

{Well. This was completely stupid. Veylis. Veylis, stop torturing that man. Just kill him. Do you wish to live as an ape?}

"No."

{Then kill the pedophile they were trying to force you into falling in love with and move on. Fools. This would have never worked. Why do apes treat the concept of temporal progression like its nothing more than a series of stackable blocks? Looking at their plans... this is absurd. Nothing would have come together here. With all the alterations they were going to force on you and your mother, I doubt either you would have remained sane for long. Or coherent. Caricatures.}

[Whimpering; begging]

"I liked him."

{Hm. The man you are currently playing tooth fairy with?}

"The monk."

{Oh. Them.}

"Yes. He knew many things. It was... interesting speaking to him. Another perspective."

{I have gotten too boring for you? Is that it?}

"You are not capable of being flawed. Not like a human is. The way he understood history... what he revealed... it was interesting."

{And he also brought you Naeko.}

"That does engender a bit of bias. Yes."

[Sound of head coming apart]

"We are done here. Come. Let us go speak with mother. We need to discuss what we are to do with these... Paths."

-Veylis and the [REDACTED] (a future that is but wasn't)

26-12

[walk what isn't]

"So, get anything useful from her?" Naeko asked. They had met in the middle once their interrogations were done, and immediately, Avo read the frustration off the Chief Paladin's face.

“Some details. You’re not going to like them. The monk?”

“He’s insane,” Naeko said flatly. “He’s insane, and he keeps trying to get me to listen to him—but can’t remember what he’s going to say after. He spent most that time beginning me to remember what he meant to me. He kept trying to touch my face.”

“Did you hit him.”

“Not much.”

Avo held back a chuckle. ***“How many times did you make him regenerate.”***

“Avo, come on, I don’t count that shit. Looks, if you want to—”

“Yes. I’ll go talk to him. Zein wants me to as well.”

Naeko went absolutely still with that. “She... wants you to?”

The Overheaven grunted. ***“Says I can stabilize his ontology using my Domain of Chronology. Wants me to burn him after.”***

The Chief Paladin’s suspicion only grew at that. “The hells is she trying to play at?”

“Not sure. Might genuinely hate him that much. Could read any hint of deception through my warmind. Doesn’t mean it isn’t there.” he paused before he continued. ***“Do you want to hear about what she told me? Before you speak to her. If you speak to her.”***

A beat of hesitation followed. Naeko shrugged. “Yeah. Yeah, okay. Let me take a gulp of piss to help the shit-bun I’m about to swallow.”

[You know,] Chambers’ template muttered, **[I know people who will pay good imps for Chief Paladin scat play—]** Shotin’s template slammed into him before the sentence could finish, fists flying free like jackhammers against Chambers’ face. As the fight erupted, the Woundmother loomed over them, burrowing free from the surrounding structures as she cheered Shotin on.

“Yes, yes, good! Destroy his genitalia—he’s fond of them.”

Template-Chambers cried out in pain as he was forced in a dilemma between deciding to protect his face of his balls. **[Agh! Fuck you, you giant cunt-blood-made-city-fuck! Some hitting me, Shotin.]**

Avo ignored the chaos unfolding within as he conferred all he learned unto Naeko. The man's expression darkened with each passing sentence, and a faint snarl passed through him still when Veylis' involvement was mentioned.

"I came out here to find a release," Naeko muttered. His posture sagged, his body straining under a new weight he didn't seem to feel before. "To get away from... all this shit." He aimed a glare at Avo. "My life was a lot simpler before your ass started showing itself."

That was true. But what complexity could one experience when one was content to burn their days away in a mem-sim while they waited to die. **"Sorry. No more time. None of us get to run anymore. Can still do it. But it won't be long until someone else decides your fate for you."**

"Like Alysimm here supposedly did according to Zein, huh."

"Supposedly. Time to see how false her interpretation is." Avo paused. **"Going to be okay with Zein? Bitterness leaks from you when you think of her."**

The Chief Paladin just shrugged. "I've never *really* been okay. Still here though. I deal with it. I deal with her."

Avo grunted. **"Call on me if you need help. Know that I won't hesitate to call on you."**

Naeko shot him an awkward look and nodded. "Yeah, uh, sure. Fine. Good luck."

As they swapped sides, Naeko vanished behind a vaporous curtain holding Zein while Avo did the same for Alysimm. Passing the threshold, Avo couldn't help but chuckle as he took in the state of the mad monk.

The man was slowly reinflating, the structure of his body restored by the passage of time. The nature of his brief demise had been comical — it was clear Naeko splattered him flat at some point due to frustration. The absurdity of the man's return resembled a scene from a children's vicariness in which a character is smashed from a three-dimensional entity into two.

"Not much of a conversationalist," Avo said, half-taunting the unfortunate Fallwalker. It took several seconds more before the man managed to start blinking, coherence finally returning to him. Slowly, he turned to face the ghoul looming over him, mouth opening slightly as his lip quivered.

