

Fate is a fickle thing.

Even in years of yore, the gods of destiny and the weavers of preordination were not omnipotent. Such is the great weakness of all Heavens, after all, for the conceptualization of all-knowingness remains beyond even the genius of the minds.

And no god has ever managed to reach such heights, though their ambitions drive them to seek it.

Despite this, limited hyper-awareness is possible, and the secret to manufacturing prophecy is quite simple, in fact.

Maintenance.

The ultimate insurance towards seeing your desired outcome made manifest is maintenance. Conceptualize the future. Create a subreality mirroring the world that is and allow it to progress with assumed variables. Designate essential characters, events, objects, locations to form your miracles around.

Then, use time itself as a buffer against any intruding elements. Often, when something happens makes all the difference between what follows, and a threat displaced often is a threat neutralized.

Indeed, when built correctly, this does not even produce much entropy. Take the Augurshields afforded to the FATED, for instance. A slight imbuement of probability to ensure all the safety they need, protecting them from “ill fortune” and or stray bullets.

The difficulty of creating such a Heaven, however, loops back to matters of complexity, and informational deficiency.

*For even the supposed gods of foreknowledge could not predict the Godsfall. For what did they know of Jaus? For how could they have noticed his machinations with their sacrifices already tainted with **Ignorance**?*

Hence, when building a Heaven of Destiny, you must not be confused. You are not creating an omnipotent system. That is the illusion at play. Something beyond the demands of mortal ken.

But what you must demonstrate is nonetheless difficult, for are tasked with the functional manifestation of a dynamic subreality capable of detecting, intercepting, and removing variables you deem intrusive.

The passing qualification is simple: you each will select a specific tree from an enclosed biome, and at year’s end—or when you believe your design is ready—we will release swarms of gnarflies infested with barkrot into the ecosystem.

Ensure the survival of your tree.

You will be getting a list of pairable Domains. This Heaven may not exceed the demands of a Second Sphere Liminal Frame. This Heaven may not be paired with another Heaven. This Heaven may not interface with outside technologies or machinery beyond the enclosed biomes. You will each be given a stipend of a million sacrifices, and should the need arise, you may officially request more.

*...Oh, and a contract of their choosing to any of you that successfully completes the project faster than the current record holder: **[2 WEEKS, 1 DAY, 14 HOURS, and 35 SECONDS - KAE KUSANADE (FIFTH KNOWING)]***

Good luck.

-Agnos Yue Reason-Bearer to her novitiates

21-12

The Paths of Futures Broken (II)

“Would you,” Zein said, her words colder than the kiss of a blade, “like to learn about the Paths? I believe that was something you desired to learn about.”

The miracles of her Heaven poured forth from her ontology, building as a golden pool around her being. A weave of rippling chronology slowly encroached, filling the command nexus, and with every inch did tension rise.

Now, more than ever before, Avo felt the threat that Zein posed—how much harm she could inflict in a heartbeat.

He danced on the edge of manipulation and provocation.

Draus cast him a thought and her words echoed across to the cadre. *+Careful. I'm ready for this, but Kae and Tavers need out if we're about to find out who's gonna light the wick. Passages are ready. Be sure about your words.+*

Avo grunted.

He stood on treacherous terrain, but he needed an edge. Playing passive meant surrendering Kare—and all self-determination—to Zein. His understanding of her deeper nature remained blurred, but it was becoming increasingly clear that unless one posed a requisite martial or metaphysical threat to Zein, she would regard them as more playthings than people.

This was a dangerous game he played, but passivity would betray his own actualization—and what he wanted for the city. Besides, it was Zein's nature to battle. Learning how to direct her focus would be invaluable for the future.

“Yes,” Avo finally replied. “Going to show me now? Use it to explain why you *have* to kill my Paladin.”

Inside his mind, Kare shivered, uncertain how to feel about the ghoul's possessiveness, terrified of what the Godslayer intended.

“Among other things.” Zein's face took on a curious quality, rage flattening to something inquisitive. Seeking. “Your Paladin. Truly, you are Walton's child. All he could infiltrate, he thought to be his, caring nothing for someone else's opinion. Or will.” She chuckled. “A commendable belief. And true.”

She released her umbrella, and it fell from existence, vanishing, and departing threads.

Lifting her now-emptied hand, she extended it in greeting, expecting him to grasp it.

His claws were large enough to wrap around her forearm twice over, but still, he committed to the awkward action, thinking himself prepared for whatever may follow.

As his splinters were scattered across the face of Idheim and his original body in the enclave, the only ones truly at risk of cessation were his cadre, but with how Zein's eyes were locked solely on him, he doubted she would strike at any of them as a means of retribution.

It ultimately didn't fit her behavior. She was a duelist before a Godclad, and she met her challengers thusly.

Nervousness and tension exploded through his templates. Entire portions of his mind rose in parliamentary whole, some begging him to refrain and to stand back, others merely quiet, awaiting what happened next.

Avo himself knew the potential risks. Hers was the future unfettered, and she could do any number of things that he wasn't prepared for.

