

IT was hard, being a summoner. They had warned her that it would be, and she had been prepared; but now that she was on the pilgrimage, she couldn't pretend such foreknowledge had been any great help. Constantly walking, constantly casting magic, constantly baring her soul to the fayth; and those physical stresses were nothing in comparison to the emotional cost. In a few short weeks, after all – if everything went as planned – she would be no more.

That was the kind of thought that tended to interrupt her sleep. Normally, fatigue won out, and she found herself waking again the next morning, mostly rested – but then there came a night where nothing seemed to work. Staring into the dark, increasingly aware of the itchiness of the travel agency blanket, Yuna decided at last to leave her bed, and to go outside.

It felt as if she was doing something illicit. Some of her guardians, certainly, would have advised against it had they known. There were fiends outside, of course, all too ready to make themselves known to those who strayed too far from the building. But some time in the cold, quiet outdoor air would help.

She stood at the side of the road; there was a wind, and her sleeves blew to the side, and her earring flapped in front of her face, reminding her of her father – and sud-

denly, strongly, she felt no emotion more acute than loneliness. That was the thing about being a summoner: nobody understood, for obvious reasons. The further she advanced on the journey, the greater the chance that anyone who could have understood was already on the Farplane.

And despite that, she wished for company. A few of her guardians would understand the need for a simple, quiet presence: Lulu, Kimahri, even Sir Auron. Tidus wasn't quite at that stage – he hadn't yet learnt to identify those times when Yuna was more in need of gentle support than vocal enthusiasm – but she couldn't deny that even his boisterous energy might have helped, just at this moment. She could go back into the travel agency, and wake any of them, and they would no doubt be confused and disagreeable, but they would obey, because they were her guardians.

It was an idle thought; she could never ask so much of them. They all had their own worries, she knew, quite apart from her wellbeing. Some summoners saw it differently, but Yuna had always been adamant that it was her job to look after her guardians just as much as it was theirs to look after her. They deserved their sleep, before another day of protecting her from fiends; it was the least she could give them.

So she resigned herself to staying on her own – until,

at last, she had another thought. Because there were those others who accompanied her on the journey, of course, even more ready to do her bidding. Her guardians tended to forget them, but how could she, when their spirits were inside her? Summoning the aeons was normally reserved for the more difficult battles alone; there was a belief that calling them out for more trivial matters was disrespectful to their sanctity. But why were they there, if not to support their summoner? When she felt this unsettled, and this alone – couldn't she lean on the powers she had acquired, just for once?

She ran her fingers over her staff, letting herself consider it, but not too much. There was, at least, no debate to be had about which of the aeons she should summon. Some had made her acquaintance more recently than others – Shiva, the newest, was still hopelessly intimidating – but there was one aeon Yuna had recognised for years, long before the two of them had submitted to the private ritual at Besaid Temple and joined powers. Sweet Valefor: a constant, if unknowable, presence on the island. Even the least spiritual of the villagers knew her name, and spoke it in hushed tones; Yuna, a ward of the temple, had felt her presence more than most.

And so she summoned, quietly, drawing shapes with her staff against the night sky; and Valefor flew to her side,

her claws out, ready to attack the imaginary fiend she assumed she was to guard against; and Yuna reached out to touch her hard, stony feathers with a shake of her head.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "No fiends. I just – couldn't sleep."

Valefor understood, she could tell; as Yuna held her, she softened. Perhaps it was the imagination of an insomniac, Yuna thought, but it seemed as if the aeon's form changed, even; those stony feathers grew downy instead, making a pleasant pillow that Yuna leant into with relief, nuzzling quietly into Valefor's side with her head.

She ran her fingers over those feathers, to soothe and be soothed; she felt Valefor's wing tighten protectively around her, and she tilted her head a little, and pressed her lips against the aeon, a message of gratitude and relief; and in time, she felt the tip of Valefor's sharp beak come to rest, with impossible gentleness, in her hair. She understood: the kiss was returned. Valefor knew.

"Thank you," she whispered, and they stayed there, motionless, until Yuna eventually found that her sadness was no longer so sharp, and that her legs were heavy with sleep once more.