

Pain. Pain was all he could remember. It was all he had known for a long time. It radiated from the places where spiked bindings dug into his skin with every wrong move. It came as a burning from the runes etched into his arms and back and face. It wasn't just physical pain either. The mental anguish was almost as bad. The wandering in circles inside his own mind trying to understand how and why he ended up in this mess. Trying to figure out what it was exactly that caused his former friends to suddenly turn on him and banish him here. Those thoughts were the other thing he had, along with pain. He had gotten used to both kinds of pain by now, and learned to numb it with rage at those responsible.

He could remember their sudden betrayal like it was moments ago. His own friends. His lover, too. There was no warning when they came for him. He had been in the topmost chamber of Oribos, doing his task of directing souls to their respective afterlives when the four other Eternal Ones arrived. He only had time to turn around and see their grim and determined faces before being seized by vines, and chains, and skeletal hands. He was pinned on his back, completely helpless. Kyrestia the Firstborne floated above him, her white wings and gold jewelry blinding in the bright light of the chamber, her eyes so full of contempt. He stared right back, and wondered: what was it that he was suddenly punished for? His big sister had never expressed any hostility towards him before. He was never told anything was wrong. He didn't do anything out of the ordinary. What was wrong? He never got an answer. She thrust her spear into his chest, taking her sweet time carving out the orb that held most of his anima, a parallel to the hearts within most mortals he'd witnessed. But, unlike them, he didn't die from the wound, although at times he wished he could have.

He blacked out, only to awake to see his heart being placed inside a construct. It was similar in shape to the Eternal Ones themselves, feminine in appearance, towering over all of them, all pristine white and polished gold. Artificial. Perfect. The Arbiter, they called her. A new judge of souls, made to serve their Purpose, and their vision of the Shadowlands, while he would be cast into the Maw. After all, someone should keep all these horrible irredeemable souls in line, and he was so passionate about defending them in the past. Nothing belonged in the Maw, well, now he would. It was his realm once, before the disaster, he would simply be returned to it. He pleaded with them, in a hoarse and weak voice, to stop. To let him stay. He would accept a new task if they needed him to. He already had one, his other sister, the Winter Queen, said to him. She, at least, seemed sorrowful. His new task would be to guard the souls sent to the Maw. To be forever its Jailer.

He fell silent then, too weak to fight or protest anymore. They dragged him to the edge of the eternal city. To enact their promise. To cast him into the Maw. The Primus lifted him by the neck, holding him over the precipice. The others stood behind him, silent.

"Last words, brother?"

"Why? Why are you doing this?" He rasped, clinging to the skeletal hand.

"You no longer fit into the grand design. You have fulfilled your purpose as a judge of souls. Now, you have a new role to play."

The Primus let go then, letting him fall.

His torment didn't end there. He lay broken on the barren ground of the Maw, in a growing pool of blood, until the Eternal Ones came for him again. He was hoisted up, and forced into a kneeling position, skeletal hands shot from the ground, restraining him. He could see all four of the Eternal Ones staring down at him. Kyrestia still had the derision in her eyes. The Primus and the Winter Queen were impassive, seemingly doing what they had to. Denathrius stood a bit behind them, and there was the tiniest flicker of pity in his red eyes. He returned the gaze, and bared his teeth at the vampire. Out of all of them, the Sire's betrayal was the most painful to sink in.

He wondered, again, what his crime was. He was too tired and broken to ask again. He would come to realise that "No longer fit in the grand design" was just a fancy euphemism for "we don't want you around anymore." Maybe it was about his defence of the souls doomed to the Maw, after all. He always questioned why the Maw was a part of the system to begin with. It pained him to see the other eternals send souls there. He had argued that no soul was inherently evil, and therefore, the Maw was unnecessary. But that left the souls in the care of Denathrius, and the Sire likely didn't want to bother with cases this cumbersome. He guessed his questioning made them too inconvenienced. It was inappropriate, it was not palatable to talk about the Maw, even among the gods of Death. His former realm was a taboo subject, only acknowledged when a soul needed to be thrown in. He was the only one who spoke about it, and now they finally decided to shut him up, and put their collective duty of judging souls onto the new Arbiter.

Familiar hands took hold of his face, and he leaned into them, delirious, almost ready to plead again, hoping his lover would reconsider and take his side, before the reality sunk in with the anima infused scalpel. Rage bloomed in his hollowed out chest then, and he jerked, and sunk his teeth into the Sire's hand. Denathrius staggered back, clutching his bleeding hand.

"Well what do you know, we have a biter here!"

The Eternal Ones took turns carving the runes into his skin, slow and methodical. They would go over the cuts several times, and then infuse them with burning anima. With each rune, he felt weaker, more and more of his power locked away. He thrashed and screamed, causing some of the runes to dissolve into messy cuts, until his voice and strength gave out, and then there was nothing but pain. The binding was complete with a set of glowing runes carved into his forehead and cheeks. He was barely conscious by then.

He was forced to his feet, and prodded harshly with a spear, a silent order to walk. So he did, leaving a bloody trail behind. The spear dug into his back several times if he slowed down or stumbled, and a few times purely out of spite. He wondered again about the source and reason of the Firstborne's sudden hatred towards him. She seemed perfectly friendly towards him just a short while ago, and now she was threatening to skewer him with her weapon, and calling him a monster. They had their disagreements, true, but it never got to any sort of violence or anger.

After all, they were eternal gods who could talk things out, even if, in the end, each stayed set in their views. What was so horrible about his questioning that landed him in the Maw?

They brought him to a platform, surrounded by tall battlements and several perimeters of glowing runes. He was ushered into the center of it, and immediately the oppressive power coursing through the runes weighed down on him, leaving him unable to act. He stood there, slumped and half conscious, waiting for whatever torments would come next. His vision was blurry, but he realised he was on top of a tower, and could see most of the Maw from here. The ghastly remnants of his formerly beautiful and peaceful realm, scoured by an unthinking cosmic storm into a barren hellscape. He couldn't save it.

Shackles were brought out, still glowing red from the forge. He couldn't even scream as molten metal was placed around his wrists and ankles, welded shut, and attached to massive chains. There was no strength left in him to fight or resist them. He was brought to his knees painfully as more bindings were forced onto him. A belt piece, adorned with sharp spikes that dug into his torso if he moved even a tiny bit out of line. Plates were welded onto his chest, forcing the bleeding hollow space open. More chains, keeping him on his knees. A spiked collar that threatened to slice his head and face open, was seared into his shoulders. That also had chains hooked into it, leashing him like the beast they now saw him as.

And then, he was left alone, chained and subdued. Alone to stew in his pain and rage at the betrayal, just another soul condemned to the Maw. His wounds eventually scarred up, but the runes never stopped hurting, a constant burning that ate at his mind. An eternity of torment until nothing was left. Except unlike the hapless mortal souls, his was too strong to be allowed blissful oblivion. He wouldn't become a shade and forget everything. No, his mind stayed intact, but he became twisted and cruel, and let the magic holding him down pervade his being. He would mourn the person he once was. He still had memories of being kind, gentle, and full of compassion, eroded as these memories were. That person didn't deserve to be here. But the one he had become? That person became one with the Maw, and made the magic of chains and runes his own. It was ironic, really. They named him the Jailer, and yet he was as imprisoned in the Maw as the rest of the souls unfortunate enough to earn a one way trip here. A monster they called him, and a monster they would get. Except they made one critical miscalculation: this once was his realm, and twisted as it had become, it still was his place of power. He could regain control of it. And so, he started planning. He will break out, and they will see what a grave mistake they had made in betraying him.

Death, after all, was never meant to be chained.