

There comes a point where a moment presents itself. A fracture on the face of history. A crack that, when struck, will shatter all the things and paths that could have been.

These moments can be felt. They can be lived.

And ultimately, they can be destroyed.

The child of an empress is to be born today, Jaus Avandaer. An empress never meant to bear children. Or so it was claimed by her court. When the babe cries and draws their first breath, the minds of men will come alight and call it a miracle, and from this belief will the necks of slaves be slit, and the blood of believers flow.

*From here, a new **God of Fertility** will arrive.*

Witness, Jaus Avandaer. Witness how, with but a single atrocity, steal the empress's greatest triumph, greatest joy, by ensuring that this child is born cold of flesh and without breath.

Witness I render an infant and god stillborns both.

-Wahakten, Priest of the Eternal City

28-14

Singularities (II)

An exploding star could scour worlds; a relativistically accelerated planet could turn anything of mundane matter into cosmic dust; a rogue singularity could drink entire stellar systems hollow of light, force, matter, space, and time.

Any of these forces would have been enough to scour the Warrens clean. Any of these forces would have inflicted unfathomable destruction across Idheim itself. But they were also casual miracles birthed within the Gatekeeper's inner cosmos — metaphysical devastation materialized as casually spawned variables.

But just as the Gatekeeper was the sovereign above Truth, Stormsparrow was a queen all her own. And fortunately for the Gatekeeper, it's decision to full manifest its inner plane was no different than a person offering the Sang an opportunity for her to bestow a mask upon their face.

Unfathomable cataclysms splashed against the Stormsparrow's newest mask like paint, and at once a resonant connection formed between it and Avo. It was as if metaphysical alignment. Avo felt his Frame slam down atop the Gatekeeper, and though it struggled, though the blank mask now filling with color over the Paladin's and Massists trembled, everything surrounding galaxy stilled.

Stars stopped expanding; planets stopped accelerating; singularities stopped churning.

And upon the tapestry, another pattern superseded the first; where the Gatekeeper's reign over Truth had threatened paradox against Avo's **Fortress of Luminosity**, the Stormsparrow's Heaven wove patterns that bound the Heaven of Truth behind Avo—rending it only capable of acting after he does.

For the first time, Avo grasped a true power behind the Storm Sparrow's miracles. The mask she bestowed upon him trembled, ringing upon his very soul.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE ASSIGNED: HERO OF WISDOM

**GRANTS YOU PERFECT AWARENESS OF EVERY DANCER ON THE STAGE AND
ALLOWS YOU TO DECIDE THE PACE OF THE SCENE**

Layered over his being, Avo found himself able to peer through it as if a filter for his cog feed. He saw from Maru's perspective as he fired, slashed, and dodged. He saw from the eyes of countless enemy Godclads, their bodies frozen in metaphysical stasis, always reacting a second too late to him or Maru. Initiative was impossible for them, as they were not heroes but merely clowns and scoundrels, second-fiddles to a scene-in-motion.

Once more, the chorus sang, and Avo heard his designated purpose. Through his role as **Hero of Wisdom**, he felt another connection forming, one linking him to the massive mask looming just above. A moment prior, he thought Stormsparrow had manifested that veil to prevent destruction. It drank in the full wrath of the cosmos as if it were nothing at all, and as stars and singularities splashed apart, the once-clear mask turned prismatic, scintillating, as if it had internalized the devastation set to befall.

Yet it was only by gazing upon the face of the tapestry that Avo understood the feat the Storm Sparrow had just performed. Chains bound Avo to the larger mask above, but this mask was more than a bunker meant to shroud the Massists and Paladins from harm. This mask was more than a ceiling to hold that scarlet curtain, imbued with the purest destruction. This mask was placed upon the galaxy itself, the galaxy that was closer to the gatekeeper's true face than even its chain-like physical form.

And it was then that Avo heard the chorus sing once more:

DRAMATIS PERSONAE ASSIGNED: CLOWN OF MISFORTUNE

YOU ARE CONDEMNED TO SUFFER IN PLACE OF THE HERO OF WISDOM. THEIR EVERY MISERY BE YOUR BURDEN TO BEAR, AND YOUR EVERY SUCCESS WILL FLOW THROUGH THEM AS WELL. ONLY BY PLAYING YOUR ROLE AND FINDING SUCCOR IN FAILURE CAN AN UNFORTUNATE CLOWN DEFY THE DECREE OF A CRUEL HEAVEN.

Even after the lyrics finished, Avo found his understanding incomplete. The Stormsparrow's heaven was beyond esoteric. Absurd, even. It was a beast of narrative, a tyrannical playwright that enforced roles and created scenes using reality as its stage. What a power she was. She

hadn't parried the Gatekeeper's staggering might, but rather entrapped its miracles within a mask, rendering it only capable of subsequent actions in the aftermath of Avo's own.

