

COMING back was a little harder each time. Coming back from what – he had never been able to explain. But each aeon he took demanded a new piece of his soul; he could hardly have been expected to adjust instantly. After his fourth, it took him an entire day to feel normal: walking back through the jungle, each paving stone surprised him with its solidity. After his fifth, he went out to the beach feeling strange, silent in a loud world, or perhaps the opposite. Auron’s voice at his ear had some effect that he couldn’t describe. Auron’s hand against his sleeve, tugging a little perhaps, and there was Jecht: *Hey, Braska. If you don’t say somethin’, Auron’s gonna freak. Just let us know you can hear us, dude, OK?*

He waited. He found himself in a warm, colourful bed, thick curtains hiding the sun; Auron’s low voice, a prayer and a tincture from one of the island priests, dressed in sweltering clothes. His forehead was anointed with thick, pungent oil, running down his nose like a tear. More sleep, and then he was himself again, murmuring reassurance to his guardians. Auron looked tired and pale; Jecht was incongruously boisterous, having decided that ignoring these episodes was the best counterweight to Auron’s increasing worry each time one occurred. Braska was merely grateful. Five aeons within him now, each proof that he had chosen the right path. The journey north awaited, and their vindication with it.