

Listen, let's not bullshit ourselves here: there are only a few situations in which we mask the egos of our finest Glaives and hide them up in the Purgatories.

And of all those reasons, it's almost never because Highflame has their number, or a No-Dragon flesh-coded smart plague, or whatever nightmare Omnitech is cooking up. We know how they work, and it isn't that kind of subtle.

They'll assassinate some of us. Sure. We do the same to them. But they're fine with leaving evidence afterward because who gives it a shit? A dead Massist is a dead Massist. A dead Sainist is a dead Sainist. We don't bother hiding the blood on our hands.

We don't bother hiding the blood unless we're doing it to members of our own family. More usually, we hide things after we commit acts against our Overkin.

Our clans fight.

Everyone knows this. everyone.

We might be bound by the same traditions, by the same culture, by the same language, by the same dream we seek. But the clans fight, because before we were a republic before we were united after the fall of the pantheons, we were apart, we were tethered by distant blood relations, by little jostling fiefdoms, fighting over who held what chain or what island.

Some of these grievances lasted since time immemorial. Some of them still last to this day.

I am telling you today, my fellow elders of the inner council, that we need to control our worst habits. We need to stamp down on inter-clan rivalry before it's too late.

We cannot be feuding and fighting among ourselves while we're also fighting Highflame's forces, while we're also facing the No-Dragon's latest plagues, while we're also trying to figure out how to break Omnitech encryptions.

We need to stand together.

Now more than ever.

And so I'm putting forward a proposal. Something I'm uncertain will be supported, but I must attempt, at least in good conscience, at least a try.

I hereby propose that we fragment the mirrors over watching our cells.

As we have those facing outside preparing and defending against outer threats, so too should we have someone inside, making sure that our assets are not afraid of having their throats slit by those who are supposed to watch over them as they sleep.

I put forward this motion now in the separation of the convex and concave clauses.

The details are in the mem-data. Cast in, take a look. Understand. And I ask you to vote with me.

Again, we cannot lie to ourselves. The time for bloodying ourselves in the face of opposition is past. The stakes are impossibly higher. We cannot afford defeat.

Our oath is: "Unity is destiny."

I think it's about time we start acting like it.

-Elder Ganduuri Kazahara, Representative of Clan Kazahara (Circa 184 P.F., months before the Third Guild War)

22-15
So Above

Peering out at the resplendent streets of the Purgatory, Avo wondered how he could have ever believed himself to be a denizen of these heights.

Absurd though it might seem, his physical appearance was the easier thing to mask. A lie manageable by claims of augmentation and a desire to test the most extreme of sheath morphologies. Such eccentricity was common enough to earn him a reprieve from further attention.

No, the true test was being among humanity itself – humanity in its most liberated form, its most hedonistic, unchained iteration, far beyond the constraints of meager survival.

Studying the busy district through the Tadpole's feeds, every inch of this cityscape was alive with motion. The district he passed over was called Grallo-Novrea. A place won by Ori-Thaum in the Third Guild War. A place they kept till the very present. As such, it bore all their staples in aesthetics and culture, and they made it known in ultimate fashion, by lacing every structure, every aspect of their city, with a fine sheen of vivianite.

Through the crystals gloving all other matter, ghosts flowed in unceasing streams, bounding through the linked minds of passing cliques. Life here was interconnected in a manner unparalleled. Interconnected, and monitored at all times.

This was a place of minds unchained, of thoughts unfettered, but it was also a place where those with the capability could gaze deep into another's inner worlds, to glimpse that which was to be hidden, take things much rather forgotten.

A new dawn bathed the streets in jade hues, the light of the natural day kissing the viridescence of loci as the structures they encompassed rosed in jagged promontories.

More unnaturally, however, matter here flowed. Was partially fluid of nature, made so by the presence of a lingering miracle.

The Tiers were not limited to dead matter and the cold laws of reality. Imagination triumphed often over limitation here, and as Avo's drone rounded a risen archway broadcasting the image of a woman wearing what looked to be an inflated suit per the latest fashion, he watched as people casually splashed down through sideways, leaped from the open doors of their aerovecs into buildings, vanishing past rippling waves.

