

MAKING his slow way back to Bevelle after renouncing his pilgrimage in the Calm Lands, Zuke tried to avoid the company of others; sending his guardians on ahead had allowed him to become a little more inconspicuous, and lessened the chance of his being mistaken for an active summoner, although there had still been a few awkward encounters.

He caught the eye of a lady wearing a complex headdress, and briefly thought she looked familiar, before he remembered: Belgemine. The woman who for some reason had taken it upon herself to challenge journeying summoners. She had crossed paths with Zuke twice already on his pilgrimage, and had practically demanded that he test his aeons against her own; both times he had been thoroughly, embarrassingly beaten, while his two young guardians stood by politely, pretending not to see.

“Ah, Zuke,” she said in her usual placid manner. “We meet again.”

It irritated him too, he suddenly remembered, that she refused to use any respectful term of address for him. *Lord* was out of the question now that he was no longer a summoner, although a simple, polite *Father* or even *Brother* would have sufficed. She was undoubtedly much younger than he was, he thought – she should have been showing respect to her elders.

“Belgemine,” he said by way of greeting, being quite sure not to use any honorific in turn.

“What do you say?” she asked him, one side of her mouth

twisting into a smile. “A contest of aeons? I am sure yours have had ample time to grow strong since our last meeting –”

“No need,” said Zuke, suddenly finding himself more cheerful than he had been in days. “The aeons are no longer mine to command. I have given up my pilgrimage.”

He had uttered that sentence several times over the last week or so: usually with at least a little sheepishness, if not outright despair. This was the first time he had said it proudly.

“Oh,” said Belgemine, seeming to lose her composure a little; another first, Zuke thought with vicious pleasure. “Then – I shall have to find another summoner to challenge. I have no business with you.” She turned away at once.

It’s not all bad, thought Zuke, smirking to himself.