

***“Take everything! USE EVERYTHING! FIND HIM! FIND THE BASTARD WHO DEFILED OUR SANCTITY! THE DEVOURER OF PEACE! THE BURNING DREAMER! FIND THE THIEF OF OUR TREASURES! EXTINGUISH HIS FLAME! ALL THAT IT TAKES! WHATEVER IT TAKES! WE UNBIND YOU FROM YOUR RESTRICTIONS! WE UNCHAIN YOU FROM MERE SERVITUDE!***

***GO MY FAMINES! FIND HIM! FORGE WHATEVER ALLIANCE YOU MAY! TURN ALL THAT YOU CAN! SEIZE SOULS AND SEE YOURSELVES EMPOWERED IF YOU MUST!***

***CAGE THE DREAMER! BRING HIM TO US! BRING HIM SO HE MIGHT ANSWER FOR HIS SINS IN FINALITY!***

***EMOTION. WE HAVE SPOKEN! WE CEDE THIS WILL TO YOU! YOU BEAR THE FAULT FOR THIS, AND SO TOO WILL YOU BEAR RESPONSIBILITY! RESHAPE THE NODES OF PEACE TO YOUR LIKING! WHATEVER YOU CHOOSE!***

***JUST SO LONG AS YOU BRING US THE BEAST!***

-The Hungers of Noloth

22-13

Shifts in the Wind

Distant sirens and peripheral thoughtcasts sang serenades of success.

Across the Sunderwilds, from the safety of his enclave, Avo listened in on Exorcists conversations exchanged in various Oversecs. With the backdoors he had into the Paladin's internal networks, nothing they knew was veiled from him.

From the summary of events they provided, Avo learned that the surviving Regulars had vacated the premises, burning their dead and destroying their trail as best they could. Still, there was a limit to what they could mask.

Sanctus and the Exorcists weren't fools. Even without tangible evidence, they had eyewitness memories and clues in the form of downed Mortality drones. There was a limit to how well-armed Syndicates could get to be, but more than thaumaturgy, few reacted as Regulars did when mortally imperiled.

To say there was suspicions pointed toward Highflame was an understatement, but without major harm inflicted and the objectives behind this supposed raid unclear, the most that would come of this would be some snarling from Nether Proparazzis.

Ultimately, it was all part of the game between the Great Guilds. Little battles in the dark denied or ignored for the sake of grander objectives.

Despite that, Avo was still pleased with his haul. He had Cas' loyalty, a new Heaven, cycler, and Soul taken from the Godclad he killed, and the minds of many Regulars drifting within his consciousness.

More than the ontologics, it was Draus former comrades that pleased Avo.

Most templates wrestled with the horror of their new existence. The Regulars merely accepted and then adapted, mering with the cognitive architecture without more than a gripe. At their core was a hollow willingness to fight, and though they served Highflame in life, they were lost to the world now. Mere figments simulated by the mind of something unfathomable to them. Even simulated, they knew their wills were false.

So, there was no true capitulation. No true betrayal. Now when all they were was grown from ghostly vines bound to an external will.

That did not mean they were devoid of demands, however. Most shared wants. Desires. Even requests. But rather than demanding that Avo do something for them, or that he commit some form of harm to himself, theirs was a simpler want. Something he himself was all too willing to grant.

**[Just let us loose against each other,]** Lieutenant Grimja said, already inspired after a brief exchange with Corner. The want was a simple one. A beneficial one. A stimulating one. Within Avo's imminently reshapable mindscape, he could form various imagined spaces. Zones of open combat for templates to indulge in the most primal of thrills.

After days of being little more than embers, Avo could summon into awareness when he needed advice, a good contingent of his subsumed minds found themselves in accord. Abrel, Kare, Elegant-Moon, and Kassamon were also piqued, but between them existed another question.

Could the bonds of comradery be formed at Avo's will? Was this another thing he could manufacture?

Avo released a hiss of pleasure as he drew hardened environments from the condensate of fog, forming a new mind labyrinth.

Peace the Incubi provided all the blueprints he needed to generate a complex structure, but there was no reason he needed to settle for the limitations of a Metamind. Avo could go beyond. Far beyond. Make vivid mindscapes of unmatched complexity and change them at a whim.

