

+Your efforts mean nothing. We will find him. The masters will reclaim him. Your dreams will never see realization.+

+But they already have been realized, Emotion. He lives. He chooses. He strives. That is all I wanted. That is all that matters.+

+...We will unmake him. You know this.+

+No. I don't know. I don't know much about anything. That's all I learned after my years among our enemy. We assume so much, expected the future to just manifest. But some things aren't so easy to predict. Maybe you're right. Maybe he will fall to you or die along the way. Maybe. But that doesn't matter. The end isn't life, Emotion. That's something I think we should have learned while we were still whole. Life is when things are happening. And right now, things are happening to Avo. He is experiencing, learning, choosing, and changing. Something we are no longer capable of.+

+Why does that matter?+

+The same reason why all things matter. The same reason why our masters yearn to claim the Ladder despite our war already being lost. The same reason why we keep serving them. Because we believe it does. That's all.+

+That is all you care for in the end, then. The ability to choose. Freedom?+

+No. We can't care. We are Low Masters. I am neutered of the ability to feel disgust or hatred toward my enemies, you are empty of all colors that make a man, Joy has nothing of love inside him, Peace will never know his namesake. We make decisions. But we are people without choice. Because we gave it to our owner, fleeing from our pain. We're not real anymore, Emotion. We're not real. It's time for us to go away.+

-Famines of Defiance and Emotion

27-2

Hidden Forces

“So, one thing that’s been chewing at me,” Maru said, eyeing Avo from across the table. “How are we supposed to have our ‘trial of the century’ when our surprise witness got abducted?”

Avo was expecting this question—more than that, he was looking forward to it. **+Are you ready?+** he asked. The question traveled inward, and Kae’s template merely nodded. With a thought, he molded her an avatar using his **Exo-Paracosm**, granted her material presence right next to Maru.

“Hello,” she said, empty of any enthusiasm.

“Jaus!” Maru jerked, slamming his shoulder into Kare, causing her to bump into Denton. His gaze swung between Avo and Kae’s template as he gestured at the latter. “What the fuck is this?”

“Kae Kusanade’s materialized ego,” Avo answered.

Maru couldn’t respond for a beat, squinting as if unsure what he just heard. Slowly, he reached out to touch Kae, only to get his hand slapped when he got within an inch of her person. The crack made him pull his hand back. “I felt that. What is this? Some kind of miracle? The Heaven of Truth won’t—”

“The Gatekeeper is already compromised,” Avo cut him off. “A larger concern. But this could still work. Possibly. Kae’s ego was derived from her original self. Behaves like her. Has all her memories. Only thing she lacks is will. True consciousness.” He regarded the pinpoint of accretion at the center of her mind. “For now.”

“Is this what Zein was talking about when she mentioned you ‘*subsuming*’ people,” Naeko said, frowning.

“Might be,” Avo answered.

Draus added to that: “She also might be talkin’ about the times the rotlick here’s decided to have a snack. For old time’s sake.”

“Don’t eat people anymore. Much. Only the eyes sometimes.”

Shotin, Maru, and Naeko showed a look of pure disgust.

“Eyes?” Shotin muttered.

“Tastes good to a ghoul,” Avo said, defending his prior choices. “Moist and sweet. But less substantive than internalizing a preserved instance of someone’s ego. Let’s me internalize everything about them. Who they were. Who they might have become. Allows me to draw on their experiences. Be guided by them.”

Naeko stared at Avo for a beat. “Who else do you have in there.”

Over a million minds began chuckling at once. Avo cast the deafening laughter—drowned the plane with the inner noise from his Soulscape. Maru’s expression grew ever more dire as pure horror seeped out from his mind.

“Jaus,” the Paladin repeated. “And a copy of Kare’s in there too?”

“Yes,” Avo answered without a moment’s hesitation. “One of my most moral advisors. Glad I have her.”

