

*+To all Mirror-Concaves and Convexes:*

*This is a confirmation that the Summer Contingency has been activated. You are free to assume pre-war footing and request the deployment of Heavens of Information for Threshold-III operations and above.*

*From reports delivered by infield assets.*

*We are pleased to state that the casualties sustained after the “catastrophe” two days ago have proven to be minimal. Communications intercepted between the Paladins and Agnosi have confirmed the “Lodestone” is back in effect.*

*As such, we have eliminated the possibility that this was a Highflame or Omnitech attack.*

*Indeed, it appears all other colors were likewise unprepared for the incident and could not capitalize on the opportunity. Emergency deploy of the Psy-Net has also proven critical in several districts, preserving our advantages.*

*Despite this, the field has changed, and we must emphasize major points of caution for all in-field assets.*

*The first concerns the reactivation of Samir Naekolong. Dormant for much of the last century, he is not back in full capacity. All Glaives operating in the Warrens are to dispose of their proxies and extract immediately thereafter. The Chief Paladin is to be considered target category cataclysm – Do not engage him.*

*I repeat do not engage him.*

*We cannot risk him turn against us before the time is right or an opening presents itself where he can be nulled.*

*An elite asset has been assigned to take point on this matter and apply diplomacy due to previous dealings. **[MEM-LOG: GLAIVE DENTON UPLOADED]** Be aware that Glaive Denton’s operational priority is rated IV. All other operations of a lower rating are subject to cancellation or delay as per engagement guidelines.*

*The second issue is the return of Zein Thousandhand – Godslayer, eldest of the Glaives, and founding mother of the modern Ori Overclan. We understand that some among you might still feel fealty or honor-bound to her by way of tradition.*

*Do not make this mistake.*

*She does not stand for our creed. She is a creature of singular intent and selfish desire. Saintest too the core. She will not bleed for you, and you are not to do the same for her. The*

*statement has been made. Any acts made to release or aid her will be considered high treason and have your name redacted from the annals.*

*The third and most troubling reports from our Incubi state that distortions have been detected in the Nether, and investigations hint at the presence of Nolothic warminds. Such is why the mass distribution of "Dichomtormist" Info-Sec golems are being distributed among operational groups. Incubi are to assume dive-pattern-vigilance for all ongoing operations. The waters are unsafe once more. The deep is unsettled.*

*As a final note, we, the speakers for the Inner Council would like to offer our gratitude and respect towards all who have given their lives in recent days.*

*More will fall in times to come. A great upheaval is approaching. We trim turbulent tides with the approach the trial.*

*But as with the Great Waves of Tribulation across our history, we will endure because we, more than any other Guild, stand together. Even in the face of internecine, even with the masks we wear before one another, we are all Ori, and for our dream we strive as one.*

*What we have in you is not faith but certitude. You have never failed us. And even if you cannot see, every thought, every ghost, every mind in this city will stand with you all as kith and kin.*

*Unity is destiny.+*

-Emergency Address from Ori-Thaum Inner Council to Active Mirrors

23-3

The Strix and the Ravens (I)

Noise.

With each passing day, the noise in Nevo's head grew. Every death he drank showed him something new—memories of a life lived and passed; how the world was through another's eyes; how they faced their end; how they believed things to be.

The enclavers that lived above the fallen Neo-Creationist warship were no different. They had their own history. Own personalities. Own *delusions*. But it wasn't the windfall he expected. They had not been the ones to build the stone temples, to shape the mountains. That had been done by previous residents. Scaarthians, judging from the runic script. The newly dead enclavers were merely settlers after the Godsfall, looking for a new home lay their heads.

But now the chain was severed, the relic that determined their biome was entombed within a cage of blood and glass fifty kilometers south of New Vultun.

Meanwhile, he laid the enclaves to rest within his mind, and let their templates wander within a construct of memory imagined from their former home. It would take time for them to acclimate. Time for them to learn the facts of Idheim and Standard. They were tribal people. Primordial. Followers of another Godclad that turned eyes to stone if their oral traditions were to be believed.

Avo would let their templates mature before drawing them out. Let time do its own work.

Leaving them within a separated mind-space, Avo's avatar instead manifested atop a lonesome tower overlooking a five-hundred-kilometer-wide district locked in perpetual war.

Before the conflagration settled within his ego, he was in the process of adapting his cognitive palace to a labyrinth. Had taken inspiration from the Incubi he nulled during his infiltration of Mirrorhead's mind.

Things were different now, his former ambitions too paltry to stand against present threats. Imbued with millions ghosts and countless subsumed lobbies, his splinters spread across Idheim as nodes to a network, and from them rose a living city animated from nothing but thought and recollection.

Nukes painted a perpetual sunrise in the skies above as devastation swept through the endless horizon of megablocks. Draus and the Regulars were engaged in brutal close-quarters engagements, firing and killing each other through walls. Enforcers joined in sometimes, the braver ones seeking stimulation, the rest serving as spectators. Most of them died horribly. Bad enough for Avo to drain the trauma from their minds, but the experiences they were garnering proved invaluable.

