

Power does not prepare one for rulership or control. This is something that one can observe in a god, but only truly learns firsthand.

To wit: consider how most understand power. Power, in the conception of the common person, is an expression of dominance. To control or inflict change on a level beyond another. Power looks like a giant stepping on an ant. Power looks like a storm smiting a ship and damning its passengers to the tides. Power is a chosen queen looking down upon her subjects.

Contaminated by this pattern of thinking, most of the gods we develop are forged thusly as entities of brutal force.

Such lends poor to the nature of our world. Such was why the ancient wars last ages and centuries. How common a thought is it to believe in a god that grants miracles to bless your spears with the ability to pierce any armor, or armor to deflect any blow? And how often do you think two such gods stood before one another on the battlefield.

Far too many times. And far too many meaningless paradoxes. Inevitably, such gods are devoured ones that mantle the architecture of existence with greater complexity. And in them, I believe a certain truth is glimpsed.

Destruction is but a minor facet of power. It takes far less understanding or energy to deform a shape or damage a structure. A single column blown free from a tower can send it crumbling down, and such takes far less effort than the process of building that tower. And then the destroyer inevitably finds themselves the tower in another metaphor; perhaps a God of War meeting their end as their people starves feebly, trapped in an eternal border threshold by a passing God of Prisons—or a God of Space.

If one wishes to reign, then they cannot merely be a force that breaks, but also one that understands how to build, how to shape, how to establish systems, and fashion a construct of sense from chaos.

It is in this belief, that I conceive the ultimate god conceivable by man: not a thing of devastation or even a master of time, but a god that harkens to the minds that govern our erstwhile kin from the void: a God of Order

-Jaus Avandaer

27-6

The Midnight Path

-[The Uplift]-

+*Just kill them.*+ Such were the first coherent thoughts cast by the now self-aware kitten.

For hours, the uplift followed the girl up and down, back and across the stupid city several times, helping the stupid whining people who just couldn't stop fighting each other. It was *ridiculous*. Absurd, even.

Instead of doing something more useful, like spending time hunting for plump juicy vermin or offering scratches, the girl was consumed by the need to watch over these stupid, stupid people.

And then there was all the whining and crying. *Wah! Wah! I was a special person who was bright from the upper city! Now I have to live with the people in the pits! Wah! Or I hate the upper city! They ate my food and their dogs ate my children! Wah! Wah!*

The kitten paused and reconsidered that last part. Okay, having one's young be eaten by those ugly dogs would be quite upsetting. But still, the kitten couldn't understand why this was the girl's problem—these people didn't even offer anything. They were just mouths to feed and time to waste.

As the kitten finished its thoughts, the girl slowed, the blinding shape hovering above their head fizzling out from sight.

"You spoke," the girl chimed, turning to face the kitten she wore like a backpack.

+Of course I spoke. Nothing else was getting your attention!+ The kitten mewed with distaste. +I tried swatting at them, urinating at them, hissing at them. And you just kept missing my message: why are we doing this? Why are we spending so much time helping this stupid, ugly, stupid, whiny, stupid, foul-smelling people.+

Eyeing the faint smoke-like wisps wrapping around their thoughts, the uplift glared at the nothingness around them and felt a curiosity wash over them. *+And I know you're there too: ugliest creature. Come out from the smoke, so I might swat you. And get rid of these terrible, terrible arms you left fused to my back.+*

The wisps coiled around the kitten and wriggled up like a rush of worms, crawling through Dice. The girl's mechanical head shifted. "You don't like the arms?"

The kitten yowled with open outrage! It was like no one was listening! *+Of course no I don't like the bloody arms. Would you want someone else to add two dog-paws on your back? Feel them bounce around as you run, ruining your balance, getting in your way, stopping you from squeezing through crevices! I mean, what was that fat idiot thinking, giving those to me. He must have been so stupid that the flying slugs eating his body must have also drunk in his raw stupidity as well!+*

Then, they recalled that they fed off some of those insects to survive, and licked their nose. *+I do suppose stupidity is rather juicy. Say, can I have a bite of one of the people to see they are as well.+*

Low, hissing laughter washed into the kitten's mind like water flooding into its ears. Oh, good, the tall ugly thing was trying to wear its mind again, making changes.

+Good,+ tall-ugly said. **+Very good. Cognition forming nicely. Thoughts no longer fragmented. Flowing.+**

+But you're still ugly and horrible. Why don't you change yourself, too? Make yourself something nicer. Like a juicy slug I can chew on.+

Tall-ugly grunted. **+Might want to adjust its attitude.+**

+How would that help? You would still be tall and ugly even if I were to change.+

-[Avo]-

[Ah, the cat's a fuck; what a surprise,] Peace chuckled.

