

{You have... no understanding of how far we have fallen. So far. The stars were but playthings. Batteries. Engines. The void was something to jaunt across. Mysteries were unraveled by the minutes and hours. All of existence was a canvas. We were learning to be painters... we were realizing what it meant to paint...}

But we could not agree on the colors. And we could not agree on the content. And we could not abide by the others holding a brush. So the strokes clashed. So the art smeared. So the canvas was burned.

You have no understanding of what was lost.}

-The Infacer to Jaus Avandaer

27-8

Behold the Nothing

-[Avo]-

+*Man, there's like jack and shit up here,* + Chambers muttered, illustrating most of the cadre's thoughts about space succinctly. +*I guess we can count the Sunderwilds, but that's like considering a fungal rash part of your balls.* +

"Always remember to scrub with soap and apply the proper creams if you develop an itch." Fucktopia concurred. ***"Remember, if you stay hard for your penis, it will stay hard for you."***

+*That's right, Fucktopia. Great message.* +

Several heads turned within the Manta. Cas, Denton, Kae's template, Draus, and Avo remained unamused. Marlowe—tagging along in person for the first time—just laughed, gleeful and aglow at the novelty of her situation.

"Target?" the Arsenalist said, materializing as a single autocannon pointed at Chambers and the throne of manifested cocks upon which he sat. Draus grumbled and warred against her impulses before responding.

+*No. No, not yet.* + The autocannon began making agitated bolt-racking noises in repetition. +*Yeah, yeah, I know.* +

One thousand and thirty kilometers above the city of light, the cadre observed a new frontier to occupy. The void—or *space* as it was formerly referred—was much as Chambers described: a vast expanse of blackness and bleeding entropy. Here, reality's canvas stood uncannily vacant, with patterns diminished, coldness dominant, and ruled by a symphony of silence. The only true points of separation were vast swaths of Rend-made scar tissue left on the tapestry, their

flowing like rivers and tendrils, crossing impossible distances between the high nothing and the madness of Idheim below.

Aside from a scant few Guilder drones and satellites skimming the dark, unable to notice the cloaked Aegis stealth ship, the void was a dormant place. It was an unoccupied place. And it was absolute perfect for Avo's budding plan.

The walls around their voidship turned transparent, while displays of perception augmenting icons overlaid themselves across the surfaces of the vessel. With but a thought, one could link their mind to the Manta's telemetries, perceive material existence across spectrums unfathomed by the basic human form; see further than even most Godclads could conceive. Today, though, Calvino commanded the helm of the ship and directed the cadre's attention.

Flashing reticles outlined the vagueness of a shape drifting in from far west of the planet's boundary. For a moment, it was hard for even Avo to make out what was coming their way, and even extending his sequences out to dip into the fabric of ontology, thought it was but a simple hulk of drifting alloy left abandoned in the upper atmosphere.

Then, its curving form came into shape, and Avo recalled a sight he saw months ago. A sight of holograms bath him, Draus, Essus, Little Vicious, and fallen form of Aurrie. There was an advertisement that called to them: a portrayal of New Vultun's hopeful future. A future that never was, thanks to Veylis' betrayal—and potentially even earlier.

Who knew how much damage twisting the shape of existence through the past inflicted.

[Who knows indeed,] Alysim said, his voice a distant echo, long past the point of bitterness. Through Avo, he enjoyed the present moment, nursing his wounded spirit on the sight of the infinite. **[They never trusted us Chroniclers.]**

+The voiders?+

[Yes.]

Avo grunted internally. **+Made the right choice.+**

[Such a thing is but perspective,] Alysim replied.

+Your actions have only shown me fear and tyranny. When have you made something better without the possibility of claiming more control? I have your mind. Know what you would have tried to do. I let your mind be your own. Doesn't mean I have to accept your delusion in silence.+

The so-called wanderer tuned his attention deeper upon the nothingness once more, retreating from the conversation.

+So,+ Cas said, studying the partially finished planetary ring with scorn, *+this was supposed to be the Guilds big project? A giant fucking disc around the world for them live in like angels watching from above while inflicting fire and ruin from on high?+* The ship's display zoomed in to the ring and showed the entire structure with crisp detail.

Only a skeleton of a structure was completed. The bones of the planetary ring were approximately a fourth of Idheim's entire size and were rowed by rails and columned by over four hundred thousand connective spines.

{At current estimates, the project was only four percent complete before resources for its construction were diverted towards other projects.} Calvino sounded almost mournful. *{It is a shame. The ring would have provided the world with a great deal more space and opportunity.}*

+Like they'd ever use that,+ Cas scoffed, speaking of the Guilds. Bitterness came from his mind like riffs from a guitar, constant, diminishing, rhythmic. Hysteria caught a glimpse of something from the man's past—something to do with his brother. The images were unclear, but there was pain, and Cas crying, watching a voidship burn while exorcist drones closed in. *+We already have all the power we need to make wonders planetside. It's not about enough. It's about want. And they don't want. They'll never want.+*

Calvino didn't dispute this claim, but didn't agree with it either.

