

*Never assume. Assuming gets you killed. Do you have any idea how many nova-hot squires got snuffed because they “assumed” their target was dead? That the building was clear? That the middler was trustworthy?*

*It’s not a number you can reach even after a lifetime of counting.*

*Sometimes, things go wrong. Or something comes out of nowhere and blindsides you. Shit happens. Might not be your fault, but it sure will be your responsibility to figure out how to handle the problem. Or prevent it from ever happening again.*

*So. With this lesson comes a simple tip: if you really, really need to kill someone, make sure you do it absolutely. Null the half-strand. Destroy their body. Bomb their home. Slag every godsdamned thing they have. And bomb the ashes again just for posterity's sake.*

*With all the freaks and fiends lining the cracks of this city, the last thing you need is a reoccurring problem in the form of someone with a vendetta. Hear me now when I say having a nemesis isn’t sexy or cool like in the vics, juvs. It’s mostly a pain in the ass and a mark being too unprofessional for this kind of life.*

*I mean, who the hells is gonna want a squire that can’t seem to snuff someone after years of trying? Wouldn’t be me.*

-Quail Tavers, School of the Warrens

25-4

Compliments (I)

With Rend emptied, the enclavers restored, and the situation stabilized, another impromptu gathering had been called on the part of Avo. His near death and ascension made new options available to him, but the downside to such an evolutionary change was inexperience.

It took time for him to learn the nuances of his Conflagration—his warminds. It would take time for him to fully comprehend the limits and capabilities of his new form. Time that was not on his side, and with the Gatekeeper almost certainly aware of his presence, a shadow settled over his potential schemes for the trial.

The Paladins would most certainly be watching for him now. Veylis and the Infacer as well, if he were to wager a guess.

More worrisome was the possibility that they had already acted. White-Rab wasn’t responding to his session—was almost non-existent on the Nether. Running his visuals through a hijacked Registry in an Oversec also revealed nothing. The man had vanished into thin air. Avo took that as a good sign he was still alive; Highflame’s assets were highly capable, but conducting a snatch-and-grab on one of the best Necros in the city without a hint of noise was impossible.

That was even more the case if Veylis was involved: her presence was vast; encompassing; displacing. More importantly, the Assembly was still ongoing. All indications pointed to White-Rab going to ground of his own autonomy.

**[Or Emotion might be dissecting him from the inside,]** Peace helpfully suggested with a snicker.

Another welcome possibility. But instinct told Avo it was too soon after the last attempt. Too much risk, and White-Rab would have covered his tracks in the Nether as well.

Benhata sighed on Avo's behalf. **[You have too many enemies, ghou].**

**+Comes with the revolution,+**

Peeking into the mind of one of his recently subverted Bloodthanes, Avo filtered through isolated sequences of mem-data to ensure that Reva was still under watch. Her designation of interest by the Longeyes was pending review before removal only after the conclusion of the coming trial. Something that should insulate her from being outright attacked by Highflame as well.

Forwarding his concerns over to Tavers, the squire heeded the details and began seeking her own leads on White-Rab while still linked to Avo. She had plenty of experience tracking missing Necros, and her relationship with the man was only a boon.

In the meantime, Avo left a submind permanently assigned to the Oversecs to keep himself informed of any forthcoming "surprises." For now, the dispatched thoughtcasts came few and far between. Most Syndicates and gangers scuttled back to their crevices with the latest descent of Naeko's palm. The Guilders were much same way but further occupied by matters relating to the coming trial and the destabilization eating away at their peers.

New Vultun was akin to a tree startled bare of birds, but in the dark, Avo there knew to be a murder of crows waiting for him, and along its branches awaited other treacheries enacted through the vectors of time and other metaphysical domains. As such, he needed to take inventory of his boons and burdens; prioritize threats and objectives; empower and ensure the security of his cadre.

As the bulk of his consciousness returned to his avatar, he took in his assembled allies seated or projected around the information center. Chambers was grinning at him with giddy anticipation, and across from him Kae and her template were lost in their own bouts of reverie. Draus, disconcertingly, was whispering to her implanted gun in conversation with her awakened Arsenalist. A kitten blurred across the table, darting through the static shrouded forms of arriving EGIs, and Dice was content to let her pet run. Not far from her, Cas and Essus were in conversation, the former trying to bolster the latter's spirits in the face of mounting horror.

