

Zovaal stood before an ornate mirror, arms crossed. The mirror was almost as tall as he was, and stuck out against the bleak interior of Torghast like an obnoxiously tacky sore thumb. He started pacing in front of the mirror to pass the time, waiting for the one on the other side to make contact. The mirror glowed red, and an image appeared on its surface. A figure clad in red and black fur-lined robes, complete with a smug grey face, white hair, and red eyes.

"Denathrius." Zovaal snarled. "Where is it?"

"Where's what, my dear?"

"The anima you promised." Zovaal growled.

"Do not take that tone with me, Zovaal. Or you will not see a single drop."

Zovaal paused. Then took a deep breath. Then exhaled slowly through gritted teeth. He had not considered how easy it would be for Denathrius to simply keep the anima. Or even return it and expose Zovaal. He could simply say Zovaal had forced him to do it, and everyone would believe him. And the anima he'd gathered would be enough to soothe any hurt feelings the others might have had about it.

"Fine. How long until it is ready?" Zovaal asked, forcing his voice down.

"It IS ready. I simply need a favour from you. You know. As a payment."

What in the Maw did Denathrius want from him?! Zovaal didn't have any resources he could give back. As if in response to Zovaal's mental question, the mirror glowed brighter, and a gilded hoof stepped through, and soon Denathrius stood in the room in person.

"How?" Zovaal stepped back, dumbfounded.

"I have my ways. And no, it will not let you through."

Denathrius raised a hand, and, to Zovaal's amazement, the shackles and the collar that he struggled to remove for eons dissolved into nothing. Zovaal gasped, and reached for his collarbones. The skin there felt rubbery and uneven. It was numb, but there was an uncomfortable pulling sensation along the edges. He then stared at his wrists, encircled by similar burn marks, pale against the darkened skin of his arm.

"You could have done this long ago!"

"I cannot remove them permanently." Denathrius replied. Zovaal didn't like his smile. "But I can remove them for long enough for what I'm planning."

Red anima poured from his hands. It wrapped around Zovaal, tugging him down until he was on his knees. It then forced his arms behind his back and bound his wrists together. He wondered what the point of removing the shackles was, if he were to be bound anyway. At least these bindings didn't hurt. Denathrius seemed to sense the question somehow.

"A simple precaution, my dear Zovaal. That, and I do love seeing you on your knees."

Zovaal's snarl rattled in his empty chest. Rage still seethed deep within him. He hasn't forgotten the betrayal. How Denathrius took part in carving the runes into his flesh. How he stood by while the Primus poured molten metal onto Zovaal's arms. How he did nothing to stop any of it. But Zovaal really needed that anima, and so he shoved the rage down.

Denathrius walked around Zovaal, hooves clacking on the metal floor. Clawed hands rested on his shoulders, rubbing at the tense muscles lightly. Long ago, it would have soothed him, a gentle touch of someone who loved him. Now, it felt mocking and forceful, the claws dragging too hard against his already mangled skin. It did little to put him at ease.

Denathrius did a full circle, stopping in front of him. His hands slid up Zovaal's neck and cupped his face, forcing him to look up. Zovaal took a shaky breath and closed his eyes, leaning into the touch. It was familiar and warm, and with his eyes shut he could pretend he's not in the Maw. That he wasn't pretty much coerced into doing this in exchange for the anima he so desperately needed to get out of the Maw. That this wasn't real.

A thumb stroked the scar crossing Zovaal's lips. His chin was tilted up, and then Denathrius was kissing him. It was rough and painful and Zovaal soon tasted blood. He couldn't bring himself to do anything in return other than seethe quietly. The kisses moved down to the side of his neck, rough as before. This drew a quiet groan from him, despite everything. And then fangs sunk deep into the side of his neck. Zovaal cried out in pain. The Sire pulled away almost instantly.

"Your anima tastes wrong." He remarked. "No matter."

Zovaal bared his teeth at him, but said nothing. Hands were all over his face then, one gently cupping the side of it, the other prodding at his tusks, the thumb slipping into his mouth. How tempted he was to just clamp his teeth down, and leave Denathrius without a finger. But he held back, reminding himself that this was a price he had to pay to escape the Maw. In the end he'd rewrite reality and there would be no Maw and no suffering. Maybe he'd even erase his own memory of this moment.

The hands withdrew from his face and mouth, and he heard the other circle him again. Long hair tickled one of his shoulders, and hands gripped his upper arms. There was no warning for when Denathrius bit him again, even harder than before. Zovaal tried to pull away, but was held in place. Hot blood welled up in both of the wounds, slowly seeping down his neck and shoulder.

"This is for the time you bit me." Denathrius gloated. "I'm sure you won't notice a few new scars. Now, get up."

Zovaal growled softly and said nothing. The bindings pulled at his body, and he slowly and awkwardly rose to his feet. He dared to open his eyes for a moment, wondering what Denathrius wanted with him now. He didn't have to wonder for long. Hands rested on his sides, sliding down in a mockery of a caress. Zovaal saw enough, and shut his eyes once again.

Clawed fingers hooked under the cloth belt around Zovaal's waist, unwrapping it and letting it and the attached bits of cloth fall to the floor. The same was done to his pants, leaving him completely naked before his former lover. Zovaal could feel hungry eyes wandering his body, and it made him feel disgusting. He wanted to hide. He didn't want to be seen. Was the anima worth this?

He was forced back to his knees. Dread settled somewhere deep inside him. There was a rustle of clothing, and his head was roughly tilted up.

