

***Hounds of my father's will.***

***Hear me now.***

***I acknowledge your choice to stand.***

***Stand and deliver.***

***Stand and fight for what you believe.***

***Stand, and be slaughtered for what you cannot achieve.***

***I have broken the Rungs. Your encirclement of our districts is no more.***

***Your Chief is dead.***

***Your bases are burning.***

***Your forces are shattered.***

***Your captains have turned.***

***Behold the grace of my respect, and weep knowing the price you have paid.***

***Your numbers still stand in the tens of thousands. Perhaps this is enough to turn the tide  
or any war. Or force a stalemate.***

***But perhaps you have only your lives to lose.***

***Your champions remain alive, and they may yet see me slain.***

***Naeko. I see you. I see my Seraphs, Authorities, and Instruments dead around you. I see  
your strength, and I am proud to have known and pained with your parting.***

***But hearts willows to wind and action, and I will not stray.***

***Your walking fortresses yet remain. Few as they are. Planescrawlers moving to swallow  
my forces.***

***But should they fall, you know that nothing will spare your families from me.***

***Some among you might think to capitulate to another Guild. To join force with force and  
turn the tides of this war. But they are not so desperate. This battle is not yet existential***

***for them, and should you greet them, know they will await you with collars hanging from their hands.***

***So now, I propose an end to this. An end to the misery. To the bloodshed.***

***You have taken respect from me. More than enough to merit this clemency, and the mark of my father blessed you yet in my mind. I will permit to you what sectors of control you have remaining and continue to recognize your role as defenders of the city.***

***I will stay my hand from your kin. I will pull my forces back and let you have peace and a time.***

***Time to heal.***

***Time to find strength.***

***Time to seek proper retribution against me, if you so choose.***

***I am known to you. Look to your remaining veterans. Look to them and understand that nothing is beyond me.***

***Nothing.***

***There is no word to convey the defilement I will inflict on your survivors if I am forced to bleed. You stand on the verge of breaking, but my ranks are swelled by blessed among you, who have seen the light.***

***I do not wish to degrade you further.***

***I do not wish to stain the memory of my father anymore.***

***But I will.***

***To do what is right, to forge that which is just, which is true, I will.***

***Spare yourselves from me. Spare yourselves. Grant yourselves a final chance.***

***Of this, I beg.***

***-High Seraph Veylis Avandaer Calling on Surviving Paladins to Yield, Second Guild War***

"I still don't know what's got you all worked up tonight," Naeko said, leaning back against the couch. "I mean, I thought you'd be happy I arrested the elder and the girl. But here you are. Mad. Mad like you always are. Madder." He shook his head. "You sure you don't want anything to drink?"

Maru shook his head. Something was still bothering him. It would come. A few more words, and a bit more prodding, but it would come out. That's just the way the boy was.

"You know, I was on a good winning streak before you cast that wrinkled thing in my face," Naeko said.

"No you weren't," Maru scoffed. "I saw the red projected by your phantoms. You lost."

"I kill half the enemy team! What do you want me to do? Beat them all on my own? Come on, man? Come on, son!"

"What mode?"

"Strongholds."

"Oh. So you were running around killing people instead of holding ground and trying to help your group, huh?" The whites of Maru's eyes shone as he glared. His expression carried the implications his words couldn't.

Naeko sighed. "Look. Listen. I bagged the Elder for her part in what she did to Morrow and the Agnos. You was right about that. You was. Her and Greatling too. I thought you would be... proud of me doing something. I don't know."

The younger Paladin's stare softened. "You know how many 'accidents' our people have had over the past month?"

"I mean, comes with the territory, right?" Naeko met the other man's gaze. "We take one of theirs. They put the squeeze on us. We run this trial. We put them before Truth and Justice, and let them feel the weight of their—"

"What are you doing, old man?" Maru asked. There was no anger in his voice anymore. Just tiredness. "You... you grab an elder and an Instrument. You jam them in the Unwhere. Hold them and tell us to withhold all rights to bail from their Guilds, and then... you give one half-assed report to the public and disappear back. You don't come into the Scale—haven't even cast in for the past week..."

"That's 'cause I'm done," Naeko said, throwing up his hands. "I got it handled."

Wordless bafflement consumed Maru. "Don't?"

“Our friend Denton came by to say hi to me. Decided to cut a deal and she dropped me some *nasty* evidence. The case is ironclad, and this time, there’s no getting away.” He let a small smirk crawl over his face. “I got us a star witness too: Jelene Draus. Got bad blood against the Greatlings. Enough to charge with them the thing on Valhu.”

“And Morrow? What about his evidence?” Maru asked. “What about Kusanade? Did your ‘contact’ give you anything on her, or is she still missing?”

“Ah. She’ll turn up eventually. Or not.” Naeko breathed. “The fact is, the Incubi used her to kill one of ours. That’s two unforgivable crimes. Stuff that all the other Guilds will jump on them for like the jackals they are. Stuff that Elder D’Rongo ordered directly. We got about a week and a half before the moot is established by Voidwatch and we can start the trial. It’s all good.”

