

*Uplift? What are we, Voidwatch? These half-strands are cultists. Look at them. They're less than human, sacrificing their own to a "god" that isn't here anymore. Hell, they still have statues of [REDACTED] placed around here.*

*If it wasn't for the Fallwalker's Heaven, we wouldn't even be here. Understand this: this is not a liberation. This is a liquidation. We have deaths to collect, memories to wipe, and Heavens to claim.*

*Now. You start pouring fire down the designated areas. The poor ventilation will make the process go faster. Save our Glaives the trouble of clearing this place block by block. After you're done, come around. You're Domain-symmetrical with one of the Fallwalkers, so start soaking Rend.*

*...It's always hard the first time. But this is for the best.*

*This world isn't good for them anymore. And we need Souls.*

*We don't have time to be playing nursery for savages. We have a war to win.*

*-Seeker [REDACTED] to Seeker [REDACTED], Ori-Thaum Reclamation Corps*

20-13  
Suzerainty (II)

Few could conceive of absolute power. Fewer still would ever wield it.

As the sprawl of the enclave settled within Avo's awareness, his reach sank deeper into all who dwelled here, the countless more beasts that lined stalls in the lower depths, and every last structure of the city.

Everything here now existed as a dichotomy, affected by the Woundmother's subreality within, and existence that was without.

Biophilic elements formed the backbone of the city's architecture, with glowing weeds trailing willowy strings down the rungs, carefully carved limestone blocks fused into place by adhesive algae, and outcroppings of coral and translucent cuticles layered additionally over thatched roofs.

Though the Fallwalker's unfading light—manifesting as a faint tickle against Avo's Domain of Luminosity—continued to ensure the banishment of shadows from within these walls, the true resource that ruled the city was gas. Gas harvested from a stock of creatures known as gastavoids: sea slugs the size of aeros, their remains used for everything from armor to delicacies, and even as secondary currency.

A brief sweep across the rung told Avo that there were still [1,200,004] such creatures left, and the egg pools had been left untouched during the fighting, essential as they were for the city's future.

It was their expulsions that powered the hydraulics of the city, along with the combustion-based letter-delivery mechanism included within the superstructure of the enclave. Slow, crude, and simple though the system was, Avo ultimately found it quite fascinating.

Fascinating. Just like the enclavers who lived here.

It had taken him scant effort to pacify the unruly, determined to fight on despite his declaration. As he rebuilt the enclave from the ground up, some swung their blades and hammers at the spreading haemokinetic constructs. Resistance became known to Avo in pockets, flaring as if inflammation within his body.

With a casual pulse of intent, weapons liquified. Armor melted from bodies, spilling in rivulets of red. Fortifications and weapon installations were dismantled. Seed-throwers were rendered constipated. Most ceased their tantrums. Some continued to rage. Then they too were brought low by sudden waves of lethargy and sickness, the blood within their arteries weaving ailments in betrayal of their bodies.

Rebellion was never a possibility. Disarmament was simply a matter of choice.

His choice.

For what could they truly inflict upon him to repel his miracles? What knowledge could they possess to turn the path of his mind?

Burrowing his blood through the bedrock of the city, Avo continued his reconstruction from the lowest rung, the improvements and additions he added arrived as constructs bearing multi-material properties congealing like scar tissue born of closing wounds. The Fardrifter tunneled through streets and structures. A tide of wind slashed through all that was, cleaving flames down to embers and funneling smoke skyward.

Where demolished rubble once lay, tendrils of blood sprouted new shapes, joining as if branches to form vast blocks of quivering red. Compromised buildings were strengthened, and accommodations were created for the downtrodden and unhoused.

The war had dealt considerable harm to everyone across the enclave. But by his touch, none would find themselves without shelter.

Where the sick and injured lay huddled in piles, whimpering and gasping in ramshackle infirmities, Avo's touch passed through them too. Veins crawling through the environment around them slithered free to pierce flesh. Blood within bodies came alive and devoured sickness itself.

The enclaves lived under more than one tyranny. Though the Fallwalker was their master, they were still bound to the reign of entropy, and unblessed by enhancements of biomancy or augmentations wrought from technology, their flesh was fated for cruel ends.

It was fascinating how many among them were old. To suffer one's age instead of keeping it as a thing of aesthetic was a dangerous thing in New Vultun. To be frail among hounds and jackals was to be meat for the taking. To be old in the presence of immortals was a torment unto itself.

The Woundmother and Elegant-Moon shared a mutual breath of pleasure as establishments rose, and plagues were drained from the unfortunate, and infused into the vicious or cruel.

From memories captured, Avo possessed a near-perfect accounting of transgressions and sins committed between the people. The easiest for him to claim were those who refused to halt their attempts at harm even after suffering his touch.

Some Pearlguard continued trying to cull the "night-touched," so hateful were they that they committed to using their bare hands. Others were tied to other acts of vileness, practitioners of atrocity that had escaped judgment across the month of fighting, but now slowly withered as Avo dealt out retribution to the demands of his newest templates.