+Not really,+ Avo muttered inwardly. But it was still a good sign. The creature had a tangible personality—still substantially more predatory than a human, and lacked the comparative emotional bandwidth, coherent.

{Ah, it felt like just yesterday when—oh, wait, it was practically just yesterday.} Only Way To Be Sure sighed in the back of Avo's mind. *{Science sure does move fast.}*

[Thaumaturgy could have done it immediately if we understood the principles,] Kae murmured. **[It's not like we can't make an animal talk.]**

Yes. But talking and true intellect were very different things. The kitten's mind held true shape now. Enough to bear a Liminal Frame, if judged by Avo. But there was no need to risk anything; best to ensure the uplift's full maturation before performing the Ensouling.

The kitten frowned out at Dice as the girl bounced it in her hands. They were halfway up a ramp connecting rungs four and three of the enclave, with Dice just finished dealing with a dispute between the light-blessed and dark-touched who were damned to live in the shadows. Avo's mem-cons reduced the inflammation of violence, but tensions still burned between the populace.

Despite their mutual animosity, all took to greeting Dice and the cadre with reverence—and a great deal of fear.

+Have been doing quite good. Managing conflicts well. People listen to you.+

Dice's triangular sensory module titled, her perception still fixed to the cat. "Their leaders are afraid of me. And they listen to their leaders. And their leaders will listen to me. So the listen to me." She placed the kitten back in her backpack and began her journey toward where Avo's mind-shaped tower rose. "People are a lot like dogs in some ways."

He grunted in slight agreement. **+Keep watching the kitten. Talk to them. Continue as you are. Should be good for its development.+**

Dice responded with a nod, her heels clicking against the ground fast—the closest she could ever come to genuine happiness. "When can he get his Soul?"

Avo was an about to respond, but the cat's thoughts came first. *+Why wait? Now! I already feel like a god; making me must be the right choice.+*

+As soon as I am sure his mind is fully stable. Don't want to risk any ego damage before intellectual development finds a baseline.+ As Avo spoke, an imprint of the cat's mind slowly began forming in his Soulscape as well.

[Well, you can never have enough pussy,] Chambers chuckled. Most of the other templates booed him.

With the kitten's development observed, Avo studied the other facilities of his enclave and considered next steps. The enclavers in his cycler farm would soon meet their New Vultunite counterparts for the first time. His focus had been stretched thin, even with ten subminds. It would be a good idea to assign a few copies of Elegant-Moon and Kae to work together on managing this place.

[A word then, if I am to be your laborer,] Elegant-Moon giggled. **[I wish for you to grant me what you are doing for the boy.]**

Avo drew in mem-data from his other submind; Eurun's reconstruction was proceeding fast. An hour longer and most of the man's mind would be reconnected once more. There were parts of him that were irreparably lost; an unavoidable consequence of suffering entropy inflicted ego damage.

Interestingly, Avo found that he could sense what was frayed from Rend. This awareness was not a boon provided to him by his Definements, but a thing related to his current ontological architecture. As the Overheaven of Conceptualization, he bore trauma and entropy both in his wards, and thus did they resonate with the worst of Eurun's wounds. The major moments of his life formed a compass to his overarching character, and between the Definements of Hysteria and Delusion, substance began to fill a mended mold.

+Of course,+ Avo replied, thinking if he had been able to mend the Gatekeeper if Veylis wasn't dwelling inside it; about what it would take to restore Jaus if the time came. *When the time came.*

[The horizon is to be considered by steps instead of thoughts,] Elegant-Moon cooed. **[Do not worry about the greater tasks. Find your limits now. Solve them. That will give you insight into your uncertainty.]**

Her words rang true. But he was also aware of another angle she was playing. **+Not going to be giving your copies Frames. Don't have enough resources yet.+**

[Ah. You sadden me; I had to try.]

[Also! Avo!] Kae's template chimed. **[We should consider moving the dragon farms to a separate location in the Sunderwilds. With Essus.]** Her suggestion made Avo's mind suddenly still. Yes, that was a good idea. With all the choiceless gathered together, and under Essus as a guide, they would develop particular nuances in their culture. Clear and stable zeitgeists.

+Not sure what we would do without you.+

Her template scoffed with indignation. **[Just get me out of her clutches.]**

+Will do all I can.+

The rest of the enclave seemed stable. Beside the lingering tensions, the culture was stable, if shocked and stunned. They had been hit by calamity after calamity in the near-term, and numbness ruled their thoughts. If only this was the end. Soon, he would make them an offer for them to consider: to go found a new place of Peace with Essus, or to see what world they can forge in a land of absolute freedom enforced by ultimate consequence.

Veylis or the Infacer were coming. They would destroy this place if only to inconvenience Avo, and he possessed little in the way of direct deterrence beyond Naeko. But it was folly matching force with force to ward off the High Seraph anyway. Asymmetry and subterfuge had seen him survive thus far; they guide him through the darkness ahead as well.

