

*"Instrument Mondelles, I assure you whoever just attacked us wasn't one of ours. I can—"*

*"I know. It can't be. They were too good in a scuffle to be a Silver."*

*"..."*

*"Your fourth member. I need to talk to him. He's the last one that had eyes on Moon. Her session is scrambled. I can't sense her mind anymore."*

*"Perhaps I can—"*

*"I'm not letting you jack into my mind. But you're going to help me, and I'll let you know how: the one that just hit us, you get a glimpse of their mind? Do you have any idea what that is?"*

*"We will need additional time and information—"*

*"You do. Okay. Good. What's going to happen now is simple. Pinkie here is going to stay here with one of yours. Neither of them goes anywhere until we have fully ensured our own factions are... uninvolved in this... unforeseen incident."*

*"And if they are?"*

*"Then we solve it together. Your active participation is a continued show of goodwill. I doubt you Ori-Thaum is so willing to expend their Ensouled, especially considering your recent shortages..."*

*"Perhaps we're less sentimental than you think, Instrument."*

*"Perhaps. But I also think you probably don't want to die. Whoever hit us knew where we were. They knew that... Hm. My shadow's gone... Would you look at that? It might just be mine too... Do you have an alternate location where we can meet? Someplace discrete and unknown even beyond you and I?"*

*"I'll make the arrangements. I appreciate your—"*

*"There's no need to glaze me up, Silver. I'm not a fucking popsicle. You haven't done anything to make me doubt you yet. If you had, I'd killed you already and taken what I need from your ghost."*

*"You're down a member, Instrument. Please don't insult me or my cadre any further."*

*"Indeed. I'm missing my Maker. But all four of you are still easy pickings. See you soon, Rasaga."*

*"How did you... great. Gone."*

-Conversation between Instrument Santanado Mondelles and Seeker Ikkuoi Rasaga

17-5

Midnight Games (I)

**Path-Hydra Grafted to [Galeslither] (Space/Labyrinth) - 50 THAUM/c**

**[Galeslither] updated to [Zephyr of the Nine-Paths] - 900 THAUM/c**

**CANONS:**

**(SPACE)**

**->WALKER OF THE BETWEEN: Allows the user to travel in a parallel space to reality; grants them nine points for which to resurface in existence**

**Hubris: The Zephyr of the Nine-Paths must surface into baseline reality once per 10% of Rend accumulated**

**Hubris-2: The Zephyr of the Nine-Paths must be anchored to a physical entity (the user may not utilize other Heavens that render them incorporeal or conceptual while the Zephyr is in use)**

**(Labyrinth)**

**->PATH OF THE NINE: Allows the user to shape an omnipresent maze for all things they take into their being; the maze is a fixed anchor of space and does not allow any spatial or geometric manipulation within its bounds or paradox will be triggered**

**Hubris: The paths of the maze cannot intersect or extreme thaumic backlash will trigger and the maze will collapse.**

**HELL [THIRD CIRCLE] - 900 THAUMC/c**

**CANON:**

**(Labyrinth)**

**->WAYBREAKER: Directionality around the user will be damaged, causing space itself to coil and distend, mixing movement vectors and positional placements randomly**

**Daemon: Rend must be balanced within nine minutes or a Daemon of Correspondence will manifest**

Recalling the altered form of the Galeslither pleased Avo. The tri-headed steed it once was already an imposing sight, its flesh formed from roiling storms and bones carved from cracks of lightning.

Feeding it the Shadowcrawler painted its mane the color of a midnight pond, the air around it shivering like a pool of darkness. But such changes were just paltry adjustments of coloring compared to the majesty of its newest mutation.

As the flames of his Soul welded both steed and hydra together, its morphology grew into a union of their best traits. The once-Galeslither, not small by any means, swelled to become gargantuan, the length of its body capable of coiling around multiple blocks. Three heads became nine, and pools of obsidian flowed between storm-wreathed scales as thirty-six hooves sprouted along the stretches of its ontology. Manes merged with spines in expulsions of wind capable of stripping paint from a passing block. The faces he beheld were akin to chimeras sculpted by No-Dragons during the biomantic experiments. The upper half of their skull remained equine, but their eyes were those of a serpent, and their lower jaw unhinged wide enough to swallow aerobarges.

