

Veylis Avandaer: *Why?*

Jaus Avandaer: *Veylis, listen—*

Veylis Avandaer: *No. Do not use your rhetoric on me. I am your daughter, not your enemy. Tell me why. Only why. Tell me why you see to cast us back in chains.*

Jaus Avandaer: *That is not what I'm doing. You know this. You can see that?*

Veylis Avandaer: *Can I? Father, you are rebuilding a god! A god of such sophistication. A god with past pantheons imbued. That Gatekeeper is the very thing we all sacrificed so much to destroy. Eons. Eons lost. **Trillions** upon trillions of lives delivered unto them, their hunger unslaked. Geniuses, icons, visionaries, heroes, and champions all rendered little more than sacrifices. For nothing. I showed you what I witnessed in the paths. I have shown you what I've seen—the unspeakable calamities that will follow. And still. And still, you choose this?*

Jaus Avandaer: *Veylis, please. It is good that you have shown—*

Veylis Avandaer: *Enough. I am not mother. You cannot turn me from sense with whispered words of passion and nothingness, a calculated hand on my shoulder! We have seen the horror. You and I. We have seen it. So why do you choose blindness? Why do you choose to ignore the ruination that this will bring?*

Jaus Avandaer: *It is only a possibility—*

Veylis Avandaer: *One that manifests time and time and time again.*

Jaus Avandaer: *My duty to our future—to existence itself is too great. Greater than even your fears, Veylis. I trust you. But you have seen the other roads as well. We are trapped. If the power of gods rests in the hands of humanity, then we will fall to chaos. We will fall. War between the cultures is inevitable. And the Ladder offers too much. Too much for man to resist. We need to be controlled.*

Veylis Avandaer: *...Of that, I think we are agreed. But not by a thing. By ourselves. By each individual triumphing over their own follies and weaknesses. Foundationally, then mentally, and finally spiritually. Our forefathers were debased because they fell to their animal natures. But you can show the rest what it means to be worthy. Letting a god cradle us as pathetic whimpering infants is foolishness, father. Hubris. To see you succumb to stubbornness and delusion is...*

Jaus Avandaer: *To let things stay as is ensures we stand apart. Ensures that the cultures remain broken and that the tyranny within ourselves will triumph. How can we talk about being “worthy” when we are failable? When the lure to make the world perfect for us—and only us—can be materialized. At the cost of everyone else.*

Veylis Avandaer: *But our natures can be overcome. Triumphed against. We can resist. We can triumph. And when we reach the precipice of self-mastery, we can reach down and pull the rest up with us. But if we give away our Heavens, if we surrender our Frames—*

Jaus Avandaer: *Then we spare ourselves the risk of succumbing to our very natures—*

Veylis Avandaer: *Father, you are being irrational. Driven by fear. The Hungers' attempt on your life has shaken you from the rightful path.*

Jaus Avandaer: *It's not just them. The others. They cannot endure this.*

Veylis Avandaer: *...I can resolve them. If that is what you wish.*

Jaus Avandaer: *No! No. I do not... I am twisted by the fact that if I do not control my fellow humans, we will turn on each other when the Ladder is formed. As if apes! Dogs! Upon each other! What worth is all my worthless prattle when power provides such pleasure? When power makes whores of men and woman alike! Betraying the promise! Betraying the dream!*

Veylis Avandaer: *They can be corrected. Order can be enforced.*

Jaus Avandaer: *Your solution, then, is tyranny to ward off tyranny?*

Veylis Avandaer: *No. I am not a tyrant. I am not afraid of the rabble, of the unworthy. But we are the masters. And they, the fools. I love you father, but I see the difference in us now. I always thought us most similar, but today, mother's teachings have shown me things you refuse to face. The gods cannot save us. The minds broke existence. They were the reason for this fault; they could not even save themselves. And [REDACTED] still seeks them for a reckoning.*

*No. There is only one end to this. One way a modicum of utopia can be realized, and that is if all people rise beyond the limits of their potential and claim self-mastery. Divinity is a thing that should be achieved. This I learned from you. From mother. From those who walked with us on this path. From the masters of the void. We **claimed** power, and then we understood it and refused its addictions. But giving it back... we will not have a chance to ever decide our own will again.*

Jaus Avandaer: *Veylis. You ask too much of people. You ask too much of me.*

Veylis Avandaer: *No. I ask of them what I have asked myself. And it is as you once told me when I was but a child: how do you kill the fears of one who has known only shadows?*

Jaus Avandaer: *...*

Veylis Avandaer: *You drown them in the light.*

Jaus Avandaer: *Veylis. We have seen the light. And despite my fondest hopes, we remain ugly.*

-Fight between Veylis and Jaus Avandaer, overheard by mother and bondsmate, Zein
Thousandhand

12-13

The Disagreement

“No?” Avo asked.