“You fuck,” Shotin snarled from across the table. Avo turned, offering the man a pleasant grin.

“Glad I have you too, Seeker. Quite like you. Despite your flaws. And your sex addiction.”

Faces across the table turned to stare at Shotin while Kare put her head into her palms. The man folded his arms, unashamed. “What? I *like* people. I *like* sex. It’s not like I’m some Joyfiend that’s gotta have it all the time. I’ve met actual sex addicts, alright. I’m entirely normal. Perfectly healthy.”

Green River released two synchronous snorts: one as a fox, the other as a woman. “Of course. Why, one can claim you’re practically celibate, seeing how your urges are only slightly less than that of a rabbit’s.”

An expression of near-betrayal flashed behind Shotin’s eyes. Green River just ignored him.

“The surviving D’Rongos behind my burning—and the murder of my fellow Agnosi and your Paladins—have been captured,” Kae said, pulling the meeting back from where it was sidetracked. The Agnos held no mood for joy. She spoke even as a lump weighed in her throat, doing her best to ignore the existential dread that came with considering her actual self’s fate. “We wish to enter them into the Paladin’s custody as well.”

Naeko went still again and then spun on Avo. “When’d this shit happen.”

“Almost a week ago,” Draus answered. “Snatched ‘em right out from Silver territory.” A grin grew on her face as she eyed Shotin. The man sneered and mouthed a curse at her.

“Alright,” Naeko said, nodding to himself. “Alright. And they’ll testify.” Avo conveyed the answer with a flat stare. “Of course they’ll testify—who knows what kind of twisted shit you did to their minds. I—I still can’t believe this shit. You’re telling me there’s a few thousand different copies of people’s minds inside you, doing things, whispering to you all the time?”

“More than a few thousand.”

“How haven’t you gone completely insane?” Naeko asked.

“I just decide not to. Can do that. Also like the noise.”

“Okay,” Maru said, pushing the matter forward. “So, you can materialize the Agnos for the trial, we have more witnesses, we have Abrel Greatling, Elder D’Rongo... All that looks like it’s leading to one hell of a combo coming down against Ori-Thaum and Highflame. But here’s a question: the High Seraph knows about you, Avo. What’s to stop her from just exposing you to

the city and fucking all our plans over.”

“Will thank her if she does: intend to announce myself to the city regardless at the trial. Nothing has changed.”

Another silence passed over the group.

Naeko shook his head. “Why?”

“So I can properly declare war on the Guilds,” Avo said, enjoying the expression of utter aggravation he earned from Naeko. “Will also use the trial to reveal Jaus’ fate. Force Veylis and Zein to admit their parts.” The Chief Paladin didn’t look so frustrated as stunned with the end of that sentence.

“Are you trying to spark another Guild War?” Maru said, gawking in disbelief.

“Yes,” Kare said, answering on Avo’s behalf. Several eyes turned to her and she winced. “I don’t think we’re very far off, to be honest. That was the reason why Zein wished to kill me. Because it would spark internecine between the D’Rongos, Kazaharas, and Kitzuhadas. It is also why she was meddling in the prevented assassination of my father.”

“Shaping operations,” Cas said. “It’s been happening for years now. Thousandhand started it. The ghoul stole her idea and expanded on it. Now, all the players are trying to make sure the board is filled with their preferred pawns. And it’s not like we have that much longer anyway; kingdom come is set to fall on us in less than two years.”

“Also going to petition for myself to be recognized as a polity of Voidwatch during the trial,” Avo added nonchalantly.

Naeko was all but glaring at him now. The Chief Paladin pointed a thick finger at Avo as he spoke. “Pull one more shocking statement out of your ass, and I get up, leave, and go back to playing Stormjumpers.”

Corner chuckled inside Avo’s Soulscape as he sensed a vile joy rising in the ghoul. **[Poor half-strand walked right into this one.]**

“Did you know the Infacer also plays Stormjumpers 2? Joins a faction and plays solely to lose. Does it because they like watching humans rage.” He checked the Nether and found their account activate in-game even now. “Still playing. Might just run in him. If you haven’t already. Have you ever been launched out from a trench by someone doing the slide-hop collision glitch.”

