

Veylis Avandaer: *Father.*

Jaus Avandaer: *Veylis? Is there something you need?*

Veylis Avandaer: *I wish to speak to you about our undertaking. The “safeguards” we are building into the future.*

Jaus Avandaer: *The paths?*

Veylis Avandaer: *Yes. While I have been building the superstructure, I have encountered half-formed simulations.*

Jaus Avandaer: *They trouble you.*

Veylis Avandaer: *They trouble me. I have seen developments that disturb me and threaten the fruition of our goals.*

Jaus Avandaer: *Hm. You are not alone in this. I. Your mother. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] have all encountered... hallucinations. Undesired generations created by the system. The paths feed off the world and everything it can detect. The Chrono-Spatial array is a complex mechanism. And an intrusive one. More likely it is reading patterns from our actions and generating potential outcomes from the decisions. But that is all that they are. Probabilistic generations assembled from an accelerated reflection of our world.*

Veylis Avandaer: *This was more. It was clear. There was a logical sequence of events. I saw an intact narrative come together.*

Jaus Avandaer: *Was Naeko involved?*

Veylis Avandaer: *No. He is affected thereafter in the simulations, but only as a bystander. Father, I am not using the paths to generate probabilistic outcomes for my personal relationships.*

Jaus Avandaer: *It wouldn't be unnatural. It would be—*

Veylis Avandaer: *Father.*

Jaus Avandaer: *I tease no more. So. Tell me about what you saw.*

Veylis Avandaer: *We finish the Ladder. We root the paths to it. The chronologies are locked into place—but there is one that all others rest upon. One that is made of material before all others. In it, you demand that all Godclads surrender their Frames back to gods. Or something like them. Castrated of desire, our new wardens mirror the minds ruling the polities, and we are*

made trophies instead of cattle. Nourished. Pleasured. But worthless. Powerless. Unable to grow.

Jaus Avandaer: ...

Veylis Avandaer: Father?

Jaus Avandaer: And... how did you uncover this sequence?

Veylis Avandaer: Come. I will show you.

-Conversation between Jaus and Veylis Avadaer, 4 months before the dissolution of Noloth and banishment of the Hungers

21-11

The Paths of Futures Broken (I)

“I must say that among all the Famines of Noloth, you are my—” Zein paused and took a moment to think. “*Second* least favorite.”

“Just second?” Chambers said, cringing at the simulated form of Peace. “Every word out of this guy’s mouth is ‘fuck,’ ‘cunt,’ ‘sow,’ ‘mongrel,’ or some other curse or slur. Rust-licking half-strand’s got a mouth that belongs to the gutters. Who the hell’s worse than him.”

“Joy,” Zein stated simply. “I could never stand the crying.”

The interior of the George Washington's command nexus was an interplay between light and dark. The walls had been made transparent, revealing the plane of darkness beyond. Coils of trailing ink and flecks of drifting hue clashed ceaselessly with neon interfaces and flickering holograms streamed from Metaminds and consoles.

The cadre had spread across the room, holding each of the corners but never straying far from a mirror. They all had their eyes locked on Zein, waiting for her to uncoil into another attack.

Relaxed though she seemed, an air of violence clung to the Godslayer.

She facing out the window now. Staring into the black and watching the others from the window. Avo stood next to her, the ghosts manifesting Peace’s projection flowing from his mind. Behind, Chambers sat atop the risen throne, a constructed map of Scale hovering above him. Kae had formed a seat from the smart-matter, and Denton was just behind her. Tavers, Draus, and Dice held to their own corner, ghosts wisping between them in private conversation—one that Avo remained apart from.

More than once, Thousandhand peeked at the aged squire, as if an old killer recognizing another. But instead of respect or acknowledgment, Thousandhand merely frowned while Tavers kept her Hellgun close by.

Avo used Peace as a puppet to recount his visit to the Deep Nether, elaborating on how he passed through when materializing the LGI core using Kare's memories, how he evaded the Hungers and the Low Masters before ambushing them, his invasion of the city eternal, and finally meeting the Doublethinkers thereafter.

