

Jaus! You traitor! Deceiver! Murderer! You promised! You promised she would be spared! You promised that my people would be—

-[this moment never happened]

26-9

The Mad Monk

-[Avo]-

[How the fuck does everyone have a warmind of Ignorance? Where are these cocksuckers getting our fucking shit!] Peace spat. Avo's glare turned inward. [What?]

+My question to you. No one else mass-producing warminds. I don't hand mine out.+

[Eat shit, you corpse-licking bastard! This is some shit Joy might do. The spineless fuck. He would apologize to you double if you were tearing his cock off with one hand and digging a knife up his ass with the other.]

[What a delightful image,] Abrel murmured. [What a warm and welcoming purgatory I find myself in.]

The internal banter did nothing to douse the rising fires of tension burning within Avo. His cognition was evolved—ascended. Not even focusing on Naeko should have left him open to a potential ambush. But then the stranger arrived—just manifested like a sudden irregularity along the patterns of the tapestry, a bud suddenly growing from the Domain of Chronology as if a fruit sprouted from a vine.

A mere second ago, the man wasn't there. Then, suddenly, they unveiled themselves, standing plain upon the canvas of existence and the sea that was the Nether. And worst of all, they were staring straight down at him and Naeko. Straight down, with a smile pulling on the man's jowls.

An inward current of fog carried Naeko and Avo to the surface. The pressure from the palm was nigh unbearable, even when it wasn't levied directly against you. Avo still felt the ache of Naeko squeezing his Liminal Frame. The Chief Paladin reminded him of what it was to feel like a ghoul again, to be impossibly weaker than your foe, to be a fragile shape they could choose to break or spare.

It was only Avo's growing mastery of the mind paired with all the aid provided to him by his **Definement of Hysteria** that ensured his survival; where he was inferior of flesh and Soul, Naeko was brittle of mind and will. Relative weaknesses exploited through absolute means.

And now, Naeko was his ally, if but nominally so. With his palm against the stranger, the unknown man had little chance of escape, little chance of victory.

Little chance wasn't none. Avo had enough of being surprised for one day. Time to play this safe.

"You have him?" Avo asked. They were outside the entrance to the bunker again. The door was sealed, rivers of snakes twirled about this lonesome island. Yet, upon the embankment leading to Karakan's prison, a shrouded figure stood in the fog, tendrils of gold untangling from their body in tandem with crawling serpents.

"Yeah," Naeko replied, sounding more unnerved than Avo was. "He's got a Domain of Chronology. I can feel it."

Avo activated his **Conception of Ontology** and delved deeper, taking the time to study the man's metaphysical structure. The revelations he gleaned hollowed his mind with surprise.

[He does not have a Domain of Chronology or Time,] Kae's template muttered, taken in by his patterns. **[He is shaped from the time itself. Peeling off from it...]**

True to her words, the structures compromising the man's existence ran alongside the progression of reality. The nature of his existence bore an uncanny similarity to how Sanctians would undergo ontological shifts during certain periods of time. But what does that mean?

+Might be a Sanctian,+ Avo said, projecting his perception of the tapestry via a screen of phantoms for Naeko's benefit. The Chief Paladin tilted his head at the details offered and grunted.

"Yeah. His squiggly shit looks kinda different." Avo shot the Chief Paladin a look. "What? I'm not an Agnos."

"Was a disciple of Zein Thousandhand. Served Jaus Avandaer. Had relations with Veylis Avandaer."

[But do any of them play Stormjumpers,] Shotin's template deadpanned, offering a shit-eating grin.

"Hey," Naeko said, a slight snarl leaking over into his voice, "get off my ass. I already did most of the actual work here."

That was quite true. Or so Avo hoped.

"Ah! Greetings! Greetings!" The stranger's voice was like a low, dry growl, and their accretion accelerated and slowed in random increments. The *wrongness* about them leaked out from their mind as well. "History has smiled upon me once more. Or will smile." A ringing laugh followed. "Such a thing is hard to tell when you are severed without anchoring. What is up? What is

down? What is future? What is past? What is history that is no more? All relative. A paltry thing of a Godclad.”

More laughter followed. Naeko flicked his eyes over to Avo, an uncertain expression decorating his face. “So. Can you spy on his thoughts too?”

Avo tried, but what Hysteria beheld was a legion of unceasing whispers with flickering instances of people and places, as if the stranger was remembering things one moment and then forgetting them the next. **“Yeah. No good detail. Probably insane.”**

Naeko nodded without a hint of doubt. “Well, if he’s out here, I guess he’s a Fallwalker.”

“Going to try and jack his mind.”

“Sure. But I’m smearing him if he does anything weird.”

Avo could live with that. Loosing a splinter from himself, another moment of surprise followed immediately thereafter as he approached the stranger, and found a splinter coming at him from the opposite direction.

[What the hells,] Benhata gasped.