It was rare that his baseline cruelty found itself aligned with rightful violence. Hence, he found himself partaking in nostalgic indulgences, reshaping flesh until organs failed. Trapping the vicious between closing fists of blood.

Through it all, he hovered atop the master's amphitheater, pieces of his Echoheads embedded into the marble of the arch-shaped structure, forming a magnetic pedestal to hover upon. The enclave shifted, moved, reacted, and surrendered to him; he pushed, rearranged, advanced, and remade, the patterns of existence his to draw upon in this trance of apotheosis.

Details expanded and collapsed across his cog-feed with reactive thoughts. His Rend climbed. But so did his thaums and ghosts.

**Ghosts - [26,562,372]**

**Liminal Frame (V) - 20,871 THAUM/c**

**REND CAPACITY [WOUNDMOTHER]: 96%**

**VENT! VENT! VENT!**

In the end, as he finished remolding the city to his own desires, he found himself pleased that he hadn't over-indulged.

It would have taken less than a thought to kill every last man, woman, and child in the enclave, and those deaths would have gone far to propel him up the spheres of apotheosis. Indeed, if he

had been the ghoul he once was, there was little chance he could have endured the tauntings of a feast so fabulous.

Now, he could adjust his ego as casually as he could reshape this city. He borrowed Draus' cognitive structure, Corner's indifference, and more than a few million memories to trap himself from going further using barricades made from sympathy.

+*Surprised you haven't said anything,*+ Avo said, raising the last of his fifteen watchtowers grow from the thoroughfares leading up and down the rungs. Eyes dolloped from its structure, and Avo felt his perception expand exponentially.

The EGI responded with a faint hum, its voice empty of any kind of offense. *{I'm merely surprised you did not kill more.}*

+*Altered my mind. Made sure I didn't.*+

*{But you still culled a few thousand.}*

+*Yes. They chose. So I did too.*+

*{Ah. Retributive justice.}*

+*No,*+ Avo corrected. +*Retributive opportunity. No justice. Never been any justice for these people. Just like there was never justice for the people in New Vultun.*+

Sweeping his awareness through walls and inside houses, he watched as people were huddled in their masses, most too terrified to react, retreating from the haemokinetic infestation spreading through their homes, while others cried softly, and more than a few prayed. People found solace in siblings and companions, mothers and fathers.

He almost hated them for their helplessness and understood why Draus left in disgust earlier.

There was no "world" here. Not really. This was a playhouse to him. A sandcastle seized from a dead Godclad. Little wonder so many were lost of mind and bloated of ego. How could he have anticipated life's indifference to his survival when he spent so many years being the most important person in the world? And, not knowing his past, how long did it take to erode his sense of self until arrogance was all that remained?

Being unable to alter the state of your own mind was a terrible thing.

+*This place is a cancer,*+ Avo said. +*These people are bad for my diet.*+

*{It is not wise to look upon them so harshly.}* The EGI sighed. *[All self-aware entities are, to the extent that they can control, responsible for their own actions. The citizens of this polities are no different, but their thinking is shackled by faith. And unlit by knowledge or enlightenment. Their lives burn to service the whims of another. Still. The ones that harm the weak or meek are still*

*guilty of action, regardless of the compromise in their thoughts. In such cases, mortality is a thing mired in murk. I cannot demand justice or nobility from you, for what would it resemble now? The deliverance of a new conqueror? Or an indifference of a greater god.}*

Spurred by Calvino's words, Avo cast his awareness to a ring-shaped mansion not eight hundred meters away from him. Most of the servants had fled long ago when Avo's arteries began to spread. Now, encased within the gardens, Dice was listening to her aunt plead for mercy, the ash-painted woman gesturing to the fetus gestating inside her, weeping about how she regretted betraying her sister while her terrified handmaid shivered in the corner.

Avo knew the story already. Knew how it was Ivory that informed the Fallwalker about the act of infidelity. How she discovered the truth herself, ironically, during a forbidden dalliance with Hand Urrins—now writhing within Avo's Conflagration, mind tumbling as if in freefall as knowledge of the outer world swallowed him.

Truth be told, Avo didn't care. These were all human trifles and discovering how easily the Fallwalker was driven to brutality by such pointless trivialities made Avo despise the man even more.

Why was he ever a Godclad? A Frame was wasted upon him. A Heaven too. Did he have no desire to climb beyond the limitations of humanity? To find what he could become past pointless impulse?

Scorn gathered like storm clouds inside Avo, but he willed it to dissolve.

*{Ah. Disappointed in our fellow Godclads, are we?}* Calvino chuckled.

