

I didn't expect to be the last one standing.

Out of everyone else.

That was the weapon.

And somehow...

I just keep making it out alive.

-Jelene Draus, User of the Stillborn

27-13

The Last Days of the False Peace (II)

GHOSTS - [822,731,124]

LIMINAL FRAME (VI) - 844,200 THAUM/c

UPDATING INFECTION...

INFECTION - [4.09%]

Emptiness was not nothingness.

Emptiness was space.

Emptiness was relative.

Emptiness was a canvas.

Emptiness was coldness.

Emptiness was isolation.

And emptiness would be salvation.

Most heavens possessed by Avo were already pre-made—harvested from golems or other Godclads. Their lore and mythology were shaped by the agnostic, and long determined by history and culture. Their domains, thus, were concepts known to man like Blood and all its symbology, Air, defined by freedom and escape, Signals, reimagined as a bastardization of lost technology.

But the Heart of the Void was to be something else. It would be a Heaven forged by a god. A Heaven forged for purpose above mythology, and the faith that fueled it would be in worship of practicality and functionality. Where once this core of roiling dark was the Heart of Noloth, shaped to protect unworthy masters in a war they could not win, now, it would be cultured to

protect the weak, the consume the strong, and mantle the hollow expanse that once cradled all of human existence.

There in the void, Avo left a part of him alongside the Manta. He, and a few hundred iterations of Kae drifted, watching the tapestry act and react in the void, studying its patterns.

[Peace,] one of the Kae-templates said. **[Perhaps that is Domain we can make. It is known to Naeko, after all.]**

[No, no,] another Kae sighed. **[Peace is too easy to compromise. I am sure the High Seraph has a plan for that. Targeted Rendbombs! Paradoxes using previous instances in history. We are trying to create something truly and completely novel! Something that the Guilds cannot easily counter the time they are granted.]**

As his inner Agnosi theorized, Avo watched all ten thousand kilometers of the planetary ring shift along the curve of Idheim. It splashed through the reaching swaths of the Sunderwilder, sinking in and out of entropy with each of its rotations. However the Guilds made it was designed to last, and now Draus was lining its interior with glass, while the Manta pumped air into a secured section of its insides.

Relative to the void, the unfinished ring was a refugee. A place to stay for the enclavers and refugees that wished to follow Avo over Essus. But there was also something else, a relative pull between Idheim and the structure that encased it — gravity born from all things with mass.

[Mass?] Kae said.

[It's been done. Gravity, perhaps.]

[It's also been done—]

[Not like this! We are *living* old knowledge right now.]

+Relativity,+ Avo said. The Kae's went silent. **+Gravity can be a secondary Domain. Fusion from the Sun as well. Coldness. Vacuum. The void. Even singularities. Only told me about them. Will be useful. Something most Godclads can't escape from. Even affects time. But relativity. Absolute effects between objects. Consider a thaumic version of gravity. Something that affects conceptual weight as much as physical.+**

Kae considered that. **[Creating worship for such a Heaven would be difficult.]**

+No. It's simple. It's about attraction. Repulsion. It is about the pressure applied between things. This is observable. But what is referenced is the canvas. Totality. The city. The backdrop. Our setting. This void. Light moves the same to all observers in the natural world. Physics shares rules. And I see it in the pattern now: the pull. The drawing. An unseen tether of force. Chains and chains.+

Calvino whispered in his mind. *{History repeats once more. Or maybe this is just weight drawn across the ages.}*

+What?+ Avo asked.

{Just a reference to an old idea. It's good to see knowledge resurrected. What is lost may always be found anew.}

Avo didn't fully get the pogniance of what the EGI was referencing, but accepted their subtle pleasure. As he continued to mediate on the fabric of the universe, he watched the relative links, zoomed back from them. Two Domains accompanied them always. Space and chronology. Space tied to chronology. Everything was somewhere. Everything existed at some time. But with relativity, wasn't the two linked as well? Weren't time and space things that moved in tandem.

From that, Avo adjusted his view of the tapestry as his perspective deepened. Thinking of it like a weave or a web or a stream was insufficient. Patterns were not lines or irregularities, but relativity distortions from other references of its own symmetry. Miracles of Blood didn't behave like blood. The Fardrifter was not wind.

But everything was part of a **Continuum**.

A resonance passed through Avo, and the idea continued to calcify.

[Continuum,] Kae said, thoughtfully. **[A reference for existence.]**

[More than that: it is like the tapestry's shape. We... we are tapping to the shape itself?]

+The shape is broken,+ Avo said. **+It must be dreamed of anew.+**

And so he did. And so he looked into the blissful empty again, and applied his own history to it. His own mythology.

Emptiness was a container.

Emptiness was accommodation.

Emptiness was acceptance.