They all died when line split the horizon clean as Abrel, Chambers, Dice, and Elegant-Moon engaged Lip, Osjon, Glitch, Kare, and Kassamon. Fleets of drones filled the skies as the Godclads fought, dying and returning between the seconds.

Even when he did nothing, his mindscape was actively simulating combat, creating countless scenarios and engagements limited only by his templates, knowledge, and imagination. To say his templates were being productive was an understatement. Avo's very mind now stood an instantly interactive testing ground of various possibilities, tactics, and strategies. A place with he could consult an archive of other egos in anticipation of any coming threat.

Drinking in the carnage from atop a blood-made tower at the very heart of the mindscape, Avo watched as the battlefield mended itself every few seconds, reverting damage and restoring the dead. The place was practically paradise for the Regulars and a playground of possibility.

And considering how briefly he'd been a thoughtform, a growing thrill filled him as he knew this to be only the beginning of his potential.

**[It was a pretty good haul today],** Corner said, materializing across from him. Avo took in the Fallwalker's appearance and found the man had made no changes. Here in the mindscape, he gave the templates options. Allowed them to experiment on their own as well. Corner proved consistent, looking as he originally did. A black armored coat draped over a red-tinted exoskeleton was the main's aesthetic, and with the strips of metal running along the sides of his bald head, connected to a chrome spine, there was little doubt of what he did for a living.

The flesh that remained on his face was even surgically altered to give him a rat-like look—the effect boosted by his red ocular implants.

But past the visuals, Corner had proven to be an incomparably stable temple. One that sided and supported Avo more times than not.

*+Three Heavens,+ Avo said. +Sound. Signals. Technology. Useful for Cas and I. Want Kae to look at Technology the most. Been having trouble penetrating Omnitech communications. Should also help us in terms of engineering.+*

**[Surprised you aren't focusing much on the voidship, considering we just lost one. Could have a replacement again. For nostalgia's sake. Something to go with your Heart of Noloth when it's ready.]**

Avo chuffed with mirth. *+Don't think Calvino would approve. Might be more useful committed in other ways.+*

In truth, he wanted to have a Domain of Technology grafted before examining the voidship. Despite his continued cooperation with Aegis, there were still things they withheld. Secrets he wanted to know. Their reluctance was understandable, but that didn't mean he couldn't skirt the edge.

*{I heard that,} Calvino said, pulsing into the mindscape next to them just as another blastwave swept the horizon. Light bathed each of their ghost-stitched forms, and Calvino bubbled like a mist-made star. {You know, every time you have one of these thoughts, the ethics committee gets a bit nervous.}*

*+Not ashamed of them. Not breaking any agreements either. Openness with each other. Part of our agreement. Not hiding my intentions. Just not stating them.+*

*{But you also understand why they're afraid of you having such things?}*

*+Would have tried to subsume them already if I was going to.+*

Calvino let out a dramatic sigh *{Yes. That's what I tell them all the time too, but you have to understand that the ethics committee are finers minds made to govern in a softer time. Still. They usually have their programming in the right place. So. Do what you can do to be*

*diplomatic. Consider it practice.}*

+Of course,+ Avo replied, already thinking of how he could turn this to his advantage. +*Would be useful if I can restore the voidship. See if I can learn how it crashed.*+

*{I suppose we didn't put any stipulations on favors.}*

+Favors was the main reason you accepted me as a citizen.+

*{No, that was mainly because we didn't want a rogue thoughtform burning millions into his own mind before the Guilds finally crushed him. The fact that you were cordial enough to chat was a pleasant surprise. Oh, the Contingency Bleaks and Category Black minds have taken a liking to you. Some of them have given you a new name: "Hungering Karma."}*

+Sounds like one of yours.+

A pause followed. Calvino chuckled. *{Avo, minds are not supposed to have an infancy, but if they did, you would be the closest thing to it.}*

The ghoul wasn't sure how to feel about that. +*Is that how you view me now? As a child?*+ , but the others, and you must understand, not everyone in the polity is aegis.

*{Not an organic one. Moreso a something progressing into being like a mind. There have been people gridlinked to use in the far past. There have been individuals uploaded into us. But someone forming into a symmetrical being in the way you have done? Not so common. Not so. You are like a civilization condensed within one person—well, monster—developing in real-time. It's been very fascinating. And loud.}*

+*It's only going to get louder.*+ Avo took a moment and interfaced with his own mind. He casually shunted himself across the Sunderwilds into the city of light to check in on the quarantine zone. The faintest threads of gold were beginning to run from child to child. With size of the population and the nature of their zeitgeist, Avo anticipated a harvest of twelve to fifteen cyclers by acclimation's end.

Presently, the integration period for the New Vultunites and the enclaves was to be a month. He could actively adapt their minds using his splinters, but it would take delicate care each day to keep them from straying. A consensus of culture needed to be achieved, and the process was almost like watching over the world's neediest garden.

