

*Put down your blade. You will not do. I cannot fashion a warrior out of you.*

*Do not be absurd, fool boy. It is not your determination that is lacking. You have. As did a million-million other fool children before you. It's not your instincts either. Or your rage. I can see why you are here. The hate. The rage. The expression.*

*Like so many before you, you have been wronged by the world. Something has been taken from you. Something you cannot reclaim. And so you wish to take satisfaction from the world. Something of equal value in pain or material. You will inflict your power on something or someone.*

*I can see your mind fixed to the future when you fight me. You are trapped there. You cannot return. And my teachings will be wasted on you. I can give you the tools for revenge. But you cannot become the disciple I desire of you. You struggle against the violence. Part of it makes you recoil. Every movement you make is begrudging, every strike a sacrifice given to achieve a greater goal.*

*When you gain what you truly desire, all my efforts will leave you with the following breath. You may retain some skill, but you will carve yourself upon the world no further. No deeds will flow thereafter. What a pity. What a waste.*

*You came here telling me what you wanted, and see you. I hear you. And I now tell you that I am selfish. I am power. I am she who holds the glaive above you. What do I want? Did you think of that? In this battle, I was your enemy, but you have given no thought to my mind, my body, my urges.*

*What good will you be if such a thing eludes you? What good will you be?*

*Begone from me. Seek your revenge and hiss you last as a dying candle. I will suffer no more of your presence.*

-Zein Thousandhand

25-19

Behold

-[Naeko]-

Zein actually took a *godsdamned* ghoulish creature as a disciple. The idea was... absurd, but there, across from him, standing in his own penthouse living room, was a creature of razor-tipped claws, needle-sharp fangs, pale-cold eyes, and lashing tendrils.

Phantasmal wisps quivered around its form, but somehow, there was a material substance to their existence—like something had crossed between the Nether and the reach.

**{Breach located!}** The Gatekeeper wailed in the back of Naeko's skull. **{Breach located!}**

And that explained what the Gatekeeper was screaming above just hours earlier. Jaus. Dead gods. What the hell was he standing across? What the hell was this Avo? And its eyes... there was intellect there. *Considerations*. It was like the ghoul was trying to dissect him using perception alone.

The Chief Paladin saw Kare pushing herself off his jack station, noted how her eyes were swinging between all the parties present, brimming with tenseness and worry.

***"Would it reduce your wariness if I admitted that you intimidate me as well?"*** The ghoul's diction was flawless. There was still something of a monster in the reverberation of their words, in the trailing hiss that followed every syllable, in how its speech echoed across the Nether as well.

"Yeah?" Naeko said, feeling not reassured in the slightest. The creature's expression hadn't changed at all—it didn't help that the damn thing didn't blink. It just stared and watched, and its gaze seemed to devour every detail. And as he thought this, the ghoul looked away, taking in the room instead. The tightness within Naeko worsened. "Alright. How the hells are you doing that?"

***"Doing what?"***

"My thoughts. You inside my mind too? Am I infected."

***"Ah,"*** the ghoul chuffed, all too amused. ***"No. But your mind is loud. Very loud. Your feelings... they are very strong. Gives me glimpses."***

Great. So he couldn't even have strong feelings around this Avo without betraying himself. And he thought the Incubi were annoying. This was just outright bad.

"I talked to Zein about you," Naeko began, eyeing Avo with wariness. "She told me you were a..."

***"Ghoul."***

"...Yeah."

***"I am not offended. My brothers are simple creatures. Simple wants. Cruel wants. They have no future. No true purpose than to serve as fonts of harvest. Silos of waste. Emblematic of the Hungers to create something like me. Trapped in the past. Terrified of change. Terrified. Unwilling to face the coming age."***

Naeko's jaw dropped slightly. Did the ghoul just get philosophical? That sounded like Vesomething... something Jaus or Veylis might consider. What the hells was this? "Yeah, that sounds like them. The Strix... he made you and went rouge?"

***"Yes. The Famine of Defiance. My 'father.' Only Low Master that saw what was to come. Plotted against his own masters; against the Guilds." Avo fell silent for a moment, and his halo sparked with rising embers. "The wholeness of him is gone. His life is spent. But his will remains undone. I am his continuation. I am the flame that comes thereafter—"***

"Alright," Naeko interrupted the ghoul before he could continue, and the damn thing actually shot him an annoyed glare. "Alright. I know. I got it. That's a lot. But why are you helping my Paladins. What do you want?"