And from there, the memory of Walton came alight, and once Heart of Noloth's aesthetics changed. In the roiling dark and empty, translucent distortions formed, sprouting wide wings, and onyx eyes of reflective white.

Conceptualizing Domain of (Continuum)

>Working Title: Strix Upon the All-And-Empty

—[Shotin]—

The Stormtree-Ori-Thaum embassy was choked for business today. Aurithalm embassy was busy today. Bodies were filtering in and out. Massive bodies. Bodies large enough to fill doorways. Bodies that Shotin wished he could just shift away. Perhaps on a normal day, he would have, consequences be damned.

But not today.

Today, he was here with his niece, and here to talk with his bond brother. Today, he was going to do something he really didn't want to do in the name of diplomacy and "outreach" between the two major powers he represented: Ori-Thaum and the growing empire of the Knower of Totality.

After a good hour of polite waiting, the last cadre of Bloodthanes stomped out from the office, their furs dragging along the ground as they grumbled to each other. Scaarthians never really stopped being an imposing sight up close. There was a wrongness that was scarred into them, and they seemed to regard everyone else much the same.

Except Valhu. They liked him. Almost everyone liked him. Valhu Kitzuhada was a popular guy, and today, that was even more the case.

As their number was called, Shotin got up and sauntered over to the front desk.

"Maybe I should talk to them," Kare said, eyeing Vaeg Saskier—her father's attendant.

"Nah," Shotin said. "It's pretty much custom that she tells me to go fuck myself with her eyes. Gotta do it."

"Uncle," Kare sighed.

"Life's about the little thing's, Kare," Shotin replied, walking across the polished ground, near reflective with its gleam. "You'll understand if you ever get to have hate-sex with someone."

"I'm deleting this memory," Kare answered.

The Sanctian attendant was sitting there in her nice vest and crystal-rimmed spectacles. She looked up at Shotin and almost sneered, but her expression flattened into confusion at the sight of Kare. The Seeker held out his hand. "No funny business today. I just need to talk to him. Make it quick. A real serious matter."

Vaeg started flatly. "Like all the other previous serious matters."

Shotin met her stare without any of his usual playfulness. "No. Not really."

That was enough to make her understand. She read the intensity in Shotin's voice, in his demeanor. There was something wrong. The ghosts circulating her metamind plunged inward

as phantasmal currents glided up and down her sequences. Finally, she blinked and gave Shotin a nod. "His schedule just opened. He'll see you now."

"Thanks," Shotin said, knocking the table once. "Love the glasses, by the way. Like being able to see myself in your eyes."

She grumbled a curse and tore the accessory from her face, fling it at him, as he laughed and walked to the opening door. Kare picked up the glasses and handed them back to Vaeg before following thereafter.

As Shotin entered Valhu Kitzuhada's office, he gave his brother-in-law a brief nod of exhaustion. "Valhu. I've come to make your day worse."

"If that's all you're here to do, then feel free to leave, because the job's already—" His brother-in-law's voice trailed off as he mentally swiped through phantasmal documents, pausing only when he saw his daughter. "Kare?"

"Hi, dad," she said, biting her lip awkwardly.

Valhu looked between Shotin and his niece and blinked. "What's wrong? What's going on?"

Shotin sauntered over to the man's sofa and collapsed. Shifting himself a few times, he readied his spirit for what was to come and looked up. "All right," Shotin said, reaching inward to get the ghoul's attention. "I'm here. We can all come out and talk now." He closed his eyes. "Don't burn him. You promised me. Don't fucking lie to me or I will—"

And before he finished the sentence, a towering, thin form spilled out from his mind, merged into the vagueness of a humanoid from a net of undulating ghosts. The ghoul once known as Avo greeted Ori-Thaum's ambassador to Stormtree in his Bone Demon avatar with active Meldskin. The voidtech disguised Avo bestial origins, but the Echoheads captured Valhu's attention. A look of confusion and uncertainty filled his face. His cone of perception jumped between Kare, Shotin, and the monster standing before him.

"There are some things you need to know," Kare began.

"Don't freak out," Shotin interrupted, gesturing to Avo "He's a..." Shotin began, then frowned as he couldn't quite find the words to say. "He's not an asshole. Well, yeah, he is kind of a half-strand. But he's trying to help us, I think. Well, mainly trying to help himself. Listen, he ate my mind, and could have turned me into someone different to use a spy against Ori_Thaum. But he didn't. And now he wants to talk to you and so do I," Shotin said, folding his arms. "Does that make things clear?"

Valhu just blinked. Slowly he took off his spectacles, gave the ghoul in the room another look, and sighed. "Shotin, are you... are you experimenting with Nova again? Is this some kind of new canon?"

"Well, I technically never stopped," Shotin said, shrugging. "But no, this is much worse than that. He's real. He's not a phantom. Listen, he's his own person. He's not just a projection. Avo, show him."

