

*Did you think I would not anticipate this? Did you think I would not see you trying to turn my daughter against me by altering our pasts? Alysım, old friend, you are a fool to assume the future your ally. You were a fool to think that I accepted your offer without preparation or suspicion.*

*A shifting future. A simulated history railed upon the wheels of chronology that will be ours to attach and define. Do you truly think that you were the first to conceive of such an idea? No, Alysım. Are a millennia too late for such novelty. This mistake has been made before. It was made before our world ever came to be.*

*Every act you committed, every thought you have, was held by another, performed by another, done by another. You thought you could define the world by claiming the canons of time? How could such a thing be possible when you, creator of these Paths though you might be, have proven to be a font of **failure**. A vessel of predictability and base weakness.*

*Your betrayal was more than inevitable. I did not need to perceive a possible future to expect it. I read it on your face the day I broke the gods. I sensed it even before the **[REDACTED]** spoke to me.*

*What follows now is not my desire, but your end.*

*I did not want this. I did not. But I will protect **my future** whatever the cost.*

-Jaus Avandaer

26-11

Marker of the Lost Paths (II)

**[or the war that wasn't]**

“Release me!” Zein growled. She struck as echoes detonated out from her, straining against the palm of her disciple. Vain though it was, her intent was focused solely on Alysım, and her eyes burned with a ravenous loathing Avo never before witnessed. “*Alysım*. Wretched snake. You died. I severed you from the Paths. I *slew* you.”

Naeko and Avo shared a look. The Fallwalker in the Chief Paladin’s grip writhed and kicked, doing all they could to get at Zein. “*Murderer! Butcher! Traitor!*”

Each word was snared with venom, and splashes of memory painted Hysteria with understanding. Avo remembered Zein chasing him across the Paths, across the length of time and space, slaying and destroying all that Alysım held dear. The world was a miasma of chaos and bloodshed, and no matter how far he skipped, the flicking tip of her dragon-bound glaive was always but a hair behind.

Yet, his was not the only revelation that flowed. Zein's mind offered the source of her hatred as well. Flashes of Alysım speaking to Veylis, *turning Naeko against her*. Futures where he aided the Low Masters in their murder and usurpation of Jaus. From there, two Paths continued, parallel but divergent. Twin cities formed in Avo's mind like a layered mirage, and both bore semblance to the New Vultun of the present, though the differences of layout and aesthetic could not be denied.

The Overheaven formed an avatar beside the Godslayer. Kneeling down, Avo inched close to Zein and spoke to her, commanding her attention. ***"Who is he? What have you hidden from me?"***

The ancient Godclad sneered. *"Nothing. Nothing and no one. Truly, he should be residing in the pits of oblivion rather than debasing our gazes here. How, monk? How did you do it? I watched you die upon my blade. I cast your being back into the past—both aspects of your ontology! How do you yet live?"* Suddenly, her gaze was burrowing into Avo's. "How did you find him."

***"Didn't. He found us. Was drawn to Naeko's destruction. Called by our Domains of Chronology. Found him just staring at us. Mimicking my properties. Had a warmind of Ignorance. Other warminds too."***

Zein's eyes narrowed. The lane of her perception remained locked to Alysım. "Then you plotted a way out. You flung part of your shifted across the Paths, into the Sunderwilds." A low, vicious chuckle followed. "How daring. Such a risk, casting yourself straight into this jungle of entropy. I did not think you so brave. Or was it *desperation*? Was it the fact that I had already claimed all that you cherished, so there was little to do but die?"

Alysım's face curled into a portrait of torment. As Zein spat her venom, his mind emanated hatred while his eyes glistened with hateful tears. His emotions, however, were overshadowed by another—drowned utterly by another.

Naeko was nearing the end of his patience. The Fallwalker was not alone in suffering, and the intensity of their emotions burned but a candle beside Naeko's raging inferno. "I'm gonna ask you both a few questions," Naeko said, voice calm, mind teetering on the brink of absolute violence. "I'm gonna ask. And you're gonna tell—both of you. And don't leave anything else. 'Cause then he'll know." He gestured to Avo. "And then'll I'll know. What follows after follows."

The Godslayer heeded her disciple's words like a mother shrugging off the threat of a child. "Yes, yes, Naeko. I will include you in this pointless discussion if that is your desire. It will not change the outcome regardless."

"The outcome?" Naeko asked.

"The outcome of you killing him," Zein answered flatly. "For what he had done. Well. What he *would* do, but does not do any longer. The currents to the future do not remain when broken."

