

And Veylis, remember this always: if something can be taken from you, it was never truly yours.

-Zein Thousandhand

21-14

The Disagreement (II)

They stood as pillars amidst the chaos, the misted torrents that once made up totality grasping vainly at their forms. The patterns of reality coursed up into the Ladder and broke in two directions. One to make the ascent. The other to feed a balance.

Suspense choked the air. Draus' mind was narrowing to a spear's tip, humanity shed to let the weapon take hold. Dice was as if a dog next to her, internal machinery building to a resonant growl. Tavers was missing. An echo of a message played across through the cadre's minds. *+Incog.* Three meters away and flanking both Avo and Zein, a glint of simmering flame built at the center of Chambers irises while Kae stole moisture from the air.

She doesn't remember Tavers.

They were gliding down the blade's edge now. Something was coming. A blow soon to fall.

Denton was openly glaring at Zein now. No more diplomacy. No more attempts to hide her displeasure at how things were developing. "This is not how things are meant to be done."

"And how are they meant to be done, agent? What is our purpose here but to win." Zein cocked her head, awaiting an explanation.

The spy remained undeterred. "I am trying to secure means of survival for the people of the polities and reduce further bloodshed on Idheim. What are you doing, Thousandhand?"

"Asserting control over a variable I let slip too long," Zein said, her tone neutral, attention fixed on Avo.

Between Godslayer and ghoul was but a single step of separation, but though Zein's gaze was on him, Avo looked up again, studying the sphere-pierced sun parting into metaphysical tides.

A new existence was being rebuilt from a final apocalypse. By symbology, it seemed more like a resurrection of reality rather than a rebuilding. Perhaps the Flayed Ladder was not unlike a Liminal Frame, only everything there was instead of a single little ego.

The fact that his Frame—the Stillborn—could invade the same heights and spread him as a contagion of change in a realm above without costing him his sense of self made more than a few things clear.

More importantly, however, the understanding *delighted* him. He relished in understanding the threat he posed, the gift he possessed, and angled his head down to face Zein once more, now more aware than ever why she feared him.

“Never told me,” Avo said, his words directed toward several figures. Denton likely knew. Calvino certainly. Zein obviously. Each of them had the means to keep their thoughts hidden from him, and they played their games of obfuscation well. But he wasn’t offended, for such was the nature of the nature of the great game.

The final game.

“Was this always your plan?” Kae’s question came as a hushed whisper. Her attention was on Zein and Calvino both, agitation building with each passing second. “Answer me! Was I always being contracted to build a weapon, and never knew? W-why would you allow the Guilds to claim such a thing in the first place?”

+We didn’t allow the Guilds to do anything,+ Calvino said. A ripple of discomfort rolled over its simulated avatar. *+Even now, we are uncertain how the Strix learned and located our restricted material. Probabilistic simulations point to Omnitech assistance. But more to the point, by the time we responded, the specimen was already beyond our reach.+*

“The High Seraph built new paths to secure the Imitators,” Avo guessed. His templates shifted, theorized, and shuddered. Most of them offered little than conspiracy theories and idle gossip. But Benhata was consumed by rising bitterness. **[We know about the High Seraph’s abilities. That’s why we operate in secret. And that’s why we operate as we are, and try to use Stormtree’s Longeyes to counter them. But Elder D’Rongo had to be told about the project. We didn’t know.]**

And suddenly Walton was in another light again.

A lone, solitary Low Master might be a peerless Necrojack, but the situation on display demanded more than the manipulation of minds. No. Penetrating Voidwatch’s privacy protection required an understanding of coldtech—or an outright disfigurement of its design. *Omnitech*. And there was little possibility that the High Seraph or Zein wouldn’t account for Noloth’s involvement in things.

Even without knowing how to manipulate the future, Avo felt the paths narrowing to a scant few.

Jaus. Just how many sides had his father been trying to *play*?

“Ah. There it is. The only possibilities reveal themselves to you as well.” Zein sighed. “Hard to see it at the time, but I think he used me and my daughter against each other. We struck at each other’s paths. Breaking futures as I played the part of saboteur while my daughter became a fortress unto herself.”

Kae's jaw fell a bit wider as she realized how far-reaching the machinations went. And how she was but a small component in the grand machine of moving deception. Her confidence shriveled. In days past, she had been telling herself that it was because of her brilliance and importance that she suffered. That the great powers were trying to suppress her attempts at change.

