

I accept my death.

I accept the coming end demanded of me for the greater good of existence, so that the next coming may be free of our taint.

I accept the destruction of reality to wipe clean the sins of man.

I accept my duty and task to bear the fires of sin and perdition, to infuse my body and bones with the vessel of our greatest tormentors, to defile their will as they have defiled ours.

I bear the Domains of their Transgressions. I festoon myself with false-sovereignty over Space, Matter, Force, Time, and other Esoterica.

I pray for my damnation, and I pray my damnation breaks the world.

And should the call come, I will make damnation known at the trial.

Let there be an end.

-Fatalist Kassadra Ashthron "Framebreaker"

28-2

On the Precipice (I)

-[Avo]-

+I choose safety. I choose peace. I wish for a safe place to live with my children. Let me have safety and sanctuary for once in my life. I want to live.+

+Peace. I'm done with all this. Give me peace. Give me light. Let me be.+

+I want to walk beneath the sky for once. Free of worry. Without being castigated for the dark inside me. I want to choose my own way. If that leads to my death, then so let it be. I will die as myself.+

+I, Kais, choose war. I will go with the Dreamer to fight this final struggle. The master was a lie. The master was weak. We were all slaves. Everything I have ever done in my life was a waste. I am the warrior of nothing, the guardian of nothing. But there is still time. I can still make a stand that matters...+

+I have no family. I have no future. Or had. For all my life, I was lightless. Dark-touched. Stained. I defied my fate. I have faced the weight of tyranny. But now I see the truth. Now I see that the sky above me is scarred by enslavement as well. This world—all that exists is stained. War. Give me war. Take me, Dreamer. Let it all burn.+

+The master shamed us. We lived all our lives thinking there was nothing above him. He lied. He lied to me. I bore him a son thinking the child was a blessed princeling. Now I know I have bred with a mule instead. I will take my child. I will see the flame myself. I will not see my son take on the legacy of a lesser. Dreamer, show us what it means to burn.+

Change had come to the enclave. Change beyond even Avo's predictions. With each passing moment, more enclavers declared their desires for the future. At present, it was an approximately seventy-five to twenty-five split between those who wished to follow Essus to establish a new haven for the FATELESS and those who desired to wage war alongside Avo.

Columns of glass were risen across the city, and across the dome, the Simulacrae swam, observing the people within the enclave with curiosity. Draus' installations aboard the planetary ring were complete, through the designated reflections, those who chose war could step through and enter their new life.

But those weren't the only mirror-constructs active.

Just beyond the reach of New Vultun, a vast, once transparent facility was aglow with luminosity, with a few hundred thousand beings prepared to immigrate into the enclave. They were figures remade in vessel and mind, and they came bearing the appearance of all those about to leave.

When the Guilds attacked, they wouldn't be able to distinguish these souls from the originals, even if they managed to infiltrate the enclave. If they were expecting minimal opposition, they were hoping for too much.

With each batch of enclavers who followed directional phantoms out of the city to their new sorting zones, some copies entered, assuming the lives their "original selves" were leaving. Men, women, and children all took up their old quarters and duties.

Avo watched as three steady ebbs of traffic flowed in three directions. The first were placed in a temporary processing facility along with the FATELESS. There, they would briefly be interned in housing units taken from New Vultun with more amenities soon to arrive via all the smugglers Avo and his cadre now controlled.

Once their population reached a million, Essus would embark alongside the Fardrifter on a pilgrimage across the Sunderwilds. Avo would remain in contact with the man, but he would not delve any deeper into his memories, and would not know where these FATELESS were bound. Such was the decision in the case of defeat or capture. Only if requested by Essus would Avo intervene—which will prompt another migration thereafter.

The warriors, meanwhile, found themselves in the weightless environment of a makeshift habitat aboard a planetary ring. The Manta's life support systems nourished the tower-shaped module

they were now living within and would find themselves settled into hive-like settlements fused along the rounded walls based on whom they shared compatible psychologies. When they were all present, Avo would trigger his Heaven of Continuum's Domain of Gravity for the first time.