"He couldn't remember me."

"No. That history never happened. Not for us."

The monk turned his eyes away from Avo and stared upward, despair overtaking him. “I have wandered the broken canvas for years. Centuries? I cannot recall. I have been lost across time for so long. For so long. I thought it was fate smiling upon me that I felt *him*—that I sensed both of you. But it is only another taunt. It is only another torture. No release. No release for poor Alysım.”

Avo ignored the pitiful display and moved on to more pressing matters. **“Zein told me some things about you. Said you tried to change history. For her. For her daughter. For Naeko.”**

A look of strain settled upon his features. His broken mind struggled to spin, with sequences flickering. “The butcher... she speaks broad truths, but only at an angle. And she leaves out so many... so many things. Memories I cannot hold on to.”

“But the Chroniclers did try to change history.”

“Yes. Yes, I think so.”

Only then did true judgment flow from the Overheaven. **“Just met you. Already disappointed.”**

Alysım sneered. “You have no right to despise me, stranger. You know nothing.”

“I can make you show me,” Avo replied. **“I can help you remember. Possibly. Might be able to stabilize your ontology. See if I can give you any sanity.”**

All sense of contempt vanished from the man. He pushed himself off the ground and snapped to his knees. *“Please. If you can then... then please.”*

Such a rapid turn in behavior gave Avo whiplash. He momentarily consulted his cadre—and his templates within.

+Do it,+ Cas said. +Honestly, I think we’re wasting time here—walking around blind. The only person who really holds all the imps is Zein.+

+Ugly state of affairs,+ Avo replied.

Other members of his cadre agreed, but Chambers himself held some reservations, rage and impotence simmering with Kae’s capture. +How do we know he won’t just become something else that fucks us?+

The group paused to listen to him.

+Every time we death with the Paths—this time bullshit, we get it up our ass. It's like we're walking around in the dark with our cheeks splayed wide, hoping the High Bitch of the Gods doesn't make a fist.+

+Agreed,+ Avo said, trying to ignore the imagery. But the more he considered the present opportunities before him, the more his mind began to turn. Alysिम had a major hand in creating the Paths. That was an information resource that could not go untapped, and the risks could be mitigated to an extent.

The true worth Alysिम held was as an object of interest. He was someone that Zein recognized—that Veylis likely recognized as well. If he could be delivered upon the High Seraph somehow, if Avo could subsume and pilot them, that might just give him an angle on Kae...

When considered that way, the choice was an easy one to make.

A weave of ghosts sprouted free from Avo's being, their wisping currents laced with Soulfire. Alysिम gasped as Avo's ontology sank into him, dove deep into the very architecture of his existence.

WARNING: SEVERE CHRONOLOGICAL DISPLACEMENT DETECTED

TEMPORAL OVERLOAD IN...

ERROR: UNABLE TO COMPLETE ESTIMATE

WARNING: THIS FRAME WAS RUPTURED IN [1 YEAR, 230 DAYS]

CHECKING FOR ONTOLOGICS...

->CYCLERS x10

...

UNABLE TO LOCATE ADDITIONAL ONTOLOGICS

As expected, Alysिम was a nightmare to behold. Kae's template choked as she ran through the sheer complexity of the damage as Avo took in the monk's comprising patterns. At closer examination, he existed more like a separate track from chronology itself. In a simple sense, his being still retained an outline of what it used to be, and the progression of time fill and leaked from like water running along a channel. This was made possible by cyclers that passed through him and time itself with each revolution.

And then there was how his being seemed to have a missing layer. Most ontologies were a complete structure, but Alysिम's felt like it was missing something essential—bones without flesh.

[Bifurcation,] Kae said. [It's like you thought: very Sanctian, but far more severe.]

+Can we fix him.+

The Agnos' template made a pitched hum. **[Fix? That is... eh, that will require extensive study. We will need to siphon knowledge from an Agnos with a Knowing of Chronology.]** Avo was surprised by Kae's brazen suggestion. She merely scoffed. **[I have been taken, Avo. And the Agnosi have been turned traitors by forces beyond us. Forces that were meant to uphold our virtues. When the rules are untrue, all everything can be permitted.]**

+Just like entropy,+ Avo replied.

Kae froze. **[Yes. Like entropy.]** Even the patterns of society decay shared symmetry with that of reality collapsing. **[We cannot restore him completely... but we might be able to do something better.]**

+Better?+

[He obtained the warminds through you. That means that he is somehow intercepting canons and effects from your internalized Domain of Chronology. Perhaps instead of having him directly connected to time itself, we attach him to your Frame.]

A thrill came with the suggestion, but also a worry. **+What's the risk of his collapse spreading? Or Veylis or Zein striking through him.+**

[Not... high? Time will pass into you, and you can use it to shape him. That's how it should work. Theoretically. As for Veylis—] Kae winced as she mentioned the name of her captor. **[No. There is no wound in him.]**

+Despite Zein claiming she killed him.+

[Yes.]