“No,” Zein repeated, sounding almost regretful this time. Her ontology quivered as if a nest of accelerating strings, and he surmised she was peering into manifested futures. “You have capabilities. That is true. That is true.” With each word, her tone grew tighter. More mournful. “With each second I see you clearer. With each exchange. I see you. I see you. I see you.”

She returned to silence, her eyes glaring into his. Her anger was still there, but it was like a sizzling ember slowly dying out. In its place, however, was something else: reluctance, wariness, weariness.

“Perhaps the girl can be allowed to live, but...” Her ontology came alive as if it were a nest of surging strings, time accelerating around her, reshaping their surrounding stimulation.

Flashing scenes and flickering sensations flooded in from a thousand channels. They stood at an intersection of paths now, speeding from one place to another, passing through soldiers fighting each other in alleyways, fire licking out from corners as fusion burners sang. They speed through fusion bombs pounding through armored megablocks and golems rising from the rubble, fighting in defiance of the devastation. They passed through districts burning and Sovereignities breaking. They speed toward the Tiers ablaze, and the mountain fortress of Scale—typically unseen and absent—now stood a cracking egg.

From it emerged a segmented spire, the tapestry of reality sinking into it as if water down a whirlpool. A metaphysical presence extended its wings around the structure, its presence felt, yet veiled. To it flowed every remaining path, every possible sequence of events.

One inexorable conclusion.

Around them, reality tightened—and then lurched.

It was as if someone had seized everything, clenched all of existence like it was a curtain, and torn it from its rails. The Sunderwilds *weren't*. The sky *wasn't*. The world turned to splatters and smears, fluid icons and symbologies bleeding into one another as the Voidstar devoured day for one final time.

An ineffable color leaked down from the place that was space. Between the vast nothingness, Avo could feel them—the fleets of the voiders holding tight in protective pockets. His Frame

wailed. So did those belonging to his cadre. The color. The color. The color. It crept. So close to purple. But not quite. As the tip of the spire pressed through the softness of the star, the light of night was pierced like a needle, and all the Heavens, all the paths, all that was known and of Idheim was injected into the wound of dusk, filling it with a building taint.

“What the fuck,” Chambers gasped, summarizing their situation. They stood scattered amidst streams of incoherence, the fabric of reality parting around them like torrents of madness. There were isles where fragments still remained. A drifting platform. A tumbling room. A burning heavy war drone.

In time, they would dissolve as well.

Avo pulsed his Skimmer. His perception of reality clawed at his consciousness, the collapse inimical to his mind. His Conundrum flared, traumas firing to counter the damage.

COG-CAP: 77%

Hard to conceptualize how something could damage something like him, but then again, how was one to perceive raw chaos?

Then, he felt it.

The Hell to his Woundshaper rattled, a resonance passing through its structure as walls of entropic wind began to rise, spilling upward from the Maw unburdened. It too was anchored. Bound to the Ladder. As threads of existence were uploaded, so too were other strands cast down—a counterweight to feed the dark. Concepts, histories, forces, thoughts, beliefs, and more unwanted. Cast away. Never to return.

The Maw drank everything in with greed and rumbled, its presence a metaphysical scar building to a final vent.

Motes crawled out. But they were eating away at foundational concepts as well. More than just matter, everything could be lost. Everything that the Ladder deemed unnecessary.

“Oh, *gods*,” Kae said, her mind reeling in horror at the implications. At what harm the edifice could inflict. At what it could remove.

As reality crumbled to feed a new rebirthing, Zein stood beneath the Flayed Ladder and the dawn impaled, the light embracing her in a withering glow.

And as she shifted, the light twisted away from her and the true face of the Ladder was given to Avo. The dead skin of existence unmade molted from its core, and what sprang free of the cocoon was an affront to the senses, an affront to the mind, an affront to even the Heavens.

Within himself, Avo heard the Woundmother scream, beginning him to turn from the sight. The Fardrifter trashed, a human-like horror consuming it, desperate to run, locked in place. The

Techplaguer's plea was more muted. Just a single line of code requesting Avo to ungraft it. Return it to nothingness once more.

The Ladder was a beautiful atrocity. The most beautiful he had ever seen.

Its exterior was a cake of flesh, countless small bodies spinally fused into the walls, their skin stripped, their eyes gouged, their minds round with sparking halos as they cheered, wept, and howled prayers for what was to come. They were as if insects melted into the cells of a hive, and with each segment, the spire thinned.

