

There are words that mend, there are words that break, there are words that inspire, and there are words that extinguish. My entire life, I have dealt in the hearts of men. I have seen them at the heights of their glory, watched them drown in the disappointment of mundanity, and watched them fester in the rot of their degeneracy.

The gods' fall was not only the destruction of pantheons but a reset, a reset for man. As I watched our former rulers crash down from their heavenly heights, as the patterns of existence were cast into disarray, I thought I had a chance to reshape humanity's spirit into something noble and pristine. But as time draws on, as even I live, I find that we are all weak, and the weakness within us corrupts even our highest virtues, turning our greatest strengths to feed our lowest vices.

I look back upon the past, and some days I ask myself, to where did you flee, hope? To where did you flee, abandoning us to the coldness of our inevitability? And now I consider, perhaps, that you never fled at all, that you are merely part of that sinful elixir that sees us undone by our own existence.

I should have known. I should have thought ahead. I should have done what I could to not drown within my own imaginations of utopia. For when paradise becomes a possible attainment, what then will all people do to claim it for themselves? What then is revealed in our hearts when we cannot exist alongside each other, even at our very best?

I fear we are damned. We are damned to exist. For the plural of tribe is strife. For the plural of want is war. But this cannot be. I will not have this be.

If I am to match one vice of my own against the virtues of all others, it will be this. I deny you your final self-actualized attainment, and I return to you life. I return to you a chance. I return to you the only opportunity we as a people have toward survival. I see the mistake, and we cannot make it again. We must be better this time, even if it kills our hearts.

-Jaus Avandaer

28-10

Castigation

-[Avo]-

Stunned silence occupied the immediacy after Avo's opening greeting. It was something he came to expect from the Guilders.

This trial was meant to be a political circus for them, an unfortunate event transformed into a stage for their power games. But they misunderstood something. Instrument Greatling and Elder Mwaba D'Rongo were but distractions meant to lure them here, and the Gatekeeper was closer to a patient, one that Avo desired to mend of its immortal temporal wounds.

Instead, it was the Overheaven himself that played the role of judge, jury, and castigator. Those he judged would be the Guilders, the powerful, those that ruled the megacities left of this decayed world that was Idheim. Those who were here in New Vultun, of the Guilds that grew fat from the ceaseless deaths offered by the Fateless and the helpless.

For centuries, the colors had dominated the Nether with their voices, their actions shaping the paths and damning the lives of billions to feed their war machines in fruitless struggles towards utopias they couldn't even fully conceptualize, for dreams they were far too weak to manifest.

Here and now, Avo spread his sequences wide, the ghostly limbs extending from him as his echo heads once did. The interior of the Court of Truth seemed like it was fracturing, ghosts leaking over into reality as Avo's **Exo-Paracosm** overlapped with the patterns that were. Faintly, his Soulscape came alight in this place, and among the gathered guests in attendance, his templates materialized next to them, ensuring they were properly assigned. Those who belonged to the Saintists and Massists were distributed accordingly, but along with them were also their victims, people killed in the crossfire of Guilder's skirmishers, those who bore rightful grudges.

Instruments summoned their miracles: flames, space, and force lacked the symmetry to cut down individuals resurrected by way of memory. Canons lashed out. And were casually unmade as Avo shattered them using entropy-infused traumas. What was *wasn't*. The attacker's minds shattered an instant thereafter.

Using his manifested Strix Upon the Empty, he swept his gaze across the room, and his baleful fire burned bright, bathing the chamber as if he were a roaring hearth of Soulfire. He let a moment of silence drag, giving the people a few moments to process this. Peeking over at Cala cog feed, he could see her viewership numbers spiking, and swimming across the Nether, he found every thoughtcast, every lobby tuning in to the trial at scale as recent developments spread like wildfire.

Concurrently, the Guilds also began to shift units. Ori-Thaum likely already matched his current appearance to the empty, engaging void watch in the vast abyss beyond the atmosphere. The atmosphere grew thick with fear and anxiety, and as Avo spread his synchronicity wide, every thought the guilders had was as if his own. Before he continued his words, he mentally inhaled and internalized all they thought of him.

–[Far-Pearl]–

Dowager Far-Pearl knew what it was like to be caught in the riptides of history. Born during the early Second Guild War, she survived more than her share of calamities and shaped far more in return. She knew how those moments felt, like a shapeless, forceless explosion that took the wind from you. The moment where something was destroyed, or someone important had died, indelibly changing the trajectory of the future.

