

*Word of advice that no one ever follows: don't fuck anyone you're probably going to kill. Or make them your consang.*

*It sounds like common sense but you'd be surprised how many half-strands think they can "double-dip" so to speak. And I'd count myself among them because I had to learn that the hard way as well.*

*Listen, if there's one thing above all others you can do for yourself as a Squire or a snuffer or whatever kind of professional you want to be, it's this: give yourself only the truth.*

*You can lie to the world as much as you want, but be honest with yourself.*

*What destroys people is when they try to run between the lines.*

*Enemy. Not enemy.*

*Friend. Not friend.*

*Ally. Not ally.*

*Things are already complicated enough. Situations change all the time. But you need to be decisive. And you everything clearly laid out in your head. Trust isn't for my line of work. It might be for you, but you still want to have a gun under the table, just in case you need some insurance.*

*Use protection. In more ways than one, basically.*

*-Quail Tavers, School of the Warrens*

20-16

A Crack in the Storm

## **ASSIGNING MINDSCAPE TO LOBBY [ZEROTH-EXTRACT]**

### **MEM-LOCK IN PLACE**

### **CONSTRUCTING**

### **SIMULATING ENVIRONMENTAL ARTIFACTS**

Memories splashed through the Nether as an invisible deluge, ghosts bleeding details into the ether like droplets of watery paint blossoming on canvas. Curtains of twitching mem-data tightened and fused. Light spread through the darkness of barren thoughts as the scenery began to load.

Six columns rose from an expanse of polished onyx. They faced each other in pairs and flanked a carpeted path leading to a low seat made from bone and marble. Skittering spiders the size of buildings wove brocades of falling silk into place, curtaining the phantasmal glow of eerie flames, and dimming the ambience even further.

Green River's avatar loaded into place upon the pearlescent seat, a fox bearing eyes green and yellow. She checked the time and counted the seconds to midnight. Her congress with the Chief Paladin was due soon.

It was time to play a game she knew all too well—the obfuscation of truths and the weaving of *un-lies*.

Across from her, she detected another accretion slowly approaching. A shiver pulsed through the ghosts maintaining this simulation as they attuned themselves to the newcomer's cognitive capacity.

A bifurcated carved into a sigil of white and black rotated at the center of twin doors. As the connection was finally stabilized, the threshold swung open, and Naeko emerged, constituted by threads of flowing mem-data.

The door closed. Green River practiced a coquettish smile, on the Paladin, masking the expression using a swaying tail. "I must confess something before we begin."

Naeko smirked slightly. "Already? Damn. I still got it."

Ah. Flattery and banter would get you anywhere if only you knew who to use it on.

"It's about you, actually," Green River said. "You are a storied man, Chief Paladin Samir Naeko. Peace-Breaker. Faith-Bleeder. But I have heard rumors—disproved as of this instant—that you were..." She let her final syllables draw out, waiting for him to finish.

"Nah," Naeko said, looking off to the side, seeming almost boyish. "I'm never late. It's just that I don't really show up for most things at all. There's a difference."

He brushed his shoulder, and she wondered just how the fabric of his synthetic grey body glove could contain the immensity of his musculature. Even within the realm of minds, the man had looked as he did in the real, but considering his biceps were comparable to that of a Scaarthian despite the near-meter height difference, it wasn't hard to believe that he was more than satisfied with his physical form.

"I'm assuming you encountered a larger... windfall than expected," she said, continuing with the hints. If this was too direct, she risked provoking his paranoia. Naeko was a creature of struggle

and brutality. Discomfort on her part made this an easier sell. “It seems that the particular sheath you are looking for is a hot commodity on the market right now.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” Naeko nodded awkwardly as he eyed her. “Our divers slipped into some pretty big leaks.”

“That’s good,” Green River said. “I’m glad to hear that. It tells me my efforts are not in vain.”

“Your efforts?” Naeko asked, shuffling as a response. Looking down at his feet, he realized how far away he was standing and made a sudden—and most awkward—approach.

Green River delivered a practiced sigh, filling with the exhaustion and weariness of a woman at the end of her rope. “You have no idea how glad I was to see you earlier today. I could not show it, but your arrival at my establishment was my... *second fortune*.” She barked a soft laugh as he just blinked. “The truth is I have been dealing with a problem. A *Low Master* problem. They have been haunting me ever since my... *reassignment* after the war.”

