

“RIGHT, sir,” said Auron, “arm up.”

Braska obeyed, raising his right arm out of the water with a small splash; too weak to keep it in the air of his own accord for more than a moment, he let his hand rest on Auron’s shoulder while Auron carefully moved the sponge across Braska’s side in a long stroke from hip to armpit.

“I really am sorry about this,” said Braska, not for the first time. “I never expected speaking to the fayth would make me this exhausted.” He smiled feebly. “I hope this doesn’t embarrass you.”

Auron shook his head. “I told you, it’s all right. I’m your guardian now – any way I’m required to serve you, I will. Other arm?”

Without lowering the first arm, Braska reached for Auron with the other: now he was clinging to both Auron’s shoulders. Auron could feel a finger or two on either side of the straps of his cuirass, warm and moist, pressing water into his skin, which seemed cold and hot at once.

He looked at Braska’s face. The newly anointed summoner’s eyes were small with fatigue, but he wore an expression of contentment, no doubt pleased to be attended to so well by his guardian. Auron dared look a little further down. The slight tan on Braska’s face came to an end somewhere on his neck; below that, he was almost frighteningly pale, and skinny enough for the bottom of his ribcage to be evident, an uneven curve across his middle.

Auron traced over it with the sponge, almost in a trance. Never had he expected that becoming Braska's guardian would lead to this kind of thing, and yet here they were barely a day into the arrangement. He would have to make an especially lavish offering to the fayth of Bevelle the next time he prayed.

"You're so attentive, Auron," Braska murmured, and the hoarseness of his voice sent a shiver down Auron's spine. "I knew I chose my guardian well."

"I'll do anything you ask, sir," said Auron, in a breathless reminder of the promises he had made when he formally pledged his loyalty.

He moved the sponge reverently over Braska's waist, close to the foamy surface of the water that hid everything below from view. The priests had given him all sorts of tinctures and spices to add to the bath: remedies, they had said, for the aches and pains a first encounter with the fayth would induce. Those remedies had also created a layer of bubbles several inches thick, and a sweet, rich smell unlike anything Auron had smelt before. The foam spared them both any embarrassment, of course, but part of Auron wished it had remained absent. As for the smell, it made him almost intoxicated. It seemed as if nothing was totally real.

"Move forward," he said, willing away such thoughts. "Let me do your back."

With a smile both tired and acquiescent, Braska lowered both hands from Auron's shoulders and used them to grip the

sides of the tub while he leant forward. Auron adjusted his own position too, dragging his knees a few inches across the floor so he could access Braska's back more easily. Through his light trousers, the friction from the rough mat on the ground stung his knees a little. It was worth it.

He wiped the sponge across Braska's back, reaching out with his other hand to hold Braska's soft hair out of the way as he worked his way up towards his neck. Squeezing the sponge and watching water trickle down Braska's spine, he permitted himself a small sigh.

"Something wrong?" said Braska sleepily.

Blinking, Auron drew himself up a little straighter and hastily wiped the water away with the sponge. "Just thinking about what's ahead," he invented. "The pilgrimage: it'll be hard, won't it?"

"Undoubtedly," said Braska, "but I have a most excellent guardian."

And as Auron continued to pass the sponge across Braska's back, berating himself for almost making his feelings so obvious, Braska reached out and laid a wet hand against Auron's arm, which did nothing at all to help.

With Braska thoroughly bathed, Auron stood to hand him a towel, gently extracting his arm from Braska's grip while thanking all the fayth that he had had the foresight to wear loose trousers. He turned away while Braska stood, somewhat shakily, and climbed out of the tub, and he tried his very hard-

est not to let his mind's eye supply the image of what was happening behind him.

"Thank you, Auron," said Braska, and Auron took that as his cue to turn around and gaze once more at the summoner, who had securely fastened the towel around his waist and was now standing on the mat, one hand on the side of the bath to steady himself. Scattered drops of water left glistening trails on his skin as they made their slow, inexorable journey to the ground.

"You're very welcome," said Auron automatically. He was suddenly in possession of a very acute need to lay his hands on himself. "Is there anything else you need from me, sir?" he asked, trying to ignore it.

"I think that's all for now," said Braska, and Auron had barely blurted out a goodbye before he found himself staggering out of the bathroom and then making for his quarters at top speed.

Bolting the door quickly behind him, he threw himself onto the futon and grappled with his trousers, then his underclothes, before seizing himself with both hands. He lay there on top of his increasingly tangled blanket, writhing one way and another, fumbling against his crotch with woeful accuracy. His hands were still damp from Braska's bathwater, and that made it feel as if Braska was somehow the one touching him. Closing his eyes, he let himself picture it, abandoning himself to the fantasies that he had had to suppress only seconds ago. He

turned his head to bite Braska's name into the blanket, and finished moments later, unbothered by the mess, breathing out long, slow breaths as he considered the journey that lay ahead.

Becoming a guardian had been a very good decision.