

+Hey, hey New Vultun. It's your girl, Cala Marlowe here.

The big day is finally upon us. The Trial of the Century. Another one. Another big and ugly event sending us tumbling to an even uglier future. I won't lie, consangs. Things are looking messy, and the Guilds are rolling out their heavy hitters and slowly raising the banners. The guns are out, and the lines are being drawn.

We live in interesting times. And, well, and let's just say your girl... she might know a few more things than you do. Things are even more ghoulish insane than you expect.

More on that soon.

Now. To the main announcement.

We're going to be doing some special FATELESS Thoughtcasts straight from the belly of the beast. That's right. Per my invitation from the illustrious Chief Paladin Naeko, I have been cordially invited to the trial itself! Scale!

Back to rubbing shoulders and sharing the air with all the other colors. Can't wait. But you'll be right there with me, because I'm going to keep my session running across the entire duration. That's right, I gonna give you a direct line of sight to every little moment, every little act, and little revelation.

We might be looking at the start of the Fifth Guild War, but I'm going to be giving you all front row seats to the opening shots.

This might see me snuffed, but godsdammit, it'll be a moment to behold.

So. Don't just suffer history, New Vultun. Be part of it. Be with me at Scale.

I'll promise you this right now: You have no idea what's waiting down the line...+

-Cala Marlowe, The FATELESS Thoughtcast

28-3
Conjunction

Avo called, and the gods of his cadre answered, but the effect was closer to a synthesis than a command. They materialized along the threading branches of his sequences, and his presence burned over them, an ethereal shadow layering them in a second layer of parallel ontology. The way they blended with his ontology was equally uncanny, remaining paradoxically themselves but also him concurrently.

Templates slotted into their originals as burgeoning dots of consciousness sank into existing minds. Avo's ghosts circulated across a chain of Domains, the gods registering within his conception like beads on an abacus, while he became the strings upon which they moved.

Existence became a thing of three different realms: the first threshold was the space in the material where Avo resided; the second were the places occupied by his cadre, subverts, and burgeoning citizenry; the third and final frontier were his simulated realities. Entire places constructed from memory and thought, refined from being mere fantasy by the all-allowing flames of his Soul.

“I—I see it,” the Woundmother and Avo spoke at once. They spoke through him, and they felt through him. Themselves. Each other. At once. Witnessing existence as the Woundmother fed undistilled insight into Avo, and said insight circulated back into the god, into the other gods, into all who were connected to him. ***“The true shape of existence... the final architecture... I see it.”***

Blood flowed over Avo's encompassing sequences. **Blood. Matter.** Then, with a corresponding neigh, **Wind. Force. Sound. Speed.** Emanations from even more Domains became the ichor in Avo's being, and within veins of **Continuum** forged from **Time** and **Space** unified, they drifted across every single point of his existence.

Avo was a nexus. Avo was a network. The gestalt was him. But he was also part of the gestalt.

Each member of his cadre struggled to internalize the full weight of his cognitive load, their own consciousness lacking his Definements, his absolute self-determination. But slowly, that was bleeding over into them as well. From the Splinters he left, through sessions flaring like supernovae lighting trails in the Nether, manifesting as the arms of a new and hidden galaxy, he was spilling over, and they were spilling back.

Something in him changed then. It was more gradual than an epiphany, but also an experience beyond meager description.

Once, the war mind of Delusion allowed for the transformation of ghosts—a casual reforging of memory and identity by means of self-directed lies. But here and now, the Definition of Delusion began to shift and change, its original definition proven untrue. His Splinters dissolved and turned clear and fluid. Transparent even in the Nether. His consciousness became a spreading membrane, that began to coat the world around him.

CONCEPTUAL APOTHEOSIS ATTAINED

DEFINEMENT OF DELUSION + DEFINEMENT OF EMPATHY >DEFINEMENT OF SYNTHESIS

DEFINEMENT OF SYNTHESIS (XIV) - “I am myself. And I am another. I am every trait that I

encounter. I am all that can be imagined, and all that has yet to be considered. I am a dream-made material. I am a falsehood turned truth. I am within. I am without. I am my ego. And am all the egos encompassed in the world. I am all and one and any at once.”

Avo’s capabilities became those of his cadre, and at once, everyone was *him*, and he was *everyone*. They all remained, but their united gestalt *awoke* to become a conceptualized entity in of itself.