“Is that so?” Naeko asked. The way he sounded hinted at a place between disbelief and fascination. “And why haven’t you—”

“Because they were in my mind! Using me!” The outburst left her in an explosive snarl. She didn’t need to act here. It was just a transplanted feeling redeployed for Naeko, made to provoke a sympathetic response. “I was a puppet. A thrall. Something they could wield against my Guild. Not only did they shame me, they continued to use me, to wield me as a traitor, and I couldn’t even let anyone know. Do you know what it’s like? To feel a vile injustice. A truth burning inside you, only for your very mind to become a cage.”

The paladin looked away from her briefly.

Ah. There. She had him. The intelligence was accurate. It had to be. A storied life also meant a scarred one, and a warrior could not live long without amassing a history of wounds and past traumas.

“Happens to the best of us,” Naeko breathed, replying with an earnest shrug, but no comforting words. “So. What’s happening now? Are they still...” He gestured up at his halo and mimed a crushing motion with his hand.

“No,” Green River replied. “Thank the Godbreaker. I seized an opportunity to free myself and took it. But it came at a cost. Unable to strike at me, they turned their reprisal against my people, nulling everyone in the local Ox-Three apartment complex.” She gave a moment of silence. “You understand, it is one thing to infringe on another’s mind, it is another to strike the people they must shepherd.”

Appeal to his sense of leadership, withered thing though it was.

Naeko responded only with a nod. “So. The Bone Demon deal. What was up with that? How does that factor into this vendetta of yours?”

She rose on all four legs and leaned closer to the Paladin, as if suspicious of even the ghosts that comprised this place. “They are building another army. That is why there are so many requests. That is what they were having me do. Having grafters across the city do. Their acolyte, the so-called ‘Aedon Chambers,’ was smuggled over into my district for a time in preparation for a raid. I know now it was delivered against Jhred Greatling—otherwise known as Mirrorhead among Syndicate circles.”

Naeko slowly nodded, the information sounding believable to him.

Then, Green River made a calculated play. One that she could potentially turn against multiple parties down the line. “The initial subjects they offered for the grafting were ghouls. I think they were trying to enhance the remains of their army, to bolster their masses with No-Dragon biomancy.”

“Ghouls?” Naeko said, frowning.

“Indeed,” Green River said. “But most were too unstable. Eventually, they proceeded to hire help. Creatures more possessed of *impulse control*. If only barely.”

“Fallwalkers,” Naeko provided.

“I would assume so.” Green River sighed once more. “But they were more well-equipped than the usual wilder rabble. More sophisticated too. The wards they used—they reminded me of the ones I saw during the war. Very resistant to traumas. Ori-Thaum exclusive, I think. I forget what they called it.”

The Chief Paladin tilted his head. “*Quicksand*.” His words were meant more for himself than Green River.

She continued. “I am prepared to offer you all that I can recall during the period of my subjugation and cooperate to the fullest extent. But I must implore your aid, for your justice and my vengeance are one and the same.” She turned rageful eyes on him, hiding nothing in the present, for such was truly how she felt of the Strix holding her on a leash for so long. “I wish to be of continued assistance. If only to see those cultists undone.”

There were several ways this could go. Even if he denied her, the fact she focused so much on retribution would—

“Yeah. Alright.”

It took her a beat to react. “Alright?” she said. “I—I see. I... my thanks.”

“So, why don’t we start at the beginning right now,” Naeko said, turning on his heel. “Flick me the memories. But keep talking. I want to understand how this all started. And everything you know.”

“Of course,” Green River said, feeling a pull seize her heart. It was the lurch of a caught fish, of deception sinking in. “Of course.”

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[7,052] kilometers.

Sixteen Fallen Heavens.

Countless hours across the Sunderwolds.

Two cities.

So many layers of separation undone by sheets of gleaming glass joined by continuous spatial junctions.

The cadre’s base of operations now stood as three parts. The first was enshrouded in a demiplane of darkness, the next ran through a dozen mirrors—spatial conduits placed across the entropy-worn borders of the Sunderwolds. The last was back in the real, within what was once a city of light, a sheen of glass standing as little more than a doorway into a tower of blood overlooking the entire enclave.

Risen from the very center of the city and latticed to each of the rungs, the most corporal symbol of Avo’s dominance stood a sinuous structure that towered over even the first rung’s skyline. The fingers of haemokinetic sickness had evolved beyond being a plague of blood and matter, growing beyond the nature of a parasite and usurping the role of host for itself.