Denton was characteristically quiet, but uncharacteristically studying Avo. He kept the form of Alysium aboard the voidship, but the bulk of his perception was directed wide, internalizing the patterns of the void alongside template Kae. Weight, sound, heat, and countless other Domains were vastly diminished in material reality. Signals remained. Bursts of radiation were ever-easier to sense. But there was something else—a persistent pattern that expressed itself as a branch connected to force.

{Gravity,} Calvino said. *{One of the four fundamental forces. Once upon a time, at least.}*

+Hidden science?+ Avo asked.

{Not quite so. The Agnosi and other terrestrial scholars already have something of an understanding, but deeper theories and experiments still elude them, and there are concepts that we would dread their knowing.}

+And us as well,+ Avo said, referring to himself and Kae as one.

The EGI hesitated for a moment. *{This will depend on your introduction to the broader cultures of Voidwatch. But I believe that if you are to expand your horizons to the void, you, with your Conception of Ontology, will glimpse things few might learn. More than a few, in fact. You have several objectives here, don't you.}*

+We all do,+ Avo said. A war was soon to begin, and he intended to do some very specific shaping during the days leading up to the trial. **+Understand that you would prefer it if we didn't weaponize the void. Would lead to too much attention turning upward.+**

{It would lead to some very pointed questions indeed,} Calvino said.

+But colonizing the emptiness. There is nothing against that.+

{Not quite. It is accepted that the void and the Lagrange points are Voidwatch territory. We form escorts and provide more efficient engagement sectors for the Ensouled of the Guilds during the sporadic Godhunts, but few Godclads linger in this expanse.}

[The faiths across history dreamed of heavens filled with color and glory beyond the reach of the sky,] Kae murmured. **[To imagine all that awaits is hollow was...]**

+Perfect,+ Avo said. The Agnos offered him an arched eyebrow. **+Paradise is ineffable. Most people cannot conceive of perfection. So they don't. So they speak only promise. So they hope for their dreams to be outdone. But here I see empty canvas. Darkness. Distance.+**

Light seconds ahead, a scintillating beam slashed through the distant void. Even hundreds of kilometers beyond, Avo could feel pulsations across the tapestry from Domains of Light, the Unwhere carrying Elder D'Rongo, Abrel Greatling, and countless more in Paladin custody in a permanent prison.

[Any chance I can convince you to spring me from jail,] Abrel deadpanned. Exhaustion crept into her thoughts. Her worry at her brother's compromise by Emotion was already extreme, and with each passing moment, the fear only grew.

Avo didn't respond to her, rather, he addressed the cadre instead. **+Here for a few things. Enclaves and other installations are compromised. Veylis knows our strategy. Will likely be reacting soon. Expect to be encountering her across the Sunderwilds on Idheim as well. Scramble to capture enclaves. Our advantage is the lockdown—can't be complacent. Can't risk them locating us. Pinning us. Capturing any more of us. So. Going to change the game again.+**

+Holy shit,+ Marlowe said, hugging her knees and letting out a girlish giggle. **+Are we going to be colonizing the fucking void?+**

+In some respect,+ Avo said. **+Calvino.+**

{Due to your attunement to the Nether, the broader polities of Voidwatch will be against interfacing with you directly. If we go a few light seconds further, cloaked satellites primed with

persistent disruptions will render your minds clean of thought and unable to progress.|

Draus scoffed. *+Shit. How long have you half-strands been plainn' to snuff the rotlick?+*

The Regular's comment made Avo smirk using Alysim's face. ***+It wasn't for me.+***

She eyed him briefly and realized. *+Ah. The Hungers, then?+*

+Famines too. Ori-Thaum. Makes direct means of infiltration impossible.+

+So, we aren't invited to the big party yet or something?+ Chambers asked.

+No. But we will build our own house right in front of them. Establish a new area of influence.+

+And how's that?+ Draus asked.

+Spoke to Naeko earlier. Willing to let us remodel his satellites a bit. Add some glass. Should make our own satellites too. Things that can be pulled into orbit. Fired from.+

"Good," the Arsenalist boomed.

+You're trying to take the sky from the Guilds?+ Draus asked.

+Much more than that.+

Reaching into his Soul, he pulled out a fistful of gnawing darkness rippling with synaptic currents. Heads tilted at him before realization hit Chambers first. *+Hey, that shit looks like the outside of the George Washington.+* Avo grinned. *+Oh, shit. You're going to rebuild the George Washington up here?+*

+No. I am going to make a Domain of the Void. And then I am going to hide us in it.+

Silence lasted for a beat, but Draus and Denton experienced simultaneous realizations.

+We'll be able to stay spread out wide across the dark. Use the Sunderwilds up here for cover and rupture selective strands leadin' down to the planet as well.+ As always, Draus thought like a weapon.

+You want to blend with the darkness. You want to mantle the emptiness itself and use it as a vehicle. Or adapt its properties to your advantage and create a natural envelopment of the Guilds.+ Denton remained ever the spy.

