
Final Pass

BRASKA is trying to hide it, but he's scared; they're close to the Calm Lands now, heading back down Mount Gagazet, and the fact that they know the mountain now doesn't make it any easier. Braska remains silent, mostly, his knuckles turning white as he grips his staff; Auron has stopped looking, and stopped protesting – he's tried to stop thinking at all, but that has proved impossible.

Forging the Final Aeon has weakened Braska; they can only walk a mile or so now before he needs to rest, sitting down for a moment to catch his breath before he stands for the next leg of the journey without catching Auron's eye. Auron wonders how many would-be High Summoners approach Zankand with just one guardian and then die as they walk feebly back down the mountain alone; it seems even more wasteful, he briefly thinks, and then he corrects himself; all of it is wasteful. All of it.

At the first signs of evening, he pitches the tent so Braska can sleep; Braska makes his way inside without a murmur of thanks. He's paid little attention to Auron over the last few days – too wrapped up in his own fate to have ties to the living now. Auron sits on the ground outside, ready to keep watch until Braska is rested enough to move on. He wouldn't be able to sleep if he tried; the days and nights blend into one now.

Being a guardian at this stage in the pilgrimage, with one's summoner wholly claimed by the fayth, is lonelier than Auron ever imagined it would be. He never thought that Jecht would no longer be with them at this point in the journey: his presence was as integral a part of it as any other. It took getting used to, of course, and there were struggles, but once Auron taught himself not to be angered by the mere presence of Jecht alone, and slowly started to appreciate his company, he came to respect him. Even – although he never said it out loud – like him. There is more he never said.

He misses him.

He misses Jecht. He closes his eyes, lays his palms flat on the ground to calm himself, and prepares to reconcile himself to the fact. All that time he spent arguing with him, shouting at him, wishing they had never had the misfortune to meet – and now, there's nothing he wouldn't give to see him again.

He opens his eyes; and then he sees it – him – Jecht. Striding towards him with the lopsided gait that Auron has come to know so well, a huge grin on his face, clutching his sword in

his hand instead of keeping it sheathed like Auron always told him to. Pyreflies hover around him in elliptical loops, from bare feet to unruly hair, the only sign that Jecht is no longer a mortal man.

“How –” Auron croaks.

Jecht shrugs, and he’s still grinning. “Felt someone callin’ me. You know, I never thought it’d be you.” He sits cross-legged opposite Auron, mirroring his stance. “It was too strong to ignore. Guess that means you’re a summoner too, kinda.”

Auron shakes his head, balls his hands into fists against the ground. “It’s not –” he says, and tries again. “Are you ... real?”

“Try me,” says Jecht, extending an arm, the one that isn’t armoured.

Auron stares at him for a moment, uncomprehending, and then slowly reaches forward with his own bare hand. He grasps the arm Jecht has offered, and feels the coarse, damaged flesh – it seems solid and familiar enough, but it’s cold, and the pyreflies wind unrepentantly around his hesitant fingertips.

He draws back. This can’t be real – he can’t have called this fayth-Jecht here by willpower alone. The lack of sleep must be making him see things that aren’t there; nothing else could explain this.

“I’m imagining it,” he says, looking down at his lap. “This is just – I don’t know. Delirium. Desperation.”

“Yeah?” says Jecht quietly.

He nods. "I wanted you to be here. I wanted it so much that I've convinced myself you're there in front of me, but – I can't call you back. That's impossible."

"Nothing impossible about it," says Jecht. "Not sayin' I can stay around forever, probably not even until morning, but – it's me, Auron. I'm here."

Auron shakes his head –

– and Jecht reaches out and grips him by both shoulders.

"Listen to me," he says; Auron can feel his hand, still cold, against the bare skin of his left shoulder. "This is real, right? This is me! Doesn't this convince you? What the hell else am I supposed to do?"

"I wish you were here," Auron mumbles.

"You stubborn piece of shit," Jecht says, and he pushes Auron backwards until he's lying on the ground; and then Jecht has a hand in Auron's hair, the other pressing down on his cuirass, and his lips are against Auron's, meeting them as insistently and as deliberately as Auron has ever struck down a fiend; his fast, angry tongue is in Auron's mouth, and Auron moves his own back to let Jecht in – to give him all the space he needs as he presses hard against every corner of Auron's mouth, claiming it thoroughly for his own.

Auron has never been kissed this roughly before; his dalliances as a young monk were always timid, cut short by fear of a priest's watchful eye – but now, he is being kissed as only Jecht would kiss, and he knows that this is no figment

of his imagination. He reaches up to pull Jecht closer, drawing him to his body, bare chest against cuirass, Zanarkand blitzball shorts against Bevelle military trousers. He runs a hand across Jecht's beard, the other through his unkempt hair; this closeness makes him feel like he is melting, turning into liquid in Jecht's frenzied hands. His growing erection settles into a space between Jecht's legs; nothing that is not concrete and tangible could make him feel this way.

"Convinced you yet?" Jecht mutters between kisses.

"Yes," Auron gasps. "Yes, Jecht, it's you," – and Jecht puts an end to his frantic words by closing his lips over Auron's again, pushing more hot, urgent breath into his mouth, and Auron meets the kiss with equal force, letting the sensation overwhelm him until all he is grasping is the air and all he is tasting is the night – and he is lying on the hard mountain pass, his heart pounding, his clothes askew, his legs trembling, gazing up at the sight of nothing at all.

He turns to press his cheek against the stony ground, and lets out a quiet wail of grief and frustration. Jecht is absent. Auron is alone.