

The Strix and the Ravens (II)

Avo reviewed Denton's mem-data as he waited for Kare to synchronize with his Metamind. A collage of moments passed through him; flashes of visual detail overlain with two sets of directives.

The first was addressed from Ori-Thaum's Inner Council to all active assets. The basic takeaways were focused on the mass deployment of Information Domain Heavens and expanded subtly requirements now that Chief Paladin Naeko was back in play. The second came from within Clan D'Rongo and arrived immediately after the Inner Council's broadcast concluded.

All D'Rongo-loyal Mirrors were given in-house phantasmics assigned for distribution. Though supposedly meant to secure their Auto-Seance's against Clan Kitzuhada's mind-raids, Denton's suspicious—and Avo's warmind of Ignorance—unveiled what they truly were.

Containing no more than fifty ghosts and seventy-two sequences, each fragment belonged to a warmind of Delusion.

The Low Masters were going on the offensive again. Pushing at whatever openings they could. Elder Mwaba D'Rongo was likely the source of this compromise, and from her was a rival infection spreading.

[You dumb cunt, you should have seen this coming.] Peace chuckled under his breath, the sour-bitter of his mind growing with each passing moment. **[Emotion isn't just going to lay down and take it. None of us are going to lay down and take it. You might have compromised me. You might have taken my burdens—my hate! But there are Three Famines! Three! And Emotion will not allow me to stay compromised for long. You think you know about the warminds? You're blind. You're fucking blind. We have things that will strip you from history itself.]**

He's talking about the forgotten. He's bluffing. They're afraid to use that one. Too much damage—too much of the Unsea will be seared barren with its deployment.

Avo pushed Peace's words to the wayside as Kare accepted his session.

Perceiving existence still as an avatar within his mind labyrinth, Avo witnessed the memory-constructed tower that was his Auto-Seance pulse and channel a beam of memories up through the clouds, projecting the sequence out into the Nether. As a cycle of ghosts streamed upward, the war-choked sky splashed and changed, fading from view as if the face of a pond disturbed by a falling rock.

As phantasmal waves swept the firmament, another mindscape drifted into view from the distance, reeled by the memories broadcast from its Auto-Seance now symmetrically locked to Avo's.

It was as if two planetary bodies intersecting their orbits, ineffably bridged by a shared emission of repeating memories.

–[Kare]–

There came a point, while under bombardment during times of war, that you just learned to treat the ceaseless thundering like noise. Perhaps the next barrage might kill you. Perhaps not. But even so, life had to go on.

Kare found the same was true for her mental health. After all the anxiety spikes and constant panic attacks she faced over the past month—all the hidden wars being fought around and over her—she was quickly approaching the point of exhausted apathy.

Such was why she accepted Avo's session the moment she departed from Scale. Another day, another crisis. At least the city's strangest ghoul was on her side.

+What is it now?+ Kare asked, looking out her aerovec's window. Heavy rain lashed down hard on her *VTR-Hourglass*, but not a single droplet lingered long on her vehicle's chassis. An aero of Sanctus make, it resembled a needle encased by several revolving rings that projected a tunnel of propulsive force along its sides. As such, its velocity was almost second to none on the market—capable of even surpassing some high-vector missiles in direct acceleration.

She wasn't much of a splurger when it came to material goods, but if she had a single guilty pleasure, it was going fast.

Avo took a moment to respond as he reached into her mind. Faintly, she directed her Specters inward and accessed their sensory telemetries via her cog-feed. Windows portrayed a mindscape consumed by perpetual war—a mindscape that housed millions upon millions of ghosts and encompassed the size of a district. Her mind stuttered to a halt as she wondered why he felt so light in her mind and how he was hiding the sheer mass of his cognitive capacity.

Most lobbies that had this many concentrated ghosts leaked thoughtstuff from kilometers away. He was barely a whisper in her mind.

