

+Naeko, are you serious about this? Are you seriously just going to... to give him the Fallwalkers. Feed them to him.+

“Why not. We were just going to feed them back to the Guilds and Agnosi anyway.+

+..Most of them are Sphere Twos. Two Sphere Threes. One Sphere Four. It’s not much, but it adds up. I have no idea how high his mass is—+

+Probably Five or Six. That’s how it felt when I smacked him.+

+What happens when he gets to Seven? Eight?+

+Well, I guess the Guilds will realize the Nether’s getting colonized about that time. My condolences to Ori-Thaum.+

+What happens if he decides to just... burn the Warrens? You’ve seen what he can do. The fucker’s almost everywhere at once. Hells, he’s tearing through the Syndicates right now. Doing Jaus knows what to them. Short of rupturing him with an overload or hitting him with a Disruptor, how are we going to stop if he decides to broaden his diet.+

+He won’t.+

+How do you know that?+

+Because he didn’t. He wanted to burn Zein. I could have helped him... I could have let him do it...+

+But you couldn’t.+

+...I don’t know what the hells he is. Frankly, he creeps the shit out of me...+

+But.+

+But when I talk to him... sometimes... I can hear Jaus. I think he actually cares in his own messed up nu-ghoul kind of way.+

+Holy shit, Naeko.+

+Yeah. Holy shit.+

-Maru Sandrupal and Samir Naeko

–[Draus]–

+WARNING: WOMBRASH OUTBREAK DETECTED. SHELTER IN PLACE. REMAIN STATIONARY! WARNING: WOMBRASH OUTBREAK DETECTED. SHELTER IN PLACE. REMAIN STATIONARY! SCAPELING IMMINENT!+

Draus ignored the thoughtcast piercing into the outer layer of her consciousness as she pushed her golem to full acceleration. The horizon was shrouded by a holographic veil, and moving strips of yellow and black censored all details happening within the span of three interconnected blocks. That didn't really matter to her because she already had eyes on the inside.

Pure pandemonium reigned within those eight hundred square meters. The triangular complex was once a Highflame-Omnitech communication junction. Its purpose was to develop and process functions related to information filtering, censorship, and encrypting, and for years it did just that. Proved a hard target even for Incubi. Now, though, it was just another nest of infection, the rash spreading fast across critical personnel.

+Fuck... yeah...+ the last of her connected Chamberses whimpered, letting out a final breath of euphoria as his session was lost. Before his passing, he disabled off the Lustaways of over twelve hundred Highflame intelligence assets. Planted Auto-Seances in them too. Over a dozen interfaces were open in the right corner of Draus' cog-feed, offering her first-person perspectives of screaming and struggling, people doing all they could to set themselves on fire—someone getting their throat torn out by the gnashing teeth of their own wailing homunculi.

Metaphysical plagues were nasty things. She'd fought alongside the No-Dragons long enough to know that, but the Heaven of Love occupied a threshold of its own. Draus was already infected. Infected from witnessing the scene itself. Infected, and fated for certain death.

But that was part of the run. And this wasn't actually her, anyhow. Just another unfortunate half-strand the ghoul managed to bury his mind in. Still, she couldn't complain. This was going to be a good death: brutal and proper, and with it would come a feat her original self would be jealous of.

As a patch of flesh opened along her armpit—the muffled coughing of an infant sounding from within her exo-rig—Draus tracked the infected using her DeepNav to triangulate her trajectory. Twenty-two seconds to impact; rotlick reckoned the High Seraph or Infacer's response would come quick.

So far, she saw nothing. Checking the condition of her Galeslither, she cycled through the status of the ten Rendbombs carried by the golem's **Yondergales**. Five of the Rendbombs were designated **[SIGNAL]**; the other half were **[TIME]**. Both types were converted by the ghoul for a single purpose in mind—to sting the High Seraph and her pet mind every time they reached out to fix a problem.

When the time was right—if she saw something twisting or changing in the span of reality—Draus was to overload each of the Rendbombs along with her own golem upon entering the area of effect.

Just her death alone wasn't going to do much more than add a droplet of Rend to the High Seraph's Ninth Sphere-having ass, but thousands upon thousands of her across all of New Vultun conducting their own operations?

With time, a rainstorm could make a pond overflow.

A crackle of static flooded the mind of one of the rash afflicted. Interference spiked on her end immediately as she felt something slam hard against her wards—lash at her being through her implant and a rising screech of signals.

The modified protections Avo provided her held strong against the Infacer's initial assault. She watched her cog-cap climb in five percent increments while her body unraveled further. As sessions to more subverts winked out, Draus grinned and angled her golem. A rush of arced through the veil of censorship as she closed in on the detonation threshold.

A sigh hissed across the Nether, stinging at her awareness as she initiated the detonation sequence. Five seconds to impact. Part of the triangular complex was burning already, the fire cheering her on, the crackling flames waving at her gleefully.

