

Someday, Samir. Someday, you will tell me, "No." And when that day comes, I will know that you are finally well, and that will make me smile.

-Jaus Avandaer

27-10
Regrets

Avo crossed back into Scale on the wavelengths of a thought. From Kare's mind, he molded himself, assuming Kassamon's form once more to go unnoticed. Solidifying in existence, his reappearance made the girl jolt momentarily, only becoming aware of his presence when his Overheaven caressed her Frame.

Her shock was short-lived, for exhaustion dominated her mind, and her nerves were long spent over these arduous days. "Oh, Avo, it's you."

"I've come to see the Chief Paladin," he said, studying her.

The stuttering flow of her thoughtstuff called out to him, and he felt the stress building in her mind. Hysteria revealed many things to him, conversations that spiraled into arguments between her and her uncle. But more than that, a greater pressure loomed.

The trial. The trial of the century; the trial where Highflame and Ori-Thaum were to be judged side by side; where Kare was meant to be sacrificed on the altar of the Paths by Zein, a small change to seed a desired future.

There, in that tessellated conference room lit by a single locus hovering over a table of black marble, there were but the two of them.

And she was scared.

"I can't believe it's actually happening," Kare said. "The trial, I mean. There were so many things happening—there so many things still... I knew this was coming, but I just couldn't believe... and I didn't think I would be so involved."

She sighed. He understood. He understood in was she would never know. ***"The future is always distant. Then it's the present. Then it's too late. All three times are absolutes of time. Absolutely relative to us. Such is why we expect tomorrow. Such is why we languish today."***

She looked at him and nodded. "Do you think it's too late? For there to be peace instead of war? For there to be another path for us? Another way?"

Avo considered his response. ***“It’s too late to go back. But the future, the path ahead, that cannot be too late, it is beyond us, absolute. I cannot make any promises to you. I don’t know what is to come. I don’t know if we will even win. But we are here. We can struggle. We can be and make our deeds true. There is a chance. There is a moment. And for a while. For these coming days. You. Me. Naeko. The Paladins. Everyone. We can make justice manifest once more.”***

She swallowed and nodded, trying to find her own words of worth.

Avo let out a chiding breath. ***“Get some rest. Or resurrect. Anxiety is better felt with a clear mind. It will guide you. Don’t give it thoughts. Don’t associate anything with the feeling. Feel it. Use it. Face what follows.”***

The young Paladin laid her face down against the table and offered a soft smile. “For someone so shaped like a living nightmare, you are very good at giving encouragement.”

“The wolf must know the lamb. The nightmare must know the peace. How else are traumas supposed to be?”

With the conclusion of their conversation, he sought Naeko and ventured into the byzantine structure of Scale once more. The walls unfurled and shifted before him, blocks sliding out of place in a welcome restructuring. Hallways formed, and the ground beneath his feet carried him upward in a cascade of force. From the eightieth floor he shot high to the hundredth, emerging from the ground into a wide open space filled with private offices and public work stations.

Windows of adjusted translucence cast the entire level in dappled ambiance. Certain offices were filled by other Paladins, their own minds oscillating, sequences flashing bright as their ghost connected them to loci, their minds spoke to family, associates, information, and masters. Hysteria stole knowledge from them, offering him insight into which were informing the Guilds on Naeko’s supposed actions. Doubtless they thought they were still providing a service to their former owners—perhaps they thought of themselves as a color first. Regardless, Avo pierced them with his Splinters.

Naeko would not be pleased, but he would offer the traitors as a gift of consolation after his admission of this transgression. For now, he siphoned away all their useful knowledge and twisted what they knew at the source. Falsehoods trickled over to their Guilder masters, and the traitor Paladins spoke lies they didn’t even know they were weaving.

This state of affairs would not last. Before the trial arrived, Avo would see this place cleansed and the backdoors turned to his advantage. The Paladins were once a formidable force. Through his support, they could be once more. The only issue was the Gatekeeper—that single point of subversion he could not overcome. By an indelible scar of time, and a masterstroke of

control he failed to perceive, the Heaven of Truth belonged to Veylis. Always had. And destroying it would see the Hungers unleashed, and the city unbalanced even further. It was simply a fulcrum that exerted too many levers.