Marlowe's mental chuckle shivered across Avo's mind as the woman's phantasmal project threw her legs up on the table. *+Well, Avo, I gotta say that I've been a part of some pretty weird godsdamned clubs, but this one's something else. Animals running free. Bloodthirsty psychos speaking to guns. Cultist in our midst—+ Cas scowled at the media from a few seats down. +Quail Fucking Tavers on a lost-and-found job. And spook minds from the void joining in on the conspiracy. Any one of these half-strand's will be an interview or ten. And then there you are making them all look normal.+*

Avo offered Marlowe a flat stare. She remained uncowed, but her eyes narrowed to crescents as she offered drug-fueled smile.

*{Did he respond yet?}* Calvino asked. The EGI broke from the countless static orbs painted by inverted waterfalls of data rising from the information center. Settling next to Avo, it came accompanied by a few of Sunrise's drones.

**"No,"** Avo replied, knowing the EGI was talking about White-Rab. ***"Likely gone Incog. Will dive back in when he feels things are safe."***

*{Likely so.}* A resonance of mutual anxiety told Avo the EGI only replied to assuage concerns. It was unnerving how accurately the artificial mind continued to judge him all this time. *{Operative Denton is still on assignment. Her status is secure. For now. My recommendation is that we establish contact with the Chief Paladin as soon as possible. Considering the developments between you and the High Seraph, his aid will become invaluable to whichever side he offers it.}*

Avo grunted in agreement, but before he formally engaged proceedings, he took in the different EGI factions spilling out from the information center.

His Sprites painted the virtual forms of each attending mind, and each had a name attached to their avatar via a string. Said strings extended additionally to connect them with other members of their coalition, and the strands interwove to become three separate webs. Approximately eight percent were gathered under the banner of the **{Ethics Committee}**, and the next largest groups were two factions under the headings **{Arm the Ghoul}** and **{Crash the Star into Idheim and End the Mistake}**.

Unsurprisingly, "Only Way To Be Sure" was a member of both lesser factions, and was actively snaking fragmented sentences and coordinates over to Avo. From what could be deciphered, he was trying to set up dead-drops in the Sunderwilds for "restricted" weapons and technologies between challenges to "spar." Both offers sounded more than interesting; Avo made a mental note to speak with that one in depth after the formal meeting was over.

*{Oh, dear,}* Calvino hummed. *{I will light a candle to honor Kant's coming suffering.}*

Avo began the meeting with a thought that compelled everyone to attention. It left him as pure intent—not a word, but a feeling. Everyone stopped what they were doing and basked him with their perception. Even the kitten came to a halt on the edge of the table.

With a gesture, Avo called upon a miniaturized facsimile of Scale and New Vultun, but importantly, the Ladder materializing over the core of the city. With flick of his claws, its shell shattered in a splash of gore as his ghosts recoiled, adding to the effect. Softly, a scream rose out from Avo's being. A scream he reduced from its truest intensity. A scream he would never be able to forget. A scream he bestowed not only on his cadre and the artificial minds, but also every last citizen in the enclave.

The illusory scene drew close to a chain of writhing figures circulating the insides of the Ladder, to the abject horror, sorrow, and despair conveyed by their features.

Peace sneered and shook his head. His scab-ridden form briefly flickered next to Avo, arms folded, teeth bared in a cruel smile as he took in the Godbreaker's torment. **[You're a real dramatic cunt, creature. Do you know that? Defiance would be proud.]**

Avo ignored him and continued. ***"Jaus Avanaer is screaming. Has been screaming for centuries."*** Amusement evaporated from the cadre as they beheld their tortured savior. A whimper of genuine horror escaped from Kant as the mind's avatar flinched back. Cas made another crossing gesture and muttered something under his breath. Good. ***"He was betrayed. Broken by his daughter. Severed by his lover. Sentenced to absolute godhood and damnation against his will."***

He pointed at the ethics committee with an Echohead, waving for them to face injustice. ***"You have an obligation to your people. Responsibility. I accept that. Know that some among you might be... obliged to Veylis. Maybe even philosophically aligned. But I will make something known to you now: I cannot accept this. I cannot allow this. I cannot let Veylis claim the Ladder. Not for the fate of this world or 'paradise' to come. Not for what has been denied to Jaus."***

*{That—that's enough,}* Kant said, more burdened by the sight than most of its peers by far. *{Your point is made.}*

For a beat, Avo considered letting Jaus scream throughout the meeting. Force them to accept his torture as ambiance. But that would be an act of pressure; immaturity and a desire to inflict pain masked by righteous indignance. He decided against it; they weren't going to enjoy what he planned *next* anyhow. Clemency was to be offered. Avo drew the memories back into his being in acquiescence.

