

“You are finished with this. I will not have you... leaving while you’re on duty to—to commit torture. Naeko! What is this! What have you been doing? How long—+

“None of your godsdamned business.”

“Naeko. If you want to be one of my Paladins—”

“Let’s get one thing clear, Osjane. I’m not yours. I was never yours. Jaus. Veylis. Zein. All of them come before you—will always come before you. And none of them had a problem with what I was doing, so I’m gonna keep doing it. She’s mine. Mine to hurt. Mine to break and put back together. Mine to give to the dogs for their fun. Mine. You try touching her again, and I’ll show you who I am. I’ll show you who I am... I’ll show you...”

“...You’ve shown me. I hear you. But is this who you will always want to be?”

“...Get out. Let me finish. Just let me finish. I’ll report in after. I do what you say after. Just let me have this.”

-Chief Paladin Osjane Thousand and Paladin Samir Naeko (Circa 79 P.F.)

26-7

Find Yourself

Avo found the woman first.

If she could still be called that.

Recent memories flashed through his mind, moments plucked from Naeko’s thoughts via Hysteria. A history of pain had been lovingly inflicted on the woman’s ravaged body. Lines of symmetry extended in Avo’s cog-feed. He connected wounds to moments recalled. Tortures inflicted to pleasure received and hatred sated.

In the very depths of the bunker, submerged in a tank of midnight rain and with tubes running down her throat, a mutilated torso greeted Avo, writhing in horror as the lights to her prison flickered alight. Metal spikes had been driven into the stumps where her limbs were. Most of her pelvic region was encased in some kind of contraption that sprouted all manner of jutting needles. Her head was left intact. Short brown hair. Round, rosy cheeks. Blue, bloodshot eyes that blinked too much, looked around so desperately, a mind that wailed and wailed and wailed so loud Avo felt her raw terror knocking against his wards.

Sister Karakan was more effigy than person. More sections were missing from her ego than her body. Sequences collapsed into each other, and her traumas contaminated almost all the remaining mem-data as well.

The restorative waters kept her alive, a drifting body whimpering and crying, mind a constant howl, yearning for final end.

[Jaus,] Shotin's template winced at the sight. The moment made him think of his sister—think what Highflame inflicted on her. **[Fuck. Godsdammit. Avo. Give her what she wants. This is disgusting—]**

[This is useful,] Green River interrupted. **[Claim her mind. She is of use to us.]**

The two new templates shared a stare thereafter, Shotin one of offense, Green River that of cold indifference.

The fact Karakan was still sane enough after centuries of torture told Avo two things. First was that Naeko dedicated significant resources to ensuring her biological and mental preservation. She was still sane enough to feel fear; her body was still composed enough to feel pain.

That meant the Chief Paladin had spent time mending her as well, culturing her for future bouts.

It was a sign that he valued her. A twisted sign. But something that could potentially be exploited.

+*Good fucking lord,*+ Cas breathed, choosing the wrong moment to peek across Avo's cog-feed. His horror caused several other members in the cadre to share in his mistake.

{Oh, Naeko,} Calvino sighed. *{There are so many other ways. There are so many things we could have done for you. If you just asked.}*

+He doesn't want to,+ Avo replied. Now, more than any other moment, was his kinship with the Chief Paladin the closest. Previously, there was pity. Understanding. A want to reach out and understand. But this was something that appealed to a could. This was something that nourished the cruelty of power—of being able to dominate another so utterly and break them at your leisure. That the nature of being a monster. And so was it the nature of being a man. **+Trying to find rightness in the pain. She was his highest catharsis. She remains his highest catharsis. A mind knows what it knows. Holds on to pleasure. Flees from loss.+**

She was the other accretion down here. The only other accretion aside from Naeko. Locating her was a trifling thing, and with the Chief Paladin still forty meters above, rooms between, and minutes behind, Avo had a chance to delve into Naeko's past further. Understand him better.

He was going to be essential for facing Veylis, the Guilds, controlling Zein.

Saving Kae. If that was still possible.

A splinter broke from Avo, passing into Karakan's consciousness with contemptuous ease. In all the years Naeko kept her, he never grafted a Metamind on her. He never gave her any chance. Her thoughts were a whirlwind of chaos. Bouts of dislocation and hallucination were welcome respites to her, but they never lasted.

The *monster* always pulled her back from the precipice of true release. Always reached into her mind forced the pieces back together—but never mended them.

Her *monster*. Her *victim*. Her *sacrifice*.

Experiences spilled over from Karakan into Avo. All she knew merged with his being. All her regrets, all her memories. He filtered through the caustic haze of her recollections, set Naeko as a critical point of data.

That brought him back to the very start of their relationship. Centuries ago, when she was a blessed sister ordained by the gods, and he was but a slave boy born to a shackler—a prisoner they used to control and terrorize other prisoners into compliance. Already, the details were fascinating. What an effectively savage way of keeping the hands of the masters clean. Direct the slaves against each other. Make them know each other as enemies. Segment the hierarchy of the downtrodden, layer them over each other.