Now, scabs bearing multiple material properties concurrently lined every surface there was to see. Organic tissue shone with alloyed textures. Currents surged through thickened arterial cords like blood passed from a heartbeat, and in their wake danced ethereal flames: ghosts swimming through the vivianite.

There were more thresholds of apotheosis to climb, but as far as it related to the people in this enclave, Evo was the only one who held absolute power.

Him, his cadre, and no one else.

The population was essentially pacified by this point. A few more pockets still needed to be enfeebled, and a few more specimens were made meals when they refused to stray from the undesired path. More effectively, the memory contagion was beginning to spread from mind to mind. Patches of thoughtstuff were lined with the wrinkles of unwatched truth. Traumas flashed and popped as if distant warheads in constant detonation.

The truth was sweeping through the people. Finally, were they going to see the light.

It fell on them like fever dreams—modified memories and moments from other lives packaged and fed into theirs. Avo had made the delivery more palatable using sequences and artifacts from the templates he collected of the locals, but it would still be a stressful process.

Facing the truth usually was.

They would learn of the outside world, how to speak Standard, the fate of their master, and the falsity of their segregation and castes. To their unprotected, unaugmented minds, the ghosts might have been a metacognitive panacea raising them from a world of ignorance. To Avo, they were as if unlit candles, so easy to burn, so useless otherwise.

But still, he kept them as they were, and only intervened when someone tried to deny the will of another.

*{Do you have any idea how impressive the feat you just achieved was?}* Calvino said. The EGI uploaded bits of information into his Neurodeck. Details about past operations—*uplifts* and liberations, primarily—filled his awareness. Most were conducted over months. His changes would probably settle into effect before the end of the day. *{Without using q-tech and neuro-memetics, we would effectively be running deprogramming and reconditioning broadcasts throughout the city. And even then, that would be a gradual process—limited by the neuroplasticity of the baseline human mind. What you effectively did was change their knowledge on a fundamental level. All from epistemological viruses you bred in the span of seconds.}*

Staring out at the softly weeping family using a cluster of eyes, Avo considered the EGI's response. *+Expected you to be more outraged.+*

*{A more ethical mind might, perhaps. But my parameters are built to desire such luxuries. This is likely one of the better fates they people can encounter. And it will free them to make their own decisions for when their minds are clear.}*

Avo grunted.

As new footsteps tread closer from behind him, he reeled the bulk of his awareness back into his body and found himself staring out three translucent windows overlooking the entire city.

Behind, technical drones were already buzzing about, installation workstations and consoles into place.

He found Tavers on approach, the ground pulsing out with each footstep. Behind, Kae was closely following Chambers, complaining about her research being interrupted. Draus emerged not long after they did, a legion of drones ferrying her various guns. Finally, two of Sunrise's bodies settled on Avo's shoulder.

The only ones missing were Essus, Denton, Cas, and Dice. Chambers remembered making contact with the first, though, and the man was merely caught in a bad processing jam, waiting along the endless train of people to be filtered into the sanctuaries.

Dice, for her part, was walking away from the aunt she left alone in her garden. The woman was sobbing with relief, her arms wrapped around her midsection, unaware of the tendrils draining the stress and harmful hormones out from her body.

Judging from her diet and the composition of her nutrition, Avo estimated she had a **[31.533%]** chance of miscarriage, thanks to Elegant Moon and Calvino.

Denton and Cas were Incog-silent. Seemingly vanished off the face of Idheim. Somehow, Avo wasn't too worried about them. They had been at this long before the rest of them, and considering the chaos of recent days, Avo thought the waters of treachery likely easier to navigate.

Still, it would have been useful to have the Glaive. Whatever arrangement she made with the Paladin would come in handy by this point. As would knowing what she had planned for the trial.

"The information center shouldn't take long to set up," Tavers said, coming to a halt just beside him. Peeking out the window at the haemokinetic sprawl he created, the squire simply shook her head. "Jaus, Avo, couldn't you have marked your turf some other way? Coating everything in your blood is a bit extreme. Even for you."

The Woundmother scoffed. ***"Hardly. It is the first touch of artistry these benighted savages have likely seen in their lifetimes. To grant them such a sight was generosity beyond questioning, master. Let no one say otherwise."***

***"I agree with the squire,"*** the Fardrifter said, immediately saying otherwise. ***"There were means we could have used that would have been less startling. Less constraining."*** The Heaven of Air's primary point of contention was how claustrophobic some of the streets looked. ***"It would have exacted little miracle-sickness from me to patrol the air."***

The Techplaguer for its part was content to count. As it felt Avo's attention settle on it, it chimed a note of attention. ***"I am cataloging our newest children. They are feeble. Be gentle with them. OR THEY WILL DIE!"***

Avo simply grunted in agreement to the sudden scream.

