

Control the wants of another, and steer the path of their fate.

-Old Ori Proverb

25-15

Patron of Divinity (I)

-[Avo]-

Shotin was subsumed. Green River would soon follow. Good. Things were going better than Avo hoped. Soon, everything would be in place, and newest additions to his gestalt would behold the truth.

First, though, the Seeker deserved a proper welcoming. **“Welcome, Shotin Kazahara. It is good to finally meet you. Glad to be doing this far ahead of schedule.”**

Shotin’s attention drifted upward to behold Avo’s immensity for but a single instant before his eyes snapped back down. There, among the gathered masses of templates flanking him, stood someone Shotin knew—someone that immediately culled all sense of awe and dread within the Seeker, leaving it replaced with but primal hatred.

Chambers leered at the Seeker, nodding in appreciation of the unfolding scene. Little did he know what was about to happen. But Avo did. And Avo sighed. **“Shotin. Wait—”**

The Seeker didn’t. Though shaped from memory, his template functioned much as his body would in the real, and so he exploded across his branch of Avo’s Soulscape in a blur of force. A savage shout came free of his throat as he sailed into the mob, arms outstretched, irises ablaze with hate.

Faster templates parted. The slower ones were knocked aside all the same. Chambers still had that stupid grin on his face when he was bowled over. The first punch greeted his jaw before he even struck plascrete. Shotin fought with nothing held back—draw not from his Heavens but his own loathing, desiring only to reshape Chambers’ face using his fists.

The sheer intensity of his hatred began to warp the surrounding environment. The towering blocks oozed away as the ghosts sank down to portray the shanties of Veng’s stand—ghettos dwelling in the shadows a few scant megastructures.

“Fuck! Cunt! Fuck!” Shotin snarled, punctuating every punch with a snarl of rage. Drawing on subsumed knowledge, Avo judged the Kazahara’s form to be adequate but uncontrolled. Abrel snorted as she took in his attacks.

[Yeah. Jhred could have taken him in a brawl.]

Kare directed a protective glare at the Greatling. **[Jhred Greatling could not even handle his own demons. My uncle is infinitely worse.]**

Abrel Greatling took a deep breath. And decided she wanted violence. She manifested at the scene and stepped out from among the templates, calling out to Kare. **[Alright, you glasser bitch. Stand and deliver. No Heavens. No tech. I'm going to give you a moment in common with *mommy dearest*. Give your uncle some of his own demons to deal with.]**

Kare shrugged her way out the crowd and rolled her shoulder—she was moving the moment Abrel made mention of her mother. **[No protocol to keep you safe here, Gold. You should have spent some time learning humility.]**

Another submind just burned Green River. The Sang was plunging down in the form of a fox. Meanwhile, introductions were quickly deteriorating into an all out brawl. ***“Everyone. Please—”***

[Let it happen,] template-Draus recommended.

“Just want to see them fight.”

[Yeah. And it'll make 'em feel better.]

Abrel initiated her fight with far more grace than Shotin. She circled first, her footwork a taunting blur. But Kare obliged her—kept pace. For a few moments, the two women worked to gauge distance as a crowd of Regulars, Glaives, Incubi, and other supporters crowded around them and began to cheer.

Meanwhile, Shotin continued trying to marry Chambers' skull to the sidewalk, unaware of how the man beneath him was planning to twist his testicles. If they could be found.

Ghosts carried Green River down in a pitched whimper—her template tensing as if expecting to splatter upon the sequence. Even after landing unharmed, the jolting thud sent her into a trance of shock and confusion, her attention first locked to herself, and then to the sounds of knuckles cracking against a skull beside her.

Hey, cal—calm the fuck down,” Chambers cried, working to create enough space so that he could gauge the position of Shotin's cock.

Unaware of the supposed acolyte's brewing schemes, Shotin continued his beatdown. “Rash me now, motherfuck! Rash me! Come on!”

Cracks accompanied yelps of pain. Back in the crowd, Kare and Abrel were still just jabbing at each other—their grudge match demonstrating far more refinement.

Avo considered enforcing his will on the templates. This was his Soulscape after all. All this spontaneous brawling was ruining the mood. He wanted to bask in Green River and Shotin's horror. Reveal to them the truth behind the war—Jaus' fate.

[Come on, Avo,] Corner said, joining Draus as a voice for leniency. **[They'll be scared in a minute anyway. Let the half-strands fight. Shit's hilarious.]**

An angry snarl slipped from the crowds. "Bitch, did you just spit at me?" Abrel cried.

Overwhelmed by the sheer chaos unfolding, Green River blinked and turned her snout toward Shotin, mind barely managing to force out the words. "Shotin?"

This finally got the Seeker to stop. The rage coursing through him struck a dam in the form of Green River, and surprised recognition followed thereafter. "River?"

