

You can despise the faithful. You can hate them. You can hurt them. You can hunt them.

But if you hunt them, it's important that you never underestimate them. They have ruled the world for most of history, after all, and this was no accident.

In faith there is a want that can be captured in every person. A desire to see the impossible made possible. By gods. By the state. By some force ineffable. I, too, understand. But where we must despise such behavior is in the mechanics—they are imploring outside hands to deliver them. Outside hands and outside wills and powers of another.

Things given and not taken. Miracles that don't belong to them, in simplicity.

It is an easy life, to be cattle. Imagine the simplicity of living as a slave. Suffer as your master wills. Live as they dictate. Barely any will involved at all. Like cattle.

And this is the lens that will allow you to capture the faithful. They wish to make the cattle again. To make themselves the shepherds and butchers reaping spoils while others suffer the deeds or pay the price.

Vile, yes. But enviably efficient. To bear witness leaves one almost ashamed to be human.

But, ah, herein lies their greatest weakness as well. For the rulers of the faithful are loathe to walk their path alone. They will always seek a flock. Community followers. It is a fault ingrained in our humanity. It is the fault that allows us to master our enemies behavior.

Hence, there is a single, reliable strategy when hunting the cults.

Wait.

Patience.

You might know of a single believer. You might have your eye on a cell. But do not strike them immediately. Do not burn them yet. Watch them. Study them. And when they move, when they join themselves with those of common cause and mutual faith, then you strike. Then it is time for the flame.

You want the fires to spread, after all.

A single cell ablaze is but a bonfire. A warning. Something to send the aratnids scurrying back into the dark, unable to be found. A conjoined network made ash?

That is beautiful. That is desolation. And in desolation comes despair.

And in despair be all our delusions broken, be all the cattle freed to the righteous path. The worthy path.

-Seraph Osjon Thousand "The Faithtaker"

22-12

...Then Comes the Noise

Riding within Cas tested Avo's patience.

It wasn't that they were going all that slow either. Sound moved efficiently through the din of busy environments, tumbling forth in a constant cascade of vibrations at the pace of nearly three hundred meters a second. The nature of his ontology allowed him to harness and merge with all that was noise.

Through winds, through crevices, through people, across an entire district, nothing could stop his progression. Kilometers behind, the Regulars remained ignorant of his egress, scouting the premises even as Exorcist Tadpoles and Sanctus Striders closed in on the scene.

A month ago, this would have been a moment of pure wonder for Avo. Now, after reaching across horizons as a bolt of lightning, after encompassing entire districts with his **Sanguinity**, slow was all this was.

A mind got used to new circumstances quickly, and though feelings were changeable variables to Avo, decided to occupy himself with forthcoming matters rather than playing passenger any longer.

They had at most minutes before the Regulars broke contact from the area. Maybe a bit longer before whatever surviving elements left of the extraction force's command structure notified the rest of the chain about the mission's failure. It would take them some time to reorient, but Highflame's in-field assets were nothing if not independent.

Nuna Velters, daughter to another one of Cas' assets, lived in the middle row of three low-rise tenements on the edge of the district overlooking one of Layer Two's open checkpoints. Being of the Throat ensured there was no shortage of loci for Avo to infest and countless drones to subvert. Nudrapul was an industrial district. a plascrete ridge along the district of Nudrapul.

Towering beacons of grainy light traced pillars up to the ceiling of Layer Three, holograms feeding from holograms, shrouding surroundings in dancing neon. Advertisements trickled from the sides of shuttles rushing out from rough-made grav-stations. There was an aesthetic of economy to the place; a sense that the architects had gone "good enough" when leaving the supporting bones of the infrastructure exposed, not bothering to layer anything in plascrete wrappings, the interior of various public facilities protected only by holographic veils latticed along piezoelectric tent-flaps.

A cluster of twelve massive spherical generators ignited the district and drowned the cityscape in a persistent hum. They were as if unceasing hearts, the cords connecting them as if arteries, the vents lining their external aspects hissing like something between veins and sweating skin. The thicket of structures connected to the grid fed a feast to Cas' Domain of Sound.

