

*No, my friend. The past is lost. But only our past. Only our history. The future is still theoretically infinite, and so, what I propose is something more radical:*

*We create a new structure. One molded entirely from our histories from all that we know, and tied to the progression of our present. From this, we can venture freely along its **Paths**, and adjust things as we see fit.*

*Ha! Imagine this! A relative solution defeating an absolute problem!*

-Alysim the Wanderer to Jaus Avandaer [**a moment that never happened**]

26-10

Maker of the Lost Paths (I)

**-[Avo]-**

Even the slightest of Naeko's blows bathed the world in sweeping torrents of destruction. Force bent to his will like clay. Violence was and *wasn't* at his behest. The patterns of the tapestry recoiled with every blow, like strings on an instrument strummed by a hammer. Only one strand held firm, despite the strain it endured.

Time.

Avo took in the onslaught Naeko unleashed on Alysim. The man was seemingly unkillable by conventional means. His ruined body was reformed by progression of time, with lines separating from the primary path chronology, crossing over into the supposed Sanctian's parallel ontology. But his immortality was an unenviable trait, for he seemed to possess little power otherwise, or what paltry canons he did command were useless in before the Chief Paladin.

No so different from most other people in existence. Few Godclads could stand against Naeko, let alone the ephemerals or FATELESS.

**+Aegis have any countermeasures against Naeko?+** Avo asked Calvino as he crept closer, reaching out with his twelve sequences to draw both Fallwalker and Paladin into the **Exo-Paracosm** of his Soulscape.

*{Our 'countermeasures' were pretty much what you just did,}* Only answered before Calvino could. *{Bully the sad sack of shit until he has a mental breakdown. Great job, by the way.}*

*{Only,}* Kant said, finishing his statement with a sigh.

*{What? It worked. Besides the psychological angle, all we got are Contingency Bleak options. Or just detonating the Nullstar—}*

*{Only!}*

*{What? It's just theoretical. We tried modifying his brain matter using q-dot technology before. Didn't take. Frigging Metaminds. Singularities aren't going to work on him—he'll just ignore the forces pulling on him. Rupturing everything's our best shot.}*

*{It will ensure the extinction of all pattern-based existence across the known universe!}*

*{Aw, you always overexaggerate. Don't worry, Avo: it'll be complete extinction at worst.}*

So. Mental warfare was how things had to be. That was fine. The mind was Avo's Embodiment, after all.

Every time Alysium reformed, he would reach out at Naeko, screaming something like "Wait!" or "I know you." With the flickering of memories intercepted from the man by Hysteria, Avo was inclined to believe him. A conversation was in order, but he needed to get Naeko to stop beating the man first.

A simple task.

Shards tore out from Avo, and as they closed in on Alysium, they remained without opposition until the Fallwalker reformed. Interesting. That suggested the man was ontologically mirroring Avo's capabilities somehow. A troubling canon; a most useful thing to subsume. Ignoring the incoming splinters, Avo pierced Alysium's mind for the first time and dove deep.

As things turned out, the space within his cognition was even more sporadic than what was being emanated beyond. Sequences were and *weren't*. Memories were and *weren't*. Consciousness was and *wasn't*. Avo's wards rattled as his templates' felt themselves start tearing. Only Elegant Moon and Draus remained indifferent, both drawn to the structure they were now infesting with curiosity.

**[There is an entire portion of him missing,]** Elegant-Moon said. **[But only periodically. It returns, then leaves, like a piece that is trapped between existence and oblivion.]**

**[Still enough left of him to think. Think it's mostly his memories that are damaged. His body ain't blinkin' none.]** Draus' template observed the Fallwalker's sequences. **[Hells. Less like part of him missing and more like he's got a bunch of pieces skipping between him and time.]**

Regular spoke true. A more detailed looking using Avo's **Conception of Ontology** showed a faint trace he didn't notice before, with rings of rolling gold running between him and time, the trails they painted akin to a series of wheels.