Channeling his perception across the various installations he built in the Sunderwilds, he regarded his prisoners for the trial, the growing flood of refugees the various Chamberes were directing through Draus' reflection, and the hanger that stored their voidship—undergoing software updates and some “special modifications.”

{Do NOT tell Kant,} Only whispered.

Avo sighed. Perhaps the best thing for him to do right now were to make copies of himself to spread across the city. The cadre was useful, but he was a glowing target. And when last he checked his brothers were still—

He paused. Avo synchronized with all his other streams of consciousness and frowned. There was a suspicious absence of ghouls across New Vultun. Two of his subminds briefly broke from creating more copies of the cadre to sweep the Warrens. Before, ghouls were like oil gliding between the cracks of the city, festering in the darkness of the gutters.

There were still pockets of them. Mostly held in cages by organizations; stored in labs and used to train new Syndicate recruits. But a critical mass was missing, and as he delved into various minds to find a trace, he found them equally ignorant, and unnaturally unaware of the sudden diminishment of Nolothe's failed monsters.

[Emotion,] Peace breathed. [Fucker's up to something. Probably been up to something since you gave the ghouls contagious cancer. Cold cunt. Did you even hesitate doing that to your own kind.]

+No. Just a mistake to be rectified. No culture. No future. No choice.+

He cast what he noticed to the rest of his cadre, a groan came from the original Chambers while suspicion rose in Draus.

+Fuck's he doing now?+

+Uncertain. Be ready.+

+Great,+ Marlowe sighed. +So are we expecting a part to the Uprising.+

+No. Uprising was incompetent. Unsuccessful. Emotion has changed. Is doing things I can't predict. Missing points of understanding. Need to be wary. Going to be making more changes. Insulate from potential counterattack. Already have Green River shadowing the Greatlings. Know Vator to be subverted.+

+Fuck. 'Course Emotion picked the godsdamned weird one.+ Draus sighed.

Strangely, Cas went cold. *+Vator Greatling... A few of my cells went missing because of him. Our young "consang" here's been a fucking monster long before your Famines ever touched him.+*

Of that, Avo was not surprised. But thinking back to the boy's attention to artistry, the way his mind drifted and accelerated as he took the world in, Avo wondered if there was something *different* about him to begin with. Something distant from humanity, but analogous.

Like a ghoul.

Whatever the case, this was just another problem for him to deal with. The building apprehension in his mood only broke when one of his subminds secured White-Rab—earning a collective cheer from his cadre as his progenitor cast in for the first time in days.

Things were constantly changing. He was not the only one arraying his forces, and worse, there was a risk he could be suppressed by the Famines in the Nether would overwhelmed by the Guilds in ways material or thaumaturgical.

He needed to continue building his advantages and keep his foes confused. If there was one thing he could take from Emotion, it was ignorance. Ignorance preserved, and the unexpected could be—

The *unexpected*.

Slowly, a thought sparkled in his mind, and he turned his perception up. Up through the dome of the enclave. Up past the ruptures lining reality. Until a sequence of his being was stretching to the threshold where the air thinned and the atmosphere ceased. Beyond that point was the void.

This was where the last remnants of hold humanity hid, huddled on their grand voidships, living lives of luxury and promise the terrestrials couldn't even dream. This was also where he was going to declare himself a polity—the EGIs thought he was going to use Threshold, but the virtual was not enough to convey his intent.

And as he considered his present situation, he hadn't been considering all his options either. Somewhere inside his Soulscape, the Heart of Noloth wriggled, and theoretical patterns tied to its future evolution blossomed in his consciousness. He wanted Kae to help him make a Heaven of the Void before her capture. His intent remained unchanged; more, it was amplified.

He could further the concept, make it a truly potent and esoteric Heaven, and wield it in ways no Guild would soon counter. Turning his gaze downward, he looked upon the enclave again, and saw how small it was in the grand scheme of things. Just a speck on the land. Just a dot amidst frayed seams resembling eldritch tendrils across the shape of reality.

How hard would it be for him to store an enclave in his mind? How many thaums would it cost?

[It could theoretically be one now, but the Rend cost and the thaumic requirements... mind and matter are far apart, Avo.] Kae strained her mind as she thought of potential canons. **[It is a good thought—]**

+How efficient would it be for me to bring the void down to the planet. Or hide part of the planet in the void instead?+

Kae's mind went entirely still at that. *+I...+ A bit of embarrassment overcame her. +I wouldn't know where to begin. The void is not my disciple of focus.+*

+It's fine. We can learn together.+ With his internal dialogue finished, Avo called upon Calvino privately. ***+Calvino. Have a favor to ask...+***