He has a warmind of Delusion too... Didn’t feel it until just now.... Shouldn’t be possible... Something is wrong here.

Avo hesitated. He halted splinter before it could sink into the man, and the oppositional splinter came to a stop as well. Wariness and suspicion intermingled within Avo. The stranger existed parallel to time, possessed multiple warminds, used them as Avo did... There were only so many conclusions to come to, and one stood above all others.

“Veylis,” Avo said, reshaping his mind before his fury could compromise his capacity to make decisions.

“What?” Naeko hissed.

The reconnected cadre shared in the High Seraph’s reaction, shock, horror, focus, and alarm erupted across countless splinters.

Yet, all the stranger did was laugh once more. **“Veylis? Ah. The daughter. No. No. I am her father’s sin. I am her father’s mistake. I am her mother’s victim.”**

Naeko parted the eldritch mists gripping the man, and Avo found himself beholding a wild-eyed who was sheet-white of skin and eccentric of dress. He was pale. Albino, without a hint of hair anywhere. Eight spherical scars were carved upon the top of his skull, their rings interlocking

along two rows. More concerning was the endless gush of blood spilling from a wound on his chest, soaking the ash-coated robes. His legs were replaced with mechanical stilts and on their sides was the symbol formed from the tips of two triangles pressing against each other.

Avo searched his memories for anything that corresponded to the insignia and found nothing. Not from the Guilds. Not even from the Syndicates.

{Our only matches are from organizations long-defunct,} Calvino chimed.

+How long?+ Avo asked, devoting all his focus to the man.

{Eons. Millions of years. At the least.}

“Do not bother trying to remember me,” the stranger said. His lips were splayed open in a wide grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes, and he sighed. “My past *isn’t*. I am *not*. You cannot see what never happened.”

Riddles. Or obfuscation. Thankfully, Avo had a guess about what the man was hinting. **“Were you affected by a chronological attack? Part of yourself pulled backward?”**

“Myself?” the stranger gestured with both hands. His fingertips were coated with gold, and he used them to strum at the passage of time briefly. “No. I... I went forward. I jumped without looking. I...” He stared up and away from them, gazing someplace distant. “I *drowned*. In the paths to the future, I drowned.” As his attention returned, there was a mournful quality to his features. “But I did not die. Not like those never were. Not like them.”

“I’ve seen this before,” Naeko breathed. Avo turned his perception to the Chief Paladin. “Been a few cases before when a Paladin had to perform a banishment on a troublesome Fallwalker or a Guilder brawl that got out of hand. People who are synced to the ones that get *retroacted* don’t... uh... some part of them gets weird.”

“Saying parts of his memories used to exist and now don’t.”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“Then why am I still getting flickers?”

Naeko narrowed his eyes. Then shrugged. “Donno.”

The Chief Paladin was a practitioner of conserving his brainpower, it seemed.

More questions followed thereafter. If the man was only mentally broken, why was he parallel to time, why was he exhibiting warminds and abilities Avo possessed suddenly? Without explanation? There was something more here. Something beneath the surface.

"I am Alsyim the Wanderer." The man's gaze took on a dazed quality. "Or perhaps I was. Perhaps that is lost to me too. It no longer matters. Perhaps it never did." He giggled, and then blushed. "I found you. It was pure fortune. Or fate. Or simple the consequence of waiting long enough for probability to collapse upon probability. A being of significant power. Another of significant thought. Both entwined with the winding twine of time. And the *Godslayer*. She is with you too. I can feel her. I can hear her dragon. Akusande."

"Okay," Naeko sighed. "He's a half-nulled Fallwalker who knows lots of things he really shouldn't. Hey! Why are you here? What do you want?"

Alsyim blinked rapidly. His eyes irises shone gold, a moment from his mind splashed into Hysteria. He was standing across from Zein, screaming as she drove her blade deeper into his chest, screaming as he wrestled against her Heavens, pushing himself forward in time while she tried to turn him back.

All around him, the city was unravel, gods were falling, an entire history vanishing, not even ash in the end.

And once more, the vision was gone. Like it never was. All the weight that Alsyim felt, all the horror—that was gone too. He was blissfully absent in his own mind once more. Ignorant. His mind shuddered ripe with sequences and thoughts, and the density of his thoughts hinted at considerations of considerable complexity. But they started and stopped. Emerged and broke. Like they were in progress until the past behind them was lost.

In some ways, he reminded of Avo of Kae when she still suffered from the Conflagration.

"I have drifted long and far across the ruins of the world—these ruins!" he gestured wide, calling attention to the Sunderwilds themselves. "This... was not supposed to be. The page was to remain untorn. There was an agreement... an agreement... But there *wasn't*... There cannot be..." There was a shift in the man's expression. An urgency. "I have spent long here. Long. For years I hid myself... I hid from the slayer. Hid and watched as she warred with her daughter. Good. A pox of them. Damn them. A praise their tragedy—glorious is the traitor Jaus' death—"

He didn't quite manage to finish his words before a veritable wall of muscle known as Samir Naeko snapped across the space between them, impacting Alsyim at Mach four and climbing, the Sage's mists curling into a balled fist.

