

The Karui's eyes were the one thing about him that could not burn. Stark, icy whitish-blue, cold and distant, peering out from a face first tanned by the sun and then blackened by flames. I was there for procession, along the marble roads and platforms of high Oriath. They tied him up, thick ropes around his wrists and ankles and neck though he did not struggle. They stacked the wood, specially soaked in oil and powder; they ignited the fuse; they stepped back. And the flames wreathed his body, curling and touching, licking and consuming. Skin, hair, and flesh peeled away from him, floating away into dust; his teeth gritted and his blue-ice eyes glimmered, and he made no sound. Skin tore back to show red flesh and muscle, muscle to bone.

But Death did not want him. The pyre burned down and there he remained, a charred husk, breaths rattling in scorched lungs, challenge still shining out from his sunken face. Death did not want him, and Oriath did not want him either. I was there for his exile, the workers binding his wrists this time frightened, careful in tying the bonds over revealed flesh now oozing with blood and pus. Not a sound issued from that burnt, ragged throat. The Karui maintained a gravity all his own, and if not for this and the intense heat he radiated at all times, as though that fire had fed his flesh instead of the other way around, I might have thought him a ghost, a curse. Karui spirits have a tendency to stick around after you think you've been rid of them.

I was there for his arrival, the boat tossed into the sky and back down through the waves, torn mast from deck, plank from plank, shredded and shattered. The ocean did not want him, either, but Wraecclast welcomed him for a time, black sands sticking to half-scarred flesh, skin hanging down in shreds like the torn sails of the vessel. I watched as he came to, as he pulled himself up along from the cold beach, as he found a weapon and a virtue gem, and wielded both as though they were old companions. With these he began to methodically enforce his presence in the land, as though he had done it all before.

I watched as he made his way up the coast and then down again, through the forest, into the mountain. That, too, welcomed him with yawning jaws, twisted flesh and molten corruption wrapping and wreathing around him as the execution flames once had.

Nightmare took him in, chewed him up, and spat him back out as well. The Karui stepped forth from the bleeding carcass of the mountain, vengeance clutched tight in one hand and his familiar Death in the other, and both bearing the same flames that had set him down this path. I was there as he stepped through the gilded gates turned green with patina, as he seized authority and power from the skeletal hands of its guardian, and then as he did so again, and again, and again.

I was there as he took the path of his forbears and stepped above even the gods, crushing them beneath his sabatons, one after another. At first he could only bear the flames in a scorching, searing beam, sweeping over those who opposed him, burning them to cinders like so much kindling. Then, finally, he drew that flame into himself, and forced it back out.

It was a sharp white flame this time, burning impossibly hot, heating his armor to a golden hue, deforming the stone over which he walked so that his footsteps remained imprinted in the

surface. All he passed looked upon him with horror and reverence both, as his already-scarred, already-charred skin continually peeled and flaked away, constantly burning away yet immediately recovering. The set of his jaw and ice in his eyes showed that he felt the pain, yet it was insignificant to him. It was nothing. He rejected it.

They were acquainted. They were familiar. They had met, had danced, and had parted ways, each deeming the other inadequate. Then the Karui found the golden device, the machine that tears back the veil of reality and shows the angles in between space, the shadows nestled into the cracks of existence, the unfathomable, unconquerable beyond.

And I was there as he reassembled the device, piece by piece, recognition, familiarity, and triumph glimmering in those cold eyes. He looked upon the device with comprehension as I had only seen in two before, father and daughter, one lost to the void, the other lost to the chase. The Atlas will welcome him, I thought. The Atlas will draw him in and hold him tight, and will wrap around him as his searing flames. He will descend into its depths and will not return.

And, for the first time, I was wrong. I watched, day after day, as he etched his runes in the stone maps, as he socketed them into the device, as he stepped through the glimmering portals. Corruption and Nightmare and malice and gods existed in those worlds, too, and they were all inadequate as well. I could always tell when he returned, as each of the six portals, one by one, twisted and pulled and then popped, like a knot pulling free from a string - and there he was again, flames pouring around him like a cloak, devastatingly hot yet, to his eyes, unnoticeable. He viewed them as he had everything else on his journey: just an obstacle to overcome.

The daughter found the Karui. Together they found the father. Together they found the others, the Warlord, the Hunter, the Crusader, the Redeemer, and the Karui beat them down and added them to his Way, each another step, climbing ever higher. Death had been his first friend, and his last worry: now he shared this friend with every creature he met, every world he passed into, every entity he wreathed in his scorching flames.

I saw him stand with the daughter, planning, scheming, strategizing. They drew paths throughout their Atlas, shifting influence here, redirecting power there. They found one of the celestials, one of the ancient, primordial entities existing both within yet outside of this reality, and the Karui introduced this entity to his three closest companions, Vengeance and Fire and Death. One celestial thought to dance with him; then a second; then a third. The Karui rejected them.

I see him now, shuffling through his collection of gems, peering back and forth between artifact weaponry the types of which should be seen only in museums. I see him poring over his notes and his logs, chiseling into stones, casting and re-casting silver and gold and electrum, coral and amethyst and ruby and opal. He does not even notice the flames anymore, settled around his shoulders like a warm, comforting mantle, though the stones around his feet sink and deform with the heat, though his flesh continually burns, chars, and disintegrates, only to be replaced again and again.

Then, one day, I see him stop. He stands and looks around himself, over each carefully placed item in his stronghold, over the familiar faces of his companions and associates.

"I am done here," he says, his voice as dry and rough as the flakes of flesh still clinging to his molten body. "I shall not return." And he steps through the glimmering portals, and for a time he does not return. Then they shimmer, they shudder, they pull, and flicker into nothingness.

First Death had rejected him. Then Oriath had, and the sea, and Wraecclast. Nightmare and Corruption had wrapped their heavy, stinking arms around him, only to be seared away by cleansing flames. The Atlas had thought to sink its teeth into his charred, pulped flesh, yet found the scarred tissues too tough. The celestials thought to best him, yet found they danced with something beyond even their comprehension. I see him now, stepping through the dark beyond, going somewhere that only those glacial eyes can see.

Begone, Exile. There is no place for you here.