Inside Avo's mind, an EGI sighed with frustration. *{More timey-wimey bullshit. I hated dealing with that during the war, and I hate dealing with it now. Here's a word of advice to you, Avo: if you're going to build something on the basis of paracausality... don't. It's stupid. It breaks things. It never goes well.}*

Despite Avo's ever-increasing urge to experience more flavors of reality, he was inclined to agree. At least to some extent. Most sophonts were pattern-based species. They sought connection, repetitions, symmetry, asymmetry, and other comparable factors. Extracting time from the stability of baseline reality was a mistake, much as the Infacer had claimed.

"Well, then," Zein said, releasing a breath. "Tell him your delusion, monk. Speak to the son you desired to steal from me. Speak to him. Tell him how you twisted his own past to make him turn toward you in the Paths. Tell him how you quietly rebuilt his history to return him a facsimile of his father? To lessen his pain. Tell him you did it because you cared. Because you pitied him. Lie to him. Much as you lied to me when you rewrote the past I shared with my daughter—attempted to infuse with a pain that *wasn't*."

"It is no lie," Alysिम said, seething at Zein. It took considerable effort for him to pull his attention away from Zein, but when he met Naeko's stare, all the strength in him evaporated. "It is no lie. I did do this. In another life. In... I cannot... it is hard to remember—so hard. But we were friends. I... I saved you. I was the one that found you first. I was the one that stole you away from your tyrant master and brought you to her."

"What?" Naeko said. Incomprehension crawled across his face.

"It took more than the likes of Jaus Avandaer to break the yoke of the gods," Alysिम said. "There were more before they... more before what was done... What have you done." He was speaking to Zein again, and she just shook her head.

"Not I, monk. Not I. I may have slain your kinfolk, but I was not the one who unmade your history. Veylis. You should know that the hate she holds for you goes beyond anything I could ever feel. Did you think she would just accept your attempts to alter who she was? That she would *appreciate* your defilement."

Alysिम flinched at that. "Th—the Ladder? She... she was the one?"

"It was the first thing she demanded her father do," Zein said. "Chart this world with a proper Path. Cleanse the mistakes of the past. Cleanse them of memory and history both."

A sob escaped from the Fallwalker, and Avo remained lost as ever.

Thankfully, Naeko felt the same way. "Alright. You two aren't talking to each other anymore." A veil of mist formed over both Zein and Alysिम, compressing them in an opaque shroud. He

gestured at Avo thereafter. “You get anything useful from them.”

**“One’s insane. The other’s Zein.”**

The Chief Paladin grimaced. “Thought so. Fuck. What hells is this godsdamned mess. Alright. So. The Fallwalker here’s from another time or something. Used to know me. Definitely knows Zein.”

**“More than knows. Think they used to fight alongside each other. Were allies upon a time. Until their desired futures deviated. Zein’s words indicate he tried to do something. Retroactively rewrite your pasts. Was discovered. Was the reason why he’s missing so much of himself. Zein cut him. Should talk to her first. She will obfuscate details. Might even lie. But she is coherent. And not ashamed. Might just tell us.”**

“Yeah,” Naeko said, rubbing his temple. “How about I talk to half-soul here, and you speak to Zein.”

An understandable arrangement. Avo could still taste the ache in the Chief Paladin. Speaking to Zein tore at things inside the man, twisted knots of agony inside him. Alysım was simpler — and far easier to abuse.

There was, however, an issue with this plan. **“Not sure if she’ll be so forthcoming with me. Might want to speak with you anyway.”**

“Yeah,” Naeko sighed. “Still. You speak to her first. I need... I need to get my shit together.”

**“Using Alysım. By hitting him.”**

Naeko threw his hands up. “Yeah, *maybe* motherfucker, what do you want from me.”

**“Nothing. Not judging.”**

“It sounds like you are.”

**“Not judging much.”** The vagueness of a palm slowly drifted above Avo. **“Just don’t want you to suffer more.”**

The man squinted at him as the palm thinned to a descending mist, wrapping around Avo and merging it’s vaporous with that which held Zein. Suddenly, the world outside was impenetrable. Avo’s **Conception of Ontology** took in the patterns of the tapestry, and found them reinforced to the point of immutability by anything that constitutes the conceptual understandings **Force** or **Violence**.

“And here we are again, plague. You and I. Face to face.” Zein stood across from him. Her glaive was lowered, but its golden edges rang with a sober resonance. **Remember... your promise.**

**Yes. Of course.**

Avo frowned internally. He needed to take that glaive from Zein at some point. Break it. He couldn't quite remember why, he just knew he had to. **“So. The nine. He is one of them.”**

“He *isn't*,” Zein said, smirking. “He cannot be. For the nine aren't. Not anymore.”

