

BRASKA was once used to casting magic with his hands; that was before he began his summoner's training. Now he finds himself needing to become familiar with the staff: he won't be able to call the aeons without it, they say, so he must use it for the ordinary spells as well, get used to wielding it like a new limb, practising until it feels more uncomfortable to be without it.

He brings it home, carries it reverently, with more respect than he has paid to any Yevonite relic for a long time. And he takes it into the small yard and shuts the door, pinned in between the houses of his quiet, pious neighbours. He takes the staff in both hands and practises the movements: the dance. It will be harder when he wears full regalia – more to trip over. He turns and bends, tries to remember the steps. The wood rubs against his palms; the unfamiliar friction makes them sting. He loops over it, slips under it, sighs out his frustration each time he places a foot wrong, loses balance, lets the staff fall and clang to the ground. Bends to pick it up, letting the sound of his footsteps muffle his groans, lightly hitting his palms to refresh them. Begins again. The constant turning makes him feel lightheaded; the lightheadedness makes him still clumsier, more irritable as he struggles to keep his balance, drops the staff again and again and again.

Auron watches through the grimy window, and sees Braska's determination, his grimaces each time the staff falls from his grip. Long hours pass; he steps out, with nothing

more to distract him in the house, and calls him in. *You haven't eaten*, he reminds Braska, wondering about the meaning of his blank face. *You need strength. Come inside.*

But Braska shakes his head and turns away, goes back to the staff and the practice, places his stinging hands against the shaft again. The sky becomes dull, and he dances, panting, blinking slowly in case it might stabilise him, filling every corner of the yard with his movements.

He has made progress – some. It's not good enough. It won't get him to Zanarkand; it's not enough to make it up to her; there have been countless summoners, and only three have succeeded. Each thought is like a wound. He drops his staff one final time, and sags against the stone wall, and presses the heels of his hands to his eyes, blinking hard against incipient tears. He has achieved something, but there is so much further to go.

His exhaustion is kind enough to allow him to walk; he decides he should thank the fayth for that, at least. He picks up the staff once more and makes his way inside; he leans against the furniture, casts the staff aside somewhere, finds his way to the relief of darkness and his bed. Auron has resumed his entreaties for him to eat; he ignores the sound of his guardian's voice, too solid and firm to fit into this world he now knows.

And the next morning, he rises, and apologises to Auron while he feels able, and apologises again in advance of what the coming day's practice will do to him, and takes his staff

and goes outside to begin. This is how it will be now, for days on end until he feels ready. All he knows must be contained in this dance, the dance that stirs and soothes the dead. They will lead him to Zanarkand, and in return, he will put an end to the pain of the living.