It was a delusion of martyrdom. But an understandable one. Her scarred heart was still tender and raw; her confidence brittle.

Seeing that no one truly cared about the ruptured Heaven of Love—that Wombrash wasn't even a topic worth mentioning was another spike driven deep into her half-closed wounds.

"No." The words left her with a whimper at first. Avo faced her and saw the twitch in her eye, a dam of frustration, rage, and trauma breaking inside her. "No. No. No! What—what the *fuck* is wrong with you? All of you? Are we just things for you to use and throw away? Do you not think we're alive right now? That we matter?"

Calvino simmered at the Agnos' words, but Zein offered only scorn. "So you are alive. What of it? Why does that matter at all? Can you enforce your will in this situation? Can you dictate the terms of your life? Do you have any worth left to leverage at this point?" The crone lifted a single finger. "Having you still is preferable. You are good Agnos. But your part has long been played. The weapon is made. That is what matters."

The retort struck Kae like a knife to the gut and the last chains of fear and anxiety shattered. A near shriek of feral fury escaped from her. She charged Zein. Made it only three steps before Chambers caught her from behind. The little Agnos thrashed in the former enforcer's grasp and howled her hate at Zein, at Calvino, at Denton, at the world unmade, all sound, all fury, but bearing little meaning in the end.

"Everything..." Kae sobbed, lashing the world with her Heaven. Her moisture clashed against Chambers flames, and steam rose, columns of pale starkness against the gloomy currents embracing them. "Everything... I gave everything... You took everything... All I ever did was try. What did I do *wrong*? Why? Why?"

Avo prepared to reach into Kae's mind, to drain out her hurt, but the Agnos' crumbling facade and Chambers' pleading eyes held him at bay.

A sad exhalation escaped Corner, the once-squire unable to bear the sight. **[Just fucking let her have this. It's all she really has anymore, anyway. The hurt is the only thing that's still her own.]**

And even that could be taken from her if Avo willed in. Connected to her as he was, a new understanding dawned and a new color was learned. A sympathetic whine of pain escaped from Avo as the full dread of powerless existence struck him at once.

There was no control for her. Not even how she lived. Not even why she acted.

Her worth was objective. Like the sacrifices, she used to make her Heavens. Like the ghouls the Hungers used as fodder of flesh and mind. Like all the little ignorant people, caught in a grand game between mother, daughter, and more shadows unseen; the legacy of Jaus rotten to its very core.

Draus' mind remained razor sharp, entirely locked in on every movement that Zein made. Part of her noted Kae's distress—and instinct warred with instinct as she held to her role. Dice was far less tempered. The hound had left the girl, and she now saw the face of her aunt when she looked upon the kneeling woman who had comforted her just hours prior, that was the first thing she saw when her mind returned to stability.

The Agnos clung to Chambers, screaming into his chest, her fists gripping the horrific coat he still wore—the one they stole from Dannis Steelhard's mannequin back at the Lots. She wept, and he stroked her back. "I know, it's bad. It's fucking bad. I know. It's not fucking fair. I know. But we're still breathing. We're still here. We're still here."

A memory bled into Avo, and Chambers' swapped places with Kae. A scene of him as a young boy sobbing into the embrace of his mother played. His father was in the background lighting up some drug or other, and blood trickled from his belt. Lashes lined both Chambers and their mother, some becoming connected wounds.

He spoke the same words she did all those years ago. He spoke them to Kae, and the wounds of their minds were connected all the same.

"You could have mastered her," Zein said, speaking to Avo now without taking her eyes off the Agnos. "You could have torn the weakness from her thoughts. Saved me the trouble of trying to—"

"Don't bullshit me," Avo said, channeling more than a bit of Draus in his words. "You weren't trying to encourage her. Or strengthen her. You were just getting amusement from her. Like you do from everything you can." And more of Chambers' template snapped into place. "You fucking junkie."

Between heartbeats, Zein was both herself and the shadows of distant trauma.

The Godslayer stood unshaken before the insult. But Avo wasn't done. "We're not the same. You all used her like she was something to be spent. Abandoned her because of inconvenience. Afraid of starting another war too early. Or ruining your precious futures. But she someone to

me. I made a promise to her. And I'm not afraid of her exerting her own will. I don't dream of enslaving the world to my will."