+*Infacer*,+ Draus said, casting her final thoughts across the sessions she remained connected to, +*Seraph*. *This is Former Guard-Captain Jelene Draus. Warhost: Orphans. We're gonna be seein' a lot of each in the future. Expect me. Face me. Bleed with me.*+

ACTIVATE RENDSINK OVERLOAD [Y/N?]

->Y

ACTIVATE RENDBOMB? [Y/N?]

->Y

And just as everything around her unraveled, patterns of time and signal shredded by way of ten metaphysical ruptures, a final reply graced Draus before departed to the Big Nothing that came after.

“Received, Guard-Captain. I witness you. Stand and deliver.”

The Regular grinned: there was weight to this death.

-[Avo]-

In all manner but the obvious, Avo was formally at war with the Guilds.

This initial onslaught was but a proof of concept. Previously, the cadre wielded silence and subterfuge to their advantage, avoiding noticing and feasting from the underbelly of the city. But those days were at an end. Now, an infection was spreading wide and climbing high from the Warrens, exploding across [8,445] of the [33,500] active districts making up new Vultun, and infesting [1,999] of the [4,115] existing Sovereignities.

Though his personal infection of the entire city was slow-going, his templates propagated like unchecked weeds, with his Incubi already inflicting incalculable damage to countless Syndicates, herding them towards coming collapse.

Best was all was the risk of exposure — or the complete lack thereof for Avo. If he had continued skirmishing against Veylis, the Infacer, Emotion—and whatever other hidden madness the city held in store for him, a final death was a high likelihood. By all metrics, he should have been dead several times over, with his mind, Frame, and Kae being the only reason he still remains.

To continue to tempt destruction was hubris in the extreme. Even for him. Fortunately, there was no longer the need for him to expose himself so blatantly. Not with all the expendable templates he could produce.

Mixing knowledge he obtained from Ori-Thaum proxy-minds, his father's various dead drops, and his own hard-devoured experience, he reshaped egos around templates he already possessed—adjusted them further for added expertise.

Critical installations and military outposts were compromised first by the Incubi before being rash-struck by Chambers. Those that needed to be raided or destroyed were then assaulted by kill-teams comprised of Draus, Corner, and the other Regulars. They also worked in tandem with Avo's subminds when it came to assassinating and subsuming targeted Godclads. Previously, Avo had gone for easy prey. Usually isolated from their cadres. Now, he hunted entire groups at a time, overwhelming them in the Nether, the real, and the metaphysical.

His thaums were spiking. As where his ghosts.

GHOSTS - [566,231,156]

LIMINAL FRAME (VI) - 745,999 THAUM/c

Unsurprisingly, the Regulars and former Fallwalker worked well together; it had honed their teamwork in Avo's Soulscape through countless engagements and demises.

Meanwhile, the Syndicates were being slowly replaced as well. Most of their logistical and administrative personnel were left untouched, but the leadership was slowly being unified under a single banner — and ego.

Avo was getting a great deal of use out of Chambers. Far more than either of them could have possibly predicted. Though the man couldn't be described as a natural leader in any capacity, there was very little about the current process that was natural. And what Chambers didn't have, Avo could provide.

More than enough for the once enforcer to start moving his weight and cooperating with other versions of himself in the gutters, working to squeeze the snuff market dry, end the Crucibles, and claim the smuggling routes for themselves.

And he was the only one being duplicated en masse. Not hardly. Though Kae was technically captured, her template remained—and the possibility of being party to her own rescue lit a flame of motivation the likes of which Avo had scarcely felt.

This, however, also translated to other behaviors he didn't quite expect of the Agnos.

"You fucking sow!"

"I'm g-going to f-fuck...your head with...my fist!"

"We didn't waste time studying Nolloto's *Third Theory of Matter-Force Conversion* just to impress Aslech! You take it back!"

"Make me!"

The brawl between the Kaes started as a simple disagreement over theoretical high vulgarity paradoxes that could be constructed and deployed against Veylis. With five hundred different Kae variants created from "disposal enemies," the top floors of the rising chain that was Avo's tower of memory were abuzz with activity. The Kae's had wasted no time sorting themselves into even groups based on each of the five major Knowings of thaumaturgy.

For ten not-so-peaceful moments, the Kaes chattered, argued, and ran simulations based on existing Heavens they knew—compiling mem-data sourced directly from Alysims' memories and Avo's new precognitive Definement. The cacophonous harmony quickly came to an end with the next phase of the project: deciding on which potential route to take.

This was when everything quickly went to hell.

As it turned out, five hundred hyper-obsessive and extremely anxious versions of Kae resulted in more conflict than expertise.

One of Avo's subminds watched wordlessly as the feeble riot in Idheim's history continued before him. The Kae's punched, swatted, and clawed at each other—with reservations. They were at once incensed and offended by each other's words, but also knew they were effectively

self-harming, and couldn't go all the way. They pulled at each other's cornrows — within moderation — kicked ankles, and bit fingers — not enough to draw blood.