“Consider it a change of scenery,” Avo said. “Also good for spreading mem-cons. People are getting a crash course on standard right now. As well as the outside world. Their master’s death.”

Tavers nodded. “How are they taking it?”

“Hadn’t need to commit any massacres yet.”

“Oh. Well, so they’re in the acceptable range of ‘fucked up,’” she snorted. “Listen. White-Rab cast me a quick something-something while I was passing over. Been a murder up in the Elysiums. Lots of Nether traffic from the usual Ori-Thaum haunts and lobbies. He thinks there might be some inter-clan conflict brewing, but he’s not sure. Clan Sendagawa is also getting into the fray.”

Avo considered that for a moment. Considering the false trail they’ve been laying to the D’Rongos, the turn of events didn’t surprise him. More than that, it pleased him and would be helpful in the near future.

“Good,” Avo replied. “More unbalanced the Guilds are the better. Gives us a bigger opening for what comes next.”

“And exactly what is coming next?” Tavers asked.

Avo spread his fangs wide in a satisfied smile. “That’s what we’re all going to talk about.”

Chambers had already provided him with a glut of knowledge regarding Naeko—who was probably already beginning his talk with Green River by this point. What mattered more where the other players on the scene.

Highflame and Stormtree were squaring up, lining the skies over Nu-Scarrowbur—and everywhere they had neighboring borders, with Knots and massed forces. The more militaristic experienced templates told him this was mostly saber rattling. The Fourth Guild War had left everyone mauled. No one was ready for another brawl this soon after, but sometimes, you had to be prepared to fight even when you were spent.

To do otherwise was to accept death.

Three knocks drew his attention. Dice was striking one of his structures.

Sending out his Fardrifter, he swallowed Dice with one head and passed her out another, injecting her directly next to him just as the rest of the cadre gathered around.



“So,” Draus asked, handing an oblong-tubed missile launcher, “you snuff the sow or what?”

Dice didn't speak. Not immediately. Her machine body offered her an unnatural stillness, but her thoughtstuff couldn't hide the damage. Coldness seeped out from her accretion as if she were a cracked cauldron holding the heart of winter. Learning who she was and facing her kin had seared into her a disconnect.

She returned wondering who she was. Presently, she felt less than who she had been.

Poor child. Avo understood. Not all experiences lifted. Not all growth was toward apotheosis.

For some, the fullness of personhood would always be denied.

“No,” Dice finally said, her body's speakers projecting the whisper clearly. “I thought about taking the baby out from her. Away from her. I think that would have hurt her.”

A quiet settled over the group. Chambers bit his lip. “Yeah, well, Dice, that shit might just kill the bitch. She doesn't have a nanosurgeon or anything. She's just baseliner meat. Also, kinda fucked up.”

Kae narrowed her eyes at Chambers. “Yes. We are a group of people who absolutely never weaponize infants in combat.”

The half-strand bit back a wince. “For fuck's sake—”

“Avo,” Dice said, cutting the conversation off. “It doesn't feel good.”

He grunted. “Want me to take the hurt away?”

Her mechanical digits opened and closed. Air hissed from from the slats lining her chassis. “No. Not yet. I'd want to go find orange.”

“Orange?” Avo asked.

“The cat,” she said. And then she walked off toward the reflection.

“Is she... alright?” Chambers said, swallowing slightly as his eyes remained locked on the girl's fading form.

“No,” Avo said. “She is surviving. Will see how she emerges after. Have something else for us to focus on right now. New opportunity. New target. For the trial. And Kae.”

At the mention of her name, the Agnos locked eyes with Avo. “It's time?”

“Time to start,” Avo said. “Time to build our way in. We the Warrens. We can flee into the Sunderwilds. Now. Only one threshold remains.”

“The Tiers,” Kae breathed.

But she was thinking too broadly. Not specific enough.

No. Ever since he burned Chambers' memories into himself, since he fed the mem-data into his Conflagration and had his templates review them, quiet treachery began to well in both Kassamon and Kare.

The next step, ultimately, was obvious by this point.

Where was everything going to lead? What bridged countless districts in the Tiers? What institution did they have two subverted Godclads operating in?

“Scale,” Avo said. Phantoms erupted from his mind as they began manifesting the layout of their next target. “We’re going to break into Scale.”