

There is no hate like love forsaken.

-Jaus Avandaer

28-8

No Road Back

"And you didn't lose me in this one?" Naeko asked. He was more tired than heartbroken at this point.

"Not yet," Veylis replied. **"Not truly. You are here before me, are you not? You have even slowly returned to some semblance of your old self. Even this echo is better than the husk you were."**

"The husk I was?" Naeko laughed. It was a mirthful sound for such a rageful man. "I wasn't a husk. I was..." He paused. "No, we're not doing this. I'm going to tell you this right now. I'm going to give you the chance you never gave me. Never gave my Paladins. I'm going to do you kindness, a kindness you didn't give me. A kindness master didn't give me, a kindness that not even Jaus gave me. I'm coming for you, Veylis. What you have taken from me, you can never get back, so I don't even care about taking from you. But you will stand down. You will answer for what you've done, and you will give back those you've taken."

A long pause followed, and Naeko swallowed quietly.

"We struggled, me and him. We both wanted to tell you, for different reasons, but now..." Veylis breathed. It was such an empty, reverberating sound. **"We didn't do it because we didn't want to offend each other. I didn't want him to think that I was going to use you against him, and he did not want the same thing, and so ultimately, so ultimately, so desperate were we to avoid hurting each other that we inflicted these wounds. On him. On me. On my mother. On you. What we want does not matter, it is what we can do, it is what we will do, it is what we can shape of the world."**

Naeko blinked. Then something inside his mind came ablaze like a wrathful flame. "Fuck you. Fuck. You. Tell me that shit again. Tell me that again. Tell me how your control is going to fix everything. It's just you now. It's just you, me, and who else? Who's left? Zein? Yeah. Okay, let's count her. Zein. Me. You. And what? Who's left from the whole world? Osjon? Naeko scoffed. "Osjon is a thing, not a person. And you know that. Is he still in love with you? Have you ever given him any interest? Have you ever gotten cold? Wanted company?"

"Enough, Naeko, you embarrassed yourself," Veylis said, but too quickly. If Avo was to judge. **"Osjon is useful, he understands this. Willingness to please and his ability to think laterally are the main reasons I keep him. As for his adoration and his infatuation, I cannot control that in another. It is a crippling weakness, his greatest blemish, I cannot respect him for it. But ultimately, I will not condemn it for it either."**

Another beat passed between them. The Gatekeeper jingled its chain-like wings.

"I remember the day you broke the Force Breaker," Veylis whispered. ***"I remember the day, for it is seared into my mind, it is mythology to me. Mythology lived. You, with the stolen power of other gods, standing against the god of peace and violence, standing against him, winning, prevailing, finding that crack in its lore. You tore a god in half. You broke the will of an entire people. I remember watching the faithful pitch themselves off a cliff, dashing themselves against the rocks far below in despair. I remember the power you inflicted on them; violence beyond force. You were perfect, you were crossing from just man and anger to wrath and retribution personified. You vent now like an angry mortal, but I remember what you could be. And because of that, there is no one else. You have left a gulf in me that cannot be filled by anyone else. Because no one else had done what you'd done, had survived what you survived, had pushed on by rage, by anger, by determination, like a cataclysm-made flesh, my brute above all other brutes."***

And now Naeko is looking away, unable to even gaze upon the Gatekeeper.

"There have been no others, you are right. It is ultimately just me and the Infacer, and we are alone, but the task has stripped us of our ability to be lonely. This is beneath us now, and I had hoped that you would have grown, you would have found it beneath you, because you have always been so much more than what you constrain yourself to be."

"Why do I want to be more," Naeko said. "Why do you think I want to be more? Everything I've done, every little bit, every step, was because of someone else. Everything I did was because of you and Jaus or someone else." Finally, he stared at the Gatekeeper again. "What if this is more? What if more is me deciding that I need to break you?"

"Would you like to hear the truth," came Veylis' reply. Avo thought she sounded hopeful. ***"If you did, if you truly chose to march against me, then I would love you all the more for it."***

Naeko was speechless. Only for a heartbeat. Closing his eyes, he couldn't help it. He smiled. "You haven't changed a damn bit."

"And, as I said, you are coming back to me. I missed you. Dreamer. I give you my thanks and my eternal gratitude."

Avo went very still at that.

[Oh shit,] template-Chambers muttered in his mind. [Avo, when a crazy bitch thanks you, it's usually time to run.]

[Yeah,] Shotin added, [it's usually a sign that you might have caught something and you might wanna resurrect.]

Veylis continued. ***"I suspect that the restoration of my love would have been impossible if he was left alone, if he was allowed to just waste away. You have breathed new life into him, new purpose, even if the purpose is oppositional. I see him returning."***

"I didn't do it for you. Take back your thanks. Take back your gratitude. He is your sin. This is not your gift."

