

+...In summation to the Inner Council, breaching Axtraxis Academy in any capacity is unlikely in the category of [Extreme]. Every attempt made has resulted in not only failure but severe losses among our Incubi, with operating cells vanishing without a trace. Furthermore, due to Omintech's information deadlock, not even Highflame assets can enter or leave the demiplane without having every aspect of themselves thought-scanned in metaphysical detail.

To put it simply, short of managing to leverage outright betrayal on the part of a Saintist elite or unless Voidwatch commits to the war on our end and lends us all their mastery to breach the [REDACTED]'s protections, there is no possibility of success for us or any other Guild.

Our resources would be devoted elsewhere.+

-Ori-Thaum Mirror Designation "Truetale"

28-9

Behold Your Savior (IV)

"Truth," declared the Gatekeeper.

The Heaven of Truth's words marked the ending of both Abrel and Elder D'Rongo's recountings. For the better part of two hours, they went over every detail they experienced on the day of their capture. Abrel, in particular, spoke the truth, every excruciating bit of it. She openly the entire journey to her arrival in this very court, how she had been tasked by her father to retrieve her brother, how she had delayed this time and time again due to familial weakness.

The harshness she inflicted on herself came without sadness or pain. This is what she deserved. All that happened was part of her responsibility.

But she also didn't leave out the presence of Avo. The fact that there was a separate group operating in the area. They were the murderers of her brother and the reason her entire cadre, aside from her, had been massacred in a chaotic confrontation against the Stormtree Bloodthanes. As she mentioned the Bloodthanes, an invisible membrane of ghosts carried an injection of thought stuff through the room, and Avo whispered realizations in the back of Abrel's mind.

Reva Javvers, the leader of the Bloodthane cadre she fought, was present and observing her.

Another eyewitness to the Instrument's failure.

However, what the two women shared were memories. Memories of the so-called Pale Spider and his cadre: a mysterious figure that captured the fascination of New Vultun's Nether lobbies and vicarity fiends after their exploits across New Scarrowbur and his engagement against Shotin Kizuhara at Veng's Stand.

As the Gatekeeper's answer finished echoing across the room, Chief Paladin Naeko projected his own mind once more. *+Opening statements from both parties have been delivered. Without further objection, we will now proceed to collecting additional eyewitness accounts, admitted evidence, and supporting arguments. The lobbies are now open for mem-data processing. For those of you who have been to Scale before, you know the rules. Do not leave any mem-con, or I will smear you.+*

The Chief Paladin casually emphasized this point by actually manifesting a palm and bringing it down upon the vast courtroom. Over three hundred beings burst apart in geysers of gore, and Abrel felt their deaths reverberate through the soft metaphysical mist of Naeko's Heaven. She swallowed as a shiver of fear passed through her, and—to her horror—her Lustaway sounded in her mind.

Thankfully, Avo didn't mock her. But the same couldn't be said about the others.

+Nasty girl,+ Aedon Chambers chuckled.

Abrel hid a groan.

Cries of shock sounded from corners of the room as newcomers differentiated themselves from the veterans. Many of those here had attended multiple trials before, though perhaps none as severe as this one. Yet, even they couldn't conceptualize what was to come.

Abrel knew. Abrel dreaded. And Abrel could do nothing about it. For at this moment, she suited her title more than ever before. *Instrument.* Instrument for greater powers to wield. Instrument in a game that she couldn't even play.

+You will never be ready,+ Avo said, speaking to her. ***+Guilds are submitting their information. Highflame. No-Dragons. Omnitech. None of them care about you. Meritocrats want you to burn. Want a demonstration of goodwill from Highflame to appease the city. Earn the Paladin's trust. Chivalrics want to save you—but also to see your family disgraced. You are not a person to them, but a living failure. And the elder suffers a shared fate.+*** A sigh followed. ***+You are all so disappointing.+***

An inhuman harshness entered the once-ghoul's mind, and Avo's cold intent made Abrel flinch. ***+Be glad you can't hear all their thoughts. Be glad that you are not melded with them. I am. And with each passing second I spend here, with each moment I linger, I spread. I see you. I see you, and you will not do. None of you will do. All you have ever done is fail yourself. All you have ever done is disgrace the dream.+***

Abrel clenched her teeth and replied with a thought. *+Why are you telling me all this?+*

+So you understand. You are not special. You are not a unique failure. You are human. Human granted power. Granted the possibility to be something greater. But you trap yourself in between. Godclad. Mortal with godly power. But mortal still. You do not become. You cling. And the world moves ahead. And reality breaks. And you tear. And

the future tears with you. I have seen enough. The Guilds deny themselves the colors. They deny the world promise and progress. But I have seen enough. And I will push you ahead.+

And then all the ghouls' viciousness vanished. It was there one moment, and then extinguished like a breeze severing the dancing flame of a candle.

