lulu, smiling indulgently at the two little girls tugging her skirts, leaned out and added ball lightning to the mix.

"Super zap!" Etta yelled. "Yaah!"

"And that's the last," she said above the din.

"Awww," Yuna said. "Do a purple one!"

"I'm sorry, dear. I'm a little tired."

Another volley of official fireworks detonated just over their heads, reverberating off all the cloister's stained-glass windows with a tremendous bang. The children covered their ears and howled gleefully at the top of their lungs.

"The Calm," Lulu observed, "is best celebrated with bedlam."

"The Ronso were quieter," Auron said.

"So, I wonder how long it will take everyone to forget Isaaru's speech?" She nodded towards the city below.

"Ten years."

"As much as that? Auron, you're an incurable romantic."

"You wanted to believe him, too."

The celebrations had been an exhausting all-day affair, with an afternoon parade culminating at Bevelle Stadium. There Isaaru had delivered his speech, flanked by an unprecedented group of Spirans in the maesters' box.

"Friends, Sin is dead."

If he had ended it there amidst thunderous cheers and applause, Auron would've thought it sufficient. But this was Isaaru. "With the Al Bhed's aid, Sin has been destroyed once and for all. Its unwilling fayth has been freed from bondage. I swear to you now, Sin will never again return to trouble Spira. This Calm will be Eternal." The ovation that followed this announcement was deafening. Nearly lost in the tumult was a buzz of conversation as neighbor turned to neighbor. Sin's fayth? What did he mean? Was Sin an aeon? Had the High Summoner used Al Bhed machina? Lord Braska had left as a heretic; had Isaaru returned as one?

"For a thousand years, the Church of Yevon has guided you with wise teachings which warned against strife, theft and greed. Sin comes, we said, from your sins. And so we taught you to be good out of fear. Now that fear is ended. But it was never true." The maesters behind Isaaru shifted uneasily, especially Shelinda, who covered her mouth with her hands. Lucil and Baralai exchanged rueful glances. These minor disturbances were nothing compared to the murmurs of indignation rippling through the spectators.

Isaaru went on, serene and unshakeable. "People of Spira, I tell you now, Sin arose from hate. Sin was never a punishment for our transgressions. It was Zanarkand's revenge: one final, awful aeon
left behind to spite its destroyers. And now, without fear of Sin, I fear we may fall away from the teachings of Yevon, thinking that nothing can harm us.

"We may be tempted. We shall be tempted. But I say to you, my friends: we are not children, cowed by nuns' tales into proper behavior lest fiends carry us away in the night. Let us outgrow the temple nursery and be captains of our own words and deeds. Cast off guilt and atonement. Choose virtue not out of fear, but out of love.

"Remember the love of the High Summoners who sacrificed themselves for us. Remember the guardians who gave their lives for their summoners." He turned, indicating Auron, Pacce and Lulu with a sweep of his arm. Those nearest the podium saw his eyes glistening as he smiled towards his surviving brother. "Honor the unnumbered dead, Crusaders and warrior monks, Ronso and Al Bhed, even the Guado, all those who have fallen in battle against Sin." This time he gestured to his left, where Nooj now stood beside Wakka, Rikku, and their children, the two youngest riding on their shoulders while Vidina and Yuna fidgeted against their legs. "Remember Lady Yuna, blessed daughter of Yevon and Al Bhed, whose guidance and guardians led me to salvation that eluded Yevon's church for a thousand years.

"Keep well their gifts. Tell their stories. Make Spira a land of virtue not out of fear, but out of love. For if you do not, Spira will fall back into its petty ways, and war will return and breed new Sins. Nevertheless, I do not counsel fear, only hope. Unite with all the people of Spira, for together we are stronger than any Sin. Build the Spira that countless Spirans died to save."

A stunned silence followed, broken by a few crying children. Then a few tentative claps echoed around the stadium, then a few more. Bit by bit a chorus of scattered cheers built to a frenzied roar that must have been audible all the way to the Calm Lands. Auron felt Lulu's nails biting his skin. "Oh, Auron," she said. "He's a good man. A poor summoner, but a good man."

"You delivered a message," Auron said. "He heard it."

"Speaking of incurably romantic," Lulu said, "It's getting late." Stepping away and lifting Mbela for a quick hug, she raised her voice. "Wakka? Rikku? I'm turning in. I'll see you at breakfast, yes?"

Wakka looked up from ministering to Vidina, who had gotten a whiff of funguar pollen from Rikku's last mix. "Sure thing, Lu. Need company back to your room?"

"Absolutely not." Haughty pride almost masked her amusement. "Goodnight, Wakka."

Auron did not watch her go, but he heard her "sweet dreams" to Yuna when she stooped to kiss the girl goodnight. Time blurred as he stayed to watch the show's finale, an obscure gift of memory for Jecht that he doubted he would be able to deliver. While the final embers were still falling, he slipped away. Rikku gave him a covert thumbs-up. Hmph was the only fitting reply.

Each step came faster than the one before, as if Sin's gravitational pull were still drawing him forward. Passageways around two sides of the Cloister led him to a small round tower in an out-of-the-way corner. It was one more irony that its door was emblazoned with Yevon's crest. Entering, Auron barred it behind him, crossed the antechamber with its armor stand and cot meant for a guardian's use, and bounded up the spiral staircase two at a time.
In the room above, Lulu sat brushing her hair by candlelight. Auron halted, absorbing the ordinary sight. Deprived of beads, earrings, cosmetics, she was truly herself again, yet she looked like an unfinished statue. The white novitiate's gown hid her curves and accentuated her pallor. But the attention to toilette was so typically Lulu that it grounded the reality he was still getting used to: the mage back in the world of the living.

