

*+Rab. I'm inside Layer One. Our "consang" made a tunnel complex of some kind all the way down through the district—couldn't stay topside, streets and skies are crawling with glassers right now. Had to snuff two that were following me earlier.*

*Nether's still stabled here, so that was a concentrated bomb they dropped. Good thing too. My Incog kicking in earlier was the only thing that kept me alive.*

*My drones are fried, but I think I have someone to shadow. Pale armor—looks like voider coldtech. I'm keeping up for now—try and make contact before they vanish. See if I can make some new acquaintances with the two Paladins I killed. Risky, but what the hell. Let it ride and let's see where the dice.*

-Quail Tavers

17-17

A New Angle

*+Jaus, Kare, I'm sorry... I'm so sorry. I couldn't. I had to stay—I couldn't go to her. I heard her screaming for me and I still couldn't... because I had to... I had to protect. Fuck...+*

Grief stained every word that left Shotin Kazahara's mind, and the weight of his implications fell like dirt from the sky, burying Kare's younger self beneath. The bedroom of her memories was a den of astounding luxury—sixty square meters. Nearly two hundred square feet. Far larger than the hab-cells allotted to the FATELESS and ordinary wagers.

Sampling mem-data wrought from both the terrified Paladin simulated before him and the girl's younger, number self, Avo found himself delighted with the goldmine he just struck.

Here was an intersection of trauma. Here was an individual shaped by history itself. Here was someone *special* for his needs.

Patterns of blue and silver formed the backdrop that were Kare's walls and a locus dangled hovered from a metallic port at the center of the ceiling, serving as a light and entertainment system both. Ghosts flowed in constant rivers through her room, the wisping trails bathing the material world with their ethereal hues.

Seated on her magnificent bed of white linen, and with a golden-furred nu-dog puppy clutched tight to her chest, the Kare Kitzuhada of yesteryear stared empty-eyed as the news of her mother's demise sank in.

Mother. Gone. Forever.

To both her sides, a collage of physical pictures trailed up the walls from two nightstands. Moments of growth mingled with family photos; her first junior strategist competition; a picture of

her father, Valhu Kitzuhada cradling her as an infant, boasting about something or another to her laughing mother.

Yelet Kitzuhada—formerly Yelet Kazahara—was just taking off her earrings in those photos. Jewelry made from purest silver. One of the pair was in Kare’s drawer even now. It took less than a glance to detect blood relations between the girl’s mother and her uncle. They shared the same sharpness in their cheekbones, the same skin fold of the upper eyelids, the same olive skin tone, and the tasseled hairs similar to strands of midnight silk.

Kare herself seemed to lean more toward her father in appearance. Her father—*ah, Ambassador Valhu Kitzuhada*. Squarer face. Heavier build. Dark brown eyes instead of emerald green that were further apart as well. The hair color and cheekbones remained present. Avo more than suspected that some delicate tweaking was conducted long before the girl’s birth to shape her eventual visage.

Most flat children her age were supposed to have a set of perfect teeth, anyhow. Perfection was a thing artificially ensured and naturally abhorred.

As Shotin’s choking sobs grew louder and louder through the Nether, Kare tightened her hold around her dog as it began to lick at her falling tears. The creature was a tiny, yipping thing, unaware of why the salted waters flowed down its master’s face, interfacing with sensed sorrow the only way its animalistic instincts told it how.

Humans desired such contact. Such touch. Before he was reborn through the Conflagration, he could have never fully empathized with such wants. Even now, he regarded these needs as oddities.

“Sorry,” he said, using one of his Echoheads to gesture toward her mother’s photos. “Life treats many of us so poorly. Some wounds cut too deep.”

The Paladin he burned—Kare of the present—only brought her fists higher and tightened her guard. Abrel scoffed at the spacing between the girl’s feet while Corner found something to judge why she hadn’t attacked yet. Thousands of different opinions filtered in from all his templates, but none truly took in the fullness of she who stood before him.