His Liminal Frame adapted, its eldritch nature reshaping internal spaces so that the Woundshaper and Zephyr still fit without difficulty. The weight of his Heaven of Blood remained greater but at its baseline manifestation, it was little more than a bug compared to the Zephyr.

***"This is outrageous. It's unfair!"*** The Woundshaper's displeasure pulsed through Avo's veins as he rode the Heaven of Wind below realspace, his nine bodies all galloping in the same direction, surging thanks to the nearly four hundred tons of mass he now stored within the winds in his mouths—the Yondergale a perfect partner for Walker of the Between.

He paid it no mind as nine-booming voices rose in mocking laughter. ***"Did a fly whisper to me? Did a small, red toothpick speak?"*** One of the Zephyr's heads coiled around and fixed the Woundshaper with a lazy eye. ***"Hm. It seems to be a dead thing—unable to move. Fixed in place."***

***"I am still a god greater than you. Be snake, mule, or whatever you desire, mine is where the master's true power lies."***

The Zephyr-heads released a unified breath and looked toward the Datacaster. ***"Perhaps. Or perhaps that will be the next Heaven to awaken and surpass you."***

***"I am not surpassed! I am merely... master! You cannot neglect my development any longer. If we are to retain our edge in becoming the god of all pantheons, we must seize every advantage we can."***

**Quick. Kill the Dragon-marked and take her gifts for your own. You may assume her form afterward. We must evolve! Evolve! Make me bigger!"**

The Heaven of Air neighed with laughter as the Woundshaper screamed on.

Enwreathed at the very heart of this new storm, winds flowed out from Avo and broadened out into nine-winding paths. Typhoons lashed the architecture within and fissures to the Yondergale opened and closed where the Path-Hydra's ribbed folds were. As darkness, air, and shifts of space spilled forth from his body, he briefly glanced at the Sang hovering near him, held in place by his winds and Conflagration as he entertained the Woundshaper's suggestion.

**[You are a curiosity,]** Elegant-Moon said, cocking her head at him as she took another bite of the purple grapes she was growing out from her hands. **[You have an opportunity to claim my life and drink my power. But you choose to restrain yourself.]** She threw her head back and laughed. **[A ghoulish given the opportunity to take whatever power it wants—to shape its mind however it wants, restraining itself why?]**

Their minds were joined by the flames. He saw all of her and she was part of him. This wasn't an exchange for understanding but a dialogue for pleasure. She wanted to hear his words and consider the form that his thoughts took when expressed.

He, on the other hand, just found her a strange partial reflection of his former self.

*+Still need you,+* he said. *+Need you intact. Like Abrel. Going to release you later. Turn you permanently first. Kill you after the use is done.+*

**[How cold,]** she responded, a smile never fading from her painted face.

Observing her now, he regarded her face paint, the symbol of the art known to him through her. A sheen of pearlescent whiteness formed the foundation above her skin, but rims of blemished red rounded the surroundings of her eyes, parted only by the sharp edges of pitch-black eyeliner. Her lips were dark like onyx, made to amplify how well she maintained her teeth.

The bone-like bio-rig around her likewise was a thing of her creation. She shaped the bioform from her own body and called it her “son-never-to-be.” There were veins and flesh between the ossified plating that ran down by her sides, appearing as if a skirt. From her back rose wings made from jutting ribs, lined by a thin membrane she could mend with a thought.

Letting her memories rush through him left an impression of apprehension and gladness that he was not hunted by her. She was an on-and-off ally of Mondelles, coming in only when he needed someone to rely on who was both subtle, effective, and not part of his own Guild.

Elegant-Moon, secondborn daughter emerges from the corpse of her mother. The worst thing about the Dragon-curse was how it inflicted cyclicity on a person. They were all to give birth after the same passage of time, to the same number of children, and suffer the same effects as their ancestors did. The release of a child was violent as understood by their former masters, and violence was to be culled.

Hence, the boys died for existing and the girls bled when they acted like boys. A means of control and a way of ensuring the perpetuation of their line still.

Wreathed in the mythology of ages, Elegant-Moon often wondered if the claims about the Dragons were true. After all, she had one circling inside her Soul, and her resurrections couldn't cure the curse, though capable of ensuring it never killed her permanently. With her Heavens, she could make her body heel, and perform personal feats of cruelty that few others among her clade were capable of.

Such was a major reason why she was killed. Even before parts of her ego were shorn away. To harm another with one's own hands—unaided by the shell of a beast serving as a borrowed blade—was the single most vulgar expression of power one could perform.

