

There is no higher sin than love, there is no greater transgression than to want, there is no greater failure of humanity, of existence, than our inability to face things as they are.

No more.

I will see us make this mistake no more. Love will hurt me no more. May only awareness ache when I think of those I lost.

New Vultun, I proclaim to you now, on the end of days, this day of all days to come, no more.

No more tyranny.

I free all of us from the tyrant that is love.

May a peaceful eternity follow thereafter.

-Kae Kusanade, Murderess of Love

27-13

Last Days of the False Peace (III)

-[Veylis]-

Veylis glided over the districts she held in sway. Even now, she could feel moats of the Dreamer's sickness trickling in, registered as spreading spots of infection. Loci went dark. Rendbombs were detonated at critical installations. Millions simply collapsed, their minds shattered and winnowed of shape. With each passing second, Avo, the Knower of Totality warred against her. And with each passing second, she appreciated his efforts more.

Finally. For a time, with the absence of her mother, she thought there a lull in her strain. A time for her to recover from all these centuries of focus. Not so. He was rapidly becoming a worthy replace in both angle and operational intensity. A different kind of adversary anyway. One that nursed her interest and vexed her strategies.

Her mother spent echoes like strikes. Was always escaping forward into the future.

Avo was a tide. A flood. An infection. Always assailing her walls. Always demanding that she remain focus or suffer losses. And with each passing day, the frequency and intensity only grew.

"His strategy remains unchanged," she back, speaking across her own path. "But his operational capabilities... his tactics. Those have become infinitely more varied and complex. The amount of Nether-based attacks striking our lobbies will likely surpass Ori-Thaum twice over before the end of this month."

{You sound way too pleased,} the Infacer said. ***{Like a girl. With a new toy to break.}***

“It’s learning how to break a being so unique that interests me. He has become an axiom unto himself: an Overheaven of Conceptualization, a God of Minds and Consciousness. What a grand Domain to govern. What a foe to face with time.”

A Knot of golems detonated within one of her factories, causing a chain of explosions before she cleaved its progression. Time moved like a blade in her hand, and across time she cut as well, her miracles serving as both weapon and canvas, splitting the devastation years away, never to register in the present.

A clean severance of fading gold left an entire complex bifurcated. Her riposte would go noticed by the other Guilds, but taking the damage was ugly calculus. She needed the facility preserved should Stormtree attempt to seize the Sovereignty. Every bit of production mattered.

In the Nether, the ghoul was spreading, launching traumas against fortresses, subverting critical personnel at an alarming rate. The Infacer had taken to routinely detonating entire areas, as if trying to gas a den of aratnids into submission. Through the integration of Omnitech’s Noosphere, they kept the Dreamer at bay with the thaumic encryptions, but that wasn’t going to be a permanent solution.

The Infacer assumed its quality of delay to last weeks to months at most.

Meanwhile, the best asset Avo had in the real was clearly former Guard-Captain Jelene Draus. The regular was unfettered. Gleeful, even. She died in the thousands, millions, soon to be billions, attacking various installations, fighting with brutal efficiency no matter what body she was woven into, no matter what equipment, what implants, or support she had.

Another reason for Veylis to exert her displeasure on the Chivalrics. Their incompetence cost her more than they could ever know. But part of her was pleased to see one of her former daughters so joyous. Be all the other Regulars as euphoric as she someday. Perhaps they will meet each other in glorious ends, dying to claim a final tomorrow. No greater glory. No greater end.

The others Guilds were also suffering, recoiling and confused about the random attacks ripping through them. Already, she could see Stormtree, Ashthrone, and Sanctus savaged by Nether-based attacks. Entire districts were dark. Phantoms flickered over their skies, glitching and broken, while entire divisions and departments lay dead or subsumed.

And despite the Inner Council of Ori-Thaum’s capabilities at contending with beings like the Hungers, despite the Longeyes’ ability to peer through all destruction, past, present, and future,, despite Sanctus's ability to shift across time, and Ashthrone ready to take everyone with them to a final end, they had no idea what they were fighting.

They knew nothing of the plague eating away at them.