“I saved your father,” he said. “Did you know that?”

Her features collapsed into confusion. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Your father. The ambassador. Valhu Kitzuhada. The Greatlings weren’t finished with you.”

Kare swallowed and took a step back. “How... how do you know that my father—”

He made his Conflagration crackle, and suddenly the memory around them broke apart into

errant flames, each flicker manifesting as one of his many templates, countless avatars floating in the inferno, all gazing upon Kare, each armed with a different expression. "I know everything you know. And I know everything I know. We are of a mind. But you are part of me. See what I let you see. Understand and think as I allow."

The disbelief in her lasted but a second before Avo infused her template with enlightenment. Kare choked as she clutched her head, staggering back as her childhood room loaded back into sequence, the end of her bed giving her something to rest against.

"It's a lot," Avo breathed, offering her a second to acclimate. The impatience inside him wanted to accelerate her acceptance, but he granted the girl a chance to settle in on her own accord. Part of him liked her more than most others. Here was someone genuinely dedicated to service in spite of suffering, turning from anger and malice toward a proper solution.

He looked forward to integrating her gestalt with his mind. It made the decision to spare her true self easier as well, shifting his mind further from Corner's as he abandoned all thought of claiming her Frame.

"*It's you,*" she whispered, finally looking up, facing him again. "Aedon Chambers is... he's just a template... a little less than a pawn..."

A swirl of flames manifested Chambers in her room. The half-strand shot Avo a glare and gave the girl a shrug. "Hey, listen, juv. Uh, sorry about your mom and shit. And the exploding babies. I was just trying to—"

Avo dissolved Chambers, the point made. "Chambers isn't less than a pawn. He's a person. Stupid. Foolish. Half-strand. Impulsive idiot. Amoral. But still a person. Like all of us."

The Paladin offered no reply.

Cycling and stitching her memories and experiences closer to his base mind, Avo sped through the twenty-four years Kare Kitzuhada had been alive. Even with her maturation process shortened to eight years instead of a decade-long affair, it was for baseliners, the fabric of her thoughts was unblemished and youthful.

She had her share of trials and setbacks, but her uncle and father protected her well, regardless of how much the two men despised each other.

"You know that Elder D'Rongo was working with Jhred Greatling already." The words left Avo as a statement. She saw Naeko's rampage through the Fire's Height like most others, but she hid her relief well. Not that it fooled her mentor any bit.

"Surprised they accepted you. Let you be part of the Nu-Scarrowbur incident." Avo said, scanning through her experience joining the Paladins. "So much family baggage."

Kare folded her arms. "That's not special. Most Paladins are either ancients like Paladin Maru or the Chief. The rest of us are all sourced from within the Guilds because of disillusionment. Or spying. That's a thing too, but it's also a double-edged sword. It lets us have some operation leeway against each of the Great Eight that someone outside of the family wouldn't have." She massaged her temples and struggled to face her current reality. "But you... you're... Noloth is *gone*. The empire fell almost four hundred years ago—the last cells of the Low Masters were scoured during the Uprising... How are you..."

Her voice trailed off as Avo found himself amused. It wasn't just this girl who needed to face conflicting information. Details of the Nolothic collapse was mixed across the board and different between all the Guilds. Issues with living in societies that viewed truth as malleable or a weapon to be denied.

"As you said: disillusionment; family cuts both ways."

Kare went still and her eyes flicked upward. "What... what are planning to do with me?"

"Going to take your template with me. Add you to my gestalt. But your true self lives. I have... relived your life. See new angles I can exploit. New opportunities. Going to plant a session in your mind. Rewrite your memories. Make you remember Chambers burning your mind instead. With the Conflagration."

She opened her mouth as if to ask him why, but looked askance as she achieved realization without any aid on his end. "You're going to leave my true self nullified for my uncle to discover. And then, after he is forced to... to *initialize* my resurrection, I will remember your narrative! Be used to direct his efforts toward whatever foe you see fit."