And then he Ensoul, burn, and Desoul each and every one of them.

The dragon farm, meanwhile, would be transitioned with the warriors, but sequestered in their own special quarters. For them, nothing, effectively, had changed. And that was just what Avo needed: a static culture primed for developing a unified zeitgeist.

The last flow was the aforementioned copies. They were simply flowing. Occupying the vacant spots.

Meanwhile, over a dozen Rendbombs were already being clustered together at the lowest levels of the enclave in preparation of the concluding act when the Saintists finally broke through the outer defenses.

Aside from the Rendbombs, the lighthouses that once carved a path to the enclave had been upgraded as well. Their glass had been touched by Draus, structures rebuilt by Avo, their undersized had complex bioforms spreading out like roots in the unground thanks to Chambers, prepared to burst free when enemies got in range. They also hosted a whole suite of warheads, turrets, and missiles for more mundane foes.

And then there were the few thousand ghost-forged structures Avo hid in loci he scattered across the Sunderwilds. The Guilders would need to winnow themselves against the voice of Jaus before they ever got the real fight.

Jaus, and the prototypical canons for the **Strix Upon the Empty**.

The coming siege would also be a good time to test the burgeoning Heaven of Continuum as well.

Ultimately, Avo didn't expect to repel the attackers. Their numbers, metal, and thaumaturgical advantages would likely be far too great to overcome despite all the subterfuge planned. But that ultimately didn't matter. He just needed to inflict attritional warfare on his foes and piece the minds of Guilder, and find out their place of origin.

After that, he and his cadre would take to claiming their bases and installations scattered across the Sunderwilds. Hit as many of the outer-city operations as possible. Rebuilding what was lost beyond the megacities was a costly endeavor, and with New Vultun still under lockdown, they would need to divert resources from other locations to establish new footholds.

Resources Avo would ambush and claim for himself.

While this happened, he would let the Guilds bleed themselves raw “taking” his enclave. He would put a good show of losing. He even had golems prepared—modified their Heavens to match members from his cadre. They might even think he was losing Godclads on his side when the time came.

Such would be his way of war. He would hold no ground and forever build, forever grow, forever spread. The Guilds would be forced to burn their own homes to stop his encroachment.

+Never thought I'd end up seeing something like this,+ Cas murmured. His phantom was projected atop the Avo's chain-link tower, and he gazed down over the enclave alongside Dice and the uplift. The man had taken a brief moment out of his busy day managing his various cells across the city. Avo had taken to copying them as well, spreading their conspiracies wide and far on a level not even Zein could accommodate. *+A migration before the end of times.+* The faither chuckled. *+How the legends rhyme.+*

+A moment like this happened in the lore you follow?+ Avo asked, voice trembling the world, coming from everywhere. The uplift yowled at the air, annoyed at the volume. Dice simply petted the creature on the back.

+The broad gist is alike,+ Cas said. *+But the hero of that story was more a prophet inspired by a burning bush rather than a monster turned spirit.+* He shrugged. *+I'm not one to complain. Might as Old Moses was, I don't think he would have much liked parting any of the seas here. Especially since that might just end up tearing the skies open or reveal some kind of hidden horror.+*

The Sunderwilds was ever inviting to ephemerals.

“More following us than I expected,” Dice said, her perception narrowing as she examined the people. “Many want to fight. Many are angry. At the world. At themselves. Some are ashamed. Some just want power. There are going to be people on both sides of the city war. The rebels. The Pearlguard. They're not going to like each other.”

+A matter of passing mood. This can be bolstered by shared experiences. Shared struggles. Deeper understanding. I will make them face each other. But won't allow them to kill each other. They can fight. Exact consequence. But death won't come. They will understand the meaning of war perpetual.+

+Stupid. Just change them.+ The uplift thought.

Avo examined the augmented sophont. ***+This is change. But it is change they become. They live in the world. They shape themselves. I will not be their sculptor unless they ask.+***

The kitten considered the Overheaven's words and spat across Dice's shoulder. *+You're stupid too. Didn't you make me.+*

+Do you wish to be sophont?+ Avo asked, awaiting an answer.