Prior conversations and conflicts flowed in condensed scenes, and all came to an end when Avo lept into the Hungers' upward-spilling wound.

Across the entire recounting, a smug smile of satisfaction became Zein, her amusement growing greater with each offending act the ghoul performed.

"Ah, you've claimed quite the prize, Avo. Quite the prize." She tried to prod at peace using an umbrella, but the phantoms merely parted while the Low Master snarled.

+Don't touch me, you fucking cunt. you fucking sow.+ More curses, more rage; no matter.

"One of my best templates," Avo agreed, speaking as if Peace wasn't there. "Much greater insight into traumas. Wards are unmatched as well. Enhanced my cadre." Avo drew from Benhata and Abrel's social engineering experience to hide his obvious intent. "Could help you as well. Trade favors."

Zein laughed. "Digging for an advantage even now? Trying to get me to betray myself. I like it, I like it a lot. Very, very, very proactive." She patted him on the arm in a rather grandmotherly fashion. The casual show of affection stood out of place from the brutality she inflicted mere hours prior. "He has also revealed to you the means to create additional Anathemas, yes? Like that which you bear?"

+*He knows nothing of the art! He is a thief! A scavenger! Fucking! Carrion!*+ Peace snarled as they spoke. The two continued to ignore him while Avo twisted Peace's rage to provoke additional responses from Zein.

Avo didn't answer directly. He simply clicked his fangs lightly.

"That will be quite useful," Zein mused. "Another secret lost to Noloith. She looked around and the George Washington once more and shook her head. "Their murder of Defiance will remain a folly unmatched. What treasures remain under them are slowly turning into your inheritance. He would be proud of you."

"He would tell me to live the life I want," Avo replied, meeting the attempt at emotional manipulation with the naked truth.

Zein offered him a brief nod and continued. offered him a brief nod, and then continued. “You entertained me. I will speak of what you wish to know. But within my parameters.”

“Got somethin’ you don’t want us to know about?” Draus asked, her voice sliding in like a knife from the dark. “Seems like you got your own plans goin’. Separate from even the voiders.”

The Godslayer’s eyes twinkled. “Worry not, Captain: interests are aligned.”

+*Shit*,+ Tavers chuckled bitterly, shaking her head inside her Rendskin. Her approximation of Zein fell further. +*If a middler, Necro, or squire I was working with said what she just did to me, I’d be wind. No questions.*+ She eyed Zein Thousanhand again and found herself baffled. +*Honestly, she’s got more traits in common with a druggie than a warrior. You sure this is her?*+ Avo fought back a scoff and cast a few memories over to her. Seconds after, Taver’s opinion of Zein was subterranean. +*Jaus. How the hells is she even still alive?*+

“The warmind that you bear? And Paladin Kitzuhada’s memories. They are the reason for your banishment.” Zein gestured to Scale—the mountain fortress that the Paladins called home, and to the supposed LGI core nested in its lower depths. “You felt *it* when you tried to remember the LGI core. Something interacting with your Frame. Your mind. Your memories.”

“Didn’t expect it,” Avo said.

“As you should not have. It is not a memory that most would possess. Why, aside from we in this room and,” she briefly looked at her fingers and did a mock calculation, “a few hundred entrusted experts at the top of each Guild, most would know little of what keeps the Nether rooted, of what keep the nightmares at bay.”

“The Gatekeeper,” Avo said.

“Yes. The true substructure of Scale itself. And the epicenter of the Ladder’s return.” That made more than a few heads turn. “It is more than merely an Ark, it is more than merely a bearer of pantheons or Heavens. It is something between a mind and a god; the finest creation under Jaus. Something meant to be the perfect shepherd of humanity, one that has no desire to infringe our will, to harm us, to exploit us despite possessing all the reality-tuning miracles of a civilization. A being that interfaces with culture and society, but is not turned or drowned by the input, capable of weaving paradise for all people without being enslaved by bias or mental weakness, and addicted to tyranny.

“It is a self-moving mind, in a fashion. One that the Exorcists use in part to direct their Overwatching Security lobbies. One that was meant to direct the total cognitive energies of humanity—living and dead—toward great designs beyond all our comprehension. And one damaged by Veylis during the Second Guild War. One that is barely functioning at all.”

