

THERE weren't a huge number of summoners who made it as far as Kilika: one every few months, at most. Still, for five years now, since he had first felt the call himself, Isaaru had made his way up to the temple's upper ambulatory whenever he heard that someone was in there attempting to win the trust of Ifrit's fayth, and had settled in to watch them leave.

Some summoners failed, of course; they were the ones who emerged and strode immediately out of the temple, too angry to speak to either the priests or their own guardians. Ifrit demanded tenacity, the legends said, but certainly not such unbecoming rage. That was why those summoners must have been turned away, Isaaru believed. They were unable to tell when their dedication went too far, and became hurtful.

Those who succeeded in their task instead walked out of the temple with quiet pride, confident but modest, and grateful to their guardians. But the summoner that Isaaru was looking at now was different again – he couldn't work out, for a moment, whether the man had gained the aeon or not.

The summoner was dripping with sweat, as if he had emerged from a sauna; those who passed by were normally slightly tired by the efforts of receiving the aeon, even if they failed, but this man seemed completely exhausted. Clumps of sodden hair were plastered to his forehead, just about visible under his lopsided headdress; his pale face glowed damply as he walked unsteadily through the temple, supported by his two guardians. He looked as if he was experiencing extreme

heat, and yet the sea breeze kept Kilika cool, as always, even inside the temple.

The summoner stumbled; he almost fell, and stood there breathing heavily for a few seconds. Then, there was a murmured debate between his guardians, and eventually one of the senior priests appeared and led the summoner into one of the temple antechambers, leaving his guardians standing under the statue of Lord Zaon.

“I’m worried about him,” Isaaru heard the younger-looking of the two guardians say, his voice low and urgent.

The other guardian responded with a rasping laugh. “So what else is new?”

“Maybe you don’t realise this, Jecht,” said his companion, “but summoners aren’t usually that exhausted by the fayth. For a few moments, yes, but not – if he’s like this here, how bad is he going to be once we get to Besaid?”

“Hey, relax,” said Jecht. “Maybe this means he’s, like, a really good summoner? You said the fayth hold back their power if they think the summoner isn’t ready, right – well, maybe now they think Braska *is* ready? And that’s why it’s gettin’ so hard? They’re meant to be testing him, ain’t they?”

Isaaru failed to hear the other guardian’s reply; learning the summoner’s name had distracted him. There had been a Braska who had gone to the Al Bhed once in the hope of understanding and negotiating with them, a young priest; Isaaru had been just a boy himself at the time, younger even than his

brother was now. Perhaps he had been of an impressionable age, but something about the task Braska had been charged with had stayed with him. It had always seemed unusually noble, the work of a Yevonite missionary.

And to think that same man was now a summoner. Isaaru was certain of it; it had to be the same Braska. He thought back to the suggestion the summoner's guardian, Jecht, had made – that Braska's discomfort was caused by receiving more of the aeon's strength – and the more he considered it, the more convinced he became that it was true. Someone as good and patient as the missionary priest Braska, whom Isaaru had looked up to for years even if everyone else had forgotten his name, was surely capable of becoming the greatest of High Summoners. Any man would surely burn and sweat and toil, met with the full power of Ifrit's fire; and if Braska had to suffer such heat now, it was surely Isaaru's duty to bear that same mantle later.