There were ten sections composing its full ontology. Ten, with nine matched to each step of apotheosis, each Sphere upward. Something rumbled beneath it, and heard it then—the voice of the Hungers thundering, calling to be spared. The Nether was consumed. The essence of mind was infused into the spire as well, and the stygian valleys of the Maw slithered into motion, becoming tendrils of disintegration bound to living matter.

The Voidstar fissured. Then cracked. It parted into ten layers. Ten rings. Ten halos that swept and exploded across existence, further and further, as—in the unmeasured distance—new constellations loaded in place.

Not unlike a sequence.

The similarity was too extreme to be ignored.

“Is this end?” Avo asked.

“No,” Zein said. She flicked her hand and drew something into existence. A pipe of hiflass. Pushing it through the fizzling screen of her faceplate, the Godslayer took in a calming hit and her accretion slowed. “It is more a new beginning. A resurrection of what will come.”

Further still did the breaking halo spawned from a star divide. More and more of existence was restructured. Consumed. Feeding the Ladder.

Zein released a shaky breath, and Avo felt the uncertainty in her posture. The trauma.

Old wounds.

“I need Naeko to delay Veylis,” Zein said, speaking plainly. “I need him to be at my disposal, and there are scant few paths in which that occurs.” She spoke without facing him, looking at the smoke rising from her pipe even with the absence of air—in function and concept. “The death I have planned for her creates a cascade I can ride.”

Avo understood and found himself emboldened. “Affecting things at this scope will just take me a bit more time. If I—”

“That is part of the problem,” Zein interrupted, voice quiet. “You. You *can* potentially engineer something like this.”

But.

And there was a but.

[Avo,] Abrel whispered her nerves tight with tension. [You need to speak very, very carefully now. But you also need to start making a plan to get you and your cadre the fuck out.]

Strangely, it was Osjon who understood Zein’s expression. Osjon, failure of a Godclad. Fallwalker. Murder of his own brother. **[Oh, fuck. I—I think you went too far. I think... I think she’s—]**

“I looked again,” Zein said. She spoke, slow and measured. Her thoughtstuff trembled as her accretion churned. She was here and somewhere else. Peering into the paths while she spoke to him. “I looked at the possibilities to come. I started looking when you played that *puppet show*. Using Peace to provoke me.” She inhaled. “I was made for a moment. Impressed after. But I looked. When you stated your plan to claim more minds—to enthrall more of this city, I looked.”

Denton stepped forth, and Avo read naked fear in her eyes for the first time. “Operative Thousandhand, I must remind you that—”

“Speak another word and I cut you down,” Zein replied, her eyes never turning from Avo, her voice without any particular heat. It was a simple statement. Like mentioning the weather, but still, Denton obeyed.

+*Just tell me when,*+ Chambers cast, trying to keep his breathing under control. +*Just tell me when and I’ll get my dick out.*+

+*Got a few shards,*+ Draus said, her focus thinned to a razor’s edge, completely locked in on Zein. Her weaponized arm twitched. +*Should still be able to open us a way out after.*+

“Do you know what I saw?” Zein asked.

Avo had a guess. “It’s me? My Frame?”

She gave a low chuckle. “That is half the issue. The problem is you still have it. You still have it, and I... I didn’t take you seriously. I saw you as *plaything*. An amusement. A plaything. But more and more, your mind spreads. Across all the paths. Across the city. Like a plague. I do not know if your developments are a thing of happenstance or if they were prepared by your creator in advance. But I see my mistake now. I see it.”

“Not planning on betraying you,” Avo said, speaking honestly.

“Betrayal? That is the wrong word, pest. Wrong word. You couldn’t betray me before as you were because you were limited. Ignorant. Weak. *Controllable*. I intended to stay far from where you were to avoid luring Veylis back to you. To misdirect her across the city. The development of your Conflagration was a surprise. But still, I thought you a greater asset then. Something more formidable. Needing less care to survive on your own. But you have shown me my mistake. You have shown me the truth of your ambition.”

“So, what,” Chambers said, sounding entirely befuddled. “You—you can’t put up with him because you can’t casually kill him anymore.”

Zein eyed the former enforcer. “No. The difficulty of slaying him is one of his more charming traits. It is the threat he poses to the final design that I cannot abide.”

{Avo. Don’t say anything. Let me talk to her.} Calvino’s tone was devoid of its usual character. Even the mind could feel the edge they were dancing on.

Avalo heeded the AGI’s words and manifested him through phantoms. Thousandhand’s posture did not relax, though nor did she respond immediately.

+*Operative Thousandhand*,+ Calvino greeted her.

