

{Tradition is a hard yoke to break. Some among my contemporaries claim that the terrestrials are merely delusional or culturally psychotic. This is inaccurate. They likely say these things not because they don't know better, but because they are warhawks and desire to sterilize the planet with one final engagement, settling matters left over from the Builder War. I do not believe and do not associate with their opinions.

No.

I think that the legal system of Idheim is substantially adequate and to be commended, especially considering their long history of extreme violence and ritualistic bloodshed to solve matters rather than diplomacy, negotiation, fact-finding, and truth. But as things go, hope is a faraway thing. Ultimately, the legal system governed by the Paladins has proven to be at least somewhat effective. They remain the balance between each of the Great Guilds, and should they offer favor to any side, the entire balance of power could be toppled immediately thereafter. They are, in a sense, crippled kingmakers.

Their trials begin with opening arguments, in which anyone and everyone is allowed to bring in evidence and memory testimonies from across the city. Countless Guilders participate. This is a place not only to decide the fate of the accused, but also to jockey for political influence and arrange themselves in case a greater conflict breaks out.

During this period, the Court of Truth is thaumaturgically sealed from outer reality while all the related parties deliberate under the watchful gaze of the Gatekeeper: Jaus Avandaer's final legacy.

The delegates involved also sometimes involve we, of Voidwatch, toward the end of preserving the polities that remain...

-EGI Hammurabi

28-8

Opening Arguments (I)

[Vator]

Vator never quite liked the aesthetic of Scale. The entire concept was just so *unoriginal*. A structure of utmost importance placed at the very top of the city? At the very core of the Tiers? Jaus Avandaer might be the Godbreaker, but his sense of style remained infected by those who came before him. So centralized, so symbolic, so utterly *drool*...

The youngest Greatling sighed. Perhaps he could regard it as a heart with valves leading out into each of the Great Guilds. Yes, that would be more palatable, but it still didn't resolve the problem of the Paladin's mountain fortress. Now that was a true monstrosity: an amalgam of shifting bricks was the best its creators could come up with. Yes, yes, the thaumaturgic benefits

it provided were great, but really now, *shifting bricks*? And did they need to make the water crash forth like cascading rocks too?

As they entered one of its many hollows, Vator frowned as they began landing on a pad holographically outlined by a technical drone.

Again, Vator sighed. This time, he drew the attention of his father, turning to glare at him with augmented eyes of silvery blue. The color stood out nicely in the dark red ambiance inside the arovec. Now Vator smiled and took a mental snapshot of the moment using his Metamind. He would see if he could recreate this soon.

“Vator,” Uthred said, voice slow and measured, “can I count on you to remain on task and unburdened by distractions?”

“Of course, father,” Vator grinned. “I am simply committed to processing all my mental suffering right now. We are bound for a most hideous place.”

The sofas they occupied in the aero formed a U-shape along the back of the vehicle. The two Greatling sat facing each other, while Green River—ostensibly sworn to their aid and secretly likely in league with their hidden enemy—joined them as a guest. Her presence inflicted an awkwardness on Uthred that Vator simply ignored, speaking easily with her and Emotion during their journey as if there was nothing to worry about at all.

Because there was nothing to worry about. Things were looking chaotic, desperate, and altogether grim for so many. That was true. But chaos was an expressive canvas! It made things interesting. Sure, they wanted to save Abrel, but the possibility that she *might* be lost to politics or—Veylis forbid—an act of sudden terror, gave the moment its flavor.

That was what finally settled Vator’s annoyance: this moment of was living history. He was part of living history.

Perhaps the High Seraph would see him rewarded for his deeds if all went well. Perhaps she would show him the paths...

Their vehicle settled with a soft thud. A vibration passed through the interior of the arovec, followed by the hissing of a door.

+*We enter the belly of a beast*,+ Emotion murmured.

Vator smiled at that. “A rather overused metaphor, Emotion. I expected something more original.”

+*I was being literal. The Dreamer is here... and he is watching us.*+

Uthred went still halfway to a stand. The former Authority glowered at the locus placed on the table between the couch. Vator was pleased his father's gaze never reached Green River; the Authority mastered himself well. "Right now?"

+Yes. Several Paladins bear his touch... the infrastructure here... even the drone.+

"But we remain protected," Green River said, injecting just enough worry into her voice. She pulled at the long fur coat she wore, and the fox wrapped around her neck blinked lazily at Vator. The young Guilder smiled. The Sang wasn't half-bad herself. He wondered if she could keep her composure if he dissected her, or if it would be the fox that betrayed her emotions.

+Yes,+ Emotion said. +We remain protected. He possesses only a facet of Noloth's treasures. The Dreamer will only strike if there is an opening—but I doubt even that. He plots his own schemes here. Be wary.+

Vator shared a look with his father.