Zein's words stirred Avo's accretion, and millions of templates within him began to chatter.

[It almost sounds like a gestalt,] Benhata mused.

Avo ignored what that could possibly mean and continued the dialogue. "It's broken?"

"It's *dismantled*," Zein answered. "Missing more than a few critical ontologies and Ark components." Her face turned inscrutable as she stared into the dark. "I suspect my daughter was seeking to create a Heaven that could influence minds. Or to usurp the Nether altogether. Her ambitions have always been grand."

"So, like, is the ladder thing broken?" Chambers asked, seeming confused. "Listen, I'm not really versed in thaumaturgy, but it sounds like the thing that pulled Avo into the Big Nothing technically shouldn't be able to do that, or..."

"It functions yet. At least rudimentarily." Zein turned to face the half-strand in her musing. Her eyes slid over to the holographic map of Scale. "You were planning an infiltration, weren't you? Using one of the paladins."

"Kare Kitzuhada," Avo answered, testing the waters with the information.

The Godslayer's eyes widen, and her mouth became a shapely o. ".Truly, it seems that the girl was part of both our designs now."

Kare's template spiked to full alertness. **[What? Avo. Ask her. Ask her what she wants to do with me.]**

Fear filled the Paladin, but so did curiosity. To have the eye of ZeinThousandhand, Godslayer, Champion of the Ori, a Glaive from a bleaker age was note for extreme concern.

"Oh. Quite simple really: I intended to engineer the circumstances leading to her death. Something to drive her uncle and clan into conflict with the D'Rongos and break them for good. As the Chivlarics and Meritocrats strain in Highflame, so does the Overclan groan under Ori-Thaum." Zein sighed. "It's a pity. She seems like such a nice girl." Then she paused, and her frown turned joyous. "Ah, but she is yours. Compromised."

"Yes," Avo said, drawing all that he could from his templates to read Zein's expressions. "Don't need to waste her. Good asset. Good Paladin."

Time shivered and coiled through Zein. For a moment, the Fisher swan within her, and he felt her reach for something unseen. Then the smile drained from her expression and disappointment returned.

“Ah. Such a pity. But we need something of severity. Like an exposed assassination for things to be in order.”

Thousandhand continued talking, regarding the Paladin as little more than a chess piece to be expended. With each word she spoke, the cold dread in Kare grew deeper.

“No,” Avo said.

“No?” Zein replied.

“Tell me what you’re trying to do. I’ll engineer the circumstances. Won’t be that hard for me. But no. Don’t get to kill what’s mine.”

Zein threw her head back and laughed. It was the kind of noise an adult made when a child attempted to assert themselves. “You are truly precious, pest. A vicious, brutal monster weaned from the flesh of man laying claim to the guardianship of a knight-maiden against a lurking crone.” She exhaled, breath filled with mirth. “A new myth in the making.”

“She’s a person,” Avo said. “And I want to help her. She’s doing what she can to aid the city. Doing what she can to fight for the FATELESS. Because she believes in the dream. Practices her virtue.” Avo leaned down, lowering himself to Zein’s level until there was little space between their faces. Her faceplate grew misted with his exhalation. “Believes in your Jaus.”

He drew on Peace again and turned the Low Master into an instrument of outrage.

Leering at Zein, the Famine of Peace scoffed. “Hear that, you fucking sow? The truth. The truth of your reckless hedonism. The truth of why I always despised you—since the first day you came, blade drawn behind your lie-spitter of a lover, hand over the bastard-lump swelling to become your butcher of a daughter! *‘This is not the dream.’* But what do you know of dreams? Attack dog? What do you know of dreams, you creature of base pleasure.”

And there it was. A twitch. A shift in her eyes. A dangerous gleam in Zein’s expression.

Twelve meters across the room, Draus rose, her arm shifting as the glass around them began to shimmer. She tasted the scent first. The threat of violence. The building of tension.

+Hold,+ Avo said.