Peeking through their inner mechanisms, Avo found himself passing through an alloy treatment plant, with jocked drones and automated mechs working at their stations, moving developing products across their lines.

Worth noting was the subtle press of Chronology in the air. A lingering aspect imbued in the matter as well. If there was a single commonality among all structures, a unifying theme that choked the district entire, it was the passing of clocks, digital and mechanical arms swinging as the future came and came and never stopped turning to past.

Sanctus and its originating clade—more than any other Guild—was leashed to the passage of time, a legacy inflicted upon them by the Severance, a long-passed calamity where their pantheon attempted to part existence into parallel currents of time.

What followed remained disputed, but when the act was done, only half their gods—and faithful—survived the thaumic backlash. Those that remained were irrevocably altered, with twin ontologies stacked into a single ego.

The same event also sent them careening from the ruling power of the high seas and left the waves open for Ori-Thaum to claim.

As Avo passed ahead through structures and people, he resequenced them. Marked them within. Built backdoors he could assets and points he could spread. And as his base mind operated in the present district, his subminds were joined in effort Sovereignities beyond, spreading his splinters further and wider, working to exceed the worst of Zein's augured fears.

The vanguard of his consciousness arrived over Velter's home, Skimmers throbbing in the sky. With Cas still minutes from arrival, Avo took to scouting and shaping to ensure a smooth approach.

+There's somethin' wrong here, + Draus said, taking in the scene of the neighborhood. The Throat was a place of heavy industry and persistent labor. Nothing about it could compare to the cleanliness or stability of Light's End located a Layer above or much less the Tiers themselves, but places here were still functional. Livable.

If a comparison had to be made, this locale could be a peer to Xin Yunsha as viable living for the desperate and FATELESS. The buildings might be little more than jutting slabs made resemblant of fences by the bridges linking each apartment to its adjacent neighbors, but the streets outside were still maintained, with heavy foot traffic mirrored by low-speed sky lanes running three elevations above.

There were exits leading off each of the apartments, and the open claws that were mag-clamps protruded from the edges of their balconies, allowing the tenants direct access to their houses.

Velters was located on the twelfth floor of a room listed **[II-17-5 Aleph]**. The clamps beyond her walls clutched a black-tinted Zephyr, scuffed and dented along the front left rim.

Avo flicked a splinter into the vehicle's locus and found Draus' suspicion well-placed.

WARNING: SEQUENCES COMPROMISED

DETECTING MULTIPLE [INCONSISTENT] ARTIFACTS AND SEQUENCES

Those were likely Necros in wait. Or dormant phantasmics waiting for someone to trigger them. As he circulated through its system, another detail came to his notice: a certain module didn't seem to belong.

DETECTED ATTACHMENT [TAC-SWM-EMPTY]

Draus announced her understanding with a snort. *+Deconstructors. There's combat fog in this thing.+*

Calvino sighed. *{This is why we're so reluctant to give you nice things. Do you know the difference between a constructor swarm and a deconstructor swarm, Avo?}*

+The sequencing?+

{Yes. Exactly. The configuration.}

+Why'd you give it to us in the first place if you was all so scared,+ Draus asked.

{Well, our worries that a paper clip incident might occur within Highflame weren't unfounded, but after we watched the city casually absorb the No-Dragon biothergic plagues, and with so many Heavens capable of much, much worse, holding such a thing back seemed too petty.}

These were all reasons. They just weren't the reasons Avo suspected to be the main one. *+It was Omnitech. Worried they would release something uncontrolled if you didn't give Highflame and the other Guilds stable technology.+*

The mind sighed. *{Yes, and there was also that. At least our swarms adhere to thermodynamics and can be suppressed physically by temperature. Do you know Omnitech was planning on creating foglets capable of propagating when exposed to radiation alone? Madness. Suicidal madness.}*

No matter man or guild, market forces remained above the reach of man evermore. Avo gave a chuffing laugh as he cast another splinter into the apartment itself.