Just the like the Warrens. The Guilds had to learn these techniques from somewhere.

She exploited Naeko's father, used him as a patsy for some manner of rebellion to paint one of her slave-managing rivals—one High Sister Koramand—as incompetent. Unable to control her own stock of sacrifices. What happened thereafter was routine. Unworthy of note. The slaves were punished, and the blame was directed onto the supposed shackler that led the rebellion.

The only memories she first had of Naeko were of him as a boy, screaming. Pinned down by a mob in that pitch black tunnel. Howling in despair was the other slaves made him watch as they castrated his father, pulled the man apart with gradual gruesomeness. They did this while they carved their own satisfaction into Naeko's back. They continued until she commanded them to stop, sensing an opportunity to cement her saintly nature in their eyes, promising to purify the foulness from Naeko's body in ways they could not.

Then, she offered something essential to them. More food; a day of rest.

How that cairn fell at her feet then. How they praised her then. How they loved her then.

Naeko, all the while, remained beneath notice. Just a sacrifice. Just a pawn in a game beyond his measure to control.

If only she knew the hell she was to reap for her action. Of the god who was using her as a pawn, who sought a new instrument to use against its rivals, who found a solution—and made

an unknowable mistake when they healed Naeko, empowered him with miracles, set him free to rage and rave across the lands of the old Kosgan slave farms.

Karakan let out a shriek of pure despair, then. She wanted to die. Had willed it so many times.

Today, she might just get her desire.

+Hello.+ Avo's greeting did not resonate in her at first. She had passing hallucinations before. But he felt her attention shift this time, feeling the weight of his presence, the *divine* nature of his being.

She remembered this—remembered what it was like for a god to commune with her.

An ache of disbelief tore at her from the inside, and the faintest embers of hope began to spark. So many times had she imagined this as well: one of her fallen gods reaching out for her, returning to save her from the vile tortures she suffered.

So much of her didn't dare to hope, but desperation compelled her to try. *Oh, oh, my gods. Oh, praise be! Praise! Are you there? Is that you, Haadaga? Maegrienn? Have you come back for me? Have you come back?*

So desperate. And so mistaken.

The people in this world were drowning in their own lies, turning from the truth. But not Avo. Not anymore. **+No. They are broken. Have been broken for so long.+**

Karakan's mind writhed painfully. Her eyes rolled. She almost shattered right then, the hopelessness too much to bear. But her hopelessness was a droplet to Avo. He forced her to remain whole while sparing her none of the pain. Just as he forced her to face him, to gaze upon his Overheaven in fullness.

+Oh. By the Choir's light. By—by—what are you.+

+Desperate. Like you.+

+K-kill me? G-give me rest?+

He considered it. In truth, he felt little for Karakan. She wasn't choiceless—her fate was one of following consequence. If Naeko hadn't ruined her so, what pity would she be worth to even the more empathetic templates. And, somewhere deep inside, remnants of the beast hissed out breaths of euphoric elation as it savored Karakan's agony.

Multiple hidden Auto-Seances remained in the ruins of her mind, and Avo undid every single one. No need for those anymore. He didn't want to risk any intruders.

+Maybe, he dug through her memories once more. Details about her family were useful. Especially with what Maru did to her son. Quite the *atrocities*. Names of bygone gods and ancient lore settled in him, as well as insight into the societal structure of the pre-modern Kosgan empire. Less than essential trivia, but revelations helped for the breaking of Highflame.

Ultimately, with each gulp Avo drank from Karakan's ego, he found himself disappointed. In the woman. In Naeko. In the idea of cruelty itself. There was pleasure to be found in holding power over another, but what did such a thing feed? What came of it? Naeko was still unsated even after all these years. Undeveloped after centuries. There was nothing of creation here. Nothing of change.

Avo already knew this color — he found it bland.

+Did you think yourself righteous when you did it?+ Avo asked, speaking to Karakan directly. Naeko was but a room away now. Dependent on her answer, he would either leave her ego to suffer in this broken vessel or consume her for use otherwise. **+Did you ever consider the slave you sacrificed? Not asking if you regretted it after. Know that. You've felt that for centuries.+**

Thinking was hard for Karakan. A conversation was something she hadn't experienced for so long. Her mind struggled to recall the steps. *+Y-yes. When... when I was young. I... the screams... I hid behind the mill. I cried. I prayed for them. Tried to set some free... My matron mother caught me... whipped me. I nearly died. And then I forced myself to stop caring after.+*

Avo didn't need to Gatekeeper to know she was speaking the truth here.

Civilization was a ladder of legacies. Legacies of pain. Legacies of triumph. Legacies and inherited behaviors; inherited traumas. Humanity was more than capable of learning. Too often, it learned the wrong lessons.