As the Regulars loaded into the simulated environment—Draus' template greeting her juniors with a feral grin—Avo considered the potential for future developments with one submind while his base self faced his comrades.

They sat around the information center within his tower, going over the spontaneous dive they experienced. Draus was pointing out something about the drones Avo piloted to Dice while Chambers chattered away at Cas. The father was currently in an undisclosed safe house provided to him by Tavers. His presence in the enclave was made possible through splinters and phantoms.

Back over in New Vultun, Avo peered out at Cas' current residence and found it to be a quaint enough abode. The noise of industrial saws and unceasing engines assailed the small room hidden away in the corner of the chop shop, but only rarely did Avo catch sight of a passing accretion.

On a cot behind Cas, Nuna sat with her knees hugged close to her chest. Her mind was all kinds of sour and bitter, but she was alive, and Avo repaired the worst of her traumas. He didn't remove the pain for her. Unlike Lucille, this one seemed glad to be miserable, drawing on her budding hate, recommitting her thoughts towards martyrdom, towards seeing the Guilds burn.

Who was he to deny such a coherent goal?

But one thing was certain. If she was to be useful to their cause again, she needed a new identity. A new face. A new set of sequences. These services were but trifling things to someone with Avo's gifts, but Tavers insisted on using another, and when she made her candidate known, he decided to commit his cognitive capacity elsewhere, ceding the role to his progenitor: White-Rab.

Of course, the process demanded little thought from him as well, and a conversation quickly developed between Avo and Walton's true disciple, the latter as baffled as Cas when he was giving a recounting of recent events.

*+Jaus, Avo, Zein Thousandhand? You fought the Godslayer and then got her pocketed by the glassers. What the fuck, cosang.* + White-Rab's mind sang with laughter as his avatar—a large nu-rabbit like entity with four ears, four eyes, a top hat, and a nice suit occupied one of the seats, feet propped on the table in spite of their intangibility. A subtle note of sourness escaped him when he considered matters relating to the Low Masters, Walton, and the Hungers, but he declined to comment about that.

*+More secrets than we know of in this city,* + Avo said. And wasn't that the truth?

*+There are other cells out there,* + Cas said, studying the projected representation of New Vultun rising from the table-like information center with teeth clenched. *+The way things were before, Zein guided them. Kept them safe—or alive long enough to properly use them.* + His expression darkened at that. *+I'm not sure how many are going to survive without her umbrella. Most aren't trained for this kind of life. They'll go to ground as best they can, but it's pretty much inevitable that most of them will be found.* +

“Come on, Cas,” Chambers said, rolling his eyes and gesturing at Avo. “Thought you were one of them hopeful, believe-y types. Didn’t Avo here just pull your ass out of the fire? Wouldn’t exactly call anything ‘inevitable’ with him around. Hells, who knows what he might do tomorrow? Maybe he’ll find a canon that’ll let him fix time, or turn his blood into a rash cure, or maybe pull Jaus back out from the Big Nothing.”

Chambers’ irreverence made Cas frown while Denton quietly shook her head. Briefly, Avo noted the hovering avatar of Calvino locked in conversation with Kae—something to ask the EGI about afterward.

“Can’t do everything Zein could,” Avo conceded to Cas. “But she wanted me controlled for a reason. Caged. Same reason why I’m going to replace her. Have things she can’t do either. Her’s is time. For now. Mine is mind. Thought.” And with a glance, parts of the Throat, the Spine, and the Tiers lit up—minds compromised by Avo in motion, unaware of the splinters they bore or how an unseen contagion was propagating through them.

As Cas took in the scene, he flinched with awe and unease.

White-Rab, meanwhile, had a more direct response. *+Well, that’s demoralizing. I spend my entire life learning how to dive, mentor asks me to be a cog-donor, and a little while later I’m watching myself get blown out of the water by a godsdamned ghoul. No offense.+*

Avo grunted. The man’s characterization wasn’t wrong. Still, he couldn’t resist a jab. “Have you thought of being Walton’s favorite?”