Almost.

Was it his imagination, or was she brushing away stray pyreflies? Her hand kept stroking, hypnotic, as if taking refuge in routine. Ignoring the fiendish whispers urging him to abandon patience for lust, he executed his own routine with no more haste than usual. Off went the sword and back-sheath, propped within reach of the bed opposite the window where she was sitting. Off went his boots and collar, glove and vambrace, belt and jug, piled under a small table where his coat lay folded. He started to shed his cuirass, then changed his mind and approached with panoply in place. Stooping, he gathered her left hand from the windowsill and lifted it to his lips. Candlelight lapped her forearm with gold, an image that had sometimes warmed him during Gagazet's frigid nights.

Lulu raised haggard eyes that softened for him, a transformation that never failed to astonish him. His mellow mood evaporated at the sight of her too-brave smile. The sheen on her cheeks was more than that of candlelight. She placed the brush on the sill and her arms around his waist, resting her cheek against the armor over his stomach. That vulnerable gesture disturbed him more than tears. What had happened since she left his side? A ghost-memory came to him, that formula she had sometimes used to deflect Tidus, expressing a fundamental truth of her being: *I'm sorry. I need to be alone for a while. I need to think.* She had not been alone with her own thoughts in thirteen years.

"Lulu." He reached down to thumb the wet from her cheeks. "It's all right." It was most certainly not, but he trusted her to decipher inadequate words.

"But you never—"

"You're not me." He shrugged. "And for what it's worth, I did. On Yuna's doorstep, waiting for Braska and Jecht."

He felt the slump in her shoulders when pride yielded. She wept for a long time. Profoundly wrench'd, he let the rains fall, wooden where a lover would have...what? He did not know. Monk's vows and death's door and all the long and weary steps beyond it had not taught him how to comfort another soul, except for one peevish boy. He did not think dangling Lulu upside-down by her ankles and waiting for the squall to pass was in any way appropriate. So he stood still. Only his hand kept moving, wiping away her tears.

When at last they ceased, her voice was only a little unsteady. "We've traveled a long way, haven't we?"

"Everywhere but one," he said. "And three pilgrimages apiece."

"I suppose that's some kind of record." She squeezed her eyes shut again, more tears seeping out. "Damn it."

"Lulu. Tell me."

"Bevelle's answer to Sin, that overgrown machina. No one would have been killed on pilgrimage, if they'd used it sooner." Her arms tightened around him. "No one."
"No one knew it was there, Lulu."

"Didn't they? Someone's kept it in working order. To stifle the Al Bhed, maybe, if the heathens ever became too troublesome. Or maybe Bevelle's already used it. Have you seen what's left of their original Home?" Her breath hissed like the ocean rolling back before a tsunami. "I swear, if I still had my powers, I'd raze this city down to the sea."

"If the maesters had discovered it sooner, Seymour would've used it to seize power. Or Kinoc would have. Let it go, Lulu. You know better than this." His voice sharpened. "And you sound like Sin."

Her arms dropped to her sides. He felt the prickle of static on armor's edges. Two of the three candles in wall-sconces guttered out. He braced himself stoically. But the lightning never fell, and the electricity in the air bled away. She kissed his fingertips. "I'm sorry, Auron. Really, I'm fine. I'm just tired."

"Then let's get you to bed."

The bed here had a real mattress. A luxury meant for summoners on their way to slaughter, its size offended him more than airships' narrow bunks. But Lulu had known neither comfort nor rest for thirteen years. Mindful of her pride, he hesitated before scooping her up to carry her across the room. He saw the line of irritation between her brows, but there were neither barbed words nor magic's claws when she set her hands against his chest.

However, she resisted when he bent to lay her on her side. "I'm not that tired," she said, looping her arms around his neck.

He changed course and sat on the edge of the bed, settling her on his lap. Tired or no, she responded with silent fervor. For a time they lost themselves to slow, sensual kisses. Lulu's fingers wandered, sketching frost-trails and heat on his arms until she found the catches of his armor and flipped them open one by one. His shell landed on the floor with a clank. Laying back, he drew her down beside him, murmuring in her ear.

"Do you suppose that one of us could make the other feel like one of the living?"

She stiffened. "Auron—" Her breath caught at a kiss pressed against her throat. "Oh, Auron, how could I have been so callous? I didn't understand what I was asking of you."

"I have no regrets. I hope you don't."

"No, except...except..." She tripped over her words, distracted by his tongue, "Surely it's blasphemy."

That elicited a bark of laughter. "Lulu, we've killed a maester, defied the High Court of Yevon, conspired with the Al Bhed, used forbidden machina, destroyed Yevon's god, and devastated most of the temples in Spira, and now you're worried about blasphemy?"

"Oh." She gave a weak laugh. "Well, there is that."

"You think too much." He traced her hip from waist to thigh, feeling her body curl against his touch. "This. Flesh. We're here. Never mind how. It makes no more sense than life, Lulu, and it will pass the same way. And there is no book, no teachings, no scripture, no map that applies to us." As if of their own volition, her hands began to map the scars of his chest.

"Don't think," she said, mimicking his gruff tones. "Feel."
He grunted assent. "Do you remember how I answered you?"

She tilted her head. "I..." and then he heard the small, wondering chuckle as his words came back to her. "I doubt it, but I shouldn't mind being proved wrong."

"You've been proving me wrong for thirteen years, Lulu. Otherwise would have become a fiend by now."