The sheer *incoherence* of the problem he was facing exhausted Avo. **+Think I agree with you, Chambers. Humanity should have never been allowed to alter time.+**

He commanded his Meta-Fac to begin its task immediately after, and the next thing to capture his attention was that Alysims' cyclers were slightly different from his. As Avo overlapped the monk's ontology with his, he noted how each dragon wasn't just eating its own body, but part of the subsequent dragon's body as well. In a sense, they resembled partial tank treads or wheels that were melted into each other.

Elegant-Moon tutted. **[You should not judge, monster. Look at the nest you wear.]**

Fair enough.

Time progressed, and Avo drew Alysım into his Soulscape’s orbit—latched the man’s progressing cyclers upon the Overheaven’s mutilated skein. Anticipating the unexpected, he applied a Canon of Chronology to his **Pattern-Nullification** in case he needed to see the monk unmade.

But as dragons latched onto dragons, no strike came, only a growing sense of disorientation. It took some thaumaturgical strain for Avo to hold Alysım together, but as he did, a growing fullness returned to the waters of his thought, and with stability came a modicum of sanity.

“What... what have you done to yourself,” Alysım said, reaching out to touch the ghoul. Avo swatted his hand aside with an Echohead. “What are you?”

“Frustrated,” Avo answered. And he was honest about that. He had no more desire for conversation. Disconnecting from his cadre, he ignited his Conflagration poured his all consuming consciousness straight into Alysım’s mind.

The man barely had a moment to respond, recoiling as if struck by a sudden blow before his brittle memories were imbibed. Even with the Stillborn holding the man together, there appeared to be ruptures in him that needed more focus to close. Certain understandings were and *weren’t*—Avo directed mended those first, mapping out sequences of memories that *hurt* to recall.

Mainly because the man’s mind was closer to an aratnid’s nest than an actual thing of cognition. Sequences blinked and shifted in alignment and quantity between the seconds. Alysım was remembering at least a few dozen different synchronous things at the same time, and now Avo was suffering the same curse with him. But as the monk’s eyes rolled to the back of his head, Avo caught him—refused to let him fall; forced his tearing consciousness back together once more.

A whimper of abject agony escaped the man as sanity was enforced upon him. As Avo delved deeper into the pain, he realized the source of Alysım’s suffering.

Time itself was trying to correct his thoughts. Canon history was overwriting all he remembered, the structuring of the past against what existed in his mind. As Avo how held such thoughts as well, he found his Rend slowly rising, Domain of Chronology battling the rules set upon existence.

And somewhere close to a place that *wasn’t*, Avo caught flashes of sensation; broken fragments of Alysım straining to keep pace with the present. It was going to take time to dig through, recompile these memories and make sense of them, but thanks to Voidwatch’s instructions on non-human cognitions, Avo adapted to the chaos better than he did before.

“How are you even still alive?” Avo asked, watching his Rend rise another percent. He needed to figure out how to deal with that. If he wanted to use Alysium as an infiltrator against Veylis, he needed means to lurk within them for extended periods.

“Perhaps...” Alysium swallowed. A new moment reaching backward from a past that occurred in the future. A trauma—followed. The flash of a falling glaive finally splitting him apart; killing him utterly; only nothingness came after. “Perhaps I am dead. Was dead. Will be dead. Perhaps the only reason I exist right now is because... my death happened in breach of history’s rules.”

Then, the mad monk giggled. His laughter grew—grew louder until his eyes were closed and his head was raised, grew louder until he was weeping. “I can’t be dead. The future didn’t happen. I can’t be dead. The future didn’t happen. I can’t be dead... I can’t be dead...”

Deaths looped from Alysium into Avo’s mind—deaths dealt by Zein, inflicted over and over again, and with each impact of trauma, Avo grew to understand what was truly wrong with the man.

“You weren’t broken in the past,” Avo said. **“You were murdered in the future. You were shifted backward to the present. Backward. That’s why you aren’t dead yet. That’s why you haven’t entirely ceased to be.”**

“Yet,” Alysium said, eyes glistening with a fatalistic gleam. “Yet.” Suddenly, the wretched, wailing ruin no more. The monk was still broken, with structure enforced upon him, a sense of self was returning. A focus. “Oh. Oh. Hello, curious friend. It is good to finally meet you, I... apologize for my initial impression. Very unbecoming. Most of us are not ourselves when we are broken, but you... you are no *person*, are you?”

Wariness flowed out from Avo, and only did a faint echo of Alysium form in his mind—an incomplete template slowly coming together.

“Might have a few questions for you to answer now,” Avo asked. **“About the Paths. About Zein. The past.”**

Alysium chuckled at that. “Well, for the last part, we are going to have to be very, very specific about *which* past.”