

+Kill me.

I am serious.

Kill me.

Ten different canons we need to patch into the wall. Ten. Just today. That makes six hundred this month. And we still have two more months before maintenance. Madness.

I said it once, I will say it again: the Paladins need to rebuild themselves. They need to reconstitute the Fallraiders Department they had before the Second War. Why? Because the problem isn't with us! We fix the threshold—Maintain them! But where we have to spend hours upon hours researching mythology, science, history, culture, and the newly confiscated Heavens, all the smugglers need to do is find some little-known Fallwalker to imprint a golem with.

And even with all the raids and constant warfare, there must still be thousands of Fallwalkers in the wilds. More! How are we supposed to outcompete that? And even if we can, I cannot just block away everything. This is delicate work. I cannot predict what specific rules a canon might have or which Domain it might affect. "Why not just block that aspect of reality entirely Seagre?"

Because then you'll have things like the Borbonda Incident, which if I am allowed to remind you, killed fifty-eight thousand people before we discovered the error. I have memories of the incident. You have no idea what it looks like when a ship is allowed to pass our borders, but all the inhabitants inside are not! To save us both time, pour some jam into a can and then grind it.

We can't increase the number of maintenance times either. We are not adjusting a single Heaven—we are adjusting over one hundred thousand Heavens! One hundred thousand Heavens designed to cover an area of 14,680,333.1 km². One hundred thousand Heavens that cost millions of deaths to maintain and adapt each year. Staggered maintenance! Part of the reason why we dismantled the All-Wall after its near-rupturing back in 201. One hundred thousand Heavens all sustained by the Maw—which now cannot be silenced even for a day unless we want entire districts to be swallowed by overloads.

There are too many leaks for us to plug. We will never out-react, outbuild, or outmaneuver the scoundrels that use the darkness as a veil. If they are to be stopped, then their homes must burn and they must be choked at the source. And that means for me to succeed at my job, the Paladins must do theirs.

Oh, [REDACTED ENTITY DETECTED], saying that makes me depressed. I need some more joy.+

-Agnos Seagre Vyers, **[Re: Annual Border Update]**

19-4
Show Biz (I)

Quail's favor came back far sooner than expected, and by midnight that day, they found themselves at Light's End, in the district of Fountaintale.

Tucked just below the sheer climb where the heart of New Vultun rose to become the Tiers, Fountaintale and the adjacent districts in the Grave Valley Sovereignty stood out as handsome places to live even when contrasted against the rest of Light's End.

Comprised of ten districts separated by a divide in Layer Three, Grave Valley got its name through its urban layout and one of its oldest industries. With its high-rises, bridges, and sky lanes cupping the Sovereignty as a near-complete circle, its radius was shadowed by serried towers of polished metal and neon-tinged glass while in its shadow did lesser megablocks part the city streets into grids.

Vast concentric ad spaces broadcast new luxury coffins for those who could afford them. The classical ash grey wood—referred to as *maganhild*—was on discount and loci containing replicated sequences of the deceased came with every third purchase. The expansive hyper tube networks paired with well-dressed FATED slumming their way down the streets while accompanied by armed drones and heavily modified nu-dogs hinted enough at the Sovereignty's relative prosperity.

It still lacked any true public-use Heavens common to the Tiers but for a death-taxable place in the Warrens? This was as close to a good living as most would ever get, with Fountaintale in particular had the look of a place meant more for leisure than industry.

The colors that ruled its streets were gold and green. Flora of all shapes, shades, and sizes dominated the wide and pearlescent boulevards made solely for walking. Fields of lush grass parted rows of freshly cleaned marble, and even the blocks were of a mixed nature, their structures a fusion of towering trees embedded with golden columns and glass windows. As the midnight rain fell hard, the air was sharp with the taste of fresh petrichor, the ground aglow with soft tones of radiant yellow.

Stepping out from the shadows beneath an arcing bridge, Avo and his cadre moved with Incogs active and holocoats on. The DeepNav placed them near the upper corner of Fountaintale, in a neighborhood called *The Lots*. Their final destination was the third flat structure among a set of twelve that spanned a twenty-kilometer stretch. The cityscape leading up to it was closer to a nature reserve than a concrete jungle, and the housing here spilled out in the fashion of homesteads instead of megablocks or even prestige apartment complexes. Manors coated with fresh paint and fenced by quaint posts sat in the darkness between the foliage, lights out—the flow of the accretions inside slowed by with slumber.

