

*“WAKE UP! WAKE UP WAKE UP WAKE UP WAKE UP! IF THERE WAS EVER A MOMENT IN YOUR LIFE FOR YOU TO FUCKING LISTEN TO ME FOR ONCE THEN YOU’LL WAKE UP THIS INSTANT!!”*

The heavy-lidded Aigead Siorc struggled to get her eyes open, even as the familiar, angry shouting filled her skull. *What on... Fray...?*

*“SOMETHING’S WRONG. SOMETHING IS SO, SO WRONG. CAN’T FIGURE OUT WHAT DON’T KNOW WHAT SOMETHING IS **WRONG.**”*

“The experiment was a success, but I fear our time is short.” Aigead recognized the voice as belonging to the Ascian Fandaniel, but it seemed so far away as she tried to force herself back into consciousness. “I shall begin the preparations.”

She tried to remember what had happened. A wave of energy had emanated from the Tower of Babil. The Garlean forces they had just managed to win over had lost their minds, and without warning there was the mad Ascian in front of her moments before she found herself suddenly asleep.

*Arms don’t feel right... she thought. Head doesn’t feel right... what did he do to me...?*

*“Well hey, here’s an idea,”* Fray’s voice rang inside her mind. *“Maybe we could answer these questions if you **WOKE THE FUCK UP!!**”*

“Now...it is time for you to awaken.”

*“Fury take me, the court jester has a good fucking idea for once.”*

Aigead’s eyes opened slowly, her every movement feeling like she was trying to move while submerged in molasses. Blinking to clear her vision, the world finally came into focus and... was that a steak dinner?

*“Seems more like a baked chicken breast or a fish filet to me. Oh, y’know, maybe Fandaniel would know, since now seems to be a great time for **stupid fucking questions.**”*

*I’m trying to regain my senses as fast as I can here, okay? she thought. Your yelling isn’t helping.*

“Good morrow to you,” Fandaniel sang, shocking Aigead a few steps further out of her stupor. She didn’t enjoy seeing Asahi’s face at the best of times, less so dressed as a waiter and with the genocidal immortal puppeting it. “Here—have a taste before it gets cold.”

She looked up. At the other end of the table sat Zenos yae Galvus, eating from a similarly prepared plate of food.. *Oh, great, as if I needed more of my least favorite people on the star in the same room together.*

“Oh, but be sure to remove your helmet,” Fandaniel continued. “Take a moment, too, to familiarize yourself with that borrowed flesh.”

*Helmet? Aigead thought. They haven't made any helmets I can wear yet...*

*“ARE YOU THIS DENSE ON ACCIDENT OR DID YOU HAVE TO FUCKING PRACTICE!”*  
Fray shouted in her mind.

She froze, the shade's words prompting her to focus on Fandaniel's other words. *Borrowed... flesh...?*

She looked down at her hands, and they were not her own.

Her arms, her legs, all similarly unfamiliar.

She screamed and did not recognize the voice.

Fandaniel raised his arm with a flourish. “So? How does it feel? I, for one, find those first moments within a new body to be most refreshing!”

Aigead tried to get up, to lunge at the Ascian, but the unfamiliar legs failed her, sending her sprawling to the ground. Her head hit the floor with a *thunk*; she reached up, feeling the shape of the helmet. Between it and the uniform she managed to put together in her panic that she was in the body of a Garlean soldier.

“We had a magitek engineer by the name of Aulus to thank for this method of soul extraction and implantation. I believe the two of you met briefly in Ala Mhigo?”

Aigead was too furious to reminisce, still trying to gather the strength to stand.

“His was a rather sticky end, wasn't it?” Fandaniel continued, heedless of Aigead's attempts to get her footing. “Thankfully, he was thoughtful enough to leave behind his mindjack technology. I took the liberty of making some improvements—and selecting you as my esteemed test subject.”

“G... give me back my body!” she finally managed to say, the words sounding wrong in this new vessel's voice.

“And permit you to go on a righteous rampage instead of partaking in this delicious meal? I think not.” He bowed to her in a mockery of courtesy. “I must say, I have gone to great lengths to reunite you with my lord.”

*“Okay, we have to breathe, we have to work through this. They have to have stashed your body somewhere, right?”* Fray said, drowning out whatever it was the Ascian was saying. Despite the shade not having a corporeal form, it almost sounded like they were hyperventilating. *“We just gotta hop back into it, how hard could that be? If the eight-foot-tall problem child over there could figure it out, so could we.”*

Aigead coughed, the body unable to keep up with the excess strain she was putting on it in its weakened state. *Wow, Fray, are you being the voice of reason right now? Shocking.*

***“I’M TRYING TO KEEP US BOTH ALIVE YOU F—”*** The shade stopped itself, sighing. *“Okay, look, I can admit at times anger isn’t the best state of mind. Just stay with me here, okay?”*

There was a screeching sound from elsewhere within the tower. “Oh my!” Fandaniel cried out, turning his back on Aigead. “Daddy is pleased his grumpy little boy has finally found his playmate!”