Zein snorted. “Speak no more, machine. We have had this conversation many times.” She paused. “I have, anyway. The bargain between us still stands. Your subjects will be preserved. Your civilizations will be protected. But.” She pointed at Avo. “He cannot spread himself any further. You know the threat he poses.”

+*I know how he is*,+ Calvino replied, sounding tired. +*Thousandhand, I’m not sure what brought this on, but must remind you that you are not exactly a stable asset yourself. Avo is working on himself. He still tortures sometimes. He has a strange notion of nobility and righteousness. He kills. A lot. But he is for the city. For change and growth. Think of that. A monster trying to be a paragon.*+

And the old Godclad’s face fell. She looked almost apologetic. “I know. This is not a thing of judgment. This is a thing of—”

“Control,” Avo said. He dissolved his building agitation with a thought. “You followed us here to see if you could find my other sheaths.” It was just a guess, but a look from her confirmed things.

“You hide yourself well. Too well. When I fought you, there was a thrill to enjoy. You were a foe I couldn’t break.” Then, she repeated the statement again. “You were a foe I *couldn’t* break. And you are changing. More and more. By the day. Even time clings to you now. You have entered the final struggle despite being only half-aware of the great game.”

“It’s not even about Kare anymore,” Avo said. “Her death is just an outcome. One you can inflict and wield to maximum effect. A delicate wound.”

“Indeed,” Zein said, denying nothing. “But she will be returned after the final victory. Her life restored and made better.”

“Or so you say,” Avo said, keeping the building hiss out of his voice.

The old woman crowed with a humorless laugh.

Kare’s template shivered inside of him. **[What do we do? I can help! You can send me your memories. I will go get the Chief Paladin and–]**

+*No. Not yet.*+ But Avo prepared to broadcast these current memories into Kare’s actual self if Zein did anything. He didn’t know the full limits of Zein’s Heaven, but ignorance was certainly one. She wouldn’t see Naeko coming.

But pulling a power of that caliber into the George Washington likely meant dooming the rest of his cadre.

Not something he could permit.

[Avo,] Kare said, trying to control her mounting terror. **[I’m afraid. I don’t want to die. I’m don’t want to die.]**

+*I know,*+ Avo said. +*Won’t let her just have you. Not my dream.*+

“Do you know what Ninth Column is in its finality?” Zein asked. “It is an initiate. To preserve the legacy of my love. To see the world he dreamed materialized and all cultures preserved. But disarmed. We will live under our own minds. Perfected beings of higher intellect and discipline, shepherding us away from our follies.”

“And you believe this?” Avo asked.

“I have not known Jaus to ever be wrong?” Zein said.

“Never took you for one to surrender your blade,” Avo replied.

“Ah. But the Heaven is not a blade. To have a Heaven is to wield power beyond power. And I’m drunk. I’m an addict. You have seen me.” She took in a short breath. “I am a terrible person to be granted such power. If there is a fight to be had, perhaps. If there is a tyrant to topple or a rival to slay. But my heart cares little for the nursing of my lessers. So long as I have something to duel, my family returned, and a substance to whittle my whirring mind, I will be pleased.

“But not you.” Her eyes became as if daggers. “Not you.” She swept the cadre briefly and flexed her fingers.

Dice took a step forward, but Draus caught her by the shoulder.

+*Just think it,*+ Draus said. That was all she needed from Avo to open fire, to start the fight against Zein in earnest.

One no other than he would likely survive.

“I have seen many colors,” Avo said, finally dispelling Peace utterly. The schemes he was trying to play withered inside him. He was in uncharted territory now. With each passing second, he felt more and more ontological mass building within Zein, as if she was retracting her focus, abandoning echoes to move only as herself. “Changed me. Made me want new things. For myself. For my—” he looked at the others. “*Consangs*. For the world. And you’re going to ask me to shackle myself to you. Tell me I cannot spread where you don’t want me to. Or maybe even ask me to surrender my Frame.”

“A request is given to a superior. A negotiation begins with an equal. A demand is delivered to a lesser.” Zein let silence punctuate each of her sentences. “But you are different. You cannot match me, but I—though I have manifested path after path—cannot seem to kill all of you. Not enough to stop the spread.”

Draus scoffed. “Fuckin’ glassjaw.” Stillness defined Thousandhand. Then she glared at the Regular from the corner of her eye. Draus remained unshaken. “I mean it.”

“I know,” Zein said. “But you are mistaken. It is not competition I cannot suffer, but what he takes. And what he might inflict on us if—”

“If I win,” Avo said. He looked beyond Zein and at the tower itself. He imagined himself ascending it. Claiming it. Consuming it. And then...

And then what?

