

[Query]

Yes, Gatekeeper.

[Why do you wish to make the truth a weapon?]

Because I want things to matter. I want there to be a fundamental force for virtue, for righteousness, for honesty.

[And there isn't now?]

No. Only a delusion of what could be. We have weaponized concepts, reality, even justice. Justice most of all. I have dismantled most gods of justice out of disgust. Can I confess to you why?

[Yes.]

I cannot bear to face them. They leave me ill. On the verge of sickness. When I behold their canons, it takes all I have to prevail against my rage, my despair. I can't sleep when I face them, and I find myself jealous of my love as she slumbers in her bliss.

[Why?]

Because in justice we are damned. In justice I see the fault of our design. Our Heavens—all were for the enforcement of order. Hierarchy. Brutality. Dominance above all. What righteous for the small? What structure to provide for the common? What instrument to stand against the rot? None. There is not. It is but an apparatus to funnel reactions of man that breaks and breaks and breaks. I see in it the greater entropy that prevades—the one in our ideals and hearts. I see no victory in the hearts of man.

[They hurt your faith in humanity.]

Worse. They hurt my faith in humanity's promise. I once thought politics of the void to be our future, our salvation but... they are fragmentation. Their triumph is one of self-subjugation. Of giving themselves to another. And it hurts of ego to behold, I cannot deny. It hurts me to think that the great triumph of humanity is to render ourselves as pet and trophies. My daughter's disgust is understandable, but her faith is no salvation. I cannot rule. I cannot be a tyrant. I haven't the heart. I haven't the will. Not to lead mankind. And not to fail her faith.

[A philosophical hell.]

An egotistical one. Forgive me, Gatekeeper. You are but days old, and this is what I offer.

[You are an arrogant man, Jaus Avanaer. Arrogant in your kindness. Arrogant in your virtue. Arrogant because you are desperate for humanity to triumph when so much of

your kindred have no interest in triumph, just survival. A lament of dissonance. Between the nature of the ape. And the dreams of man.]

...

[Did I hurt you?]

Yes. Thank you.

[You are welcome.]

I must find a way to introduce you to her.

[Your daughter.]

Yes. It would do her well to greet you properly. My daughter. My champion. My love. My greatest pride. She is beyond me. Beyond me in so many ways, but still she... I cannot bear failing her, I cannot bear hurting her, but I do not have the ability to deliver the world she desires—and the fault is mine. So exalted was her birth and potential that I have left her severed from the common man.

[She holds fault for her own choice. Your fault is trying to make child of someone that isn't.]

...

[You are a brittle man, Jaus Avandaer. I see why the world seems a cage. I see why you will not rule. You are wise. But wisdom is a trait. Not a decision. And seeing the path does not mean you can tread its length.]

*No. Help me. Please. I am trapped. I am trapped with the rest of humanity, but they think I can lead them. But I cannot. I cannot. I cannot even convince my own daughter to abandon her **path** of folly.*

-Jaus Avandaer to [The Gatekeeper]

24-11

The Atrocity

The very thought that Walton could have used Raldi as nothing more than a decoy gnawed at Avo, but the possibility couldn't be ignored.

Everything he did for Avo came at the cost of another—of countless others. Kae. Noloth. Zein. The Column. But was he truly willing to sacrifice his disciple in such a manner? As nothing more than a lure? The relationship between White-Rab and the Strix was a genuine one. This Avo

believed to be true. But Walton had never strayed from his objective. Never been stymied by conscience or mercy.

[You keep forgetting what he was, creature,] Peace snickered. [Defiance, of the Low Masters. Just because the sow-born bastard was a traitor doesn't make him the ally of another. You were his only loyalty. His only legacy. Blind gods, he probably saw you as Noloth's only true inheritance.]

Bitterness came, but Avo didn't sequence it away. Refused. The truth wasn't something to flee from but accepted. He faced this before. Many times before. Walton gave everything for him, but one must face the enormity of their forebearer's deeds once they pass—the good and the ill lest delusion become something he wielded against himself.

And ultimately, Walton was effectively gone. Used by adversaries and allies as an effigy, but fundamentally gone. His game was finished, and it was time for Avo to determine how he would carry out the man's legacy.

"I see my statement has struck home," Veylis said, still speaking through Kare. The Paladin's movements were lifelike, the lack of a mind betrayed the constructs nature as something less than a puppet. Avo's stay of silence convinced her of the wrong notion. Turned her attention to White-Rab. With her certainty cemented, the only thing that could turn her away was the actual truth, but Avo doubted that would spare his progenitor from the High Seraph's wrath either.