Ah. And there was the mind most Paladins sought in their candidates. "Yes. And what an easy foe to find: Clan *D'Rongo*."

The Paladin swallowed sour spit as she tried not to vomit. It didn't matter in this mind-space; Avo wouldn't have let her. "Don't do this. Please."

"I have to," Avo said. "You understand."

"No."

"The Guilds have fed enough from the city. Failed their own promises. Debased their own dreams. Tired of watching them choke away what we can become. Insulted by this stagnancy. This oppression."

"Billions will die if the clans go to war!"

“Billions die now,” Avo said. “Most of them FATELESS. Subjects. Not citizens.”

“Why? Why do you need me to do this? Can’t you just—”

“You are the perfect candidate. Neither Clans Kazahara nor Kitzuhada will take your burning at the hands of the D’Rongos with mute acceptance. Quiet wars will erupt within Ori-Thaum. The Council will be distracted—the Incubi forced into battlelines—”

“You’re trying to make us easier to burn,” Kare said, horror growing with each realization. “Trying to unbalance the Guild from its defensive posture. Sow chaos between the representatives.”

“Originally just wanted to burn your uncle. Kill him. Subsume his Frame and ghosts. But this is much more... delectable. You will help me. Serve the right purpose. Do the right thing.”

“No!” she shouted. “I will not do this. I will not! You cannot turn me as an instrument against my own people—drive my own uncle further into his madness. You will...”

“Destroy your people?” Avo asked. “Yes. I suppose that will happen. In some way.” He sensed the conversation becoming too confrontational and shifted his mind again, imbuing himself with extensions of empathy and humanity to better guide the conversation. Immediately, self-disgust filled flooded his being as the weight of what he was doing settled.

He was turning and kind and noble girl into an instrument against her very people. He was going to use her as the spark to set Shotin Kazahara off against his hated rivals, striking a blow against the very stability of Ori-Thaum itself.

The act was evil. *Evil?* Yes, evil. He was treating a person like a thing. Stealing their choice away from them without even thinking, without considering—

Corner. He sequenced his mind to be more like Corner’s. And Abrel’s. The way he acted—he didn’t even think. Their callousness and disregard melded so well with his base self’s inhumanity that all things other than his immediate objective and potential choices for more power became afterthoughts.

But this... the *opportunity* she presented... the access she gave him to the Tiers and Ori-Thaum itself.

He couldn’t just let that go.

**[Let me talk to her,]** Abrel said, speaking only to him. Her request caught Avo entirely off-guard. **[I’m pretty sure my mom tortured hers to death. Just one of the many lives she snuffed out at lamatier. Highflame left out the fact that she was doing it to break**

**Kazahara. Guess that's probably my dad's doing—covering up as much as he could for us.]**

+Why?+ Avo asked. +Why offer me this? Why do you want to speak to her now?+

**[Because that way we can cut past you being a pussy with that sudden hit of empathy you just got and get to the part where she agrees. You know I'm right.]**

+Could just take the parts I need from your mind.+

Abrel gave him a smirk. **[No you can't. It's not about the right words. It's about everything. The right person, the right past, the right pressure, and the right set of opinions to offer. She'll know who I am. She'll listen to me much more than some monster that popped out of nowhere while she was chasing that sick fuck Chambers. Human intelligence gathering is sometimes more *emotional* work than rational.]**

He lingered for an instant but flagged as his curiosity and the potential that Abrel presented overcame his apprehensions.

Abrel stepped into the scene with a burst of flame and had her back facing the Paladin. She was observing Kare's room, looking around as if she hadn't seen it yet. "Cute colors. You know liking blue gets you beat up pretty good in the academies, right?"

Kare blinked, not expecting Abrel Greatling to manifest before her. "You're..."

