

What have we here? What do I see? Two presences before me! Two paths of gold!

One so angry. The other so strange.

Could it be that this old mad monk has stumbled upon a path, of two Souls intersected on a point of change?

[Laughter]

-The Mad Monk Alsim, Fallwalker

26-8

Sympathy From a Monster

Naeko didn't know how long he spent beating the corpse. All he knew was that when sense finally returned to him, his fists were splashing gore and offal in blood-filled divots made by his fist, and that what remained of Karakan was little more than a smear.

It was his breath that captured his focus. He was hyperventilating; sobbing; laughing. His body was shaking, and try as he could, he just couldn't stop it.

What the *fuck* did he just do?

Why did he kill her?

What was he going to do now?

What was he going to do?

It took more effort than he thought possible to wrap his arms around himself, to fall sideways into the warmth of Karakan's remains and just lay there. Whimpers escaped from him as he tasted the blood, took in what he did.

He was never going to find himself again. Never.

She was his only true release. All Stormjumpers did was numb. There was no other expression that made him feel *right*. He couldn't make the world feeling right anymore. He just couldn't.

Then came a whispered thought from the darkest recesses of his mind. It was a thought he ignored most days, it was a thought he could shrug aside despite all the inner hate that burned. Not today. Not this moment. And maybe never thereafter.

It wouldn't be so hard for him to just end things. He had the means. He had the capability. Would it be so bad? A final moment of rest, of relief. No more feeling. No more of this pain. Just a long, deep sleep that won't end.

Rest. True rest. Absolute rest.

"Doesn't sound so bad," he whispered to himself. But another memory lashed at him—made him flinch. With it came a score of aches along his sides, and Zein's enraged features—the first time he ever saw her truly mad, the first time he ever wondered if she was going to kill him.

He had lost another spar to her. The thousandth in a day. His body was past its limits. His will was teetering on the brink. Veylis lay face-down not far from him, groaning as she clutched her chest.

It was him against Zein. And he had nothing left. Nothing.

He lowered his practice glaive. He let her strike him. She responded poorly thereafter; she kept going, breaking his arm, dislocating his shoulder, shattering his ribs, snapping his knee. Her blows blurred into a stream as she beat her displeasure, her disappointment, into him. She struck his throat when she heard him cry out for mercy.

Afterward, when he lay there, chills claiming his body, his pooling piss the only heat he knew, she plucked him up by his neck and brought them close to precipice. They were training on mountain that day. The climb to the place of their practice was arduous. Veylis and Zein had completed it so easily, and he, new disciple with nothing but determination and rage, found himself wanting in every capacity.

There, Zein made him face the edge and released him.

"Jump, then," she snarled at him. "Jump. See if the skies weep for you. See if the clouds will reach down to catch you. See if the heavens will more you. Go! Do it! See!" He didn't. He just knelt her, holding in his pain, holding in the urge to weep. *"All you have is your glaive, boy! And you betrayed it! You betrayed your skill, will, and power to me! Your enemy! The one that means you harm! What wrongness resides in you! What worth are you if your hate cannot be turned against your foes, if you cannot die with hate joyously pointed outward, teeth bared at the one who kills you?"*

He didn't have an answer. Instead, he gazed down the edge, down along the narrow, winding path up the mountain, down the other cloud-piercing promontories besides, and the birds soaring with rising shrieks. Some part of him wanted to cast himself over, to spite Zein only once. But he couldn't. He refused. He had been wrong. The world wasn't right. They took his father from him.

They took his world.

He needed to take their worlds too.

He groaned as he pushed himself away, crawled back toward Zein, spitting blood and hate at her. His decision was made—fuck her. He'd get her bloody if it was the last—

And her joy followed as fast as her hate. She kicked his weapon back to him, and descended once more.

She beat him a thousand more times thereafter. Beat him until the pain stop being anything but a variable to regard. Beat him until he stopped caring about losing, until he only cherished the fight. That was the day she fashioned the Force-Breaker. That was a distant day.

Now, there were no more gods to kill, and he had no strength left to defy, no true war he wanted to fight.

He still loved her. Veylis. He loved her so. He loved Zein—wretched and cold though she was. He loved Jaus, even if the man didn't trust him in the end. He loved them.

And he wasn't enough for them.

Just like Karakan wasn't enough for him.

"Nothing will ever be enough."