"Auron." That name, a whispered talisman. The brand on his palm tingled in a sympathetic pulse. She relaxed, as if the word made burdens easier to bear. "Then...please remind me what it is to be human."

Thirteen years they had waited, and now, at last, they had time. She was no longer Spira's Lady. She was his: this warmth, these curves, this refined elegance mixed with dangerous seduction, these fierce kisses, this secretly passionate woman who constrained herself with chilly reserve, with bindings and belts and braids before the public eye. For him, she was abundant.

The pyreflies sang between them until both life and death ceased to have any meaning.

Hours later, they lay face to face, as close to sated as unquiet souls ever dared to be. Auron pressed a light kiss on her brow. "You have something of mine."

"Your coat is lying folded on that sideboard," she said, drowsily affable. "Nor is it my fault that someone stuck a sword through it."

"Not what I meant." He captured the hand fondling his stubble and drew it down deliberately against his chest.

Lulu made a soft, desolate sound in the back of her throat. He chastised himself for being another cause of tears. But her eyes remained dry as she sought his gaze and moved their interlaced fingers to the hollow between her breasts. "Well, you have something of mine. I suppose it's too late to return it."

He embraced her, sealing clasped hands between them. "But too early to let go."

Chapter End Notes

And Mars put off his shield and panoply, and for one night only, war was in abeyance.
The Houses of Healing

Chapter Summary

Our Story So Far: Sin is defeated, its occupant freed... but being Sin for thirteen years is not something one can throw off in a day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A day in St. Bevelle began with countless bells— yet too few, with gaps of silence where the Tower of Light should have boomed forth. Auron and Lulu rose and dressed in silence, exchanging ironic looks as the mage bundled into the shapeless gown of a novice nun. Outside, they found the corridors nearly deserted. A few tardy acolytes scampered towards chapel, heads down and hands furled in their sleeves. Only one made fleeting eye contact and a quick bow, too preoccupied to notice when Yevon's prayer was not returned.

The cloister garden was cold, foggy and uninviting. Invisible gulls wheeled and keened overhead. Dew lay heavy on leaf and stone, enticing Lulu to remove her slippers and tread on wet grass. Auron offered his arm and walked beside her, halting when she stopped to look back at their footprints marching in parallel across the lawn.

"Well, that hasn't changed, at least."

Auron squeezed her hand tucked in his arm. "This is new."

"Is it?" She gave him a quick smile. "I'm sure we walked like this once…oh, but that was a dream."

The garden drew her on. She perused every flower and shrub, stroking leaves and stems as if she were still tending her dream-bower. She halted again before the truncated stumps of a rosebush. This she did not touch. Her mouth tightened as if its severe pruning offended her.

"Hardly up to your standards," he observed.

"But sometimes it's necessary." She fluttered fingers over it. "I understand how it feels."

"Solid?" he suggested. "Real?"

"You know what I mean." The motion turned into an upswept gesture he should have recognized sooner. "Catch."

He had only begun to move when the ice-spur nicked his ear. Rumbling, he caught her wrist, nodding at the flowerbeds.

They moved to the empty lawn before the fountain, amusing themselves with old drills. Lulu cast. Auron parried. He had to take care on his follow-through, checking swings that nearly clouted her. Long ago, she had dodged his strikes with a facility that astonished him. Now, her steps were not so sure-footed, and her judgment of distances seemed suspect. Stubborn as ever, she pushed herself until her robes were mud-streaked and his face red from the prick of ice thorns.
She tired quickly, however. Alighting on a bench, she watched him go through sword-drills with an appreciative smile, knowing every move. Now and then a monk or nun, cutting through the cloister, gave him an agitated look and a wide berth. No one dared approach until the abbot himself emerged and headed towards them. Auron finished a lunge and straightened, planting his sword.


"Very well, Father," said Lulu, averting her gaze from Auron's complacent expression. "I'd like to take up your offer of healing lessons, when you have the time."

"My time is never my own," said Zuke, "and therefore, my time is yours. You are, after all, my second-best student."

"Second-best?" she said over Auron's hmph.

"Isaaru learned all I know. You had your own notions of what mattered." Zuke's eyes twinkled. "So. Shall we remove to my office, to avoid interruptions? Sir Auron, would you like to observe?"

Auron shook his head. "Don't overdo it," he told her.

"Don't be impertinent."

As she stepped onto the paved colonnade surrounding the garden, Lulu's feet nearly went out from under her on slick flagstones. Zuke looked down. His brows jerked upwards at the sight of her toes plastered with mud and grass. "I'm surprised to be telling you, of all people, to wipe your feet."

The mage laughed, an unrepentant sound that rippled across the cloisters. She dashed away the dirt with a water spell and followed him inside.

Auron took up his sword again and smiled.

Lessons were served over Zuke's excellent herbal tea. Lulu warmed her hands with the clay cup, listening. Absently, she stirred the steaming liquid with a fingertip capped in ice.

Zuke faced her across his desk, gnarled hands steepled on a nest of papers. "Curing magic is most like watera, the inviting, the offering, the opening of channels to old rains that air and soil remember. You cannot force flesh to heal, bone to knit. You must rouse it, remind it of its proper form and shape. You must gather the energies of pyrefly-essence and with them— Lulu?"

She scowled. "Pyreflies. That I can do."

"Can you, now?" He paused to shuffle scrolls and parchment, clearing away the space between them. She drained her cup, ignoring the dangling interrogative. Zuke shook his head and continued. "But life-energies are stronger than pyreflies, which can only reflect, sustain and magnify. And yet life is weaker— or rather, more delicate— than the elemental forces you command. For you tap time: you summon all the lightning strikes, all the rains, every frost, every wildfire whose memory is stored in the air and soil around you. Whereas life—"

"It is ephemeral," she interrupted. "But surely, the power of life is everywhere too, for most matter in Spira has been part of living flesh at some time."
"Yes. I think that may go a long way to explaining how pyreflies build the bodies of fiends. But each life is unique, and you can't graft one to another."

