

*If you live long enough, there will come a time when the future thins, and the novelty of your experiences grows fewer and lesser by the day. As you develop your skill, you realize most never learn, and even the ones that do walk a path tattered from the treading, making mistakes you've seen another lifetime ago, making decisions you have lived before.*

*Rejoice when such a time happens. Rejoice. You have arrived at a place where few will ever know. A place where you can apply history to the forecast of the future, and where your anticipations fall less in the realm of theory, and more along the lines of recalled memory.*

*There are only so many choices left to man. And sooner or later, you will learn to know them all.*

-Zein Thousandhand

28-1

Breadcrumbs

**[Veylis]**

Veylis had been here before.

Spreading her paths wide across her city, her world, she watched Rendbombs and nukes cleave ruinous scars across the city, their deployments growing increasingly targeted, inflicted to shape deliberate outcomes. She listened as thoughts were exchanged by those beneath her, the best among them training and preparing for the war they knew was always coming, the shameful desperately trying to find profit or an escape before the end.

Highflame ruled over an entire faction of New Vultun. Their control was even greater when all of Idheim was taken into account. Even with all the losses she sustained during the Fourth Guild War—a dishonor brought on by her former Seraphs and the Chivalrics while Veylis attended matters related to her mother—her Guild remained peerless when measured alone. Only Voidwatch stood above her on such accounts, but they were so scarred from the past that they refused to embrace thaumaturgy, thus barring them from any chance at true victory.

No. Once more, Veylis Avandaer found herself simulating countless futures while hidden wars raged across the city, connecting their variables to the trial that was soon to begin at Scale.

A calamity awaited at the crown of New Vultun. This could not be denied. Though even now the final trigger for the Fifth Guild War was obfuscated by developing crises and clashing factions, Veylis knew the face of her true foe for what was to come.

Veylis had been here before, prepared to fight a war against all the other Guilds, but what hadn't been the case was the Dreamer. What hadn't been the case was a being embodied of consciousness and conception standing against her rule through time and history.

Tracking the Dreamers many tendrils was nothing like hunting the echoes of her mother. Veylis' mastery over time alerted her to discrepancies in the tapestry and severe inconsistencies via her simulations. But where Zein was quick and escaped forward by skipping across the waters of chronology, Avo was vast and vaporous, sowing seeds of chaos without ever truly being present.

That didn't mean she was blind to where his many minds hid. No, the Dreamer was sophisticated but not infallible, the Infacer could predict their positions more often than not. But thoughts were fluid, and between her fingers he would slip, spilling away to bring his contagion elsewhere, to infest another place, or strike at another Guild.

Which was why she also refrained from striking him when there was an opening — he was proving more useful alive than dead; weakening the Massists far more than Highflame or Omnitech. Doubtless, he would try to assimilate Ori-Thaum and their allies for use against Veylis eventually, but such as a predictable play, and she would simply strike should he achieve his desired goal, steal victory from him using the very discord he brings.

The No-Dragons and their dowagers might prove to be a vulnerability in her alliance, but they were a useful weakness to have. The elites among the cursed daughters were ever-bellicose. Especially to one another. She intended to use them against Avo before he could claim them in any capacity. Misinformation was a double-edged blade.

As of now, she watched from within the Infacer's avatar as he spoke to massive flesh entombed within metal. The facade the Dreamer used for Stormjumpers was clearly stolen from one of the many egos he enslaved. But she could read the surprise in the Overheaven even through his disguise. He suspected her, suspected the Infacer, but wanted what they had to offer.

For a third time, Veylis had been here before. There were only so many ways one could react.

**+Assuming the node is trapped,+** Avo said, speaking plainly about what the Infacer was offering them. The mind had long extracted everything they could from the ruined mind of the Famine—though they recovered little due to the sheer amount of trauma sustained. What they granted the Dreamer now was a symbol of sentiment as well as a test. A test to see if he could restore what the Infacer couldn't. A test to see if it would make him go after Noloth harder.

