

*And so it was, with deception upon deception, tragedy upon tragedy, the slaughter of the Paladins was engineered far in advance of the actual onslaught.*

*Veylis Avandaer, daughter of Jaus Avandaer and Zein Thousandhand, made her play carefully, quietly, and completely. While most reeled and struggled to come to terms with the new world order in the aftermath of Jaus' death.*

*In the year 53 Post-Fall, chaos still gripped the stage of Idheim.*

*The Guilds were in disarray, each once meant to be a pillar holding up a new and unified world, now found themselves as disparate poles of great power.*

*No longer able to integrate or work together, they scrambled to fill in gaps, create their own industries, to flesh out and hole themselves for what was to come.*

*The first war was merely a skirmish, an engagement between forces not yet ready, cut short by Paladin enforcement and Voidwatch's techno-logistical embargos.*

*Short as the first year of fighting was, the death toll was high and grudges were already cemented. Beneath the shock was rage, and none knew better than Veylis Avandaer that letting matters fester longer would cause control to slip further and further from her grasp.*

*So it was that during the fifty-first week of the year, as the Day and Voidstar were on the precipice of eclipse and Salvation Day was to signal the year's end did the hammer fall.*

*A war that would last nine full years, leaving 44 billion dead and the Paladins reduced to a withered shadow when once they stood twice in force and cadre to any Guild.*

*With Stormtree still Saintist aligned and under the dictatorial rule of Naerya the Thunderclaimed, the Massist were at a disadvantage when the second round of fighting began.*

*And neither were the Paladins, who, though expecting a routine suppression run, were quickly cut down from within, butchered by those they thought were their own comrades.*

*Unbeknownst to them, Veylis had turned much of their ranks through manipulations of her mother's philosophy, exploiting deliberate failures under Chief Paladin Osjane Thousand's tenure to expose the frailties of her father's institution, and inserting loyal Instruments into the ranks beforehand.*

*Over the decades, the culture of the Paladins changed from within, and when the time came, they heeded the High Serpah's call over their own commander.*

*Cadres were butchered from within. Oversecs were compromised and nulled to a man. Brother turned against sister as the word of Jaus was invoked by both sides, all believing they were the true adherents of the dream, none surrendering, none capitulating.*

*However, though High Seraph's demonstration of rhetoric proved effective, it was ultimately her skill at arms that found itself wanting.*

*Her rumored lover, and once brother-in-arms under a shared master, Samir Naeko, entered Highflame space to speak with the High Seraph specifically, imploring her to cease hostilities, to turn from carnage and let peace stand.*

*None could fully claim what happened that day, but it was said that history itself was fractured at several points, and across the city, districts were unmade in their entirety as outbound missiles detonated anomalously at their launch sites, as Godclads found their miracles turned inward, as inflictors suffered their own wounds.*

*Two Sovereignties were deemed unsalvageable in the aftermath of this "talk." But when it was done, Naeko emerged alive, shaken, but ready to fight.*

*And the Paladins needed him, for in the darkest of moments, Osjohn Thousand, another of Thousandhands disciples junior to Naeko and Veylis both turned on his sister and killed her immediate successors as well.*

*Yet, when all was seemingly lost, all was about to fall, Naeko returned with his personal cadre—men and women he spent years burning death-farms alongside, and sorrow turned to burning rage as one massacre folded in on another.*

*Just as the traitors had caught the loyalist off-guard, so too were they unprepared in turn for the Force-Breaker's vengeance.*

*By the time Omnitech and Highflame forces completed their spatial encirclement of the Paladin's fortress, they found themselves faced not with open doors and what was arguably the most essential strategic hardpoint in the city seized, but all their assets dead to the final Godclad, and remaining survivors rallying for a siege.*

*And though the scouring remains a tragedy, it too stands as a statement, for when Veylis arrived in manifestation to deliver her terms, she asked for conditional surrenders and made no further attempts to seize the fortress, for the prize was already lost, and war was already frozen.*

*And though she had inflicted a mortal blow against the city's guardians, final victory still eluded her, for survival of Jaus' fist ensured another stalemate and—some would argue—set the conditions for Stormtree's realignment for their part in the betrayal.*

*-The Scouring of Justice (Documentary)*

20-17

A Crack in the Storm (II)

Words failed to convey the depth of Scale's defenses, so Avo let the simulation speak for him.