+Yes. And I think everyone should be like me.+ Of the many possible statements Avo expected, this wasn't one of them. *+Better than them. So much crying. So much fear. Prey. Useless. Should be like me. Should look like me too.+* The kitten purred slightly as it raised his neck. *+Entire universe would be better if it was like me.+*

[Everything you touch is stained with your egomania,] Benhata breathed, as he shook his head. **[Incredible.]**

[No,] Elegant-Moon rebutted. **[It is simply how most cats are. And they are correct.]**

OBTAINED: CONFLAGRATION x1

Two more major sequences sprouted out from Avo as his consciousness suddenly expanded again. As his Definements grew stronger, memories flowed over from another submind. Apparently, he subsumed another Ori-Thaum Sleeper embedded within a Syndicate. Her original personality was forcibly triggered upon discovery, and Avo breached her Auto-Seance and drank her flames before they could be used for lesser purposes.

But it also reminded him of another fact. Everything was still in motion, and all across Idheim, the different powers were making their play.

In a hidden locus hidden in a crack running down a plascete wall, Avo, White-Rab, and a subjugated Famine of Peace examined the offerings they obtained from the Infacer.

Ruin defined the node of Defiance. What few sequences clung to each other along frayed strands of incomplete memory. In them, Avo found only a mess of sensations and concepts. In this, he determined that Walton unmade himself from within, detonating traumas behind his wards to deny the Infacer a final victory.

Such was why the core of the node was so structurally hollow. Everything there had been shredded apart before anything useful could be claimed.

[Say what you will about that fuck Defiance, the bastard always knew how to go out clean,] Peace snorted. **[Wish he didn't. Would've made culling his nodes a lot easier. And it would have spared me the indignity of being owned by his cunt-bastard of a monster.]**

The Famine of Peace was just jealous his other self-managed to escape the fate of cognitive bondage.

+Jaus,+ White-Rab groaned, examining the sequences alongside Avo. Their ghosts were brushing over the node, compiling what little of the mem-data they could. Splinters drifted through the wreckage, melding coherence back into the sea of discord. For now, Avo was focused on gathering all the broken pieces back together. With enough figments, he could run his **Definement of Pre-Cognition** and start simulating restorations, but such a thing would take time.

Time that he needed to devote to other matters for now. But this responsibility was not solely his own.

+Rab,+ Avo said. ***+Going to leave this with you and Peace. Can work on this when you have time. Will send a submind to aid you when I can.+***

+Synced,+ White-Rab replied. *+Got some other business you need to handle right now?+*

Some was an understatement.

+In the process of clearing out the enclave. Replacing the inhabitants with copies. The Guilds are closing in. Essus is preparing to lead the vulnerable and choiceless away. Some will stay with me.+

His progenitor whistled, mind anxious but steady. *+So. We're going to war again.+*

+Yes. One last time.+

+You know, I'm not sure if I believe that. I already survived through one of these messes—they keep going. The Guilds. The wars. The city. It doesn't feel like any of this is ever going to end. You showed us the Ladder and... well. Utopia is supposed to come after.+

Avo grunted. He knew what White-Rab was implying. ***+Victory is disintegrating. I know. The winning faction will fissure with enough time. People change even in imagined paradise. Can't be perfect. Humans can't imagine perfect—haven't even defined it well. Their notions are limited to satisfying. Or pleasurable. EGIs couldn't deliver either. Even with all their sophistication.+***

+So. It isn't the last war, then.+

+No. It is,+ Avo said. ***+It is because I don't ever intend for it to end. Even if I win. I will not take humanity's will from them in the end. I will not take their ability to be vile. To be good. I will not steal the act of retribution from them either. I will only end death. I will only unfetter consequence. From this day—and for all the days to come—order will be forged into a synonymous shape.+***

White-Rab was quieted by the statement. And the quiet, Avo left him for the company of Green River, preparing to shadow the Greatlings—and the Low Master connected to them.