[Impossible,] template-Kae gasped. Her disbelief, however, was short-lived, for in its place sprouted growing petals of wonder. **[M-magnificent. This can't be the work of some primordial Heaven, the discarded remains of a fallen god. This must have been created. It must have been...]**

An iteration of the Agnos chimed away in his head. Avo simply regarded the Storm Sparrow's massive, divine form with apprehension. A mental projection of laughter peeled out from her. *+Turn your gaze from me, Dreamer. It is time for a dialogue between you and your nemesis-to-be. The scene is not done. Do your part and play your role.+*

Shifting his attention back to Veylis, Avo saw strands of gold erupt free from the Demiurge's body. Soul fire erupted from the titan, and golden hedges clashed against one another. Chronology itself shuddered as the High Seraph fought a war within as well as a war without. With each passing second, the Sage of the Sundered Sky, Naeko's heaven, was slowly sliding its colossal fingers out from the Demiurge's open wounds.

Though Veylis tried, she was merely the master of time, not force nor violence. And what little success she did enjoy was gutted as slashes carved wider wounds upon her metaphysical form. The trio of Zein, Nako, and Alysime were as if wasp larvae, hatching free from the body of a tarantula. And though Veylis tried, though Avo's hysteria detected her growing frustration, the gatekeeper simply wouldn't respond.

"Sparrow," Veylis sighed. ***"Your flaying will be a thing of myth when I'm done."***

A memetic washed out at Avo, but the Overheaven disrupted it with a counter-signal from his Techplager. And then the Infacer's presence vanished once more—arriving and vanishing in a worrying instant.

Whatever the mind clone was going to say got interrupted as a new template manifested within Avo's depths. In seconds, memory spilled across his being as a war continued to rage all across New Vulten. Another stream of his consciousness had located a node of Jaus—Jaus, who planned much of this in advance, to turn defiance to his cause. Jaus, who walked the paths and anticipated the many desolations of New Vultun's future.

Avo had found him within the Heaven of Love, and now the man demanded that he let the heaven fall. Madness, but on top of it, an impossible opportunity. For all that he had prepared for, for all that he anticipated, Avo never dreamed that he would encounter the savior. But upon that premise, he doubted Veylis did either.

Straining his cognitive capacity, everything stood frozen for a single instant. He took stock of the battle between him and Veylis—barely begun. But even so, billions were dead. Entire districts were missing across the Tiers, with wounds lining reality, trailing for thousands of kilometers.

The opening exchanges of the Fifth Guild War raged, while in the Sunderwolds, massive folds of space began to curl in around a lonesome enclave, and a Heaven of Winter.

He regarded a Paladin—Hera Nought—and watched as she came apart, her Soul detonating from sudden thaumic overload. Their ontologies shattered as a stack descended upon them, shifting them from the battlefield. Avo didn't even know what killed her—never realized there was a blow.

Behind him on this metaphysical battlefield, the first Sanctus chronoframes were forming, materializing as giant armored knights forged from the golden streams of time. Thousands of planar stacks were forming like battlements around the Paladins, walling them in as Shotin Kitzuhada's Heaven began to manifest in full. In the corners rose pockets of entropy, Ashthrone Fatalists primed for death, wishing only to offer themselves to a worthy cause.

So much stood on the precipice.

Yet none of this had to be. No more needed to die. With the Gatekeeper halted, the Famines briefly severed, and Veylis in an internal stalemate, losing a battle against encroaching death, Avo saw an opportunity. A chance to steal victory—not with force, not with miracles, but with a spiritual blow.

With Jaus himself. And at the same time handle matters pertaining to the falling Heaven of Love.

At once, Avo aligned the battlefield. As Veylis' paths could simulate places and phenomena across history. His gestalt connected all things grasped by the network of his mind. By now, the Court of Truth no longer resembled what it used to be—its tessellated brick nowhere to be seen. Where spatial reality wasn't ruptured, it was extended, a nightmarish intersection of interconnected realms.

Hundreds of Saintists were scattered and hidden behind metaphysical barriers across the galactic canvas. Their cadres stood scattered, while Golems continued to stream forth, fighting in their stead. Meanwhile, the Paladins and the Massists held a grand stage, protected by the Seraph. But they weren't to be the protagonists of the following scene, and neither was Avo, for that matter.

+Sparrow,+ he said, casting his thoughts at the song, **+I need an extra mask, one befitting a great hero above all others.+**

"And why would you need—" Her answer came as Avo materialized Jaus. The Savior's body was stitched into being with a splash of ghosts. He stood apart from the manifested heavens and the chaos—just a man, but a man above gods nonetheless. The Savior's mind jolted with surprise as he turned to regard Avo.

"We can stop this right now," Avo said, speaking to Jaus. **"You are her vulnerability. All this is for you. There is no greater wound that can be inflicted upon her resolve. Help me."**

Amidst the continuing struggle and clashing cannons, Jaus went unnoticed by most, but the Stormsparrow saw, and the Stormsparrow was awed into silence. In her stead, the chorus sang out, equally surprised.

WHAT IS THIS? WHO IS THIS?

A SHADOW?

A FAÇADE?

HOW CAN THIS BE?

HOW CAN HE STILL BE?

HIS PRESENCE, IMPOSSIBLE, TRUE, AND NOT.

Jaus looked on now, sweeping his gaze across the surrounding galaxy, his very being an extension of Avo's. But his mind was still a construct all his own. It took little time for him to settle his gaze upon the gatekeeper.