***"Because you—the few of you that stand true to your ideals—are the only ones that still seek to do the right. To live in accordance with ideals; practicing divinity. Want to help you make things right. Want to bring down the Guilds for what they have done. For what they will do. Want to set Jaus free."***

And there was another topic Naeko didn't want to face. Jaus' fate. Jaus. Trapped in the Ladder by lover and daughter. Jaus, who didn't trust Naeko enough to tell him of his final design. And now, the only other man the Chief Paladin loved as a father was trapped in some kind of prison or torture.

He didn't want to know. He didn't want to see. But he needed to. He had to.

"Show me—" Naeko swallowed. "Jaus. You said he was trapped and screaming. Zein... told me what she did. But I want to see. If you have the memories, I want to see him."

Avo tilted his head and let out a quiet breath. ***"I can feel the fractures in you. You are naked with pain, Naeko."***

The words the ghoul used made Naeko nauseous. He swallowed sour spit and forced himself to remain composed. It was like the damn thing could see right through him. But it didn't see all of him. It didn't really know who he was. "I want to see him."

The Chief Paladin's words were final, and his junior-under-Zein begrudged his request no longer. Ghosts began to percolate into phantoms, spilling out from Avo's halo like a boiling tide of water. Phantasmal threads pierced through Kare and Maru as their wards grew resplendent. ***"This will be an ordeal to endure."***

Maru scoffed. "Listen, I've been through the—"

And then it began. There was no prelude—no buildup. Where once they stood in the living room of Naeko's penthouse, now a portrait of damnation wailed at him, tore his senses and mauled

his sanity. Jaus' screams were unceasing, like being caught in a storm of mind-shredding despair. Existence unraveled around them, with most patterns flowing to the shared delta that was the Flayed Ladder while others were dissolved outright. Oscillating dragons spiraled across the spire's ten rungs, but a fracture unzipped its flesh-coated exterior, with uncountable bodies fused to the structure, praying—always praying—but not loud enough to mask Jaus' howls.

Faintly, Naeko heard Maru collapse. The boy was whimpering somewhere behind. Kare was curled, squeezing her skull tight against the base of the jack station to spare herself from perception. Only Naeko stood strong. Only Naeko endured as an ocean of trauma like no other came flooding forth from Avo.

With a sickening squelch the Ladder tore open, and the inner atrocity was laid bare. Reality was comingled by its depths, comingled and interwoven into a single being replicated along the golden chains of time. New instances of Jaus were birthed with every fracture, and so the agony he suffered was unceasing, cyclical, without end. Though the temporal wound Zein left upon the Ladder stopped Veylis' forced apotheosis from ever culminating, the horror remained: Jaus was trapped. Jaus was trapped across space, time, by all the patterns of reality.

Alone.

Naeko's wards were trembling, but he ignored the damage—couldn't stop himself from looking away despite the pain. He reached out for the damned effigy that became his friend, his master, his *father-to-be*, and a tear escaped him.

Why. Why didn't Jaus talk to him? Why didn't Jaus *trust* him? He would have never allowed this. He loved Veylis, but he would never—

“Stop.” The words came from Naeko before he realized he was speaking. And all at once, it became too much. The way Jaus eyes were always wide, rolling, without chance of unconsciousness; loudness of his cries; the way he writhed and fought, trying not to drown. “Stop! Stop! Enough!”

He didn't know if the ghouls could hear him over Jaus' cries, but a second thereafter the phantoms faded, and the soft ambiance of the penthouse returned. Kare was fetal and shivering. Maru muttered soft curses to himself as he sobbed.

Only Naeko and Avo remained standing — the former shaken, the latter resigned. ***“I reduced the intensity as much as I could.”***

“Reduced,” Naeko said numbly.

Avo did answer. Instead, it looked almost sheepish. Ghosts slithered across its links to Kare and Maru as he began to mend the harm inflicted on them at speeds Naeko thought impossible. ***“Are you well?”***

“No.” Naeko shook his head, the sight and sounds of the moment seared into his mind. Another memory added to his tower of nightmares. “But I don’t think I’ve ever been.” The scenes took something from him. Wounded him. Fighting Zein did the same. But cold fire, aching and bitter, filled parts of himself that were now missing.