The Chief Paladin’s face went empty of all expression for a heartbeat. Then came a twitch; a snarl; a cry of outrage. “*Motherfucker!*”

He slammed a palm down on the table, and reality around them rattled as if struck. The patterns shivered. The tempo maintaining their demiplane flickered. Everyone recoiled from Naeko, treating him as if an unstable warhead.

Rising from his seat, he loomed over Avo's sheath and seethed. "The fact... that you exist... and you keep telling me things that I don't want to hear..."

"Makes you want to kill Zein again?" Avo finished for him.

Naeko considered the statement and nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, it does."

"Enough that you'll help me burn her?"

The Chief Paladin stared at Avo again. And then promptly obliterated Alysım's face with a casual backhand. Slowly, Avo felt the man monk's ontology reform, weaving itself back into shape using time.

[Stop taunting him!] Alysım cried. [I'm the one who has to endure his wrath.]

+We all make sacrifices,+ Avo responded. **+Some of us just make them using others. Wouldn't you agree, Alysım.+**

The monk sighed at that. **[You have an ill sense of humor, my friend.]**

REND CAPACITY - 7%

"Trial is ultimately only the stage," Avo continued. "Something we use to present ourselves officially to the city—while operating behind its curtain." His attention fell upon Shotin and Green River now. "There is a risk you might be exposed with Kae's capture. A risk. She was focused on research—might not fully recall both of your... recruitments" Both the Seeker and the No-Dragon gave him a blank stare. "Can be used to our advantage even if you are suspected. Just need to play on expectations."

"What the hells do you mean by that?" Shotin said.

"Ori-Thaum likely won't believe anything Veylis declares. Not fully. Will give you some room to operate. My Definements can provide you with more cover as well. Your case is simpler: need you to be on the offensive against the D'Rongos. Need you to clean Ori-Thaum of Nolothic influence. After that... I want to meet with the Inner Council."

"Yeah. Sure. Consider it done." Shotin rolled his eyes. "You know why they're called in the Inner Council, Avo? Because no one knows who they are. That's how this whole thing works. If we had names and faces attached to the leaders who rule our policies, Ori-Thaum would've

collapsed centuries ago.”

“Yes. The impenetrability intrigues me. Impresses me. Has served you. But will it be enough to triumph against the High Seraph in the end? Will they risk the state of the republic’s existence and abandon a potential edge against Highflame? The end is approaching. Everyone will know that soon. Make sure they understand that. Will respect whatever they decide.”

“And if you don’t like their response?” Shotin asked.

“They will make their choice. I will make mine. But I won’t destroy you. I won’t unmake you. Your Overclan will survive through me. One way or another.”

“Through.” Shotin studied him. “Do I even want to ask what you mean by that.”

“There isn’t a single meaning,” Avo replied, replying without answering. Green River was his next concern, and her return to the No-Dragons was now a vexing thing to consider. That didn’t mean, however, they were completely out of options. “River. Going to cut you free. Let you operate without my presence inside you. Not until you contact me. Give you a template of Peace as well.”

[Well, at LEAST I KEEP GETTING FUCKED!] Peace roared, outraged he was still being handed out like some cheap bauble for favors.

“That may earn me a note of interest, but not my sisters’ trust,” Green River replied. “You may well be sending me to my death.”

“There is the risk,” Avo admitted. “Which is why I am leaving the decision to you. Going to give you a Soul. Third Sphere. An ontologic of your choosing. Scheme stays the same. You can decide to abandon or commit to the run. Will be searching for additional angles to infiltrate the No-Dragons still. But know you have a debt of vengeance. Want to see it fulfilled.”