"So you say," Veylis replied, ***"but these are my feelings. These are my judgments, and they are beyond your means to effect. As is the Agnos. She is mine now, mine henceforth forever, until I have no more use for her. And then she will be mine to decide, to discard, to preserve, or to elevate."***

"Elevate," Avo replied.

The High Seraph elaborated. ***"You have focused and become a nuisance, and even a danger in some areas, this is true. But though you are meticulous, though you are overwhelming, though you possess means of attack and complexities beyond even my mother, you are a newcomer to this game, this great game, and you have taken your eye away from the skies above and the wounds that remain."***

Avo did not understand what she was insinuating, but Veylis had no intention of being mysterious. ***"The Heaven of Love, its rupture is deteriorating rapidly, but you already knew this. She even had plans to resolve it after the trial."***

And then Avo understood, and then dread drowned the millions of templates that existed within him.

"What have you done with Kae? What have you made her do?"

"I have not made her do anything. She is brilliant. She has a potential solution for the Heaven of Love, but it requires someone to mantle its full weight, and for that, there is only one candidate worthy of the task, worthy of bestowing such a glory upon."

"You want to graft the Heaven of Love onto Kae?" The thought left him as a near feral growl. He altered the structure of his mind to keep himself composed, but this was unexpected; disastrously unwelcome.

"Yes, her solution requires a direct interface, and I believe no one else will do. Don't worry. Victory will be one we all share, and if she passes, her loss will be something we all mourn."

"No," Naeko cut in. "No. No. This won't happen. You are done deciding. I will have her back, Veylis. I will have her back, and I will burn your world. I will break your paths. You have been blinded. Blinded by expectation. Blinded because you are an observer, but you do not live. You are a creature of two cages, one for the world, another for you. I will remedy your mistakes. I will meet you, will for will, miracle for miracle. We settle this the old way."

A low hum of approval came from High Seraph. ***"So you say. Come then, Dreamer; my love. Take the future from me, if you can. Defy my will. Substitute your own. We will see who stands in the end, and who falls before the blade of deliverance."***

And at that, the waters of chronology stabilized, and Veylis receded. Another long quiet settled between now Chief Paladin and the Overheaven of Conceptualization.

"I... think I understand why you fell in love with her," Avo said. ***"Are still in love with her."***

"Yeah." That was all Naeko wanted to say about that. Verbally, anyway. ***+Well. Your test worked. Don't think she realized what we were doing. Nasty godsdamn Heaven you made.+***

+Thank Kae,+ Avo hummed with pleasure. The bodies currently channeling his and Naeko's presences were actually Fallwalkers. Fallwalkers subsumed and overlapped by the gestalt. Somewhere across the city, hidden within the pocket of a madman from future's past, their actual selves hid, plotting a coming attack.

"No road back," Naeko said, speaking more to himself. "You ready?"

+Yes.+

"Well. I'm not." Naeko rolled his shoulders. "Not until the fight starts. That's how it always is."

A hundred and fifty kilometers away from Scale came three people in an aerovec. Three people and one node of Noloth. The Greatlings, Green River, and their offering approached the fray. Below them, lightrails ignited with impossible radiance, but the stations were barred from the public, sealed off by thaumic means and guarded by golems and ghosts alike. Only the esteemed and powerful rode the city's veins, soared across guarded skies, their shadows flitting over fortified blocks and streets in protected convoys.

Up in the void, a war was being fought. The beginnings of one, anyway. Relativistic weapons slashed across the vast nothing, striking at a target that couldn't be killed by such means. Who learned from them and experienced every exchange.

In the gutters below New Vultun, haggard masses passed into reflective panels, ushered onwards by their former captors, the cruel overseers suddenly different in disposition and intent.

As the refugees crossed over, they found themselves in a new place, passing from living hell to a resplendent sanctuary. Curved arches welcomed them inwards as phantasmal trails tunneled through their beings, tickled the recesses of their minds. Awareness suddenly flooded them, and they realized they were being processed, taken to a new place, a new home.

Some among them began sobbing openly. Those were the ones that still had energy. The others were torn between confusion and general emptiness. New Vultun had not been what they

hoped, not even close. But just as they were about to be fed to the snarling maw of a hungry nightmare, another whiplash followed, and suddenly they were safe again.

At the end of their hallway, three men stood there, waiting. Each of them exactly identical in flesh and posture. The skin was impossibly black, with a rubbery sheen further slickened by viscous, oozing sweat. The men possessed alloyed limbs—cybernetics, as it was known to the refugees. Their captors were heavily augmented, blended of machine and flesh alike. But unlike the cruel enforcers of the Syndicates—at least before their sudden change in behavior—these three were welcoming, if seeming a little sad.