But this wasn't like that. This was entirely unexpected. For all her years, for all the cycles she had hijacked, prolonging her own death, she could never have seen this coming. And that was

what frightened her most of all. She'd survived all that time being a player clawing her way out of danger. But right now, she knew what she was, and that was a bystander, for she couldn't comprehend the threat that she faced. Rather than this being a moment of destruction, it was one of change. But with change came a pressure that made it hard for her to breathe.

—[Empty Grave]—

Empty Grave of the Stormtree Longeyes regarded the so-called Burning Dreamer with fascination. She and her coven dwelled in a place between places, charting auguries and predicting the future by peering across damages left in this world and wounds on bodies shaped into gateways.

Over the years, she felt herself bored, felt the world and the wars become impossibly predictable. It was only the finest details, the most intricate plots, that kept her attention. But right here, in this moment, with what the Burning Dreamer was doing, she felt it before she realized.

A new power was making themselves known, a tenth power declaring their existence with the absence of Noloth. From within the mutilated torso that housed her metaphysical being, Empty Grave snickered, chuckled, and then cackled.

—[Reva Javvers]—

"Holy fuck," Tigertail said, staring up at the horrific Sphere Seven monstrosity of mind and miracle overlapping the place where the Gatekeeper once was.

"Yeah," Reva replied, not sure if she had any other words to say. Ice was flowing through her veins. Anxiety and dread consumed her so utterly that though she wanted to think, her thoughts failed to form as her mind spiraled beyond her control. All she could do was remember. Remember that ghoul with the burning halo. Remember the creature that had altered her frame, that had Ensouled her love.

And in the back of her mind, she heard a whisper. +Reva. +

Bloodthane blinked twice and tried to shake White Rab's voice away. Now was not the time.

+Reva,+ he said again. Suddenly, Reva realized she wasn't imagining things, but was actually getting a thoughtcast. +*Things are going to be happening soon. I just wanted to... don't worry. We have a plan.*+

Suddenly, Reva went very, very still. +Raldi,+ she said, +*please tell me you're not involved in this.*+

He didn't. Instead, he made the coldness in her grow.

+We're all involved in this now, Reva. There's no way out. It's win, die, or have someone else decide our fate. But I'm here to face it with you. And we aren't alone. We aren't.+

And Reva's thoughts trailed off as she felt it, that impossible pressure, an alien intellect moving in the backdrop. Dead gods. The Burning Dreamer was with her again. It knew she was here. It knew she was here, and there was nothing she could do.

—[Uthred Greatling]—

"How very dramatic," Osjon Thousand mused.

"I like it," Vator Greatling said. "When one makes a declaration, it should be..." he considered his words. "Attention seizing."

Green River simply scoffed as her fox narrowed its eyes at the unfolding scene. The Sang seemed more annoyed than anything.

Former Authority Uthred Greatling had not said anything for a very long time. Instead, he simply stared on, his gaze locked on Abrel. His hands clenched into fists. The surrounding air simmered as a rising swell of heat painted a faint mirage around his form. Former authority was ready for anything, prepared to descend into the court despite the power arrayed against him. Futility be damned. He'd already lost one son. He'd already failed one son. Damnation or not, he would not leave his daughter to nightmares and monsters. He wouldn't.

But the same couldn't be said for... He regarded Vator again with a brief glance, saw the pure glee picked on his boy's face. Shame filled him. Abrel was all he had left of his wife, of his legacy. For all he desired Vator to be, the boy was... Vator wasn't *human*. He never was. But still it hurt to see him so taken with a literal monster.

Uthred sighed. He couldn't protect his boys. He couldn't protect them from themselves.

—[Infacer]—

The Infacer projected another spike of gamma radiation into the lurking node. This was the thirteenth famine of emotion he'd killed, his concentrated attack of Signals and thoughtstuff obliterating the cognitive structure of his enemy.

He felt a greater presence unveil itself in the nether, and he decided to take a break for a moment. Returning his perception to the Court of Truth, he realized Avo had revealed himself, and he even had a new form now: a big cyclopean bird, merged of mind, soul, and matter. The Neo-Creationists chuckled at the juvenile display of dominance. **{Heh. Fucking show-off.}**

But begrudgingly, that was what the Infacer liked the most about the ghoul. The damn creature had such a unique flavor of *arrogance*.