As the new variables entered her Heaven, she resimulated her paths, and saw a **51%** chance that the bulk of the Massist Guilds would be captured by Avo before the year was over. That was, if she didn't find a way to put an end to him before that.

"There is one thing he's doing. Something that I can't quite predict," Veylis said, expanding her paths now, directing them across the Sunderwilds. Her core location was still enclosed in the city, close to her many protections in the Tiers. There were too many threats to risk being backlashed. She needed to do this as subtly as she could.

The sanctuaries were effectively lost to him. She could see them destroyed now; would it be a pointless thing. As would the murder of that unfortunate soul, Essus. Kae's memories depicted a man who was broken after the death of his son. Not vengeful, not fueled for change, not even driven to claim the Ladder himself for a chance at fixing this great injustice. No. Simply broken. A pity.

She would have to shape a better life for him, feed strength into both him and his boy so that they can face the life and every life to come. It would be a gesture of esteem to those who stood with the Dreamer. Something that would have never been granted to the man otherwise.

Alone. He was damned. Weak and cursed by predestiny. Only through Avo's choice was there true weight to his being. Weight to his existence. The same could be said for Aedon Chambers. The same could be said for countless others.

"Do you think he's being honest with us about Noloth?" Veylis finally finished her question. Looking beyond the borders, she studied the crawling tendrils of the Sunderwilds consuming the horizon. Seven hundred kilometers away, there was an enclave she needed to burn.

{Yes. I think that he despises them more than we do. The Hungers are an impediment, something we need to remove, completely reintegrate with the Ladder before its final deployment. For him, they likely represent something... disdainful. The murderers of his father. The mistakes of the past. A personal adversary. Or maybe he simply desires to devour them, to take their place and make better whatever dreams they had.}

The Infacer chimed with wry amusement. **{That last part, I think, is the most likely. I can say a lot of things about the Burning Dreamer, but his appetite stands out even among all the foes I have faced. What a palate. What a diet.}**

The EGI made a few biting noises, teeth clicking together, and Veylis replied with a noise that was almost a laugh.

"Then we should accommodate him on this," Veylis said. **"He presents both a unique challenge and also an opportunity. He can engage the Hungers on their own territory to take hold of the Nether."**

The Infacer considered her words. **{You wish for him to completely capture the Nether, don't you. So we can collapse it all at once?}**

“A potential path. But there are others I have planned.”

{Oh. Agnos Kusanade’s project. I do wonder how you intend to hurt him with the Heaven of Love.}

Naeko’s face flashed into Veylis mind, but she pushed his shadow away from her, raw discipline surmounting base emotion. ***“That’s not for him. That is for our victory. To cement our final alliance.”***

{Oh. He’s not going to like that. What you plan to do to him.”}

“He will come to accept it. I will have the rest of eternity to win his forgiveness, after all.”

{And you’re not afraid he might fall for someone else in the meantime.}

The High Seraph snorted. ***“One does not yearn for a lesser flame.”***

{Oh. Hello, Zein. Glad to talk with you again.}

“Do not mock me.”

{Do not speak exactly like your mother, then.}

The two shared a bemused silence thereafter. Understanding was precious. So was a reliable equal. ***{The No-Dragons are making me worried again. They’re talking more with Stormtree. Sending out diplomatic missions. Even pledging support to the Paladins.}***

“Yes. The Dowagers are plotting something. Something they do not wish to share with us. They are speaking through their plague forms. I managed to contain some subjects for you. Do you think you can decipher what they’re planning.”

{Maybe. It will take time. Time I do not think we have. Whatever the case, I think this is just another bout of internal politicking. A great many First Sisters are about to reach the end of their cycles, after all.}

Veylis began creating new paths for her erstwhile ally just in case. ***“Offer everything we have on the nodes of Noloth we captured. Give the Dreamer what you preserved of Defiance as well in exchange for a favor.”***

{My choice.}

“Yes. You are the one with rapport right now. He is your companion. It would see more natural if you did it.”