"No." She set the cup down with a clank, sloshing out the last few drops. "No, we can't."

Again, the crease-lines of care around his eyes deepened. He paused to refill her cup, setting it aside with his to cool. "So," he said, "we use pyreflies to cradle and concentrate a single life's frail pulse, as one shields and blows gently to nurture a spark into a blaze. White magic requires a gentle touch, supporting rather than commanding. Do you understand?"

"I think so." She refocused on him with a hint of warmth. "I've watched you and Yuna do it often enough."

"Hem, yes," he said, pained but pleased. "Well, then. I think we may proceed to the training sphere. It is easier to demonstrate on a real wound, or rather, its simulacrum. As I recall, you were always more relaxed when you need not fear casualties should your bolts go astray."

"I just didn't like anyone to see my failures, as well you know."

His eyes crinkled at her candor. "You have changed, my dear."

Taking a swirling blue sphere from a cabinet, he placed it with its stand on the table between them and settled his hands around the sphere's lower half.

"More than you know." She spread her fingers over the top.

The cramped, dim office vanished. The rug was replaced by an infinite plane of hard-packed gray earth, scored with a faint grid. What passed for sky was a mottled haze the color of ash. Zuke arrived first and stood waiting. Lulu stumbled into view with less than her usual poise, pyreflies eddying up from her feet like dust-motes.

He took a step towards her. "Lulu?"

Her form remained insubstantial, revealing the horizon through her body. The baggy white robes of Bevelle had been replaced by an elegant black gown, once tailored, now tattered. Its belts flowed out in a sweeping train that blurred into vines and creepers. The ground around her feet began to transform into sand, rocks, splintered bones. Pyreflies danced around her like drunken stars.

"Lulu!"

Seeing his dismay, she looked down, flung up her arms as if to ward off the pyreflies, and blinked out. Zuke backed out of the dream-space as quickly as he could, nearly jostling the sphere off its base. He raised his eyes to find Lulu clutching her chair, jaw clenched. Zuke struggled to hold his voice level. "Steady, Lulu. Ground and center."

"It's all right." She straightened, chest heaving as she fought to bring her breathing under control. "I'm sorry, Father. I didn't realize I was so rusty. Let's try that again."

"I think not, my stubborn friend." He gathered up the sphere and set it on the window-ledge. "I must commend your determination. But this was a rash experiment. I have no business taking an untethered fayth into the training realm."

Her eyes flashed. "You know?"

"Not at all. I'm quite agog with ignorance." He gave a mirthless huff of laughter. "But I fear I can
guess what, or rather, whom, Isaaru meant, when he declared that 'Sin's unwilling fayth' has been
freed." Zuke flapped a hand abruptly. "Drink your tea."

"I'm not...untethered." She took up the clay cup and stared into its depths, as if trying to divine via
her own reflection. "It...I..." She gestured at herself, a slashing motion that dismissed what it
indicated. "There's no statue to house the Fayth of the Final Summoning, Father. Just flesh and
bone. Mine, Sir Jecht's. Lady Lilith's. And all the other guardians whose High Summoners are
commemorated with temple statues."

"The Final Summoning?" he said. Horror dawned in his eyes. "A guardian's soul? In Yevon's
name, you mean to say that—"

Lulu exploded out of her chair, fists slamming against the desk. "Yevon made...me...Sin!" Her cup
burst before it hit the floor.

Zuke recoiled. The room felt suddenly hot and dry. Lulu's hair lifted from her shoulders as if from
static electricity. Swallowing, he reached across the desk to lay his papery hands over hers. Her
fingers were too warm, her nails uncomfortably so. "Lulu. Daughter." His voice broke on that one
word. "Listen to me. Whatever happened, you are not Sin now."

The oppressive heat bled away. Her head drooped. She gave a mute squeeze of acknowledgement
before pulling away and crossing her arms. "I'm not so sure of that."

"I am," he said. "Ill-tempered as ever, and you've come back with enough firepower to melt
Gagazet, I'll be bound, but that's Lulu all over."

"Thanks a lot." She let out a chuckle that was half a whimper. "No, really. Thank you."

"The least I can do. But I should have looked for you, when you did not return."

"No. You couldn't have reached me. No one could."


"Auron." She spoke the name like a talisman. "Yes. Spira has no idea what he's suffered to free us."

"I suppose not," He watched her with wary pity. "Lulu. This wish to become a healer. Are you
seeking atonement?"

"To what? In whose name? My victims are dead. I'm damned. Nothing can alter that. But Sir
Auron and I must return to the Hall of the Final Summoning and end this, lest another follow in my
footsteps. There is little in Zanarkand which can threaten us, but I must be prepared for that little.
And—" Her expression softened. "As I told you, Father, I am tired of being only a destroyer."

"There are different routes to redemption." He sighed. "I could loan you a healer, you know.
Doddering summoners aside, there are many capable youngsters who would consider it an honor."

"And none I would risk."

"In that, too, you have not changed." He steepled his hands on the desk once more. "Well, my
friend, I'm afraid you've taught me more today than I've taught you. A hard lesson for both of us.
With your permission, I should like to consult the High Summoner on your...condition."