He saw Zein in another light now. Not as the jovial pleasure-seeking glave at the apex of martial enlightenment, but a woman who cared little beyond getting back what she wanted, who sated her hedonism from whatever sources she could, and left what she broke in the past—oblivion's problem now.

And then there was Calvino. Voidwatch. They had been helpful, but their capacity and capabilities should be beyond this. Their ethicality should have compelled them to act. To do more than embargos and diplomacy.

There were only so few possibilities for why they didn't.

"Calvino," Avo said, looking down at the phantom-formed mind. "How bad is it? With Voidwatch? How diminished are you all? Or is the other thing? Are the minds still aligned?"

A pause followed. *+Some of the former. A lot of the latter. The High Seraph has also made promises. Ones that seem increasingly palatable and in accordance with the demands of certain polities.+*

"The cowards desire to reunite," Zein cut in. "To bring the Builder War to a final close, and reawaken the Anointed Sleeper that guides the cults of Omnitech and mend the rift."

Cowards. Her disgust with them was a problem of surrender rather than philosophy.

"And here I am," Avo said. "At the center of everything. Something to usurp the Ladder."

"Or perfect it," Denton said, almost too soft to hear. "The Stillborn's inclusion into its structure would allow a perfect synthesis of ego and Soul."

"My daughter's crowning jewel of control," Zein finished.

Kae was silent now. Still holding to Chambers. The man looked small and terrified having called on too much of the boy. Avo left his mind untouched as well. Unaltered. Chambers never asked. Neither did Kae. This wasn't for him to change.

"I do not wish for you to see this as a moment of acrimony, Avo," Zein said, her voice paradoxically softer with him, kinder despite the harshness he just offered her. Scorn for the weak. Pride for the strong. She reached out for him, expression regretful. A measure of respect present. "I do not blame you for what your father has done. But you were never meant to grow as you have. To reach the heights you have. Commendable as I find you, your progress must be stopped."

And that brought another question to the forefront. Several, in fact. “Fredritch Three-Eye. Walton told me to meet them at Easy Armistice. Was supposed to deliver a node to me. You told me they were supposed to have my Frame. Assume found out about their compromise. Which is why we never met.”

Annoyance—almost imperceptible—flickered across Zein’s mien. “Your father did all he could to ensure you were the only one that could be chosen. It was a wonder, really. I considered Fredritch a pupil. Well, almost. I wonder what the Strix whispered to them. How he got them to turn.”

“Did you kill one of our own, Operative Zein?” Denton’s words were spoken with a frigid calmness.

Thousandhand merely rolled her eyes. “I’m hardly so wasteful. And the disruption it would do to be paths would be unspeakably noisy. No. I simply sent them ahead. To the places I needed them. So they could perform their duties without second thoughts or find the opportunity to betray the cause further.”

“That what you did to the Scalper? Javvers?” Avo recalled the surprised face of the Syndicate boss as he suddenly vanished. At the time, it seemed like Zein unmade him, and his body didn’t materialize even after her “death.”

“Ah, I’m surprised you still remember him. He seems rather insignificant in the scheme of things. But yes, I am using him for his nice. A Bloodthane. One that you might recall. You did cross Heavens with her at Nu-Scarrowbur, after all.

Reva. She was talking about Reva. White-Rab was not going to like this. Avo cast the memory over to his progenitor and guessed that Tavers was ahead of him on that.

“Why don’t you just fling all of us into the future?” Avo asked, his curiosity genuine. There was little he could have done to stop Zein before. She could have used any of them as pawns.

“Because despite your childish ranting, I too am not a petty tyrant. But helplessness is a hard sight to bear.” She cast a near-pitying glance at Kae again, too tired now to show scorn. Zein breathed.

“Preferred us cultured and free-range slaves, do you?” Draus spat.

Thousandhand rolled her eyes. “I prefer you not as slaves at all. But disciples. Or comrades. I look upon all of you and...” A memory was playing behind her eyes, thoughtstuff bubbling, expression slackening. But as soon as it came, it vanished. Zein was present again. “I remember the worth of having peers to stand alongside. And I am not so cruel to deprive you of life’s more sublime joys.”