[Cyclers,] Kae theorized. [But if they are looping, why aren't they staying in place? Wait, how are they looping with the tapestry directly? How are they operating outside of his Frame?]

**+Perhaps his Domain of Chronology is internalized too,+** Avo considered. But intuition told him that the truth behind the mysterious Fallwalker was far stranger.

***Ignorance is vanishing them. There and not. It stopped existing for a while. It stopped existing when he was beyond the horizon. When it was just him and Naeko.***

Avo paused as a new consideration took shape. Perhaps he wasn't just rooted to time itself—perhaps he was rigged upon the *Paths*.

As Alysium reformed himself once more, he returned with a scream for mercy. “Naeko, please—”

He didn't manage to finish his words when Avo shattered his mind from within. Shrapnel sprayed into the Chief Paladin's thoughtstuff but stopped dead before they could go any further. Naeko's rule over force and harm were absolute—it would be useful to learn how his canons functioned.

**[It won't be easy fashioning a Rendbomb against him either,] Kae said. [Entropy targeting Domains of Force and Violence are not exactly uncommon, but with the Chief Paladin's demonstrated powers... I suspect it will be very hard to achieve detonation at all without the potential for surprise.]**

And it will take a hell of a big bomb at that to overload Naeko. Or many, many, many small ones. Even success bled into the danger that he would just vent his Hell and form his palm into a fist. That was an arguably worse outcome, only assuaged by the brief opening between the shift. That was something Avo could potentially exploit, but price of failure would be high.

**+Have him,+** Avo said. Memories flashed back into Alysium's mind, but they immediately disentangled, spooling out the Fallwalker's shattered shell of a mind. Such was confirmation that the man's mind and body weren't separated across time, either—it was only a facet of his cognition that was skipping. The third factor in the equation was time. Time held Alysium's body together, and it also began restoring his mind.

Avo stared down at the Chief Paladin, who glared down at the body form of the Fallwalker, his face a mask of feral rage. “Alright,” he said, barely managing the words. “Put him back together. Make him feel it more.”

**+Can do better,+** Avo said. ***+Can time your blows to trauma-patterns. Pair them. Make him break in mind and body both. Repeatedly. Already mending from time.+***

“Already—” Naeko paused. The raging current of thoughts rounding his accretion slowed. “Is he naturally mending or are you naturally mending him.”

**+Time.+**

Naeko squinted. “The fuck is this guy? How’s that shit work.”

**+Trying to figure that out. Could hit a few more times. See if he confesses fast enough. Would be funny.+** Naeko’s eyes narrowed further. **+Not mocking you.+**

Avo was.

“You know what, ghou! I’m not sure if I believe you.”

Naeko was a simple man. Simple didn’t mean stupid.

A whimpering noise came from Alysium. Time was weaving the man back to shape — and quickly at that. As his memories continued to flicker across into Avo, the Overheaven attempted to hold onto the mem-data, yet found it like clenching sand. It seemed that memories which only existed at specific moments in the future couldn’t be retained by mental means alone.

“Wait!” Alysium held out a hand, breathing fast. Naeko’s lip twisted, and a savage gleam filled his eyes once more. Avo plotted his delicate scheme; there was no easy way to turn the Chief Paladin from his decided path, but his behavior could be convinced or redirected. Ultimately, Naeko’s loyalty mattered far more than whatever this mysterious stranger knew.

Or so Avo presumed.

“You said you knew me,” Naeko replied, his voice low like distant thunder. “Yelled out all kinds of funny things as I broke you. If you did, you’d know better than to spit on *his* name.”

Alysium’s features twisted into a grimace. “You—you do not remember. Of course you do not... That moment is no longer real. It is not longer true. My future... my past... both have been stolen. I have been stolen from my life.”

Bouts of indescribable pain passed through the man. He clearly believed a wrong had committed against him, and the ache of his trauma bore symmetry to the scars lining within Essus. He had been shattered. Shattered from who he was.