But he too was a Godclad, and where she held time as a blade, he was a predator apart from all others in the fathomless ocean of cognition. Their arms met and their ontologies rang like clashing blades, made symmetrical by infusion of chronology.

The weave of coalescing time tightened around all those present. A lurch passed through their beings as Avo felt interference crackle through his mind as time dilated unnaturally.

Existence transformed. The world was as it was, but there were threads of resplendence that ran between the seams, stitched into the tapestry of reality—pulling and twitching in places.

The blood within Avo shivered as he used the Woundmother to sense the material composition of the room. ***“Master... there is something else in the patterns. Like something is actively supporting it.”***

The Fardrifter felt it too. As did the Techplaguer.

Time was a foundational Domain. The future was always coming, and nothing was exempt from its presence. Matter could be destroyed. Energy could be expended. Ghosts could fragment into specks of madness.

But time? Time always continued.

[Or does it,] Lip asked, dread tinging her thoughts. [She’s gotta vent sometime, right? What the hell does that look like?]

Avo didn’t know exactly, but he had his suspicions.

{Yes,} Calvin said, confirming his thoughts. {She can do that. She can cast you backward. Or hold you in place. Of course, you know there’s nothing there but oblivion, but that’s the efficient part. No evidence. And it’s hard to recall someone partially eradicated from time itself.}

It was a disquieting realization, learning that Zein could have eradicated him and his entire cadre in an instant. They had all come far, forcing her into a prolonged battle, even. But they needed countermeasures. Something to deploy in case she wielded the worst of her abilities against them.

And then came the intrusive thought: a memory of how to nurture dragons into existence. With the Domain of Chronology fused to his very Soul, he might be able to twist the fabric of time and affect the dragons—extract aspects of their ontology before implanting the harvested materials in communities. Engineer major cultural or societal events to cause more dragons to sprout forth.

Somehow, he knew how to culture dragons, and with these means, he could create new cyclers—or potentially even a tunnel toward the future should he face Zein in earnest.

But these were nebulous thoughts, his knowledge coming through a haze, its source unquestioned.

A gesture from Zein broke him from his considerations and called his attention back to her. “We stand now in a simulation, a place formed by my Heaven, using the world around us as a template—a *canvas*. Just this little chamber and all the things and people in it, we have created a

root: a point from which new events will transpire. And from here, we can discover almost any outcome should we have the proper information.”

Without warning, existence is divided in two. Avo’s perception blurred as he found himself staring down at Zein from two pairs of eyes, receiving sensory input from two different sheaths. Both moments continued, but in one her hand shot out. Such was the last thing he saw before that version of himself died.

The stream in which he still lived clipped over the one where Zein had killed him. Across his splinters, other memories leaked over—recollections from each member of his cadre. Dice and Draus attacked immediately, supported by a stream of Rend from Tavers. A whirlpool of penises and raging water came from Kae and Chambers next. Denton, ever the pragmatist and most familiar with Zein, simply turned the smart matter hull separating the nexus from the darkness beyond into gold bars, allowing the starving shadows to invade.

In retrospect, instead of living two lives at once, it was more like to concurrent recollections stacked right over each other.

Either way, it was more than a little overwhelming.

“Hells,” Draus said, shaking off her disorientation. Errors populated her cog-feed. “What was that? Felt like part of me got pulled out and slotted by in.”

Zein smiled coldly. “It’s just a possibility. Of what could be. Should I choose it to be so. The lives you just lived in parallel were not your own. Rather, they are echoes—constructs molded from what I know of your behavior and capabilities. They are more like puppets or *programs* if you will.”

Calvino expanded a pop-up window to indicate what a program was and Avo hummed. “But only draws from what you’ve observed. Your understanding of the world.”

Silence. The crone regarded him as a nu-cat would a fleeing aratnid. What master would give away all their secrets so easily?

“This is what you used to decide Kare Kitzuhada had to die?” Avo asked, pulling them back into dangerous waters.

“The simulations I ran for her are larger and more expansive.” Time streamed forth from Zein and the command nexus around them peeled away, the waters of time bringing them to the interior of Scale.

A clash of sound and violence prevailed.

Thunderous clashes between warring Godclads of every Guild and the Paladins themselves raged across the vastness of the courtroom. Reality wailed—and tore. Entropy spilled from metaphysical ruptures as Rendbombs were detonated, destabilizing existence itself.

A haze layered the chaos, a fog of war that left the details unclear but the battles undeniable. At the heart of the chamber were three bodies. The first was Elder D'Rongo—a member of Ori-Thaum's inner and outer councils, and first representative of her clan. She lay in strips of mangled flesh, her body brutalized by gunfire, blood pooling in her plasteel holding cell anchored to a podium. Across from her was Abrel Greatling, dead from a miracle, but resurrecting.

Outside her cage, however, Kare Kitzuhada had taken fatal damage on her behalf—a point-blank detonation of several Rendbombs built specifically to overload each of Abrel's cyclers.

Something later revealed to be delivered by Ori-Thaum assets from an unknown source.

Everyone was back in the command nexus again, the transition more jarring than even the last. There was no prelude to their restoration. No progression or pause. It was just like a vicariness running its course, returning a mind back to the palace.