As they disembarked their aero, they found themselves greeted by a cadre of Paladins. The group had the opacity of their masks at max and their Metaminds were furthered veiled by wards. Wards unknown to Vator.

But not to Emotion. *+These are phantasmics of Peace's making.+* A mental breath left the Famine. *+Bold. The Dreamer is openly leaving his touch upon his favored.+*

"I salute you, Paladins," Uthred said, granting the Paladins a gesture usually reserved for one's superiors in Highflame. Yet, before he could speak further, a Paladin interrupted him.

"We know why you're here. You've been expected. Please, follow us. The Chief Paladin wishes to speak with you."

Once more, Uthred froze, while Vator's grin grew ever wider. So, this was what it was like to be drawn into the Great Game. The unexpected at every turn, the unknown always waiting just over the horizon.

Tiles of tessellation spilled down from the walls as a part of the wall folded over to become a bridge leading to a vertical pathway. The first of the Paladins walked off while a contingent of drones trailed over them.

+He is abandoning subtlety,+ Emotion said, sounding more than a little unnerved himself.

+What does that mean?+ Vator said, casting his thoughts straight into the locus in his grip.

+That the Dreamer likely doesn't intend to hide much longer...+

[Alysim]

Exploiting a chronoshift to attack another district was not a novel idea. Indeed, Sanctians used their unique ontologies to great advantage across all the Guild Wars. More than that, plenty of Squires used chronoshifts to escape pursuit or infiltrate zones of interest.

However, using a chronoshift to sneak a man fated to die in the future into a Highflame communications facility with its personnel pre-subverted to use its Heavne of Signals to gain access to a demiplane connected to Aextraxis Academy was going to be a first in history. More than that, there was likely only one being in history, past, present, and potentially future that could achieve this. Well, *beings* might be a better word. Avo was a legion unto himself after all.

Shifting forward into time was a lot like being injected through the narrow tip of a needle the present threaded around you. The experience was uncanny for Avo's other subminds, for it felt like a part of himself got ineffably lost—connected in sense and awareness; but disconnected by relative location. As the district inverted with its twin, echoes were left across space and time, balancing any possibility of Rend.

The operation was a delicate one. Something that required days of focused planning, preparation, and short-term shaping. All this to create a window of opportunity while leaving Veylis blind to his true plan.

All this to bleed and savage the Saintists, only to ensure his own failure in the end.

[The Gestalt]

A series of Rendbombs ripped the tapestry open across critical Saintist strong points. The bombs were not meant to destroy but delay, and ruptures of space, geometry, and chronology oozed from metaphysical wounds lining the face of existence. The locations targeted were fast-response portals for golems; Omnitech surveillance outposts; and forward operating bases across the Warrens.

Alone, a few of these losses would be of little note — nothing more than a jab. Hit together, and Veylis faced an offensive she couldn't ignore.

Once more, her response was staggering. A mere millisecond after the attack began did Knots of golems emerge from golden pathways and wrinkles in the fabric of existence. They carried with them Rendsinks to soak the entropy, while Veylis struck. Her attacks were shapeless; came without betrayal by sight or sound.

Places in reality existed. Places weren't. Surviving subverts tried to hide in place and escape her notice; subverts died.

And while Veylis battled in the material, the Infacer fought in tandem with their partner, hunting Avo's Incubi in the Nether, who had been the first to be replenished after their scouring. They crashed lobbies and nulled minds in an aggressive blitz of Nether warfare, fully aware of their

coming deaths but unworried, for their thoughts were linked to dead-man-switch Rendbombs of their own.

Avo had stolen a page from Ori-Thaum's book. As the Infacer reached their static tendrils across the Nether, and burst forth in drowning floods of radiation, hundreds of Incubi were nulled at once, and hundreds of bombs went off.

The first of these bombs were created from Signal Rend. The others, however, were filled with the metaphysical waste heat of *Information*. As the first detonations arrived, the Infacer soaked the entropy into their Frame but were entirely unprepared to find their referential understanding of the world absolutely shredded. Suddenly, integers and letters ceased to hold any understandable meaning, their signs constantly changing, even within the Infacer's dataspace.

Immediately, Avo sensed the Neo-Creationist mind recede from whence they came, and a small sensation of pleasure filled him.

Nothing like using the Guilds' tricks against each other.

Other attacks occurred without rhyme or reason to onlookers. People suddenly turned hostile towards their former comrades and family, exhibiting impossible abilities in sudden explosions of violence and destruction.

Unbeknown to the ignorant, they were no longer faced with those they knew before, but a gestalt wearing their body. Avo, Corner, White-Rab, Draus, Chambers, Cas, Denton, and Kae wrecked havoc as one and themselves through another. They were minds within minds and Heavens upon gods, each supporting each.