*+Come on, Avo,+* White-Rab said, barking a laugh. *+Don’t be a half-strand.+*

As a Peace offering, Avo cast memories over into his progenitor. As well as an active simulation of Peace. *+Here. Brought you a trophy back from my homecoming. Peace. He’s the one that nulled Walton. All of him.+*

And as a stream of curses escaped from the Low Masters, the amusement within White-Rab went from warm to cold as he took in the scab-armored twin of his long-dead master. *+Well. Guess you giving us all a headache was worth it.+*

Now it was Avo’s turn to chuff a laugh. *+His knowledge. Can make it yours if you want them.+*

The offer enticed but also sat ill in White-Rab’s stomach. All he was came from guidance, effort, and wise choices. This felt easy. A shortcut. Unnatural. With regards to that, he really wasn’t far from Zein. *+I think I want to study him first. His wards. Sequences. Other stuff.+*

A thought of affirmation left Avo as he cast a splinter out through White-Rab into one of the man’s loci, infusing it with a hundred thousand ghosts and all the sequences taken from Peace. The gift felt like a karmic thing – something that hardened the unseen bond between them.

In some way, both Avo and White-Rab saw parts of Walton in each other. If that was natural happenstance or another thing the once Famine of Defiance sought to ensure, they would perhaps never know.

*+Well, if we're going to start, I'd say we work our way up from the outside. From the bottom to the top.+* Cas' eyes narrowed at the sanctuaries around New Vultun, at the gutters and Warrens. *+Our most at-risk cells will probably be found there. Zein... she had a habit of latching onto the desperate. Using them more than anyone else. People are willing to fight and die and all that. The ones we have in the Tiers are citizens and the fact that their citizens should buy them some time at least.+*

He was hoping. But Avo agreed with his assessment. Especially since he had been planning to spread himself across the Warrens even before he obtained the warmind of Delusion.

Tendrils of blood lingered between structures and across districts, unseen Nether-conductive circuitry meant to make up for the Conflagration's weakness in days prior. Now, the splinter made that redundant, made it easy for Avo to jump from mind to mind, lobby to lobby. With his ability to shift ghosts between the junctions of his Metamind, they were even Nether-subtle, the best of all possible designs.

In the end, the only thing that stalled his pace was that he could only run three concurrent trains of thought. Perhaps with the trip he would take into Ori-Thaum territory on Kae's behalf, he would find a way to surpass that as well soon.

That said, he could do two things at once. Dedicate one submind to persistent propagation in the lowest depths of New Vultun, another to infiltration, a finally to whatever his attention demanded in the moment.

"Chambers," Avo asked, the mention of the sanctuaries reminding him of Essus once more, "can you establish a session with Essus yet."

The man bit his lip. "I mean, *kinda*. The connection is pretty fucky and thoughts and ghosts not connected to him keep bleeding through. I think they're slowly untangling like the flats here, but it's going to take a bit."

Good. That could be to their advantage as well. "Activate the session," Avo said. "Restore him before the others can recover. Seize the advantage. Embed myself in the smugglers as well."

As Chambers obeyed, a series of updates flowed across Avo's subverts mem-data. Slowly, anticipation began to build inside him. He stopped the spread of his splinters and recalled his subminds, recomposing his Metamind once as new information inflicted upon him a brief halt.

“Highflame is calling for a grand assembly soon,” Avo announced. The conversations among his cadre ceased and Draus narrowed her eyes.

“Reckon you got a way to get us front-row seats,” she asked.

“Might,” Avo replied. “Have a few Instruments subverted Instruments. But there was something else beyond that called his attention. Someone he wanted to access hours ago.

## **SESSION [ELEGANT-MOON] DETECTED**

A hiss of satisfaction left Avo. One after another, doors were opening, granting him deeper access to the Guilds.

The Paladins.

Highflame.

Stormtree.

And the No-Dragons.

Just a few more for the full picture. Just a few more, and he would possess every perspective worth having in this city.

Vengeance for Kae first. Essus as well. An ear on Highflame.

Then more propagation, deeper infiltration of the Guilds—reunions with Abrel and Elegant-Moon. A look into whatever matter was troubling Reva with Stormtree. And then seeing about fixing Tavers’ boy.

Lots to do. Lots to do, and storm clouds gathering.