“So. That’s justice for us? For Morrow?” Maru still wanted more. Gluttony made Naeko tired.

“What else do you want from me?” Naeko said. “Look. In a single moment, my relationship did more work that—”

“Morrow told me he was gonna quit,” Maru interrupted. He reached out and snatched Naeko’s drink with a growl of annoyance before taking a swig. “Your taste is shit.”

Naeko grinned at him. “You don’t know what shit tastes like, boy. I do, and it’s not the drink. So. Morrow was gonna leave but he got cut down before he could. That’s what’s bugging you?”

“No,” Maru said, brows furrowed. “He was going to leave because... well, heard this from his brother, but he was planning to ask the Agnos to elope.”

The Chief Paladin shifted his entire body as the couch creaked. Suddenly, his focus narrowed as he leaned forward, attention rapt. “Yeah? Damn. That don’t work with the Agnosi though. Their vows are supposed to be... well. *‘Only death or severance shall free a bearer of the faiths.’*”

Agnosi were not permitted to families or legacies in any circumstances. The rules only stopped applying after they were dead or had all their memories carved out. They also couldn’t have any money, purchase long-term property, or *ever* be Ensouled due to the nature of their work.

Theirs was a lineage of sacrifice. Turncoat fathers taken in by Jaus and shackled to Guild supervision: forsaking power to give themselves life in the coming utopia.

Of course, things didn’t quite turn out that way.

“She could’ve taken severance,” Maru said. “But I looked into Agnos Kusanade’s file before. I think she loves her work the most of all.”

This earned a roll of Naeko's eyes. "Well. Guess they could have had an unofficial series of trysts or something. Just... happen to live, work, and spend their days together. It could've—"

"He's dead. She's missing. The Ori are sticking to the official line that she went mad and tried to murder him. Highflame has the incident redacted. The Agnosi themselves have blanked out her name—pretending she doesn't exist either. So. Could've. Could've... Could've. We could've done more at the time. We could've pressed." Maru's eyes dropped. "We could've done what we should've and kept fighting."

Oh. So that was what this was. Old wounds reopening from a rough day at work. "Did Kazahara jacking into your mind bring this on?"

"Fuck off." The sheer force behind the snarl told Naeko he was on point.

"Look," Naeko said, lightly bumping the smaller man with a cinderblock of a fist, "we gotta do what we can. We gotta do what we can for who we can because that's what Jaus wanted, right? Because if not, who's gonna keep the Fallwalkers at bay? Who's gonna keep the Guilds from getting too loud in the Warrens? Voidwatch? Nah. Our lives are poison to them. And we're not worth one of their citizens. Right now, this is the best thing we can do. Okay?"

Maru didn't respond immediately.

"You know what? Fine. I'll do some work. I'll look at the after-action you sent. I'll even go up to the Tiers and grab that Planeshift by the ear and make him say sorry to you. You want that?"

"Don't patronize me."

"Because I can do it. He's got some cute tricks, but I tussled with old Thousandhand and... you know who. He's a snot-nosed kid. I'll kick his ass for you."

"I don't need you to defend my honor," Maru said. "I just need you to be a Chief. To be there. To be—"

"Fine! Fine! I'll come to work tomorrow," Naeko said. "I'll do the morning cast and all that. Boost morale. Commendations all around for stopping the outbreak. Star of Valiance to Karu."

"*Kare.*"

"Huh?"

"Kare. You know her name. You're deliberately getting it wrong to rib me, you fuck."

Naeko breathed out through his nose and smirked. "Yeah."

The younger Paladin whipped the hardest punch he could into Naeko's jaw, and the blow just thudded off without effect.

"Alright." Naeko shifted again and patted his couch. "So, you feel like watching something now? I still got, like, a billion hours of classical action flicks to get through. Maybe we can do movie night at the station or something. Use the projector and play some of them in the lobby of the Scale at midnight."

A snorting laugh escaped from Maru. "You ever think about what the Chainbreaker might think if he could see us now? Hm?"

A beat passed as Naeko just studied the other man. "Yeah. At night. Sometimes. Especially when I look out at the city."

"And?"

"Well. I'd probably just try to kill him. To spare him from seeing what his girl became."

A momentary flash of light was cut off as the windows polarized immediately. Silence settled between them as the window pane rattled. Outside, passing ghosts cast warnings of a nearby nuclear detonation, commanding all streetside residences to take shelter.

"Be in the office tomorrow morning," Maru said, standing up. "Or I'm going to smash more of your shit."

"Alright," Naeko frowned. "You just leaving? Do you need me to—"

And then a gunshot pulsed from Maru's very being as the room around him bloomed with gunfire, different places in reality overlapping as the younger Paladin rematerialized from the barrel of a linear acceleration rifle far from Naeko's home. Then, as the plume of the weapon faded, the chief found himself alone again.

Alone, and with his drink stolen. "Dammit," Naeko grunted, staring at his empty palm. Grumbling about being disrespected, he reached out with his utility fog, seeking another bottle when his mind wandered and his nanos back to scratch his chin.