Then her expression hardened and she spoke to Avo once more. “But I was mistaken with you. I should not have allowed you to fester. You were not a child to be trained or a beast to be humored. Your end was to be one of acceptable sacrifice. A pillar of perpetual change with or without the Ladder.”

And that answered why she didn’t just take the Stillborn from him. Even in the end, still meant to be little more than a thing for someone else to use. As for the Hungers, so for Zein.

Despite it all, Avo couldn’t help but laugh. Sometimes, the pattern was a line. Other times, it was like a circle, like—

[REPETITION]

Chronology shuddered around him. The emanation painted a scowl on Zein’s face.

“But now I’m like a sickness. A *pestilence* you can’t quite bottle.” Avo clicked his fangs together and let the beast sink back into him, the urge to hurt, to fight, to kill, to maim, to *devour* coming back like a spreading fire. She told him what she wanted. Why should he disappoint her? “So. What follows now?”

Zein tipped her head in a small nod. “Indeed. What follows?”

Suddenly, the space around them broke apart into tightening threads of gold. Some strands accelerated faster than others, surging where others merely flowed. Time lag distorted the links he had to his cadre. Crackling numbness pulled at Avo’s ego from all directions, his consciousness now split between two chronological velocities.

It was hard for him to think. Hard for him to focus. He struggled against Zein’s miracle with all he had, but his mind was grinding against itself, his ghosts bursting from the trauma of the experience.

+A-vv-o...+ Draus—fastest among the cadre in present circumstances moved as if a slug through sludge. Her arm was shifting. A sheen of glass spread over her body concurrently with her Meldskin. Her Neural-Tuner strained to equal the temporal differential between them, but it was a coldtech augment built for relatives.

Then they were moving even faster, the others becoming mere silhouettes behind a curtain of slithering radiance.

A hiss of pain escaped Avo, his accretion folding—*bending* as if a light peeling around a relativistic construct. It was hard to focus. Hard to think. He lashed at her with his Heavens. Did all he could.

Echoes shattered and died in her place. They shattered and died and she did nothing to retaliate further, regret scratched deep in the lines on her face. Then, another heart. Another track divided from the rest.

Avo felt his cognitive pressure slacken, but as his cog-feed flickered back into sight, his heard his templates screaming.

WARNING!

COG-CAP: 677%

ESTIMATING GHOSTS LOST - [24,512]

A pained hiss escaped from Avo as he slid more of Draus in place, blunting away the pain. Before him stood Zein, umbrella in hand once more, regarding him with a passive look.

“Now you surrender yourself to me.” Her words neither request nor command, but statement. “You bring all of yourself back into your current sheath. Or I peek into the minds of your comrades. I find where the rest of you are hiding regardless. And I take them from you. Your cadre. Your home. Everything that you have.”

To cement her threat, she made some of the passing streams around them flow backward. And it was like they never were.

“I can give these memories to Naeko. Give my Frame back to Highflame. Veylis.”

Zein shook her head. “No. You’re more selfish than spiteful. You will try to reveal me, perhaps. But that will do little to impede my operations. More, I see now how you might approach. The angles are many, but they can be prevented. Threaten me again and I *rewind* the annoying one.”

Chambers. She was talking about Chambers.

Avo’s mind sharpened. He reshaped his consciousness in an instant, unmaking his rising rage before it could betray him. His templates were recovering. Suggestions and plots formed and broke in his mind.

There was so much noise he never noticed the whispering from deep inside.

She doesn’t know what Tavers is doing. She doesn’t know what Tavers is doing. She doesn’t know what Tavers is doing...

And then an unexpected voice cut through the madness, the advice snarled with purpose. All for the sake of biding more time—of figuring out an escape-solution. **[Provoke the cunt to anger—but not with a threat. Make her focus on you. Strike her at her root.]** Peace was like

a maddened warg free of his cage, but at this moment, despite all his hatred for Avo, they were united by a common foe. **[Tell her exactly what I have to say. Watch the sow's face change.]**

So Avo did. "Chains... from chains. Never knew how accurate that was. Till now."

The passivity drained out of Zein's eyes. Replaced by a chilling blankness. "You speak words without knowing their meaning."

"I speak words to someone who was clearly forgotten." Zein's jaw tightened. The more cowardly of his templates screamed for him to stop. Avo kept going. "Look at yourself. Look at you now. You don't care about anything but a single goal. Willing to sacrifice everything. How human. How pathetic. How very godly of you. Imagine your victory. Imagine Jaus facing you at the end—"

"Be silent," Zein whispered.