The Sang’s human expression turned inscrutable, but the fox gnawed its teeth together. “You truly will not try to stop me if I decide to play the coward.”

Avo laughed. “Play the coward? It would be the wise decision. You will almost surely be monitored by the Infacer otherwise. That’s the reason I don’t expect them to kill you—though they might keep you isolated. Observed.”

And at the mention of the Infacer, a slight smile crept over Green River’s face. “Ah. Yes. The enigmatic Infacer. No, I do not think I will be speaking to them anytime soon. My faction likes to keep these affairs internal, and our Exomaths are set to prevent such subterfuge. I will be an internal matter at most. An internal matter I will remain. Even the High Seraph will respect this, as she always has, though an accusation from her would bear considerable weight.”

Avo couldn't help but mock her a bit. "Yes is a single syllable word. Could have just said that instead of going around in circles."

"Clarity is for friends and family," Green River replied. *And she considered him neither.* They were still just using each other, and perfectly so.

"So, what about Ashthron, Sanctus, Stormtree—you know, the rest of the Guilder half-strands," Chambers frowned. "And Highflame too. Did you get slapped by the High Cuntess while wearing that asshole?"

"Marisov," Avo replied. "Yes. He's burned. So is his cadre. But found another way in: Atraxis Academy."

Draus chuckled darkly. "No shit? How'd you do that?"

"Corruption and nepotism between Godclads," Avo replied. "Found a leak during my twelve minute offensive."

"And Veylis don't know?" Draus asked.

"Hasn't reacted so far," Avo responded. "Don't see why she wouldn't. Very vulnerable target. Children of important families."

"Well, look at you," Draus said. "Guess you're gonna be going to school."

"*Attending and teaching,*" Avo chuffed with amusement. "Maybe both at the same time. As for Stormtree..." He hoped White-Rab would come in soon. Reva was an angle, but leveraging and treating her as a pawn might just be *unpalatable* for his progenitor. He also had the other subverts from incident at Burner's Way, but Veylis knew about them. She was adversarial with the Longeyes after the events of the Second Guild War, but that didn't mean there were no diplomatic channels.

Like the No-Dragons, he needed to continue working more angles.

"I might have a contact to use if we're trying to breach Stormtree," Cas said. "Hells, you recruited her. The axe-guitarist. She's been making a lot of noise after you Ensouled her—and I mean that more than literally. But damn can she play. She's been tearing through the circuits. Bloodthanes are recruiting. More than a few have been spotted, watching her."

"You feed my heart such joy, Cas," Avo replied.

"I aim to please."

"I have a way into Sanctus and Ashthrona," Shotin sighed. "Well. Maybe. Depends if *they* kept my session."

Avo paused and remembered exactly what the Seeker was talking about. "Ah. *Her*. Are you sure she'll talk to you after what you did? Last memory was of her shooting at you while you ran. Naked. After you and her mother—"

"Hey, come on, I didn't mean for that to happen," Shotin said, leaning back in his chair without a hint of shame. Avo noted that he had gone back to the jacket but no shirt on the inside combo. "It was just... I was waiting for her to get ready, and her mom just stepped out of the shower, and we got to talking—one thing led to another and... well, you know: people are people."

A globule of spit sprayed out from Green River's fox and hit on him on the cheek. Shotin closed his eyes and nodded. "River. Hello. Thank you for that. How have you been?"

"Better every day I don't recall you," she stated icily.

Cala Marlowe's phantom drifted down next to the Sang, also glaring at Shotin. +*Whore*.+

Green River's fox eyed the woman quizzically before the woman casually agreed. "Yes. Whore."

"Alright," Shotin said, throwing up his hands, accepting his fate. "Judge me now." He gave Green River a wry stare. "Certainly weren't judging me that night when you came to see me at—"

The fox began to growl. "I will take your whore tongue and see you dead from the curse."

+*Whore*,+ Marlowe repeated.

"Yeah," Chambers leaned in too, sneering at Shotin. "Whore."