+But not all is lost. Not all is damnation. Don't worry. Abrel. Do not fear. You will not end in powerlessness. You will find a pointless death. Not you. Not your father. Not your brother. You, more than all others, are fortunate, fated by my hand. The truth is coming. The truth absolute. You have already heard his cries. The rest have not. When the time comes, be ready.+

+Be ready,+ Abrel replied. +Be ready for what?+

+Be ready to stand truthful. Be ready to do the right thing, at least once. I ask of you now, Abrel Greatling, what does it mean to be worthy? What does it mean to burn for righteousness, for virtue? What do you want forever to be?+

–[Avo]–

The moment was close, and through his **Precognition**, Avo could feel path peeling away from path. The futures were coalescing at scale and had been for the past months. But right here, even within the chamber, possibilities were withering away like branches consumed by wildfire, winnowed by clashes between unseen powers.

Within the Nether, static pulses resounded, spreading from the corners of the room as the Infacer engaged Noloth's many nodes. Having Omnitech fight on his behalf was a boon, and he didn't doubt that the Infacer was trying to play this game to their advantage as well, but ultimately, this allowed him to keep his focus on what mattered.

The gGuilders continued as they were, reveling in their ignorance, ghosts ferrying information from minds to loci. Colossal corpse crystals hovered within the communal lounges for both Saintists and Massists, and they filled it with memories, depictions to aid or condemn the accused. Not even those of the same Guild were aligned. Clan D'Rongo alone desired to save their elder. The rest of Ori-Thaum remained coldly neutral, and their allies regarded them with increased suspicion – a long-standing problem, considering how often the Incubi breached the trust of their comrades.

The Meritocrats and Chivalrics continued their everlasting power struggle. The former wished to see Abrel punished to the utmost extent, another strike against the great family now fallen. Mother and daughter sharing disgrace. But even the Chivalrics themselves were not unified. They wished to see Abrel spared because her defeat scarred their prestige by association. But they also didn't want to see her completely absolved. House Greatling had once been a substantial player in Highflame politics. Now they were voided. Humiliated, castrated, and cast

out. Former rivals found opportunity to both preserve their collective reputation while also taking what they once could not.

Being a gGuilder was like being tethered to interests folding over interests: what was good for your Guild; what was good for your internal faction; what was good for yourself? All these things came together in a chaotic clash.

[NEW VULTUN] INFECTION UPDATED...

>5.21%

AXTRAXIS ACADEMY INFECTION UPDATED...

>68%

A synchronous moment jolted through Avo as his many subminds sent each other an update. Out in the Sunderwilds shimmering folds of spatial collapsed over the horizon as they drew closer to his Heaven of Winter and enclave. Slowly, he felt metaphysical pressures slip over into the perimeter of his expanded perception, thanks to his memetic watchtowers.

War would soon be at hand beyond the walls of New Vultun.

Meanwhile, within the city, Avo himself leaked, leaked across the minds. The students at Axtraxis leaked into the faculty and their families. Already, Avo was spreading across the Elysiums with twelve techno-thaumic reactors marked on his Deep-Nav. But he still needed to engineer means to get Alysium out of the demiplane.

In the Court of Truth, Draus and Kae approached the accused. Soon, they would take their positions and face the Saintists and Massists respectively. They would bring disruption to the processings and accompany Avo when he made himself known.

And as the moments passed, as things proceeded, the Stormsparrow hummed a jubilant tune in their private podium while Vator Greatling's attention jumped between her and the Burning Dreamer himself.

"Can I show you something?" Vator said, breaking the silence.