The ghoul promptly speared an Echohead through the ambassador's nice carpeted floor. Valhu winced as Avo extracted his stinging tendril. "The carpet was a personal gift from one of the Longeyes."

The ghoul simply gave him a nod, and then ghosts flowed out of him, filled the damage, melted into the carpet. When they settled, the carpet was whole again, as if it had never been stabbed in the first place.

Once more, Valhu blinked.

And Avo spoke his first words. ***"Ambassador Valhu Kitzuhada. Pleasure to finally meet you. Glad to finally speak. Happy I saved you."***

"Man you saved?" Valhu said. His hand was still reaching under the table, where that old spatio-kinetic pistol he took from that Regular all those years ago was strapped. It wouldn't help, but Shotin didn't try to stop him. What was the point. And Avo probably knew already. He wouldn't be surprised if the ghoul was already in his brother-in-law's mind.

"Jhred Greatling," Avo said. "He was planning your assassination. Planning to bomb the function you hosted. The one at the Fire's Height. Two months ago. I stopped him. Killed him for personal reasons. Caused the Shattering of Nu-Scarrowbur and Mazza's Junction. Also caused the arrest of Abrel Greatling and Elder Mwaba D'Rongo."

Valhu's mouth fell open. "No... I know you... You're the bioform. The Pale Spider."

"That is one of my titles. I want to tell you a few things. Let you know a few things. I promised Shotin that I would spare you, won't consume you from my Gestalt. At least for now. But that doesn't mean I need to leave you blind, and that doesn't mean we can't be allies. Your clan is engaged against the D'Rongos. Need to know they are compromised by a Low Master of Noloth. Need to know that Noloth intends to breach your Guild further. Need to know that the Fifth Guild War is approaching. Veylis making her play. And I need an audience with the Inner Council. Want to talk diplomacy."

The ambassador struggled to internalize all that information. "I.... you..."

Blood danced like swirling mist upon the ghoul's palm, and a locus was formed. Placing the corpse crystal on the ambassador's table, Avo infused the faceted item with ghosts. ***"All the details you need here. Also a captured Famine of Peace. Dissect him if you wish. Believe your Incubi will be interested. I know this is overwhelming. But there is no more time. And we stand to be of great benefit to each other."***

For a few seconds longer, Valhu struggled with his thoughts. As his eyes skipped to Shotin, then Kare, a nod from his daughter lessened his worry. His head lowered. Valhu sighed. "Alright. Start by telling me what you want. I'll tell you what I think after."

And the confused man was gone, and in his place was the diplomat—a veteran at his trade.

Avo continued, **"Ambassador, you are held in high esteem for both Stormtree and Ori-Thaum. Want you to make introductions for me. Want to meet a Longeye through you. Want to speak with the Inner Council, as said."**

Valhu swallowed slowly. "I will not betray my oath."

"I don't want you to betray anything. I do not want your loyalty. This isn't a threat. This isn't a bargain. I'm going to tell you where you can find our shared enemies. And you will help me. Because the cost otherwise would be too high."

"Veylis Avandaer is about to start the Fifth Guild War," Shotin elaborated. Then side-eyed Avo. "Actually, no. The ghoul here is about to start the brawl, Veylis Avandaer is just content to oblige."

"War was coming regardless. But the end approaches. The Ladder looms. Do you know of the Ladder, ambassador."

"Ladder?" Valhu said.

Avo grunted. **"Assumed so. Did know your daughter was the target of Zein Thousandhand. Wanted to kill her so you would fight a war to her design by grief."**

Valhu's eyes only widened.

"It's true," Kare said, sounding exhausted. "Everything he's saying... it's madness, father, but true. I know this is strange, but—"

"A meeting with the Longeyes is more likely than the Inner Council." Valhu looked like he didn't understand the words he just said. "Stormtree's governing crones are always interested in a conversation. But the Inner Council. They view the world through their Mirrors—"

"I already got a summons," Shotin said.

Valhu froze for a beat. "Then why ask me for introductions."

"Because you are a proper channel. This is what Great Powers do. It would seem improper for me to just breach in through Shotin. Maybe it wouldn't even work. But it would spark a war. A war we can delay or avoid. Depending. Understand that you are also working to save your Guild from me."

By this point, the ambassador was entirely dry of words.

That was fine, Avo had plenty. ***“Let me give you some perspective. Let me show you a glimpse of the end. Can tell me what you think after that. Can bring peace with you as an offering. Get back to me afterward.”***

“Why—why do you want to speak with them? Are you seeking a preemptive truce?”

“More. Want a temporary alliance for the trial. And want to work together on resolving the matter of Noloth...”

Valhu’s perfect posture turned crooked. A suffering noise escaped him as he looked at his daughter and brother-in-law. A chuckle of disbelief preceded his words. “What the *hells* have you two gotten me mixed up in?”