

WHEN Zuke decided to abandon his pilgrimage, he sent his two young guardians on ahead. There was no point having them around while he languished in his shame; they had enough troubles of their own without having to deal with more misery. He made his own way back south at a leisurely pace.

There were people he could have visited all over Spira, known from a lifetime of Yevonite connections; he neglected to seek out any of them. It would be too awkward and embarrassing to have to admit that his pilgrimage had ended not because of the fayth's refusal or some serious injury, but simply because he had realised, halfway across the Calm Lands, that he didn't really have it in him.

And so he found himself standing on the dock of a ship departing Luca in nobody's company but his own; until he noticed a young woman a few feet away who was observing him with what appeared to be great admiration.

He blinked in her direction; she bowed deeply, approached him at quite a speed, and said, "You must be a summoner, sir. What an honour it is to be travelling with you."

Zuke tried not to grimace visibly. "I *was* a summoner," he corrected her. "But I have given up my pilgrimage – it was the wrong decision. Please, take your admiration elsewhere."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said the young woman. "Did you run into trouble on the journey?"

"Not as such," said Zuke, wishing he wouldn't have to say

any more about it.

“Then did your guardians?”

He shook his head. “They’re unharmed. Two fine young people – it would be wrong of me to ask for their services now, so I sent them away. No – I simply decided I could go no further. I failed. That’s all that happened.”

“You seem resentful,” she said.

“Resentful?” Zuke echoed, with some surprise. “Not especially.” He turned to look out across the sea. “I’m just surprised by your interest. Not many people wish to associate themselves with one whose commitment to Yevon is so evidently lacking.”

“Oh!” the young woman exclaimed. “No, sir, surely not! You may have only made it halfway, but undoubtedly, you will make it easier for those who come after you. You will be able to use your knowledge to advise future summoners – and didn’t you say your guardians were young?”

He nodded reluctantly.

“Then perhaps they will guard other summoners in the future,” she went on. “Each, I’m sure, with more success. Don’t think of your pilgrimage as a failure, sir – it was an opportunity to learn, that’s all. A way of bringing us all one step closer to the Calm.”

It sounded ridiculous, Zuke thought; but then, he was in the sort of mood to be cynical about anything at the moment. “Do you really think that?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” she said, “most sincerely.” And he could tell she was being honest; the intensity of her gaze betrayed that.

“Well,” said Zuke, “thank you.”

It wasn't a comfort to him then, not yet; but as the days passed and he grew surer that he would retreat to Bevelle and enter the monastic order, he was reminded of the encounter on a few occasions, and each time, he was grateful for it. She was right – it hadn't been a waste.