Both Osjon and his father regarded him, but whatever they wished to say never came, as Avo replied first. **"Yes."**

Hysteria hinted to Avo what the boy was hiding in the depths of his mind. It had to do with Avo's brethren, former brethren: the ghouls. The boy had performed some enhancements on them at Emotion's behest. Now, with Emotion gone, the youngest Greatling sought another source of validation, and though the Burning Dreamer was an enemy, he was also a specimen. A specimen that Vator couldn't quite help but admire and be fascinated by.

More, he wanted to compare his work to what was done to the Dreamer themselves.

From the boy's flesh bubbled a misshapen mass of meat, parting his nice suit. Then, his ribs unfurled like spreading fingers, and though no blood flowed, a tunnel of tissue and teratoma unveiled itself. Avo peered into Vator as if he was a picture frame wrapped around a portait of an animated cityscape. Domains of Skin, Flesh, Bone, Space, and more rang upon Avo's Frame, and he saw within Vator a realm created from metaphysical biology.

There, along the slick walls of his innards, thousands of nu-ghouls lay incubating within tumorous pustules, their bodies twisting, growing, and developing, outlines already far stranger than their prior morphologies.

The Woundmother cooed in the back of Avo's mind. **"Hear their blood, oh master,"** she said. **"He has improved them. The haemophage sings in new notes."**

"And you've done this recently," Avo asked.

Vitor nodded. "What do you think? Are you offended? Do you think that they're—"

"I think that they are better," Avo said simply. He felt at their tissues some more, and found himself certain of hi reply. **"I think that if you would have made them—if you would have made us—there would have been more of a war."**

Vitor's expression flinched, and slowly a look of pride crawled over his face. Across from him, his father looked on with purest horror. "Vator," he growled.

Avo's gaze snapped to the former Authority and silenced him with a hardening glare. **"Do not deny him his experience. He wants. And so he will find. Fear will be your weakness. Not his."**

The Burning Dreamer looked over the youngest Greatling once more and nodded. **"Would you like to seek greater glory?"**

"Avo," Osjon sighed, "this poaching is hardly appropriate."

"I don't care if he joins me," Avo cut off the Speaker. **"I simply care to ask one question. What do you want to become, Vator? Do you want to be an artist? Because artists...they cannot be constrained. Not if they truly want to find absolute expression."**

"Absolute expression," Vator muttered.

"Slaves. They are limited by the humor and allowance of their master. They will take your canvas from you. Decide if you want that."

Vator simply stared on, trying to digest Avo's words. Letting the conversation end there for now, he looked down in the court, and Avo gave a chuff. Shifting his consciousness upwards, Avo glimpsed across the expanse of the void. Relativistic rounds carved through the nothingness, slipping between the twirling fingers of entropy to strike at his Overheaven. The initial salvo to this war was being fired, loosed from Voidwatch upon their latest rival.

Yet most attacks never made it, for ghosts spilled free from a cyclopean owl of abyssal black and ethereal bright, its sequences layered over space-time itself, unmaking entire sections of reality with the destruction of memory. A small detachment of voidships greeted him, a fleet about three short of a million. Most of what they fired were esoteric weapons, missiles that detonated with memetic signals meant to scramble standard cognitions. They impacted Avo only briefly, and rather than harming him, he absorbed more of their properties, using his **Definement of Empathy** to digest all their effects.

The duel continued at a short range of three thousand kilometers. Between the feathers of the Strix Upon the Empty, a crimson storm forged spires of blood-made spears and flung them back towards the gathered Void ships in retaliation. The Haemokinetic missiles were further augmented by the touch of the Arsenalist, causing trajectories and velocities to suddenly jolt, compound, and build among all the shots Avo unleashed.

At the very same time, within the planetary ring, the Woundmother itself continued its fabrication, existing in multiple points at once, warring and creating in perfect harmony.

By now, Avo suspected that most Guilder satellites had picked up signs of engagement in the void. He had suppressed the initial reports from arriving back on Idheim only to delay until the trial's initiation. Now he wanted fear to spread. He wanted mem-data to be carried home so that they would have footage to view in sync with the trial. And so his proclamation of becoming a rival polity could be heard not only by those of the void, but also by those bound to this wretched, ruined, miraculous cradle of a world.

Casting his thoughts to the local void liaison within the Court of Truth, Avo signaled what was to come. **+Kant. Ready to tell your fellow 'Guilders' about the new threat you face?+** Avo asked.