But he could use it still. She would be watching him through it. And he would give her a show, give her something that dulled her expectations, and feed her Alsyim when the time came.

By assumed defeat, he would lose the Chronicler to the High Seraph, and from there, his following plans would unfold.

Naeko's office was an oblong structure built on a risen platform at the very center of the floor. Through transparent glass, Avo saw a dozen plush toys standing at attention. They were no larger than his hand, and most of them had tags still attached to them. A certain few looked stitched back together, and some had burn marks that told tale of flames survived.

Most of them were bioforms of various varieties. Some were of Heaven and golems, though reduced to somewhat cherubic facsimiles of themselves.

[The hell is this,] Draus' template muttered. [Why does he have all this shit?]

Avo had a guess. **+Likely not his.+**

Stepping through the open door, Avo caught sight of a desk, of opal and violet. It was wide with twelve different holo-screens, while a sprawl of notebooks and magnets were planted along the metallic rims of the table. A long bookshelf occupied the right side of the office, and it offered tomes such as *Love in Passing: A Tragedy of Alfyreia and the Noonsinger*. Memories taken from templates told him this was a sorrowful tale of love between a changing god and a priestess they truly loved. Or so the retrohistorians claimed, anyway.

What is agreed upon was the ending. She offered herself as sacrifice to keep her god the same. They accepted. And love did nothing.

"Foolishness," the Woundmother scoffed. **"What mass does a partling's life amount to? What material? As well as hope a droplet of rain could smite a rising tower."**

Other tales such as *Book of the Nine Kills* by Zein O'yaje—*Thousandhand*—were also there. Overall, an eclectic collection, and something Avo doubted the current Chief Paladin was interested in. Atop the shelf, however, were miniature figures of Naeko himself, a palm holding him aloft while he had his arms folded, and Zein next to him, her glaive held high, her face coiled as a sneer.

Avo wondered what it was like to be born during a time when all the great figures were heroes, saviors, conquerors victorious to a city rising in the aftermath of a grand calamity. Here, though, Naeko looked through the glass and took in the far horizon of Scale—that barren expanse of

nothing protecting him. Exiling him. His mind flowed slow, and a weight of melancholy was upon him.

For a moment he didn't speak. The ceiling above glittered, and Avo found himself taking in a twin layered art piece. One was a galaxy—the same galaxy the Gatekeeper embodied—and the other was a map New Vultun's many districts.

"She really gave a shit, you know that?"

Avo knew exactly who Naeko was talking about. ***"Osjane. Yes. Can tell. And you cared for her. Kept her office the same."***

"Her office," Naeko breathed. The man turned, and he looked no less burdened than Kare. "Yeah. I guess it still is. It should've still been." He fell silent for a beat and spoke again. "I'm glad she's dead."

Avo grunted.

The Chief Paladin continued. "I'm glad she didn't get to see what her brother became; I'm glad she didn't see what happened to the city she loved, what Veylis and the Guilds did to it. What I let happen. She had the biggest heart. I didn't think it was possible for someone to be a pacifist, but..."

He shook, as if sobering. "But that's what got her killed, anyway. Murdered by that idiot bastard brother of hers."

Conjured memories of Osjon Thousand gave Avo a reference. That colossal bald cherub was the avatar of Naeko's hate, and a common face in Maru's nightmares. Avo's encounter with the High Seraph's speaker was only brief, but they left him feeling more than slightly unnerved.

"Drop the guise," Naeko said, gesturing in Avo's direction. He was talking about the other Paladins. "Let them see. Let them choke. They'll know soon enough anyway."

"Would rather wait. They're attentions are occupied. Paladins Serrak and Horkildyr are talking to Ashthron and Stormtree right now. Their thoughts are the loudest."

Naeko frowned. "Yeah, real rat's nest of traito—*motherfucker*, didn't you say you wouldn't jack my Paladins without speaking to me."

Avo grinned. "Yes. But they're not *your* Paladins. Not really. And I'm asking you right now."

The Chief Paladin's mouth opened and closed several times before he repeated a choice word. "*Motherfucker.*"

Ah, but why was it so fun to tease the man.