"Yeah, yeah," Abrel cut her off. "In space. Or somewhere. Held by the voiders until my bullshit trial for some bullshit reason or another. Don't remind me." Spinning on her heel, the Greatling stode around the bed and pointed at some of the pictures. "Well, look at that? There's our 'esteemed adversary.' I'll tell you one thing: it's a trip realizing that the guy who tortured the mind out of your mom has a nice and happy home life and whatever. Really lubricates the 'we're all just humans trying to live together *blah blah blah*' the voiders keep trying to go one about."

The Paladin's mouth opened and closed but her face hardened. She looked at Avo and then back at Abrel. "Get away from my pictures."

The Greatling looked at the other girl with a cocked eyebrow and held up her hands. "Fine. Touchy. I get it. I understand. My mother's a fucking monster and because of her, you lost out on a lifetime of hugs. Believe me, I feel for you. Hell, I felt *just like you*."

"What is this?" Kare said, speaking to Avo now. "What kind of trick—"

"The guilt-trip emotional kind," Abrel interrupted, snapping her finger at Kare. "Listen. You're going to want to do this because this isn't over. Your dad and uncle are in deep shit. Your Guild

is in deep shit. And this is the best chance you got at making it out.”

“*He’s planning to eat them,*” Kare hissed, pointing at Avo.

“Oh, yeah. It’s gonna be a real bloody massacre in the end. Same as it always is. But you—and your family—don’t need to die. You can save them. You can even save your Guild.”

Kare wasn’t getting it. Abrel continued.

“Listen, there’s going to be a Fifth Guild War soon. Like it or not. The only difference is when the next big one gets here, it’s curtains for everyone who loses. Now, I don’t know how much you understand about Highflame and Ori-Thaum relations, but despite your uncle and dad having personal patches of purgatory dedicated to them in the great utopia to come at the end, the history of the new world is probably not going to be very kind to the Ori in general. If Highflame wins. Probably a bit worse for us the other way around, but hey, winner takes all, am I right?”

Avo strengthened Kare’s awareness of the Flayed Ladder—of its eventual arrival as the true endgame for all the Guilds.

Again, the Paladin wanted to throw up. “Oh, *gods.*”

“Yeah,” Abrel said, sounding genuinely sympathetic this time. “What a thrill, huh?” Coming a halt next to Avo, she pointed up and him and sighed. “He—you might not like it—is likely Idheim’s best shot at continued survival.” Kare shot Avo another look and shook her head in disbelief. “Yeah, yeah, I know, *I know.* I’m not crazy about his ass either, but he’s the only one doing anything real about the Syndicates right now, the only one preparing to fight the Guilds right now, and the only one who wants everyone to live their own lives, but not escape from any consequences they deserve.”

“He killed your entire cadre,” Kare whispered.

“Yeah,” Abrel said, through gritted teeth. “And fuck him to death for that. But he’s also spared a Bloodthane from Stormtree. Ensouled a FATELESS. Liberated a bunch of slaves from a Syndicate. And has a voider citizenship.”

“*What?*”

“I know, right? Those half-strands take the weirdest people.” Abrel shook her head. “If you help him, he won’t hurt your uncle. Or your dad. I mean, he already saved your dad from my idiot brother once, so you already owe him there. But also, you’ll be making sure justice is done. Don’t you want that? Don’t you want to live up to your oaths?”

“I—”

“And Ori-Thaum doesn’t need to be eradicated,” Abrel said. “No Highflame. Or any of the Guilds. If we manage to push into the Tiers—to *remake* everyone’s mind, then maybe empathy might just reign, and a better end than some giant war might take shape. That, and you have a chance to do something good. *Undeniably* good. You can help end the Rash. You know, the one that we’re all suffering from? Avo. Pull Kae to the front of her mind. And show her what her people die.”

Avo did as his template suggested and this time the Paladin just sagged. “She *was with you?* The entire time?”

“Yes,” Avo said.

“The Chief just...” Kare blinked as disbelief blossomed inside her. “He just cut a deal with you. Let you go. Jelene Draus. Kae Kusanade. They’re the witnesses he’ll use. But he doesn’t know what you are yet. Your Frame, and what it can...”

