

We are not certain what the paths are or how they are functionally expressed. All we know is this: of the 62,384,556 attempts that we, Stormtree, Sanctus, and Ashthron have made on the High Seraph's life, every operation has ended in abject failure with no survivors among the operatives deployed.

Despite the Sleepers we have seeded across Highflame's choirs and the personnel we have turned, we remain unable to procure any useful intelligence regarding Veylis Avadaer's Heaven. This, in part, is likely because no one within the Chorus knows either. Neither has any Agnos interfaced with Veylis Avadaer's Frame for the past four hundred years.

A possibility could be that she has gone without any adjustments all that time, but with the creation of new Heavens and Domains and from what we can judge from simulations of her personality, it is highly unlikely she would foreswear growth in exchange for secrecy.

The greater likelihood is that she herself is trained in the ways of thaumaturgy by virtue of being blood to Jaus Avandaer.

Constructing a simulation from the mem-data we managed to obtain from our fallen assets, the nature of the path seems to mimic the natural world in some fashion, with visual feeds perceiving a "rebuilding" of space, matter, or place around them. Considering the lack of resonance with any of those Domains, however, it is likely she is tapping a concept into far more esoteric.

Though no operatives have ever managed to return from the paths alive, the High Seraph sometimes sends the bodies of the fallen back to their families or parent Guild. We deduce that this honor is afforded only to those she finds interesting in feat or spirit.

Our... attempts at seizing mem-data related to ehr from Chief Paladin Naeko have also proven to be... less than fruitful. The assets we used against him remain metaphysically impotent—unable to inflict violence of any kind upon themselves, objects, or other people.

Whatever the case, my summation is this.

If the council demands it of me, I will do my utmost to prepare, orchestrate, and execute the operation to assassinate Veylis Avadaer. But my personal recommendation, formed from years of active experience, hard data, and lack of intelligence, is that this is a waste.

A waste of effort. A waste of lives. A waste of materials. A waste of time.

Veylis Avadaer is not a problem we can solve simply by ghosts or blades.

-Mirror-Concave Izu M'Grin

The Roads Untrod

The breeze brushing across the filth-coated stones of the hall whistled at Uthred, the noise shrill like laughter, mocking him for his deed.

It was all he could to avert his eyes from falling. He fixed the point of his vision toward the horizon, gaze climbing as building light poured down. Blood was pooling at his feet now. Blood, a shade darker than *her* hair. Her body was a falsehood, but the hollowness panged inside him, true and deep.

As the unnatural brightness coiled across reality, Uthred Greatling straightened his posture and reviewed the state of his combat-skin. His equipment was ready. His Rend was almost nonexistent. The only question was his spirit, and so he was to show his will once more.

For himself.

For the High Seraph.

A demonstration of worthiness.

“My resolve stands,” he said, pushing the words out from his lungs. He had no urge to speak, but speak he did, if only to burden his mind with a new focus. He needed to get the High Seraph to respond. Needed to—

“Why do you assume that I care about your resolve?”

The hairs on Uthred’s neck stood. *Her* voice came from below where her body lay, and for the span of a heartbeat, he thought his mind was betraying him. Then, she rose, rising tall and staring down at him. His body was trapped between two thoughts and lurched as if pulled by conflicting movements; he wished to turn away, but also to strike her down once more.

Her face remained a blank canvas. Her skin, wan like paper, regretted him without any discernable features. No eyes. No nose. No ears. No lips. Not even true complexion. Only her hair spilled out from the skull in threads of color, alternating between red and auburn while bathed in the caress of the light.

A dryness filled Uthred throat as he took a step back.