"Oh hello, welcome, I have been waiting for you for some time. We are Essus. You may treat us as the same person. We are here to serve you. We are here to give you sanctuary, safety, and, if it pleases Artad, a new home."

And then all three of them lifted their arms, and their being molded over the archway ahead. Suddenly, the empty space between the second most portal flung open as if a camouflaged door had been flung open, and as two points in reality converged, a new path revealed itself to the refugees.

"Come, come, let us be away from here. It is not safe to linger anywhere. They are always looking for us. There is food and shelter waiting for you. You are safe now. You are safe."

High up in the void, seven figures stood upon the unfinished planetary ring as they gazed down upon the entropy-scarred face of Idheim. Weaves of Rend lined the face of the planet, making it a scarred back long acquainted to the kiss of a whip. But over New Vultun, there was a clearing: A wide open space untainted by existential collapse. It was toward this space that Chambers spat, the act one of scorn and disgust. The man laughed. *+Consangs, you have no idea how good it felt to do that...+*

Beside him, Marlow repeated the same thing, but she was a phantom, and her gesture was even more metaphorical. Guitar strings twanged in the vacuum. Cas eld-Canduir played the instrument transplanted in his arm. It was a somber riff, but one that was growing with building intensity. Beside him, Denton was in constant communication, her ansible and Metamind working with equal frequency.

They were all present. And they weren't. Through Avo's Strix Upon the Empty, both of these things were true.

Draus, Dice, the uplift, Tavers, and White-Rab were there as well, preparing for each of their own operations. The uplift, specifically, was glaring up at the ghostly tendrils passing through its body, hissing at the Soulfire rushing through its being. The girl and her favored companion remained within the enclave. Outside, a constant exchange of people continued; existing residents were filtered out while their copies flooded in. The process happened at maximal efficiency, requiring partial attention from the Regular to keep the necessary reflections active.

Avo's submind did the rest, casting directions to everyone involved, arranging a system of traffic built around absolute **Synchronicity**.

The dragon-farm had been moved as well. Placed in a special section of the orbital ring that also crossed back over into several sections of the Sunderwilds. An additional layer vivianite had been fused over their shelters, and an Incog phantasmic was constantly running, parrying any chance of detection.

Everything was in transition. And there was no better capstone to such a moment than the addition of another member to the cadre.

Though, this didn't mean Avo was particularly enthused. Nor the uplift.

+*Kill you*,+ the uplift meowed as it clawed at the empty air. Avo was holding the cat aloft now, and Dice looked on in anxious anticipation. +*Eat your throat*.+

+**Stop. Struggling is pointless.**+

+*You are pointless. Unless I eat you.*+

The cat was determined to remind Avo it was a cat evermore, even with enhanced cognition.

"Be careful," Dice muttered.

Avo understood. The cat knew what was happening—Avo had explained things over and over, and the creature blinked at him, indifferent to being Ensouled. The only aspect that appealed to it was the offered Heaven—a thing that would allow it to make prey of almost anything, thanks to the **Heaven of Gluttony** that Kae had designed.

The **Micemaker** was a specialized Heaven made for targeted assassinations. Bearing Domains of **Hunger, Cooking, Space, Geometry, War, and Speed**, it effectively binds the uplift and their desired prey into a demiplane in which the cat is absolutely larger, absolutely faster, and absolutely capable of devouring anything smaller than it is. Limitations to the build remain: It wasn't designed to face high sphere threats, but targeted kills of low level Godclads beneath Sphere Four or essential personnel would be a simple affair.

The death of the uplift was a sudden one. One second its heart was pumping. Then one of Avo's sequences twitched, and then it went limp as an injection of Soulfire, cyclers, and ontologies spilled into its being.

An anchor scar immediately formed over its unmoving body, but Avo descended into the cat's Soulspace to see if there was anything amiss with the creature.

[**I don't think I could have done this alone,**] template-Kae said appreciatively. [**You might be the only one on Idheim capable of grafting this Heaven on the cat—uplifted or not. The way its mind works... The integration of the mythologies and beliefs are too strange.**]

Avo chuffed. **+Not that strange. Know what it's like to be a predator. Thoughts made up of impulse. Instinctive cruelty. And hunger.+**

From within the Soul, the cat bobbed up and down curiously, examining Avo's intruding branches. **"Oh. Why are you still here. Thought death would be nicer. Wanted there to be juicy bugs."**

**GRAFTING MICEMAKER (HUNGER/COOKING/SPACE/GEOMETRY/WAR/SPEED) - 755
THAUM/C**

+Might get your wish soon,+ Avo said. Turning his thoughts to Dice, the girl's machine body gave a mechanical whine while her nervousness climbed. **+It's fine. Still a half-strand. Maybe that should be its name.+**

A rare thought of disapproval came from Dice. "No. It should decide its own name."