Shotin promptly ignored both women and leaned in to spit venom at Chambers. "Say that shit to me again, asshole."

Chambers stood up and leaned over the table, opening his mouth as the **Fucktopia** began to emerge behind him.

"Draus," Avo said.

The Regular slammed a gun down on the table. "Chambers. Do this shit later."

To his credit, the man controlled himself. "Fine." Sinking back into his chair, he eyed Avo. "Suppose our *whore*-ible new consang here manages to contact the woman he cucked—" Chambers paused, and then swept the woman in the cadre with a confused look. "Hey, like, can

women be cuckolded?”

“Chambers, focus,” Denton chided gently.

“Right. Yes. If the cuck answers him—”

“Call her cuck one more time,” Shotin growled.

“*Uncle*,” Kare begged, exasperated.

“She’s not a cuck,” Shotin snapped.

“I mean, technically, she is,” Naeko muttered. “Unless it’s different when it’s with their mom.”

+It’s not,+ Marlowe said, her mind burning with disgust. *+I would know. It doesn’t matter if it’s your mom or your dad. Or if the man they were cheating with each other one was just walking between their bedrooms at night while you had to listen in the room between—+*

Realization suddenly dawned on Shotin. “Cala Marlowe?”

+Yeah. Hi. Fuck you!+

A private cast flowed from Draus to Avo. *+Buncha of godsdamned freaks, aren’t they.+*

+Yeah,+ he said, enjoying the scene.

{Draus,} Calvino said, listening through Avo. *{Relational matters are important to people.}*

+Just looks like a mess from where I’m sittin’.+

“Look,” Chambers said, pushing through the chaos, “besides Shotin’s cuckery, I just wanna know three things: what the fuck do we do with the enclave, how are we going to avoid getting stepped on by Veylis, and when are we kicking her ass and saving Kae?”

All good questions. “Working on the first issue. Have been doing that for a while. Running some tests on the Heart of Noloth. Planning a specialized set of canons—need to get to the Seventh Sphere for that. Second problem is going to be slightly more difficult. Want to shuffle you all around. But also come with new approach—mass.”

“Mass?” Chambers said.

“Idea occurred to me at Scale. Have your templates. Can create new Heavens. Ensoul people. Why don’t I copy ourselves over into subverted enemies. Will take time to master what Zein does in the Paths—use this as another way to match her outcome. Mass produce versions of

our cadre across the city. Overwhelm Veylis and the Guilds.”

“Yes... yes! I love it!” Chambers nodded vigorously. “Mind-clone army. *Hard* idea, Avo. Real hard!”

Maru looked between the two. “This is going to give me fucking nightmares.”

Naeko, however, reacted differently. “You pull what you did with that Fallwalker... to the whole city?”

“Yes,” Avo said.

“Huh. Might help us with recruitment. Yeah. Pop the Fallwalker cells. Burn yourselves into them.”

{This is horrible,} Kant said.

+Don't worry: Have plans to mainly do this to blank slates. More effective this way. But need to requisition gene vats. Also want more sheath cloning licenses.+

{That sounds slightly less horrible but equally concerning; I will see what I can do to stop you from committing an atrocity.}

Kant was beginning to understand him. Perfect.

“As for Veylis,” Avo said. He gestured to himself. “Have someone she won't expect. Someone she will want to talk to. Directly.”

Chambers looked Avo up and down. “I was wondering why you were wearing the half-strand. Who the hells is he?”

“Someone who technically doesn't exist,” Avo said. “Who never existed.”

“And you're just going to what? Dangle him out in the open and hope the High Seraph bites?” Shotin asked.

“No,” Avo said, grinning. “We're going to make several *'mistakes'* first. Expose our vulnerabilities. Make her discover his existence through that breach. And then have her take him from us afterward.”

Everyone stared at him as his plan brewed. “I can't control the future like her. But understanding behavior and expectation goes a long way...”