

*Order within, chaos without.*

*Every Godclad who wishes to say one should live these principles.*

*You must know and have perfect control over yourself, your own canons, domains, Heavens, augmentations, phantasmics. And you must never make them clear to your enemies. Always change. Always adapt your structure. Always be inscrutable.*

*Contrarily, you must inflict as much chaos on your enemy as you can. Inflict confusion. Force them to react. More problems. More problems! More problems! No end to the flames they must put out! Make every turn a dilemma!*

*War is not a dance, but it is a duet — and not one of romance.*

*Your song must rule theirs, or be ruled otherwise.*

-Ying Yang Wei, the Stormsparrow

26-5

...Are Paths to the Present

-[Infacer]-

*{I told you he wasn't human.}* The Infacer chuckled. Veylis didn't respond. Poor girl. Silence was her way of sulking. Even with her power, she still despised making any mistakes. That was what they appreciated the most about her: how many humans despised the ape inside them?

The Gatekeeper had once again exceeded its purpose. Secrets leaked over from its wounds, revealing *truths* most delightful to Veylis. Once, the marks she made were but a means to access the Heaven of Truth with the return of the tower. To sunder it totally, claim its Heaven, and let flow the tides of Noloth when the time was nigh. In the meantime, it served as a fantastic peephole.

Or did.

They wouldn't be able to hide that much longer now. Not that it mattered. They got more than they expected out of this affair.

Tides of progressing time pulled Kae Kusanade from the grasp of reality. A horrified scream sang out from her as she found herself descending in the Paths. But she did not come alone. Her mentor—Ori-Thaum's pet High Agnos—was also taken along with his aides. Paladins Kare Kitzuhada and Maru Sandrupal were left slain but untouched besides. There wasn't the need to force the Chief Paladin into the throes of foolishness.

As for the Dreamer? The Famine of Defiance's finest work? The Infacer watched as Soulfire detonated out from their being after the thoughtwave struck them. It was like gunpowder kissed by a spark. What a peculiar Embodiment they epitomized: an Overheaven of *Conceptualization*. Fascinating.

But now the Infacer had a measure of their shape, and proper countermeasures could be created.

A pity. It would have been refreshing to battle the Dreamer in ignorance. To learn his measure through repeated engagements. But such was war. The pendulum always swung.

Rifts of chronology sealed themselves, golden seams zipping back together, reverberating to become opaque boxes around the Agnosi. Jakuta was a dazed animal, trapped and confused as to where he was. His inferiors fared no better.

Kae Kusanade, however, deviated from expectations.

Her sheath unraveled into a yawning chasm of swirling space, water, and relative geometries. Bottled maelstrom expanded within Veylis' Paths, and trails of gold peered down at the Agnos with curiosity. The girl pressed at the edges of her time-wrought cage, striking out to create more space for herself, lashing in hopes of finding a domain she could backlash.

***{Hm,} the Infacer murmured. {She's Ensouled. Imagine that. Well. I suppose it is easy to breach a vow when it has already been broken against you. Would you not agree, Veylis.}***

The High Seraph's silence lasted a moment longer. And then a melodic series of laughs emanated from existence itself, ringing forth from a cacophony of noises, from a collective of voices. ***"A ghoul. Our newest adversary, our Burning Dreamer, is a ghoul..."***

***{Nothing special about that,} the Infacer reminded.***

A breath passed through the Paths. Veylis offered her agreement: ***"Indeed. What more are people than apes, after all. What matters is that he stood. He rose. He became. Despite it all. This only makes the threat he poses truer. The symbol he represents brighter. It will be a valorous deed when we claim him."***

And her mother was leaking into her again. The shadow of legacy lingered deeper than blood. ***{Focus on our new guests first. We have much to learn.}***

***"Yes,"*** Veylis said. But though they were in alignment, a hint of hesitation seized her, kept her from shutting a slight tear in the Gatekeeper entirely.

*Oh.* Right. How could she resist catching a glimpse of *him*. Another human weakness. Another human novelty. She spoke little of him after their ugly parting during the second war, but so often has her perception strayed, so often have her Paths flowed past his place of residence.

Veylis Avandaer lingered in place, her gaze like eyes gleaming with a slit throat, peering at one she still yearned to claim across the threshold of time.

And just the same, from beyond the point of her receding grasp, he stared back.

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**-[Naeko]-**

He could *feel* her. The weight of her existence greeted him like the memory of a warm palm against his chest, an incomprehensible babble of words lulling him to sleep, and an aching scar reopened to bleed once more.

They emerged from Zein's prison a heartbeat too late. Just in time for a thoughtwave detonation to backlash above. Just in time for Naeko to parry the violence against his mind using a vaporous shroud. Just in time for him to take in the mutilated remains of Kare and Maru—*his Paladins*. Just in time to realize the Agnosi had all been taken.