Zein was kneeling this time when Avo and Naeko arrived. No slashes came across the reach of time. No biting remark came from the crone to set the tone of their conversation. Instead, she simply took in a breath and turned.

Studying Naeko, she ruminated for several seconds, taking in his armor as her expression turned inscrutable. Her combat skin was a mirror to his, though far reduced in aesthetic; defined by functional simplicity.

When her breath finally left her, Avo thought there was a misting to her eyes. Her translucent helmet made it hard to tell, but there was almost a twitch of emotion. Almost.

“You have returned,” she breathed. Standing, she left her glaive on the ground and stepped toward him. Avo might as well have been absent—in this moment, he didn’t exist to her at all. Naeko stood as if a barricade made from hyper-advanced alloys, expression stone solid.

She came to a stop when there was just a meter between them. “What are you about to do?” Zein asked. Her head was cocked, her voice was low. “What do you seek? I know that look in your eye. You are drowned again. Drowned in the best part of yourself. You wish to break something. Someone. Who?”

“Veylis,” Naeko said, voice flat. “It’s about time we end this. It’s about time I did what I should have done centuries ago. We’re going to stop her. I’m gonna take back what she stole from me. The lives. The people. The *peace*. And you’re gonna help me do it.”

And Zein had never looked prouder. “So. You are ready to kill your heart, then. To sacrifice your love for victory.”

“She was,” Naeko replied. “I’m just a damn fool who took two centuries to learn a lesson she already knew.”

“But learn you did,” Zein said. “To be a blade is... no easy feat. I salute you, Samir Naeko. I recognize your valor.”

Naeko tried to hide the worth he found in her words, but he betrayed himself by looking away from Zein. Strained relationship or not, she was still the closest thing he ever had to a mother, to a master that cared for him. Zein was poison, but when you were a boy with a hollow wound instead of a heart, anything that filled you granted comfort.

“You sound almost human, Zein,” Avo said, interjected. ***“Is solitude making you soft?”***

The old woman barked a laugh. She eyed Avo’s avatar and smirked. “I suppose I have you to thank for Naeko’s restoration. Ah. All these centuries. All my hopes that he could recover on his own; stopping myself from speaking to him. And here we are: my son, resurrected by my chosen monster; my most troubling foe.”

Avo chuffed with annoyance. Even now, she was insufferable. ***“Credit is mine. Not yours. Should have been there for him.”***

“And rendered him weak?”

“Made him strong,” Avo said, a slight snarl entering his voice. Every time he spoke to her, a bit more of his patience died. ***“Healed him. Helped him. We are not people. Not like him. He lies to himself. Calls himself a dog. But this isn’t the action of an animal. His deeds are pain-shaped.”***

Naeko was staring at him, posture rigid, but not speaking.

“You are obsessed. Only pleasure is in violence. Drugs. You are not alive unless you are in conflict. Unless death is close. Elemental. That is your nature. Veylis has that too. But more. But delusion. Delusion constructed by the highest intellect. Delusion nonetheless. You. Her. Me. All of us are more shaped by our inner mythologies. All of us take from the world. Take. But we don’t suffer. We don’t break. Not like they do.”

“That is what it means to be a Glaive,” Zein said.

“No. That is only part of what it means to be a god.” Avo regarded Zein again, watched her thoughtstuff churn, watched her fingers twitch. Doubtless, she was thinking of cutting him, killing him, dueling him across time itself. ***“Hm. You don’t understand. You never learn. But you will. Before this is over. I will show you. You and Veylis both. You will see. And you will know suffering for the first time.”***

“Hollow words, unless made true,” Zein said, taking a step closer to Avo.

“Enough of this shit,” Naeko growled.

Both crone and Dreamer faced each other, animosity held, but ignored for now.

“We don’t need to like each other,” Naeko said. “We just need to work together long enough to handle Veylis.” He took a breath. “We’re gonna be spending some time in here with you.”

“Truly,” Zein said, sounding surprised. “You wish to sharpen your skills before facing her? She is no easy—”

“We’re going to be setting you free.” Avo said, cutting her off.

And suddenly, Zein went very, very still. “Explain.”