**{Of course,}** the Infacer said. **{Though I will tell you that we did not apply much effort in the attempt. Do not expect to be impressed when you burn through the impediments I left you.}**

**+Then why leave them at all.+**

**{For the pleasure of increasing your potential frustration.}**

Avo grunted. **+Admirable dedication to the cause of being a bastard.+**

***{Oh, and one more thing,} the Infacer continued. {I have a list of names and Sessions for you as well. People I suspect of being Low Master proxies. Individuals that are not so unlike our mutual acquaintances, the Greatlings.}***

Avo was silent for a moment, considering the information. ***+Having me do the hunting?+***

***{Well. It is a family affair for you. And honestly, they bore me most days. Casting you locations to an informational dead drop. You can have one of your thralls pick the details up for you in case of paranoia. Spare you the need of risking yourself.}***

The Infacer was deliberately being condescending again, trying to provoke a reaction from the Dreamer. Sadly, the EGI was not going to get the argument they wanted; the Overheaven seemed more contemplative than suspicious.

***+Trial begins tomorrow. Expect to be seeing some of yours in attendance.+***

***{Some of mine?} the Infacer chuckled. A broadcast went up over the dirigible as another call for Stormjumpers to assemble went out. {Ah. Yes. I suppose you will see some of my “extensions.” Though I would regard them more as observers. I recommend against trying to claim them. They are more like one way assets.}***

***+And Veylis? Will she be attending? Or will I be having my second meeting with Osjon Thousand soon.+***

***{I think it would be most conducive to Thousand’s long term survival if he stays as far away from the Chief Paladin as he can. Seraph Thousand’s an optimist, but... hope in one hand, shit in another.}***

***+Didn’t answer if Veylis will be coming herself. Would be good to finally greet each other on neutral territory. In the flesh.+***

The High Seraph almost laughed at that. The damnable beast had a sense of humor. What meaning did flesh or vessels hold to creatures such as they? They existed in a place above the material, conceptual axioms unto themselves. But here the Dreamer was, trying to goad her into an old-fashioned standoff.

Pride. That was a trait she had seen in many of her foes as well. But few of them possessed a pride like hers. Few, but the Dreamer was close.

***“I will keep you in suspense,”*** Veylis said, speaking through the Infacer. The mind’s avatar sagged in annoyance; they never much appreciated her intrusions into their conversations.

**+Veylis,+** the Dreamer greeted. **+Will be expecting you. In whatever form you come. Recommend you do the same.+**

This time the High Seraph did laugh, and once more she let time carry her voice over to the Dreamer, using the Infacer as a channel.

With words exchanged, sabers rattled, offers made, and trade conducted. The end of this session of “diplomacy” was upon them. But there was still one more thing that the once-ghoul still had to say.

**+Have given me something I've been searching for. Searching for some time. Grateful for that. Going to grant you something in exchange: do not mistake the paths for certainty. The future is quick to betray.+**

And then his avatar winked out, and their EGO-ID thusly grew gray, disconnected from the game. Flashing surges of lightning splashed along the underside of the ship as the entire vessel shuddered. A theme song blared in the distance, the sound of Stormjumper descending to grace a new battleground. The deck was sparse of players now, with there being only a few hundred others aside from the Infacer themselves.

**{Well,} the Infacer muttered, {that is fucking ominous.}**

**“He intends to attack us,” Veylis surmised. “It will come soon and sudden. The trial will be his means of approach. He will either use it to unbalance us, approach us, or strike at us altogether.”**

All the simulations she ran in the past few days pointed to a single certainty, however. With all the activity happening under the Dreamer, they were almost certain to unveil themselves before New Vultun soon. Veylis and the Infacer held the last vestiges of their anonymity and preserved only to see if Avo could further trouble Ori-Thaum. As things were going, his war against the Silvers were likely soon going to take a most overt bent.

**{Right. Well. Best of luck to him. How is our Agnosi doing? Have they managed what you wanted with the Heaven of Love?}**

Veylis traveled across her own ontology, her Heaven so vast and complex that it dwarfed New Vultun by several dimensions. It took a great amount of Rend to simulate layered timelines, but more than that, housing actual beings within a chronologically constructed reality also made her a literal nation unto herself than merely being the leader of a great power.