*“Can we pay him real money to never say the word ‘Daddy’ ever again?”* Fray asked.

Aigead had managed to get herself on her feet, but still needed to steady herself on the edge of the table. She wondered if this would be enough for her to throttle Fandaniel, but his turning back to face her delayed those plans.

“Ah. Exposition is in order.”

*“I don’t suppose there’s any cutlery we could use to cut his voice box out with, is there?”*

As Fandaniel launched into his explanation, Aigead looked over to her place setting. She didn’t think any of the utensils would be adequate, unfortunately.

She glanced to the other end of the table as Fandaniel was describing how he manipulated the nationalistic pride of Garlemald to summon a primal via the former emperor’s corpse. There Zenos sat, continuing to eat the meal in front of him. He seemed to be entirely uninterested in Fandaniel’s machinations.

*“Not too surprising,”* Fray indicated. *“Ennui’s Favorite Soldier over here really only has one interest.”*

The crown prince lifted his wine glass to his lips, taking a sip before looking back up to address her. “Does the pursuit of prey you have bested before excite you?”

*Uuuuggggghhhhhh*, thought Aigead.

*“Uuuuggggghhhhhh,”* said Fray.

It turned out that watching Fandaniel walk over to refill Zenos' glass was entirely more interesting than whatever nonsense the man himself was going on about this time.

“I have no doubt fallen in your estimation since Ala Mhigo,” he said when Aigead finally managed to tune back in.

The discomfort of speaking with another's voice wasn't about to keep her from responding to that. “I wouldn't worry about it, you were never that high to begin with.”

If this had any effect on Zenos at all, he didn't let it show. “Fair enough. But do not let your disdain deprive you—deprive us—of an opportunity to craft an even more majestic moment of euphoria. I have been honing my craft as I set the stage for our reunion.”

“Yeah, of course you have, big guy,” Aigead responded. She was sure she could have come up with something snappier, but at the moment she was just happy that she finally managed to stand straight up.

“Wheresoever there is suffering and despair, you appear, to fulfill your duty as defender of this star.” The crown prince smiled and Aigead was hyper-aware of her borrowed flesh crawling. “The chaos and destruction that my hordes have wrought...are my gifts to you alone.”

The faces of those that had suffered at Zenos' hands flashed through Aigead's mind.

*“This is why you put a rabid animal down,”* Fray said.

“At a loss for words?” Zenos asked, pushing his chair back as he stood up. “No matter. As you will learn, I have only just begun.”

As Aigead watched him leave the table, she considered her options. Regardless of how much she may have thought Zenos overestimated himself as a “worthy foe,” that didn't keep him from being a tough fight even at her peak form. Clad in this unfamiliar vessel, she was sure she wouldn't stand a chance.

“Oh? Will you not finish your meal?”

She was considering still having a go at throttling the Ascian, however.

“There is only one thing that can sate my hunger,” Zenos responded, “and it would seem my friend has lost her appetite. I hoped this display of civility might prove an entertaining diversion, but clearly we are above such pretensions.”

Aigead took a few steps forward. She wasn't sure what Zenos had planned or how ready she'd be for it, but that didn't mean she was about to be caught off guard.

“While my lifeless body was in the possession of the Ascian, I too claimed another's as my own,” he continued, walking towards an adjacent platform as candles lining the edges lit his path with each step. “It was an enlightening experience, to fight in an unfamiliar form. Flaws and failings in my technique were plain to see.”

*“...wait. Wait wait wait wait, something's not right.”*

*Of course something's not right, Aigead thought, answering Fray's concern. We're in someone else's body, we've established this.*

*“No no no, not that, something else. There's... there's something else...”*

“Whence rises one's true strength? The flesh? The soul? Perhaps you should like to discover the answer for yourself.”

*“Oh gods.”*

The candlelight burned brightly, illuminating the platform. In the middle, seated atop a profane throne, was the slumped-over but unmistakable form of Aigead's own body.

*...no. No. No no no NO NO NONONONONONO—*

Zenos turned, his eyes aglow with the power of the Resonance. “Or...together.”

Despite her struggles with her current vessel, Aigead broke into a full sprint, not even slowing a bit when Zenos' own body fell limp to the floor. The only thing that managed to stop her was when her own body's head rose, looking at her with a smirk before teleporting away.

Her breaths were short and panicked. Zenos had her body. Zenos has HER body. He'd *slipped into it* like it was a damned *suit*, as if he had any *right* to it. And now... and now...!

“Oh dear!” Aigead whirled around at Fandaniel's sudden presence behind her. “Whatever would happen if my lord were to greet your friends as you? I shudder to imagine what carnage he would wreak!”

She lunged forward, seizing the Ascian by the lapel. With Zenos currently absent, he would have to be enough for her to take her fury out on.

*“Aigead!! Godsdammit Aigead, focus!!”* Fray called out.

Fandaniel chuckled, unbothered by her threatening demeanor. “We’d better hurry if we want to avert the bloodbath.” He smiled as wisps of darkness converged around them. “You can thank me later for my generosity.”

And in another moment, they were gone.