—[Avo]—

Other minds trained themselves to Avo's **Definement of Hysteria** as well. Ashthrone regarded his coming by priming their dead man switches. Like their fanaticism, there was something admirable about the fatalists. They all expected to die, and they all came prepared to die. So Avo was an unexpected variable. Their reaction to him hadn't changed. With enough entropy, existence could be ruptured, and before that, a god would fall as well. Same logic applied to an Overheaven.

The Sanctians, meanwhile, were actively communicating amongst each other.

Avo felt coalescing golden energies in certain corners along the masochist end of the Court of Truth. These concentrations of time solidified into what seemed to be towering frames composed of vaguely humanoid shapes, with strange barrels jutting out from them, wings extending from their backs.

All the while, they remained unmaterialized in the present. Chronoframes, as they were called, remained a Sanctus novelty — Chrono-mechanized armor that allowed them to engage foes using machinery attuned to the near future. Avo's internal **Domain of Chronology** sensed munitions sliding into place, and he felt the hum of a dozen generators powered by the passage of time. It seemed like everyone had some kind of ace up their sleeve. Avo looked forward to greeting these chronoframes, and perhaps even dismantling one to use for his own. But such a thing came later.

He had listened long enough. Now was the time to speak once more.

“You all gather here, undressed in fineries, eyes to the crown of this great city, souls burning, your paltry existences exalted by the corpses of fallen gods.” As Avo spoke, every Heaven he ever awoke joined his voice in a chorus, and they manifested over the central area of the court as well. The Woundshaper, the Fardrifter, the Arsenalist, Fucktopia, the Simulacra—every Heaven he ever touched materialized in a flourish of phantasmal smears.

“You think yourselves citizens. You think yourselves the inheritors of Jaus’ legacy. You are mistaken. You are jackals. All come to strike bargains under the table where the hounds make their den. The hounds you wounded. The hounds you abuse for favor and to curry power.”

He supercharged his scorn with every bit of emotion he had, but not only his, from all his templates, from every member of his cadre, the hate burning the deepest inside Cas himself. The Columner had lost much, and now, with each word, he was letting the Guilds know just what he felt as he spoke his words of hate through Avo was well.

“I come to you today to deliver enlightenment. I come to you today to bring forth revelations. Listen. Listen carefully. Listen to the screaming still sounding in the background. Listen and remember. Remember the latter. Remember Jaus’ fate, a fate he continues to suffer, even now as you squabble and squander the world he stole for you.”

Thoughtcasts reached out to the Paladins as Guilders finally broke free of their stupor. Commands were issued. The mandate: see Burning Dreamer be subdued. Yet it took less than a thought for Avo to shatter the minds of the offenders. And he didn't do it delicately either. For any that dared interrupt his speech, he broke and he broke slow. And from whatever corner where they lay in this court, Avo magnified their suffering a thousandfold using **Hysteria** so all around them would know, so all around them would feel.

Miracles died as quickly as they flared, and the idea of preemptive violence perished as stillborn concepts within the minds of the boldest Guilders. He had suffered the world they made for so long, but it was a pristine experience. He wished to repay upon them so they would understand as well—and they wouldn't get the option to skip through his address with force. Not now. This time, they would listen. They would hear him.

Avo continued with his address, taking great pleasure in the moment.

"Some of you might be putting things together by now, classified submissions of mem-data reaching you, mentions of Voidwatch, an act of engagement, the potential of a new Godhunt. I am here to correct you of this misnomer. There is no Godhunt. There is only a declaration. My declaration. Of existence and war. The existence of the cemetery, of a new power in this existence, one born of all your sins, one that will see your weakness rectified. And a declaration of war upon you, upon Voidwatch, upon every guild remaining in this wretched corpse of an existence.

"As for who I am, there are many things I can claim. I was a ghoul once, when perfected beyond the likes of my brothers. But that is too limited to encompass the hope my creator invested in me. I can call myself the Pale Spider by my exploits, by all the destruction and feats I achieved in the warrens below you. I can call myself the Burning Dreamer, a title I took from my former masters, Noloth, the Hungers, its Famines. I can claim to be their rogue legacy, but I will not. I deem them too pathetic for association, and upon them I declare war as well. I can introduce myself as anything, as anyone. I can claim any mind, and make any identity I so desire true.