"No!" She drew a breath and forced herself to speak calmly. "No thank you. I trust you, Father, but
to me he's a stranger. And unlike you, he followed Bevelle's orders against Yuna."
Returning to the garden, Lulu was too preoccupied to notice Auron until he fell into step beside her. "Well?"

"We'll need to restock your potions," she said, ruffled.

"Hey, Lu!" Wakka shouted from across the garden, now awash in sunshine. "Where you been, sleepyhead? I was just about to send out a search party."

"Father Zuke and I were having tea and a chat before you woke up. Just like the old days."

The cloisters had become more crowded in her absence. Clerics tending the flowerbeds shot scandalized glances at the children frolicking in the fountain, the younger two sans clothing. Shrieks of delight and a blitzball's tinny thump echoed loudly through the cloister's arched galleries. The tension in Lulu's shoulders eased as she stepped onto the grass.

Rikku waved from a bench just out of splash range. "Watch out. I think there's fiends in the bushes."

Giggles erupted from the shrubbery. Yuna burst out and flew towards the mage with arms outstretched. Lulu bent and caught her hands. "I'm sorry, sweetling. You're too big for me to carry, as I am now."

"Awww."

Without breaking stride, Auron scooped both of them onto the nearest bench. Lulu, giving him a reproachful look, attempted to smooth her skirts beneath the wriggling child. "I'd like to have seen you try that three days ago."

"I'd like to have done it ten years ago."

The oldest boy had broken away from the free-for-all by the fountain and marched towards Lulu. "Hey, Lady. Are you a Yevon?" He folded his arms. "Because if you are, you'd better leave Yunie alone."

"No longer," Lulu said with cool satisfaction. "Lapsed, like your father."

"Lapsed?" Vidina drew himself up. "What's that s'posed to mean? Dad would never—"

"Breakfast!" Rikku said, clapping her hands. "Come on, everybody, towel time! Vidina, help your father fetch the trays."

Yuna herself brought a tray over to Lulu's bench. Soup was pooling in the sodden napkins, but the spicy aroma rising from a covered basked smelled delicious. "Eat," the girl said. She bumped against Lulu's knee. "Mum says it's bad for you to miss breakfast."

"Thank you, Yuna." Lulu set the tray next to her, took a pair of chopsticks, and selected a bite. "It's good."

"See?" Yuna picked up a dumpling with her fingers. "No more pyreflies. Wait till you get home. Dad's cooking's the best."
"Yes." Lulu's hesitation was so slight that even the girl did not notice. "Yes, that was one thing he always did well."

"I heard that, Lu!" Wakka said, tossing the ball over from where he was sitting on the lawn. It bounced lightly off Lulu's shins. "We won't tell her about your cooking, ya?"

The mage kicked it back in his direction. Water splattered everywhere when he leapt up to intercept it, although the ball had been quite dry when it left her foot. The children shrieked with laughter.

"Hey!" Rikku said. "No blitzballs at meals, remember?" Glancing over at Lulu, she bounced to her feet. "Oh! Speaking of cooking, you didn't use any sun goo, did you? Good thing I've still got some. You're looking a little pink from yesterday." She ambled over, digging into her satchel. Auron was beginning to suspect she had somehow connected it to the Farplane to hold all her alchemical components. "Here we are!" She brandished a small pot and waggled it in front of the mage's nose. "One ice queen ointment, coming up! Want me to put some on or—" she lowered her voice, smirking at Auron— "should he do it?"

"I doubt you or Sir Auron need sun protection," said Lulu. "But I'll have some, thank you."

Auron averted his gaze while Rikku applied the lotion. The women fell to mundane chatter, discussing how to "liberate" Lulu from stuffy robes which, Rikku declared, made her resemble an albino flan.

Retreating to the cloister's back wall, he observed the pleasant scene with detachment: a family picnicking on the lawn, acolytes bent to garden tasks, women plotting a shopping expedition into the city. This, truly, was the Calm they had fought for, the ordinary life which seemed to him more foreign than Sin's dreamscapes. Auron marveled at how easily the mage could step back into Spira's currents. Yet much as he wished for her to savor a few days' rest, the pilgrimage road beckoned. Peace without purpose was still a threat. They must face Zanarkand soon.

Zanarkand.

Even as he thought its name, his vitals gave a sideways lurch. Some sickening variant of *Gravija* began dragging at him like Guadosalam's breach to the Farplane. The chopsticks Lulu had been holding slipped and fell, spearing the dirt. Rikku chattered on, oblivious, but Yuna was patting the mage's face. As quickly as it had come, the nausea subsided. A faint, insistent tug remained, a minor irritant like the background hum of the pyreflies.

Lulu was already composing herself, features smoothing over. She chucked the girl's cheek, then looked up and met his eyes. To judge by Lulu's curt head-shake, she was as baffled as he.
Author’s note: I usually assume a mentor-student relationship between Lady Ginnem and Lulu. However, I’ve noticed that Lulu addresses Zuke in the original Japanese as sensei, and Zuke speaks to her as a trusted friend or protegé. By contrast, he has no special words for his other guardian, Wakka.
Lulu was knitting herself back together as methodically as she used to repair lace-embroidered sleeves before the campfire. Auron saw it each morning when they awoke. The shreds of dream that fled her eyes at first kiss were human now, most of the time. Her nightmares were fewer. The red marks at her wrists and throat had faded to ghostly white. On good mornings, he would wake to find her tangled in his arms, instead of brooding at the window.

Dawn gave them time to drill and plan. Auron had found a broken terrace behind the palace where they would not imperil passersby. Here they dueled, an old dance from simpler days.