A few minutes past midnight, the cadre stood among the scarce few figures walking the streets, moving unknown to the cloaked surveillance grid caging the top of the Sovereignty.

Chambers and Dice shared similar wide-eyed looks, but both were enraptured by different things. The former was trying to calculate just how much one of these range manors might cost, while the waif was fascinated by the greenery in general.

“Big grass,” she whispered, pointing to a tree.

“Nah,” Chambers said, blinking as he squinted at another house—this one placed next to an artificial riverside. “Tree. I think this place’s got some No-Dragon touch to it. This is a hell of a lot of nature.”

“Rated fifth best vacation spot in the Warrens,” Tavers said. “There are more than a couple of spots worth living. Even down in the Spine. ‘Slum havens’ the Guilders call them. A place where the lesser FATED can go and have a cheap and relaxing time should any of their business take them downward and away from the glory of the Arks and Elysiums.”

Draus, for her part, glared out into the dark, her augmented eyes a pulsing red, scanning for possible threats. “Godsdamned waste is what it is. Wide open spaces. No cover ‘cept soft wood. Shallow waters. Boxed in by higher buildings. Shit, this place’ll be fucked if the Saintists ever get pushed to defend it. Losin’ the outer perimeter means losin’ the high ground means losing more and more urban defense. Whoever build this place might wanna consider snuffin’ themselves, because this is the very image of in-facing killbox.”

Tavers snorted at that. “Trust me, Givoril Paibok’s too much of a blowhard to do that. He’ll tell you he’s the best architect on Idheim and then talk your ear off about the next imp-sink he wants you to help finance.”

The Regular turned to face the squire. “Sounds like you know everyone.”

“Everyone worth knowing,” Tavers said. “You survive in my profession long enough, and you’ll soon find out that everybody’s got a problem for you to fix. As long as you’re fine with wiping ass, there’s good imps doing nanny-work once you make it as a squire.”

Leading them out from the neatly curated meadows, The Lots greeted Avo with a deluge of phantasmal advertisements. Bands of newly released blockbuster vicarities revolved in the air over the complex, their subject material ranging from action, to historical dramas, to censored erotics.

Kae chirped as she caught sight of something among the lineup. “Oh. A new season of *Time-Cipher*.”

Pulling memories from his templates, Avo realized she was talking about a crime serial involving

a Fallwalker with a mysterious past and an even stranger Heaven. Apparently, as long as he could find a murder weapon, he could jump back in time to the moment the victim was about to be killed and stop the murder from ever happening.

{I suppose this is proof that humanity will recreate Quantum Leap in some form or another on a long enough timespan,} Calvino quipped. Avo ignored him.

“So,” Draus said. “What’s this Stage-3 you’re leading us to supposed to be? Some kind of... vicarity production studio?”

“The vicarity production studio,” Tavers replied. “Have you heard of the name *ThrillMax*?”

“Yeah. Entertainment. Under Highflame.” Draus paused. “Some of them asked to film a docu-series on the Regs once. Had a few of their Necros piggyback some of our killers on a raid. Soft little shits had a mental breakdown. Series got canceled.”

A wheeze escaped from Tavers. “Sounds like them. Ah. But that’s the way of these theater types. They live by selling people the best fantasies. Reality is just the ugly bastard next door they have to put up with.”

“Whoa,” Chambers breathed, “Stage-9’s projecting a bunch of Stormjumper game assets in the sky.”

“Oh, yeah, they provide most of the mem-artifact updates for the Kosgan Imperial faction in the game. Also, recorded a few pain-death sessions there so the players can get the full spectrum experience.”

“There is death even here?” Essus asked, his faint voice coming from the back of the group, almost drowned out by the pattering of rain.

Tavers angled her head back. “Don’t worry, consang. They’re criminals. Human trash. No one’s gonna miss them.”

{There’s a lie,} Calvino said, with a humorless hum.