At once, the gestalt was attacking, living, moving, dying, learning, hiding, hunting, fleeing. Reflections became blood became wind became space was sound and space and light. They sank into the tapestry, and for a moment, their very beings gnawed at the bones of existence. With Rend climbing fast but their awareness blooming wide—spreading vast across New Vultun, the gestalt seized the moment and infused their collective consciousness into the Heaven of Continuum—the Strix Upon The Empty, a God of Minds Myriad.

A massive avian form shifted in the void, each feather a mind among its wholeness, the contours of its being outlined by traces of ghosts and absolute white. Its wings flapped, and a wave washed over reality.

The gestalt knew the shape of New Vultun—of Idheim—better than any singular entity. It assembled fragmented secrets a single mind could not connect, it noticed angles and firing trajectories beyond even the augmented senses of a Regular. In a moment of divine coalescence, the totality of the gestalt peered out through one of Draus’ copies.

She was within the body of a former enforcer, aiming an *Atrocity-Deletion* heavy railcannon from the back of a shredded cargo drone. Missiles were streaking after her. Golem Knots were slipping across space, squeezing into existence before her. This iteration of Draus wasn’t long for this world. Her attempt to guide a Rendbomb into a stormtree to cut off the potential escape vector of a Bloodthane cadre her other selves and a few Chamberses were trying to snuff was likely to fail.

But that was before the changing of the variables. That was before her newfound wholeness.

There was only a replica of Draus a second ago. Now, both gods, ephemerals, and a newly ascended Overheaven used her sheath as a conduit.

“Trajectory,” the Arsenalist, Woundmother, Simulacrae Replica, half a dozen other Heavens, a few thousand Incubi jocking into local surveillance and passing drones, and Avo said as one. The Heaven of Reflections required a sheen of glass to perform their miracles. But the gestalt was not just the Heaven of Reflections.

Through a portal two kilometers away, twelve Knots composed of Drauses and Chamberses hunting a fleeing group of Bloodthanes in their golems, crushing space down to a choking perimeter, barring the escape of their prey via layered demiplanes. The stormtree was their only

way out. Should they reach it, there were several hundred points they would be able to flee through.

But that wasn't what was going to happen.

The gestalt invoked its Definement of Pre-Cognition—simulated possible firing solutions to resolve its pursuers and reach the stormtree at the same time. Rend spiked again, and the paths to the future cascaded over one another. Back in the real, a shower of flechettes and missiles turned to splatters of blood as they were liquefied mid-transit.

Then, a firing solution was found. A single shot. To accelerate the cargo drone. To destroy the pursuing Knots. To slay the Bloodthane cadre.

The Draus-variant pulled the trigger to her railcannon. The Arsenalist flashed within her. Her proximal-explosive munition zipped out—and bounced off the rear edge of the drone. The projectile's moment jumped into the drone, and the sound barrier blasted apart, peeling the cargo vehicle's chassis. Scab-like hull formed around Draus. Shrapnel skipped against shrapnel, but their kinetic energy jumped with each impact, and their trajectories were also altered by the shadow of the Arsenalist.

As one, flakes of metal impacted the tumbling explosive round, and suddenly it was accelerating toward the golems again, its alloyed tip enchanted with blood, ghosts, sound, and glass. Tendrils of gore darted out from the shot as Draus' pursuers closed in. The Woundmother's **Sanguinity** bore a reflective tinge to it, and swept across the world as frequency of signal and sound alike. Somewhere in the blood, fire and flesh bubbled, and when stormtree golems drew close, the munition detonated.

And the explosion tore reality asunder as well.

Soulfire blossomed out from the overloading golems. The impact struck them from angles material, thaumaturgic, and mental. Their patterns were entirely encompassed—there was nowhere in time or space they could have avoided the onslaught.

In a sense, their destruction was fated. Inevitable. The gestalt knew where they were, what they were made of, and the destruction can found them was custom-designed to match and overcome their miracles.

Heavens splashed apart in gouts of divine fire. Wreck fell first like meteorites, then vanished into tangled ghosts before they slam down into traffic and inflict collateral damage. But the destruction wasn't over. The Continuum only grew, the all-binding membrane of **Synthesis** transferred the devastation over through minds, surpassing any laws ordained by time and space.

Concurrently, Draus' copy shot through one of the stormtree's portals, was shunted up along a forking bolt of lightning. Spearing from the Spine into Light's End, her fraying cargo drone emerged just as the Bloodthanes drew near.