They had yet to discover the source of that unseen magnetic current, although the mage had some ideas. "Sin bridged Spira and the Farplane." She drew back her arm, conjuring a missile of ice. "With that channel severed, pyreflies are bound to reroute."

Auron parried, spraying fragments in all directions. "Whatever the cause, it's not coming from anywhere near Guadosalam."

She sidestepped most of the shower. "I don't know, Auron. It could be the Fayth Wall. It could be Zanarkand. It could be something new. There's no point in speculating. We simply have to resist its pull."

Her dodge had taken her too close to the crumbling edge. He swung his sword out and around, forming a barrier at her back.

Lulu turned and gazed down at the vertiginous plunge to the next tier of the city. "Oh. Quite a view, isn't it?"

He waited until she rapped the blade with her knuckles and moved away from the brink. She had not shared Auron's fondness for heights in the old days, but a decade as Sin had clearly left its imprint.

He resumed his attack without warning, throwing his weight into a swing. Lulu jerked away, the hem of her robe catching his blade. A mask of cold caught his face on the blind side. He came dangerously near to hamstringing her on the backstroke. They were not pulling punches now. Cast and parry, slice and dodge—the flagstones were growing treacherous with slush, but it was good practice for the mountain they planned to cross.

"Gravity control was Sin's," Auron said. "If you still have it, we should test it."

"No." She scattered ice-nodules at his feet, causing him to stumble. "No more flying. And no more shields. Just Demi, and it's not very reliable."

"Anything else?"
"Aero." She leaned away from his next swing. "Brace."

Auron set his feet and crouched as a burst of shearing wind slammed into him like the downdraft of a Garuda's wings, pistoning the air from his lungs. Gravel and slush peppered his face and bare arms.

"Use on Gagazet," Auron rasped. "Knock down foes."

"Only if we're back to back." Lulu stepped neatly over another scything stroke. "Hold."

He straightened and leaned on his sword. Lulu gathered a handful of fire to herself for more subtle work, pacing the open space around them. Ice chips and puddles steamed away.

Auron observed her steps. Her footwork today had been flawless.

It was time.

"When do we leave?" he said.

Her movements arrested. Her eyes lifted to survey the horizon where the Calm Lands spread out in a green haze. "I don't savor crossing those accursed plains on foot again. Three times is enough."

"You said you can't fly any more."

"Auron, don't be dense!"

He considered and discarded the prospect of chocobos. "An airship?"

"Why not? Surely your Al Bhed friend will ferry you on one last journey."

"Maybe." The corner of his mouth ticked up. "He'll expect payment."

"Then perhaps we should adjourn to Macalania Woods," Lulu said. "Time to test my spells on real fiends again, hmm? We should collect some hunting spoils to cover expenses."

"Oh, no you don't!" Rikku came trotting around the corner of the burned-out building. "There you are! Blitzball tournament today, remember? Shake a leg!"

Auron took in the games with resigned boredom. His thoughts drifted to old friends from Zanarkand who might have enjoyed the spectacle, assuming they did not make one of themselves.

Lulu, at least, was enjoying herself, childhood memories sparked by the athletic forms darting through the water. Even here, she could not help analyzing.

"There. The Goers' right defender. Watch his off-hand. When he cocks it by his ear and thrusts, it's a Blind spell." Lulu pointed, trying not to rouse the girl dozing in her lap.

"Ha!" Wakka winked up at Rikku, seated beside Lulu on the row behind him. "See? Lu was always good at spottin' the sneaky stuff."

"That's because Lulu's sneaky," Rikku said, elbowing the mage. "I still haven't forgiven you for that Lightning Eater, you know. You about gave me a heart attack."
"What's a Lightning Eater?" Vidina said, not peeling his eyes from the match. "A machina? A fiend?"

"A shield against electricity," Rikku said. "Lulu's favorite spell. Meanie. She sent it to me as a reminder of what we were in for, when we went to rescue her."

"Zap zap zap!" Etta said, bouncing on his father's knees.

Yuna stirred drowsily. "Thundara?"

"Not here." Lulu brushed her cheek. "Too many people." To Rikku, she said, "I knew I'd answer to Wakka if anything happened to you."

"Damned straight," Wakka said.

Auron stretched his legs to block Mbela, who was crawling stealthily towards the aisle. The girl squeaked and scrabbled back to her mother.

"Hey!" Wakka said. "He did it again! I saw it, that time. You're right, Lu, look. The shooter can't aim."

"Or swim." Lulu shook her head as the Ronso plowed into the opposing goalie. "So, are you going to explain why you've enlisted me to help scout?"

"Uhhh," Wakka said. "Who says we're scouting? We just thought you'd like to see a tournament."

"Wakka. Aren't you getting a little old to be coming out of retirement again?"

Wakka reddened. "I'm not that old, Lu!"

"Shhhhh!" Rikku's cheeks creased with laughter.

Lulu arched an eyebrow.

"I'm just coaching," Wakka said, lowering his voice. "Rikku's a pretty good midfielder, though. We're rebuilding the Al Bhed Psyches."

"Yeah, Pops went ballistic when he found out Rin was betting against Team Al Bhed," Rikku said. "Rin's been backing the Luca team. We've promised to bring the Cup back Home."

"I see. So that's how you convinced Cid to leave you in Bevelle." Lulu's soft chuckle transformed into a gasp, lost in the crowd's roar.

"Lulu?" Yuna sat up. "What's wrong?"

"Ow!" Rikku said. She rubbed her arm. "Yo, prickly lady! What was that for?"