The *thing* bearing his wife’s contours tilted its head at him. *“Why do you retreat now, Uthred? Have you not cut me down once? Did you not state your resolve remains?”*

Mustering his strength, he planted his feet and refused to move. The monoblade remained extended, his fingers gripping the hilt tight. “I... *do.*”

“Then why did you kill me?” The question sounded so genuine, words of lowest contralto articulated clean and clear. *“You didn’t want to do it. I can feel it. See it in your posture. But you did it anyway. Cut me down. You seem to have strength confused with surrender, my love. Supplication to an outside power is not honor.”*

“Do not spit this poison at me,” Uthred growled, mind screaming for him to cleave the creature down once more and ignite the pieces with his Heaven. But his body was reluctant, and from her words grew a seed of despair.

“It is true. She knows. Of course she knows. She has been watching you. Do you know? For three days her eyes rested on you, peering at you from the light. Learning who you are now, how you have changed. If you have changed.”

“And so the High Seraph sends you to test me?”

“I am not a test,” the blank-faced thing said. *“I am but an echo. A reverberation of your past. A construct formed from alternative possibility. Nothing more. Never to be more. Never to be beyond the reach of her Heaven.”*

“Does she speak through you,” Uthred said, voice on the verge of cracking. “Is she using you to—”

“Does it matter to ask questions you cannot know the answer to? What worth is it if I say yes? What matter is it if I say no? “I” am of no consequence here. I am gone. Dust. Forgotten. But you are here. Present. Being judged. Once again, my love, I am not a test. I am just a conversation.”

A block of ice formed in Uthred’s gut. “A conversation? Someone for me to... talk to?”

She held out her arms beneficently. *“An altar for you to confess to. Tell me about our House. Tell me about our children. Tell me of our woes.”*

Uthred swallowed as his heart pulsed for the second time in a full minute, the state of his nerves betrayed. Forcing his jaw to loosen, he spoke again, and the words climbed up his throat like shards of jagged glass.

{Works,} Avo said, sending the message to his cadre as he wriggled free from the mangled body of his final victim.

Riding the waves of a traveling signal, he managed to **Techjump** himself within the squire’s exocortex. *Waveraiders*, they called themselves. Named after their specially designed golem, a construct capable of traveling across spaces beneath radio waves. A prize they stole by hitting

an Omnitech-associated outfit and something they now used toward the purposes of boarding and plundering Maw-barges.

Heaven gained: [Waveraider] (Signals/Space)

GHOSTS - [25,557,009]

THAUMIC OUTPUT - 16,062 THAUM/c

After finishing their session at the Lots in Fountaintale, the cadre spread their attention out across New Vultun in search of easy prey for quick kills. Connected via Draus' reflections, they were districts apart and a step away, with Chambers jacking and scouting through various lobbies, Avo venturing down to the gutters alongside Kae to set up for the border run to come. The Regular and Dice were out on safari while Tavers and Essus monitored possible smuggling routes.

To say their time was spent most fruitfully was an understatement. Draus and Dice moved fast and hard, covering thousands of kilometers in a day as they mem-locked vulnerable targets, marking them as harvesting spots. More reflective passages were left in place—a checkpoint allowing Avo's Conflagration and Heavens to reach through for ghosts and thaums.

Targets were ones of sheer opportunity, districts and Sovereignties away from each other, with their deaths masked by the severity of the harm.

Killing ephemerals no longer required anything more than a thought. Avo envisioned himself an industrial scythe carving across a vast field paved by Draus and Dice, victims entering his awareness and dying in the next instant. The effort required was less than a squeeze, not even the stomp of a boot when one needed to crush an aratnid.

No.

All it took from them now was a thought. A casual decision: *die*.

Of his templates, Corner and the other Fallwalkers gloried in the incremental genocide, with a few thousand lined for the butchering every half-hour or so. The rest of his cognitive population was not so enthused. Template-Draus yawned in boredom at the slaughter, and her reaction was shared by Calvino, though the EGI took to actively reminding Avo to finish his massacres quickly rather than playing with his food. The Paladins demanded to be deloaded until after the killing was done while the other templates whimpered and wailed. Elegant-Moon, meanwhile, advised that he use the opportunity to procure some additional augmentations to experiment with.