“Alright,” Naeko said, rubbing his face. “Come on.” He walked past his desk as portion of the ceiling opened in the level outside, and a platform extended from the ground just outside Naeko’s office door. From a right corner office, Paladin Serrak—a heavily chromed man of Kosgan ancestry—saluted Naeko. The Chief Paladin flicked at the fool and splattered him against the ground. A death anchor formed immediately thereafter.

“We’re goign to the summit now?” Avo said, trying to keep the amusement out of his voice as he felt another rush of force sweep through Scale. His Splinter within Horkildyr vanished in a haze of vapor and gore. Naeko was a man who could remain in bliss when there was something he didn’t know, or didn’t see.

Once the ugliness came to light, however...

“Yeah,” Naeko said, sighing. “It’s where most the heavyweights will be gathering for this godsdamned trial. It’s where I last...” A flash of Jaus Avandaer entered the Chief Paladin’s mind. In Naeko’s recollections, Jaus was ever-radiant, his hair like spun gold, his features calm but strong, and his eyes ever-piercing.

Avo glimpsed the effect Jaus had on people. Even gone from this word, the visage of his near-divinity still remained. And that was what Jaus was—near divine. Where gods demanded fealty and devotion through awesome power, Jaus ruled another by capturing their hearts through words and actions. Avo knew more than most how powerful mastering another’s want was. He was learning the intricacies of such a power even now, with Chambers, with Tavers, with the gods, and Essus, and more.

A resonance passed through the Overheaven. He realized what Naeko wanted from him; this was to be a measurement. To see if Avo was peer to Jaus in any way. They both cast their shadows over the Chief Paladin.

ANd as said, when discomfort was revealed, he was not one to endure.

Ascending to the summit of scale, Avo found himself in a place he could only describe as cavernous. The roof loomed over him like a nest made of tessellated lattices, and from them hung enormous gems that lit the polished crystal floor with a dim ambiance. The space was wide enough to hold balls or galas, and likely did at the time, judging from all the wraps, clothes, and blankets thrown over tables and chairs. There were no walls here, only railings on the far side of the room, obscured by translucent curtains.

“Not much privacy for backroom dealmaking,” Avo stated.

“That’s cause there isn’t supposed to be any ‘backroom dealmaking,’” Naeko explained. Their footsteps were the only noise that sounded in this place, and three steps into their stride, Avo finally shed the disguise of Kassamon—and his ephemeral form entirely.

The crown of Scale was a summit in more ways than one. This ultimate precipice of New Vultun was a juncture toward which countless patterns crossed. Looking beyond the tip atop this mountain, he saw eight lightrails in motion, circulating outward toward individual arks obscured by mist and distance.

Thaumaturgic cascades swept over the shattering waves while the mountain’s blocks shifted and cycled like cells dying and cells being born. All roads led out from Scale; all roads led to Scale. Avo knew the campaign Highflame and the former administration of Stormtree waged against this place, but only with perspective did the value of such a territory sink in.

More than just a nigh-impregnable fortress, it was also flanking every other major throne of power held by the Guilds. Scale was the counterweight. Scale was the lodestone. Scale was the loaded gun next door.

And so, Scale had to be taken.

Or crippled.

Naeko came to a stop at the edge of a terrace overlooking the unnatural waves sweeping across the demiplane. He drew in a crisp breath and closed his eyes. A distant recollection was all that remained in the space of his thoughts.

Someday, Samir. Someday, you will tell me, “No.” And when that day comes, I will know that you are finally well, and that will make me smile.

Jaus sounded better when he wasn’t screaming. He was not the sort of man that could bear pain well. Such was how it seemed to Avo, anyway. The Chief Paladin ruminated on the moment for a few moments longer, and Avo gave the time that he needed.

When Naeko opened his eyes again, he turned to face the hovering form of Avo’s manifested Overheaven. “Did you hear those thoughts too?”

“Was nothing else in your mind.”

The Chief Paladin nodded. “Hell of a disappointment I turned out to be, huh?”

“You may judge yourself this way. Some others. But not to me.”