Lulu shook her head, gathering Yuna in a quick hug and depositing her next to Rikku. "Excuse me." She stood and moved towards the aisle. Auron rose and moved with her, scanning the crowd. *There.* At the top of their section stood a solitary Guado, his crest of forking hair singling him out from the other spectators. His attention was riveted upon the Al Bhed family. Even at this distance, Auron recognized the hostility radiating from that elongated figure. Auron gently pressed Lulu's forearm down as she started to cast. Her skin felt clammy.

"I'll deal with him," he said.
Stealth was impossible, and Auron's prey saw him coming. With the eel-slippery speed of his kind, the Guado wheeled and dove into the nearest access tunnel. Auron followed, breaking into a run as he passed the top tier of seats. His quarry had a formidable head start. Fortunately, the guard at the bottom of the stairs heard them coming and stepped out into the fugitive’s path.

"Hey, you! Halt!"

The passageway was illuminated with a white flash, and the guard staggered.

The Guado had pulled up to cast, and that was all the opening Auron needed. He barreled into the gangly figure, ramming him against the wall with his bracer pressed against the nape of his neck. "Don’t try it," he growled, as the Guado struggled to raise his arm for another spell.

Seizing spiky hair, Auron hoisted and spun him around. The long face was unknown to him, but the sullen recognition in the Guado's eyes was plain enough.

"Sir Auron!" The guard came up in a wobbly salute. "What's this man done, sir?"

Ignoring the question, Auron pressed thumb and fingers around the Guado's throat. "Who was your target?"

The answering croak was full of spite. "Whom do you think, guardian? She who destroyed my race."

"Sin is dead."

"A lie. You know the truth! Her form is changed, but the spirits of my murdered kinsmen howl for justice!"

A whispered argument at the top of the stairs alerted Auron to more witnesses. Glancing up, he saw Wakka's orange crest silhouetted against the sunlight. Lulu evaded him and descended, coolly appraising the stranger pinned in Auron's grip.

Out of the corner of his eye, Auron caught an upward movement: a furtive spell-cast. Without thinking, Auron punched the Guado's hand hard against the wall. He felt bone snap. His victim jackknifed and began whimpering in pain.

"Sir Auron!" the guard said, pressing a button on the wall. "Please leave this to security. I don't want to have to arrest you."

"What did he do to you?" Auron growled as Lulu drew up beside him. Her pallor seemed even more pronounced than usual.

"Only Bio. Rikku had an antidote."

"She's a fiend," the Guado said.

Wakka, following her, glared at him in mild loathing. "Look, I don't know what your problem is, man—"

"The Guado have a grievance against me," Lulu said, expression remote. "Remember what happened to Guadosalam."

"Well, yeah, but..." Wakka spread his hands. "But that wasn't you. You didn't want to do it."

"Didn't I, Wakka?"
"Were Lord Seymour still alive, this traitor would have been executed for her crimes against my race and the High Summoner she betrayed!"

To a stranger, Lulu might appear unmoved, but Auron saw pale lips tighten.

Wakka's belligerent, "What?!" masked the sound of the Guado's choking.

"Auron," Lulu said, a gentle remonstrance. "This isn't important."

He heard only the raw fatigue in her voice, not her meaning. A surge of rising bile swamped rational thought. He began jerking his prisoner roughly from side to side, ignoring the clawed hands scoring his arms and the feeble kicks pecking at his shins. It took a cold spill of water inside his collar to snap the world back into focus. All but snarling, he lowered the Guado until his feet touched the floor.

"That is enough." Juno came jogging into view, her sword halfway out of its sheath. "Release him."

Clamping down on the Farplane whispers urging fiend's violence, Auron pried open his fingers and stepped back. The Guado cringed away from him.

Juno and the guard exchanged nods. "Sergeant. Tend him. Sir Auron, you are under arrest for—"

"Hey!" Wakka said. "Auron got a little hot, ya, but that Guado attacked Lulu first. He magicked her with poison. I think he was trying to kill her." His outrage was tinged with incredulity.

"Is this true?" Juno glanced to her subordinate.

"I don't know, Captain," said the guard. "Their dispute began in the stands. I intercepted them here. He did cast a spell on me. Sir Auron was pursuing."

Juno pursed her lips. "All right. Sergeant, escort this Guado to the healers. Lulu, you will return to Yuna's Cloister and remain there. Sir Auron may accompany you, provided there are no further incidents. Of any kind." She fixed the mage with a pointed look. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Quite clear, Captain." The mage raised a finger to stopper Wakka's protest. "Wakka, please stay. Reassure the children. You must let me know how the tournament comes out."

"But, Lu!" Wakka balled his hands into fists, eyes tracking the shambling Guado being led away. Finally, he gave Auron a grudging nod. "Look after her, ya?"

Lulu turned and glided off, trusting Auron to follow. Juno waited with her hand on her sword’s hilt until they were gone.

"Man, sorry," Wakka said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Never seen Sir Auron go off like that before."

Lulu did not speak until they were halfway back to the cloister. "Remember that I can defend myself. Rikku and I had a rather...exciting...shopping expedition, the other day."

"You didn't mention any trouble."

"He wasn't much," Lulu said. "Although Captain Juno may guess who put one of her monks in the healers' quarters. Rikku's powders confused him enough that I hope he doesn't remember what happened."

"If Gippal isn't here in three days, we leave."
St. Bevelle, the holy city. *The holy terror*, he thought dourly. Long ago, he had pledged his life to guard it from Sin. Considering life’s ironies, it was no surprise that he was guarding Sin from Bevelle.