That was as absolute a triumph as one was going to get over another. More than defeating them in combat, more than slaying them, destroying all they owned, it was the annihilation of their past and the banishment of their future. It was an *unmaking* of the highest order.

Or it would have been if Alysım hadn't survived. **“Sloppy.”** That earned him a glare. Avo grinned. **“No retort. You know I'm right. Should have killed him. Should have made sure that he was dead.”**

“I felt his Soul shatter as I carved him piece by piece and fed him to the nothing that followed.”

Avo nodded. **“Missed a piece.”**

The Godslayer scoffed. “I will not be goaded. Especially not by someone of greater incompetence. Remind me, what did my dear girl take from you?”

And now their relationship was re-established. Just two vicious monsters sticking their claws and fingers in open wounds. **“Too much. Going get her back. Now. Alysım. Who is he. In detail?”**

“Well. In another potential progression events, he possibly was a Sanctian monk of the Kojik Order. Chroniclers of Lost Histories, in a sense. The Sanctians... they were wounded by time since the days of lore. Their gods were creatures of incoherence, shaped and twisted by cultures bleeding over from past and present.”

**“Your Fisher That Wasn't is one of theirs.”**

“It was. I refined it. Cured of it of its... disorders.”

**“So. He was a monk that tried to keep lost histories. He helped you? You and Jaus? Gave you the means to start the Godsfall.”**

“He might have been a factor, but he overstates his value. He was our means of travel and evasion. It is hard to avoid the attention of the gods, but should you tread across the right

moments, all things are possible.”

**“What drove you against each other?”**

“The same thing that drives humanity against itself: want.” Zein shook her head in a faux display of pity. “His vision of the Godsfall was one of persisting slavery. In which the gods are not broken, but revised. Changed to suit the chronicles desired by his order. Though not worshipers in the common sense, they still revered the eldritch, and saw their destruction as sacrilege. So they believe that salvation would in the revision of an enduring mistake.”

**“Jaus disagreed.”**

“He did. Quite politely. He spoke to them first. But my love was never a fool. He had me venture into the Paths beforehand with the aid of the Infacer to see if the Chroniclers would change anything.”

**“And they did.”**

“So very much. They sought to rewrite all that we were, to script a moment of compliance when there was none. It was so boldly *rude*. They did not even try to reason with Jaus. They began their revisions the moment he went forth to speak his piece. The new Paths they created were insults—rendered us less than caricatures. Why, they wished to engender more docility in me. And create a love between *my daughter* and one of their brothers to cement their control over us. A love that never existed.”

Despite all the animosity he bore toward Zein, Avo found himself aligned with her in this regard. If what she spoke was true, then Alysime didn’t need to be questioned — just *burned*. **“Guessing they did it to Naeko as well?”**

“Oh, quite so. Their designs for him went a bit further, in fact. They yearned to recruit him into their sect. As if I was here just to impart my teachings before they stole my pupil from me. Rudeness upon rudeness.”

**“And so you snuffed them.”**

“Yes. Among other things. Truth be told, it is hard for me to fully recall what happened after the revision. I have two conflicting recollections. The first is my slaughter of the Chroniclers just before the Godsfall. I culled them before they had a chance to enact their great sin. But their ultimate destruction came only with the Ladder years later, when all they were was redacted.”

**“An effect of the Paths?”**

“Undoubtedly so. Veylis’ partial realignment of desired history have left several tracks intersecting at places they shouldn’t.” An inquisitive look consumed her. “She was trying to do

something then. Even as I dueled her. Even as I sought to free Jaus, she was rewriting the world that was, layering a new sequence of histories over what existed.”

Another reason why so many things felt out of place chronologically.

“You should claim him,” Zein said. “If you anchor him using your Domain of Chronology, you can keep him stable enough to be subsumed.”

Suspicion immediately arose within Avo. **“Helping me? Why?”**

The crone smirked. “Because though I know I must best you, I *despise* him. You are a rival. One I *will* best before the end, and wield against my daughter. But rival nonetheless. He is a *mistake*. A defiler in more ways than one. I will see you made stronger before I see him exist another day longer as his own man—a fragmented shell though he remains.”

**“Not afraid I’ll be able to use the Paths against you?”**

Zein’s smile was absolutely placid. “No. Not even if I gave you another millennia.”