{You know, we have much more mind-bending cityscapes in the Threshold. And some of the worlds we had were terraformed by smart-matter as well.} Calvino's tone was flat, but it was clear the EGI had something to prove.

Avo offered a grunt of acknowledgment instead of a proper reply.

Casting a splinter out from the drone, he too dove into the city's architecture, but he sought to immerse himself in the currents of mind rather than water-wrought miracles.

As he descended the nearest locus he could find, he noticed another peculiarity about the city—the sense that no structure here stood alone. Gone were the bulky, brutalist blocks of plascrete stacked upon the district's grid like a piece of a board. Gone were veins of traffic running between, of shifting life moving from place to place.

No. Here, the environment was as interconnected as the people. Bladed edifices rose as two at the very least and in the translucent rivers running within their matter, miracles ferried people, serving as the primary means of transportation instead of aeros or rail lines. With how seamlessly everything spilled into one another, the feeling of liberation came with the banishment of privacy, but more than that, another epiphany settled upon Avo.

Ori-Thaum designed these places to resemble mind palaces. The interconnections to sequences. The structures to phantasmics. The people to ghosts. The analogy was perfect and betwixt. And at the heart of the district, countless threads rushed from streets and structures to merging, forming the Tower of Elsewhere trademark of this local.

Formed from coiling currents, the spire of the tower opened into a translucent pool. Looking upon it drew weight more upon Avo's Domain of Space. Truth be spoken, traveling through here was like venturing into a storm of miracles.

Back in his body, Avo shot a glance at Kae, who was busy going over potential improvements with Chambers. The man was gesturing to her wildly, the words "castration immunity" repeated

several times. If the Agnos minded his antics, she didn't let it show. Instead, a new amiability had entered the dynamic between them. A trust that previously wasn't there.

Bonds forged by moments of mutual trauma went a long way.

{You are sure this plan of yours will work?} Calvino said, looking through Avo's mem-data. The mind was studying the information taken from the node Avo burned when he walked the halls of the Trident. *{It has been a month, and the Ori are not known to be lax about their security.}*

+Yes,+ Avo said, swimming through a sea of ghosts as he worked to filter a specific mind from a morass of millions. *+Some things might be re-encrypted. But a month isn't long enough to change their organizational structure. Or create enough new and complete identities to replace the ones I discovered. They're also probably not sure about the nature of the compromise. Can use that as well.+*

Inside his mind, Benhata shivered with despair. As far as he—and Avo for that matter—knew, the Guild still hadn't uncovered the truth behind his fate and wasn't aware that his knowledge of their inner mechanisms was being weaponized by an unseen adversary.

For years, Ori-Thaum and its Incubi existed as the terror in the Nether. But that was no longer the case. Not when these waters belonged to another. Not when they couldn't even perceive that which dove against them.

SEQUENCES DETECTED

Avo's Metamind shuddered with resonance as he finally detected the memories he was seeking. An ego materialized in his consciousness thereafter, matched to a codename he stole from the nodes.

Ireeni D'Rongo. Former Glaive. Former Mirror-Concave. Now retired from active combat and dedicated to managing Inner Council affairs instead. Her current duties were focused on the retirement, rehabilitation, and redistribution of former military assets. Mostly Glaives and Incubi like her who were no longer of the life.

She lived in a community mansion located in the twilight fathom of the NeruoMirage Duplex. With how closely tied the district was to canons of ocean and water, many of the structures were without doors, and their interiors were more as if microcosmic biomes.

Threading across the vastness of sequences with a thought, Avo arrived at the place of her residence and found himself plummeting down through a sprawling undersea labyrinth. Peeking out from cog-feeds, people sank and swam next to him, drawn by various creatures of the deep or submersible vehicles toward vast havens pulses with neon and vivacity amidst a forest of corals.

Direct addresses were rendered unnecessary items due to the vastness of the space. Regardless, the Ireeni's importance made itself known as her abode overshadowed many others, a three-story mansion made from gleaming pearls and painted glass, placed right on the edge of the ocean bed overlooking a deep abyss parted by flashes of bioluminescent.