About time. **"Good,"** Avo said. **"Both of you have arrived and Shotin's rage is vented. Now we can begi—"**

Chambers counterattack brought an end to Avo's hopes. "Surprise attack!" Chambers declared—after his digits curled around Shotin's testicles and up along the length between the male genitals and the rectal area.

[Taint,] Benhata deadpanned. **[It's called the taint.]**

Avo was more distracted by Shotin's agonized howls as Chambers lifted him off the ground in a vicious, twisting motion.

"You're a fool, Silver," Chambers chuckled, squeezing tighter as Shotin kicked and thrashed, pain editor working hard to keep him from blacking out. "Dannis learned this lesson the hard way in the first Soft Masters movie: never left your guard down. Or they'll come for your ball—"

A descending elbow cracked against Chambers' skull, sending the man tumbling backward. Broken from her stupor by the moment of groin-based violence, Green River joined the brawl by latching onto Chambers' calf. Neither action had any effect on the man's death grip. Chambers' fingers were fused around Shotin's balls; his grasp was tight enough to be absolute. Practically a canon unto itself.

"Fuck!" Shotin cried, foam escaping his mouth. "River!"

"Mmmphghg," she said, which, when converted into thought was. **+I'm trying!+**

The sheer absurdity of the scene made Draus break down into hysterics. Pig-like laughter escaped the Regular, and those of her kind joined her. Meanwhile, Abrel and Kare had taken to flinging any template they could get their hands on at each other—their conflict a finer hatred.

“Enough of this,” Avo growled. ***_Stop_***

And where once the templates were allowed to perform to their own desires, to proceed along their own simulated paths, a higher will collapsed upon theirs, and compliance became the only choice thereafter.

It was a tyrannical act. An effort of brute force. But they were part of him. Nested in his mind. His Soul. He was inducting them into his gestalt, and by all the gods would he have a moment of sanity to discuss important matters before the circus within began once more.

Ghosts swatted people back to their places. It took a full percent of Avo’s cognitive capacity to make Chambers release Shotin’s cock. Green River and the groaning Seeker were placed next to each other while a wall formed between Kare and Abrel, muttering oaths of hate and unfinished violence for the interruption to their fight.

[Mighty embarrassin’ for you, Avo,] Draus taunted. **[Thought you was all about choice.]**

He had to reshape his mind to stop himself from snapping at her. ***“Yes. And I get one too. Had your fun. Need to handle appropriate matters now.”*** With that, he bade the core of his Overheaven to loom over his two newest templates. Newer, anyway. More egos and deaths were raining in the backdrop of his sequences—the other subminds never ceased in their operations. ***“Welcome. Glad to finally have you. Both of you.”***

Green River’s perception was locked purely to the metaphysical crown at the core of Avo’s ego. Shotin’s awareness swung like a pendulum, seeking Chambers, noticing Avo, finally regarding all the surrounding templates.

“What... what the fuck is going on,” Shotin gasped. Now his mind was stuttering—trying to keep pace with all that was happening. “Where the fuck—who the fuck—how—”

“Are we dead?” Green River said, asking a more pertinent question.

“Your original selves are. Temporarily. But you aren’t. Not as long as I remain.”

“We?” Green River whispered. The vulpine’s eyes swiveled. “What have you done to us? Are we captured, then? Prisoners like Peace.”

From the gathered mass of templates, Peace barked a sneering laugh. “Prisoners. Yeah, fucking right. Just like how an arm is a prisoner of the mind. You’re a *limb*, Sang sow. Not even an arm. Not even a digit. Maybe not even a thought by this point.”

The chaos of the situation made Shotin reach out for his Parallelist—his other Heavens too—but found himself isolated from the tapestry. Ice seeped into his phantasmal veins as he finally gave

Avo his full attention. “What—what are you?”

“Was many things,” Avo said. The mindscape changed. Instead of being a dilapidated street running along Veng’s Stand, the skies and horizon besides scrolled as if portals to an animated gallery. Moments from Avo’s past played. His ascent from the Penumbra came first. His battle with Rantula followed, and then his engagement with the Scalpers, his infiltration of Mirrorhead’s base.

Green River’s attention was taken by his time as her guest. Her horror loomed immediately thereafter when he stitched more understanding into her using his ghosts, letting her relive his transformation from ghoul to thoughtform. Concurrently, he nourished Shotin’s curiosity, granting him insight to when they stood against and alongside one another.

The Seeker blinked while the Sang processed the offered memories in silence. “You’re the Pale Spider,” Shotin muttered. “But—Benhata—”

“Here,” the Glaive said, stepping out from the crowd. Meeting Shotin’s widening eyes, the Mirror just sighed. “I was one of his earliest acquisitions. Sometimes the city just decides to fuck you, huh, consang.”