He then played his part, hissing in outrage at the Low Master’s template, creating imagined tortures and traumas, peeling the scabs from the man’s body, and drowning him in Lucille’s memories. It took drastically resequencing Peace’s mind to make him react with pain, but the effect was more than worth it.

Zein's face cooled from a thundercloud of coming rage to a cold winter breath of hatred. "More," she breathed. "Make him feel it more."

And in that moment, Avo grasped her nature better—how to provoke her. But also what her Heaven lacked.

The Fisher That Wasn't could fling constructs across time or place Zein ahead of all others on the pace of chronology. But it hadn't detected him at first. His appearance had surprised her, just like back at the Trident, just like she didn't know the nature of his templates. Perhaps she thought they were full copies of minds. In a way they were, but their lack of will must have gone unnoticed.

Regardless, this was his absolute advantage.

She might have the full picture and the ability to manipulate and foresee coming events, but he could peer into minds and systems with unmatched efficiency—and twist them to his own ends.

Between them, another duel had just begun.

One that Zein didn't even know about.

Howling curses sputtered out of Peace, his countenance a visible canvas of agony. As his suffering continued, Zein's fingers tapped her umbrella.

Dice and Draus were still, the nu-cat at their feet laying on its side, trying to understand why the people were so tense. Beside them, Tavers checked the condition of her armor and lined a Phys-Sim trajectory to Zein's head.

Kae's fingers were digging into her arm and Denton turned off her holo-tie pre-emptively.

The only one who remained relatively loose was Chambers, who only acknowledged the situation through Ghost-Link. *+Fuck it. I'm game for round two. She moves and I'll rash her. Sorry Kae.+*

+No,+ the Agnos said, squeezing her arms to get her nervousness under control. *+We might need that this time.+*

Making Peace wail was fun for Avo as well, but he kept his eyes locked on Zein the entire time. "Full minds. I don't enslave them. Hold them back from talking. Truth is usually more useful."

"The truth," Zein said, Peace's wailing expression splashed over her faceplate. "Is that what that was supposed to be?"

The blessing of having over a million other minds simulated inside your consciousness ensured

you had a response to almost any trap question. "His truth. Tells me who he is. Shows me his weakness."

The Godslayer nodded. She tapped her umbrella three more times. "But would you agree?"

"That Jaus wouldn't want this?"

She finally looked away from Peace and met his stare.

"Only knowledge of Jaus is tinted by myth. Comes through Peace. And I don't care about that. I don't care about *Jaus*. I'm just embarrassed by you."

The silent anger inside Zein broke and she did a double take. "Embrassed?"

"By your weakness," Avo elaborated.

The disbelief in Zein grew. As did the incredulity among the cadre.

+Avo,+ Tavers said, mind tight with anxiety.

+*Know what I'm doing*,+ Avo replied. +*Probably*.+

Dice said nothing. She merely picked her nu-kitten up and placed her beside the glass. The small animal mewed at her in confusion, but Draus understood.

Keep the cat away from the fighting.

"Told you about my encounter with the Hungers," Avo continued. Memories spilled out from him, manifesting as a collage of scenes to infuse his words with emphasis. "Met the Doublethinkers at the end. Begged me to free them. Found them pathetic. To fail their own power. Their own idealization."

He let out a slow hiss and glared down at Zein. "Expected better of you. Taunted by a Low Master. And surrendering to the future instead of shaping it. Are you an ephemeral or a Godclad."

Zein's eyes were unblinking now, her thoughtstuff impossibly still.

Avo kept going. "I shape things with my power. Opportunities. Circumstances. *Outcomes*. I struggle for what I want. I engineer possibility. You have it as part of your Soul. But no. Kare's 'death holds significance.' That's acceptance. That's surrender. That's *human*." Avo released a mocking laugh while Peace began to whimper for mercy, his mind so different he was another person. "But maybe I don't understand. Maybe I'm just ignorant. Said you were going to tell me about the paths. The future how I'm loud. Well. Suppose this is a good point to start then: why

must you sacrifice the Paladin?"

But Zein didn't speak. Instead, her fingers tightened around her parasol.