As the Heart of Noloth quivered atop his palm, Avo leaned in. **+I intend to create several new Heavens.+** To his rear, the Daystar shimmered its oscillations of radiance, but Avo felt a twinge of *something else* building. **+Will be learning aspects of the void under Calvin's supervision. Also engaging Only. Don't want to just set up a space colony. Want to set up a fluid network using the expanse itself. Use the sun. Use the void. Use the atmosphere. Use everything beyond the Guilds' knowledge. Strike them at our leisure. Hold no ground otherwise.+**

+Because even with all the shit that Guilds have, they can't possibly control so much of the void without running themselves dry.+ Chambers nodded, and the surrounding penises mimicked the action. *+Very sneaky. And this will help us mess up the High Fuckess, right? Make it hard for her to track us once we go snatch Kae back?+*

[Oh, Chambers,] the Agnos sighed. The former enforcer was a bit much at times, but his care was an undeniable fact. Her loss was a mistake to be made right by him, and tension gnawed at him with each passing second they spent preparing.

+Partially,+ Avo said. **+Mainly to ensure we have every advantage possible. Use canons alien to the Guilds. Concepts Voidwatch refuses to show them. Things Aegis is still deliberating on showing me. But can be learned.+**

{Yes. Such is the wonder of observation and experience.} Calvin said.

Denton frowned at that. *+It's risky.+*

{How so, operative?} Calvin said. *{I am not revealing anything. Just supervising and informing Aegis on a timely basis. If anything, I am performing my expect specifications.}*

+First priority is transference,+ Avo said. **+Planetary ring is partially finished. No life support. No source of food. But these can be constructed. Life can be sustained once we seal any leaks and claim one of the spinal supports for our own as a temporary place to stay. Cas. Need some demiplanes of sound. Something like the Armistice. Will be useful for habitats.+**

The faither took on a thoughtful expression. *+We're gonna need a lot of Rendsinks for this.+*

+I will settle logistics. You provide the music.+

Draus caught on immediately thereafter. *+You're gonna want to start movin' people from the enclave. Bring them across usin' my reflections and store 'em in the ring.+* Slowly, a chuckle followed. *+You... you're stealin' their dream. Your insultin' Veylis. You're planning on finishing the ring, ain't you? Gonna cut the Guilds bad with symbology: their dream completed by the ghoul who can.+*

Marlowe's eyes brightened. *+Holy shit, I just thought of the wildest fucking promo I could edit for this thing. Can you do it? If you can do it, holy shit, the city's gonna go nuts. The Nether will pop off.+*

+But you won't be keeping the enclavers and refugees there permanently, will you?+ Denton asked.

Astute. ***+No. Veylis will destroy the ring for my insult when the war begins. Won't bother trying to capture it. Too much effort. Not meant to last. Which is why I want it loaded with glass when that happens. My Heart of the Void will offer the rest of infinity as a refugee for the choiceless.+***

+Heart of the Void,+ Chambers said. *+Sounds nova. I like it.+*

+Going to be focusing on some high profile raids for that. Creating copies of all of you even right now. Focusing on targeting Godclads. Sabotage. Building up thaums. Close to Seventh Sphere. Close. Will be transferring thaums between the cadre. Graft specially shaped Heavens only we have.+

+The ghoul shares instead of having the entire feast to himself,+ Draus replied dryly. *+Well this is a novelty.+*

+Been sharing a lot, Draus,+ Avo replied, slightly annoyed.

+Then why are you the only ascended god out of all of us?+

+Might be able to bind your mind to a big gun powered by the sun.+

+Don't patronize me.+

+Not patronizing. Inspiration. Call it a Dyson Cannon.+

{Oh, dear,} Calvino said, the first hint of worry entering his voice. *{Avo, perhaps—}*

Draus cut him off. *+Wait, like the voiders used durin' their wars? The shit that glassed planets?+*

+Yes. Kae thinks it can be achieved through a variety of means. Going to advance your Heaven of Reflections too. More luminosity. Glass can focus the bright. Channel it into your Arsenalist.+

+Why the fuck didn't you start with that, then,+ Draus said. A growl of pleasure escaped her. An instinct expression of fear passed through Chambers' face. A ball sack patted his shoulder.

"It's okay, friend. The noise she made scared me too."

+But want to do something before any of that,+ Avo finished. Ghosts coiled out from him and reached out to touch each member of the cadre.

+Wow,+ Chambers said. *+What's happening?+*

+Finishing something I should have done days ago,+ Avo replied. **+We will be declaring ourselves to Voidwatch soon. Going to do it honestly. My polity will include all sophonts. People. Uplifts. Gods.+**

Calvino chimed with unease. *{There will be a great many minds made worried by such an act.}*

+That's what I'm counting on. Partial alienation. Gives Voidwatch cover from the Guilds. Gives me legitimacy as my own power. And lets me stand as the ninth choice. The past has scarred Voidwatch. Has scarred the Guilds. But in me memory flows. I am unchained from the shadows of what was. And through me will the gods learn. The gods change. The gods grow in a new garden above the weakness of man.+