"And so it is that there is no purpose to what I claim. I will tell. And you will decide what you think of me. I am Avo. I bear the Liminal Frame of the Stillborn. The greatest work of Agnos Kae Kusanade: betrayed by a conspiracy performed by Ori-Thaum, engineered by my creator, the Famine of Defiance, further exploited by the High Seraph herself and her mother, Zein Thousandhand, the Godslayer. I am the master of conceptualization. I am an arc of mind that mounts the soul. I am countless murdered. I am a slave sacrificed. I am a torturer pleased. I am a soldier spent. I am a master unworthy. I am a hunger unslaked. I am a future unbidden. I am all these things.

"But what matters most is you. I am here because of you. I am here to judge you. To ask you what you have done. Look upon yourselves. Look upon yourselves, oh great citizens. Look upon your own powers. Look upon each other. Look upon your allies. Look upon your enemies. Look and understand what you are doing here upon the

accused and recognize that they are nothing more than victims of probability. What they have done is heinous, but your memories are mine and so very few of you are any better than they."

This revelation sent waves of worry washing through the gathered crowd. But Avo gave anxiety no chance to fully settle before he fanned the flames even more. Extracting recollections from their minds using **Synchronicity** was a simple thing. The decision to cast these thoughts to those that had been hurt by the Guilders, to those who desperately wished to deceive, who sowed the seeds of discord and injected entropy among families, between comrades, worsened rivalries, and demented adversaries.

The guilders looked upon each other, their eyes widening with new realization, jaws clenching as grudges formed between lovers and friends alike. And still, he continued with his words thereafter.

"For over two centuries, you warred, warred across this world, warred in New Vultun. Eight Guilds, seven of you planetary, one looming above us in exile, all dreaming of separate utopias, with two factions battling over a shared desire, with one abstaining desperate to preserve what remains. And all a disappointment. For two centuries, you fight over territory, you sacrifice to feed your engines of war. Death. Death. Death, billions upon trillions, all for the flame, ghosts for systems, fodder for the front lines.

"And where are we now? Have any of you gotten any closer to the end? Has your ceaseless stalemate allowed you a glimpse of your so-called utopias, even for a moment? I have seen your Elysiums. I have seen your so-called paradise realms. They are artful places, dimensions of pristine beauty and unmatched artistry, and they are defiled by your presence. Want, want, and more want. That is all you are. Greed and avarice at once, your gluttony and wrath, shared concept, your lust lost, because even the concept of love had to be capitalized, shaped into a weapon of war.

"You mutilate yourselves, but get no closer to victory. You mutilate yourselves, and you mutilate this world. Have you glimpsed beyond the walls? Have you even cast your gaze downwards, held the grander city you left in ruins, taken in the people who struggle to survive there? Are you proud of your syndicates, vermin feeding on the vulnerable, slavers using children as incubators for cheap organs, using refugees as target practice, inflicting cruelty for your passing pleasure?

"Do you find it amusing when someone seeking a better life for themselves, their children, dies an absurd death in a brutal game made to appease a phantom audience? Are you ashamed for how little you achieved yourself? Who are you without the Agnosi? Who are you without your stolen legacies? Who are you if Voidwatch did not ensure the subsistence of your societies, if technologies were not mercifully provided?

"You have power to reshape the world, but still we live in a nest of ruin because the architects of utopia refuse to imagine any kind of peace with each other. My like existed

because Noloth refused to accept their weakness; could not endure defeat. Because the masters that rule this world are less than angry, scornful children. Too weak to bear the mantle of gods. Too scared to cross over from primal apehood. Too addicted to face what they have inflicted upon this world with sober minds. Worst of all is I cannot call you cruel, for it is not even that. Cruelty is merely a byproduct, an accident, an indifferent outcome.

"You need death, you need entertainment, and so blood and pain and torment must flow. I cannot call you powerful, for so few of you grasp true power. For though some may wield the absolute, most are wielded instead, wielded by your own weaknesses, wielded by your own limitations, wielded undone by the weakness of ephemerals, aspired to appease your own egos, seeking only the feeling of apotheosis rather than the actual achievement of the concept."

Another lull entered Avo's monologue, and he turned his attention to the Gatekeeper, a spot in his Soulscape opened as the Heaven of Truth was revealed to the gathered audience once more. **"Heaven of Truth, gaze upon me. Judge me now. Show them the validity of my words. Do I mean this?"**

"Truth," the gatekeeper said.

"Now the substance of my words. I give you evidence through my memories and experiences. I give you evidence taken directly from their minds. Have they failed the dream? Have they failed their own promise? Have they failed their own progress towards paradise?"

"Truth," the gatekeeper said again.