A miniaturized landscape took shape from misted blood and bubbling phantoms, its expanse eight-thousand kilometers across in all directions. Blizzards whipped up waves of tessellating stone, the vast ocean surrounding the fortress cube-like, the waters they were mimicking a propagation of endless edges.

Sharp angles and biting geometry were but the warning to what defenses lay within.

Tuning the opacity of the frost-made veil, Avo revealed the ever-shifting mountain that stood at the center of things. Its cliffs were as jagged as the waters themselves, the angles perfectly straight, the stones constantly slipping over one another, as if moving through each other on escalated belts.

Outside, the structure looked as if countless staircases meshed together. For every few right angles there were, an opening occupied the space besides, vast hollows into the anomalous stone-behemoth connected to lightrails and physical bridges, each shaped from the rime-stricken air engulfing the plane, some running up into the Elysiums—before the very Arks themselves.

From this, the Paladin's home base earned its namesake. Where one bridge would enter, another would extend from the opposite side, a perfect line threaded through two thousand kilometers of gliding stone. There were thousands upon thousands of crossing lines, and they were all sustained by the same precarity—able to be cut with a banishment of wind.

But symbology was greater than that. This Avo knew well from the Paladin templates he had flickering inside him.

Scale was more than the object it resembled; it was signifier and signified—the balance running between districts under different Guilds, and the Paladins who were once supposed to serve as the counterforce to any manner of disorder, be it natural or thaumaturgic, within or without the city, for citizen or subjects.

Such was the dream, but everyone knew the lament of hope.

“Trying to invade the expanse directly is suicide,” Avo said. “Waves will swallow you. Fuse you into the stones. But they're also directional. Shifts you away. Absolutely. Keeps things vector in whatever direction they flow.” Parts beneath the cubic waters came alight—a vastness of undersea caverns leaking down into New Vultun itself.

“Planecrawlers,” Avo continued. “More than just a complex construct. Connected to the outer defenses. Holds most of their golems.”

“How many Knots? Drones? Asset distribution?” Draus’ eyes were aglow with excitement. The red of her optics zoomed in and out as she ran her tongue across her lips.

Yeah. Avo understood.

“Unsure,” Avo said. The Regular cocked her head. “And no one among the Paladins knows either. Everything is in decentralized silos after the scouring. Even the space inside the fortress itself. You’ll see. Oversecs and divisions are their own thing. Details are not shared. Information is scrambled. That. Another another thing.”

At the very base of the mountain, a large spherical object with tubes running across the entire structure pumped mem-data like a heart. But it was not a distributor of energy, but a consumer instead. “LGI. Limited governing intellect. A wonder from a bygone era produced by the Guilds united. Now an administrator locked away inside a mountain. Last line of cognitive defense for the Paladins.”

“Ah, shit,” Chambers muttered.

*{That is not all,} Calvin said, its words broadcast by Avo using his ghosts. {It is also connected to a techno-thaumic reactor, allowing it input into the defenses. The mists were designed to be limited peers to ancient entanglement technologies. Effectively, as long as you are in the expanse of this space, it will notice you on a molecular level.}*

“Shit,” Chambers repeated, looking overwhelmed. “I don’t really get what that means, but it sounds bad.”

“Very,” Kae said, eyes glittering as if she had some preconception was what had just been said.

Strings of mem-data extended out from the LGI, rising upward into the air, where over forty million techno-thaumic and pure coldtech orbital and intra-spatial weapon platforms lay dormant. Each was wrapped in cold clouds of their own in the void, joining them to Scale’s airspace as well.

A staggered sigh escaped Tavers. The legendary squire rubbed her templates. “Well. I suppose that’s a pretty lightly armed defense grid for the voiders. I don’t think I’ll be able to skip across the waters with a billion squires. Hells, it’ll take an army of ‘Clads, and even then...” Her voice trailed. “How is their N-Sec?”

“Siloed,” Avo said. “But they have walls of Specters pointed outward. Perception lining everything inside as well. Would overload and shatter most of your Meta in seconds. Would

grind me away in minutes. Not nearly as sophisticated as Ori-Thaum. Compensated with brute force. Don't afford themselves any secrecy either."