More than a few bodies grew deformed as his Sanguinity swept through them, crimson lightning lashing entire groups as the Woundshaper stole the traits of their biomods from them, downloading the organs into its **Remembrance of Flesh**. Budding tumors spread within lungs.

Tongues were shifted from the mouth to eye sockets, enforcers, gangers, and slavers tasting their own optical nerves as they screamed.

Canon: Remembrance of Flesh (V) - Allows user to memorize traits from biological organisms at a tenth of the thaumic cost; the biomass they memorized can be spliced before they are grown.

->Notable traits obtained: [Aqualung]; [Poly-ocelli]; [Neuro-Fiber Chitin]; [Octopid Nerve-weave]; [Echoskin]

The most useful of the mods came from battle-morph bioforms, but even then, they weren't anything special. If grafted into a body like Kae or Dice's, their combat efficiency would spike, but these were deltaware at best. The cadre could and would get better on demand via Calvino or Tavers, to a far lesser extent.

But collecting traits was wise. It allowed Avo to shift his and his cadres' biologies to accommodate changing circumstances. Or maybe just atrophy the body of a foe without killing them outright.

It was twenty minutes before dawn when Essus sensed something unseen— an unknown object passing through an invisible doorway he left as a metaphysical net between the valley of the Maw.

Diverting the Manta to respond, Tavers fed visual confirmation of another barge slipping back into reality, flying low to hide using the fog of material-devouring motes. Their following intentions were to simply trail the ship, but another surprise followed the first when a second entity was detected—its form only visible on the stealth ship's sensors: a nail-shaped distortion swimming in the radiowaves.

It closed on the barge before the Manta and materialized in a burst of radiation. Spatial waves splashed out from it and lapped over the barge as it loomed close, mounted guns flashing, sweeping through the misting bodies of the unprepared crew on the topside of the vessel.

Zooming in on the hijacking, there were questions about why the group was conducting the boarding action, but any hint of it being rooted in goodness quickly vanished when a heavy kinetic projectile punched out through the guts of the vessel, resulting in a persistent spillage of cargo. Especially refugees.

{Oh, look Avo, another chance for you to test one of your horrible reality-ripping abilities on a defenseless person who will die screaming as you flay their flesh and devour their mind,}

Calvino deadpanned, surmising what was to come.

So it came to be that Avo manifested the Techplaguer, triggering its **Techjumper** miracle for the first time in direct combat. Riding radio telemetry broadcast from the Manta, the Heaven of

Signals splashed into the golem's own area of effect, the metaphysical impact through the golem and Godclad alike.

Canon: Techjumper - User inserts themselves into a signal or system capable of transmitting signals, moving as a packet of data and materializing at the endpoint of the transmission.

From the ship's systems, Avo followed the flow of data to arrive in the pilot's exocortex before rematerializing his body.

Tear back into reality through flesh, bone, and viscera, Avo hissed a light laugh as the scene dawned on him: a ghoul pushing out from a parting skull. It was like a rebirth; an abbrant ghoulification.

{Oh, is that what the inside of my skull looks,} Kae said, disgust clear in her voice. {I... may want to consider removing my device now.}

Draus and her template chuckled as one, and both spoke at the same time. *{Reckon she's touchin' her exo right about now.}*

Avo set to work immediately, subsuming minds and deaths. The Waveraider sparked and buckled, unraveling as the Sanguinity spread itself. New knowledge spilled into Avo's consciousness alongside the new templates. Lives relived and secrets unveiled. Memories of other barges intercepted and raided greeted him.

Along with how they achieved their ambushes.

Beyond the New Vultun border existed a sea of encampments, mobile settlements of FATELESS amassed, desperate to get into the city. Here sprouted opportunity and predation alike. Smugglers looking to stock their cargo. Scouters seeking potential circuit fighters. Swindlers working the crowds, making what profits they can. And amateur Necros plying their craft, binding secondhand Metas to those with something worth trading.