Her words brought a pause to Avo. **"Do you still want to be called Dice?"**

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I am only still here because chance. It is the right name."

The right name. How often do people ascribe their own beliefs upon the patterns of existence. Avo spoke to the uplift once more. **+Creature. Do you even want a name?+**

"Not from you."

+If you had to refer to yourself?+

"Wouldn't need a name. Why would I refer to myself?"

Perhaps "Confidence" would be a good name for the cat. It possessed a level of self-absurdness beyond any human. **+And if another is to refer to you?+**

RESURRECTION - 3%

The uplift considered that for a second, and then replied. **"Lucky."**

Several templates within Avo responded with amusement.

[Looks like we got some themes going here,] Corner murmured.

+Why?+ Avo asked.

"Because I was lucky to be found."

Fitting. A bit too fitting. Life rhymed in so many strange little ways. Avo shifted the mem-data over to Dice, and girl suddenly went very still.

"I like the name," she said. "I like it a lot."

Concurrently, somewhere hidden in the Warrens—untraceable even to Avo—Tavers sighed. *+Well. I don't know if to congratulate you or curse at you, because the streets... they've never been so quiet. The Squires I keep tabs on have gone to ground. Necros too. Everything is getting locked down. All the Guilds are calling in curfews. It's tense, consangs. Real tense. I think the people feel it. Now the war's coming. It's a little early. Some people are trying to deny it, but yeah, the city's on the edge again, and everyone knows. Everyone.+*

+Good,+ Draus said. *+Less collateral I need to shoot through.+* A spot of tension followed. The Regular spoke again. *+So. You're going to be channeling me and Kae through the gestalt, huh? Reckon that'll be enough to give the Gatekeeper the slip.+*

+Should. It is the truth. You are there. You are me. And Veylis won't understand the Heaven. Doesn't. Didn't know that she wasn't actually talking to me or Naeko. That I was channeling our presence through subverted Fallwalkers. Proxies for our true selves. We have an opening.+

+Yeah. Speaking of... Jaus. I didn't think I'd be listening in on the Chief Paladin's relationship issues.+ White-Rab chuckled to himself. *+We might all end up dead with you, Avo. Can't say it's going to be boring.+*

The Overheaven grunted. ***+How's the node looking.+***

+Still broken. It'll take time. Probably won't be done until after the trial. If we survive the trial... +

"Veylis will have her own issues soon enough..."

Once more, Avo shifted subminds. But this time, he was within a new vessel. Alysिम stood with his arms open to the sky, soaking in the midnight rains. He was walking the streets of the Tiers, unnoticed by patrolling drones and Specters. **Ignorance** protected him, and the knowledge he bore of the paths kept him prepared for other means of detection.

The district of Olphium was quiet as a grave. Everyone was to shelter in place and prepare for chronoshift, and with the populace mostly belonging to Sanctus, they had obliged. When the shift came, the position of the district would switch over to its counterpart in the Tiers; a place that bordered a Highflame surveillance facility. Through the thoughts being cast there, Avo would shuttle Alysिम across the vastness of space and time using the chronoshift as cover, and plant Alysिम within Atraxis Academy.

The instructors, students, and systems were already subverted. But it would be the non-Godclads that Avo consumed to serve as another junction in his gestalt. The others were compromised by Veylis, marked with her will.

“We approach a convergence of fate,” Alysim breathed, seemingly speaking to no one.

“Yes. Are you ready?”

“It does not matter. The paths have fallen away. Can you feel it? The routes have gone from uncountable to many to now, so few... There is no ready. There are only the actions we can perform, and that which follows thereafter.”

“Truth,” Avo said, emulating the Gatekeeper. **“You don’t expect to survive this.”**

“Dreamer. I am already dead. I simply wish to see if I can achieve my task before the moment that I am slain.”

This was true. And this made Alysime far freer than most people Avo knew.

“Not your paths anymore. Won’t do what you did. Not tainted of control like you.”

“Indeed,” Alysime sighed, mournfully. “But I can feed off solace enough. At least the traitors may yet be punished. At least a better choice remains to chronicle this world’s history.” A deep sadness welled up from within Alysime. “Remember us, Avo. Remember everything if you can. Chronicle what has happened. Bring the testament of what has been suffered, and what we have survived into the future.”

“I will not be your chronicle,” Avo said, regarding the pulsing pinpricks of consciousness growing among his templates. Alysime’s vision was so low—so ultimately human. **“My testament will be of existence’s resurrection and liberation. Damn the chains of the past.”**

And thus was the will of the Overheaven spoken. And thus did the district begin to shudder with oscillating gold, chronology bleeding over the horizon, into the near future...