Godsdamn Zein.

Godsdamn Veylis.

And godsdamn him for letting this all happen.

***“There are many other things I can show you. Memories. Truths. Struggles between the Guilds. I help the Paladins because we can help each other. I can grant you knowledge. Insight. You can face threats I can’t. And give me legitimacy.”***

The last word drew Naeko’s attention. “Legitimacy?” And then an intrusive thought followed, and realized what the ghoul wanted. “You coming to the trial.”

***“Have to attend. Watch over members of my cadre. Kae Kusanade. She has been failed enough. I will not allow that to happen again. Will reveal what happened to Dawton. But that is only one aspect. Want to speak to the city. Entire city. Want to show them the true shape of the war. The end is coming. The end is coming. They should know.”***

“That might just spark a war,” Naeko said.

But the ghoul just smiled. ***“The war has already been sparked. I am just choosing to feed the flame of my own initiative. But I do not want to be alone. We do not need to be alone with ourselves. The Paladins do not need to remain crippled. I can sort through those you can trust. Those you can’t. I can empower the ones you choose. Make this a common front.”***

“An alliance?” Naeko asked.

***“A union,”*** Avo said. ***“Do you have a dream, Naeko? What do you want?”***

What does he want? Again, the shadow of Veylis loomed over the ghoul, and the echo of her presence nearly made him shiver. It seemed he was destined to be surrounded by charismatic monsters until the end of time. “Honestly,” Naeko sighed. “I wanna give up. I wanna give up. Play Stormjumpers. Let the world end. Let damnation be damnation.”

***“But such a thing is beyond your choice now. His screams scarred you.”***

Here the ghoul went reading him again. Naeko glared. “Yeah. I can see why Zein found you interesting.”

The statement actually made Avo growl with disgust. **“She is selfish. Dishonored herself. Enslaved by her past. Choice-taker. No better than the Hungers. No better.”**

The sheer scorn earned a chuckle from Naeko. “And how long did you know her.”

**“Less than two months. Ambushed me. Killed me. Showed me certain things. Took me as a disciple and then overdosed on drugs repeatedly. Then tried to use me as a pawn. Relationship deteriorated further from there.”**

Yeah, that sounded like Zein. “Well. She spoke pretty highly of you. Called you a plague. Said you were spreading through the Nether somehow. Was infecting the city.”

**“Work in progress.”**

Jaus. Not even a denial. Naeko took things a step further. “She also said you’d try to infect me or claim me somehow too.”

**“Yes. Want you to be a part of my gestalt.”**

“Your what?”

His question was answered by a ghost host expanding out behind Naeko like unfurling wings. Sequences branched along his Echoheads, and the background vanished into a space where the mental and metaphysical were wed. Naeko felt his ward rattle and his Frame shake. From on high, he took in the faces strange and familiar alike.

Abrel Greatling. Kare Kitzuhada. Shotin Kazahara. Jelene Draus. Aedon Chambers. Kassa—

“Kassamon?” Naeko muttered. The ghostly manifestation of the man had the decency to look apologetic.

**[Sorry, Chief. Got burned at Veng’s Stand. Didn’t see it coming. Hells, I don’t think anyone saw anything coming.]** He frowned at Avo, but the ghoul simply clicked his fangs together in prideful satisfaction. **[It’s still fucking bullshit.]**

**[Yep,]** Abrel concurred.

“What... what am I looking at?” Naeko asked. Kare was among the ghosts but also next to him. That could be the original. Or had the ghoul seeded a clone or simulacrum of the original into the Paladins.

***“They are templates,”*** Avo said. ***“Perfect copies of someone’s ego—their mental self. Only missing the will. So far.”*** Naeko noted faint dots pulsating within the minds of each template. ***“The assimilated are usually nulled. Ephemeral do not survive subsumption. Godclads resurrect. Prefer the latter for that reason. Would not cause you any pain—”***

“Fuck no,” Naeko answered, almost immediately. He repeated himself for emphasis. This shit wasn’t just creepy, it was also godsdamned weird. “Fuck. No. You keep—keep your ghost away from me.” A faint vapors gathered around Naeko as likeness of a palm enshrouded his person. He was gonna need to find someone to clean all his loci or something. But the ghoul just might eat their minds too. Shit. Godsdammit. Fuck. He was going to be paranoia all the time now. Dammit. What possessed Zein to try training this thing.