The sides of Stage-3 were lined with animated posters. *Triumph at Ao. The Fury and the Will. Oath of the Seraph. Jaus: The Dream Lives.* Each was a major war drama or action epic laced with so much Saintist propaganda that it would take a Necro specializing in counter-memetics to extract all the mem-cons.

When they finally arrived at the front entrance, Tavers briefly dropped her Incog and cast a wisping ghost through the glass before fading from notice again. A beat later, the scanner grid went black as the door hissed open.

“Come on,” she said. “Set-Veylis is ours for the next week. The walls will be lined with ghosts acting as anti-perceptors. Once we activate the demiplane, everything will be perfect.”

“You’re sure this will work?” Avo asked.

The squire waved him off. “Listen, *ThrillMax* has recorded and sequenced everything from war movies to ‘Clad on ‘Clad brawls in this space. Now, it might not be a plane designed *specifically* for ‘Clad fights like those in the Supremacy Games, so be careful when you’re using something that messes with spaces. Don’t hit the borders or the Rendsinks connected to this place might go to shit, and then we’ll all—”

Avo noted a singular thought signature deep within the structure. “Quail,” he said, cutting the squire off as he reached out with his Sanguinity, “there’s someone here—”

The presence of his miracles was more pronounced than ever before. All around him, it was like reality was fracturing into arteries of blood, the veins forking like bolts of shimmering lightning. The mist that used to be was gone. In its place was a spreading storm that rattled blood, matter, flesh, and light.

Cracks traveled across the tapestry of existence as Avo reached out to seize his prey, his awareness exploding out to encompass the world. Within a heartbeat, he glimpsed the stranger’s form and absorbed the layout of the entire neighborhood into his newly enhanced Heaven of Blood. In the same instant, Tavers’ hand was placed against his chest while Draus aimed a glass-made pistol at the squire’s head, the glass in the room breaking unnaturally.

The squire frowned but gave no hint of fear. “Don’t. That’s Cala. Don’t snuff her. She’s ninety percent of the reason we can even use this place. She’s probably just wrapping up another insomnia stream for her thoughtcast.” Tavers sighed. “Didn’t expect her to still be here.”

Draus’ gun remained trained on the squire, and the Regular’s template inside Avo’s Conflagration shivered with anticipation, on the verge of violence. **[Don’t worry none, rotlick. Ain’t gonna let the mean ol’ squire hurt you.]**

He grunted to acknowledge Draus’ responsiveness. “Neglected to mention this ‘Cala’ character.” Cala. From his consumed memories came the likely answer. Cala Marlowe. Host of the increasingly popular FATELESS Thoughtcast. A strange figure in New Vultun’s media scene—a Guildler who seemed to despise her own kind, but operated under a Highflame studio contract.

“Cala Marlowe?” Kae asked. “*That* Cala Marlowe?”

“Yes,” Avo said, cutting Tavers off before she could answer. “Saw her. She’s sequencing tonight’s tracks. She’s not lying.”

The Agnos blinked. “Oh. I liked some of her musical recommendations. I didn’t know she was

under ThrillMax.”

“Wasn’t always,” Avo said, siphoning more knowledge. “Ancestray is a mix between Ashthrone, Sanctus, and Ori-Thaum. Ugly family history. Divorces. Public conflict. Emancipated herself at fifteen. Fled from the Tiers.”

Tavers regarded him then with an uneasy expression as if beholding something rotten. “Is that all from your fire?”

“The minds I consumed.”

She shook her head. “Creepy as shit. Anyway. We should head to our set and leave her alone. The last thing she needs to get embroiled with whatever it is we’re doing. Girl’s life has been rough enough as is.”

Chambers scoffed at that. “Isn’t she FATED? How hard can her life be?”

Avo regarded Chambers for a moment. “How hard can one’s father make it?”

With this sentence, the ex-enforcer swallowed as his eyes grew distant. He understood, and with it, his bitterness dissolved into dread. “Yeah, okay. Point taken. Life’s rough, consangs. Let’s go.”

The interior of Stage 3 was a series of filming sets connected to a long spine. Each room was locked behind armored vaults, each demanding specific memories and a physical key to unlock: both things possessed by Tavers. Faintly, Avo felt a presence brushing against his Domain of Space; there was an active Heaven in the vicinity.