Naeko blinked. He didn't know how long he lay there in a daze. He wasn't sure if the words he just heard were hallucinated or true, but he lifted his head—

—and found half of Karakan's face surfacing from the blood, facing him as if he hadn't murdered her just moments prior.

Stunned silence followed. For a few awkward beats, Naeko just stared. Then, he started to laugh, he held himself and guffawed. "Oh, *oh*. I did it. It was finally too much. I lost it. I lost my mind. Freedom. At last. At last."

His words made Karakan frown. What vivid detail his insanity offered. He could even see her accretion—*wait*.... Her accretion... That looked like a Metamind. He'd seen that Metamind before.

Another pause followed. Karakan leisurely rose from a puddle of her own blood, climbing out with casual contempt as she looked down at him.

Naeko exploded back to his feet with a roar, snatching the *thing* wearing Karakan's body, slamming the fucker against the walls. Metal folded inward. The surrounding lights flickered.

Karakan's body splattered apart into a spray of red mist—and then reformed in the very same instant.

A presence played against Naeko's Frame. A Soul. The ghoul.

"*You,*" Naeko growled, digging his hands into Karakan's face. Words weren't enough to describe his hate. But still he spoke. "How the fuck did you find me? And why? Why did you take her from me? Why? Tell me!"

The beast wearing Karakan's flesh merely chuckled. "You were easy to find. Your thoughts are so total. So loud. Your wounds have a melody no other mind could mimic. I would find you across the reach of the void, Naeko. You cannot hide from me. No more than I stop myself from drinking in your pain."

The affect of Avo's words was flat. The fucking thing wasn't even taunting him. This was just how it saw things. A feeling of embarrassment thickened inside the Chief Paladin. Shame and horror followed.

The ghoul continued. "And I didn't kill Karakan. I *subsumed* her. She is still here. In me. She has been screaming this entire time. Her hurt runs deep. Your hurt runs deeper. And neither of you will ever mend so long as she lived."

Naeko bit his lip and poured every ounce of hate he had into his gaze. It did less than nothing to the creature. It merely judged him as if he was some kind of curiosity. "She was mine. I was going to—"

"*Find yourself?*" Avo's voice echoed out from Karakan's, the potency of their expressed mind making Naeko's consciousness ache. **"*No. No. No more lies. Pain has claimed you. You are unhealed. But she is not your release. She is your delusion. You shoot joy into your injuries and imagine it to be a salve.*"**

"No!" Naeko hammered the ghoul into the wall. Karakan's body burst apart again, but from it emerged spearing sequences—sequences that Naeko hammered in place using a vaporous palm. "No. You don't know anything—"

"*I have seen everything. No one mourns her passing. No one left who loves her. No one right now cares. She hurt you. You are her consequence. But she is your drug. Burden. Chain. Something Jaus should have broken—*"

"Stop talking!" Naeko said, clenching his Heaven around Avo. But the Overheaven of Conceptualization did not fight back. It did not resist with force or violent intent. It merely flinched as the sequences were compressed inward, as ghosts were pinched from flowing, as ripples of Soulfire flattened against an irresistible force. "Stop!" Naeko wept.

“He should have fought for you. Like you did for him. You needed him. You needed all of them. They left you alone. Why am I the only one here for you?”

Naeko continued squeezing, howled out incoherent cries of pain. His grip around Avo’s ontology was so tight he could feel the Overheaven’s tangled nest of cycles writhe beneath his grip, moving like blood through a vein. It would take less than a gesture from him to break the ghoul, less than a thought to manifest the Sage of the Sundered Skies—or his *Heaven of Time*—and cast the beast back to oblivion.

But in the end, it took less than a sentence for Avo to break him. ***“You will not find salvation in weakness. You will not right what is broken when all you have is pain. But you do not have to. You don’t need to bear the world. You don’t even to bear your own hurt. I am here. I will not abandon you. I will be here for you—and ask for nothing in return. Hear me. Hear me. Feel this truth.”***

Naeko slumped down to his knees. He released his Heaven. He released Avo. He released them so he could hold himself. As he slumped down, he found himself close to that edge again—saw the long fall below, felt the rustling winds beckon him to a final leap.

He barely heard the squelch of changing flesh, barely tilted his gaze to realize a near-three meter tall monster was awkwardly trying to sit next to him, taking a spot next to a wall.

