

There is no forever. For all things relative to people and gods, there is a beginning to the play, a middle, a progression, and an ending for all to come to a final, wondrous halt. Death, in other words. A final death. Cessation.

So many fear it. But, to me, it is something to earn. A crescendo to your life to make existence a masterpiece.

Have I ever told you how I obtained the seven? I didn't? Well, I think I won't. I think it will remain a mystery, be it upgraded by a genius Agnos now unfortunately passed, or collected when I was wandering the Sunderwilds beyond New Vultun's magnificent walls.

But know this. My Heaven is about song. It is about existence itself. And it sings to me. It sings. It tells me things. Things that only existence should know. Things that I don't even understand.

For though I am the Stormsparrow, your most esteemed mistress and elder sister in matters of violence and entertainment, I am but a player and not the stage.

-Ying Yang Wei, the Stormsparrow

28-9

Behold Your Savior (II)

The feeling of apprehension seeped forth from every template within Avo, and for once, he found his core self aligned with them. The Stormsparrow was unnatural, uncanny, and she looked at him with such impossible intensity that even he felt unnerved. And then there was that faint melody playing in the backdrop. A chorus of voices singing together, but composed by various expressions captured across reality — they were the crashing of waves, the whistling of wind, the explosion of thunder and artillery, and the crackling of fire.

As Avo tried to glimpse the Stormsparrow's ontology, he found her at Heavens a complex weave. One tower stood above nine others, but all their Domains and Canons coiled around each other like a living symphony. And then they overheard the lyrics:

***Oh, beast turned god of conscious hunger,
before you stands the mother, the daughter.
The world's womb awaits, this age ushering the end,
and what follows will be decided by words, truth, violence, and Rend***

An existential chill passed into Avo as he regarded the Stormsparrow. **"What are you?"** he asked, his fascination exceeding his fear.

A body shifted beside him. Naeko now stared upon Avo, his mouth slightly agape. "Godsdamn, she does that to you too, huh?" The Chief Paladin sneered at the Stormsparrow. "Well. I think congratulations are in order."

"Not bothered by her," Avo said, slightly offended. **"Just want to understand her."**

The Stormsparrow lifted all her hands in a casual shrug. "But that is not a question for me. I am merely a dancer on the stage, just like you. A performer. The spotlight upon us is greater, but the song and the chorus," she looked up, "that is for the totality of existence to speak, and we are not the totality."

At the back of Avo's mind, Kae's template tried to distinguish each of her patterns from another. **[Perhaps... perhaps if an Agnos designed them to be...if there was a signal...]** she paused. **[We will need to look into her Frame to fully understand this. There is too much at a glimpse.]**

+I understand,+ Avo responded. **+Keep watching.+**

Additional knowledge circulated through his being as he pulled from his gestalt all he knew about the Stormsparrow. Even her history was shrouded in mystery. Some claimed that she walked the expanse of the Sunderwilds, traveling on foot through the most horrible places imaginable, fording even the Shattered Sea to rise on the ruined shores of Noloth.

Others think she encountered Fallen Heavens in the depths of the entropy-stained chaos, and took their ruined husks for her own. Others said she was just another refugee, but one with an impossible skill in combat. So impossible that the smugglers who took her were found dead, and the syndicate that bought her eradicated the day thereafter.

Then there was the theory that she was a plant, that the No-Dragons had seeded her years in advance to ensure that they had a card to play that operated in their interests but wasn't directly connected to them.

This theory likely held little weight as Green River squirmed in her seat, doing her best to remain unnoticed by the Stormsparrow. Indeed, from Green River's memories, the Stormsparrow held their love for her parent Guild nor clade-kin. All No-Dragons remembered the *Acts of Woe*, three months of brutal slaughter and sacking they reaped as they tried to force the Stormsparrow to accept their demands. It was part of the reason why the No-Dragons were so disrupted in the Third Guild War.

A single Goldclad, no matter how powerful, could not face the might of a guild, but a single Fallwalker in the right places at the right time when the Guilds were at war could be the sole determining factor of balance in power. Such was the lesson the Stormsparrow taught to those who sought to chain her; her loyalty and her agency belonged to herself and herself alone.

Most disconcertingly were Calvino's words thereafter. The EGI had been watching, listening, and the other minds were also compiling knowledge as well. A thread of static slipped across the expanse of spaces, and Avo heard the mind whisper to him. *{We have almost nothing on her either. Be careful with this one, Avo. You stand in the presence of another wild card.}*

"Wildcard," Stormsparrow said, echoing Calvino's words.