Shattered chains danced in blossoming pieces, and from its divine light spilled the rest of the impossible dimension. And then there was Veylis, her colossal form looming, a static crown crackling upon the Demiurge's head. Pain twisted within Jaus, and his heart grew sour with near despair.

"This was... this was not what I wanted," Jaus said. "This was not... not what I dreamed."

"I know," Avo replied, "but the dream is not over. The past is lost, burned, damned, never coming back. But the future—we can still change that. We can still save you, save everyone.

"The Heaven of Love—"

"I am dealing with it. But that is only one path. The war is here. Right here. She is right here. We cannot run. She has chosen. And so have I. And so must you.

A flash of blinding light enveloped the edge of the Stormsparrow's stage. Several Paladins flinched back before the visual-vector miracle splattered them apart. On the sides, Maru returned to his manifested bleed gunner, firing constantly from the crevices between its serpent-like form.

His mind was a torrent of rage and fury, and he barely noticed Joust. But just a glimpse was enough to send him into a daze. Seconds later, the Paladin crashed down upon the stage, his heaven vanishing, his ephemeral form returning. But before he could say anything, Jaus greeted him with a smile.

"Maru, it gladdens me to see you are still well."

The Savior smiled, and Maru looked on with disbelief. Even as the battle raged beyond them, the paladin turned his attention to Avo and growled out a set of words. "What the fuck is this? How are you—"

"He is merely the enabler, not the architect," Jaus said. "And I am not truly myself, but then again, that just might be a philosophical question."

Jaus gave Maru a wink before he turned his full attention to the Saintists. At once, Avo expanded Jaus' form, turning his ghost from just the size of a man into a phantasmal behemoth, dwarfing the entire stage.

Most of the fighters didn't notice him at first, so consumed with their own survival that all else came second. But Avo's hysteria captured their attention and magnified Jaus's very presence. At the same time, the Stormsparrow acquiesced to Avo's demands and bestowed upon the Savior a mask unlike any other.

It was a mask of black and white. It possessed no facial features; the colors met as if in a stalemated clash.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE DESIGNATED: THE PROTAGONIST.

YOU ARE THE HERO OF HEROES. YOUR ACTS SUPERSEDE ALL OTHER HEROES, AND YOU ALONE CAN DENY THE WILL OF THOSE YOU DEEM VILLAINS. SPEAK LOUDLY, SPEAK TRUE FROM YOUR HEART, AND ALL WILL KNOW THE WEIGHT IN YOUR WORDS.

The mask settled upon Jaus' face and then disintegrated altogether. Avo could still feel the bestowed miracle in the tapestry, but the savior's face remained bare, allowing him to speak truth without impediment.

Looking on at Veylis', Jaus' node took a calming breath—one entirely unneeded since he wasn't a physical entity—before speaking his first word. "Veylis!" Jaus' voice boomed across the battlefield, across all of New Vultun, through each of Avo's copies, into Cala Marlowe's very lobby. The savior's presence was vast, and everyone would know of his presence in this hallowed place. "Veylis! Stop this! I see what you're doing, I see everything you've given, but stop this. Stop for just this moment, and face me. Face me as you did when you consigned me to the Ladder."

That all continued on for a few seconds longer, but the Gatekeeper was the first to notice Jaus. Once, through an almost impossible effort, the galaxy receded back into the heaven of truth, and it gave a pitiful moan. **"Now... creator... truth? False."**

Both its queries were questions—for what was a node in relation to the original?

The Demiurge, meanwhile, went very still, even as a hand began erupting out from her form. While this continued, Avo did everything he could with his Heavens, fighting the rash among his allies, and denying its encroachment on himself as well.

The full weight of Veylis' attention fell upon Jaus like a falling meteor. Her perception splashed through the Stormsparrow's opening curtains, and she regarded her father node with almost a look of disdain.

"What a feeble attempt at deception, Dreamer," she said, her voice betraying no suffering, even as a familiar golden glaive began carving down the length of her abdomen.

"It is no deception," Jaus said, resolute. "I am just a node of your father, but all he was, and all he can be, and all he feels are inherited within me. I am an echo of his legacy, and I have seen this day. I have rued this day, and now I must face this day."

"Enough!" Veylis hissed. **"I will not be—"**

"No!" Jaus shot back, his voice rising to a staggering yell. "Never enough! And it will never be enough! And that is how I lost you—because I let you become a Godclad in the first place. That was how I damned humanity! I stole Heaven. I should have just allowed them to stay fallen. Instead, we took from them their flaws—and accepted their hubris as our own inheritance. We were not ready for such a burden. And so long as we remain human, we would never be. That was my great mistake, and for that, I deserve to be consigned to the Ladder. Veylis... tell you to surrender you Frame—I'm sorry. It was a more absurd than anyone could have endured. I might as well have asked you to abandon breath itself."

In the aftermath of those words, Veylis went completely silent.

"What is this?" she said. There was no anger in her voice, no scorn. Instead, Avo's **Hysteria** captured a true, genuine feeling rising within the High Seraph.

And it was cold dread.