

Akusande. Will cut in my stead, in exchange for your life?

...Yes.

Will you serve my will in death, as you would in life?

...Yes.

Will you defy time itself to ensure my fall be undone my return be swift, my vengeance be taken?

...Yes.

-Zein and the Dragon-Glaive "Akusande"

21-15

The Glaive Unsheathed

Time rebalanced, and Avo's base ego snapped back in alignment with his subminds. As his cog-feed ceased its flickering, he studied the room with a projected Skimmer and stared.

As did his templates.

As did his cadre.

There, over Thousandhand's unmoving corpse was Quail Tavers flicking the blood off her blade. A legend stood over a legend, and surreal though the moment might have been, mortal skill triumphed against divine power.

[Holy fucking shit!] A shrill squeal of pure excitement left Abrel as her adoration for Tavers turned manic. [Oh my gods, oh my gods, holy fuck! Quail Tavers just fucking snuffed fucking Zein Thousandhand oh my god!]

The other templates were equally impressed. Somehow though, Avo felt as if he was missing part of the credit.

Had... help... a lot of...

A beat passed. No echoes emerged to cut anyone down. A metaphysical scab formed over Zein's corpse. *Second cycler.* Of course. Tavers released a shaky breath and shot her severed armor a frown. "Thank Jaus I invested in that decoy loc—"

The only forewarning for what came next was a single-thread gold unspooling from Zein's fallen umbrella.

Time accelerated. parasol *shattered* into parting threads, and then in its place was a glaive made of fractured oracle glass slicing up to cut the squire from below.

A haemokinetic claw materialized to stop the blow, but it was Dice that arrived first.

Sparks flashed as the jagged tip of Zein's weapon recoiled from the waif's alloyed sheath, a radiant rune protecting her from physical harm. The cracks within the blade deepened, and an uncontrollable pressure was hissing out from between the fissures, temporal sinews weaving the outline to a growing sinuous form.

+Run. Now. Vent as soon as you get a chance.+ The thought left Avo as a redundant command; his cadre was already in motion, Tavers abandoned her still usable Hellgun along her Rendskin, the armor not worth her life. The air shifted. Faint ripples formed across time and manifested probing attacks, gunfire and eldritch phenomena spewing free from the transforming glaive.

An eruption of fire spawned a wall of bioforms to blunt the attacks. Chambers pulled Kae as the cadre began their retreat. Tavers dove first through an activated reflection, her Metamind flashing as she sent her drones a universal attack order. Metal and flesh joined the carnage while the others fled.

Draus was the last to leave, her focus lingering on Avo's broken sheath for a moment.

+Go,+ he said. No sense in risking any of them. Their Rend Capacities were still high after their initial battle against Zein, but he was the only one capable of surviving without a material body. *+Need to try ending this. Killing her. Get to the enclave. Remake your passages. Anything you can to burn our trail.+*

And there was something else he needed to do. A promise he made to break Zein's glaive somehow. To whom or why he gave this oath was irrelevant. It just had to be done. And now seemed the best opportunity he would get.

The Regular shot him a nod and clenched her fist. The unused passages cracked first, then dissolved, turning into scintillating powder as a rapidly swelling figure tore through the opposing drones and monsters. *+See you soon, consang.+*

Then she crossed over as well, plunging through her **Liminal Paracosmos**, accelerating toward a portal opening in the near horizon within a world made from shifting shards of reflective brilliance.

Chambers' brief blast of flame had formed around three hundred humming wasp-sized monstrosities each half the size of a full-grown adult. They were mostly in pieces now, sticky green blood leaking from their broken carapaces vanishing behind chomp scales and slashing

blades. The twenty-two drones in the Command Nexuses at the time were but smoking husks as well, most obliterated without ever contributing.

It took paltry effort on the part of his Woundmother to mend his mortally wounded sheath in the George Washington, but his Metamind was screaming at him, all three of his cyclers nearly filled with Rend. With a thought, Avo set his tripartite mind upon three different tasks.

A point of no return had been crossed with Zein's slaying, with her open intent to enslave him once more. From this point on, his relationship with Ninth Column was adversarial, and his continued association with Aegis was questionable at best. But calamity also offered opportunity.

With Zein struck down, with his mind functionally restored and more liberated than ever, he directed the first of his subminds to flood his essential subverts before spreading his splinters wider across the city.