[The fuck,] Corner muttered. **[How'd she hear that.]**

Avo wanted to know as well. He sensed no intrusion across another. Unless she held power over consciousness that dwarfed even his.

"Do not be surprised. Reality told me," the Stormsparrow interrupted, pointing up at nothing in particular. Another one of her hands also gestured downward. "As above, so below. As within, so without." Her words and coordinated movements seemed to have some kind of symbolic implication, but Avo wasn't sure what. "Again, dear friend, it is not I who knows. I just hear the script, and try to sing the words given unto me by the *Chorus of Eternity*."

And with her words, Alysım spoke, his voice reverberating across time and demiplanes.
+*Chorus of Eternity? That is... I remember that... it is a Heaven from the million-year ancient empire of Vatrahal. Long ancestor those you call Sanctians... It was supposed to be lost... Displaced after the first Calamity of Time. The only records my people compiled said it was a Heaven of Epics, made to capture the current state of the world in auguries turned to melodies.*+

It seemed, then, that the theory of the Stormsparrow walking the Sunderwilds had a lot more credence than all the others.

In a sudden motion, the Stormsparrow stretched her human limbs out and sauntered over to Uhtred and Vator Greatling. Slowly, she nudged herself between them, squeezing in as both father and son shot her uncertain looks. Slowly, more of her arms sneaked out, wrapping around both men as she shook them slightly. "Oh, poor unfortunate father. I heard your song a month ago. Your theme was strong then, and you could have been under the spotlight. But now that time has passed, and so your role turns to supporting another as they ascend to the apex of the stage."

Thereafter, her rightmost head spoke to Vator. "Child bred of the higher womb, are you ready to see what the future holds? The future awaits you as pawn and player both. Your song is loud, getting louder and discordant." The Stormsparrow interrupted herself to pinch Vator's cheek. "But only time will tell when noise comes of your final crescendo."

Retracting her arms, she folded her legs and regarded Osjon, "Ah, and there is the *wretch* of our tell. My regards to the High Seraph. Tell her I intend to partake in all the glories of this great war to come. Tell her she will not be able to keep me distracted as she did last time. I'm wise to her ways now. Her, and that strange little ghost that keeps her company so."

And for once, Osjon's face was not one of serenity, but genuine wariness. "Your well-wishes are conveyed."

All three heads of the Stormsparrow laughed in unison. "Oh, but my wishes are not well. But I'm sure your master knows this. But that's enough to you, you love-struck little bitch. I'm surprised you even came here, bold of you to think that *he* will not kill you when she gets the chance." She made a casual gesture towards Naeko. "You must know, Osjon, that Veylis, she will never

love you. For what queen could love a bitch? Not after she has known the true pleasure of possessing an actual war hound. Perhaps your dead will serve to kindle her urges."

The pitch of the metaphysical symphony grew shrill, shrieking voices assailed Avo mind. Then, they went silent. As if they never were to begin with. A coldness spilled into the room, and vapors began to bloom out from Naeko.

"Sparrow," the Chief Paladin said. His voice was calm, but it was calm like a mountain facing a storm. Naeko, Avo, and the Stormsparrow studied each other. The Fallwalker waved them off.

"You should prepare yourself," she said, speaking to Avo. "It will soon come time for you to steal the climax of the Gatekeeper. That is your plan, is it not? To make your grand unveiling at this trial, and to force a new paradigm upon the city."

With each revelation she spat, Avo's hunger for her Heavens grew greater. **"You know much,"** Avo told her. **"Yet only now do you reveal yourself."**

The Stormsparrow merely juggled. "I know nothing. I remain as ignorant now as I was a month ago. But the world, it has brought me here. The rhythm, the pace, the acts, it comes together. We are fated to collide here, now. Maybe as allies, maybe as enemies. Regardless, we now share a stage. I cede the moment to you. Show me your song, stranger, and then I will show you mine."

"I'm not sure if you are going to like what you hear," Avo said as he let a single scream leak out from his mind. Jaus' voice drifted over to the Stormsparrow, and the amusement painted her features suddenly drained. **"You say you don't know. Might not want to know."**

"We might not want many things," the Stormsparrow replied, nodding. "If that is what hides in your mind, and if the screamer is who I assume... It is a horrible thing, but be a part of a tragedy. But alas, we all have our roles to play. The performer is not a performer because they like their lyrics. Those are rewritten. They simply need to make do with the part. Our scripts are far more interpretive than the others, but even so, we are not the stage. Strange one, we are not the stage."