One revelation after another slammed down on Kare. Her template cracked from the trauma but Avo fused her back with his flames.

“Too much,” he said, frowning at Abrel.

“Nah. That’s necessary. Changing your mind hurts.”

“I didn’t know,” Kare said, clutching her head, voice strained. “I didn’t know...”

Abrel leaned down and laid a hand on the Paladin’s shoulder, fighting the urge to sneer at this open show of weakness. “Listen. *Consang*. If you help, the ghoul will trade with you. Like he did that FATELESS girl. You’ll get your choice and then some. You’ll be powerful enough to decide what you want and seek whatever justice you want for the Paladins. If you don’t... *he’ll* let you go.”

Kare looked up and blinked. Abrel continued. “He’ll let you go, but you’re uncle will still be his target. Your dad will still be in danger of whatever the fuck else the D’Rongos are planning with Mondelles and his lot, the Guilds will be as shit as they always were, and we’ll probably end this affair on one large bloodletting. You’re a good one. A nice one. You should have had a better life. But guess what? So do the trillions of other people on this pebble. Now, are you going to live up to your oaths and make sure they don’t get a ‘mom’s not coming home’ moment too, or are you going to stick to your guns and maybe come home to no dad as well?”

Each word made Kare flinch. Abrel looked over her shoulder and grinned at Avo before reasserting her sympathy and playing the game to its conclusion. “Take it from a Greatling, huh? There’s always more to lose. Do the right thing. Do it for New Vultun. Do it for *her*.” She pointed at the younger self of the Paladin, and Kare turned to look.



That was the moment Avo felt it. That was the moment they had her.

Helping Kare back up, Abrel patted the other woman down and stood position beside the ghoul again. **[And that's how you prepare an asset.]**

Avo found himself very glad that Mirrorhead was the sibling that found him.

"I have conditions," Kare said, forcing her mind back under control. "There's so much, we can... F-first, if you want my help, I won't kill for you. I am not your asset. I am a Paladin of New Vultun. Force me to break these oaths and I will do all that I can to stop you."

Which was *nothing*. The realization sent a pang of coldness through Avo. "Yes. What else?"

"My uncle and my family live. You don't touch them. And as for the D'Rongos and the corruption... we can bring them to justice instead."

"A priest doesn't banish a god," Avo said. "Your authority is beneath theirs. No arrest. It will be seen as open defiance. Open conflict. See you cullled again like in the Second Guild War."

"But they can be voted out," Kare said. "The Council is of the clans. We vote for our chosen representatives..." The very ideas she was harboring could be considered treason if she was still an Ori, but anything was better than letting a monster burn away all her people.

"Politics," Abrel said, smiling. "This should be fun."

And potentially useful.

"Fine," Avo said. "We can... deal. Come to an arrangement. I'll let you go right now. Show of faith. But I'll contact you when you sleep. Change your memories to remember Chambers. That's no negotiable. Thoughtscans reveal too much. Need to keep this quiet."

The Paladin swallowed. "Fine. But I want to know everything down the line. If you are who you say you are—who you present yourself to be, then I want to know. And I want this to be done right."

"Of course," Avo said, clicking his fangs together. "Why shouldn't it be?"

"Okay," Kare breathed. Then—

Upon hearing her affirmation, he burned her mind again and altered her recent memories. The changes he made were minute, taking out more than he put in. She remembered everything up to Chambers unleashing his Conflagration on her and laced everything thereafter with deception.

She remembered his laughter, his mocking chortles as her mind faded within the fire. Then, before her consciousness completely eroded, she saw his face looking down on her, nodding with satisfaction.

*“Oh, the D’Rongos are going to like these sequences.”*

**[Come on, consang,] Chambers said. [Making me sound like a shitty two-bit vicariness villain.]**

*+Hm. Might be too sophisticated then.+*

**[Hey, double fuck you for that.]**

He cemented the memories in her mind and surfaced from the dive.