

*Her blade, a song of woe through time,
Her blows, her strikes, death her rhyme.
Mother against daughter, an ordeal of fate.
The future rests their clashes, hearts bound by love and hate.*

*But upon the tides of time an infection comes,
The ravenous beast molting, a god he becomes.
Mother and daughter are no longer the only shadows that loom,
For only will the true struggle begin when the monster mends the world's womb.*

-Unidentified Thoughtcast

21-5
Blood of Dragons (II)

Avo was in the enclave; his stolen city of light.

Avo was passing through the Sunderwilds, bound for the George Washington, seeking to root himself in its systems.

Avo was diving across his sessions, burying himself within Abrel's consciousness, Kassamon, Kare, and Elegant-Moon soon to follow. Her mind was ignorant of his intrusion, his memories melting into hers, not even waking her as she slumbered.

Every splinter that parted his mind fractured his awareness further. He could spawn a legion of fragments, but he could only wield them. Direct them only as a unified concert. Broad focus resulted in broad effects. Meticulous work required focus and concentration; greater investitures of total cognitive capacity.

And so he began his approach as a thoughtform of three parts.

As Denton told him of her relationship with Nako, he speared first into Abrel's mind. The girl was asleep, slumbering within a porcelain prison. He jacked into her senses and studied her cell. The room was aglow with a somber ambiance. Liliac on white. Sounds of a distant waterfall almost too quiet even for Abrel's hearing.

The Exorcists and voiders were unaware of his hidden Auto-Seance, planted deep in the folds of her memories. They were not his equal in the art then. They remained as pale shadows now.

An exchange of memories followed. In the moment of Abrel's inhale, he wove into her all that her template experienced alongside him. He left himself and the others vagaries, of course, drawing a curtain over what he desired to keep hidden. But he gifted her with a rebate of knowledge. A fitting trade for all the aid she offered.

He trawled further through her memories, filtering through the mem-data for critical moments of worth.

Surprise filled him as the face of Uthred Greatling appeared. Realizations blossomed, one following another, perturbed by the sudden dissolution of House Greatling, unnerved further by the fact that a former Authority and his Instrument of a son was seeking the cadre down in the Warrens.

Abrel, for her worth, had misdirected them from the true mark. She sculpted a story, portraying Chambers as a mastermind. A rising threat unseen, the vengeful hand of Noloath striking once more.

There was something here. Something he could engineer. New actors on the scene for him to exploit. Studying Uthred and Vator's capabilities through Abrel, Avo found himself more thrilled than perturbed.

So they sought the Acolyte Aedon Chambers. So multiple parties were noticing the suspicious Fallwalker using a Bone Demon. All this could be twisted to his advantage. Offered as bait.

While he constructed his plot, Denton spoke in the backdrop, elaborating on her relationship with Naeko.

"My association with the Chief Paladin is one of informational and mutual benefit." Denton paused to consider her words. Hesitation gripped her, but she remained free of tension. "I am an open double agent. Ori-Thaum knows that I am compromised by Voidwatch. As does Paladin Naeko. Both entities assume this is the depths of my cross-allegiance and work to leverage their own gains through them."

"Openly a spy and unofficially a liaison," Avo remarked. "Fascinating how politics works between Guilds."

"Fuckin' messy is what it is," Draus snorted. She regarded the Glaive with a flat stare that conveyed her disapproval of the arrangement. "You're a fragging waitin' to happen, consang. Just a bad choice away from a snuffin' with all the daggers pressed up against your back."

Denton remained indifferent. "This is the most optimal way to achieve our ends. The risks involved are manageable."

"And if you end up dead?" the Regular asked.

A ghost of a smile graced Denton's face. "People in my line of work usually only end up wrong once. Regret is not our privilege."

And that was sufficient to assuage the Regular.

“The arrangement I struck to relieve you all from Naeko’s arrest was twofold,” Denton explained. “The first was claiming you as my assets. Under Ori-Thaum or Voidwatch I didn’t say.” Avo caught her implication—another angle he could use to implicate and muddy the waters for Clan D’Rgono. “But thinks you are my hounds. And I traded him information I knew he lacked. Information relating to Elder D’Rongo’s orders to commit conspiracy to murder and frame an Agnos. The latter act openly in breach of the Accords.”

“And that will matter when the trial begins?” Avo asked.