"--You and your daughter and his broken world. Do you imagine he will embrace you? Do you intend to lie to him about your victory? About what you surrender to win it? Do you?"

The glaive was through his chest. He didn't remember it going in. He didn't remember why one of his eyes was missing, why his arms were broken, why his legs were snapped, why he was hacking up blood.

"It's the truth," Avo said, forcing the words out from a mending lung. "Truth! I have Peace's memories. I remember him! I remember Jaus. He would be ashamed of you. Ashamed!"

A crack passed through him. He was on his back again. Starring up into a writhing mess of hive of chronology, strings sliding over one another and Thousandhand standing over him. Her face was a shadow of loathing, her eyes pale dots of anger.

She doesn't know what Tavers is doing.

[Hey, Low Fucker,] template-Chambers said, spitting at Peace. **[You better not be doing this just so Thousandhand can torture Avo more.]**

[Of course I am!] Peace said, honest in his hate. **[It just so happens that pissing Thousandhand off is the best way to distract her.]**

"You know nothing of what I have done for this cause," Zein seethed.

"Your cause," Avo retorted. "This is for you. You and no one else. You. Your daughter. Your lover. They both believe in something. But you? You're just selfish. Just want your family back. Drugs to do. People to hurt. You're a child. An infant that grew skilled but never wiser. Your dream is to make existence a playground. Pleasure. Pleasure. Pleasure. Never consequence."

Calvino's manifestation crackled. *+Thousandhand, you will not--+*

And then Avo couldn't see out of his left eye. And then the world was a spiral of colors.

"Consequence?" Zein's said, casting the gore-strewn Neurodeck she tore from Avo's skull aside. "My 'consequence' is what started this in the first place. The lessons I taught my daughter drove her to bind her father into the Ladder. To fuse him with reality itself." And there was almost a sob in her voice. But weapons didn't weep and so she settled for anger instead. "Let me educate you, then, on the nature of being a Godclad. This is our culmination. I say one thing. You say another. And it cannot be both ways. What then? What then?"

She doesn't know that Tavers is aiming. She doesn't know. She forgot about the Incog. She forgot about the Incog. Please. She must forget about the Incog.

Weakness gnawed at Avo. Strain. Exhausted. Even thinking was hard. Focus. Slippery. "No."

"No?" She asked.

"No. You're not a Godclad. You're human. Powerful. But only human. So was your daughter. So was Jaus. That. That was the problem. You are all only yourselves. You all consume. Interpret. But you only live as yourself. You don't see through another's eyes. You don't live as another has lived. You are all just here for yourself."

A look of disbelief overtook her. A beat. A laugh. Humorless cackling. "And—and you are different? And you are nobler?"

"Nobler?" Avo said, almost unable to hear the word. "No. But I want to become *everybody*. And I want to learn what it really means... to become a true *god*."

Zein opened her mouth to reply but shifted into a cut. A splash of darkness smudged the rushing gold. A release of entropy tickled Avo's Frame, his Woundmother's Hell singing in accord.

A foot away from the Godslayer, Tavers fell in two, split across the middle by Zein's sweeping blade, her Hellgun still venting even as she fell.

Something plummeted in Avo's chest. The accretion shimmering just outside Taver's exo-rig began to thin.

But there was something wrong.

It was hard to focus, but he couldn't feel any... where was the flesh?

Where was the *blood*?

“Quail Tavers. I presume.” Zein said, watching the bifurcated squire plunge before her slowly. She shot Avo a scowl and shook her head. “And here I was hoping would could have talked. Shared experiences. Few have survived as long as we. But, alas, your lot was ruined by association, and ultimately, what could this old hawk learn from carrion such as you—”

A frequency blade erupted out from the top of Zein’s skull. The stab was precise. Quick. And from behind.

The Godslayer never saw it coming. Her umbrella clattered free from her grasp.

Tavers, wearing only her holocoat, had abandoned her armor. Had allowed it to be cut down in her stead as a distraction. She twisted her blade one final time, flicking it up from where it entered just under Zein’s right ear before she tossed the Godclad aside with a grunt.

“She’d tell you to get vacant after getting a kill,” Tavers said, quipping at the corpse.