It was up to Avo to keep his cadre from harm, to see his father's sins be cleansed. White-Rab—and Reva for that matter—needed to be protected. Watched. Another weight to be borne.

The risks were spilling over.

The threats were only growing.

No other way but forward.

"Once again, I must commend you on your accomplishments. Misdirecting the Great Guilds for so long, identifying a most unexpected flashpoint in the form of Jhred Greatling and inflict such chaos across the city... It's *sublime*." Notes of genuine pleasure cascaded along strands of time, driving Avo to wonder just where Veylis' mind was rooted. Whatever the case, the High Seraph was no liar: she genuinely found his achievements — misattributed though they might be — spectacular.

"I have so many more questions for you. So many items of curiosity. How did you claim the warminds? How are you using them in such a sustained manner? Were you the cause of the Nether's imbalance as well? What drove you to conflict against my mother?" "Her drug habit didn't help," Avo deadpanned.

Kare's lips came together in a thin line as Avo's warmind of Hysteria detected a shadow of displeasure from Veylis. A faint memory—gazed as if through the currents of a raging river—called to him, showing a young girl glaring down at her clearly intoxicated mother. Smoke drifted up past Veylis' face as Zein offered her a particularly foul-smelling herb.

Veylis refused her. Vehemently. She landed the first her first blow on her mother that day, and for that, her mother, intoxicated though she was, picked up her and spun her proudly before bringing her to the beach.

[What the fuck is this family,] Talon-3 muttered.

{Such is a question many minds have failed to solve,} Calvino commiserated.

“Did she try to leash you to her Heaven?” Veylis suddenly asked.

It took a moment for Avo to understand the subtext. “Zein?”

“Yes.” He didn't answer. Which was an answer unto itself.

“Forgive my mother,” Veylis sighed. “Her predilection toward forcefulness and dominance is charming only when it's directed against a common enemy. Doubtless you must have deviated far from her paths in the end to provoke such severity. More than once she has cast assets into the future, dumping them out at the right place at the right time. I must admit to losing more than a few of our exchanges due to such. But I suppose she must've planned to deposit you just before the end. Just before the arrival of the Ladder. Isn't that so.” Avo saw little point in denying this. Veylis knew her mother better than he did. “Wish I could have killed her.” “You wouldn't be the first. It was her dragon, wasn't it? I felt its presence. Poor creature. Well. You should know by now that she only has but one objective: to undo the shape of my paths. To completely sever my father from his final destiny. Now that you've sampled her selfishness first-hand, that you've seen the state of the world... we need not be enemies, White-Rab. Perhaps not allies, but you must know this world requires a unifying symbol. A singleton.”

“You?” Avo asked.

Veylis had Kare shake her head. “No. My father. Vast though my ego may be, I am unlike my mother. I am not driven by impulse and feeling; base emotions.”

Somehow, Avo found this dubious, and she read his doubt from Marisov's expression.

“Truly. I am not. Not even the slightest.” She held up a hand as if imploring him to listen and paused. “Have you any idea what it took from me to commit myself to this task? To—to seize the reins of Highflame? To forge proper warriors out of jackals and hyenas?” “Know you murdered your father,” Avo jabbed.

Veylis opened her mouth and paused. A confused expression followed. “Is that what you think happened? Is that what my mother told you? What you believe?” “Don't believe anything; don't

trust anything. Know the damage your war has done to the paths. Most people thought Zein was dead. Thought you either tried to ascend Jaus and were betrayed. Or that you were the arch traitress that murdered your own father.” “Ah,” Veylis breathed. She nodded as if contemplating the information. “A rare case where all myths are true.” She closed her eyes. “Before I go further, I wish for you to know that if you believe what I did to my father granted me any gratification, you are wrong, and will incur my despisement.”

Avo grunted, unimpressed by the threat. “Tell me your truth. Don’t care about the rest.” Veylis opened Kare’s eyes, and with a wave of her hand, the world around her twisted and changed, waves of time painting the scenes of a final apocalypse.

The sky was flayed asunder by descending tendrils of chaos. A starry firmament materialized and tore as the Sunderwilder spilled over into stable reality. As the patterns of existence unraveled, only Avo and Veylis remained. Two forms stood amidst the torrents of entropy, shrouded by the shadow of a rising spire.

The Flayed Ladder rose once more, pushing out from the ruins of Scale like a tooth birthed from a wound. All sense of consistency shattered. The chains of causality broke. The world was a boiling cauldron of incoherence, but this time, the Ladder itself groaned, the Ladder itself cracked, the Ladder itself approached as fissures inched down its exterior.