Elegant-Moon sighed. **[The bioforms here are mere mimicries of actual creatures. Little more than clones. Such conformity is an ugly thing for the human heart to suffer. I pity these people.]**

Breaching the walls of her house, Avo locked in on the highlighted accretion on the second floor, briefly slowing as a strange feeling swelled from within.

She has protectors watching. You can't see them. And they don't see you. Mutual blindness is to our benefit.

The feeling faded as fast as it came, and Avo rose through marble flooring, marking doormat drones and a slumbering combat-morph nu-dog on the first floor for posterity. As he ascended the third, he found himself halted by a peculiar sight.

The woman he sought to breach was standing behind her desk, a chain of ghosts reaching out from her, connecting her mind to a mech made in her image. In the machine's arms cooed a child, an infant girl no older than a year with red, round cheeks, double-lidded eyes, and a narrow slit of a nose. She, too, looked impossibly alike to Ireeni D'Rongo.

A vicarious wrongness overflowed from some of his templates. As rested his perception the uncanny scene before him—a woman piloting a machine that was her replica holding a child genetically modified to share her resemblance. It wasn't something he was supposed to witness. Moreover, it wasn't something many in the city got to enjoy anymore.

After the Rash, people bred still. Mainly for lotteries at the Tiers. Massive rebates and benefits offered by Guilds and Syndicates. Even most Guilders reduced the time a child spent as a newborn or a toddler. Their growth was accelerated. Boosted so they could join their societies at their earliest convenience.

In a city like New Vultun, infancy was a luxury and motherhood was a privilege. And with the Rash still in play, it could only be a vicarious privilege at that.

Avo knew he was intruding on an intimate moment then. As a command undulating through Ireeni's Metamind, the nanny-mech dipped low with the child in a tight embrace, and the little lump of flesh and life giggled.

Avo resequenced his mind to avoid thinking about how the child would taste or if he could it down his throat in one gulp.

{The answer is you can,} Calvino said, offhandedly estimating the child's width.

That drew a laugh from Avo, but his target here wasn't the baby, but the mother. Drifting unseen through the thaumically charged waters, he directed his splinter down through her perception, leaking past the Quicksand wards that guarded her, past the Skimmers that patrolled her inner mind.

There existed certain gulfs in her memories. Missing details just before the day of her resignation as a soldier. Such a thing wasn't unexpected, nor was the assortment of Necros guarding her. The reason behind her departure was tied to the child—a life offered as a reward for years of faithful service.

{So,} Calvino said. *{Are we about to eat this one?}*

Avo considered it. But that's not why he jacked into her. No. She was just to be a domino. Something he would use to access the others. It was under her that the D'Rongo's retired operatives were scattered across the Tiers and hidden in protective planes. It will also be through her that they are driven out from hiding, their handlers warned of a suspected attack from Clan Kazahara under the prompting of a certain Seeker due to recent hostilities.

{Oh, I see,} Calvino chuckled. *{You're using her to pull a bit of a fire drill.}*

+*Fire drill?*+ Avo asked. +*What's that?*+

The mind paused. *{In... olden days buildings had these levers you could pull that would sound alarms should a fire start. This will prompt people to flee their structures for safety. Some, however, exploited this habit by deliberately starting—even falsely claiming fires—and then intercepting their targets during their egress.}*

It was strange to think of a society that couldn't just cast their thoughts at one another.

Whatever the case, he soon found that which he was looking for: sessions. Specifically, single-use sessions were only to be used in times of desperation to contact Elder D'Rongo's most trusted Mirror-Concaves. Once, she knew their faces and names, but those memories had been extracted under the justification of security and redundancy.

Few knew her exact role in the clan, and even if someone penetrated her knowledge, they wouldn't be able to use her mem-data to uncover anything further.

This was the angle Avo obtained when he subsumed the node. This, and the awareness of other critical intermediary assets in Ori-Thaum. For all the secrecy they practiced, for all the decentralization and intrigue they exercised, there needed to be connective tissue between their elements for coordination. There needed to be bones tying their forces together.

