

+Here we go. Into the belly of Scale, where peace or ruin may follow. Listen close and keep your friends and families closer, consangs. This might be the beginning of the end.+

-Cala Marlowe, *The Fateless Thoughtcast*

28-8

Opening Arguments (IV)

–[Abrel]–

Abrel's return to Idheim was as quick as it was jarring. The Unwhere was effectively a place in constant transition. The Instrument existed within a beam that jumped from satellite to satellite, dancing across the void. For the week she spent there, she was conscious but somewhat divorced from having a body.

After the voiders had returned her, she was briefly examined by the Paladins and then placed in another constellation of satellites. And there she lingered. Until she was suddenly called back. A faint shifting sensation was what caught her attention at first, and that was all. Suddenly, she was spearing down through the atmosphere, a beam searing her material form back into reality.

Within the confines of Scale, her cog-feed loaded as the radiance faded from her person. Abrel found herself entombed within a silo made from tessellating bricks. Everything here was a sheen of black, and as they shifted, she felt herself descend as if within an elevator. A few moments thereafter, the walls before her parted, and she saw another figure standing across from her. Something about the look in their eyes told Abrel she was dealing with someone older, though they lacked any genuine wrinkles. The stranger was dressed in ornate finery, fitting the aesthetic of Clan D'Rongo of Ori-Thaum. A blue velvet cap on their head and a translucent curtain was veiled across their left eye, distorting their planned mark from sight.

As the space between them stood open, an awkward silence followed. Abrel stared at the Ori, and the Ori stared back.

"So, you're the elder," Adril said, trying to stay nonchalant. Usually, when an Instrument saw an Ori Elder, the situation fell under the category of "assassination" or "interrogation." This time, however, they were both being tried in a neutral court — their sins paraded before all the Guilds to judge.

Bitter amusement welled up within Abrel. Truly, the Greatlings were breaking new grounds in the realm of dishonor once more.

"Indeed. I am Elder M'waba D'Rongo. And you are Abrel Greatling. It seems that fate has frowned on both of us."

Abrel kept her lips thin at that. "Wouldn't quite call it fate."

An inscrutable look drifted across the elder's face. "No. I wouldn't quite call *him* that either."

Now, Abrel understood. Which made her anxiety worse. Pawns. That was what they were. Pawns in pieces in the Great Game, with no ability to influence their own lives, no capacity to overcome the participating player. A genuine emptiness opened inside Abrel. What the fuck did being worthy matter when you had no power over anything. Anything at all?

+It matters because you choose. And things change.+ Avo murmured in the back of her mind. Abrel almost drew upon her Heaven.

+Jaus! Fuck! Don't do that, you—+ She caught herself before she annoyed the nightmarish omnipresent mind-eater that now held sway over her fate. Her family's fate as well. Her template was uploaded into their Metamind, and recent events struck Abrel like an artillery barrage.
+Oh... oh, shit. The Speaker... he's here too?+

+Very popular girl. Very unfortunate girl. Depends on perspective. But will see if I can keep you and your family alive through this.+

Abrel scoffed at that. It wasn't a promise. But it sure as shit wasn't a "no" either. She would take pretty much anything she could get at this point.

+She wasn't referring to me. Do you know that?+

Another jolt of panic flared up inside Abrel. She searched through her new memories and understood. **+The Famines?+**

+Yes.+

+Right. Great. What a delightful clusterfuck I'm descending into.+

+Don't worry. Won't let you suffer pointless blame. It is time for truth. It is time we all be honest. You. New Vultun. Me. It is time for all of us to officially meet.+

Instrument Abrel Greatling closed her eyes. Maybe being judged guilty and banished by the Gatekeeper wouldn't be so bad after all.

+It's worse. Hungers are on the other side. Will see you mentally and metaphysically dissected.+

+Hey, Avo, stop making my existential crisis worse.+

+Can't run. Can only face it. Stand and deliver, Abrel Greatling.+

Pure disbelief became Abrel. **+I hate you. I hate you for saying that.+**

—[Mercy]—

The Famine of Mercy grinned as their session to the disposable node was lost. The Dreamer's ploy was a fascinating one — the Famine expected more direct conflict between their descendant and Highflame, but a limited alliance forged in a place of interest was good strategy.

If a bit limited.

Emotion was always meant to die. His sacrifice was unknown to him, cast out to be captured by the Greatlings, sequenced with thoughts of betrayal to serve the means of Noloith. Originally, Mercy wanted the Greatlings to be their vehicle for entry, to have an expendable node close to the Gatekeeper itself. The lost node he was attached to the warmind of the Forgotten. It was meant to sever as a severe disruptor—to scour all minds present and create an opening to access the Gatekeeper.

Thankfully, the Greatlings were merely a vehicle of convenience, For Mercy had a lot more than one node of emotion to expend and more than one plan to enact.