With a sweep of a finger, Avo drew away columns of smoke and cleaned the air. *+What would you do? Aegis. Voidwatch. Uplift them? Give them better lives?+*

*{No. We were constructed to maximize and serve the human experience, and later iterations included all sophont subspecies to our citizenry. For most, as long as no true harm or deleteriousness is inflicted upon another's well-being or will, we strive to have them indulge in whatever life they so desire.}*

*+So. Would be like their caretaker.+*

*{If that is how you regard it. The point, however, is that I think you should give knowledge to the ones you spared. Feed truths into their mind gradually. Minimize psychological harm. And then have them decide how they desire to live or where they wish to go. I think it is a most fitting choice for you. Something that would make Walton proud, in the spirit of "showing them the colors."}*

Thousands of templates, and Avo still felt philosophically and rhetorically dwarfed by the artificial intellect. Perspective over history granted a deepness of perspective. If only Voidwatch was not so reluctant to sink their hands into the art of thaumaturgy.

But, then again, such was how existence fell in the first place.

“Fine,” Avo said, reassembling his Echoheads and burying his taloned digits into the arch upon which he stood. Claws of ceramite and silicon gouged deep into the marble as Avo peeled away all that was pale.

The white offered by the Fallwalker was a facade of the old world. A lie. Best to cut that chain before things began. Best to break the faith before he could rebuild the egos of the people anew.

A few templates sang out the symmetry between him and Jaus in that moment, but the comparison invoked reprisal and clamor. There was something unspeakably taboo about placing the Chainbreaker next to a monster, but from that emerged threads of a new alignment.

Just how similar of likeness was Jaus to the Fallwalker? How shrouded in myth and devotion?

The very thought sent the populations of his mind into a near-unified uproar. Sampling their ire, Avo merely chuckled.

Children hold to the ideals of their parents. Adults hold to delusions of sanctity, binding it to Guild, faith, concept, or impulse.

Time and time again, Walton’s final act in the Deep Bazaar—forcing Avo to shatter his last node—was an act beyond merit.

For unchained was he, and yet bound where they.

Perhaps that, more than his burning divinity, and their withering mortality, formed the greatest gulf between the decisions they made.

He would have a new task for Chambers soon. The creation of mem-cons. In a fraction of a second, Avo incubated a cognitive virus from his Conflagration, instilling it with all the essential memories and understandings he possessed of the outside world, and streamlined it to acceptability using the minds he gathered from the enclave.

He stripped artifacts from the Pearlguard, night-slaves, breeders, and nobles, and bred varied strains from the mem-con, segregating them between cultures and castes.

And as his work came to an end, Avo felt a new form slip into the city through a panel of glass lining fused into an alleyway on the third rung. An enhanced body familiar beneath his touch and luminous with a Frame bearing a potent Soul.

Ah. The just the man he sought—

+*Oh no*,+ Avo gasped, suddenly alarmed.

**[Oh, shit!]** template-Chambers cried, noticing his actual self as well. **[Avo. Burn me. Burn me right now. I—I don't know what I'm gonna do.]**

Reacting in an explosive instant, Avo triggered the connective session between them and flooded over into Chambers' mind. New knowledge and memories flowed in and out of him. He recalled the plot to peel Naeko from his trail, the arrangements that Green River sought, and the progression to the Chief Paladin across the city. Chamber received experience traveling through the Sunderwilds, passing between the borders of Fallen Heavens before invading and claiming this enclave.

**[Oh, hey, consang,]** Chambers said with a laugh, staggering momentarily as he stumbled out the lip of the allyes. **[Was waiting for you to do that. So... yeah, shit's kinda wild back in the mega. But I see the same thing goes here.]**

The man eyed the numerous eyes and ears produced from fissures of oozing blood, biomancy grown from wounds lining the structures around them.

Looking through the streets, Chambers noted the crowds huddled against the walls, staring fearfully at the spreading veins around them, along with those naked few groaning in pools of blood, clutching at their joints and wheezing through rot-claimed lungs.

**[Jaus, Avo, did you really have to do 'em all like that.]** The former enforcer frowned, looking through the people around him as the faint embers of lustful thrill began to sizzle and die. Everyone around him was so *baseline*. So withered and frail. He had seen faces like theirs before in vicarities, but more often in the Crucible, as smuggled goods as well.

The lecherousness in him made him wonder about a free-love utopia where the bodies were prime and culture was open. Here, he saw the source of his past sins and listened to distant cries and unceasing sobs.

+*Yeah,*+ Avo said, looking down from his arch. +*Disappointing. Aren't they?*+

**[...Heard our girl was some kind of bastard princess here.]**

+*Of a higher class anyway. Currently talking to her aunt. Don't think she's going to kill her.*+

**[Cause the sow's got a kid?]** Chambers asked.

+*Because Dice can't remember the face of her mother. And her aunt will have to do.*+

**[Ah. Fuck.]**

+*As things go. Good thing you came. Need your help right now. Giving you some mem-cons. Need to kill you. Have you plant them. I'll provide the ghosts too.*+

**[Yeah. Yeah, sure. But after that, we're gonna need to talk about a few things.]**

+*More than a few*,+ Avo replied.