For a few heartbeats, Naeko just flexed his fingers. The landscape they occupied was nothing but a fist-shape crater. Rumbling crashes sounded in the distance as objects the size of mountains descended as trailing balls of fire, re-entering orbit after their displacement. Vast wounds lined the face of reality, and the patterns within them bled over into others, were severed of all stability.

In the foreground stood Naeko, destroyer above destroyers, breaker above forces, tyrant of peace. He let out a quiet breath as a palm swept upward from him. Avo only realized the purpose of the act a moment later when he caught an enormous slab of earth that grew and shadow and threatened to impact everything for miles.

+*Jaus*,+ Draus muttered. She broadcast her perspective over to Avo, and he saw the devastation spilling over to where she was as well. Her parts of the Sunderwilds remained mostly protected, with matter unraveling into shrilling notes past a certain speed, but mere kilometers beyond, fireballs plumed high into the sky, annihilating all that was there. Including an existing enclave. +*Don't think there's ever gonna be a flechette with that man's name on it. Not unless we pop his Frame first.*+

Avo was inclined to agree.

{*Avo*,} Calvino said, a hint of disdain laced under their voice. {*Do get him to stop if possible. The tantrum was understandable; the destruction was less than acceptable. This is not collateral damage. This murder of a second degree.*}

+*Trying*,+ Avo replied. The standoff between Naeko and Alsyim continued, with the latter babbling and the former just glaring. Hysteria painted two sets of understandings in Avo's mind, and he knew the slightest hint could set the Chief Paladin off again. The man was on edge—warped by a lifetime of bloodshed and fury. And truth be told, had Avo been any better than him before? When he nulled those three hundred thousand Crucible viewers those months back? With his hunger? +***This is why you never tried recruiting him. He is volatile. Rageful. Ruled by it. Chained to this flaw for centuries.***+

{*That, and he is compromised. He remains compromised. We estimate that there is still a near fifty percent certainty he may bend to the High Seraph's camp before the end.*}

+***Sounds like you're trying to warn me away.***+

{*The opposite. You should keep going. We only gave you a sub-twenty percent chance of lasting as an operative of Aegis and a citizen. But you grew. You did. There is statistical likelihood. And there is the truth as follows. I expect you to achieve another such "truth" with him.*}

The surprise was in the EGI's words rather than the estimates.

"Zein." Alysime's words snatched Avo's attention. "Call upon her. If you can. Call upon her! She knows—this was her doing. Her doing, and the will of—call on her. Please. If you want to know. If you want to know the truth that isn't but still might be. Call on her."

Naeko shook his head. "I'm talking to a godsdamned—"

**+Should do it,+** Avo said. The Chief Paladin eyed him. **+There's something very wrong with his ontology. Something that keeps him attached to the progression of things. Got some details from glimpses into his mind. He's been hiding. I think. Hiding in the Sunderwilds from Zein. Tracked us from your presence. The damage you left. And then maybe latched to my properties through time. Paths. That's my guess. Might even be connected to the Ladder. Zein told me there were nine before. Nine behind the Godsfall.+**

Confusion swept across Naeko's features. "Nine? Nine what?"

**+Nine people.+**

"What are you talking about—"

"--The Ladder?" Alysım gasped. Suddenly, nothing else mattered. He pushed himself off the ground and looked past Naeko, perception spearing into Avo's looming Overheaven. "They created it? They finished our great work?"

Both Paladin and Overheaven fell silent at that.

**+“Our” great work,+** Avo said.

"Of course." The madman threw his head back and roared a laugh. "There would be no Paths without me. No Paths to chart and guide our progress, to keep us away from calamity. Of course I was... there was..." He was lost again. A memory was there and not. A moment was then and gone. "It is no longer real. Things are no longer true." Despair returned to him. "Please. Do not hurt me anymore. I do not deserve this torment. I only wish to—it is only fate that saw me delivered to you! Only fate. Ask her. Find her. She will know. She holds all that is lost."