And that she was peering back at him through a resplendent gap shimmering just below the Gatekeeper's mass of skulls.

He was a man torn in multiple directions. His muscles screamed for him to act. Refined instinct roared for him to strike her with his palm. But his thoughts were addled. Drowned by the past bleeding over into the present.

This moment happened before. Dead Paladins. Broken Gatekeeper. Veylis. Him. Separated by the Paths.

It happened again, and he still failed to stop it. Still failed to see her coming. Still failed to—

**+Naeko!+** the sheer force of Avo's thoughts broke through, and the Sage of the Sundered Sky poured free from Naeko like water from a collapsing dam. A palm exploded out from him, so wide it dwarfed scale, so heavy that all force died beneath its weight, that heat itself was barred from passing over into coldness.

All that power, but a moment too late. Always a moment too late. Always a bit too weak.

The rift closed. The Paths were sealed. The Nether carried a single utterance from Veylis herself, laced with bitterness and contempt. **+Coward.+**

Avo lashed his sequences into the Gatekeeper a moment after. His phantasmal tendrils punched into the Heaven of Truth, digging through its structure as waves of radiated Soulfire consumed both of them. But while the Burning Dreamer hissed, mind drowning Scale in eruptions of outrage and frigid dread, Naeko stumbled away, and kept walking.

Something inside him broke. A tingling was crawling down his hands. A numbness pulled at his heart. Too much. It was all too much. He noticed two calcifying scars in his periphery. Kare. Maru. Resurrections. Why hadn't Veylis taken them too? Why? *Why?* He couldn't think—this was too much. All of it was too much.

He needed...

He needed to find himself again.

He needed to take a breath from someone else.

Karakan.

Time... time to see her. He needed to see her...

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**-[Avo]-**

*{Tru-truth,}* the Gatekeeper whimpered, flinching as Avo struggled to pry its wounds wider, desperate to breach Veylis' Paths. In haste, he triggered his Conception of Ontology, infused tethered his Soul directly to his nest of cyclers once more.

But he was building blind. He had no idea how Veylis' Paths worked in detail. He hadn't gotten a chance to observe how she danced across the tapestry, how she moved. Ignorance offered him nothing. His Heavens remained quiet, dry of aid and advice.

He knew his efforts would prove futile. But still, he tried.

**ACTIVATING CONCEPTION OF ONTOLOGY...  
EDICT OF \_EXO-PARACOSM\_  
->APPLYING DOMAIN OF (CHRONOLOGY)**

**MISSING DETAILS**

Voices were screaming at him from within and without. The Gatekeeper was folding in on itself. Its chains were reconnecting, its galaxy was shrinking, the rifts were vanishing, and he couldn't reach Kae across the Nether.

He couldn't *sense* her at all.

+*Avo! Stop!*+ Draus shouted. Her template had been trying longer than she had.

Chambers, however, fed his blind panic. **[Fucking—do something, consang! Get after her! Get that time shit open!]**

**[It's too late,]** Abrel sighed. She knew. She already accepted. **[She's gone, ghou. She's the Seraph's now.]**

+*No!*+ he snarled inwardly. Savage frustration imploded within him. **+*Mine! She's mine! Can't have her! Need her! Was going to make things right for her!***+ He was making things right for her. That why he let her come here. They were going to repair the Gatekeeper. They were going to prepare—to turn things against the Guilds for the trial.

Instead, they handed her over to Veylis. Just let her be stolen.

**[Avo,]** Kae's template said, her voice quivering, shaken, but anchoring his focus. Reshape your mind again. Use Draus.

All his want screamed for him to do otherwise. It took all his will to choose what was right. His cognitive shell rebuilt itself—his ego turned external, faced the world for what it was. Rage and agitation still burned within him, but it was a cold fire. Something more known than felt. Something that didn't deprive him of focus.

Carefully, he extracted himself from the Gatekeeper. Examined its scars in detail. The wounds. They were pressed together again, but present. Just thin crevices rather than open gorges. Part of Veylis was still here. He could still use this somehow. But how? How would he be able to do anything to the Gatekeeper without her knowing in advance? And even if he could force open the Paths, how was he going to get Kae back? With all that he inadvertently revealed to the Gatekeeper—to Veylis and the Infacer? With the sheer difference in power between them?

How could he stop the High Seraph?

Not alone.

Zein. *Naeko*.

He detached from the Gatekeeper and sought Naeko—but the Chief Paladin was gone too. Vanished. Their accretion failed to register even as Avo filtered through Scale's thoughtwave frequencies. But where a common Necro would falter, where most would find themselves without options, Avo continued. Avo created his own angles, found a connection through the symmetry of memory alone.