+Might be an attack planned. On you. Or your uncle. Not sure which of you is a priority.+

Kare just let out a sigh. *+Of course. Who is it this time? Is Jaus back? The High Seraph created him a cyber-thaumic body and bound his memories to Omnitech's Noosphere so he might take*

over the city and enact a bastardized version of his dream?+

The ghoul actually paused. *+No. Strange assumption. Detailed too.+*

+It's a popular conspiracy theory on Saintless. It's... pretty much what it sounds. A mind lobby for Anti-Saintist conspiracy theories.+

+Strange place to be spending time.+

+I'm a Paladin, Avo. Spending time in questionable places is most of my job. Apparently, the other part is being embroiled in every quiet war and pitch-black political action this city has.+

The damned ghoul actually chuckled at that. Good to see he was finding her misery so amusing. *+Not between Guilds this time. Internal matter. For Ori-Thaum.+*

Another sigh escaped her. A deeper and longer one. Damn her uncle. What has he gotten her into this time? *+Is it the D'Rongos?+*

+...Good guess.+

+It was pretty much the only guess that makes sense,+ Kare replied rolling her eyes. Faint flashes of light and pierced through the vapor of the clouds. The turbulence grew, but her *Hourglass'* stabilizers compensated. A bolt of lightning skipped off the velocity bubble thaumically formed around her vehicle. Kare took a drink of water as the weariness inside grew. *+I told him not to start anything stupid. This isn't the time for clan warfare.+*

+Might not be his fault,+ Avo replied. *+Elder Mwaba D'Rongo is likely compromised by Noloth. Think she distributed fragments for a warmind among her loyalist assets.+*

A package of mem-data followed his words, and despite instincts screaming for her to deny the transfer, Kare allowed the information to pass over into her Metamind and glared off into the roiling atmosphere parting Scale and the rest of the Tiers. *+I have only known you for weeks, Avo. Weeks. And in that time, I find myself involved in conspiracy after assassination after conspiracy.+*

+Don't blame me. Only trying to stop them.+

+I know. I just saying... I miss being ignorant.+

A pause followed. A hissing laugh escaped the ghoul. *+Don't worry: your ignorance is quite intact.+*

The Paladin squeezed her eyes shut. Of all the impossibly smart, impossibly powerful, impossibly inscrutable ghouls who could have burned a template of her mind and protected her

from the shadows, she just had to get the one who thought he was funny. *+Thank you, Citizen Avo. Your mockery is what all Paladins aspire to receive.+*
+Welcome. Could repay that by letting me sit in on your meeting.+

Kare frowned. *+With my uncle.+*

+Want to bring him into the fold. Maybe. Prevent him from becoming compromised at least.+

She rolled her eyes. *+Somehow, I don't like their chances of jacking into Uncle Sho's mind. Trust me, many, many, many, people have tried. And many, many, many sad families are now receiving monthly stipends from Ori-Thaums because their idiot children thought they were going to be the ones to null the great Shotin "Planeshift" Kazahara.+*

+Believe he's a challenge. Good. Hope so. Will be a useful asset. And template.+

Kare snorted. *+Avo. I know that you're telling me this because you trust in free will, but there is no chance he will let you claim him. Not willingly anyway. He's far too proud to be someone else's backup singer. I can't stop you from coming with him. Agh. I think I feel safer when you're with me these days. But I don't think you'll be getting his willing help.+*

Hells. That was half the reason she was meeting him right now.

For the past two days, he sent cast after cast after Ghost-Link request and she ignored them all. But she knew if this went any longer, if she got held up in any more meetings with Naeko, Maru, and the Senior Paladins, Shotin Kazahara would personally attempt to break into Scale and speak with her directly, rules and propriety be damned.

Upon which he would likely turn into a smear on the bottom of Naeko's palm. Like the few hundred million unfortunates who perished over the past few days.