“Certainly,” Denton said. “The truth will be ascertained. The transgressors will be shown for what they are before the city. The punishment is coded into the Heaven itself and requires the clearance of the Chief Paladin and witnesses from the Guilds to be delivered. Such was how previous events proceeded. As this brings all the major powers together, trials are usually proceeded or followed by moots between the powers.”

Her gaze turned aside for a moment. “I think that was part of Operative Thousandhand’s schemes. She mentioned something about favored developments should specific individuals encounter each other during one of these gatherings. How it would make them easier to prune.”

“Wait, so there’s something I don’t get,” Chambers interjected. Heads turned to face him and he awkwardly made eye contact. “You’re literally selling out your elder and all this other shit. Why haven’t they—” He made a twisting gesture with his hands and mimed the noises of someone choking.

“Because the mem-data was obtained through other seniors within Clan D’Rongo. And also, I am just an agent. A Glaive. The messenger. I am a hand for multiple parties. Not the actor themselves. To liquidate me would anger many of my benefactors. There are benefits to leveraging an open identity and a role steeped in labor. And presently, Clan D’Rongo still believes they have the most sway over me. As does Clan Kituhada, Clan Kazahara, Clan Imaru, and Clan O’yaje.” She paused again. “I suppose a number of subsidiaries and independent Fallwalkers would be upset by my sudden removal as well.”

“And... do any of them know your true role?” Kae asked. “That you are a member of Ninth Column.”

The Agnos’ question caused Denton to genuinely smirk. “I am already a compromised spy. What other secrets could I have?”

This made Chambers do a double take. “Wait a minute. Hold the fuck up. Everyone’s fine with you being a spy because they know you’re a spy and are using you as a spy against the others, and you’re using all that spy shit to hide the fact that you’re an even deeper spy for a secret spy organization.”

The Glaive thought about what he said and simply nodded. “A flavorful way of portraying my role.”

He blinked in disbelief and coughed out a chuckle. “What in the fuck.”

“Were Aegis engineered from the start, weren’t you?” Avo asked.

Denton pressed her lips together. “I have a FATE-Skein. I passed through Essentials at Amoi Elementary. I finished Professionalization at the Tadeka-Ikkein Academy of Arts and Culture. I was recruited on service day.”

She gave a brief history of her youth, but never once did she say now.

+*Seed them young*, + Avo said to Calvino.

{*A cover performance works best when it’s mostly true.*} the EGI replied.

As the cadre fired off other related questions at the Glaive—Kae taking a special interest in what her part was in the overarching shape of things—Avo shifted the bulk of his awareness over to the splinter he cast through the mirror.

The reflective passages running through the Sunderwilds were as if a tunnel leading between sections of space. Noise cut in and out as he accelerated in the form of a traveling Specter, the fragment of his mind crossing flickers of reality, a collage of shattered landscapes.

Colors and brushing pressure graced his perception and Frame. The Sunderwilds *leaked* in a way. The fragility of torn reality was a palpable thing.

Then, into the last threshold he passed, and found himself back inside a shell formed of smart-matter and shadow.

Neon colors and expansive holographics pulled his attention. The interior of the George Washington had been substantially altered since he last returned. There was more machinery present. More drones performing active maintenance—audio-visual telemetries received from various cameras or optics, the moments they collected playing in real-time, viewpoints from over a dozen Sovereignities and districts, showcasing how things were on the streets and from the sky.

Avo ignored them for now, wasting no time as he buried his splinter into the encrusted vivianite on the throne.

Data flowed through his mind as he merged himself to the Shepherd AI’s internals—the damaged construct’s internal systems upheld by its broken crew. Flickers of an ancient programming

language extended to erupt into threads of memory. Both Calvino and he studied the bastard cognition of the entire structure, and were of two minds regarding its make.

The EGI was about as disgusted as it could be. Shame and criticism were not its favored tools, but faced the fates of the crew with honest disappointment.

Avo contrarily found himself impressed by the Low Masters. Surprised that they managed to scaffold technologies they could understand through an asymmetrical application of their art. To be able to achieve something like this took nothing less than a prolonged effort. Cruel mastery.

It was also probably why so many systems within a Metamind aped voider direct-neural interfaces. Noloith stole from the most reliable source of advancement they had.

Considering what Avo had just done to the Hungers, he was practically just following Noloith tradition.

Drifting through sequences and scripts, he reached the reactor of the ship and studied the bodies. They remained there. Trapped. Fused. Encased along an amber grapevine like a thread of disfigured minds. They were like shrapnel but mainframes both. Pillars of cross-cognitive manipulation. Thanks to their brain-computer interfaces, the entire vessel remained function. Somewhat.