Releasing mem-cons through the population, letting the invasive memories spread, and giving the Waveriders something to track.

"I see," Avo said, breathing as he grinned. Panic pulsed through his newest templates while his attention turned away from the other bodies moving inside the barge. "Using a bottleneck..."

"I see," the blank-faced thing said. Her voice was empty of judgment, without condemnation nor pity.

"You see," Uthred replied. The casualness of her words churned frustration inside him. First, he was taken into this place. Then, he was told to bare himself and make speech of his shame. In return, all he got was this? A casual statement bereft of any substance. "No. No, you do not see. Jhred is dead. Abrel is being held by Paladins for what she did in the aftermath. The Paladins—that bastard Naeko. He refuses me. The other Houses, they spurn us. The Meritocrats, they smell our blood."

Turning away from the imitation of his wife, Uthred swept his surroundings and searched for any sign of the High Seraph, a hint of her person. "Is this the admission you seek? A statement of weakness? Of the embarrassment House Greatling has brought upon you? Upon the Guild?"

Nothing. Still nothing. His jaw clenched. He fought to keep his temper controlled.

"She cares nothing for shame," the shadow of Lady Greatling said. *"Stand and deliver.' Deeds, Uthred. Deeds above all. Merit through action. Have you forgotten—"*

"I have not!" The words escaped from Uthred as a shout, the force of his bellow startling even him. A moment of shock followed, and he stepped away from his wife's shadow. "I have forgotten nothing. Except for you." Shaking his head, he looked around this place—the place of his greatest triumph—before returning his gaze to his wife. "I have served. I have served beyond faithfully. I have deeds enough. Glory enough. But faded victories are as varnished gold, and so the shadows of present defeat prevail. Jhred was... he was always your boy. Your son more than mine. He could not master himself. And I could not spare him my scorn. And so he left. And now he died.

"Abrel... she is born of us but bears my rage. She loved Jhred deep, and so, whatever happened... it must have..."

Uthred refused to sigh. He held the exhaustion inside himself. "What do you wish of me, Great Avandaer? Take her away. I do not deserve this insult. I have given all for Highflame. Do not taunt me with my wife's shadow."

"And why do you assume that I am an insult?"

"You have hair. A voice. But I don't know if it's 'yours.' And I have no face to recall when I leave."

"And is that something you want? To remember me? To have my banishment unstricken from the records?"

Uthred paused.

"It is possible. All defeats can be atoned. All blemishes can be smoothed. All shame can be turned to glory. You are in the paths—history retold. The roads untrod. Where did you wish your life led you? And what do you wish to become of your fate now?"

"I... I wish to wipe away our failings. Achieve redemption Redemption. To prove the worth of our bloodline once more."

"The failings of your son, or your daughter?"

Uthred's eyes hardened into a glare. "Our failings. Ours. I am their father. Their patriarch. The fault is mine to claim."

"So you say." the shadow of his wife hummed a shaking laugh, the low melody of voice feeding his ire. *"You know what is the come soon. The assembly. The trial. More than Highflame will judge you. More than our guild will see your shame."*

"I know," Uthred said. "I will face them. They cannot shake me."

"But your daughter can. Are you prepared to abandon her, Authority Greatling? For the greater good of the guild and the name of your house? What price are you willing to pay to show your resolve? To undo your shame?"

Coldness rose up his throat. "I..."

"What I—the voice of Veylis Avandaer—High Seraph, demanded a sacrifice you are not prepared to give? What then? What will you do then, Authority Greatling."

Uthred closed his eyes and centered himself. "...Would my position do instead? My life?"

Then, in an instant, the shadow of his wife went very still. *"No, it will not."*

And then the walls suddenly splashed inwards as existence itself fell like a hammer upon Uthred Greatling.