{Fine. Ashthrone is not going to like what is coming.}

“We should also identify and isolate the remaining nodes of Noloath as well. Expose them to the Dreamer and have him exterminate the Famines. Observe him. See how the remnants of Noloath react. See how he faces them.”

{Trying to collect some more variables to nail down how our ghoul might operate?}

“Yes. And I would most appreciate someone else dealing with the pests. Why not have it be done by a plague.”

{Not exactly the weirdest gig I outsourced. And speaking of using someone else to our advantage... have you decided on what we are doing with Vator and Uthred Greatling? They seem to have caught a bug.}

“Yes. A wondrous occurrence. I thought I had wasted them — the threat they faced now far eclipses their capability to contain, capture, or kill. But this is fortuitous. I intend to have them hold course. See what the Famine is planning to do through them. Perhaps Instrument Vator Greatling will surprise me. As he has done so many times before. Perhaps his father will rediscover some of his old mettle. Whatever the case, they can be used against Noloath and the Dreamer both.”

{More and more pawns by the day,} the Infacer sighed. {You always did like your sacrifice plays.}

“There is a weight to loss. It grounds you in victory thereafter.”

{There is also a benefit to not losing anything and just fucking destroying the other asshole.}

“Yes. But what kind of story would that make for.”

{A comedy. Or propaganda.} A comfortable silence settled between them briefly. {You know he'll also be coming for us in the meantime. He won't let you keep her.}

“I know. And I am counting on it. All paths lead to the trail. And so, at this junction, he will strike at us. He will attempt something while the city's attention is captured. I look forward to his attempt.”

{And what about his enclave? Are we still going to burn it down during the trial too?}

“Oh, indubitably. It will be trapped and waiting for us. This will be a useful opportunity to feed him some wins. Nourish his morale further. Shape his behavior and portray a false pattern for him to latch onto.”

{We will still need to make a proper effort. Actually lose something substantial enough to make him think we were not faking him out.}

“Of course. How about a few hundred Chivalrics on a quest of atonement?”

{Dear girl, I keep forgetting how much I love your pawn-plays.}

This time, Veylis did laugh. Then, the oddest emotion followed after. *Doubt. “Infacer.”*

{Yes.}

“Do you ever get the feeling that things are on the verge of going terribly wrong?”

{All the time. You?}

“With every new path I simulate.”

–[Draus]–

+Hey, Avo,+ Draus said, taking in the reflective lining the installed across a forth of the planetary ring. Most of its middle spines gleamed in the darkness of space, each of vitrified internally and externally, like polished studs embedded over an alloyed hoop.

She was sitting on the edge of the ring next to a mess of half finished radiators. Behind her hovered rings of circulating guns forming the shape of the Arsenalist, and beside sat the Simulacra, reflecting the glory of Idheim with its body.

“Everything,” the Simulacra said.

+Hm,+ Avo said, finally responding. Draus knew he was up here with her somewhere, trying to get his new Heaven to work. She felt more than a few tugs in the darkness. He was doing something to void. Made it mess with weight or something. **+Done?+**

+Almost,+ Draus replied, watching the world from behind the helmet of her Meldskin. Never expected to get so far up here. She wondered what it was like fighting weightless wars. She might just take up Only on their offer soon. *+The EGIs are connecting the Manta to the rings interior habitats. There are some unfinished facilities it can integrate with. Start pumping oxygen through the entire place. Get some hydroponics going.+*

+Good. Ahead of schedule. Still a bit over a day left.+

+Yeah,+ she said. The trial. That was coming. While all those different variants of her got to run around, one of her and Kae’s clones would be going in to jion the circus. But somehow, it all felt so godsdamned final.

Didn’t help that Veylis had Kae. Kae. An uncomfortable emptiness formed in Draus when she was captured. By the High Seraph, not less. Now, they were going to try to get her back. Avo

had an entire mad run planned, and Draus was supposed to run heavy diversions in the meantime.

The risk, as always, was high. So high it might as be suicide for most. But ghouls made a habit of telling the impossible to go fuck itself, and their cadre—despite being made up of freaks, rejects, monsters, and weapons—was proving itself to be...

Hard to kill.