More importantly, it ensured they remained backed up. Awareness. The Shepherd prevented them from being burned hollow when the Conflagration lit them before.

That, more than anything, indicated they could still be saved. But that required the base parts of their ego be untangled from the jungle of crossing data.

+Going to leave a splinter here permanently. Just like with the cadre. Let's you access the details. Are you getting anything else? Know you got to spend some time with the system.+ Avo felt a note of surprise come from Calvino. The EGI hadn't been expecting this.

{I think so,} Calvino said. {But it's mainly because you're merging into the infrastructure. The way you can bridge the Nether with standard technology is useful. Maybe together, we will be able to unravel this mess.}

+After,+ Avo said, his attention drawn to a flash of images in his periphery.

Aerial feeds over what looked to be Burner's Way compelled Avo's attention. He saw three walls of golems and drones facing each other, boxing in a half-collapsed factory. Interfacing with the display, he isolated Highflame, Stormtree, and Paladin units on the scene, but more importantly, his focus narrowed in on ten figures amidst the industrial debris.

Four looked to be Highflame Godclads by their armor, and towering over them stood their Bloodthane rivals. A cadre of Paladins stood wedged between them and Avo ordered the drone to zoom in.

As it did so, he realized he was looking down on the scene through an Exorcist Tadpole. He wondered how Tavers managed to get access to that, but found himself soon considering if he could construct them using his **Haemokinesis** instead. When its optics settled on the Paladins, however, all prior ruminations vanished.

Kare Kitzuhada was in the thick of things alongside her mentor, her armor of slatted white smeared with oil and fumes while her helmet was set to transparent.

She appeared to be trapped with the unenviable of de-escalating a tense encounter between two rival cadres, and with her mentor locked in a shouting match with three of the Highflame personnel, it seemed the junior Paladin was the only one making a genuine effort.

It looked like she needed a hand. And it looked like she was in a prime position to help him as well.

[Oh no,] template-Kare breathed, dread filling her phantasmal veins.

+Don't worry. I'll make sure you get out fine.+

Nine other Godclads. Four Highflame. Four Stormtree. One Maru Sandrupal—a figure closely tied to Chief Paladin Naeko if borrowed memories suggested correctly.

What a windfall. What an opportunity.

More vectors to spread.

Shifting his awareness back into his original body, he created more splinters as he triggered his Auto-Seance a second time.

It was time to render some diplomatic support.

There were some days that the city was just out to get you, that made you regret being a Paladin, that made you regret not taking up your uncle's offer.

This was just one of those day, Kare told herself.

The attack—if it was an attack—had left the Nether destabilized and triggered more than few hasty trigger fingers to squeeze.

All across the Tiers and Warrens, skirmishes were being fought, and they greeted Kare's cog-feed as an endless stream of emergency dispatches.

She and Maru had been among the first Paladins to recover from the unbalancing.

This engagement was one of many encounters spawned in relation to the disaster.

It began with a Highflame drone severed from control and plunging into Stormtree territory. Usually, this is where a bit of shooting followed, but everyone was temporarily incapacitated, things took a while to spiral out of hand.

Of course, the first ones to recover here were the station Godclads from each Guild: the Instruments led by Idril Marasov and Bloodthanes under pack leader Urdna ag'Naeg.

For approximately one minute and twenty seconds between the start of the scuffle and the Paladins arrival, over two nukes were detonated—and pocketed—nine hundred drones were destroyed, and an entire portion of a district's industrial sector lay in ruins.

Thankfully, said the district was Burner's Way.

You couldn't break what was already considered to be a dilapidated wasteland since the Fourth Guild War.

Of course, Kare's idea of stopping the conflict was more rooted in approaching with dialogue, Thoughtwave Detonations, and suppressive ordinance. Maru decided to jump them into the fray by hijacking an explosion to transpose them. She wasn't much a fan of the brawl that followed thereafter either. It took more than a few shockwaves to the Heaven for things to calm down.

Now, standing within the partially collapsed ruins—partially of her making, Kare nursed a sore neck and ringing ears as the leaders of each cadre threatened to do unspeakable things to one another's corpses.

This wasn't exactly how she envisioned spending the day. She was supposed to have time off. Spend time in a vicarity with Risha. And maybe have dinner with her father later. This though...

What did Uncle Shotin say?

"Sometimes, the city just has to fuck you in front of everyone." Right.