"Great," Tavers frowned. "Not only are we dealing with a fuck-ton of heavy BVR and intra-spatials, Incogs aren't going to cut it."

"No directly," Avo said. Dissecting the structure of the inner mountain with a thought, he revealed the Paladin's main place of operations, and the cracks of weakness revealed themselves.

Scale, internally, was built more like an inverted tower. The bridges running between places in the Tiers were concentrated around the upper ten percent of the entire mountain. Checkpoints akin to the border wall ran down ten levels across the central spiral within, making each descent its own fort to siege. There were one hundred and twenty floors in total, comprised of workstations for each Paladin, training facilities, an internal depot, a spacedock, other sectors designed for miscellaneous functions, and the Court of Truth.

A demiplane within a demiplane where the trial was to take place.

That was located in the middle of the mountain, with an entire chunk of the structure dedicated all to itself.

The rocks within tessellated as much as the rocks outside. The space within was narrow. Claustrophobic. The matter was adjustable. Unbreakable. For any attacker, the interior of Scale remained a siege situation throughout, while the defenders were granted easy ambushes and active-shaping for close-quarters combat.

"Shiiiiitt," Chambers groaned. He leaned back and took everything in. "This makes clearing a megablock look nice. It's like some sick-fuck strategist somewhere decided to torture the ideas of siege warfare and tunnel warfare until they fucked a hate baby into existence."

Kae closed her eyes and suffered the analogy. "Chambers... Must everything be either sex or violence with you?"

"Well, you made my Fucktopia, Agnos, you tell me."

She lowered her head in defeat.

"Paladins were culled after the Second Guild War," Avo said. He gestured at the stations. "There are less than forty-four thousand workstations inside. Should be even fewer Paladins. Most are stretched thin across the city. Much of the space is empty. Besides for drones. Means Exorcists patrol more areas."

"Cool," Tavers said, sounding none too enthused. "That still doesn't help you avoid detection."

“We can’t,” Avo said. “Not easily anyway.”

The squire just stared blankly at the simulation. “So. You show us this. Make us all gawk. It’s shown. We’re gawking. Let’s get to the part where you give us something good and we take turns patting you on the ass.”

Avo grinned. “All these defenses are a nightmare. Saintists learned in the Second Guild War. But. We already have two assets on the inside. Subverted more perfectly than Ori-Thaum or the No-Dragons ever could. We couldn’t go unnoticed. But we can go unrecognized.”

He loaded the templates of Paladins Kassamon and Kare for everyone to see. The two stared at him in naked horror, tiny bodies tethered to his crackling flames, their figures manifested like quivering candles.

**[No,] Kare breathed. [You... you said–]**

Avo assuaged her worry. “Going to keep my promise. Not going for any of you. Just want an advantage. To see your Heaven of Truth. Ensure protections for my cadre.”

He looked to Draus and Kae. The populations of his templates generated other considerations, worries, and plots for how he could avoid inserting them in this situation.

Having Draus stand witness already sat poorly with him. It was a risk putting her in front of so many—especially Highflame. She would doubtlessly be targeted after—traced and hunted by a billion scrying eyes.

But the Heaven of Truth stood an obstacle unto itself. Even if he could create a clone of the Regular or the Agnos somehow, it would be an alternate. And he didn’t know if the Heaven of Truth would accept that.

Considering the absoluteness of Heavenly powers, the possibility was suspect at best.

Suspect wasn’t going enough. He wouldn’t lose one of his. Not to this performance. Not for Elder D’Rongo or Abrel Greatling. Not to the Guilds. He had given fire to his cadre, and by all the power he possessed, he willed them to continue burning, for their company had offered him more than meager survival and offered genuine insight.

No. Just like his Heaven, he needed a few variables that were under his absolute control. Hence the securing of the enclave. Hence the benefits of editing the Heaven of Truth’s ontology before the trial began.

It wasn’t a necessity, but it was a major advantage, and right now, with Denton and Cas absent, he needed to position everyone for maximum success and minimal harm.