And perform it she did. Time and time again. On her enemies. On the ones Mondelles told her to kill. And on their children and surviving family thereafter, usually taking care to keep them alive as audience so someone could see the deed.

See her.

It made her feel real again.

Of course, her talent lay in assassinations. Natural causes were her specialty, and she knew how to make even enhanced bodies fail in conceivable ways across distances vast via applications subtle. A lifetime of practicing on your sisters would do that to a girl. Even a Scaarthians' monstrous constitution was nothing before the anomalous flesh of a Sang.

Poison was wasted on her kind.

Returning his focus to Draus and the others, he tracked them based on Chambers' position on the DeepNav. For all the satisfaction the evolution of his Galeslither brought, it had a new critical weakness, and that was the interference it inflicted on his ansible. Not unexpected, but still a minor setback.

Increasingly, he was growing to empathize with Calvino's frustration.

Imagine eons of effort undone because someone decided that a few things worked differently somewhere at some time for some arbitrary reason that wasn't fully thought out anyway.

Heavens were mad constructs made to dominate a madder existence. Sense and sensibility were slain millions of years ago, long before the first pantheons rose on Idheim to debase themselves in the name of imagined paradise.

Directing one of the Zephyr's heads to coil up along the sides of a megablock, Avo eyed his Rend steadily as it climbed past eight percent. He could stay submerged for some time, but he could see the hubris turning into a dangerous flaw if circumstances aligned. Previously, he could stay hidden in the darkness or wind all the way until he was on the edge of rupturing.

Now, every ten percent demanded that he rise or suffer the metaphysical toxicity building within his ontology. He would need to use this with care—and consider enhancing its capabilities using a Domain of Space as soon as possible. But he would consult with Kae before any further changes.

He still had boons to give Dice first anyhow.

He reconvened with his cadre down in the gutters below Loathing. The dilapidation and absent infrastructure lightened the chances of being spotted or encountering an unforeseen threat.

It was also increasingly becoming Avo's personal dominion. Over twenty percent of the structures had haemokinetic strands fused within their structures by his Linger canon. Theoretically, he could abandon his flesh and escape mentally his network if there was a need. He was also considering imparting more knowledge over to Chambers—showing him how to construct a lobby using the parts he subsumed from Oversec-C1.

Building more permanent influence in the Nether was always going to be useful, and having the half-strand install more “trap-sessions” so he could surgically nullify new threats would be worth the time.

**[You could also theoretically rebuild yourself from a single drop of blood with my Heaven,]** Elegant-Moon teased. **[You will no longer need to infuse yourself in bodies that aren't yours or ridiculous blood-made proxies. All it takes is something born of the flesh and—]** She plucked a hair from her head and from it, grew a rapidly budding clone of herself, though it remained hollow of cognition—little more than a fresh corpse. The Nether affected many things. The creation of a true ego remained beyond the grasp of other Heavens.

But not his Conflagration. Not his grasp. *+Trying to get me to kill you?+*

**[I told you. I'm no longer real. I died already.]**

But he was beyond tempting. He rebuilt his mind when he changed it these days, his decisions and moods were determined by the architecture shaped by his choice. The beast remained absent inside him, and the ghoul that woke in the barge was an ember in the flames of his memory. Growing to be more meant changing; meant altering yourself to accomplish greater feats. He was no more who he was days ago than she was herself after her death.

*+Makes the two of us,+* he said. *+But I came back. And I returned better. I don't need to kill you for your treasure. I'll get another Domain of Biology. Or whatever you have. Kae will decide the build. My Frame will forge the design. Yours will just be the mold. You are not my food. You are my poison. You are my dagger.+*

Musical laughter sounded from the bones in her hand shattered, skin tearing and healing to form a flesh-made fan. She used the bio-shifted limb to cover her mouth: a faux-display of propriety directed in mockery. **[What a monster. What a creature. How I would have loved to keep you as a pet instead of the other way around. Alas.]**

A twitch of discomfort came from template-Chambers of all egos. **[Hey, like, is she going to be with us for good, 'cause... she's kinda fucked up.]**

**[Really?]** Abrel said, frowning. **[This is what bothers you? This? I mean, it's pretty gross and stuff, but Vator does worse all the time. She's practically gentle.]**

