

AURON had decided it was time for Braska to learn some self-defence. He would need it for the pilgrimage; they would be encountering dangerous fiends, after all. So Auron booked one of the rooms among the warrior monks' extensive training facilities, and persuaded Braska to meet him there.

They began with a warm-up routine; Braska seemed to keep pace well enough. He mirrored Auron's movements wordlessly, staring right into his eyes as if he thought that would help him stay in sync with what Auron demonstrated; Auron tried not to let it distract him. Braska's eyes were almost unbelievably blue, he found himself thinking. He knew that well enough already, but this opportunity to look at them for such a long time was a reminder – a welcome one, he had to admit.

"You should use your staff to defend yourself," he said, eyeing the long piece of equipment that Braska had recently been given to call his aeons. "I'm going to approach you from behind. When I get close, lift the staff and try driving the end into my stomach. You want to try and force me back – onto the ground, if you can. Got it?"

Braska nodded uncertainly. "All right."

Auron began his routine. Braska clearly detected his presence; he raised the staff at Auron's approach as he had instructed, and managed to tap it lightly against Auron's ribcage before Auron succeeded in reaching around Braska and laying a hand on his breastplate to signify that he was close enough to

attack him. “Not enough force,” he said, quickly withdrawing again. “You need to try to knock me over. Imagine I’m really trying to grab you.”

“But I don’t want you to get hurt,” said Braska.

“You have white magic,” Auron pointed out. “And I’m used to combat injuries. Besides, I don’t think you’d be able to do me that much damage, sir.”

Braska’s eyebrows drew together; his mouth fell open a little. Were it not for that, Auron probably wouldn’t even have noticed the way he had just addressed the summoner. It had become natural; he had spent a not insignificant amount of time imagining himself using such terms over the past few days, since Braska had taken his first aeon and become officially eligible to embark on the pilgrimage. *Sir*, he would say, *my lord*, and he would be honoured to kneel before Braska and do whatever he asked. *My lord summoner*, he would say to the operators of the inns and travel agencies. *My lord summoner’s been walking all day. He needs rest.* He would take the keys they gave him and lead Braska to his bed, and help him remove his headdress and breastplate, and take his hand if Braska requested it. *Can I get you anything, sir? Anything at all, Lord Braska, just say.*

“You called me that when I received Bahamut,” said Braska slowly, “but ...” He shook his head a little, seeming to collect himself. “We’ve spoken about this, Auron. You don’t need to call me sir – or *my lord*, or any of that. I’m bringing you with

me on this pilgrimage as my guardian, yes – but as my friend, too. You’re not some kind of servant.”

“I,” said Auron. His face felt hot; he hoped it didn’t show. “It’s proper,” he managed at last. It didn’t matter, he told himself, that his reasons for wanting to address Braska that way were anything but proper. He wanted Braska to know that he was entirely at his command. He would do anything he asked, and more besides. He would dedicate himself entirely to Braska’s service: he had already made that promise. And if Braska asked him to lie with him, and warm him when they camped in the snowy lands of Macalania and Gagazet, and to hold him close and soothe his exhaustion – he would. Of course he would.

“Oh,” said Braska. “I suppose – it’s in the teachings, isn’t it?”

Auron knew Braska’s familiarity with the teachings was no longer what it had once been. It was true, after a fashion; they stated that guardians should address their summoners in polite and respectful terms even if there was no outright instruction that words like *Lord* and *Lady* were to be used. It didn’t matter. Braska deserved respect: the utmost respect.

“Exactly,” he half-lied. “You know I want to do this properly. Sir.”

“But even now?” said Braska. “I’m the one trying to learn from you. It hardly seems right, Auron.”

The sound of his own name made Auron almost gasp; it

was an indecent reaction, he knew. He was failing to exercise the restraint he normally took such care to practise in every area of his life. It was so tempting to give in – to confess that he was so desperate to serve.

“I should set an example,” he said instead, trying to remain impassive on the outside. “You know people won’t be polite to us. If I address you that way, maybe it’ll shame them all into doing the same.”

“Hmm,” said Braska. “Maybe.”

They resumed their practice. Braska seemed to be getting used to it: he even managed to pin Auron to the ground a couple of times. Auron would have been able to throw him aside easily, but he let Braska straddle him if only to give him some encouragement, holding his position until looking into Braska’s blue eyes became too unbearable. This wouldn’t happen on the pilgrimage, he reminded himself. They would be fighting together, as allies, not as foes. There would be no reason to be so physical with each other – unless Braska commanded it. And again, Auron found his mind filling with the welcome thoughts of what he might say in such a situation. *Of course, sir. Anything you need, my lord. Whatever you say.*

*You don’t mind, Auron?*

*It’s a guardian’s duty.*

Auron hadn’t dared articulate what *it* might be even in the confines of his mind, but he knew full well what he hoped for. There was nothing in the teachings about how the relationship

between summoners and their guardians should play out – it was probably something no priest of Yevon had ever even considered. These familiar thoughts were probably blasphemous, but he had long since conceded that he could hardly stop them.

He wasn't concentrating on the fight; Braska found a window to jab his staff into Auron's stomach, and Auron staggered back, gasping in genuine pain, clutching the area instinctively.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" Braska asked him, wide-eyed.

"No," Auron lied. "That was a good move. Now strike me down while you have the chance."

"Auron," said Braska.

"Strike me," Auron insisted.

Braska raised the end of his staff; looking doubtful, he drove it into Auron's shoulder. It bounced off and clipped his ear, his neck; pain assailed him immediately. He sank to his knees, at least half a genuine reaction to the blow. His earlobe still stung. His neck would bruise, if Braska didn't cast white magic on it.

He lifted his fingertips to touch the raw skin, hot and swollen; he looked up at Braska, his master, standing over him.

"That was good, my lord," he murmured, surprising himself with the hoarseness of his voice. "Well done."

Braska looked a little frightened. "Stand up, Auron," he said. "I don't want to hurt you. Let me heal you."

And Auron obeyed, just as he knew he would all the way to Zanarkand. Braska would strike him down; Braska would help him back up. It would be that way until the very end of the pilgrimage: absolute, complete obedience, resolute devotion. *Anything for you, sir. Anything.*