Transparent tendrils zipped free from her mind and slid into them. The gestalt engloved the flaws and architecture of their words, leaked into their sequences, penetrated their memories, and overflowed into other vulnerable minds through rapidly triggered sessions. The same transparent tendrils also injected the unfinished blast waves emanating from the presently destroyed Knot.

Full manifested though the Bloodthanes were, they weren't prepared for Draus' copy to detonate the Rendbombs contained within her cargo drone. Nor could they avoid the ghost-injected devastation injected over from the dozen destroyed Knots Layers below. The entropy hammered into them first. Thaumic Overloads followed—but never finished. A second series of blasts tore their ephemeral forms apart as they tumbled free from backlash. Three among their number ruptured outright. One survived—until the gestalt transferred a donation of Rend to all their cyclers.

But not before draining them of all their thaums.

The Draus copy ceased to be at this moment as well. But that was fine. A note died. The symphony only grew louder.

Once more, the Strix triggered its canon and wove the entropic cataclysm across spacetime.

A few hundred thousand more places across New Vultun ruptured. Portions of districts and entire cadres immediately ceased to be. Destruction overflowed across compromised minds, into compromised installations and facilities, into suspected Famine nodes, down upon essential targets. It was ruination spreading like a plague through a chain of minds; it was a storm beyond the confines of causality.

A chain of calamities jumped and jumped again. Space and time were just playings to the gestalt so long as they threaded a bridge across the Nether. But it wasn't just a passage across space. It was alignment. It was a single rupture opening in the gutters, the Tiers, Light's End, over a cadre, within a techno-thaumic reactor, at once, at the same place; across a few thousand other places,

One target became another, and as Avo's **Synthesis** expanded, so did the horror, so did death and Rend climb.

GHOSTS - [1, 551,772,442]

LIMINAL FRAME (VII) - 1, 700,060 THAUM/c

WARNING: REND SPIKE DETECTED

>REND CAPACITY - 91%

VENT! VENT! VENT!

The gestalt felt its massive spike. It sank deeper into existence, displacing more of reality's patterns, casting tides of miracles impossible to ignore. But the attack happened so instantly, so synchronously, so *impossibly* that the near-million Guilder assets Avo just killed could do nothing more than die in ignorance.

Nothing could have prevented their ends. No force could have spared them.

No force, until Avo felt a counter-presence press upon the tapestry. It's weight far greater than his. The patterns of Chronology ground against his reign of Continuum, and a golden slash split the seams of existence.

The gestalt felt every Saintist asset it was trying to pierce come apart in the same moment. It was beyond their ability to react, and with the mind-junctions severed, the gestalt ceased operations. Diffused back into individual minds a microsecond before the High Seraph's second attack landed.

Avo snapped back to himself and shuddered. Across his conjoining pockets of **Synthesis**, he found his subverts reeling and gasping from the experience, his cadre trying to process what just happened, and eighty-percent of his copies split vertically down the middle.

Dead.

GHOSTS - [1, 789,772,233]

LIMINAL FRAME (VII) - 1, 864,355 THAUM/c

>REND CAPACITY - 98%

+*Holy fuck!*+ Chambers breathed, stumbling in mind and body. +*Did we just... how the hells...!*

For once, Draus fared no better, spent her time trying to center her mind, to comprehend what she just became, the feat she just performed.

One voice cut above all the others. One voice ripe with pride and excitement. **[Masterpiece. A second masterpiece!]** Kae Kusanade's template danced upon Avo's sequences, pumping her fist high while she danced a messy jig. She was too gleeful to be shocked, and too proud of herself to be overwhelmed. **[A miracle above miracles! A Heaven of Heavens! A god of gods! It can be done! It can be done and I did it! We did it!]**

But through her joy, Avo found himself shaking. This miracle-test took a total of eight-point-three seconds. Eight-point-three seconds, resulting in over a million deaths, the slaughter of countless

cadres and high-ranking Guilders, the annihilation of facilities, military, commercial, and logistical, the response of Veylis Avandaer.

Veylis Avandaer.

Somehow, she managed to riposte his impossible strike with one of her own. She located the ones he compromised in less than a second—killed them at once, then killed eighty percent of his cadre with her next blow.

How she managed such a feat was beyond him. A death anchor was scabbing over Essus in the sanctuaries.

She managed to hit him too, somehow. Cutting him down even through the border walls.

The Strix Upon The Empty was a Heaven of incredible capabilities, of miracles esoteric and paracausal. But Veylis parried his blow on reflex—then struck back with a miracle above miracles of her own.