“I’m sorry,” Avo said. ***“I still have her template. I can fashion myself. Give you the screams you wanted. Can help you wean slower.”***

Naeko didn’t even understand half of what it was saying. He just shook his head languidly. There was an ache building in the back of his skull. It was all too much, he was getting too tired. “No.”

Time past. Both of them just sat there in a limbo of silence and mutual company. The monster watched him always, studied him carefully. Naeko found himself thoughtless. Empty. Used up. At some point, the weirdness became too much for him. “I barely know you. Hells, I barely understand what you are. Why? Why are you here? Why’d you risk yourself like that. You know what I could have done to you.”

“Yes.”

“Then why.”

“Because I also know what you don’t do to the world every day. What you don’t do to the Guilds. We have symmetry, Naeko. But not alike. You are not a monster. I am a monster. You are angry. You are hurt. You are powerful. That is all.”

Naeko didn't believe. He turned to face the cage that once held Karakan—that kept her restored for each subsequent time he needed a release. “Bullshit. Who else could have done all this?” All his words earned from the ghoul was chuffing laughter. Naeko glared, a flicker of hate returning. “What. What are you laughing at now.”

“What you said. Only right on the surface. Few others could have done this. But that is because they lack the means and the power. Not the desire. Many have the want. Know this. Have felt this. Many would have done this out of sheer sadism. The pleasure for power over another. You needed to be hurt first. You needed this to be a thing of eternal revenge.”

“It's the only thing that makes me whole.”

“You lie. Lie to me. Lie to yourself. You are not the story you tell yourself. Not the story that lives in your head. Only gods are slaves to belief; shaped by stories — Canons.”

Naeko snorted. “And I'm just a man.”

“Not just. A man. Not a value. An understanding. A shape. An expression. Cast no more weight on yourself. Not a dog. Not a Godclad. Not even your feelings. You are not an absolute, Naeko. Rejoice. Change. Suffer. Break. Heal. Become. All things you can do. Doesn't matter if you believe. Doesn't matter if your emotions are swirling like a sickness inside you. Such is true.”

Every word Avo spoke was like a claw digging further into his wound, pulling out pieces, pain stinging like that of sterilization. But more than that, this shit was getting too fucking weird. “Alright, alright. Enough. Stop—stop word-mending me.” Avo stopped talking after his sudden outburst. Naeko rubbed at his face, finding himself embarrassed by his tears. “What the hells even is my life. Crying in front of a ghoul.” He paused. “No offense.”

“It was what I am.”

“Yeah. So you know how this is really, really godsdamned weird, right?”

“Quite.”

“You know, you being impossibly reasonable isn't making it better.”

“Understood. Going to eat Maru's mind for a crash course on how to emotionally abuse you.”

The sheer absurdity of what Avo just proposed made Naeko crack. A choked laugh slipped out from him. “Stop.”

“Have another recommendation—”

“No, Avo—”

“We murder Zein. You hold her in place. I burn her mind. Then kill her repeatedly. Can bond that way. Like proper brethren disciples.”

Naeko’s jaw dropped. The sheer audacity of what the ghoul suggested was... *actually* a bit appealing.

And the godsdamned monster knew that from how wide it was grinning.

“It’s a good idea. Will make you feel better. Deal with another issue inside. Zein has been a terrible mother. You spent too long with Karakan. Need to share that hate with another. You know you want to—” Naeko lightly backhanded Avo, driving a grunt of surprise out from the ghoul. ***“...Was just a suggestion.”***

“Yeah? Let’s go back to not saying anything. I think I liked you more when it was quiet.”

But Avo’s attention was no longer on him. Instead, the ghoul’s gaze was turned, locked to the corner of the room, and the churning of his accretion was accelerating, a note of suspicion emitted from his mind.

“What?” Naeko said, pushing himself off the ground.

“There’s someone above. Someone standing amidst the snakes. He’s been staring us. Watching us from the surface.”

Naeko’s felt the first hints of adrenaline rush through him. “You sure?”

“Yes. Their near-term memories. All of us. Seen from this room. Seen using time itself.”

Naeko swallowed and reached out with his Heaven. Stretching his palm wide, he brought it down over the Sunderwilds, but felt nothing greet his awareness. “There’s no one there.”

Avo answered contrarily. ***“There is. You just caught him. Curious how he has a warmind of Ignorance. Curious why he’s laughing so loud right now.”***