His second submind shifted over to the George Washington's systems, where Calvino was interfacing with the SHEPHERD earlier. Back in the enclave, his sheath slumped as the breadth of his consciousness whistled out of the body, leaving but a sliver of ghosts rooted in place.

Finally, his base mind rose, mended of flesh and clear of mind, pushing himself up using the steps of the dais, the throne of his once masters. Turning, he faced his new foe, the thing hiding within Zein's glaive.

A dragon unleashed.

It was far smaller compared to the Hungers, nowhere near their world-embracing presence. Even still, it dwarfed him by dimension, easily taking up the entire nexuses, its body writhing through the air, scales resembling plates of armor shaped like teardrops.

Searing light cleaved free from the crenulations running down its form. Each section of the dragon's body was a map of shifting constellations, some forming sigils connected to Domains he knew. More not. between its scales. From the projected resplendence came bleary images. Almost like holograms reflected by surging rivers. Then, it seemed more like stratocumulus.

An atmosphere was taking shape around the dragon. Avo caught glimpses of half-formed places and sensed unrealized phenomena. With each thundering heartbeat that emanated from the dragon, moments manifested and vanished, changing like dancing smoke. Through the obfuscation, he saw its face finally. An eyeless head lined with feathers and scales. It looked between a hawk and a snake, but its movements jolted from place to place.

Avo saw battles fought, lives lost; atrocities committed, revenge sowed; hate abating, and in its place emerged love and lust, slaked at last beneath the looming heights of a cavern made from metal, artificial lights painted twin bodies etwined.

As the scenes played, its tail coiled around Zein's corpse, accelerating the Godslayer's return.

The ghoul snarled. Already, the scabs were growing thicker—he needed to push—

A lashing cut traced an opening along his ribs as shadows erupted from the dragon. He manipulated his Echoheads, shielding himself using his biomagnetism, conserving his Rend for what was to come. The dragon reached into its mists, pulling past into present and casting calamities out to best Avo.

But he simply dove—sinking into the shadows at his feet and tunneling fast toward Thousandhand's yet dead form.

COG-CAP DISTRIBUTION

->[BASE] - 55%

->[SUB-1] - 20%

->[SUB-2] - 15%

->[STANDBY] - 10%

REND CAPACITY [WOUNDMOTHER] - 98%

REND CAPACITY [FARDRIFTER] - 97%

REND CAPACITY [TECHPLAGUER] - 94%

Draus' last mirror burst apart, signaling the cadre's exit of that particular passage. Avo barely noticed. The dragon expelled light remembered. The shine of true day. He surfaced as a rush of wind, his progression undeterred.

“Knower.” the Dragon's voice reverberated louder with each passing moment. It sounded sharp and vicious. The kind of voice one would imagine a predator to have. As it twisted and whipped a typhoon to counter his approach, its feathered him broke into four petals, and he saw a small face at the heart of its skull. It was a tiny, pale thing, the mien of a Sang girl greeting.

Her eyes were closed and her hair spilled down from a half-finished bun in messy tassels. A sharp intake of breath nearly made him pause, but wasted no time still.

There was everything to gain and nothing to lose.

Zein made her point.

Time for him to make his.

“Knower! Knower of Emptiness. Burning Dreamer. Hold. Hold, please.”

He did not. Despite something inside him desperately wanting him to. Despite Denton loudly demanding that he stop, her avatar visibly panicked in the corner of his feed. *{Avo! No! We need her. She's the only one—}*

She said more. He listened. But it didn't matter.

He tumbled out from a torrent of wind and splashed into the world as a stream of pulsing data. Pulsing of disruptive signals struck him. His Heaven rattled. The Techplaguer shrieked. A few more points of Rend. On the edge. Close. But they had options. And he had a plan.

+*Calvino*,+ Avo called, pulling himself along the ground as a blur of force tore his left arm clean. He regrew it with a thought. Lightning coursed through him. He **Boltstrode**. But the dragon flicked a whip of electricity, striking him, parrying his dash off course.

{What just—oh.} Avo's memories synced up with Calvino—still active in his undamaged enclave-sheath. A data spike pierced out from the mind, and an uncomfortable silence grew. *{Well. This is not good. This is not good at all!}*

“Knower. Dreamer. Avo. Stop. We have spoken. Unknowingly. Stop.”