Outbreak. Shotin Kazahara. Kare Kitzuhada. Jelene Draus. Ambassador Valhu Kitzuhada. Aedon Chambers. Elder D'Rongo. Kae Kusanade.

Names were echoing in his head. Flashes of places and undeveloped threads of thought. With a wince, he cast his Meta out to link with his home entertainment locus and closed Stormjumper as he triggered a session. Accessing his personal lobby at the Scale, he flooded his mind with

all the confidential mem-data, ignoring the over two million sequences of inactive cast he let build up over time.

Profiles were passing through his cog-feed as he skimmed through them. It all had the look of some great big Guilder mess that he wanted no part of. Just thinking about it all gave him a migraine. But then, parts of it didn't make any sense. Parts of it were too disjointed.

Take this Aedon Chambers guy. Real sick bastard, apparently. Fled across Nu-Scarrow with his privates out—privates that Maru had given Naeko a close-up of earlier. Then, just a few days ago, he showed his face again at Veng's Stand in an engagement against a certain Ori-Thaum Seeker.

The connecting element here? Maybe D'Rongo or something, but things were jumpy at best. Chambers was listed as an enforcer under Jhred Greatling's Syndicate, then his suspected assassin, then a bunch of other unconfirmed theories and details. No clarity at all. And nothing in his history hinted at any of these capabilities.

Opening Jelene Draus' file next, he reviewed all thirty thousand pages the Exorcists compiled of her active engagements and killings she committed across the Warrens. The disgraced Regular kept herself pretty busy since her fall from the Tiers, slaughtering her way through the dregs of the FATELESS night after night, Crucible after Crucible.

*Dread Draus.* She had a bit of a fan following in the Tiers. Some people were collecting vicarities from enforcers and gangers she killed in a particularly brutal fashion.

Juvs these days had strange habits.

Despite her connection to the Greatlings, though, he couldn't tell where she was leading either. Sure, she fought the Silvers, but she had nothing to do directly with the Ambassador or...

Well, he did beat her former superior. What's-her-name Greatling.

Veylis was always a sore loser. Loved wiping the board clean as soon as he beat her in a game of Tides.

Distant memories came back to Naeko. Of a life he lived after emerging from the slave pits. The family he had. The warmth he felt.

Those memories were like a fire now. They burned him. Burned him something bad.

He shifted his mind back to task and shook the discomfort off.

For the first time in years, he began doing some investigative work, diving deep into detailed simulations of the crime scenes and reviewing random sequences of recollections edited into a coherent narrative.

Jumping from place to place as he tried to follow Chambers along his flight again, he struggled to comprehend what was with the guy. He was loud. Then gone. Then loud again. Reckless. But well funded and supported...

He would need to subpoena Shotin Kazahara for a more direct look and talk with his niece, the Paladins' very own Kare Kitzuhada. Nice girl. Too good to be wasted with old ruins like him and angry husks like Maru. But that was the thing about people who were too good: they treated their own lives real cheap.

Jaus would've liked her. Which probably meant she was going to end up dead sooner or later. Just like Morrow.

Just like all the others.

Naeko resolved to regard her more as a caricature in his mind to lessen the hit when it inevitably came.

As he jumped into the vicariness of an office worker watching Chambers' escape at Light's End, something else drew his attention. Another figure. Blood was misting around them, flowing like a protective shield as trickles of red flowed from their Metamind into the drone they hijacked—an Exorcist Tadpole.

Pausing the vicariness and zooming in on the creature, Naeko examined the phantasmal artifact built from countless collected recollections. It had eight back-scaled tendrils coiling out from its back, but what parts of its skin could be seen were white like sections of hardened ceramic.

The fact it had a Metamind told Naeko it possessed the cognition of a person, at least. The blood, however, he was cognizant of. They lost more than a few emergency response knots and Triangulator golems against an unidentified Fallwalker with a Heaven of Blood grafted to Sphere Four Frame.

He made the connection there but frowned as no additional details were forthcoming when he tried to find a file on them.

Unlike the others, this one was a complete enigma. Theorizing from the Exorcists listed it as a potential bio-rig of some kind—the most likely prospect. That could be connected to Draus somehow. She was known to work with Sang middlers from time to time. But there was something that still bothered Naeko. Something that made him fixate.

Blood. Stormtree had more than a few Heavens rooted in that domain. As did the No-Dragons.



But he found no hits in his list of active Godclads that resembled or wore a biological exoskeleton that looked like a souped-up ghoul fused within another layer of bone. And the few thousand who had Heavens of Blood were all eliminated in quick succession.

That just made his wariness grow.

Fallwalker, maybe. But a Third Sphere Fallwalker? They would have picked someone like that up. Noticed them passing the border or spotted them somewhere in the Warrens at some point. This one, however, seems to have appeared out of thin air.

“*What* are you?” Naeko whispered, materializing his own avatar across from the creature. Looking up at its imposing form, he wondered why its presence had filled him with such uneasiness, even as he prepared to restart the scene for another run-through.