

AURON has had to lend Braska physical support plenty of times on the pilgrimage – not only does each communion with the fayth weaken him more than the last, but he’s the least used to the strain of simply walking such long distances. Several times, now, they’ve finished their allotted daily portion of the journey at the pace of a shoopuf calf, Auron’s arm wedged against Braska to bear his weight, Braska limping into the next village with polite smiles that turn into grimaces, pretending not to notice the locals’ muttered disbelief that anyone so *weak* could be a summoner, and the two of them both murmuring warnings to Jecht when he threatens to draw his sword in response to such slander.

But it’s Auron, now, who suffers, after a day of combat: there have been too many armoured fiends, the sort that neither Braska nor Jecht can do much to impede. Auron has launched himself into battle countless times, driving his full strength against these fiends repeatedly, and in turn, they’ve unleashed their most devastating attacks against him. By now, he remains standing only thanks to his own adrenaline, and Braska can tell even that won’t sustain him much longer: he grips the hilt of his sword to steady himself as much as anything else, and his eyes lack focus as he stares at each of his opponents, sometimes blinking too long as he raises a trembling hand to his forehead in an attempt to wipe away the sweat seeping from his hairline.

Normally Braska would step in, of course, with a healing

spell or potion. But it's late in the afternoon; they've run out of medicine, and Braska's magical power is spent for the day, used too rashly in service of damaging fiends instead of supporting his guardians. He'll get a lecture from the fayth about that when they reach Djose, and normally he'd be worrying about the consequences it might have for his success, but for now, all his concern is for Auron, who is still taking blows meant for Braska even though he's in no state for it, his face contorting in evident agony, his knees almost buckling at each impact.

With a last swing of his sword, he sees to the final fiend, and Braska prepares himself, ready to hurry forward and let Auron collapse into his arms; but just in time, Jecht rounds the corner, fresh from a visit to the nearest travelling merchant, and he shoves a bottle of something in Auron's direction. Auron takes it, somehow – fumbles with the stopper and almost spills half of it on the loamy ground – but he has just enough of his senses left to raise it to his lips. Moments later, he's straightened up again, no longer so frighteningly pale, even smiling at the aptness of the timing; and seeing his cherished guardian safe and well, Braska lets himself breathe again.