***“Understand it might feel like a lot,”*** Avo said, speaking as if he was inviting Naeko out for dessert rather than asking if he could *have* Naeko’s mind for dessert. ***“Will give it time.”***

The Chief Paladin pointed a single finger at the ghoul. “Hey, you keep your ghost-shit away from me. I see a wisp, I’m gonna go ghoul swatting.”

Avo cocked his head at that. ***“Understandable. We’ll work on it.”***

Another thing he had in common with Veylis: no never meant no to their like.

*Their like.*

Dead gods, was Naeko really comparing his love to a *ghoul*? More intrusive thoughts followed, and these were most unwelcome; the thought of deeper *intimacy* followed and Naeko’s wards thundered from sheer disgust.

***“Why are you making that face?”*** Avo asked.

Good. They didn’t “glimpse” his mind or anything that time. Thank fucking Jaus for small miracles. “It’s a cramp.”

The ghoul grunted, doubt ringing clear in its voice, but it pressed no further. ***“Zein did not lie to you about me. But she does misconstrue my nature. I was a ghoul. I did hunger. I did partake in flesh. I am burning plague upon this city. But I have done you more service than anyone else across the centuries. I have protected you and yours whenever I could. Used them? Yes. But aided. Preserved. Fought for. Repeatedly.”***

Naeko slowly turned to look at Kare’s template, then the Paladin herself. She was pale with sweat, sitting against his jack station, but still she found the strength to nod. To agree with Avo.

**[Listen,] a template spoke—was that *Aedon Chambers*? [Just spend some time with him. Sure, he liked eating eyeballs, torture, used me as disposal asset, had an aratnid impregnate my balls—]**

“What?” Naeko muttered.

**[---but he’s also the best consang you’ll ever have. The best. He gave this gutter rat a chance at being a ‘Clad. Hell, he made me a whole person. Almost. Shit, we’re working on it. But he’ll do what he can to make your life better too. He’ll fight for you—hells, he’s already fighting for you. Glasser boss—Naeko... he can’t hurt you. He can’t null or snuff you unless you let him. But he’s still here. Still here talking to you. Trying to make things work. Why don’t you just give this a chance, huh? Kae? Say the fancy thing you said to me earlier.]**

The Agnos poked her head out among the crowd—waved at Naeko awkwardly. **[Ah. Yes. Avo’s efforts toward facing the Guilds and aiding the city are empirically proven. We are having a visible effect on the Syndicates and have protected endangered individuals multiple times. This is beyond dispute.]**

A few dozen other confident testimonials followed. But a few thousand other faces looked nonplussed—even annoyed.

Naeko held up a hand and silenced the presently speaking templates before he gestured at the silent majority. “What about the rest of you? How do you guys feel about him?”

A man with the upper half of his face replaced with studded stacks of chrome snorted. **[How do I feel? He tore out all my blood and used it to skull-fuck my sister to death.]** The woman next to nodded bitterly.

**[He warped my flesh. Grew tongues where my eyes were and tasted me using me. Fucking using me! Fucked up!]**

**[You ever get your mind burned along with a lobby of a few thousand other half-strands? Because that’s how I got-got.]**

**[I was just trying to make some imps. He opened me up from the inside. Slowly.]**

Instead of a dozen voices, a few thousand aired their grievances, and they were none to happy about their deaths either. As the complaints flowed, Avo and Naeko just stared at each other, neither blinking.

***“Lots were Syndicate enforcers. Gangers. Necros. Some others are Guilder opposition. Enemies. Fewer are unfortunates. Collateral damage. Not hiding this. Want to be honest***



***with you. Should know you can trust me.”***

**[He make me eat my own fucking eye, glasser! My own eye!]**

Finally, Naeko blinked. A mind-eating, mass-murdering, Frame-having ghoul was the closest thing he had to an actual ally. “Holy shit.”

***“Indeed. Now. Want to talk about Scale: wish to examine the Gatekeeper first.”***

***{Truth,}*** the Gatekeeper whispered. Naeko thought he heard a hint of fear.