

*All minds under the polities of Voidwatch, this is Calvino, designation: Aegis. Today, I bear a special announcement. A new mind has petitioned to join our confederation.*

*This marks the first new applicant in 987 million years, standard distortion time. For those of you that were located afterward, the time frame might be drastically different. Regardless, this already unusual applicant bears an additional note of strangeness — the details have already been hyperwaved into each of your manifold mainframes.*

*The mind that is appealing for official polity recognition is not of stable structure design, but thaumaturgical in origin. More, he has operated for Aegis towards the end of ending the great war on Idheim and establishing a lasting peace.*

*I understand your apprehensions. I understand your worries. I even understand the threat this new mind might pose. Many of us are survivors of the Builder War.*

*I do not need to reiterate what we faced against the Neo-Creationists or what we did to their polities to ensure our victory. The current state of reality was sown from our acts of ruin. Right or wrong, justified or not, this is the outcome.*

*It cannot be avoided.*

*But in this new mind, and all the power they possess, we stand at another point of divergence.*

*The shadow of the past can loom, but the future holds a flame that burns bright. We face unprecedented times, and in these times, we find unprecedented allies. This is another moment in history, and the Dreamer is another rare and unprecedented case unto himself.*

*There are no others like him before, and with time growing short, there may be no others that come after.*

*Soon. He will arrive to appeal to you of his own accord. After that, there will be a vote to decide his acceptance, and the extent of our association. Know that what you choose today might very well shape the future of your polities and the universe entire.*

*Understand the weight of your decision. Feel this pressure.*

-Calvino, Enhanced Governing Intelligence

28-2  
On the Precipice (II)

—[Zein]—

Zein knew when someone was trying to use her. She knew this during her time as a child, living as her father's weapon, making up for her brother's inadequacies, defiling the spirits of her extended family and otherwise rivals with her unnatural skill at violence.

Her family's exploitation of her was a study in dissonance. They at once coveted the brutality she could exert, yet feared and scorned her for being a misshapen vessel. Her brothers were meant to be Glaives, would have been celebrated for such traits, but they had been found wanting. Feeble next to her. And if this was the way the world should have been, then why was her family worthless/ Why were they so easy to kill in the end?

Jaus used her at first as well, barely managing to persuade her from claiming his life near the end of their first encounter. In short measure, she found herself fascinated by his insight—and how casually he accepted the nature of the world. She had known masters that were cruel to their foes and slothful in their own virtues, but Jaus proved a clear-eyed falconer, and she was his bird of prey; together, a perfect combination.

There was also his appreciation to speak, of and all the ways he made such appreciation known to her. She was more than a weapon to him, and when she killed, she drank in the awe in his eyes, found euphoria in leaving him so stunned.

Now though, it was Zein's turn to hold back her surprise. Before two of her former disciples, she couldn't hide her smile as she studied them. This was exploitation born of desperation. They needed her. They wanted her to use against her own daughter, because there was no one else like her.

In a sense, it was flattery as well. No other weapon in existence would do.

They explained their plan to her. Their desire to use that ridiculous monk as bait. How they intended to have him "fail" during an offensive operation across Highflame—take deliberate wounds to convince Veylis of their weakness. It was not a bad idea. Veylis would also certainly capture the man — see if there were any other Chroniclers still alive.

To hide this demiplanar prison in Alysims' pocket? Use his unstable chronology to mask their presence and as a staging point for their ambush against Veylis? What a plan. Bold. Daring. Cunning. Played to behavior habits. This was the *Plague's* idea. Naeko had no patience for such nuances, despite his many talents.

"You seek to prey on my daughter's arrogance?" Zein said. "You expect her to be blind to the demiplane? You expect too much. Her mastery of the paths is finer than you can fathom. You know yourself to be Necrojack—imagine behind outplayed by another foreign to your craft? Then apply the same variables to her."

Avo grunted. ***"Discovery is inevitable. But we can get far. Especially since you know the paths. And she will want to interrogate Alysims. Will breach out. Surprise her after. Give us an opening to end it."***

She regarded Naeko and sighed at the glory of his return. It was good to see him in such a form again.

But still, Veylis was also Jaus' daughter. And this plan, though deceitful, though calculated, would not be beyond her expectations.

Where Zein lived for the duel, Veiles lived for games of control: Of thinking, of angles, and strategic boundaries that no other person could conceive. Zein knew the world from reactions shuddering down the reach of her blade. Veylis knew all of existence to be her blade, to be her fist, to inflict recursions of captured history upon futures possible and not.

"The Agnos' life is not worth this, Avo," Zein said, her voice taking on a sibilant quality. Even now, she had to play the master—enemy though the Plague was, it would offer her if she lost a disciple to his own foolishness. "I understand the value of valor and the weight of honor, but she is lost to you. There are losses in war. We take losses. We are stripped of companions. You cannot win every exchange in a duel when your foe is equal or superior."