Set-Veylis—named that way after the High Seraph herself—was a production stage dedicated to “high octane action and disaster immersion.” Acquiescing to Tavers’ commands, the meter-thick doors swung inwards and revealed a dimly lit room showing a ruined cityscape on a wall-sized screen.

“Welcome to the production room,” Tavers said, the lights inside coming on with a wave of her hand. Leading them into the room, Avo found himself studying the consoles embedded just behind the screens. It almost resembled a combat information center on a Highflame warship. Haptic interfaces flickered to life as he approached, with some dedicated to adjusting audio, others for visuals, and a few he had no comprehension of. He realized that most of the templates within him were warriors of some capacity. Few were artisans. Almost none were true entertainers.

There was something to be said about how unbalanced his mindscape’s population was.

The sides of the room curved wide with the screen, and he sensed the hundreds of jack stations in the leftward auditorium twenty meters away with his bio-magnetism. And the place just kept going. It was clear that some spatial miracle was affecting the set by this point. The interior space was far larger than even the studio outside.

As Tavers cast another command for the room to seal itself, a red light flickered over the vault as the words “**IN SESSION**” glared down at the cadre. “Alright. Here’s the director’s room. Production happens here, but that’s not what’s important right now. What you need is around the back and up the stairs. Once you surface, you’ll find yourselves with fifty square kilometers to work with and a ruined city as a backdrop. The walls around us are censored so no one will be peeking in, and this is a closed set, so you don’t need to worry about cameras. All and all, kill the fuck out of each other as much as you want. Just don’t trip the borders with a Heaven of Space or something.”

“I’ve always wanted to see the Heavens we made to…” Kae’s voice trailed off. “There is a techno-thaumic core here, isn’t there?”

Tavers nodded. “Yeah. Under the Layer. And connected to a cluster of Rendsinks.” She eyed Avo. “Don’t even think about eating it.”

“Too late,” he said. The squire glared. “Not going to. Tool loud.”

“Yeah,” Tavers said. “And I’ll be the one who catches hell. Anyway, have at you. Best option I had on hand. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is get creative.”

“Sometimes,” Avo said. Turning his attention to the ruined sprawl presented within the, he activated his Sanguinity again and felt his way around the back of the production room, up the stairs, and out from a bunker’s door on a small hill overlooking the entire scene. The place looked as if an imitation of the now destroyed district of Kososo judging from the concentric layers and defensive walls separating the area into quadrants.

[Fucking Kososo,] Corner muttered, suppressing a shudder as memories of fire and chaos passed through his mind.

“Fuckin’ Kososo,” Draus laughed, sounding more than amused. “Yeah. I know this place. This is gonna be fun.” She eyed Avo from the side as a dangerous expression crawled over her face. “Say, we gonna all be bleedin’ each other with our Heavens in a bit, yeah?”

“That’s the intention,” Avo said. “Practice Godclad on Godclad combat.”

{Something Threshold is unfortunately unable to simulate.} Calvino tittered. *{Or fortunately.}*

“Well, why don’t we make some sport of this then,” Draus said. “We do this round-robin style. Duels. Then groups. You. Me. The half-strand. Kae. Dice. Then, me and Dice against the rest of

you. You and Chambers against the rest of us. And then all of us on you.”

Avo clicked his fangs together with amusement. “It’s the last one you’re looking forward to.”

“Is it so wrong for a Reg to wanna bag herself a special ghoul?”

“Can she? I have your mind inside me. Won’t be fair.”

Draus sneered. “Talk’s cheap. Show me by snuffin’ me, pussy.”

She was going to regret that. They all were. Avo let a bit of hunger leak back into his system, sharpening his senses and spiking his thrill. “Fine. Let’s make sport of this ten. Best of ten? Death or incapacitation. Won’t even burn any of you.”

“Sounds nova to me,” Draus said. “I’m gonna scalp you, rotlick. Every time I kill you. So you can count the losses.”

“Will gorge myself on your bodies,” Avo shot back, never breaking his glare. “Make your template learn how you taste.”

In the corner of Avo’s eye, Tavers looked between the two with a growing frown and was about to say something before Kae put a hand on her shoulder. “They do this every other day. You’ll get used to it.”