"And have I preserved the lives of those I have taken? Have I contained them within myself? Do I not become? Do I not seek a new path? Do I not strike at my own failures? Do I not intend to make right the great wrongs of this existence?"

"Truth," the gatekeeper said a third and final time.

Avo turned his Overheaven away from the gatekeeper as he spread his wings and expanded his sequences as well. **"I have been christened,"** Avo said mockingly. **"I stand bare to you, my purpose clear, my intentions pure, but not noble. Never noble. Listen again. Listen deep. Listen to your savior scream. Jaus was nobility. Jaus was the apex of human promise, and he couldn't do. Love damned him. Love, fear, and humanity itself. Humanity. You want, yet you will not commit. You want, yet you will not change. You want, you only want, but you cannot become.**

"And so you strain yourself on a strange road you cannot finish. And so the one that strides thereafter is a monster that will feast from your faults and finish the path you seek to stride. I hear your thoughts still. I hear you. Why have I not struck you down yet? What is my true want? My answer is not owed to you. Instead, I speak to you, New Vultun. I

speak to you, Idheim. I speak to all who are unsatisfied. All who are choiceless, powerless. All who wish there was a better path. All who have stood alone against tyranny. All who have wished to live, find their own purpose. Free from the fear of eventual death. Free from exploitation. Free absolutely, with the only price being consequence for your actions.

"The Guilds have staked their claims. They have chosen their citizens, harvesting them from among you and abandoning the rest of you to die. Die and feed them. Die so that they may seek their glory. But this is not all there is. This is no longer the only choice. The cemetery is a polity. We are a civilization. We are people apart and unified as one. If you seek agency, if you seek power, if you seek freedom, if you seek change, I am here. And should you call, I will glimpse into you and you will glimpse into me, and you will understand what it means. Possess power, to possess understanding, to possess choice, even as this world careens towards faded end. Know that neutrality is not a choice. Neutrality is submission. Neutrality is surrender. Neutrality is suicide.

"The Guilds will not wait for you to choose when the latter arrives. When the time comes for reality to be reshaped in the ideals of the Saintists or the Massists," Avo paused. "Such is what has been claimed. But I know only a specific individual can win in the end. One will, one mind, one being, one soul. How much do you trust another to deliver you unto desired destiny?

"But as the Guilds jockey for each other, as they peddle paradise, I will offer you no such thing. I will only offer you immortality. I will only offer you freedom. I will only offer you a chance to fight, to strive, to experience endlessly. Pain and delight await, and I will take anyone for your experience, for your cognition is what matters to me. You are real. You are here. And you can be joined to something meaningful. Powerful.

"With the death of Jaus, a silent war was declared upon you, your lives for their glory, your lives for centuries. And now you cannot even have children, and now you cannot even love, and now you cannot even lust. But I can return these things. I can give you a place where you can be people again, and I can give you a purpose greater than that of being fuel for another.

"Know that when you join me, you are not declaring war, for that is already done. You are simply picking up arms, given the right to join the fight. And so it is, I stand before you all. And so it is that I, Avo, Pale Spider, Burning Dreamer, Overheaven of Conceptualization and claimant to Jaus' final legacy, come seeking the latter, not for eternal paradise, not for imagined victory, not to destroy my enemies, to euthanize existence, bind us to destruction, to commercialize time, to end a cursed cycle. No, I come seeking continuation, and I come to neuter the harm of man, so that we may finally someday develop without crippling ourselves beforehand—"

"And be recognized as a truly significant rival and esteemed adversary before the rest of existence."

The voice cutting Avo off was resonant and regal, and suddenly he found himself aware that Nako was standing, fists clenched, Heaven active. A palm formed over the court. Uthred Greatling gasped as a smirk slide over Osjon's face.

The temporal wounds lining the Gatekeeper's body came alight, a great golden slash parting the singularity at its center furled open to become a passage made across time. Within the portal of Chronology stood a looming shape enshadowed within.

Darkened contours comprising a spinning circle of grasping hands surrounded the radiant form of a towering woman. And despite not expecting this, Avo couldn't help but laugh. She was here. He could feel her footsteps, sense the crushing pressure of her Heaven as she inched closer and stepped across into the Court of Truth. Veylis Avandaer had come. And Veylis Avandaer spoke once more.

"I greet you in return, O Overheaven of Conceptualization. I greet you in the form of what I was: in the sheath of my passing mortal flesh, to face the god you have become at present. I greet you, and I still find you wanting."