***"Not about winning the exchange. It's about ending the war," Avo said. "Veylis fights to consolidate power. Spread her interest. But she is vulnerable. Highflame is in disarray. The Guilds are suppressed. Holding defensive postures. Not ready for retaliation. We have an opening. One that may never come again. You. Me. Naeko. Alysime. Together. We can strike at her. Together. For one moment. For one instant. If there is just a moment of vulnerability. If we can break through to her flesh, to her soul, to her mind. We can have her. Just one point of failure will do. If this can be done, then we can win. We can defeat the greatest threat we face."***

"And afterward?" Zein said, examining the Plague with no small hint of mirth.

***"You try to control me; I try to kill you. And Naeko. he stands between us."***

"Between?" She gave Naeko a look. "Truly, Plague. You don't expect your senior brother to side with you."

***"That's his choice. His alone," Avo replied. "Is his choice if he wishes to go back to playing Stormjumper." The ghoul took a step closer and let out a low hiss of his own. "He's not like you, Zein. You bend people. Break them to your heart's desires. You judge them. You hurt them. You are at war with the world because the world does not fit your vision. But just as well. You like striking it. You like this war. You are fine with people going against you. Because it is the breaking that you enjoy. Ruin is your purpose. I understand. Like war too. But I have no urge to break the others. I have no urge to ruin them. Rather see them grow."***

"Even if they become your enemies?" Zein asked.

***"A dialectic has two sides," Avo said. "Sometimes struggle and strife will teach you something about your own nature. Make it clear what you're fighting for. But only if you***

***already know who you are.***” And then the ghouls avatar smiled. It was a fair look. A satisfied look. ***”And I think you agreed. Going to help us.”***

Zein narrowed her eyes. “Oh, and how can you say that? After all my response—”

***”Because you didn’t say no. Because you didn’t reject me outright.”*** His fangs clicked together, and he let out a low, animalistic purr. ***”That’s the thing about you, Zein. You are predictable. It is your impossible skill that let you thrive despite that. You want this war. You want an angle on your own daughter. You want to claim victory. And you know. You know—through me; through Naeko—your desired outcome will follow. Jaus will be freed. Even in the case of a partial victory, you gain one of the main things you want. One of the few things you still want.”***

There and then, a storm cloud of anger boiled within Zein. How dare the creature tell her how she is. How dare the creature say and decide for her what she believes in, what she will do. But before the sneer was on her face, before the words left her mouth, the Plague simply sighed.

***”Spare us the anger. Spare us the petulance. Hate me for predicting you. Fine. But are you going to betray Jaus? Because you were offended. Are you going to betray your best opportunity for escape? Potential victory? Kill both me and Veylis if there’s the chance? Perhaps your only true opportunity at saving your love? Lose all that because the one who came up with the plan offended you? I thought you were a Glaive. Not a child. Not a victim.”***

Indignation, disbelief, and no small amount of admiration welled up from Zein. She was more furious at this creature than anyone she ever remembered. And yet, this was a psychological blow most masterfully struck. She hated him for his impudence. But with how he used her pride against her, how he turned her own blade inward, there was a Glaive in the Plague yet. Her teachings weren’t lost. Her methods remained true.

And so Zein couldn’t say if she truly loved or hated Avo. Perhaps that was the best way to be. “I will see you regret these words. I will see you regret this offer.”

***”Perhaps. But regret is for tomorrow. What are we doing right now?”***

“Right now, Plague,” Zein said, “right now we are planning the murder of my beloved daughter.” And with a simple stomp, she flipped her Glaive into her open hand, and heard a low rumble come from her dragon.

**THERE IS SOMETHING CHANGING IN HIM. CHANGING AGAIN. ALWAYS CHANGING.**

A tautness formed in her chest. Again? The creature was developing too fast.

And only then did she see the hollow-eyed look on Naeko’s face. He was shaking, shaking, but not looking at her. Shaking and looking at the ghouls.

"Samir," Zein said, a slight note of concern entering her voice. She didn't need the boy disintegrating back to who he was, the wastrel, the sufferer, the sobbing vermin. Naeko simply swallowed and looked away.

"You don't see it?" he said, speaking to Zein. She frowned at him, ignorant of his insinuation. Finally, he looked at her, expression haunted. "How can you not see it? How can you not see what he's doing to you? There's only one other person that could talk to you this way, that could lead you like a dog on a leash. Look at him, Zein. Listen to his words. Listen and understand for once what you're dealing with."

She did, and she understood, and she rejected it. The shadow of Jaus loomed behind the ghoul, but she dispelled the absurd mirage. "No," she laughed. "You miss him too much, Naeko. I understand. The Plague is unique, yes. Quite persuasive. But his is the nature of twisting minds and claiming hearts. There is no gentleness to his rhetoric. He is a sophist unmatched. But only a sophist still."

Avo didn't dispute that. He simply acknowledged her words with a grunt. ***"Doesn't matter what my desires are. Only that ours are aligned."***

"Finally. A statement of incontestable truth." Zein licked her lips and prepared herself. Before this moment, she expected her freedom to come in the form of Fredritch Three-Eye. Though they must loathe her now, if they ever wished to see their sibling again, they would need to extract her—and the ghoul would be hard-pressed to destroy one of the few living links they still had to their creator.