{Of course,} Kant replied. The mind actually sounded enthusiastic about this. {I'll make my arrival once you finish peacocking.}

+I don't peacock.+

{Avo. Please.}

The ghoul didn't peacock. He stood by that statement.

With the opening phase of the trial fast approaching its end, and the last pieces of evidence filling the loci, Avo felt a growing thrill of anticipation fill his being.

[Never thought I would ever make it here,] Corner whispered. **[Well. Kind of. Whatever the case, I'm gonna enjoy spitting on these shitters with you, Avo. Fuck them. Fuck the Guilds. Fuck them all to death.]**

[This is what was wrought from our destruction,] Karakan whimpered. **[This? Why? Why have we gone so wrong?]**

Other templates chattered, most of them simulating drinks to partake within Avo's Soulscape as they anticipated the glorious moments to come.

[This shit is better than a pay-per-view vicarity,] template-Chambers chuckled. **[This is gonna be so fucking nova...]**

-[Abrel]-

Thoughtcasts sounded from across the room. A bland feminine voice spoke first. *+Dowager Far-Pearl of the No-Dragons. All evidence, arguments, and miscellaneous information have been submitted. We resign ourselves to the judgment of truth.+*

A male voice followed thereafter. *+Fatalist Ashaki. Ashthrone. Information submitted. We resign ourselves to the judgment of truth.+*

A soft, casual whisper came thereafter. *+Empty Grave of the Stormtree Longeyes. We have said our peace. We let the bones lie where they may. We resign ourselves to the judgment of truth.+*

+Mirror Concave: Three-Sound. Our arguments have been made. Our mem-data has been provided. We hope this insight serves the court well. We resign ourselves to the judgment of truth.+

"Navigator Ishtan here. Sanctus resigns itself to the judgment of truth."

And a voice that Abel was familiar with followed thereafter. *+Speaker Osjon Thousand, on behalf of Highflame, we have seen the accused and offered forth what we can towards their judgment or innocence. We resign ourselves to the judgment of truth.+*

A mechanical voice rattled immediately thereafter. *+Omnitech has provided all caches of available detail. We resign ourselves to the judgment of truth.+*

A Paladin provided a final statement. *+Voidwatch informs the gathered Guilds that they wish to abstain.+*

The room filled with scoffs and groans. Expected. Typical.

Several more call-outs followed, mostly from independent outfits and specific parties clarifying their positions, and a long silence resumed thereafter. The Instrument and the Elder met eye to eye. Despite the difference in their origins, despite their rival positions in life, in that moment, they shared a single emotion: anxiety.

+Very well. If everyone is resigned to the judgment, and no further evidence or arguments are forthcoming, I, Chief Paladin Naeko, declare the opening stages of this trial to be in session.+

Responding to the Chief Paladin's words, the Gatekeeper began to change. Its chains spilled apart, breaking and spreading as a glorious nebula swept across the room. The ripples spilling from its myriad skulls expanded into what seemed like a swirling singularity. The Gatekeeper was slowly manifesting its full heaven. Celestial trails spread wide across the room, like heavenly arteries. And the metaphysical weight, once uncomfortable, now approached a territory of being unbearable.

Both Abrel and the Elder gasped, while all within the chamber went silent. The thoughtstuff lining countless accretions ceased their churning. All eyes watched as countless ghosts swirled from both sides of the room, as streams of data, evidence, argumentation, and information condensed in edited memories and eyewitness accounts poured into the Heaven of Truth. The ambiance of the chamber went dim as countless stars emerged from the Gatekeeper's being, flared, and then simmered. As the Heaven of Truth worked, filtering through falsehood and collating points of shared truth among the mem-data offered to it, it spoke to Abrel and D'Rongo once more.

+You... You...+ The Gatekeeper's voice trailing off, a strain filling its every movement. Abrel felt her attention drawn to indelible marks of gold quivering upon the expanded tapestry that was swallowing the court. She knew those to be wounds left upon the Heaven of Truth by her High Seraph, and part of her dreamed, that Veylis Avandaer would reach through the injuries she inflicted to save her loyal Instrument.

But Abrel knew that wasn't the case, that it couldn't be the case, that Veylis cared nothing for her, or at least was more than willing to see her sacrificed.