That was what Avo could strike at. Infect. Through them, he could misdirect the ones that were hidden, open to direct attack.

As he copied the last of the twenty-six sessions, he spent the splinter inside her and created a hidden Auto-Seance for future access.

He didn't expect to be making a return visit but one never knew in this life. But if he did things right, no one would know anything was wrong until long after the Glaives left the Tiers.

Returning back to his sheath, Avo checked the progress of his other facets and found himself pleased. His splinters were spreading fast through the sanctuaries and Elegant-Moon actual self was finally reachable for synchronization.

Right then, other matters took priority.

"Kae," Avo said. The Agnos turned, eyes wide.

"It's time?" She asked.

"Yes," Avo said. He shot Draus a look as well, and the Regular responded in an instant. She flicked a shard of glass through one of her shimmering reflections, guiding it back across the Sunderwilds, back toward the border, back into New Vultun. Things were in motion now. Soon, Draus would find a usable extraction point in the city. Avo just needed to secure the Glaives and Incubi involved in Stillborn operation and get them to said place before anyone could respond.

Loading the first of the sessions into his Auto-Seance, Avo assembled an avatar based on Ireeni's mem-data. With the warmind of Delusion, the process was instant and perfect in deception.

He triggered the call. A lull spread as his Metamind pulsed. One second. Two. Five. Twelve.

"Are you.... diving?" Kae asked, mind tense and fists clenched. The others were also gathering close. "What's happening?"

Before he could respond, an update flashed into his cog-feed.

SESSION ACCEPTED

Avo bared his fangs wide in a savage grin.

+Identifier: [3-OVELD-OVELD-SURNER-5-5-5-SURNER-DO YOU REMEMBER WERE JAUS WAS BURIED]. Response sequence.+

+In our dreams. He is buried in our dreams. + Avo broadcasted the collection moods, visual patterns, and audio hallucinations required to certify his identity within a manifested splinter. The Mirror-Concave's mind was a miasma of checkpoints, chokepoints, and mem-cons. The man had more information hidden from himself than actual recallable moments.

Even so, Avo slithered deeper into him, rooting past the wards in anticipation of what was to come.

+Confirmed. You have thirty seconds for data—+

+An attack is imminent, + Avo said, casting over false data. Using Delusion, he compiled memories hinting at Shotin Kazahara's involvement behind the incident at the Trident and connected it with recent hostilities between the clans. *+Critical deep cover assets compromised. Recommend immediate evacuation and sequencing of new cover identities.* +

Cold fear flowed through the Concave. Immediately, his ghosts came alive with activity, reacting to the information. *+Affirmative. Proceeding to Winter Protocols. Fragmenting sequence. Going dark.* +

+Unity is destiny, + Avo said.

+Unity is destiny, + came the reply.

As the Mirror-Concave ended the session, Avo remained with him as a splinter, patching into the man's cog-feed to take in his surroundings. The ceiling whirled to the side as the Concave disconnected from his jack station. Swinging himself over the side and nearly tumbling from the nausea of being under for too long, he stumbled toward his closet to grab his outwear.

Knowledge flowed into Avo's mind as his newest asset continued his preparations. D'Rongo's Glaives were hidden well. Severed from the Nether and hidden in various planes or prisons, requiring physical retrieval.

Such was why Avo held back from burning the Concave. Such was why he continued to cast the others as this one stepped into his personal hanger and activated the engine of his aerovec. In twenty minutes, he would be taking a trip down into the basement of a local cocktail lounge where he'd ask for the "restricted content."

There, he was to receive a wine barrel. A wine barrel that held a planar pocket housing one of the twenty-six survivors leftover from the Stillborn operation.

Ori-Thaum was thorough. Ori-Thaum was careful. Ori-Thaum was paranoid.

But you could be all these things and still lose. You could be all these things and still be preyed upon. Some part of Avo felt bemused at the horror he had become, a creature no ordinary Necro could detect—or even stop him anymore.

Then, he remembered the fact that these people ignited Kae's mind due to stoked fears, and realized the rules were never real in the first place.

New Vultun took. So did the Guilds. So did he.

He was just the more impressive predator.