**->DEFINEMENT: HYSTERIA (XII) - "I AM A MOMENT ABSOLUTE. I GRIEF-CONSUMED, JOY-DROWNED, ADDICTION-CLAIMED, RAGE-UNFETTERED. I AM A SHARED MOMENT ACROSS MOMENTS. I AM A FORCE BUILDING ON FORCE."**

Though he never penetrated the truth depths of Naeko's mind, some scars could not be hidden. Some emotions were too immense. Some moments marred an ego eternally.

Veylis left more than one set of wounds to follow. Avo's control over time was wanting; his mastery over mind was unrivalled. Naeko might as well have left a blood trail in the real — in seconds, Avo narrowed the Nether down to a single moment, a single sequence of memories.

*"Why, godsdamn you! I loved you. I still love you! I would have done anything—we could have just—"*

And so, words from the past gave him a path to the present—a chance to get at Veylis. Naeko's signature emerged in the DeepNav, blinking rapidly down the Tiers, across New Vultun, heading for the border.

Avo left a submind at Scale to convene with the Paladins when they returned. His base mind pursued the Chief Paladin. He would continue to put on a play of desperation for his enemies. He would use their perception to his advantage—make him seem like he was floundering; yes, sprinkle in some planned mistakes. Feed their confidence.

Once more, the game had changed, and his being struck out in a myriad of vectors. *As it goes.* There was only one thing to do: keep going.

**+Going to get you back,+** Avo said, offering a new promise to Kae's template as he triggered her session over and over. Inside his Soulscape, the Agnos was an inch away from breaking down, but she held herself intact, nodding demurely as other templates of the cadre gathered around her. Avo's next thoughtcast went wide. **+Avo to cadre: Kae has been taken. Veylis Avandaer has our Agnos. Prepare for emergency debriefing. Going after Chief Paladin. He's leaving New Vultun. Heading out into the Sunderwilds. Going to try and bring him into the fold.+**

The responses he got ranged from Chambers' extreme horror to Draus' cold casual acceptance.

**+Avo,+** Cas said. **+Veylis' got a lot more than Kae. She's got her memories. Her mind. Our location. The way we operate.+**

**+I know,+** Avo said. **+One problem at a time.+**

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–[Kae]–

+*Let me out!*+ Kae cried. The world was pitch black around her. Pitch back and *cramped*. She manifested her Maelstromer a mere moment after she fell—and it was futile. She struck and pressed against the walls, but they did not give. They did not break. She hammered against surfaces in the air, striking out using fists, knees, elbows, and kicks.

Her efforts granted her little more than faint thuds.

All the while, she struggled against the suffocating presence of the High Seraph. This place she resided in was a snapshot of reality reconstructed from the patterns of time itself. Time, commanded solely by the High Seraph. Time, that could be turned backward at any moment, and that could cast Kae from existence into oblivion if her captor so willed it.

And she clearly didn't. She wanted Kae alive. The realization filled the Agnos with building chills rather than any relief. What did they want with her? What were they going to do to her?

Alone in the dark, the silence lasted anything from minutes to hours. She couldn't tell. She spent so long with the cadre chattering away in the back of her head that the quiet itself was torture. Any attempt she made to contact Avo using her Auto-Seance was interrupted by a targeted disruption. They were still watching her. Kept her isolated. Alone. Her terror kept her from weeping, from reacting in any manner she considered too extreme, but the pressure inside her was only building — always building.

She was teetering on the brink when the box holding her suddenly vanished, dissolving away to blinding sunshine and shrill noises of nature. The shift in extremes left her whiplashed. Nausea overtook her. Nausea sent her tumbling to her knees, her fingers sinking into the softness of soil.

As her vision settled, she found the gaze settling on green blades of grass, and a looming shadow that drew closer. From the shade cast alone, Kae could tell the approaching figure was far larger than her. Larger than anyone she had ever known. Spiraling limbs turned around the giant's contours like a wheel, and when they planted their foot next to Kae, she found herself back herself, her shivering expression reflected by a gold-coated foot hovering atop a burning wheel.

**“Agnos Kae Kusanade.”** The speaker's Standard was accentless, but definitely related to Zein. Their voice was deeper, yet their tone was softer, and trailing behind every word was a reverberation, a tinge of power leaking through even now. **“It pleases me to finally meet you. Let me offer you my greatest gratitude: it seems your work on Project Stillborn has exceeded all our expectations. Including your own.”**

Slowly, Kae looked up, squinting as the sheer brilliance of the giantess blinded her. “H-High Seraph.”

The master of Highflame extended a languid hand. **“That is only for those under my cause.**

**We are esteemed enemies, though you are my prisoner. I grant you the right to call me by my name: Veylis Avandaer.”**