But no one's luck lasted forever. *+You ever think that, that at any moment we can make another dumb mistake and that'll be that? You'll be dead for good this time?+*

Avo paused briefly, considering the question. He hummed within Draus' mind. **+Yes. All the time.+**

+Yeah, well, I've been getting that feeling more and more.+

+Are you developing a fear of mortality?+

"Fuck yourself," she said casually.

+Where'd this come from? Bored? Tired? Kae?+

+No. Just got a feeling. It's a hell of a feeling. I felt the same way when Loraea Greatling or that suicidal final op. We Orphans, we probably all had that feeling. Hells, a few of us joked about it, but we knew what was wrong. We knew we were gonna die for nothing, and yet all of us walked away and did as she said. Looking back, it feels mighty pathetic. What a waste.+

+Are you expressing dissatisfaction in the path we're taking right now?+

+No, not at all, consang,+ she said. *+I don't mind dying right now, not one bit.+*

Avo materialized next to her, taking the form of the ghouls he was. Echoheads attached to the open vents of the radiator as he sat down awkwardly beside her.

+Ain't been that long,+ Draus said. *+But it sure feels like a lifetime. Feels like I came out of a dream. Or a stupor. Like I'm not lost in the dark anymore. Up here? After all we went through? Yeah. Makes me feel a kind of weight. The kind of weight that makes me know what I'm doing is worth it and matters.+* She paused. She wasn't sure what brought on this sentimentality, but it was here. And she wanted things to be stated plain. *+I like what you did to me, Avo.+*

+I like the fact that we met,+ Avo replied, earnest and calm. **+Likely wouldn't have made it this far. You kept the beast at bay sometimes. Early on. The fight we had. The promise of your violence. Saved me from straying. Might've been Walton's plan all along. Still. Wouldn't work without you. You were something of my past. Something I could understand. Might've been what kept me centered.+**

+That, and you wanted to eat my eyes.+

+Yeah.+

They both snorted a laugh.

+You know something?+ Draus said, thinking back. +We never got to have a proper second bout. And now... well, you feel real, but it ain't the same. You're nothing but ghosts and thoughts and memories. Probably won't feel right to bleed you this way.+

+It can still be done,+ Avo said. He let out a slight hiss of consideration. **+Draus?+**

+Hm?+

+Do you want to fight a war against me?+

She cocked her head and smirked slightly. "Go on."

+Our copies. Make them an army. A thousand each. Fight in an open plain. Sunderwilds. Just who we were. No weapons. No powers. Just us. A bloodletting like no other. Other members of the cadre can watch. Losing side gets to have a last stand if they want. Or accept terms of surrender.+

+Last stand?+ Draus snorted. +When did you become a godsdamned romantic. Ain't you just about the eating.+

+Jealous. You got a glorious war during the Uprising. Culled ghouls. Fought Guilds. I hid in the Umbra. Hid from swarms. Nukes.+

+And it wasn't even you doing the hiding technically,+ Draus said. +It was just some other ghoul that your pa pulled memories from.+ A sudden guffaw tore out from her as she rolled her eyes. +Holy shit. You're stolen valor.+

+What?+

+You're stolen valor. You're stolen ghoul valor.+ Her laughing intensified. +It's too much. You're not even a real ghoul, Avo. You didn't actually fight in the war. You just got memories of ghouls that did.+

He looked down and bared his teeth. A low hiss of displeasure followed. **+Going to kill you. Eat your eyes.+**

+Are you now?+

+Going to kill you for making me think of this.+

+Hm. You remember what you asked me after our first fight?+

+If you felt real?+

+Yeah. I still don't feel real. But I don't think anyone does anymore. I don't think any of us will ever feel real until someone finally wins. Until this is over. Until finally there's something worth coming tomorrow. You and me, we are monsters and weapons. And when this is done, whatever we are now, it can't live in the future. It's gotta go away, or it's gotta be put away. But right now... right now we're the realest motherfucking things in this entire goddamn universe. That's what I think. I'll bleed with you, Avo. I'll bleed with you any day.+

He grunted and grinned. **+I'll tell the others. See if we can find a moment for ourselves. For everyone.+**