*{Avo,} Calvin*o said, sounding uncannily stunned. *{Did you... What did you just do with your new Heaven?}*

For several seconds, Avo didn't respond, still reeling himself. Marlowe was hyperventilating. As were most of the surviving minds he was still connected to. The memory of the moment was too large for them to bear without being in full synchronicity with Avo.

+A masterstroke,+ Avo said. **+Managed to find apotheosis again. Once more. Once more. And it's still not enough. Still not enough... She's still...+** He gathered his focus and adapted his mind. He needed to invest more canons into the Strix. More than that, however, he needed to use it carefully. The Rend it demanded was absurd. But perhaps with an upgraded Hell, he could make it last.

[I'll get on that,] Kae chuckled viciously. **[We'll get her soon. We'll have her. I know it—I know it!]** She squeaked in hateful glee. There were few pleasures one could find greater than to be a chief architect behind your own rescue.

Several of his ghost-towers pinged him then, signalling a sudden push by Guilder assets. They were converging on the Sleeper fragment and the enclave concurrently. Across New Vultun, winding coils of gold shrouded Highflame districts while emergency casts flooded the Nether. This was... He managed far more than he expected.

{The politics wish to speak with you,} Calvino chimed. There was a staggered quality to their words. *{An emergency session has been called in Threshold. Your attendance is necessary, operative.}*

+I... Yes.+ Avo cleared his thoughts. He would need to release a **Pattern-Nullification** on the encroaching hostiles in the Sunderwilds first. **+Been looking forward to this. We will speak to them. We will.+**

{We.} Calvino's word was between question and statement.

+More than myself now. Much more.+

{I know,} the EGI murmured. {I think... I felt a part of you spill over.}

Once again, Avo fell silent at that.

Naeko's halo flashed violently as the Chief Paladin's expressions went from incredulous, to exhausted, to apathetic. "Avo. What the fuck did you just do? Exorcists say there are a few hundred thousand ruptures detected across the Warrens. And what was... that pale glowy shit coming out from you earlier?"

The Overheaven let out an overwhelmed hiss. **+Was testing a new Heaven. For the trial. Worked a bit better than I expected.+**

As he mastered himself, he caught Zein staring at him. Unblinking. The crone had gone stone still as she took him in.

"The was not Chronology," she whispered. "That was not Space either. What have you discovered, Plague? What Domain did you just wield?"

A chuckle escaped Avo before he could help himself. He didn't answer. Instead, he made a separate statement altogether. **"Going to start moving Alysium now. Have new options for the Axtarxis run. New options. Can make the loss look even better. Even better..."**

"You alright?" Naeko said, looking at Avo with uncertainty.

"Never... never better." Avo twitched.

The Chief Paladin shared a look with Zein. Neither believed him.

–[Veylis]–

{Alright. What the fuck was that.} the Infacer muttered.

Veylis cocooned her districts and Godclads in thin lattices of Chronology as she surveyed the damage. The attack had come so sudden, even she was caught by surprise. It wasn't even within her paths until five hundred thousand lives were already lost. They all died at once—consumed without hint nor reason.

Only honed reflex and instinct prevented her from suffering greater losses. It was the Dreamer. It had to be. She knew it. And so she struck, killing all her Heaven deemed likely compromises, unmaking the once-ghoul's pathway toward greater harm.

Her second cut was a warning sent across time. She cleaved through every one of his assets. All the ones she and the Infacer could find. This was warning and counter-attack delivered as one.

But it hadn't been enough. And she hadn't anticipated this.

Apprehension and thrill filled Veylis Avandaer. She only felt that when she was facing her mother, and that was an entirely different experience than what she was just forced to repel.

“A masterstroke,” Veylis breathed. ***“The Dreamer perfects himself evermore. He is learning the paths.”***

The Infacer crackled uncertainly. ***{That did not seem like he was using Chronology to me.}***

“No. No, you are right. But it was close. Did you see his patterns? Feel his sudden surge in mass?” Her time-wrought tendrils slithered quick down into the Warrens as she reached the end of the paths, reacting temporal echoes and lingering ripples cast by the Dreamer. Across time, she pulled an object into her Heaven. Powder drifted inside her, but time coiled around it, returned it to its once-shape, reformed an explosive munition.

For a second, the round hovered in a space of gold. Then, Veylis created a puppet of herself, and wrapped her fingers around the projectile. ***“Infacer. I think I have come to a decision.”***

{About what?}

“The trial. I have decided that I will attend, after all. In person.”