Take, for instance, Clan D'Rongo's recent "victories" against the subversive threats lurking among their cells. The esteemed Incubi managed to "discover" the nodes influencing their actions and driving them towards civil war with their allies and managed to constrain Noloith's influence once more. With ten nodes of Emotion and three nodes of Joy captured, they came to Scale with offerings prepared to procure their own influence and spare their elder her charges.

Such was how they perceived things. Ultimately, people didn't operate based on *truth* but believed truth. And the problem with belief was that it always sought to align with their *emotions*. Ori-Thaum's Inner Council would doubtless prefer this to be how things are as well.

So it was that the victorious Mirrors and Elders of Clan D'Rongo were to enter the Court of Truth and reveal their own captured nodes. And they wouldn't be the only ones. Mercy had engineered obvious attacks on other Guilds using his lesser counterparts. Every Guild was getting hit, and each time, nodes were lost in the attempt. It painted a clear narrative to follow for Noloith's enemies.

And because Noloith was a sunken power reviled by all, no one would question such an outcome.

Well, other than the Dreamer, of course. Defiance's masterpiece was always going to cause some *deviations*, but it mattered little. For every disadvantage they inflicted, they also created more openings.

Openings such as the one in Scale—access to the Gatekeeper, and the potential liberation of the City Eternal itself.

And with that thought, a shiver passed through the Deep Nether, and sequences quelled in on themselves, tangling, bleeding, breaking apart in a chaotic miasma. Only Mercy remained, filtering through the chaos and withstanding the displacement of thoughts. From a place ever deeper, the Hungers emerged, greeting their newest, most unshackled servant with

apprehension. Apprehension that Mercy could feel without difficulty. Ever since he integrated aspects of Defiance into himself, his ability to *comprehend* feelings and intentions was fine-tuned. He wasn't so much more empathetic as he was *literate* to the mem-data governing another's praxis.

"We see what you are doing, Mercy, and it disgusts us. It disgusts us to see so many of our faithful cast out, given unto our enemies," the Hungers spoke in unison. Voices vibrated from the looping cities running endless along the dragons' crenulations, but though they claimed revulsion, they sounded anxious. There was an opportunity here, an opening. For years they were stranded across the threshold, sealed away in the Deep Nether as a primordial anchor for all to use. But now, with the shifting of power and the Dreamer about to face the High Seraph for the fate of this world, points of leverage previously non-existent could now be exploited.

"Nodes are meant to be spent," Mercy replied casually. Flicking his mind across his many lessers, the ascended Famine regarded them more as ordinance than peers. *"We surrendered the wholeness of our ego for a reason — to ensure absolute obedience in our service. There is no need for them to understand why they are being disposed of so, only that they are used toward greater ends."*

But though the Hungers were paranoid, they were still composed of people. A fondness lingered in them, shaping their relationship they had with their priests. Enough for Mercy's casual callousness to fill the City Eternal with slight horror.

"We have precious few advantages," Mercy began, assuaging the Hungers. *"The Dreamer holds the Paladins and seeks to lay claim to the Massists, but he is spread thin, focusing on far too many fronts at once. This is why he is trying to use Highflame against us, exploiting his limited advantage of diplomacy where we cannot."*

It was more like they would not, for the Hungers would not suffer any kind of union with those behind their exile.

Mercy continued. *"We have approximately two million nodes left and one thousand and two warminds. Our arsenals are sparse compared to the Guilds, but should we ensure the Dreamer and High Seraph devote all they have to facing each other, we could thread the gap between. But that means aiding the Dreamer."*

And to do that, ironically, Mercy had to steal one of the Dreamer's tactics. As Avo had done to them in the Court of Truth. *"He is currently striking at Highflame's districts. I suspect he is trying to reclaim what he lost—the Agnos. We should push him closer to fulfilling this desire. Enough to trouble the High Seraph."*

The Hungers fell silent at this. Their discomfort grew worse. Mercy was beginning to feel something about that. A sense of annoyance. No, shame. Shame that the City Eternal, filled with the best and brightest elites that Noloath could produce, was left cowed by basic strategy towards certain victory. And rather than facing them as servant to master, he now needed to be as if parent to child.

"It will be well," Mercy said, speaking in a soft tone. *"I will keep our touch subtle, and our efforts will be just enough for him to become a problem. But not anymore."*

The many looming maws of the Hungers trailed golden dollops across the Deep Nether.

"My priest, you do this solely for our victory. Only for my final liberation my..." the Hungers shuddered. A distant scream reverberated across every single looping dragon. The changes the younger Greatling made to the ghouls had lessened its traumatic burdens, but not removed them entirely. Only with the culmination of their banishment could they be truly freed. ***"You care nothing for the Burning Dreamer?"***

Ah, and there it was, that fear, that almost jealousy, but that worry. The worry that the shadow of *Avohakten* would return to be their undoing — the closest, their most loyal servant, ever came to falling.

"You don't feel anything for him, do you, Mercy?"