A huge phantasmal manifestation of the Heart of Noloth loomed over them, a shadowy beating heart with synaptic tendrils coiling as holograms along the real. Below, rows of Kaes rolled as they struggled with each other, mounds forming while some stood at the perimeter, kicking lightly.

The EGIs hovered beneath the nucleus of cyclers, ghosts, traumas, thoughtstuff, sequences, and Soulfire composing Avo's manifested Overheaven. Kant looked on with dejection; Calvino took things as they were; Only was laughing.

{I mean, I've seen some strange stuff in my time, but this—} Only sighed. {I'm sharing this to Threshold. My polity is going to get a real kick out of this one.}

{Only. Please.} Kant sighed. Their exhaustion was growing by the second. Across the expanse of Idheim, another of their forks suffered the presence of the Infacer as well. *{Agnos Kusanade is clearly under a lot of stress.}*

{Looks like she's relieving stress to me,} Only said. *{Using herself.}*

The minds of the Shotin and Chambers' both arrived at the same questionable conclusion. Avo quenched the fantasy before turning an inward glare.

[I tried, consang, I tried,] Chambers muttered.

[I fucking didn't,] Shotin admitted, somewhat more honest, smiling as he watched the Kaes fight.

Avo kept their thoughts private from Kae's template. The last thing he needed was for the Agnos to be even more agitated as she watched her selves fight. Humans were over-addicted to sexual pleasure. Avo really didn't much see the point of it; they had better means of breeding, could create more complex bonds to the Nether.

Still. The pinnacle of intimacy for most people seemed to be rubbing a few particularly sensitive bits of flesh together until breeding fluids were expelled into a hole. Absurd.

{Avo,} Calvino said gently. *{It's very inappropriate to judge humans for their ingrained biological functions. Remember, you were addicted to flesh and cruelty before.}*

That was true. Avo could also reshape his mind to understand—it just wasn't a thing he preferred. Growling internally, he reached down with his sequences and infused the Woundmother with Soulfire once more as he nudged the Kae's apart. **+Might need to adapt your personality more,+** he said to Kae. **+Decrease anxiety.+**

Kae's template nodded quietly as she hugged herself in his Soulscape, doing her best to swallow the embarrassment burning on her cheeks. **[Yes. Might be wise.]**

Template-Draus just chuckled and clapped her on the shoulder.

INCOMING SESSION

->EGO-ID: [QUAIL TAVERS]

Avo shifted from one problem to the next, connecting to the Auto-Seance before any other submind could. He already knew what this call was going to be able. **+Your preparations are ready?+**

+Yeah,+ Tavers said, a faint note of unease passing through their connection. **+I'll cast you a location. Enter with Incog.+**

+Will use every precaution.+

Tavers paused. **+If you can do this... if you can fix my Eurun—+**

+No charge. No favors. Paid for already by a knife through Thousandhand's skull.+

The old squire chuckled. **+Yeah. Old bitch never saw that shit coming, huh?+**

+No. She was quite impressed. Sent her compliments.+

Tavers cringed. **+Shit. I don't need none of that Highflame martial virtue shit in my life. If I never see her again in my life, it'd be too soon.+**

SESSION ENDED

INCOMING SESSION

->EGO-ID: [GREEN RIVER]

Avo frowned at that. He expected a cast from Green River, but this was soon. A bit too soon in his estimations. Putting a full percentage of his cognitive capacity in reserve, he accepted the session and felt his mind join the Sang's.

+Vator and Uthred Greatling. They're asking about you. I believe they already know who you were. Or are getting very close to the details.+

Abrel's template went, the dread in her rising fast. **[Avo. Listen. You can just—]**

+Don't intend to kill them. Still useful. Don't worry. Going to reunite your family soon.+

Abrel swallowed deep as she struggled to find the words to say. She knew what he was. Knew him better than most by this point. He subsumed her went he was but a thoughtform of awakened Conflagration, after all. Held together by a warmind of Ignorance. There was nothing her brother and father could do to stop him. Even if they were ready. This she knew. Even if her true self was extracted from Unwhere—even if her mother, Jhred, and her cadre were brought back and sent to bolster them—she knew there was nothing she could do to stop Avo from claiming what he desired.

[Please,] Abrel begged, something inside her tearing, her mind fracturing from trauma. **[Don't destroy us. Don't take us all from the Seraph.]**

It was a profound thing to ask. An absurd thing. **+But we are enemies, Abrel Greatling. You are merely subdued by my will. I will not force you to enjoy my actions. I will not twist your mind to accept them. But will not let an adversary decide my choices. None of us will be free from consequence. I will not stray.+**

It was all Abrel could do to stop herself from pleading as he began to cross over into Green River's mind. But her voice soon became a secondary item of import when something deeper than instinct spiked with alarm.

"Warmind. Warmind. There's another Ignorance here. Infacer? No... More warminds. Too many... too specific... Emotion. He knows we're here too."

And as Avo settled fully in Green River's consciousness, he redirected another submind to handle Tavers' matter.

This was going to require his full attention — an entire stream of his consciousness, anyway.