When the Chief Paladin of New Vultun stated he intended to stand and deliver, it was not a slogan or empty platitude. The Syndicates had all but retreated inward to wait out the storm, and more than a few illegally operating Godclads were sent running home after a dozen repeated deaths.

+He asked about you, you know,+ Kare said, mind still on Naeko. *+He heard you talking to him during his fight with the Godslayer. I told him that you helped me. Maru did too. He's given you a name: the Benefactor.+*

Avo chuckled. *+Makes me sound sophisticated.+*

+He told me to let him know as soon as you make contact. That he wants to meet before the trial. To thank you for helping him capture Thousandhand. For all that you've done for "his Paladins."+

A pause. A silence. Seconds dragged.

+Will think about this. Talk about it after I deal with our Low Master problem.+

+Do you think these... warminds are spreading through our Oversecs?+ Kare asked, her anxiety rising with the question. She used those Oversecs every day. The last thing she needed was some kind of invasive phantasmic in her mind. Well, not another one.

+Hm. Benefactor does sound better than "invasive phantasmic."+

Kare cringed. *+Ah. Sorry.+*

+It's fine. Thoughts are thoughts. Don't worry. Don't raise an alarm either. Don't want the Low Masters to know you or the Paladins suspect anything. Want to counter their ambush. Uproot them from where they're hiding. Just need you to proceed to brunch as normal. Speak with your uncle. I'll handle other matters.+

Despite her unease, she nodded. *+Alright. I—I trust you. I owe you my life. Will owe? The Zein thing was—+*

+Yeah. Confusing when you don't have a Domain of Chronology.+

The way he said that... *+Avo, do you have a Domain of Chronology?+*

+...I don't have a Heaven of Chronology. Or anything related to time. I am not breaking any of the laws.+

+That was a very strange answer to a relatively simple question.+

+Less you know the better. Said you missed being ignorant.+

Her eyebrow twitched. *+I meant that ignorance was bliss, not that I want to be kept in the dark about things considering my present or future potential of being murdered by Zein Fucking Thousandhand. You know what? Maybe you and my uncle might just get along. Considering how you both find it so easy to treat me like a stupid, vulnerable child, maybe that will be a point of unity between you and for once, he'll think of someone as a friend instead of someone to fight or have mind-sex with.+*

A low chuff of displeasure escaped the ghou. *+Kare. Will null your uncle if he attempts mental relations with me. Just letting you know beforehand.+*

The seriousness of his reply made her snort. *+Gods, the thought is disturbing enough.+* A beat followed. *+Should—should I tell Maru or—+*

+I'll let him know if needed. But not don't want to show my hand so soon. Paladin Sandrupal is volatile. Will likely demand the Oversecs be shut down. Or scare off whoever's coming for you. Will have to twist his mind to stop him. Don't want to do that.+

Yeah, those were all very Maru things to do.

+So. I'm playing at being bait today.+

+Just think of it as undercover work. And a nice family lunch.+

+Oh, yes,+ Kare said, rolling her eyes. *+Wonderful family lunch. That's what's going to happen.+* Her uncle totally wasn't going to mock her choices, try to browbeat her into working under him, insult her capabilities. Today was definitely going to be a different day.

+Unaddressed family issues,+ Avo said. That was all he said.

Kare narrowed her eyes in annoyance. *+It's not that bad.+*

+No. It's really not. One of my consangs just finds it funny.+

Suddenly, Kare's insides went into freefall. *+One of your--Avo, how many people are looped into our current conversation?+*

+Ignorance is bliss.+

+Avo...+

+Should tune into your favorite station. Listen to some music as you pass through Scale's liminal threshold.+

+Avo!+

--[Avo]--

It took a few carefully "misspoken" statements to distract the Paladin from her mental woes. The girl was stressed. Too stressed. She was remarkable about compartmentalizing, but as he reached into her mindscape, Chambers' template almost had a panic attack.

