

IT had been hours, or at least it felt like hours; the Hymn was still echoing, stuck in a loop, and Auron might have hated it by now if it wasn't a clear case of blasphemy to think so. But at last, the door to the fayth's chamber opened, and Braska stumbled out, pale and trembling.

Auron felt himself move forward before he even made the decision to do so: it was as if an instinct took over, one whose sole motive was *protect Braska at all costs*, and he took hold of his friend before he could collapse, catching him around the waist and letting him fall against his shoulder.

Braska's head rested there for a moment before it stirred, and Auron felt the weight of Braska's body lift off him; he loosened his grip as Braska drew himself upright, and murmured, "The fayth – has seen fit to trust me."

Auron's heart sank – apparently some part of him had hoped that Braska would fail – but he could think about that later. He let go of Braska, now that it seemed he was in no danger of falling, and arranged himself into a clumsier bow than any he had performed in years. "Then – my lord."

Braska's eyes widened momentarily, and he let out a breathless laugh before regarding Auron with renewed seriousness. "Auron," he said, the affection clear in his exhausted voice. "Thank you."

They headed slowly out, through the still and unimpeded Cloister of Trials. Braska's breathing still seemed a little laboured, and when they were close to the exit he laid a hand

on Auron's arm to stay himself, and Auron made sure to advance at a slow enough pace so as not to strain him. As they walked, he couldn't help running through the calculations he'd been doing while Braska was in the chamber. Of the summoners who finished their training and gained their first aeon, around half were denied access to the second by fayth who deemed them not worthy of the responsibility. Then, half of the remaining summoners failed to get the next aeon, and so on. That meant roughly one in sixteen summoners managed to enlist all five of the usual aeons and reach the stage where they were permitted to proceed to Zanarkand. But that was forgetting those who were killed or seriously wounded on their journey – such casualties took out nine out of ten of the remaining summoners. Half the rest gave up on their journeys, and two-thirds of those remaining failed to defeat Sin even having completed the entire pilgrimage. That meant that roughly, out of every thousand summoners who set out on the journey, only one saw it through to the end.

Even after so many hours of ruminating on it, he wasn't sure whether to be relieved or worried by the thought. Most would-be summoners found themselves having to abandon their pilgrimages relatively unharmed, usually because they failed to gain the trust of the fayth. Many of the rest would perish, but this was in most cases due to fiend attacks on the road rather than the Final Summoning itself. For some reason, that at least was comforting: if Braska were to be killed on

the journey, Auron was certain that he himself would already be dead. He was Braska's guardian: he would protect the summoner with his life, and therefore, Braska would die only if Auron had gone before him.

The only situation that truly struck fear into him was exactly the one that Braska was wishing for: a successful Final Summoning, where Braska would give his life to defeat Sin, and Auron would be left in this world to mourn. And *that* was why Auron felt his stomach twist when Braska emerged from the chamber of the fayth, and why he still felt uneasy as they emerged through the exterior door of the temple, Braska's hand still resting on Auron's sleeve, his face still glowing with a faint sheen of sweat.

Other parts of Spira, Auron knew, had great ceremonies when a new summoner gained their first aeon: but in Bevelle, such a thing happened nearly every month, and while it was common knowledge that Braska had been training, nobody was ever particularly excited on such occasions. The only people waiting for them outside the temple were two young boys sitting on a high wall, who in all likelihood were only there by coincidence.

The larger of the two boys nonetheless nudged his friend at their approach, and called out, "Hey! Were you in there getting the aeon? Becoming a summoner?"

"Yes, I was," Braska called back, his voice still weak, but his face lit with joy.

“Show us, then,” said the boy, and his friend nodded enthusiastically.

Braska’s hand tightened briefly against Auron’s arm, and he closed his eyes, and Auron called up to the boys, “Let him be. He needs rest, he shouldn’t be performing for you like some kind of circus animal.” It was the same tone he used with his subordinates at the temple; the same one that, until not too long ago, the senior monks had used with him.

“It’s OK,” Braska murmured, and he turned back to the boys. “Give me a second,” he said, more loudly.

“My lord,” Auron pleaded, and Braska’s mouth fell open a little. “Oh – Auron. You don’t have to address me that way. When you said that in the temple, I thought you were –” He broke off with a smile. “Never mind. Let me give them a show. It won’t do me any harm.”

Auron drew back, only a short way; part of him was still sure that Braska wouldn’t have the strength to summon the aeon, and that he would stumble again; and if that was the case, Auron had to be there, ready to lend him support. He watched warily as Braska drew his staff and first spread his arms out, then began to draw the staff in an elaborate twirling motion in front of his chest. He had barely been doing this sort of thing very long at all, Auron knew, but it already seemed so natural – as if the staff was an extension of his arm, long and lithe in the afternoon sun.

A large, swift creature began to descend from the sky as

Braska continued his motions, settling finally on the ground with such force that Braska instinctively stepped back; it was unfathomably huge, at least twice as tall as he was, and covered with hard scales that were dark on its limbs and torso, giving way to the brightly coloured feathers of its wings. Auron had seen the creature a few times before, in fact: it was, after all, the same aeon that was taken by all the summoners who started out in Bevelle. But seeing it under Braska's command made his breath catch in his throat.

The creature stood, folding its enormous arms in front of its even more enormous chest, while the two boys whooped and cheered; then, at last, Braska wearily began to motion with his staff again, and the aeon took flight, disappearing into the sky.

"That was brilliant!" the younger boy gasped. "You're a great summoner!" He and his friend had surely seen this before if they made a habit of hanging around outside the temple, Auron thought; he wondered whether they offered the same words of encouragement to all the fledgling summoners who came through. But Braska, at least, seemed to be encouraged by it; he smiled up at them again, apparently too weak to raise his voice, before turning and reaching towards Auron to steady himself once more.

"No more summoning," Auron said, although he wondered whether he was even entitled to give Braska this most minor of instructions now. "You should be resting, sir."

Braska nodded. "Yes, that's right, Auron. Thank you." He

clung tightly to Auron's arm and let Auron lead him home, shuffling along with downcast eyes; Auron had never seen him so exhausted. He guided Braska to his house, and unlocked the door with the key Braska thrust towards him with a trembling hand; then, prising himself away from Auron, Braska staggered off to sit down. Auron made a brief stop in Braska's kitchen to get him some water, and then brought it through to him and handed it over.

"Thank you," Braska said again, between sips. "Auron – my guardian."

"Do you need anything else, sir?" said Auron.

"You really don't have to call me sir," Braska murmured.

"It's proper," Auron protested. "I'd rather follow procedure."

Braska shook his head, but made no further protest. He closed his eyes. "I don't need anything else. You can go back to your duties."

Over the course of Braska's training as a summoner, Auron had become convinced that his own duties were of secondary importance; but he realised there was no more Braska needed from him now. "Rest well, sir," he said, before turning and leaving the house.

Braska was a summoner at last, and Auron was his guardian: it was a terrible and wonderful thought. The road ahead would be long and painful, Auron knew; but he would stay by Braska's side. He would not let him down.