Avo fought the urge to hiss at the dragon. It was yelling for him to halt while still attacking. The smart matter mended as fast as he did, but the dragon was only using physical attacks thus far. He suspected it wasn't trying that hard, that it was holding back either out of fear of destroying the voidship or it simply didn't want him dead for some reason.

Regardless, its reluctance was his advantage. A tingle in the back of his mind called for him to respond, to cast a thought in greeting to the dragon, but decided to engage with Calvino first.

+*Calvino. Need your help. Can you shut off the reactor for the ship? Isolate the current module from the other. Want you to eject all the others into the darkness. Leave only the Command Nexus by itself. Going to vent through the Hu—.*+

A gold wave scythed out from the dragon. The following temporal lag almost dislocated Avo's base mind from the other halves of his consciousness altogether. When his senses returned, his templates, the cadre, Calvino, and the dragon were calling to him all at once. Twenty seconds were gone from his memory. He tried to move but found his limbs missing and a spiked vivianite pillar buried in his chest. His body spasmed and he hacked blood over the twelve slender arms gripping the weapon.

“Now we speak,” the dragon said, its body curving at impossible angles to lean in close to him, bringing its human facade at level with him. Zein was still protected by its tail, and through the flicking movements of the dragon's sinuous body, her scab was almost ripe for resurrection.

Scenes flashed over to Avo's mind, recapping him with what he missed. He prioritized his conversations. +Calvino?+

{The system is still too damaged to receive comprehensive inputs,} Calvino replied. {Trying to do anything to the ship's reactor will likely result in the crew's final death as they are deeply integrated they are with the system. But I can divert more of the ship's mass over to the core. And move the other sections away. I must say, I do not like your current plan.}

Avo thought it wasn't bad. It would turn things to his Fardrifter's advantage, anyhow.

A ghostly wisp caught Avo's attention, and he found the polearm thrust through him imbued with ghosts. Potent with sequences and memories. He looked up at the dragon, surprised. The Sang girl's eyelids were open now, and a cluster of eyes—all colors, all shapes—made active rotations in her sockets. ***“Take it. That is all I can do for you now. They will show you the truth of things. They will show how the paths work. The shape of time. What you have become. Take it and know.”***

Finally, the question became too great to ignore. “Why?”

The dragon went still. The Sang's face contorted with effort as she fought to slow the passage of time around Zein, to delay the Godslayer's resurrection if she could. ***“There is a promise between us. But you cannot keep it yet. You cannot break me from my cage. You cannot break me from her will. But perhaps after. Perhaps not so long.”***

Avo stared into the girl's eyes and coughed. “Not the first time we talked.” He knew it wasn't. Knew it from feeling. But he couldn't remember when they last spoke—if they ever spoke.

“An unremembered dialogue has its purpose.” It twisted the pillar to provoke his action. A splinter shot free from his halo, drowning in an ocean of ghosts.

Too many for his splinters to erode in time.

This demanded a shift.

This demanded a return to fire.

A reconstruction of the voidship flashed into his cog-feed. The other components were diverted. Moved far and away from the command nexuses in anticipation of what was to come.

“The mind is right,” the Fardrifter chuffed, feeling the predatory essence in the shadowy cosmos outside the hull. ***“This is a poor plan. We swim within a cage that seeks to devour us.”***

The Techplaguer chimed a retort. ***“Take heart, STEED! The administrator will FREE-FREE-FREE us.”***

“And,” the Woundmother said, prepared to vent their Hell, ***“I suspect our erstwhile kin will not be doing much of the eating. Congratulations, however, are in order mule: I do believe you might be acquiring some new architectural improvements soon.”***

Sending a final command into the ship’s systems, Avo watched as the dais sank, taking the throne and the locus with it. It too was now in motion, moving fast to join the other sections of the ship.

Maybe he wouldn’t be able to salvage any of the modules. Maybe the new engineering bay was to be lost after a single use. But at least he could set them free from the dark. Allow Voidwatch to extract the sections.

Briefly, glimpsed through his various splinters. Kare and Maru were already en route to Naeko, the latter trying to start a session. His various splinters were spread across the Oversecs, and he melted them into hidden Auto-Seances for eventual easy access. The others were embedded in high-traffic lobbies and loci managing critical infrastructure. He spent those as backdoors as well, forming multiple bridgeheads to further his infestation of the city.

Disjointed by time, his submind didn’t get the chance to hunt down and jack Syndis or gangers. That was fine. He’d do what he could in the moments he had left. But first, he had ghosts to burn and a final scheme to try.