Almost all matter caught at the epicenter of the impact disintegrated from the blast wave. Avo dispelled his avatar and manifested his Overheaven in avoidance, casting out his hawk of light to gain distance and altitude. As he triggered his Canon of Speed, he found himself devoid of words for the scene before him.

A furrow of destruction ran onward across the horizon, like someone had tunneled across an entire section of the world. The sheer force of Naeko's blow sent chunks of landmass the size of districts and mountains into the stratosphere, and a cloud of dust and ash rained down like an avalanche. And still, the Chief Paladin was going. Still, a thundering fist obliterated a distant range of mountains beyond, smashed biomes flat and further gouged the ruptures littering the Sunderwilds tenfold.

[**..Holy shit,**] Abrel breathed. For once, Kare just stared along with her, jaw open in disbelief.

+Avo,+ Draus said, chuckling at the sheer destruction she just witnessed, *+we might need a plan in place to snuff your new consang if shit ever goes sour because I don't think we got good odds against that.*+

Chambers, rather than being awed, was more incensed by the display. *+What the fuck! He can do that? Then why'd his ass run! Go up to Highflame! Beat the bitch!+*

Only a sigh of disappointment sang from Calvino. *{And here I had hopes of learning more about our mysterious new friend.}*

+Hopefully Naeko only killed them,+ Avo said, noting how strange that sounded. **+See if they resurrect. Ask them after. Try to calm the Paladin down first.+**

A snort came from the Regular. *+Anyone ever tell you that you're hopeful person, Avo?+*

+Don't use my words against me, Draus.+

–[Naeko]–

The rage was upon Naeko again. The rage exploded when that *fuck* said Jaus' name. Naeko didn't even know what he was doing until he did it, didn't realize he was roaring, hammering a straight into the jaw of the *cunt* and driving them across the thresholds of the Sunderwilds until it already happened.

Even when his mind caught up with his raging heart, it didn't matter. Naeko just put more force into it.

Karakan might be dead, but he might still find more than a bit of himself today.

Nothing stopped his path of destruction. No power in existence could. The physical broke. The metaphysical tore. The world trembled.

Naeko raged.

Alysim was made of harder stuff than the sister, but harder stuff didn't matter when Naeko was hitting you. The blow all but vaporized his flesh, and the only reason why Alysim still existed was because the clinging strings of time holding him in place.

Those, too, threatened to snap when Naeko hit him again.

Every blow the Chief Paladin landed was a cataclysm unleashed. A fist downward sent fractures down to the subterranean plates. An uppercut banished all clouds and untangled descending branches of entropy for the width of a continent. A slam made reality skip for a moment, the concept of time itself writhing from Naeko's blow.

+Naeko!+ A voice was echoing in the back of his mind. An annoying voice. A voice from some half-strand that liked to hear themselves talk a bit too much. **+Naeko! Stop! You're not hurting them right.+**

Damn right he was going to hurt them— Wait, what?

"What," Naeko said. He slammed a boot down into the soil below, and a falling palm stole every last bit of force from his velocity. Tendrils of time slowly began to weave Alysim back together, reconstructing the shape of a whimpering, beaten man hugging his head, face turned away. The bastard wasn't even going to give him the dignity of a fight. He was just folding in on himself, ready to take this beating.

REND CAPACITY - 0%

A streak of light snapped across the Naeko's periphery. A trail of radiance transformed into a bloom of twelve sequences and an ocean of ghosts lit by Soulfire. Naeko squinted at Avo's arrival. Neat trick. **+Not hurting him right. He's tied to time. Need to strike at the Domain if you want to hurt him.+**

He found himself taken aback. Didn't expect to be receiving help with this, but alright — he could get behind a bit of help.

Alysim struggled in his grip, fully restored by chronology, frowning as he peeked an eye out at Naeko. "Why? Why do you strike me? Why?"

Naeko flung the restored man to the ground. This *presented* interesting opportunities. Karakan was *delicate*. So very *breakable*. But Alysim? He came back just fine. Seemed his Heaven kept him spared from destruction, but not pain.

"You have no idea what you just woke in me," Naeko said, laughing at the man. "For a second, I was curious, too. Curious. But then you just had to mention *his name*. So. Now, I really don't give much of a shit about who you are and what you know. I just wanna hear you scream."

Horror filled Alysım's as Naeko's grip tightened, but a second thereafter, his expression broke and changed. As Naeko began to pop his vertebrae, one from another, Alysım gasped and smiled. "I-I remember you. Samir. You are Samir. You are Samir Naeko!" His face ignited with joy. "You are my friend."

Naeko ended this conversation much the same way he did to Karakan—he headbutted the man until his skull was no more.