Yet, as the Gatekeeper struggled to form its words, two more voices entered the fray. "I deliver my objection to these proceedings." Abrel knew this voice as well. Jelene Draus. Suddenly, she found the Regular standing right next to her, arms folded, leaning against the phase-cage. The Regular didn't regard Abrel much, instead choosing to keep her narrowed glare on the Gatekeeper. "I object on the grounds that this entire trial has been a farce."

Only then did she regard Abril. But never did respect nor concern enter her eyes. "Strange fuckin' lives we lead, huh?"

"Yeah," Abrel replied, unsure what else to say.

The faintest smirk pulled at Draus' features. "Well. Shit, juv. You ain't seen nothin' yet. Keep your balls tucked."

Surprised mutters and a hundred cones of perception splashed over the disgraced Regular. She withstood without a single hint of discomfort.

"I—" another other voice sounded out and cracked. Kae Kusanade appeared next to Elder Mwaba D'Rongo. The older woman stared at the Agnos, eyes wide for a moment, struggling to process what was happening.

"You..." D'Rongo breathed, face paling with horror and disbelief.

"I also reject these proceedings," Kae said, her voice jumping high and low. It was clear that she had a hard time controlling her nerves. Public speaking was not something the Agnos enjoyed doing, or perhaps it was just the attention, all too much all at once. "She is guilty of many things," Kae continued, gesturing to Elder D'Rongo, "but she is not a player in this game."

Specters and drones drew close to both the regular and the Agnos now. Abrel and the Elder's holographic projections were replaced with Draus and Kae instead, and while this happened, while mutters began to build among the gallery of gathered Guilders, a third noise cut into the proceedings. It was a most unnatural sound.

It was a noise of cascading pain: building; rising; agony; eternal. It was a scream that seemed to go on and keep going. It was horror and torment without end, rising and rising and rising evermore. It was the voice of Jaus Avandaer, damned by the actions of his daughter, damned to an undeserved fate, damned to the latter.

From behind the cosmic canvas that was the Gatekeeper's Heaven, phantoms began to spill over. Reality rippled like the surface of a pond, and then everything began to change. The horizon before Abrel and Elder D'Rongo expanded into a ruined hellscape. Ash and entropy consumed the world as all peeled away to nothing. Land and sky both fell to existential decay as they collapsed, and the remnants of their patterns drifted upward into a single standing edifice. There, a flayed ladder approached, bodies layered over bodies, bound and kneeling in eternal supplication, their spines fused, rings made from dragons lining the exterior segments of the structure, rising in ten circles.

As the Ladder drew closer, as the entire court faced the shape of their final end, Jaus' suffering only grew in intensity. Wards rattled. Abrel struggled to hold back a whimper but failed. She knew that this could be so much worse, that even now the trauma on display was neutered, impaired to what it was at its origin.

"Truth," the Gatekeeper moaned. **"Truth,"** the Gatekeeper wailed, like a child pleading for mercy.

Then a new voice, deep and sibilant, joined it. **"Truth."**

Over and over the flayed ladder, a creature of midnight black spread its wings. Phantasmal sequences extended from its body, spreading outwards like tendrils, and at the core of its eye

burned a single orb of baleful Soulfire clutched by a nest of dragons, walled by wards lined with trauma and entropy.

–[Marlowe]–

+*Holy shit! Holy shit! What's happening? What's happening?*+

+*Is that... is that a giant bird of some kind?*+

+*What the fuck's...?*+

+*All right. Okay. You know what? I'm done. I'm not doing any more SunCloud today. Fuck this.*+

Cala Marlowe simply clapped as more thoughtcasts flowed through her mind and her viewership spiked, as displayed in her cog-feed.

ACTIVE WATCHERS - [134,123,188]

And even more would be coming. Oh, these poor shits thought this was something else. They didn't know a godsdamned thing. But the thoughtcaster did, and she could only giggle to herself as the screams grew louder. "Oh, you dumb half-strands haven't seen nothing yet."

–[Avo]–

As Jaus continued screaming, as the court itself fell to strangled silence, Avo greeted New Vultun unmasked, undisguised, in the ascended flesh officially for the first time.

"Good evening, New Volton. My displeasure to finally meet you." As he spoke within the Court of Truth, so too did every mind, every body, every template he subsumed echo his words. All over city, copies broadcast the words of his address, congesting the Nether from gutters to Elysiums, leaving no room for ignorance.

The time to hide was over.

The last branches of the paths dissolved, leaving only one way forward.