+*Will be back soon,*+ Avo said, casting a final thought through his cadre’s splinters before gathering every shard connected to his consciousness back in his current sheath. He didn’t need anything else to burn. Just the pillar.

As he shifted from Delusion back to Ignorance, a fortress of fire speared up from his halo before pouring down into the pillar, searing it clean from within.

“Yes,” the dragon sang, voice rising in a joyous song. Its scales cracked and opened, and Avo caught a glimpse of Zein’s garden—that plane she drew him into when they first met. So. That was were everything hid. Inside the umbrella; the glaive; the dragon.

Sequences, ghosts, and memories that would have taken Avo hours to digest as steam came ablaze in an instant. Over twelve million ghosts were hiding with the pillar. Twelve million ghosts bear centuries of information, carving epiphanies and understandings into his very mind.

Moments from before the Godsfall detonated within him like warheads, the blasts of understanding came in sync with the howling ascent of his refueled Conflagration. He *knew*. He *remembered*. He *recalled*. Memories that Zein had hidden even from herself poured into him,

her self-obfuscation a deliberate action—to prevent her daughter from using their shared experiences and ever achieving a mem-lock.

And now, an entire archive was his. The truths behind the Idheim's history—at least from Zein's perspective—became known to him. His perspective loomed, and a rising thrill battled a cold pit of dread forming in his stomach.

Oh, how great the glory at the end. And oh, how bad things were. Worse than he could have ever realized.

“You see?” the dragon said, releasing the pillar and shifting away from him. It was straightening now, head pointed down in an arcing loop while countless hands extended from its body, fingers spread wide in a mock embrace. **“Do you understand the paths now? The shape of what is to come? What mother and daughter left broken in their past embrace.”**

“Yes,” Avo breathed. Even with the Conflagration, it was too much. All too much. He needed time to process what he learned. To go through everything and let the details settle in. Already, his templates were overwhelmed, more than a few screaming from mem-data overload.

No other mind besides his—or an EGI's—could have possibly managed an intake of information so great.

Ghosts - [13,877,899]

He called on his Woundmother's Domains of Matter and Biology once more as it inched a single percent away from maximum capacity. Threads of blood stitched flesh and broken implants back into shape, the pillar unraveling with the caress of his **Haemokinesis**. Slamming back down on the ground, Avo took a step toward Zein's body, her resurrection almost imminent.

But the dragon shifted into his path again. **“No.”**

He could try to make another attempt with his Boltstride, his Fardrifter. But he knew that to be in vain, that the dragon would just skip him across time again. Its actions were paradoxical. Contrary. It betrayed Zein's confidence, yet protected her from him. The way it acted made him uncertain—unnerved.

“She won't forgive you for this,” Avo said, gesturing at Thousandhand with a floating Echohead. “You let me—”

“You tore into my shape and stole your prize. Who is to say otherwise? Who will tell her? You?” The dragon chuckled. **“She likes you. Veylis would like you. So I like you. And I am meant to serve in her stead. She is blinded by matters. But essential in this path. Look into the memories, and you will understand. You have your part in the final design. She has hers. As does my progenitor.”**

“Could take her Frame. Take her Heavens. Replace her.”

“**No!**” Force exploded from the dragon. Avo magnetized himself to the hull. The beast was coiling around him now, coiling closer and closer, but the Sang’s eyes remained locked to his.

“We have a bargain. You and I. I and her. She and her daughter. You have invaded the paths of your own will and power. But the rest of us are ordained. I can choose to spare you. But I cannot let you have her.”

Noble. Heroic. Reliable. Even commendable.

But *unacceptable*.

Avo let out a breath and prepared to disappoint his newest “consang.”

“I understand,” he said. “But you understand why I have to try.”

The dragon’s eyes widened. Chronological distortions flared from its every scale. But it was too late. It didn’t realize what he intended. Lacking Zein’s divine foresight and echoes, the dragon managed only a betrayed roar as Avo shed an entropic missile from his Frame. His Woundmother’s Rend dropped instantly to zero as it struck the inner hull of the command nexuses, and as an firestorm of entropy dissolved eight percent of the ship in a heartbeat, the serpent of time shivered as gnawing darkness flooded in and Avo manifested his Fardrifter in full.

REND CAPACITY [FARDRIFTER] - 98%