Kae, in particular, targeted techno-thaumic reactors in Light's End. She wielded her experience like a weapon and formed the conditions for one collapse after another. Though a template, she too was to be instrumental in her own rescue, in the testimony at Scale, in the creation of Avo's greatest Heaven.

Despair had her in the beginning. Despondence. But now How did one process being captured by the single most powerful woman in the city? Now, after hearing what Veylis intended, after realizing that the High Seraph planned to use her original self to debase the Heaven of Love towards some end or another, the Agnos was finished. She had enough.

The Saintist wanted to use her to ensure their own victory. She would see them live under a sundered sky that would remind them evermore of their eternal folly.

To that end, Chambers agreed with her. Which was why people were exploding while genitals grew from behind the eyes, within the ears, and filled the throats of Guilders across the city. Lustaways failed. The rash spread. White-Rab, Avo, the Incubi, and Chambers worked in

tandem to make everything worse. As the sores spread, Paladins arrived mere minutes thereafter, pre-alerted to the risks and effectively taking control of the district thereafter.

All this while a mercury teardrop comprised of a ferromagnetic non-Newtonian fluid slipped from reflection to reflection, punching clean through Highflame's hierarchy as thoughtcasts went unheard and sessions went unanswered.

All this happened at once — in perfect *synchronicity*.

Faintly, the shadows across New Vultun shivered as ghostly feathers licked at the corners of reality.

[Alysim]

The chronoshift concluded. Alysim looked across from the building upon which he stood and saw a massive beam trailing up into the air, dissolving into flickering motes. He took a step forward over a reflective puddle—and promptly splashed down and across spatial reality. He emerged out of a vitrified wall a second after, twelve kilometers away from where he used to be. He stood within an operations center manned by three technicians clamped upon wall-mounted jack-stations.

Avo's influence over their minds was subtle, so as to avoid drawing too much attention. The Infacer was presently incapacitated, granting them an opportunity to move unimpeded. Their alternative plan was for Avo to engage directly and make it seem like he was trying to capture and weaponize the facility, rather than using it to smuggle Alysim over into Atraxis.

Beyond a thaumically reinforced window rose a constant stream of light, and from it emanated miracles of Radiance and Signals. Such would be the vehicle of Alysim's transference, and such was a vulnerability Avo hoped to exploit without alerting Veylis at all.

The facility was designated as **[R29 Legacy]** across Highflame's classified channels. There were others of its like, but this one was specifically made to monitor thoughtcasts and transmissions passing through the demiplane governing Atraxis Academy. The light of this facility passed through several Omnitech checkpoints before arriving at the existential cleft over Highflame's central Sovereignities in the Tiers, ensuring the thoughts and data consumption of Highflame's future cadre remained "uncorrupted."

In a strange sense, it reminded Avo the Unwhere used by the Paladins—itsself currently active, as D'Rongo and Abrel were making an imminent return. It seemed that Highflame was stealing tricks from the Paladins. Each one of the Omnitech checkpoints presented a risk as well, but with the Infacer missing and Veylis occupied, Avo seized the moment and clutched Alysim using his Techplaguer.

The Heaven of Signals manifested like an inverted broadcast tower, bouncing on its dish-shaped antennae. ***“Time to BOUNCE! UPWARD into time. Hm. The SLEEPER is close.”***

A splash of random numbers swept over the Chronicer, and a second later he was poured into the light past the walls. But Avo wasn't done. A weave of gold formed over him, and for the second time that day, Alysım skipped across time, hopping past each checkpoint without every being registered.

Carried by a beam of spreading brightness, Alysım dissolved across three thresholds before he was sudden shunted over into a new spherical plane near low orbit. Its expanse was one of roiling clouds and roaring fire, and a structure six hundred kilometers across and three hundred tall hovered in the epicenter like an ebony anvil indifferent to the lashing flames within a furnace.

From seemingly nowhere converged five sources of light, and they swam up the bottom of the structure into a lone pylon. From there, Alysım shifted through the complexities of pseudo-technological infrastructure to finally staggered free from a wall of consoles with circuits and chips connecting them to a massive slab of vivianite.

At once, the gestalt reoriented itself within Alysım while queeling the intensity of their assaults.

The first part was done. Infiltration was easy. Now, it was time to inflict some very deep, every actual wounds across the heart of Highflame.

Chambers chuckled in the back of Alysım's mind. *+Alright, consangs. Let's go make these Guilder half-strands wish their dad's squirted them over the edge into the Maw instead of ever finishing inside their moms. Or the vats.+*

+I believe the vats work that way,+ Denton added. *+Though they technically could...+*

+Whatever. It's a metaphor. The point is: Let's show that sow Veylis the worst fuck of her life.+

Inside Alysım's right pocket, Naeko gave an unpleasant cough.