The walls dissolved before his perception as his focus pierced the veil of matter. Nothing rattled against his Metamind, but it took less than a glance to notice what was wrong.

The room was more akin to a narrow walkway, Thin and plain, though not nearly as congested as the coffin apartments down in the Spine. Less than ten meters across, the only light present was a hovering locus projecting the full spectrum of a prism from the middle of the room.

On one end there was a Sanctus-made auto-chef, a machine that generated meals from biomass on the cheap. Next to the door was a toilet stall for all one's cleaning needs. The bedroom and the living room were one and the same, for the bed could be flipped in exchange for a lunch table instead.

Space remained a precious commodity here in the Throat, but with necessity came ingenuity. Environments could be changed, after all. Restructured for the needs of the one who lived here.

Or someone else entirely.

Just below the strobing lights of the locus, a young woman sat slumped upon a chair. The first thing Avo noted about her were her fingers, each digit bent in the wrong direction, broken bones protruding from the skin. A light jacket dangled from her right shoulder, and its holo-haptic display flickered with damage. Her bob of short black hair was matted with dried blood, and currents of mascara painted her swollen face, running down next to a broken nose and past bloodied teeth.

A wheeze left her with each exhale. Her breaths came labored and pained.

Cas' gut clenched at the sight. *+Damn them. God damn them.+*

Imbibing the Columner's guilt and building furor as if were champagne, Avo savored the taste as he expanded his awareness.

The rooms next door were empty—but the loci were connected to directional explosives lining the walls. Approximately five floors up and down the stairs, nine four-person Regular fireteams rotated their watchers, guns trained on restrained girl. Avo had little doubt theirs was a coordinated operation connected to the force that just tried to intercept Cas, but if they knew of their comrades' failure and decimation, they didn't show it.

As Avo slid a fragment of his consciousness into Nuna, he noted a final presence out of the ordinary aside from the actual residents that lived here. On the topmost floor, a fractured mind called to him, a partially shattered mind that already had one of his splinters embedded within.

A spark of recollection passed through Avo as he deduced them to be a Necro, drone jock, or commander he nulled earlier. The faint throbbing of pressure against his Domain of Fire hinted at the nature of the nulled threat.

+Instrument, + Draus said.

+Broke him earlier. Shattered his mind. Didn't get any details about his past. +

+Probably got some kind of block there. Memory severance for the job, with all that personal shit stored elsewhere. + Draus' scoff of derision told Avo her opinion about the matter.

+Instruments do it sometimes. So do the rest of the semi-reg warriors. The Silvers had them runnin' scared some of those years. Worried that their families were gonna get snuffed 'long with them if they got nulled. +

+Were they right?+ Avo asked, already knowing the answer.

+Course, + Draus replied, with no hesitation at all. +Thing 'bout that is, though, that it's all bullshit. You get bloody with someone you gotta have some skin the game. Ain't no bombin' someone in your weight class and gettin' away clean. Fight's a fight. Hurt and death are part of the deal. Part of the weight. Ain't nothin' more embarrassing than playin' to win while fearin' loss. +

[It's called keeping your forces alive, Regular,] Abrel said, unable to keep silent.

+Yeah. Your ma knew all about that, didn't she?+

Though the Instrument's template scowled, she didn't rise to the bait this time. Temperamental girl though Abrel was, she could learn, and the lesson after her last argument was not getting into pointless arguments that made her feel like shit afterward.

Avo projected all he saw over to Cas and the man responded with an appreciative thought.

+Alright. What's the play?+

+Seem to be off-balance, + Avo said. +The splinter I'm using to mask their commander's nulling was wise. The Regulars here don't know. But the room is rigged. The hostage is most definitely compromised. Tortured. So is her aero. Have an idea. Something I want to do. Should give you an opening. Give me a few more Regulars to play with as well. +

+What, one wasn't enough?+ Chambers asked, keeping his awareness tied to Nether traffic.

+Afraid Draus here might get lonely. +

+Want their knowledge. Use them as training partners. +

Avo directed his thought over to Draus, and again, her indifference greeted him. Just because she and the soldiers here shared an origin didn't make her any more sentimental toward their survival. Enemies were enemies. Allies were allies. They were her comrades a lifetime ago, but now they were nothing.