She arrived at a fruit-rich forest sprouting from fertile black soil. Vines curled around a clearing in a rustic perimeter. Beyond it lay a sparkling facility forged from Agnos Kae Kusanade's past, and within its walls came laughter and the sounds of ambient companionship.

Her reconstruction of Paladin Dawton Marrow had been perfect. She had done her research into the man's life—relieved the critical moments of his past and mastered his personality on a level that even the original would find uncanny. As such, when she made the puppet, there were no flaws to his behavior.

His was a creation she carved into existence with perfect strokes of chronology.

At present, her puppet sat in a chair with his boots up on a dining room table while he regaled the others present with ribald tales from his time as a Paladin. Aside from him, though, the rest were all actual people stolen from the material world.

There was Kae, her mentor, his aides, and all of them laughed along in this place of reverie, enjoying a brief break to their work. Small particulates of static lined their Metaminds like silver sediment at the bottom of a clear river. The Infacer kept them from fully recalling how they arrived, kept their minds focused on the task at hand.

For now, their thoughts were primarily occupied by a single task — a great work: the restoration of the fallen Heaven of Love and updating its canons to bring a final end to the wars plaguing Idheim.

Nested in this prison-sanctuary, they all thought they were aligned. Members of a secret cabal in the process of doing something great; about to fool Veylis Avandaer herself. The Stillborn project was at their disposal, and rather than merely developing the thaumaturgical prototype Highflame desired, they were going to use it to do some good first.

“Alright, Dawton, alright. Enough.” Kae breathed. Her giggles finally quieted down. Veylis watched the little Agnos as she smiled, her face bright, her mood relaxed. She was such a fragile creature—but her will to guard her companions still demanded that the Infacer overwrite her mind to stop a self-nulling.

As things were, Veylis offered her far more comfort than the Dreamer ever could. And if all this went right, if her plot succeeded, Kae Kusanade would go from fantasy to newly forged reality and never know the difference.

But for it to succeed, she needed Kae to do the unthinkable.

A ruminating look swept over her face, as she projected a representation of New Vultun. There, just three districts away from Scale itself, was a demiplanar pocket titled **[Rash-Containment-Zeroth]**. It was there that the original rupture happened. It is there, and across fourteen million other points all over New Vultun that the Heaven of Love is contained.

So far, their access to this point was provided through survey drones protected by specialized Golems. In actuality, Veylis was simply feeding them details she obtained through her Heaven.

Another truth was this was an act of guidance, breadcrumbs laid across the ground toward a final decision.

A decision to be made by Kae Kusanade.

As the joy faded from her face, the Agnos regarded the containment plane with a slight frown.

Veylis' puppet performed its programming admirably. "Kae? You alright? Getting awfully quiet there."

"I'm fine," she said. A small sigh escaped her. "I just... we know the problem. We know that the canons contradict each other—that the damage dealt to the Heaven was internal. It was ruptured from *backlash*. Trying to repair all the missing pieces of mythology... the lives that might cost could number in the trillions—maybe more!"

"Patience," High Agnos Jakuta Ajayi said. He took a sip of rich brown coffee between bites of a sliced mango. "We can still identify the critical faults. If those are stabilized, we will be able to stop the rupturing and grant ourselves the time needed to finally resolve the damage."

"But not fix it in time to stop the next war," Kae followed.

The other Agnosi looked between master and apprentice in preparation for another argument relating to their methods. Kae and Jakuta fought nigh constantly while working, to the point of screaming obscenities at each other, only to brush those moments off as bouts of passion a few minutes after.

In that regard, both of them were quite cat-like: momentarily fixated; vicious while in conflict; immediately indifferent thereafter.

This time, however, Jakuta listened, either too tired or actually interested in what Kae had to say.

"We have the Stillborn," Kae continued. "We know its capabilities. Dawton even tested it!"

The Paladin coughed into his hand. "Let's... not be so loud about that."

"But it worked! You saw how the Imitators reacted and merged with Souls, right? Melting into the canons. If we can get them to learn or direct them in some way..."

A few specks of static resonated in her mind. "Direct them..." Kae mused. "What if... what if one of us *grafts* the Heaven of Love onto ourselves. What if we make the Stillborn a Frame for that exact purpose?"