"...We're not done here. We need to talk about recompensation. You broke something of ours, *Ogress*. You break, you pay. Now. Is that going to be done through imps or other venues of satisfaction? I leave that up to you."

Instrument Idril Marasov was a square-jawed idiot who loved to point. Chrome lined the side of his cheeks and biothaumically grafted insectoid limbs jutted out from sockets along his ribs. He wore a Mantis-Incarnate bio-rig in place of inorganic armor.

Across from him, the Bloodthane Urdna ag'Naeg just loomed, her face forever a sneer, the shadows veiling her face a result of her three meters of height and messy dreadlocks swaying as a curtain. Bones decorated the exterior of her combat skin. Speaker grills lined her arms and shoulders, the sound distortions crackling from her pulsing metaphysically, making even the air around her shiver with vibrations.

Kare still felt the thunderous soundwaves washing through her bones. Even with her Heaven manifested, the unpleasantness went Soul-deep.

"Paladin," Urdna chewed, spitting a globule of phlegm onto a cracked slab. Enough saliva left her lips to crack the edge of the plascrete once more. "You tell this *boy* to bring me a woman to speak to. I have tolerated his insolence, but wish to speak to an adult."

Ironically, this was about as childish a thing as the Bloodthane could say. The woman knew not all clades were as the Scaarthians, sexually transitioning upon full maturity. This was a deliberate insult.

A deliberate insult that the Instrument couldn't seem to endure.

The man's face reddened.

Kare swallowed her own sigh. The entire time, the two were passing insults, and only when they wanted her to deliver an insult on their behalf did they address her.

Off to the side, she could hear Paladin Sandrupal declaring how many rounds of sexual congress he held with each of the other Bloodthane and Instruments' mothers. Though his method wasn't calming things down, it did seem stress relieving.

"Listen to me, you uppidity sow." Idril held out a hand. The Bloodthane slapped it. Toward Kare. Who was forced to dodge.

"Citizens," she said, forcing the words out even as her frustration spiked. They seemed intent on fighting each other. Intent on ignoring her attempts at resolution. Intent on starting a war just to feed their egos.

To think people like this could be Godclads was despair-inducing.

"Point that finger in my face and I will claim your arm as a trophy," Urdna sneered. "It is a small, shriveled thing, but not all specimens can be *worthy*."

“You half-strand piece of shit—” The Instrument took a threatening step forward.

Kare intercepted him. “Instrument. No. Wait!”

He planted a hand on her face to shove her aside, but she twisted under and got in his path. White teeth were bared at her, and his anger turned away from the Bloodthane. “Glasser. I’m going to scalp this too-tall bitch. You can get out of the way, or you can be the appetizer. Up to you.”

Kare closed her eyes and breathed. Who taught these Instruments how to speak? It was like everyone owed them imps.

“Try it, *partling*. Find out if you are mother enough in your infant bones.”

And why did these Bloodthanes always have to fan the flames?

“Fuck you!” Idril snarled.

“Fuck you!” Urdna spat.

“No,” Kare said, her patience slipping. If they were going to fight—so help her Jaus—she was going to snuff them first. “Enough. Stop.”

And then the strangest thing happened.

Just as quickly as the violence escalated, the air changed. There was a twist in the current. A shift in the Nether. Where their accretions were churning fast, accelerating to meet the coming violence, their minds suddenly stopped, and the expression emptied from their faces.

“Oh. Of course, Paladin. My apologizes.” The Instrument nodded and backed away.

Across from him, the Bloodthane also bowed her head. “Shameful behavior. From both of us. Truly.”

Kare blinked. Both of the other Godclads peeled away, stepping back and... staring off with confused expressions.

Their faces probably matched her at that moment.

What had just happened?

Turning, she regarded Maru, but found him and the other Guilders staring off in awkward directions as well, distracted by something.

“Paladin Sandrupal?”

“Hm?” He replied. “Right. Good job. Rookie.” He gave her a nod. “Great de-escalation. You should get a medal for that. I’ll tell Naeko.”

The other Godclads were all oddly nodding in sync with him.

Animal fear welled in Kare’s stomach, and dryness settled in her throat. “I... Just doing my job.”

From within nine new minds, an outsider spread their influence, fangs wide in a savage rictus.

Oh. Things were going to be just delightful. Maru now. Kassamon after. And who knew how far he would spread? Who knew what he could achieve with his new gifts? With how subtly he flowed, how unknowably he moved, who, then, could stop him?