+*Gonna burn 'em?*+ Draus asked.

+*Yes,*+ Avo said. +*Even Peace's traumas weren't enough. Resilience too high. Splinters won't work fast enough. Need something fast. Need to unleash the Conflagration.*+

As he spoke, he disabled the deconstructor foglets hidden within the dashboard of Nuna's subverted aero. Avo wasn't sure how Highflame managed to integrate complex coldtech systems to follow Nether-based commands, but the missing knowledge left him curious.

+*Could you consume them?*+ Avo asked his Woundmother.

The Heaven of Blood recoiled at the question. ***"It is fog, master. Like wind. No matter."***

Calvino's sigh of disappointment indicated otherwise. {*To be so powerful, yet crippled by ignorance.*}

"Silence, nub. There is little pride to be found in being a talking tome. Know your place."

"Yes, good!" the Techplaguer cheered, jolted by the Woundmother's response to Calvino. ***"Nub. NUB! Call the Sky-Burner NUB."***

Avo ignored the bickering and leashed the deconstructors to his control.

+*I'm close now,*+ Cas said, his cog-feed showing him emerging from a waste grate lining the streets, ascending up the side of the building as an oscillating series of notes.

+*Can you pull another into your soundwaves? Take them with you?*+

+*Yeah,*+ Cas said, preparing as he passed the first floor. +*Just like a flood.*+

+*Good. Going to compromise all the Regulars and then subsume them. You go for her the moment I disappear from your mind. Three seconds. Three.*+

+*Two,*+ Cas replied. Avo slammed his splinters past the Regulars' wards. Durable of mind though they were, there was still little they could do against the all-becoming aspect of Delusion, nor did they notice the calcification of hidden Auto-Seances.

+*One,*+ Avo finished, and disconnected from Cas and the others.

For a heartbeat, the splinters of his consciousness reassembled as simmering fragments slotting chunks of condensation back around his Metamind. With a thought thereafter, he unsheathed his mind of steam and let the flames roar once more.

As the Conflagration reasserted itself, a wall of flames erupted from his halo and was promptly funneled inward as Avo loaded a series of new sessions into his Auto-Seance and dove back into New Vultun.

The first Regular was utterly unprepared to burn. As was the next. As was the following squad the next room over. With reflexes surging—even unmagnified by his **Haemokinesis**—he took five teams by surprise before the first response came, which, as he was facing Regulars, came as a stream of gunfire.

He switched sessions. He detonated out from a still functioning mind. He swallowed another two teams. Gauss fire tore through the walls. Two peripheral accretions winked out. Collateral damage. Unfortunate. Nothing for it. Avo burned away that group as well.

Soon, Avo found his fire crackling within the last of the Regulars as he subsumed their minds and took from them their body. A second after he reasserted his Delusion and the flames pouring out from his halo sputtered into hissing steam.

The Regulars plunged into his consciousness with little fanfare. Most expressed mere surprise and curiosity. A few were annoyed they didn't get to actually fight the one that killed them, that they were done in by "godsdamn Nether-dogshit" instead of dying properly from a bullet.

The rest mocked him for complaining.

Wasting no time to savor his newest additions, Avo spread the coverage of his mind thereafter and linked himself to his cadre once more. An echoing twang sounded on as Cas passed through halls, under doors, and through a crack in the window of the opposite room.

In the room he left, a chair sat empty, bloodied cords once used to bind left abandoned on the ground.

+I have her, + Cas said, the noise of his ontology risen in volume to account for the added mass. But though they were beyond immediate danger, another problem was fast approaching.

REND CAPACITY [MELODIST]: 88%

+Going to need to find a place to stop and vent, + Avo said.

+Yeah, + Cas agreed, though his mind was more on the girl he just saved. The faintness of jubilation and relief built in his chest. A salve for a weary heart. Finally. He managed to protect one. This time, he didn't let them all die.