It was just Karakan's fortune that her life was going to end, but her existence would carry on. **+Going to claim you now. No more pain. But this is not a release. This is not the end. This is a new progression. You have been shaped by consequence. We will see what it has made of you soon.+**

A sob of indescribable relief sang free from Karakan. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head. *+T-thank—+*

The thought went unfinished as Avo disconnected from his cadre and awakened his Conflagration. The fires devoured Karakan's ego, and her template emerged within his Soulscape with the ending of her life.

Naeko arrived far too late to notice the fires around Karakan's accretion climbing upward as steam.

–[Naeko]–

A strange feeling tugged at Naeko as he entered the room, disturbing his already frantic state.

He needed this. He needed something to break. Break something that deserved it.

As the bolts on the titanium door unlocked, as the door slid open, he found himself agitated. There was a thunder in his veins; he wanted to tear into her now. When he finally laid eyes on the *bitch* floating in the tank, he all but tore across the room, fog-woven hands streaking forward, tearing off the top of the container to claim her.

Bolts and plugs were ripped from her limb-stumps. Blood blossomed in the water, but her flesh reknit almost instantly. She so perfectly damaged. The healing kept her skin supple for the tearing, bones healed from the breaking, vocal cords intact for the screaming.

He needed this. He needed this.

What scant discipline remained in him snapped. Snarls and growls left his throat as Karakan crashed against the cold metal ground below. But as she landed, there came no cry. No sobs followed thereafter. As he pulled her from the ground, he expected the struggling to begin. She would kick, claw, fight.

He planned to let her go, give her the hope of making it three rooms away. Give her a minute of hope before he broke it inside her again.

Instead, he found himself gripping a limp shell of a woman. A limp shell that stared straight through him.

Naeko sighed. Dammit. Fuck. Was she broken again? He paid good imps to have her mended—they were supposed to be reliable.

As glared into her eyes, he knew something wasn't right. It wasn't the distant expression of someone willing themselves to dissociate from their bodies, willing their minds somewhere else—anywhere else. No. She was staring straight at him—into him. Her expression was one of purest boredom.

And was that—was there a hint of pity there.

Pity.

“What,” Naeko growled. He held her up by her hair, weight less than a feather. “*What!*”

“What.” Karakan continued staring at him. Her mind was flat, accretion stable, thoughstuff smooth. What the fuck was this? Where was the fear—he needed the fear. He struck her. Lightly. The jab into her left rib folded her over—broke a rib.

But her stare was unblinking. Her expression didn’t change.

Karakan *sighed*.

What was this? What the fuck was this? *This sow. This bitch. This—she*

“Scream,” Naeko whimpered, pushing a thumb deeper into her right eye. His digit traveled further along the hot, gushing canal of her socket. Crimson welled around his finger, poured down her cheek. Still, she just stared at him, unimpressed—no, pitying. “Scream!”

He wrapped his hands around her neck as raw crawled over the edge of his vision. “Come on. Hm. Judge me. Judge me now. Stare at me now. Look at me like I’m still nothing. Like you just watched me scream all those ago.” She obeyed. Her stare and expression changed. No more pity. No more boredom. Just haughty judgement and superiority. Just like that day. Exactly like that day. “YOU FUCKING!”

Naeko lost himself. Fury took from him his words. All the world was crimson and hated. Only after the fourth thud did he realize he was hammering her skull against the ground, that his fists were bloodied, that her right eye socket had been caved in, that her jaw was missing—torn free at some point.

Blood spurted from severed arteries along her throat. Karakan gurgled, but never lost the look.

“F-fuck,” Naeko whimpered. Tank. He needed to heal her. He couldn’t lose her—not now. She was all he had. His only way to find himself. Seizing her using his fog, he dunked her back in the water, kept her submerged as broken flesh was rejoined. She bobbed in the water momentarily, her back faced to him. Slowly, she turned, and as she did, her expression was back to boredom. Back to pity.

BITCH! WHORE! SOW!

He tore her through the glass this time, unable to even think about the shattering tank, unable to consider what he would do now that his water splashing across the floor. She impacted his open grip with nary even a gasp.

The body was breaking, but why *wasn’t she*? “What? What’s wrong with you? Huh? What? Scream! Scream, you—” A sob escaped from him. Horror and shame formed a lump in her

throat. He closed his eyes and did his best not to break. In front of her. He was her torturer, but he was breaking in front of her.

Godsdammit. Godsdammit. He was worthless. He was worthless. He was worthless.

The warmth of a palm pressed against his left cheek. Another hand caressed his right soon after. Naeko found himself devoid of thought, his skull filled with a ringing as he opened his eyes and faced Karakan again.

There she remained, in his grip, but with compassion and pity more than anything else, touching him as she sighed. "I see you now. I see you, Naeko. I see you. I wish I did sooner."

All the power in existence couldn't stop Naeko from breaking thereafter.

A scream came. Not from Karakan, but him. A noise of absolute anguish left him, and he reared his head back from her touch, and brought it down against her skull.

She splattered apart against his face. She splattered. She died.

And Naeko knew that he was always going to be lost.