They needed to get ready. They needed more shaping. More thaums. More ghosts. More subverts.

There was a window here. A distinct opportunity to completely flip the table and change the game.

Avo wasn’t going to let the opportunity go. The Guilds and Syndicates had resources and industries ripe for the taking. He didn’t even need to build anything. He just needed to dive deeper and melt into the world.

All he needed was time. Time, thought, and his cadre to water the seeds of change.

The seeds of a new empire. One of smoke and steam; unknowable and untouchable, beyond notice or reach.

Beyond the Guild's capability to destroy.

He could win this game before it truly began. All he needed was to bite deep.

And from the way things looked, no one was going to stop him.

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An oppressive mood of wrongness gnawed at D'Rongo like a chill she couldn't shake.

The mood set in with the Nether's disruption—the sudden disruption of the cognitive realm dislocating her thoughts and leaving her stranded within a beam of light. Even as the Exorcists and her Incubi were peeled from her side, the Unwhere continued to function, shunting her across clouds of satellites dancing amidst unblemished pockets in the void.

In isolation, she screamed. She screamed but would admit to no one, betray the truth of her dread if only to deny its reality.

After an eternity or mere minutes, stability reasserted itself as her protectors beat her jailers to arrive by her side. They swept her mind and ensured she wasn't compromised and fed her an injection of knowledge from the outside world, detailing developments spontaneous and severe, and each added revelation caused the cold chasm within to spread wider.

The Low Masters struck at the city again; Chief Paladin Samir Naeko broken of his lethargy, engaging the supposedly long-dead Godslayer in open combat before taking her into custody; more troubling deaths within her clan, of growing movements detected from the Kazaharas and Kitzuhadas.

Dogs. Vermin. Stealing this moment to strike at her kin while she was indisposed. Humiliated. A reprisal was needed, an act of retribution—

A sudden weight peeled her active thoughts from her mind. It was as if the world around her had changed somehow without her noticing.

*+That, elder, is always true.+*

The familiar, *hated* voice came from within her palace. D'Rongo bit back a cry of alarm as she forced calm on herself. Him. The priest. Back again. Back, and with her protectors blind to his presence.

Loading herself as an avatar into her own mind, she found her Incubi strangely dulled, unable to react, unresponsive even as she cast her thoughts at them, trying to provoke a response.

The Nether still flowed. Nothing was jammed. Part of her feared they were compromised, but seeing as she was speaking to a herald of Old Noloth, there was a far simpler possibility.

+*Ah. Priest.*+ She began her response with a scoff, the object of her loathing emerging into her perception. He looked more grotesque than he usually did. Stitched eyes. Bleached skin. Tattered cloak. Dead owl in an open chest cavity. Aesthetic nightmares suited for scaring children. All this earned from her was scorn. +*Come to threaten me again so soon.*+ She paused. And still no citrus. Just a hollowness. A chill. Another pretender then? It didn't matter.

The priest—or whoever he was—studied her before speaking. +*I was not the one who spoke to you before. But I know of you, elder. I know of what my brethren inflicted on you. The injustice the provoked you to perform.*+

Few things could catch Council Elder Mwaba D'Rongo off-guard. Nonsensical condolences from a Famine of the Hungers was one. +*...Why are you here? What do you want?*+

+*There is something that has been taken from both of us. We share a mutual enemy. One that has driven both of us to dark places. To desperation.*+

Even as he spoke, his mind remained vacant of emotion. Not even a drip of thoughtstuff betrayed. +*The bargain you seek to make,*+ D'Rongo said. +*Out with it. That is the only reason—*+

+*We are prepared to give you warminds.*+

And all hint of mental activity vanished inside the elder.

The Famine continued. +*We are aware of your attempts to manufacture Heavens tangential to the lost Domains of Mind, using information as a substitute. They stand as analogies as best, and though your Guild has protections, they will not be enough to guard against the Burning Dreamer.*+

+*The what?*+ D'Rongo asked.

Something that was almost a smile played across the Famine's face. +*Who are you, that you cannot even perceive the face of your true foe? Pitiful practitioner, allow me to light your mind with knowing.*+

She didn't. She refused.

He showed her anyway.