“Concept I have is three-fold,” Avo began. “Want to access the Heaven of Truth. Learn its designs. See if I can change it.” Kae nodded along to his words, animated with excitement—and more than a little anxiety. “Also want to be able to access the bridges. Move through Scale somehow. Use it to strike at the Guilds without them knowing. Will be more long-term. Take more time to set up. Might be the single most major strategic position in the city.”

All that made sense. Draus nodded along. “What about the last thing?”

He eyed Kassamon and Kare briefly. “Want to include the Paladins in my gestalt. All of them. No deaths.”

Both templates recoiled at his desire.

**[Fuck you,]** Kassamon said, hyperventilating. **[I won’t let you enslave—Jaus, Kare, do something!]**

The junior Paladin paled and just stared up at Avo. It was a pathetic scene, seeing two simulated Godclads rendered entirely helpless, knowing that they were but facets of his mind, and he could command them to do whatever he desired—and even make them enjoy it.

“Can negotiate about that,” Avo replied, a slight hiss running beneath his voice. “Conditional. Optional even. But need something to contain Naeko. And the knowledge would be good for all of us. Good for the city too.” He brought the templates closer, and they were as if embers facing the inferno that spawned them. “Know what I am now. Know what I want. Know I’m the best chance the city has at cleansing itself. Have seen my actions.”

**[I’ve seen you do terrible things,]** Kare whispered. She swallowed and mustered strength—phantasmagorical though it was. Her back straightened. She lifted her chin. **[I have seen you torture people. Twist their flesh. Warp their minds. Because you were curious. I have watched as you wandered the city like it was your playground, obtaining enlightenment from other peoples’ suffering.]** She bit her lip now. **[I have seen you save the helpless. But I haven’t felt you care for now. Not truly. I don’t...]** She inhaled. **[I would not call you a monster. Not comparatively. But what you are... it’s not...]**

What she felt was raw revulsion. To leave so many lives in the claws of something like that was just horrifying. The Guilds were already bad, but he was incomprehensible at times—his lapses and ever-growing character leaving his ethicality shrouded in dubiousness.

Kassamon took a place behind the former trainee. “Look. I’m basically your puppet here. You know I’m not a good Paladin.” He winced. “I’m not even a good Godclad. But it’s too much. It’s too much power you’ll have.”

“It’s not enough.” Avo’s reply silenced both of them as he turned his awareness back over the

enclave. “There are five hundred thousand people here. I can kill them all right now. With a thought. A twitch. My Heavens will grow. I will tear entire districts asunder. Do it in seconds before anyone responds. Then. The Guilds will bury me. Or the Paladins first. I will sweep through ephemerals and lesser ‘Clads. Then I will be swatted from existence in turn. By paradox from conflicting canon. By power more asymmetrical than mine. By a foe of a higher apotheosis. By my own Rend becoming more than I can sustain.

“The Paladins are not enough. This enclave is not enough. If I am to devour the Guilds and grant deliverance—and consequence—to all who live, I will need more. Need to become more. Control more. And it has to be me. You know this.”

From his mind spawned other flickers—others he had killed and consumed. They faced the Paladin as templates bound to the same central ego, but also those they couldn’t protect, and the legacy of a world lost to promised glory.

There stood Syndicate scum, caught in the riptide of the undercity, victims and perpetrators both.

There glared Fallwalkers. Godclads of lesser stature. Tyrants turned vultures.

There stood Draus and Dice and Chambers as well. True allies on a path. Wayward lives bound for fates ruinous or glorious.

“We all must make a choice,” Avo said. “Going to let you have yours. But I will act. I will find my advantage. One way or another. Going to use Scale. Going to use everything I can against the Guilds. But with me is mercy.” He stared down at Kare in particular. “Mentioned my cruelty. It’s there. Less than before. But it’s there. Lapses too. But you didn’t mention yourself.”

**[Myself?]** Kare asked.

“You are my testament,” Avo said. “You are the future I seek. Egos preserved. Death spared. Consequence borne. Redemption possible.” He glanced at Chambers. “No tyranny of small egos but the flourishing of minds upon minds. Humanity unfettered. But not unleashed. Civilization. Perfectly balanced.” He fought the urge to grind his fangs together in satisfaction. “Like a *scale*.”

The Paladin bit her lip and turned away. Her hair bounced as she looked down, but Avo could already feel the walls inside her.