The words evoked a sense of curiosity in Avo, and he felt his mind percolate across all those he touched in this chord. Even now, there were No-Dragons striking bargains with those of Sanctus and Ori-Thaum. Tentative treaties of neutrality to preserve essential districts should war break out. In another locus, hidden by willing subterfuge, members of Highflame struck bargains with Bloodthanes and Fatalists alike — the conspiracy one of shared desperate to hit the death quotas they needed to collect for their respective Sovereigns.

There were other whispers as well. Some plots prepared to ensure the prosperity of their Guild, while others were mere traitorous ploys for individual interest. All had a song, and none of them were aligned. Avo could vaguely see where the Stormsparrow was coming from, and how such a Heaven might be conceived. But that also meant her canons might possess some of the most complex mythologies anyone has ever conceived.

A realization that Elder Mwaba D'Rongo had finished with her recounting and Abrel's was about to begin. Soon, the Guilders would offer forth their evidence, feed the Gatekeeper truth and untruth alike in an attempt to tip the scales in their favor.

None of them would be prepared for Draus or Kae to reveal themselves. None of them would be prepared Avo's arrival thereafter. None of them would be prepared to learn of Jaus' final fate, certified by the adjudicator of truth itself.

And now another variable was with them. White-Rab told Avo about the Stormsparrow's coming, but even with his progenitor's warning, the eccentricity of the Great Game's oddest participant was something to experience.

"Should prepare yourselves," Avo said, speaking to Draus and Kae. This part was theater as well. They only were only semi-present. Just like he was. By means of his gestalt, they were and weren't at the same time. Small blessing that the Stormsparrow seemed ignorant of this fact.

[She's not the only one who can have a truly esoteric Heaven,] Kae boasted.

+Let's see how long we can keep our advantage,+ Avo replied. Something told him his Strix Upon the Empty will be needing some updates very soon.

As the "Regular" and "Kae" rose to depart the podium, they triggered holocoats and activated Incogs. A second later, both Vator and Uthred blinked, struggling to recall what just slipped their minds.

"Why?" Vator asked. His eyes glinted with inscrutable curiosity.

"Why what, young one?" the Stormsparrow replied.

"Why do you dance to the world? Why do you dance to the tune of fate?"

"Fate is a word," the Stormsparrow whispered. "Fate is intention and expression imposed upon a concept. Fate is a Heaven. Fate is a canon. And fate calls to me now. As fate called me elsewhere before. I am a dancer, dead one. I follow the loudness of the music. But you are worse. *Were*. For all your life, you lived only by the chains of your culture. Your breeding. Do not seek to comprehend me, for I know I cannot comprehend you."

Vator blinked, and a brightening expression came over him. "And... that is enough? Just *spontaneity*? No greater meaning?"

"I was also personally invited," the Stormsparrow said. "My thanks to you, Rabbit. Know that the Dowager you helped me kill found her ending quite glorious."

She was looking at Avo again, a smirk building, as if she was anticipating a potential reply.

+Yeah,+ White-Rab sighed. +*She's a bit like that. Really. Don't confuse her insight for prophecy or heightened awareness. She really, really doesn't know what's going beyond the present. You'll see.*+

+Hope you're right,+ Avo answered. **+Because I don't think another Zein-like—**+ He paused as another cascade of thoughts passed through him. Quickly, he used his **Precognition** and ran a set of simulations, setting certain parameters involving himself, Naeko, the Stormsparrow, Veylis, and *Zein*.

Simulating...

Simulations Completed

Yes. Yes, this might just do.

Rend Capacity - 61%

Eyeing the Stormsparrow briefly, the ghoul matched her grin with barred fangs and chuckled under his breath. ***"So. Do you know anything about Zein Thousandhand."***

"Quite. She never says long enough for us to complete our duet. A shame. I spent years wondering who the mysterious traveler was, only to discover that she was in Paladin custody. You have earned my grudge, Chief Paladin." The Stormsparrow wagged a finger at Naeko.

"Would you like to meet her again?" Avo asked.

Several heads suddenly snapped to Avo. A shared look of alarm spread over both Osjon and Naeko.

A guffaw broke free of the Stormsparrow. She smacked her lap as a squealing horn built and built. "Well. I am already here, at your service. What is your request."

"Will talk about this away from prying minds," Avo said, his gaze taunting Osjon. No longer did the Speaker look so placid. In fact, his halo was spinning quite a bit faster than before. As both Fallwalker and Overheaven regarded Veylis' servant, they broke into growing laughter at the same time as Naeko let out a disbelieving breath.

"Aw, fuck. You two did *not* just become consangs."