

HIS father had sent guards to escort him back down the mountain. Armed with his mother's aeon, he was to return to the Calm Lands and fight Sin. In doing so, he would die beloved by his people as he had never been in life. That was the directive, issued months earlier without his knowledge.

They beckoned him with their huge, spadelike hands, and he flinched away. That particular Guado feature was one he had not properly inherited. The more he looked at hands like those, the more he felt sickened by them. They were so grotesquely large and blunt, so much so that even the sight of his own father's hands had always provoked the same feeling of revulsion. If Jyscal had ever tried embracing him, he must have cowered away from such attempts, and they had to have stopped a long time ago – he could remember no such loving contact with his father. And now Jyscal's lackeys, these guards he had never met, were supposed to become replacement guardians as he descended Gagazet. He doubted they had ever seen an aeon.

He was meant to summon her when they returned to the Calm Lands. The Ronso watched them walk past and said nothing, their tails twitching silently as the three Guado shuffled by – perhaps they considered it a forgone conclusion. As they neared the foot of the mountain, the temperature began to rise and the sound of birdsong drifted over the cliffs. The Calm was within touching distance. The thought made him burn with rage. She had led him through these fields just days earlier,

weak but determined, concerned with nothing but her son. Before that, she had waited for him at each of the temples while he sought their aeons, and had been ready to steady him when he received each one, cradling him against herself, kissing his sweating brow. He had slept in her arms at night, knowing her love kept him safe from fiends and terrors.

*Call it*, they said when they reached the plains. *Summon the aeon, and vanquish Sin*. But he could not call her, knowing she was his mother, and knowing she would be used for nothing but the renewal of this spiral of death. They must have known; they would have seen the spheres. All the Guado would have known what would be required of the summoner and his guardian as soon as their intent to journey was announced. All but the summoner himself, too young to know, too small, too weak, too strange. Even she had chosen not to tell him, perhaps rightly fearing he would refuse. She had underestimated his will. He could still refuse, even though she was gone. *Because* she was gone.

He summoned her, not to fight Sin, but to have his retribution. She was enormous, monstrous, the true reflection of his grief, and wrenching her from the ground already felt like a death. They wept together as he commanded her to kill, and when he let her fade away, only the bodies of his two guards were left behind, still and pale and unblinking. He spat in their faces as if they were fiends, and then he sent them, to put an end to a job well done, crying noisy tears while the pyreflies

made their way into the sky.

And then he walked back to Guadosalam alone, quelling the fiends with the magic she had taught him, and calling her again each time they seemed too ferocious to overcome using his spells alone. She rose from the earth with awful grandeur each time, and on each occasion he understood his pain and his power anew. His strength was incomparable now that he possessed a Final Aeon, and yet he was newly marked by the death of the two guards he had sent to the Farplane. Their blood was on his hands. He was a child, and he had killed for the first time. Now that he had done it, he would never shy away from it ever again, even though the thought made his eyes sting and his throat burn. He would kill again, he knew; perhaps not until he was a man, but it would happen.

He remembered her on the silent, lonely journey. Remembered how she had clasped his hands in her own, so small and delicate and lovely, and traced her steady fingers over his palms. She had taught him how to dress himself, and had known how to take care of his hair, in places soft and smooth like a human's, but scattered with the rigid, arborescent growths of the Guado, and coloured a bright blue that was uncommon among both races. She had never passed comment on its strangeness, never done anything but kiss it and tell him it was beautiful. For others, he was an abomination, swiftly removed to Baaj to put an end to the mistrust he inspired. For her, he was her son, and she his mother. A truer love could

not be found in all Spira. She had placed her soft lips against his face, and he had known then that he would never need anyone but her. *My son, my darling son.*

He arrived at Guadosalam, and sought an audience with his father; it lasted only a few minutes. He was still a disappointment, a disgrace. His failed pilgrimage, while wilfully subverted, had only made that clearer still. Jyscal, terse and distant, said no word about his mother. Did he not miss her, after so many years of exile? Had they not loved each other, once?

The verdict was pronounced: he was to return to Baaj. He considered calling her then, using her to make his father's mighty palace crumble. That would show Jyscal how much they had both suffered, and how that suffering had made him strong and deadly and merciless, robbed him at last of his childish doubts and follies. But he found himself accepting the renewal of his exile. He would have hated remaining in Guadosalam under his father's eye, a despised boy who had been too disturbed to bring the Calm. Alone, he could seek to understand. He had had a glimpse in Zanarkand of the true nature of Spira, and now he wished to untangle its complexities fully. Time in Baaj would allow him to reflect without meaningless distractions, and to grow into a man while deciding how to put an end to this eternal, horrifying suffering. He would be unbothered by others, Guado and human alike, who would never have comprehended the things

he had seen.

But he would not be alone, not really. In bidding his wife dedicate the end of her life to her transformation, Jyscal had made his last mistake. He had ensured that mother and son were bound together forever, truly inseparable at last, in a way more infallible than even her embraces had allowed. With her, he would rise to greatness, and cut down all who stood in his way. She was with him now, always, a part of him. Together, they were invincible.