And then suddenly Jaus was gone, and all Naeko could think of was Zein. Zein, his master, standing over his beaten body, complimenting him as he tried to remain conscious. Zein, his

master, who fed him soup and told him tales of all the people and beings she killed as he suffered from a fever, promising him that the sickness in him would be easy to slay. Zein, who looked so proud of him when he claimed the Peace-Breaker.

Zein. The only one he ever thought of as a mother. And the only mother he ever wanted still.

Zein. Who abandoned him.

“She isn’t a person,” Avo said, speaking directly to Naeko’s thoughts. ***“She’s more like me. Or what I was. She was... almost closer to a god. Elemental. Consumed by concepts. You are not. You rageful. And hurt. You sate yourself on the violence. Cruelty even. But it’s nto enough for you. You seek more. You want more.”***

“I wish I didn’t.”

“Many wish they were another,” Avo agreed. ***“Many wish to be different. But the difference your mind desires is not the difference that will set you free. And you are afraid of being set free. How can a dog that despises itself be its own master.”***

Naeko’s lips curled, and he fled the topic. As expected. “You sure Veylis will take your bait? Dropping Alysium in her lap through a failed run is suspicious. Especially since it’s happening with the trial.”

“The operation will ‘fail’ beautifully. In part because I will make a genuine attempt.”

“Yeah. Fine. You know you’re asking for a hell of a lot when you requested Zein’s prison, right?”

“But you will give her to me,” Avo said, expecting Naeko’s accord.

However, what the Chief Paladin said went further than he could ever have expected: “Give her? Fuck that. I’m not giving my master to anyone. But she’s got a lot to answer for, and so does Veylis. I’m not giving you Zein, I’m coming with you. I’m about done with all this bullshit—all these Guilds, and the Ladder, and the future—tired of it. Tired of it all.”

Avo hesitated, finding himself unsure what Naeko was about to say. ***“So. What is your wish?”***

“My wish?” Naeko chuckled. “I don’t just want to help you with this run. I don’t just want to see you get Agnos Kusanade back. I’m coming with you. You think you have an angle of Veylis and the Infacer? Alright. Alright, I’ll believe you. So, let’s go all in.”

“All in,” Avo echoed.

“Everyone keeps telling me to shed my leash? Fine. I’ll do it. I’ll do it. And I’ll do what I should have years ago. I should have...” He steeled himself. “Seen this done when Veylis came back after what she did. Definitely after what she did to here. My home. My Paladins.”

Uncertainty gnawed at Avo, but the problem standing before him was now twofold: it would have hard to enact the operation against Veylis with Naeko and Paladin support; and who in this city could truly stop the Chief Paladin without immense cost. **“You still love her. This will shatter you.”**

Naeko didn’t deny it. “Yeah. But I’m already all kinds of broke, so.” He shrugged. “I guess I’m tired most about waiting. Waiting for the end to come. Waiting for someone to win, for everything to just fix itself.” He bit his lip. “I’m not like you or Jaus or Veylis. I don’t know why people do the things they do. I don’t know how else to be. But I think I’m finally out of cowardice.”

“It is not cowardice that stopped you, Naeko,” Avo said, lowering his Soul to face the man. **“It is pain. It is madness. It is survival. You are close. I can feel the cracks in your mind. Held together by will. Protected by your Heaven. You don’t want to shatter.”**

“And I might?” Naeko asked, looking for answer.

“Yes. But I am here. I will not let you come apart.”

“No,” Naeko said, shaking his head. “No, you will. Before I agree to doing any of this with you, I want you to promise me something: If I die or stop being myself... Just let me rest. Just let me rest. I’m tired. I want there to be an end. One way or another.”

Templates simulated lines of dialogue, paths to turn Naeko from the edge. But disquieting as the request, Avo knew it wasn’t his choice to make. **“I will endeavor to make whatever you choose the truth, Naeko.”**

Something loosened inside the man. “You know what? You’re not Jaus. There’s no one like Jaus. But you’re still just too *damned* close.”

“Perhaps insight is the key that ascends one to being a peer of the divine.”

“Perhaps. So. Let’s go through this mad desperate run of yours one more time. See if I can talk myself out of this.”