Mercy paused and considered that. Did Mercy feel, or did Mercy experience? It knew it was surprised at what the Burning Dreamer was doing, amused by their creative tactics, happy to be playing this game against them, for who else could wield the realm of minds like Mercy themselves?

"No," Mercy lied. *"It is all for you, all for you."*

But in truth, it was for Mercy too, because even a fragment of a father could feel the tremors of their finest legacy.

—[Marlowe]—

Cala Marlowe dreamed up a lot of fantastical shit in her time. Part of that was all the drug use. But being invited to Scale, attending a trial that would probably lead into the end times—well, beginning times, depending on who you asked—and being in cahoots with the mastermind of the whole ordeal...

That's the kind of madness not even drugs can provide.

She was among the last people to enter Scale before the plane was formally sealed. Her group numbered five hundred, and they were listed as the *unaffiliated*. You know, citizens that didn't quite qualify for being a color anymore, but didn't actually do anything bad enough to get booted down the Tiers. They were a loose bunch of bastards: children of Fallwalkers, neutral families left over from bygone eras, lottery winners who remained unsponsored. Detritus, basically. But ultimately, in a city like New Vultun, even detritus could be useful.

Of course, useful to who was the question.

She knew a few of those who went in, in the last group. *Yat Gwan Sin*: a member of the Lost Harvest Society, a member of a very anti-No-Dragon clade, who unfortunately caught the bleed over of the Dragon Curse due to being subjugated under the Sang during the Age of Pantheons. And then there was Thalen Moller, a former Highflame vicar star turned ardent Paladin supporter after suffering a mishap while diving through an unedited Crucible experience. Now, he was basically the Paladins' number one fan. No question why he was here.

Then there was Marlowe herself. She was, after all, invited by Chief Paladin Naeko on a whim, a thing closer to engineered fortune than outright qualification on her part. But that was fine. Kala Marlow knew her lot in life, and her lot, being born a color, meant that the coin was going to land in her favor more times than not. Being part of Avo Gestalt only magnified her position.

Stepping into the vast chamber, she felt the coldness of the court wash over her, heard the ringing of chains, stared upon that statue, twin hands clutching out from a scale, and took in the thousands upon thousands of Massists and Saintists glaring at each other from their respective podiums.

The space was at once colossal and too small to contain the naked animosity choking the atmosphere. Thoughtcasts were exchanged, staccatos of curses, muted insults, and intercepted men-cons. The Exorcists were doing their job quite well. A few Saintists and Massists were taken away by Paladins, constrained by cages of light as they protested their innocence.

+They wanted to start a little fight,+ Avo said, chuckling in the back of Marlowe's mind, **+decided to show their plans to the Paladins. Remove trouble before making my own.+**

+Right,+ Marlowe replied, **+wouldn't want anyone to steal your thunder.+**

A Ghostlink from a passing drone reached out to Marlowe, and she accepted the mem-data it was trying to transfer. Her seating arrangements were received. She was getting a shared compartment at the middle of the second level, row 600 B2. There'd be four others seated with her, all of them unaffiliated as well.

+Ori Sleepers,+ Avo helpfully informed. **+They don't even know it. They think they've always been neutral. A few have memories of being Agnosi descendants.+**

+Nice to know,+ Marlowe replied, strolling the vast open center of the Court of Truth. **+When are our guests going to arrive? I want to start the stream right when the stars splash down.+**

+You have about two minutes,+ Avo said. **+Recommend you get to your seating point. Will give you a good view.+**

+Synced on that, consang,+ the thoughtcaster replied with a sing-song voice. **+So when are you planning to crash the show, by the way?+**

The Overheaven chuckled. **+I'm going to give the Guilds some time. Let them deliberate. Let them argue among themselves. Maybe you should mingle. Talk to some of them.+**

The thought almost made Marlowe throw up in her own mouth. *+Do I really need to? Can't you just use your Synchronicity to peek into their minds anyway?+*

+It's for perspective. And might be interesting to interview them afterward. Show the Warrens just how unprepared their betters really are for what is to come.+

+You know what, Avo, you really have a gift of making a girl go from not wanting to do something to really wanting to do something.+

+Going to intrude on the scene when the opening arguments are done. Let the Gatekeeper impose its pressure on Abrel and the Elder. Seems like the best time.+

+Very media. Using the Gatekeeper and stealing its thunder, huh? Maybe you could've been a star in another life.+

+No other lives. Only this one. At least until someone wins.+

Right. The Ladder. The endpoint of this entire fucked up existence.

+Any recommendations for what I should say?+ Avo asked.

+When you introduce yourself?+ Marlowe asked. Grim inspiration ignited within her. She had a horrible, beautiful idea. *+You shouldn't say anything at the start. Someone else should make their piece known. Someone everyone knows, everyone loves, and everyone respects. I think it's time for Idheim to hear Jaus voice once more.+*

She could practically feel Avo's excitement swell. ***+What a wonderful suggestion, Marlowe. Certain to hurt Veylis' feelings.+***

+Well, we gotta find a way to make politics entertaining somehow.+