[The fuck...] Abrel breathed.

[What... was that?] Kare muttered, mind whirling at the mess of memories she was just faced with. There were things she saw—the entire cadre saw—that they understood, but also information that was just known. Like a retrospective update.

+I hate it when she does that shit, + Draus growled, thinking back to how Zein just threaded information from the paths into them before their attempt on Mirrorhead's life.

"Is this supposed to be what happens?" Avo asked.

"It is an unfinished scene. One I'm currently scripting." And she said no more.

Avo prodded further. "Why? Why does this moment need to happen?"

"To provoke something between the Guilds—a temporary accord and a mutual cleansing. As Highflame has Chivalrics to purge, so too does the Overclan of the Ori have corruption it must uncover. Think of it. Think of the moment. The *resonance*. A daughter of the Ori-turned-Paladin giving her life for a prisoner—a disgraced Highflame Instrument.

"Her father and uncle will be distraught of course. But pliable towards new... persuasions."

Avo considered the scene she was painting, and his templates filled in the details.

Most were confused, but between Banhata, Abrel, and Elegant-Moon, a potential picture came together.

This was about politics—most likely meant to provoke a moment of uneasy peace. Kare Kituhada just proved to be the most effective sacrifice on the altar.

Her worth came in three parts: she was a Paladin; she was of a major Ori clan; and she was related to Shotin Kazahara. For the first, it would spark her comrades back to war footing. Scale would likely be locked down, the other Godclads banished and viewed as outright adversaries.

[Making sure that no one can get close to the Gatekeeper,] Banhata theorized.

Then, the Ori themselves would have shame to match Highflame. With the spearheads of each major alliance undone so publicly, there were good odds of a restructuring happening. A removal of “problematic” elements. The ones replacing them thereafter would likely be more to Zein’s liking. Especially if she wanted to engineer a prolonged period of disorganized peace.

If Avo had to guess, this was a delaying strategy to get more of her schemes in place and ensure some kind of advantage when the Ladder returned.

Finally, there was Shotin Kazahara. His rage and retribution would be certain in the aftermath, but even Kare wasn’t sure why Zein wanted to use him in such a manner. Planeshift was a volatile enough character on his own. Perhaps the death of his niece would make him reckless and willing to—

[Vulnerable,] Elegant-Moon whispered, her mind glittering with fascination. **[She wants him to make choices so severe he would otherwise never commit to them. She plans to disfigure his heart and replace its driving motion with her hand. Maybe she wishes to recruit him. Him and the Ambassador.]**

On the throne, Chambers’ eyes swung from place to place. “I’m completely fucking lost again. Why’s the druggie wanna kill the glasser again?”

“Peace,” Avo answered, testing the waters. The thinning of Zein’s lips told him he was right. He fed his conclusions to his cadre through his Splinters and made a show of addressing them directly. “This is supposed to be an engineered moment of armistice. Disarray will grip both Guilds. Very *similar* kinds of disarray. Old factions will be replaced. And the sacrifice of an Ori to protect a Gold will strike at the heart of the conflict. It will shame the Guilds in a way they couldn’t ignore.”

Just as he had struck at Zein with words she couldn’t turn aside from.

There was meant to be a way to things. A foundational concept. To say that she was a coward and bending before the world was to claim all she was but a lie.

The same thing applied to the Guilds.

Saintists and Massist were supposed to be at war. The war of all wars. Eternity was at stake. Utopia. But being forced to see the narrative break within the halls of Scale? For who was friend and foe to be so muddled from the act committed?

That struck at a civilization's heart.

But there was just one thing Avo had to say about that: "I can make this worse. I can make your plan better. And we don't need to waste an asset."

"Oh?" Zein asked, surfacing from ire to curiosity once more. "And what can you add that I have not already accounted for?"

Arrogance. Arrogance and self-assuredness.

For all Zein's skills, she was really too stubborn. Ever the warrior, she treated her sandbox as a mechanism to deliver her outcomes and situations in the most direct ways possible: shock and blood.

Avo had nothing against violence, but the craft that defined him—that was his father's legacy was one of subtle betrayals. "You're looking only ahead. Just the future. You forget about history."

"History?" Zein asked.

Finally, Avo turned to Kae and let his excitement run over to her. The Agnos was confused for a heartbeat, but when the rest of his thoughts arrived, her eyes widened, and she understood what he intended.

"There is a unique opportunity before us," Avo elaborated. "One that can achieve the false-peace you want. And more. One that allows her revenge to be sated. And her name to be made just again in society."

A beat passed. Threads of gold drew taut around Zein as her brows furrowed. Then she saw. Then she *remembered*. "Ah. The Trident. The information you stole that day."

"Yes," Avo said. "There are Paladin killers still unpunished. D'Rongo's soldiers. Know where they are. Can access the sleeper identities they're hiding under. Track them. Take them. Use them. It will all make for a better design. A more calculated approach."

As he finished speaking, Zein mulled on his words, let out a small breath, and nodded.

“No.”

The “future” washed over them again.