*{Thank you,}* Kant said.

***"Of course,"*** he replied.

Draus' eyebrow rose with her paranoia of his general pleasantness. It only grew when Avo did nothing thereafter.

***“I have called everyone here to show you the changes that have taken place in me. And to ask for... advice.”*** Paranoia gave way to genuine worry as Draus got up from where she sat and strode over to loom over Kae. Placing a hand on the Agnos' shoulder, she actively began grilling the smaller woman how much ego damage Avo actually sustained. ***“My encounter with the High Seraph has given me more perspective. Left me broken and reforged. Aligned my ego and fire. Helped me cross another threshold.”***

And then words ceased to be sufficient. He decided to show them instead, shedding the pretense of his mortality and doing away with the guise of his avatar. His sheath came apart as echoing fractals but his Metamind remained. His Metamind grew. His Metamind swept across the entirety of the enclave, across the reach of Idheim, unbound by the horizon or the limits of superposition.

A tempest of metaphysical fire breached the real as baseline reality was assimilated in pattern and structure. The symmetry of his world within was superimposed on the world without. The substance of matter unraveled around them as a current of ghosts swallowed them hold. Caught within a branch of metaphysical fire, they glimpsed through the ethereal channel embracing them and noticed other branches of a shared likeness crawling across reality, encoiled by slither dragons.

+Sequences,+ Tavers breathed, the first to notice the foundational sinews of Avo's structure. Following the onrush of memories back to its source, all eyes present turned metaphysically to a fissure of eldritch fire rising behind mountains misted by memories of past traumas.

Recollections of atrocity and suffering danced around Avo's ontological nexus in translucent streams, and impaled upon an ever-jolting Ghostjack, the flames that constituted Avo's mind and Soul were bundled into one by Chronological knots made from dragons. His cognition flooded swept across existence with each thought, and his ghosts, thaums, and splinters broke him from the chains of boundaries.

He was a searing scar at the heart of an incandescent sea—an animated sigil of divine fire crowned by towering barricades wrought from trauma and entropy. Through the gaps left by his cyclers extended phantasmal tendrils rippling with Soulfire infused ghosts. From them came pathways across the world—sequences, but more, with structures shifting like water. Along certain phantasmal limbs shimmered mindscapes and cities. Palaces, labyrinths, and more. Where ghosts passed did the patterns of the tapestry come alight, and where light fell followed the pressure of his perceptive omnipotence.

For the first time, Avo manifested the full weight of his Overheaven, and found himself delighted. Before, he was relative flesh entombing the power of absoluteness. Now he was the absolute wielding a deception molded from a memory of flesh.

### **AVO, THE KNOWER OF TOTALITY (CONCEPTUALIZATION) - 124,870 THAUM/c**

Silence came as the cadre's response. The enclavers, meanwhile, had to be bolstered by his ghosts—prevented from mentally shattering outright.

Needles of static snapped between the EGIs as they exploded into a uproar of conversation, but Kant just kept staring. *{You—you're genuinely a god now.}*

The Woundmother, Fardrifter, and Techplaguer drifted parallel to the sequence they occupied.

**"More,"** the Heaven of Blood cackled.

**"All,"** the Fardrifter stated.

**"YES!"** the Techplaguer agreed, dampening the theatrical affect. Avo was disappointed.

Draus squinted her eyes up at Avo's thaumic core and frowned. "That it? This all you got from gettin' your ass kicked by the High Seraph."

Avo's mood fell further. He reshaped his cognition to take some of the sting out. **"Was ambushed. Survived. She didn't win."**

The Regular's face broke into a taunting grin, and Abrel, Corner, Peace, and a few thousand other templates blinked into existence behind her, all sharing the same look.

His **Definement of Hysteria** shook slightly. Avo replied with a chuff of indignation and ignored the Regular. Ungrateful. Gave her guns back and still she taunted him.