Jakuta's drinking turned to a loud, prolonged slurp. As he put down the cup, he nodded

thereafter. “Kae. You should take a break.”

“I’m perfectly fine.”

“You’re absolutely consumed,” Jakuta replied with a slight scoff. “I understand your excitement... this thing you discovered, it could revolutionize thaumaturgy entirely. But there isn’t enough testing. The Stillborn theoretically can repair the Heaven of Love, but that’s still a lot of Rend to drain, and the life of the user at risk.”

Kae leaned in and whispered. “We can use the Maw.”

Her mentor leaned back, eyes widening. “The Maw?”

“Yes. The Paladins will be distracted with their trial soon and—the Heaven of Love should not have more mass than the entire waste output of New Vultun.”

Dawton was blinking rapidly. “Uh, Kae, I know I’ve been talking no small amount of shit to you about my colleagues, but they’re still might, probably, definitely notice something like this.”

“The Guilds are probably going to start fighting immediately after. You know how messy this trial is going to be. We won’t have a better opportunity.” She gathered herself before she went too far. “Look. If we can just integrate Stillborn—”

“Kae,” Jakuta began.

“--there is literally no risk in such an action. We can just insert the Frame, have it begin diagnostics, and extract it immediately.”

“Kae.” Jakuta’s voice bore an edge this time.

She stopped talking for a beat after that, choosing to eye Jakuta instead. “We have a chance, Jakuta. A chance that might never come again. We owe it to the city to try. We owe it Jaus—”

“Jaus is dead,” Jakuta cut her off. “And you must rest. No more testing or research for today. Please. For me.”

Six sets of concerned eyes stared at Kae. She wilted before the unified front, stood, and then excused herself.

**“The moment is made,”** Veylis said. **“Withdraw your presence from the others. Leave the memories.”**

**{Yeah, I know,}** the Infacer said. **{Stop treating me like one of your Authorities. I know what we are doing. I practically came up with the idea.}**

The High Seraph ignored them as she began to subtly extend her paths closer to Scale and down into the Warrens. ***“Increase her fixation on the thought. Make it all she can think about.”***

***{Veylis...}***

***“We leave a trail for the Dreamer to follow when he arrives. He is coming for her.”***

***{And you think he can breach your paths?}***

***“I do not think. The possibility exists: I will prepare for it. Should he get here, Jakuta and the others will give him a false trail. Continue with her edits. I will see to it that her Frame is prepared in time. We will give the the Dreamer a dilemma worth suffering when the time comes.”***

***{Or you might just end up real-deathing the girl without doing anything. The Heaven of Love is more than a little damaged. The High Agnos’ advice can go for you too, you know. We have the advantage. We have time. We do not need to risk so much.}***

***“It is not risk, but a calculated provocation. Upon the foundations of certainty, I build this masterstroke.”***

***{Stop talking like your mother.}***

***“She will approve,”*** Veylis answered. ***“Once she sees what I intend to do, she will approve. And she will fall to me. The city will fall to me. If this is done right, if my blows across time strike true, then love will be mine to claim, and where the Dreamer seeks to make his stand at the trial, I will see him led to the Heaven of Love if he wishes to save the Agnos, will see its structure restored by his Frame, and seize the labor of his fruits to deliver a final killing blow to win this war.”***

Silence followed. The Infacer just listened. ***{You are tired. I know that. I am tired too. But we need to operate with clarity and meticulous intent.}***

***“I am operating with clarity and intent. The variables are changing. And I will not underestimate the Dreamer. He must not be allowed to fester. I have what he desires, and he can manifest a desire of mine. The attempt must be made. All other paths lead to greater calamity. Stand with me, old friend. Shape his path. Secure our future. Thread this narrow path.”***

The Infacer just sighed. ***{Well. If this works, you will get your old boyfriend back, if nothing else.}***



***“His purpose is beyond what he offers to my heart. Through love, I will see the vastness of existence claimed, and through the Force-Breaker I will see the rest rendered impotent. Voidwatch. The Guilds. Oblivion itself. He will be restored of purpose and rightful place. And I will peel the weakness from him. Victory is near, Infacer. Victory, long before the Ladder is set to arrive.”***