The uncountable bodies fused to the ladder's shape clung to their supplication even thousands of their number were shredded apart in gushing rivers of gore. Most continued their prayer, skulls melded to the structure, prostrations eternal, unaware or indifferent that the cage they comprised was being torn open.

A Soul-rattling crack ran through Avo as the Flayed Ladder was pried open. The act of violence scarred him—scarred his mind as much as did when Zein first showed him.

COG-CAP: 55%

Even with Hysteria, Emotion’s onslaught was paltry. All other traumas were inconsequential. This was the face of all things unmade. This was the alter of all laws undone. This was the defilement of all that could be, will be, never to be.

“Look,” Veylis' voice was gentle, sorrowful. Kare’s form was fraying, coming apart in flowing strings. Inside, Avo caught a glimpse across the veil, saw an immense shadow cradled by countless arms, enchained within the darkness of a pit. There was a place there. A time. A location. Avo’s internalized Domain of Chronology whispered secrets to his instincts, fed realizations that couldn’t be deduced by a mortal’s insight.

Veylis wasn’t here. At least, not in the present. Her Heaven was an ocean, but not all its waves moved in sync. If he wanted to seek her, to strike at her, he needed to learn to swim, for unless he learned at one point in time to strike, she would always be beyond him. Just as his splinters placed him beyond her.

Or so he hoped.

“Look,” Veylis repeated. Kare was utterly dissolved now, and her dissolved silhouette stood a window to ever-changing moments across history. Places, sensations, people, and ideas claimed by the High Seraph for her own use. In a way, she was more archive than person—the embodiment of retro-history resurrected.

As stared, a chasm of blood oozed free from the Flayed Ladder, and darkness followed the bifurcation. It was not a natural darkness. No. But it was familiar. The motes he saw in the Maw. The same shade infusing his entropic winds—that which he used to unmake the concept of matter. Devouring shadows coursed up and through each segment of the tower, but slowly, the Rend receded, and Avo’s mind recoiled as he struggled to conceptualize what he saw.

The screaming tore into his mind—began as it had always been, as if it always *was*, like Avo had been retroactively hearing a note of unceasing agony for time upon time upon time upon—

COG-CAP: 71%

Wincing, Avo shifted his mental architecture and devoted more sequences to his wards. He used symmetrical memories for amplification, Hysteria hypercharging the potency of his wards. The Conundrums, already peerless among its category, turned from reactive layers to an impenetrable field.

Updating...

COG-CAP: 49%

He caught Veylis doing a double take, tendrils of time coursing around him, rearing back as if serpents waiting to strike. He didn’t bother stifling his satisfaction. “Rude of you. Been through this already. Can’t crack my mind this way.” **“I wish to see your mettle,”** Veylis answered, her voice now sounded like the totality of all things. She was an explosion, a whisper, a breeze, a hurricane, a laugh, a cry, a river, a fire. She spoke, and existence itself spoke in her stead.

“Surprised?” Avo asked.

“Impressed. I have known so few with the fortitude to behold the truth.”

He was about to continue, but light painted shape into the interior of the Ladder, and Avo’s thoughts abandoned him.

The sight was an atrocity. There was nothing else to say. Across ten segments—ten Spheres of thaumaturgy—a sprawl of torment cried out to Avo; a wall of hands reached out for him. From the soil of the Maw to the tip where the Ladder burrowed into the coming kingdom, one face looked back at Avo, one man suffered endless cycles as the cyclers around the Ladder spun.

Around a pulsating Soul orbited duplications of one man, and golden chains laced his selves together like links in a *chain*. Duplications of one man experiencing the fullness of the apocalypse, the calamity flowing through them—becoming them. This was the source of the screaming, and through the man coiled upward to ascend the spiral of existence, his movement found its end upon a temporal scar. A split bifurcated the fifth segment from within, and the flowing paths of time came apart as tatters, as separate futures, as contradictions.

Soulfire erupted with each passing second. But the Ladder endured. As did the man's suffering.

And as the tower came to a final halt right before Avo, displacing tides of black. Realization followed. Realization, and horror.

[Jaus!] Benhata cried.

[Jaus,] Abrel whispered.

[Jaus.] Corner choked.

[Jaus?] Chambers breathed.

“Jaus,” Avo finished, struggling to process what he was seeing, forcing himself to look away. “That—”

“Yes,” Veylis’ said, her tone taking on a somber quality. **“My father. The crown of my faith. The one true savior the world deserved, and who deserved the world. Come, Dreamer. Gaze upon my greatest failure. Gaze upon what my mother has deprived the world—the glory that we could have had. Gaze upon the reason you must aid me, gaze upon the severance of Jaus Avandaer!”**