The other improvements he was making to the enclave was still ongoing. He had burrowed fifteen additional layers deep into the earth, vastly expanding the habitable space. There was still the issue of the *carnivorous darkness* here, but he would settle that soon. When the next cycler became available, he would graft the Heart of Noloth to himself and remove the current Fallen Heaven from effect.

Until then, he would continue with initial excavations.

Checking in with each member of his cadre next, he found Chambers, Dice, and Dogmother sorting the former mod slaves in the processing zone. No issues with them. It was even a good thing with Dice. The girl might still be missing major components of her personhood, but she socialized without restraint or fear.

Perhaps growing from attack dog to Godclad opened doors in her mind. Or maybe she was a child making up for a lost life.

Either way, she was changing, and that was pleasing to see.

With Draus and Fardrifter passing back into the enclave through window, they were en route to meet Kae who was still speaking with Marlowe. The thoughtcast host had the Agnos laughing as noodles spilled from her open mouth. The enclaver cook eyed the hysterical woman fearfully but held himself back from commenting.

The mem-cons were slowly dissolving his inner prejudices—melting away the malignance of his former culture, but the taboo of open laughter was a hard trait to remove.

For whatever reason, the master of his place hated smiles. It was a stupid restriction. A pointless one.

The man was lucky he died at the hands of another. Otherwise, Avo might've carved a permanent grin into his features before taking all he had.

*{And this is why the ethics committee demands that I constantly monitor your psyche,}* Calvino said.

*+Psyche's fine. Just got hungry watching Kae eat.+*

He shifted again, this time checking in with Essus. Tapping into the man's cog-feed, he found himself watching a group of youths talking to a heavily tattooed Scaarthian woman from a fifth-story stack.

"Avo," he greeted.

*+Anything new?+*

"I think I have another smuggler. This one for the *giantesses*. The cold-mothers' Guild."

*+Stormtree.+*

“Yes. Smugglers tied to other Guilds seem to be much less active these days. But this one has been aggressive. Almost desperate. I am going to make contact when I can, but she seems only to be interested in the young... I fear to discover why.”

Avo understood and cast a splinter out to infect the smuggler. A passing drone swept the plascrete streets with a flickering grid but otherwise ignored the crowds breaking curfew. *+I'll see what I can get from her.+*

“Thank you. Also. There has been an outbreak in Sanctuary-102. Something they brought in from the Sunderwilds. If you have time—”

*+Take a look when I can.+*

“Artad’s blessings, Avo.”

The ghoul paused. *+Keep yourself well, Essus.+*

Shifting away from the sanctuaries, Avo became the splinters he had nested across New Vultun, creating a mental replica of the megacity within his mind. Four hundred thousand red dots marked the lobbies he compromised. Over one hundred and forty million minds were noted as moving crosses. Spread out across a continental stretch of land, his presence drifted like threads passing through the currents of the city, but he was there, he was spreading, and a new plague was filling New Vultun’s veins.

#### **ESTIMATED INFECTION LEVEL: 0.00014%**

He needed to hit more high-traffic lobbies. Places like Marlowe’s thoughtcast and other frequented haunts. The thought of infesting Stormjumper lobbies came naturally as he watched Kare’s marker descend from Scale to meet her uncle. He cast the mem-data over to Draus and placed her on standby.

If he could secure the Planeshift, he would truly be happy with the day’s recruitment efforts. Right now, he was but—

#### **Auto-Seance Activated**

**->Session MEM-ID: [Cas eld'Canduir]**

#### **Ghost-Link Accepted**

*+Cas?+* Avo asked, surprised that the Columnner was contacting him so soon. He was supposed to making contact with the various cells. As cold tension passed over from the man’s mind, Avo knew there was something wrong.

+Avo. Denton sent me something earlier. Packet of mem-data. Said that Clan D'Rongo was compromised. Said she needed to go dark, and that you needed to be place to watch over. Shotin Kazahara. Said you'd understand why.+

Avo did. +Compromised. Compromised how?+

But before Cas could respond, Avo accessed Denton's mem-data, and understanding expanded in his mind.

Memories passed through him of Necrojacks sequencing new phantasmics into themselves—a Meta-update on the part of their Mirrors. Denton had neglected to sequence hers, casting it over to Cas as a package instead. Viewed initially, the ghosts seemed to contain stable improvements made to Auto-Seance's security functions, but faintly, a feeling ebbed inside Avo. A dissonance that made his steam flicker.

*There's a dormant splinter of Delusion in this mem-data. Not ours. Not ours. The Low Masters are making a move.*

Peace's booming laughter lit a flame of frustration in Avo's stomach. He thought he would have more time after his descent into the Deep Nether. Corner just scoffed as a response. **[The easy days never last, consang. Looks like your back to having rivals in these waters.]**

+No,+ Avo replied, sharing the information with his cadre—and Kare. The Paladin jolted with a start as he prepared to commune with her. +Not rivals. Prey.+