If he could do anything, what?

There was so much to try. So much to learn. For him. For everyone else. To live every life possible. And suffer every consequence imaginable. What kind of people would emerge from absolute freedom balanced by absolute karma? And spared of death, no less.

“There,” Zein said, catching him in the moment. “That is what I cannot abide. I had hoped you limited. Obedient. Or perhaps dull enough to heed my orders. But I looked further beyond the point you proposed. The point where you turn the trial into your personal stageplay. Never mind the Heaven of Truth’s gaze—you will just rewrite everyone’s memories in advance. Twist them to be yours in permanence. As you already have too many. As you will somehow do to Naeko unless I stop you.”

It was pleasing to his ego to know that he inspired such primal fear in a being like Zein Thousandhand. However, inspiring such fear was how he found himself entrapped.

[Godsdammit, Avo,] Kassamon said. [Couldn't you have been less gluttonous? And bragged less to the time-jumping psychopath.]

"There were nine of us in the beginning," Zein said, topic turning without warning. "Nine of us when our crusade against our gods properly began. Jaus. I. Your *father*. Infacer, the broken mind we uncovered beneath the waves. Veylis, born here, born in Noloth. Six others. Six others, and I cannot recall them. Only shadows. Do you know why?"

Somehow, the answer was there, told to Avo by the Maw. "They don't exist anymore." Speaking the words formed a slab of ice in his gut. "They were... removed."

A huff of affirmation came from the Godslayer. "Despite my efforts, they had to be unmade." She closed her eyes and sadness passed through her, spilled from her accretion. "They deserved better. We knew they were going to—they would take to use the Ladder for themselves. The paths warned us—it was hard to resist, I understand. But we couldn't allow it. And so we had to make sure."

"Make sure of what?" Kae said, voice almost too quiet. "The Ladder—all the patterns. It could... it could theoretically create *anything*. It is past the Ninth Sphere. Past the high conceptual! Into theoretical omnipotence—"

"No," Zein said, tapping her armored sternum. "No. It can do whatever it is willed to do. But wills clash. Desires clash. Beliefs clash. And you know this better than I, Agnos. But what happens when two conflicting absolutes are made manifest?"

The Agnos bit her lip and hesitated before answering. "Paradox."

"Paradox," Zein concurred. "Paradox. But imagine that for time. Imagine a clash between paths already laid."

Avo froze. "The Ladder. It was used once already. The paths you're talking about aren't just those generated from your Heaven. There are events already laid in advance. Temporal architecture leading to the end."

"And your presence is breaking them. More and more."

And Avo understood. When she spoke of him being loud, it wasn't just from the use of his Heavens or the spread of his mind, but the changes he was making to structures already in place.

He was as if a fire spreading down the threads of a spiderweb.

"I cannot threaten you with death or pain. I cannot risk losing you to Veylis. I cannot allow your unfettered spread. There is too much at risk, and—lovely monster that you are—I just don't trust your nature." She shrugged apologetically. "Call it prejudice. Call it old grievances, but you are the Strix's inheritor through and through, and he has already insulted me once—with *you*."

Zein stopped. She speared a finger at Calvino. “You. Did you tell him why the Tenth Sphere isn’t possible?”

In the same instant, Kae’s eyes swept over to the EGI as well.

The mind remained silent.

“Calvino,” Avo asked.

+It cements itself. + The mind replied.

“What?” Chambers muttered.

+The Souls inside you. They snap back into place. There’s enough sustained death inside your Heavens that they can affect existence irreversibly. And they bridge your Soul back to where it was meant to be. +

Chambers still looked lost. Most of the cadre did. But not Denton. Not Zein. And not Avo.

“The core of the galaxy,” Avo said. “The center of the world that was. Every Tenth Sphere is a restoration.”

+Yes. But just the Soul. Just the Soul and nothing else. Not even the Heaven, once it’s done bridging. +

And so no changes are made. The mind simply dissolves. The reality functionally usurps the Godclad past a certain point. But the tenth section of the Ladder remained.

But there was something else. What if someone wasn’t just their own mind? What if someone was coded into their Soul?

Avo looked at his hands and understood. Understood for the first time the significance of his Frame.

“But the Imitators,” Kae said, eyes widening in realization. “But... but they haven’t emerged in us. Even after days and weeks. Which means...”

“I am my Soul?” Avo asked.

“More so than the rest of us. But perhaps the better way to look at you is as an infection vector for existence itself. Even existence to come.” Zein faced the Ladder again and sighed. “I suspect Veylis wanted a means to subsume the Ladder—or *obsolete* it. Make it so she had another chance at victory, even if someone claimed the Ladder before her.”