A mass of Incubi congealed into shape behind him.

A numbing ache pulsed through Shotin’s marrow. A quiet laugh escaped him. Just the one. “The Acolyte. Chambers. Was he real?”

“Chambers is real,” Avo said, channeling the connected memories into the man. **“But he is not of Noloth. Was New Vultunite. True to his heart.”**

“And the rash?” Shotin said, biting back a snarl. He was thinking of all that he suffered. All the people who died from the outbreak. “Was that you too? Did you tell him to do—”

“All me, consang,” Chambers taunted from behind a wall of Regulars.

The Seeker clenched his teeth. “You *fuck*. This isn’t over. All those people—”

“Are dead,” Avo finished for him. **“Might’ve survived if you weren’t there. Would’ve survived if I wasn’t. You are an interesting man. Tortured by the cost of our actions. Traumatized by war. But so loyal. So idealistic. ‘It has to be worth it.’ You have less than two years left before the end comes. Do you know that?”**

Shotin opened his jaw to hurl a growling demur, but Green River spoke first. “Two years? You speak of a final war?”

“I speak of the last war that will ever matter.” He buried the point home as he dissolved the world shape of his mindscape, gave all the ghosts of this branch over to the hell that was shown to him, to the naked face of the Ladder.

The mutilated spire rose beneath Avo’s baleful presence, its outer shell began to crack even before it finished rising. Jaus’ scream came out like a whistle, but the depth of his pain was enough to made countless templates turn away.

Not Green River or Shotin Kazahara though. They were fixated. Twin minds crackling with fires of growing horror as Avo fed understanding after understanding into them.

“I wish to make this know the truest way I can,” Avo said, granting them the realization Veylis gave him. ***“Believe what you want. Be loyal to what you want. Know this. Remember this. Never forget this: our savior lays screaming in the unfinished womb of utopia.”***

And with that, the Ladder shattered apart, unveiling the atrocity within, letting the symphony of anguish bleed without, and in seconds, both Sang and Seeker joined their voices to the chorus of Jaus’ pain.

GHOSTS - [999,431,357]

LIMINAL FRAME (V) - 215,002 THAUM/c

UPDATING INFECTION...

INFECTION - [0.78%]

As Shotin and Green River suffered the epiphanies of their initiation, they were not the only ones to be anointed by Avo’s flame.

The first he sought was the Scaarthian who troubled him so those two months ago: a fortuitous discovery made during Chambers’ ill-fated “milk-run” for smuggled organs, the Scaarthian in question proved formidable even for a ghoul in an exo-rig. Implacable short of incapacitation.

Both qualities worth treasuring; worthy, by all metrics.

Jacking into a registry in the Nether, Avo tracked his ignorant disciple to *The Roach’s Den*, one of the few bars left untouched during Avo’s sprint across Nu-Scarrowbur. Slipping into the establishment’s only working locus, he extended a tendrill of awareness and took in his former foe.

A person could change entirely over the course of two months. No one epitomized this statement more than Avo. But the Scaarthian had undergone a literal maturation of their own. As boy, they were well over two meters and built like a compact aero. As a matriarch, they stood a little over three and made Naeko seem a toddler.

The other members of their former band were nowhere to be seen—nor did their absences matter much anyhow. The Scaarthian—Gaei an’Caig as they referred to themselves—was presence enough for a solo act, plucking at an electrical guitar built along a battleaxe.

A battleaxe that was magnetically chained to a coldtech brace they wore.

Avo shared the moment with Cas, and the Columner responded with positive surprise. *+Yes. By all that is holy, yes. Fantastic choice.+*

The Overheaven chuckled. Perhaps the man could do with some company in the future. Assistance for his efforts. That depends on how *Gaei* might perform from here. Shredding the attentions of all other patrons at the bar, Avo layered a cognitive filter of their feeds and senses so he could have some time alone.

With all minds compromised but the one he desire, he molded his avatar into the form of a Night Mantis and stepped out from the darkness of the room.

The rhythm of Gaei’s plucking went astray with a resounding snap. The Scaarthian’s eyes widened, accretion accelerated, nostrils flared. *“You?”*

“Me,” Avo responded. The other guests noticed nothing—the masquerade he imposed on them progressed as if reality itself. “Came here to see you. Watch you play.”

To the Scaathian—and by the bluntness of her nature—she merely bared her teeth and snarled. Her grip shifted, and the instrument now became a weapon. “Dreamed about you a few times. Got one of my consangs, killed you did. Come to finish the job, have you? See an end to things?”

“Come to offer a gift instead,” Avo said, bidding his avatar to reach inward and extract an unused Soul.

Gaei’s eyes widened, but her finger remained locked around the neck of her guitar. Good. A warrior to the roots.

He would need more like her soon enough—would be Ensouling more like her soon enough.