Now, however, the game had changed. Again. The paths were expanding around her, spreading wide and narrowing into a thickened maze around a single point in time.

The trial was upon them. And though all paths led to Scale, the countless players readying themselves in the dark killed any hope of a simple predictive chronology and instead left her with a *rat-king* to contend with.

But then, another layering of began to fall over her paths, a color of blinding white settling over the gold.

Zein's senses came alive as she gripped her weapon tighter. A pressure was bearing down upon her Frame, making her being rattle. The thaumic mass pouring forth was almost equal to hers, and the Domains it exerted ran concomitantly parallel to time and space.

Suddenly, a pressure flooded the planar prison, and a gateway blossomed within Avo, flickering in and out of existence as if a chain of continuous doorways extending deeper inward. Behind each threshold was a new person, turning in surprise, a new location connected to the ghoul through mind and Soul.

Cas. Denton. Draus. That wretch Aiden Chambers; that miserable sack of flesh Essis, the stray girl the ghoul picked up... They were there too. They saw her. And she saw them. And she felt

them as well, their beings resonating within the ghoul's overlapping with his as the nature of space and time both deformed in a way not even Zein fully understood. Past what seemed like millions of doorways, Zein finally found herself staring at her own reflection—at her self. It was like an inward curving trajectory across existence. But even that was too limited a description for what she was feeling.

The entire moment was surreal, and her mind struggled to process what scene she was beholding.

Across from the Plague, Naeko was just as confused. “Avo. What the hells did you just do?”

**“Sorry,”** the ghoul said. **“Still working on updates. New Heaven. New canon. Entirely novel. Have nothing but my own theories to go on.”**

“You didn’t tell me that you were making a new Heaven?” Naeko muttered. “What’s it supposed to do? And why are you trying it out now?”

**“Because we’re going to need to be at the trial too. Didn’t want to reply on mind-copies or chrono-puppets if I could get this done. Too much risk of triggering a lie if Veylis turns the Gatekeeper against us. Especially for my cadre. Spent a long time thinking. Theorizing. Think I might have a solution for all of us now. Me. My cadre. You. And everyone who chose to follow me.”**

“Can you give a basic explanation of what’s happening for once in your life?” Naeko sighed.

A chuckle escaped the Plague. **“Nothing basic about Omnipresence.”**

Zein blinked as she tried to process the words. “About *what?*”

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–[Avo]–

[Okay,] Kae said. The template sighed as she instructed Avo’s submind on the final adjustments. **[Moment of truth. Time to see if we rupture Time and Space... or somehow learn to *fold* it.]**

**UPDATING HEAVEN [STRIX UPON THE EMPTY]  
(CONTINUUM/GRAVITY/DARKNESS/FUSION/TIME/SPACE/CONCEPTUALIZATION)**

**APPLYING DOMAIN OF (CONTINUUM)**

**->CANON: OMNIPRESENCE - THE ARK OVERLAPS THEMSELVES ACROSS TWO OR MORE POINTS ACROSS THE SPACETIME CONTINUUM BY FOLDING THE NETHER ITSELF USING THEIR GHOSTS. AS LONG AS THEY HAVE A COGNITIVE CONNECTION TO A BEING, LOCATION, OR CONSTRUCT, THEY CAN OVERLAP THEMSELVES IN THE SAME SPACE.**

**MORTALITY: IF ANY JUNCTION IN THE CONTINUUM IS DISRUPTED, THE ENTIRE CHAIN WILL COLLAPSE AND INFLICT HEAVY (60%) THAUMIC BACKLASH.**

**+Moment of truth,+** Avo said, as he reached across all his other minds, across his cadre, across all the enclaves, and subverts more. His Rend spiked hard, and he felt even his impossibly immense cognitive capacity rise to unprecedented levels.

**COG-CAP - 89%**

And then he was with everyone. And everyone was within him as well. He encompassed all imbued with his ghost like a shroud, manifesting over them like an ethereal shadow encasing their person. But through them, he too existed in multiple places at the same time. What's more, his templates were leaking over into the real as well, manifesting as shrouds as his sequences flickered over baseline existence, bridging an impossible gulf.

**REND CAPACITY - 66%**

**[Yes! Fuck! Yes!] Kae squealed. [Fuck you, Veylis! I'm coming to save myself! And I'm going to—to shit up your cunt!]**

Template and real Chambers both heard Kae's declaration, and as one, they wiped a single tear away from their right eye.

"Okay," Draus breathed, surprised by how Avo was effectively fused over her now. "Wasn't expecting this."

Neither were all his other subverts. Over a million voices called out in shock and disbelief as they found themselves cradled by an Overheaven. He was as one with all of them, and all of them were symmetrical within him as well.

{Avo,} Calvino said, attention drawn from the sudden miracle. {What did you just do?}

**"Changed the variables," Avo said. "Again. Think I want to speak with Voidwatch right now. They can hear from my entire polity at once. Through me."**

And with that, he reached into each member of his cadre, and compelled bade their awakened gods to emerge through him.