**"Regardless,"** Avo said, moving on, **"I am an Overheaven. An Ark—"** As he uttered the words, a croon of sheer pain slipped from Kant as the EGI's humanoid avatar fell to its knees. That reaction made everything worth it. **"Wanted you all to know. All to see. All to understand the threshold I crossed. What to make certain you remain aware of who I am. Who you support."**

*{Honestly is a good policy,}* Calvino said, speaking as if there was nothing wrong. *{I commend such behavior.}*

**"I do try,"** Avo replied, playing along. He was half-tempted to drain the smugness from his thoughtstuff. He decided not to.

{Ark,} Kant said. The EGI turned its attention over to Kae. {Ark? Like... what the Guilds have?}

The Agnos—in a rare case of solidarity—accommodated Avo as well. Holding up her arms, she shrugged coquettishly. “It seems so. This situation is unique and unknown. Even to me. The process of creating the Guild Arks is shrouded even among the Agnosi, and I suspect the original architects also had their memories purged. But, from what I can tell... from all the Domains and Heavens Avo has internalized and... how *I* managed to help connect him to the Nether and interface with the tapestry of existence itself... It seems that Avo controls enough of reality within his ontology to create a functional world. Or forge an *alternative* history.”

{A-another one,} Kant’s voice quivered. {He—he’s pretty much another Guild unto himself.}

**“No. Not a Guild. Just going to be the thing that eats the rest. Want you all to see something. Understand the depths of my abilities.”** He turned his attention to Chambers. The man was practically about to explode out from his seat. **“Are you ready?”**

“I’m always edgi—uh, ready.”

Avo ignored that. Kant didn’t. {What? What did he just say?}

The EGI was ignored as the ghoul proceeded to the next phase of his attempt of his psychological offensive. Ghosts speared out into Chambers, and Soulfire splashed out from his Frame as they sank into him.

A cry of surprise came from Kant and Chambers began to laugh maniacally.

Countless templates materialized to protest in disgust, but Avo kept going. Chambers deserved a reward for his efforts, and Avo had the power to give one. Reaching deep into the man’s Soul, he linked his Conceptualization to the patterns comprising Chambers ontology and began his work. Slowly, carefully, with template-Kae guiding him every step of the way, he found the Heaven he was looking forward and heeded the slumbering consciousness that lurked within.

## **ACTIVATING CONCEPTION OF ONTOLOGY**

### **ACCESSING LIMINAL FRAME**

->ISOLATING HEAVEN...

->ISOLATING PATTERNS...

### **INFUSING HEAVEN**

Liminal Frame (V) - 110,870 THAUM/c

->[FUCKTOPIA] AWAKENED

Chambers threw back his arms as a storm exploded into existence. A storm made of swirling genitals and questionable fluids. Then, unexpectedly, the countless bits of dismembered flesh

swirled together to form a smiling face that looked down on the gathered parties and smiled. ***“Hey, everybody! I’m the Fucktopia! Sure is swell to MEAT all of you.”*** It promptly giggled.

Regret found Avo immediately, but Chambers was cheering, so that made it worth the.

**[No the fuck it does not,]** Abrel hissed into his mind. **[What in Jaus’ name were you thinking?]**

***+That this would be a new show of power to Voidwatch. And something to threaten them with if they don’t acquiesce to my demands.***”

Flopping cocks fell in a downpour as Chambers opened his arm to embrace the “rain.”

Horribly, the bulk of the penises leaned down to embrace Chambers as well. ***“Aw! There-there! I can feel you’ve had a HARD life.”***

Chambers sniffled. “I’ve been hard for so long.”

***“There-there. We’ll make everything better now.”***

Everyone else looked on in various forms of quietude. Some were lost to disbelief. Others confusion. One to abject disappointment.

“Avo,” Draus said, glaring up at him. “This shit better be done when I get back or I’m gonna find out if a disruption to your fire will still snuff you.” And then the Regular produced a gun out of thin air and shot herself.

Blood and brain matter splattered over the information center console. Only Way To Be Sure sounded like they were choking. A traumatized ache ebbed free from Kant. *{You—you motherfucker. You did this on purpose. This... this is an intimidation tactic. Calvino! You! Were you helping him.}*

Avo’s longtime EGI whistled innocently. *{I had no knowledge of such an event.}*

Avo hissed and laugh, and Marlowe cracked up as well. The thoughtcaster leaned back in her chair and sighed. *+This shit’s better than the circuits.+*

***“Glad you liked it. Because I want to talk about more pressing matters now. Starting with the Infacer.”***

Only Way To Be Sure suddenly stopped laughing.