Lip spat as old cultural wounds flared. **[I'm with the degenerate on this one—we don't need no Dragon-fucked in this fire. Nothing good comes from her kind. Except as fuel fro a nice pyre.]**

**[Ah!]** Elegant-Moon cheered, regarding the Scaarthian. **[A conjoined. Tell me, do you wish to feel yourself as a boy again? For those glands secreting all those chemicals to drop and become testicles once more? Do you know how long your kind takes to die from imbalance?]**

**[You fucking bitch... You Sang-sow!]**

Avo drew away from the conversation as the screaming Lip and the sneering Sang formed a duet with the Woundshaper and Zephyr inside him. He had other matters to attend to: he could see the Manta now—feel it brushing through across space.

So what was how they were detected? They would need to keep an Incog active next time if they were separated. Risking active communication in these circumstances wasn't worth the risk.

Releasing his Heaven of Air, he chose a head to leave through as the folds and winds collapsed around him, launching him back into the world on a gust of wind. He released the heavy debris and wrecked aeros he stole to augment his travel speed via his Yondergales as he sailed high with Elegant-Moon in tow, the particulates of his Meldskin shivering as his grav-thrusters flared, flinging him through the sky before he splashed through the protective membrane of the Manta.

Dropping into newly grown crew module where Chambers and Kae waited—some kind of



phantom-supported board game happening on a smart-matter-shaped table between them—he tossed Elegant-Moon aside and the ship created a holding cell for her.

“New consang?” Chambers asked with a lifted eyebrow.

“You won’t like her,” Avo replied, offering Kae a grunt as she gave him a faint smile.

The half-strand snorted, and a splurt of blood trickled out from his nose. Avo had Elegant-Moon keep Chambers’ biology protected from her cursed nature. “I mean, how bad can she be?”

“She’s a Sang, Chambers,” Kae said. “She’s already making you bleed. We need to get you a neuter-mask or circulatory regulators.”

“Only a little blood. I’m sure I can take more.”

**[Noooo!]** template-Chambers screamed while Elegant-Moon’s cognitive self sighed, envisioning growing aratnids inside him—and more importantly, severing his pleasure centers. **[Run, actual-me! Run!]**

But Chambers couldn’t hear his wiser self and ran his fingers through the ugly blonde mop he called hair. The Agnos snorted at the attempt at saiveness while the “ceiling” above them opened. Draus distended upside down, her body fused along the gimbal sprouting holographic controls.

“You know this thing flies itself,” Avo said.

“Yeah,” she said. “But I wanna fly. Someone got to do all the killin’ today.”

He spread his fangs in a wide grin. “Took a new Heaven took. The one that ate you.”

Her fist cracked into his head and something like the sound of a gunshot went off from the sheer velocity of the blow. His Meldskin took the hit. He never stopped grinning.

“Greedy, gluttonous, ghoulish,” she said, voice devoid of any actual ire.

**Armor Integrity: 96%**

*{I still have no idea how they got the Regulars to be this robust,} Calvin sighed. {She shouldn't be able to punch that hard. Damn the Guilds. Damn their anomalous bastardization of our technology.}*

"Back to the Washington," Draus asked. "See you got us a new consang to play with. She know anything useful?"

"Lots," Avo responded. "Going to be my way of getting more influence over Highflame and Ori-Thaum. Peek her insides. Steal the design of her Heavens. Reshape her mind more. Catch. Release. Use her as a trap."

**[So romantic,]** Elegant-Moon said.

Draus nodded, but a grimace passed through her features. "Listen. About the veins of light from that Godclad—the snuffed you first? I think I know—"

"Santanando Mondelles," he said.

The Regular paused. "The Greatling let you know that?"

He grunted. That was all he needed to say.

"Listen... if it's him, I'd like to not snuff if we can."

Oh? What was this? More ancient history? "War comrade?"

"He's part of the reason my discharge wasn't execution. He also pulled my half-broken corpse off the field."

So a thing of honor. Interesting. Avo never considered himself honorable, but Draus...

"Will see what we can do. Talk about it. Have more options with her." He gestured to where he tossed Elegant-Moon and the ground turned transparent, revealing the Sang mid-wave, her mind chained to

Avo's along a string of fire. "Drop her off at the Washington first. Have somewhere to be in a while."

"Dice?"

"Yes. Think I'm going to speak to her mind to mind soon. More than earned it."