"Open up." Came the order.

And so, Zovaal did as he was told. Like he always did. His realm was destroyed and the others wanted him to move to Oribos? He did that. He didn't really have a choice. The others didn't want to let them borrow their sigils for a short while to fix his realm? That's fine. He'd just suffer quietly for all eternity. Denathrius shoving his dick in Zovaal's mouth in exchange for all the anima he had hoarded that Zovaal needed to reach Oribos? Fine. Zovaal would do that too. Even though he had no love left for Denathrius, and was tempted to bite his dick off.

Zovaal resigned himself to his fate. He was used to not having agency. He was used to being used, although not in this way. What he wanted never really mattered. He kept his eyes stubbornly closed. Something broke even more inside him, and he hated it. He hated the fact that some part of him enjoyed being tied up and defiled like this. There were moments when the pain felt good. He didn't want this, but he didn't really have any other options other than wait for another eternity for the Maw to naturally grow. And maybe he should have.

He was torn between desperately wanting to lash out and have chains pull Denathrius apart limb from limb, and gritting his teeth and powering through. He knew that were he to kill Denathrius, his plans would be ruined. A death of an Eternal One wouldn't go unnoticed, and it would destroy the sigil Denathrius promised to give him, and destroy Revendreth itself, which would surely alert the other Eternal Ones to Zovaal's actions. And he was in no position to deal with Kyrestia and the Winter Queen together. So all he could do is close his eyes and endure and try to derive some enjoyment from it.

He managed to shut reality out for a while. He was somewhere else. Somewhere with grass and a cloudy sky, and someone was on top of him, gently holding his face. He tried to focus on the memory, but the person he was with remained blurred. He was sure it wasn't Denathrius though. They were kind to him. And then his memory warped, and jumped to the moment his realm was destroyed. His mouth was full of ash, and he couldn't breathe, and he choked and coughed and suddenly he was back to the present moment. How long was he gone? Something leaked from his mouth, and his chest hurt way more than it should have.

Zovaal opened his eyes, and looked down. And all he saw was red.

The Nameless One found Zovaal slumped by a wall in a different part of Torghast. His head was bowed down, chin resting against the inside of his collar. Red coated his chest, and he was eerily still. Was he hurt? The Fae's hackles rose, and they looked around in case whatever did this still lurked around. The corridor was empty. Even the Mawsworn were nowhere to be seen.

They examined Zovaal further, picking up things they hadn't noticed before. There were bite marks on his shoulder and the side of his neck, one so deep it seeped a black liquid. Was THIS Zovaal's blood? Then what was the red stuff? The Nameless one leaned in and sniffed at Zovaal's shoulder. It smelled metallic.

Suddenly, chains shot out of the air, wrapping around the Fae and pinning them to the opposite wall. Zovaal was awake, and glaring at them, his eyes wide. He looked terrified, and that unsettled Nameless more than everything else. What could have scared the Jailer, the master of the Maw, witless?

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" Zovaal roared.

"It's me!" The Nameless One croaked out. "It's just me!"

Zovaal lowered his arm, and the chains dissipated. The Nameless One slid down the wall, and slowly got up. Zovaal still sat by the wall, one hand clutching at his hollow chest. He was gasping for air.

"What did this to you? Is it still around? Should we rally the Mawsworn?"

They saw despair in Zovaal's eyes then, and then he looked away and slowly shook his head. Their own, similarly hollow, heart ached at seeing him like this. They sighed.

"Stay still. I'll be back soon."

Zovaal nodded weakly. Nameless came back dragging an urn filled with water, and a rag. They sat on the floor next to him, and he let them clean him up. By the end of it the water in the urn was tinged red, and Zovaal couldn't look at it. Nameless stayed with him for a long while after. They didn't know what was going on, but Zovaal was clearly hurt, and they wanted to be with him and help him. And possibly keep him safe from whatever harmed him.

Some more time passed. Zovaal's new wounds healed. They didn't leave scars. Maybe the universe decided to take pity on Zovaal for once, and spare him those particular marks. Maybe the universe saw that the mental scars were enough. He never told anyone. Not until much, much later.

The sky shattered, and living mortals found their way into the Maw. Some even found a way out. It didn't matter, or at least Zovaal told himself it didn't. The Nameless One had a different opinion, and took to hunting the mortals down and knocking them off the edge of the Maw. That

is, when they weren't glued to Zovaal's side. He was grateful for their company. They didn't want anything from him. He did notice hungry looks from them, but they were different. He couldn't really put a finger on it, but the looks Nameless gave him didn't set him off. For now, they were content with simply being. They'd regale him with whatever they got up to during their excursions into the Maw. All the mawrats they saw, all the mortals swatted off the edge.

Some more time passed. The mortals have left the Maw, and reports started coming in, of his allies in the Shadowlands being foiled. Devos, the fallen Paragon who had listened to his story and for once believed him, was slain. Then Vyrax, his agent in Maldraxxus, came to the Maw with many of his soldiers. At least he was able to slay the last Margrave loyal to the missing Primus. Zovaal listened to his report, nodding along. It, too, didn't really matter.

The Jailer turned away and stared into the burning sky. And then it happened. It was barely visible at first, a small red trickle blending in with the orange clouds. But it grew, and others joined it, and soon massive streams of red anima poured into the Maw. The Maw surged and grew, dark tendrils whipping up and towards the eternal city of Oribos. Below, the Mawsworn roared and cheered. And Zovaal saw red, and looked away.