His mood was improved by the gift they found waiting in the lower room of their suite. Two packs marked with Yevon's official crest had been placed upon the cot. A sealed scroll was tucked into the straps of one of them. Lulu broke the wax and read:

*Defenders of Spira:*

*To those who undertake the sacred duty of pilgrimage, the College of St. Bevelle is honored to donate these offerings. We pray they may ease your hard road. All glory and praise to you, our brave champions! Rest in the knowledge that you walk Yevon’s true path. The hopes of Spira rest with you.*

Thus far the traditional wording, or so Auron gathered. Braska had received neither note nor gifts on his departure from Bevelle. However, a different hand had added a personal note at the bottom of the official scroll:

*I will pray for you, friends, that you find what you seek. It is your deeds that have ensured no other will ever be so provisioned. If you need aught else, ask.*

*Zuke, Abbot, Yuna’s Cloister.*

"He knows my fear. Oh, Auron, this could outfit ten pilgrimages. When I think of those little gifts the villagers brought Lady Yuna when she left... why, this could pay for a whole new temple in Besaid."

Hearing how abruptly her voice died away, Auron pressed a hand against her shoulder before drawing a pack towards himself. "Let's sort through these and decide what we need."

They had just finished repacking when there was a rapping on the door that sounded like someone kicking it.

"Enter," Lulu said, shaking her head as Auron drifted behind the door.

Rikku burst in bearing a bundle of folded fabric and a bag of parcels. Yuna followed her, carrying a pair of ladies' boots half her height.

"They're done!" Rikku said, heading for the stairs. "We stopped by the tailor to pick up your new clothes. Auron, shoo, out! Oh, wait, this one's yours. With a few modifications." She thrust his old red coat at him, mended, pressed, and shockingly clean.

"Thanks."

"Okay!" Rikku said. "Come on, Lulu. Time to de-nun-i-fy you!"
Led by an eager Yuna, Lulu strolled into the garden almost an hour later. Rikku sauntered over to Wakka and mimed pulling back a curtain. “Ta da!”

Gaping, Wakka nearly took a blitzball toss from Vidina on the nose.

Auron's inspection was more discreet, but he was drily aware he usually reserved this sort of scrutiny for weapons, enemies or terrain.

The mage was girded in a stiff corset whose scalloped neckline had probably caused Wakka’s distraction. The matching gown was a dark burgundy like the shadowed folds of Auron’s coat. Instead of belts, her skirt was formed of overlapping bands of textured brocades, furled like the petals of a closed blossom. A subtle pattern of rosebuds and leaves was picked out in dark green, purple and navy threads twining along hems and edges.

Rikku or Yuna must have done something to Lulu’s face, but Auron’s practical experience in such matters limited his observations to: *Violet lipstick. Still odd.* Hairsticks, earrings and necklaces of lacquered wood picked up the subdued hues of her gown’s embroidery, supplemented with beads of purple shell and malachite.

Not for the first time did Auron wonder what alien race had deposited Lulu to be raised on simple backwater Besaid.

He inclined his head. Lulu raised her chin, accepting the subtle homage as her due, before turning away to face the children's uncensored critique.

"Why's she still wearing a dress?"

"'Cause she's the Lady."

"Frydc y dress?"

"The dye looks like blood."

"Zu blood."

"Cooool."

Rikku snapped her fingers in front of Wakka's face. "Beep, beep! Eyes up!"


"Thank you, Wakka."

A distant rumble which had been growing in the background finally caught Rikku's attention. "Whoa-ho. Guess who's back?"

"Gipper-Gipper-Gipper!" Mbela cried, dancing around. The kids began to whoop, looking up at the sky. The drone of engines grew louder, but the airship was not visible from within the garden.

Wakka turned to Lulu with a pensive smile. "So, hey, Lu. Done anymore thinkin' about whether you're ready to come back with us?"

There was a shrill pop. Gippal's voice crackled from somewhere close by. "Rikku, come in. Rikku, come in. Pick up the frickin' sphere!"

Rikku fumbled in the pockets of her cargo pants and pulled out a sphere. "Yo, Gip! Keep your hair
"Rikku, find Auron, quick."

"He's right here, Gippal. What's up?"

"Uh..." There was a weighty pause. "Shinra, tell them."

The young man's scratchy voice cut in. "My sensors detected a massive energy node coalescing over Mt. Gagazet. The wave form is unstable, but consistent with an extremely high concentration of fiends."

"And that means...?" Wakka said.

"Our foe." Lulu raised her eyes to meet Auron's. "Sin is reforming."
NEWS! (Author announcement)

Chapter Summary

in which I aten't dead.

I bring NEWS.

Okay, not the news you want: this chapter isn't posted yet. (Although it is written!)

In late 2018, I edited, revised, pruned, and polished *Love Her and Despair* within an inch of its life. I removed about 15,000 words, although it's still a monster of a fic.

Then I began reposting it one week at a time in 2019 on Dreamwidth, complete with new illustrations.

Up through Chapter 42, I've been able to post the revised Dreamwidth chapter and replace the AO3 chapter simultaneously. But due to the fact that I've divided/merged some chapters, the revisions between DW and AO3 are getting a little out of sync. I could just delete the old chapters on AO3 and repost them, except that I don't want to lose precious comments. So please bear with me until I overrun the end of posted chapters and start putting up the new ones.

Which, if all goes well, should happen by the end of October. There are about 6 chapters left.

In the meantime, you may want to check my Dreamwidth once a week to catch up on revised chapters as I post them.

Or just reread up through chapter 42 — now with all new illustrations for almost every chapter! — and relive the saga.

Thank you all SO much for coming back to this long-dead story. I hope I can finally deliver the ending it always deserved. Or at least, finish it, because finished is better than perfect.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!