Knowing the right words to say to a mind you could grasp was a simple thing, but speaking the words didn’t feel so easy.

**[You want to use me and Kassamon to access the court?]** she asked.



“Yes,” Avo said. “To shape the conditions at the scene. And then. Want you two to place reflections along each of the bridges. Just outside Scale. Connect us to the Tiers. How does that sound for now?”

Kassamon and Kare looked at each other.

**[So,] Kassamon said. [The third thing...]**

“Leave contentions for later,” Avo interrupted. “Easier choices now.”

“Load me into the simulation,” Kare said, reluctance thick in her voice. Kassamon shot her an uncertain look but she just shook her head. “I can elaborate on the layout of the court at least. That shouldn’t harm anything.”

Kassamon merely swallowed and looked down.

The simulated map zoomed into the midsection of the mountain, and a vast chamber—well over the size of a megablock, with walls lined with podiums and alcoves for dignitaries and officials, looked over twin pedestals—where Abrel and D’Rongo will be placed. A vast statue stood at the center of the room, its design twin-interconnected hands, with one bearing and blade and the other, a feather.

Stepping up before the statue, Kare swept her gaze through the simulated room and shook her head. A long vertical crevice stood open at the far end of the room, the only way in or out, lined with scanners and thaumaturgic barriers.

On the day of the event, the entire room would be filled with prominent members of society, and major figures across the Tiers. All would gather to watch the judgment of Instrument Abrel Greatling of Highflame and Ori-Thaum’s Elder D’Rongo for separate—but tangentially linked crimes.

The evidence would be fed to the Heaven of Truth, and Draus stood a critical witness. Her, and other details promised by Denton.

Kae’s role in the situation remained murky, but Avo had suspicions she would likely be drawn in some form or another as well.

Standing before the interconnected hand, the Heaven of Truth came alight in Kare’s memories and gestured toward it. **[On the day, the Heaven will be channeled through this receptacle. But is actually connected to the LGI’s systems.]**

The limited governing intellect flashed again, and Kare reappeared before it.

The air around her boiled now as the large bulbous construct rumbled and shook. Faintly, Avo could feel his Conflagration quivering, his mind sinking deeper into Kare's, until step by step he found himself standing before the coldtech wonder for the first time, eyes trailing up the tubes as blood and fire painted a living portrait of what was recalled.

And then, the unknowable happened.

Motes of thaumically charged droplets of red flowed, forming the composition of Kare's false body as she reached up to cup the contours of the LGI as she had done those years before. The fire fusing her into the matter shivered.

Kare opened her mouth as if to speak.

But something inside Avo fell through.

In that instant, three conditions were met.

Thaumaturgy flared, fueling an active miracle; liminal subreality slipping over the tapestry of existence.

Thinning it.

A mind, perfect in its simulation and embodiment played a scene from the past; an ego wearing an ego.

Cognition absolute.

But the flaw was what triggered it. What no one knew. Not even Kare herself; the memory she recalled was a false one, and as she reached out to gesture at the LGI, her ignorance of the truth—the absolute truth of the world and the memories denied to both her and the master she was mantled upon nourished a dormant construct of counter-cognitive design.

A heartbeat later, Avo was gone, and the rest of the cadre's Metaminds with him, flicking out of existence like candles in the wind.

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You are not you.

You are many within one; a ladder of knowing.

But you did not know this.

Neither did your machine mind.

Neither did all the little fragments you collected and added to yourself.

You are a warmind.

You are Ignorance.

You will not know how you are now becoming a portal to a place though lost and locked.

You will not know how your passage has punctured the Nether. How Metaminds are winking out. How things will briefly return to the way they once were.

You do not know of the fox and slave cast out of their conversation.

You do not know of the shadows that have been following you in the city, turning the Guilds' attention away from you.

You do not know of all the schemes and deceptions spilled across the city.

You do not know where you are falling.

Only that it's up.

Only that it's a place grown above the "here."

You do not know how your impulses have been hiding from you. Slipping out from you. Waiting to be fed. To finally pull you across.

You do not know.

But you will know now.

For you are of a shape as the warmind.

And it is of a shape as you.

And on the other side of the Dreaming Unsea, you finally emerge, and you take your first true-false breath in a world unfinished, a reality undelivered, a dream abandoned.