[Fuck me, her chest feels like it's filled with lead bricks. Fuckin' glasser needs all the Numb she can get.]

Avo knew it was bad when Abrel concurred.

Synchronizing Kare's template with her actual ego, her past two days flowed through Avo as a blur. In the aftermath of Zein's capture, Naeko offered to place her under protective detail. She declined, mostly believing the situation to be resolved, but also because she didn't want to distance herself from the other Paladins with her "special treatment."

Call Kare Kitzuhada a fool, but don't accuse her of being anything short of truthful about her ideals. She did all she could to live her dream, to be among those that safeguarded this city.

That was divine enough in New Vultun.

Worth protecting. Against Zein. Against Ori-Thaum's clan politics. Against whatever madness the Famines were trying to concoct.

As the Paladin continued arguing with him, he shared his memories with White-Rab and sent his progenitor a message. *+High threat dive. Might need your assistance. Respond if able.+*

The reply took less than a second to arrive. *+Synced. Is it the Famines?+*

Avo hesitated, but only briefly. *+Probably. They're in play again. Spreading through the Nether. Thought they would be down for longer. Was wrong.+*

+That's fine. I want to talk with them. About the Strix.+

Vengeance. There was as pure a motivator as any. Another legacy they shared of Walton.
+Wards set up?+

+Did that days ago. The memories you sequenced into me are really lighting the wick too. Didn't realize it was possible for someone to... uh, hate that much. Peace is a very, very unhappy boy.+

[I'm not a boy, you misplaced abortion!] Peace snarled.

+How's the thing with the Bloodthanes?+ White-Rab asked. +You got access to any of the Longeyes yet? For Reva's questioning?+

+Soon. Not going to forget her.+

+Good. 'Cause I won't let you.+

And there was a separation. Love. Human love. Romantic attachment. Even now, to bind one's ego to another seemed treacherous to Avo. Dangerous in the extreme, unless they possessed

his capabilities. His nature as a thoughtform ensured he could endure any lasting trauma, but for White-Rab, the risk was infinitely more severe.

Still. He didn't stop himself from falling. Maybe there was something there. Worth exploring when they eventually began their run on the Heaven of Love.

But that required them to get Kae back up into the Tiers first.

Shifting away from White-Rab, Avo synced his memories with both Draus and Dice, and found both of them ready and waiting.

+So,+ Draus said, annoyed at how cloak and dagger things were again, *+the Famines are about to try some fuckery again, huh?+*

+Probably. Going to share the address she's going to. Need some passages connected to the local district. Sniper points for you. Rush points for Dice. Just in case this gets physical too.+

+You expectin' it to?+

+Don't know what to expect with the Famines,+ Avo admitted. +Especially Emotion. Caught them off guard the last few times. More potent than they are in the Nether now. But don't want to play the fool. Looped White-Rab in. Link to him if I get nulled somehow. Contingencies.+

+Well, shit,+ Draus chuckled. +Looks like you're finally learnin' to get that ego under control.+

+Is such a thing even possible,+ Kae said, her voice arriving as an aside to the conversation.

The best thing about having consangs as a gestalt is all the experiences, insights, and support you'll get. The worst thing is that every one teams up to mock you. Even when you improve.

+Not that unbelievable,+ Avo growled.

+I'm sure its not,+ Draus agreed. +Ain't hard to be smug as shit to someone you killed if you get to keep their mind a prison post-mortem.+

He hissed at the Regular and stopped speaking to her. He sought a final edge to the coming struggle. Something the Famines didn't know. Something that Kare's identity as a Paladin allowed him to use without fear of reprisal from Veylis.

+Fardrifter. Need you back.+

A chorus of affirmative neighs sounded within his mind. ***+It's time to strangle the very passage of time?+***

+*Might just be.*+

+*So be. You call. I answer.*+

GRAFTING GOD

->**[FARDRIFTER]**

It was time to play voyeur at a family lunch.