Naeko's expression turned inscrutable. Avo intercepted the man's suspicions before they could compromise his choice. **+Could be a trap. Could be. But I'm inside his mind. Veylis wouldn't let me go this far. Zein wouldn't either. Dealing with something unknown. Something drawn to us. Pulled to us by our Domains of Chronology.+**

"You want to let him see her?" Naeko asked.

**+Your choice. Not mine. Everyone keeps using you, Naeko. Everyone. I am doing it now.+** The Chief Paladin shot Avo a puzzled expression. **+I will not lie to you about this. Have my own wants. Own needs. But what kind of god would I be if ideals are so easy to betray? If my canons are but conditional? Won't see a world where you are just a pawn. A hound should get their choice too.+**

Naeko bit his bottom lip and looked away. His thoughtstuff roiled like water boiling and a storm of emotion raged within his bones. "Why? Why the *hells* do you sound like him?"

**+Jaus?+**

“Yes,” Naeko snarled. “Yes, Jaus. He always saw through me. I couldn’t hide anything from him. It was like I was just glass. He did that to everyone—just knew how people were. And here you are, playing the same game, doing the same thing, saying the same words.” Naeko fell silent. “‘A hound should get their choice too.’ He said that to me. He said that too me at Scale. Salvation’s Day. Just months before everything went to shit, before the Ladder was supposed fix everything.”

Avo understood what Naeko was asking now. **+Was purely coincidence. Didn’t glimpse it from your mind. Or his. Is what I believe. You still have the Gatekeeper. You can still use it on me.+**

A stray note from Naeko’s mind told Avo the man didn’t want to believe him, but he broke from his stupor. Just shook his head. “No. No, I... I *believe* you. It’s godsdamned insane, but I do.” Naeko rubbed at his face with a massive hand. “What the hells is my life.”

**+Tragic. But ongoing—+**

A mist-made hand swatted Avo lightly. His entire being rattled violently.

“Stop talking like him,” Naeko muttered. “Gonna give me a trauma.” Lifting his head high, Naeko stared up into the underside of the mountain his palm was hefting and sighed. “Alright. Fuck it. No finding myself today. Just make this shit worse. Let’s go talk with her. Again.” He closed his eyes. “Again. *Fuck.*”

Chambers—among other templates—winced at the scene. **[Avo. Maybe, like, go alone or something. The guy’s reacting how I might if you made me meet my old man again. Give the poor shit a break before he actually *breaks.*]**

**+Could go alone,+** Avo said. **+You don’t need to—+**

“Piss off, ghoul. She’s my master. If she’s hiding something else from me, I want to know.” Naeko grimaced. “I want to know.” Slowly, he filled his lungs with air and reached down into his pocket. Before he retracted his hand, he gave Alysium a final glare. “If I find out you’re bullshitting me, I’m gonna *retroact* you, you understand? I’ll turn send the rest of you into the nothing too.”

Pure horror consumed Alysium’s features. The man’s nerve broke. He reached out for Naeko. “No! Please!”

Naeko’s hand shot out from his pocket and wrapped around the Fallwalker’s neck before Avo could full follow what happened. Then, they were *elsewhere* again, the fabric of space

collapsing inward with the inversion of the Chief Paladin's pocket, into a gray expanse looming over memite ground before.

Whistling strokes of a blade cutting through air called their attention. There, alone in this prison, Zein was practicing again, humming a joyous tune as she cut and stabbed with glee. As they felt her, she felt them, and slowly turned, facing the threesome with a wide smile on her face. "Ah. You return. Tell me, were the wounds my girl inflicted on—"

Her words died. The triumph on her face vanished as she noticed the stranger among them.

Alysim's face broke into a murderous snarl. He clawed at Zein despite the grip Naeko had on him, seething with hatred. "*Murderess. Thief. Traitor!*"

For a heartbeat longer, Zein stared on in uncharacteristic shock. "You... I killed you..."

And that was all Naeko could take. A ragged cry of exhausted frustration broke from the Chief Paladin, and at its end, a palm hammered down against Thousandhand once more.