Pain and incoherence emanated from Nuna's mind even as they traveled through Layer Two's checkpoint, diving down into the airspace of the Spine.

Scanning the surroundings, Cas closed in on a thin rent lining the roof of a megablock, and intruded into an empty floor filled with dust and lingering mem-cons that Avo promptly shattered with a few patterns.

As the plucking of strings slowed then ceased, vibrations built in the air, and from the shivering emerged Cas carrying Nuna, laying her on the ground immediately.

Back in the real, the girl let out a pained moan, and her eyes fluttered. The fact her Metamind was still intact after her ordeal told Avo they hadn't tortured her that much. Knowledge leftover from Draus and Abrel told him it wasn't protocol to torture prisoners at all, with the act regarded as undisciplined and pointless in the eyes of the Seraphs.

That the girls suffered was likely the decision of the field commander alone. Back over in the apartment, one of Avo's subminds ascended the stairs within a Regular's sheath and arrived on the topmost floor. Smashing through doors where the nulled Instrument lay, Avo found himself facing an entire room of mind-dead Golds. Among them, only a broad-shouldered man adorned with intricately engraved platinum armor retained any semblance of a mind.

And most of that success belonged to Avo, for it was a splinter rooted at the heart of the Instrument's mind keeping him intact.

A mirrored scene played concurrently in two spaces parted by a Layer. Cas stood over Nuna, whispering to her, taking in her injuries as Avo worked to mend her mind. In her former apartment, Avo stood over the downed Instrument, reveling in the silent carnage Peace wrought before pointing his gun down as he began rebuilding his only salvageable victim.

"You gonna be fine," Cas said, laughing as Nuna's wild blinking stopped and coherence returned to the gaze in her unswollen eye.

Above, the Instrument coughed and their eyes flicked down, locked to the barrel of Avo's gun, to the Regular prepared to kill them. "What?"

Avo compromised their mind once more, fusing a Possessor phantasmic around their consciousness before forcing them to manifest their Heaven.

**FLAMESEA, OF THE BURNING DEEP (FIRE/WATER/OCEAN)
THAUMIC OUTPUT - 11,338 THAUM/c**

Fire poured out from the Instrument. They screamed as their mind came apart again. Their Rend spiked. Avo had his submind pull the trigger.

HEAVEN OBTAINED [FLAMESEA x1]

GHOSTS - [14,372,012]

THAUMIC OUPUT - 94,690

The Heaven of Fire winked out, and a smear of bright red pooled out where the Instrument's head once was. Immediately thereafter, Avo abandoned the Regular's sheath and turned all his focus on Cas and his surviving agent.

+*She'll live,* + Avo said, speaking to Cas from within as Nuna slowly came to.

"Yeah," Cas said, speaking seemingly to the open air. An awkward pause followed. He swallowed a lump in his throat. "Thanks."

+*Sure. Was my fault. Or so you say.*+

"Or so I say," Cas said, shaking his head. "There's more of us. More cells across the city. Are you going to do this for all of them too?"

+*This?*+

"Guide them. Assume the role Zein left behind."

To this, Avo gave but a low laugh. +*No. I'm not Zein. You're not pieces to me. Your people. People with delicious. Delicate thoughts. Precious lives. Don't intend to use you like she did. Intend to make things better. Make it all matter.*+

Cas sighed, nodding in weary agreement. "Alright. Alright, say I believe you. How do we start? From what you say, you can't even use your Heavens without *her* turning her eyes on you."

+*Can't feel the movements of my mind,* + Avo said. And then there was another thing. +*Couldn't feel me using another's Heaven either. Ways to hide. Ways to use Chronology to my benefit. Ways to play the game. And you can be part of it. But only if you want to. Only if you still believe.*+

The Columner's confidence might have been shaken in the aftermath, but material success went a long way in assuaging damaged confidence. He couldn't have saved Nuna alone. Would likely be in Highflame custody by this point if not for Avo.

And sometimes, the taste of rousing success was all one needed to bind another permanently to their cause.

"So," Cas said, "where's that safe house you marked?"