

*The Guilds are not unbreakable. Nor are they as united as people think, even internally.
I've spent my years among them. I've glimpsed the heart of the machine—its inner structures.
The Godclads at the top. The administrators running their operations. The warriors they use to
enforce their might.*

They're all people.

People.

That's the problem.

People.

People who have their own wants.

People are their own poles of interest, of desire, of philosophy.

*That's why I think we will win. That's why I think that this end, this dream of Jaus, must come
true.*

*Because tyranny is unnatural. And people always will yearn. Even when they build chains
around themselves and all of us, they will dream of a day when they are free. Free to be who
they want. Free to live the lives they want. And free to believe in what they want.*

To worship what they desire openly.

The gods of the past are beasts of legend and nightmare. I don't dispute this.

*But what I do dispute is that the things of tomorrow cannot be guardians or protectors. Or can't
be something beautiful. Mistakes can be learned from. Such is what Jaus dreamed of—a triumph
of human society and culture rather than a fall back into savagery and brutality.*

*But this triumph needs to be tempered with understanding: humanity is fickle. Frail. Our opinions
and emotions drive us to act, and when our wants collide, and stay collided, then the only
recourse is war.*

This cannot be the case.

*The future can be reclaimed. We just need to fight. We just need the light to spark. We just need
to—*

-Last Thoughtcast of [REDACTED], Cultist

20-15
Everything in Motion (II)

Reality shifted.

Shotin materialized before a translucent door, triggering the in-built Specter governing its locus. Ghosts flowed out to connect with his Metamind while a grid of light flashed over him. Thoughtstuff spilled over him as a demand was conveyed. One that he had heard a thousand times and never once obliged.

+Please connect your FATE-Skein to private lobby [DEEP-0] and submit the necessary sequences to gain—+

Shotin's Liminal Frame spanked. His Parallelist descended like a falling axe on a thin slice of space before him, the sealed door sliding out of existence to become a gnarled entrance pungent with natural aromas and framed by aged oak.

Stepping over a sill made from tangled roots, Shotin swept the room with a disdainful look and snorted. Every time he visited this place, he hated it more.

The embassy was a location as stale as the man who ran it. Picture walls and floors as a blank canvas of pure silver. Picture a concentric info-center two steps beside the entrance, spewing public-use phantoms out like a foundation while its ghosts broadcasted pointless injections of trivia straight into your mind. Picture rows of smart-foam seating with in-built snack and drink dispensers. Picture all that, and then fill the space with a hundred of so buzzing drones, the constant pulsing of a half-dozen Skimmers, and more than a few service mechs meant to accommodate the needs of any dignitary.

As one of the stupid fucking machines came sauntering up to Shotin wearing its stupid fucking suit complete with a stupid fucking bowtie, he shifted it into a plane of fire and smirked as it vaporized almost immediately.

He kept going forward as a pitched wail sounded, ghosts swimming through the near-Nether around him like snakes in a pond. Warnings were likely going out through the building, but he didn't anticipate anyone hitting him with a trauma pattern. Not that it would do them any good.

The security team all knew who he was. They knew what he wanted. They knew better than to get in his way.

A few hundred cones of perception splashed over him, but Shotin just let the worthless diplomats gawk. The only thing he hated more than the regular politician were the ones who practiced their delusions of peace. Above them, the symbol of Ori-Thaum shone in the material

and the Nether—a phantasmal crown with a half dozen in-facing eyes staring at each other, forming something of a visual panopticon.

There was only one reason any of them were here, and it certainly wasn't to play house. No. Stormtree was here because those broke sows didn't have the logistics or economics to sustain any kind of long-term engagement, Sanctus was here because they were probably looking for reprisals against the No-Dragons again after the most recent outbreak in one of the districts, and Ashthorne was here because they needed another aid donation after their last attempt at collective suicide.

The way he saw it, this wasn't any kind of diplomacy. This was a template for respects to be paid, but Ambassador Valhu Kitzuhada was the type of half-strand to layer some satin over an old-timey warehouse and name it a place of "mutually gratifying congress."

Shotin was halfway across the room when the woman behind the front desk finally noticed him. With a look of absolute annoyance, Vaeg Saskier rolled her eyes as her body blinked in and out of existence.

Ah. The reversion was almost upon her. Already, he could see chunks of heavyweight muscle bulging along slender, suited arms. An oval face curtained by a bob of grey looked up and glared at him as he drew close. Bright green eyes regarded him as if a pile of shit that had sprouted legs.

LUSTAWAY ACTIVATED

He resisted the urge to smile brightly at her. The Saskiers always had a bit of an effect on him. She and her brother—or sister, depending on how many hours had passed. Hard to really say for Sanctian.

Poor chronologically-challenged bastards.

"Hey, Vaeg," Shotin said, thrusting his chin at the crystalline doorway. He felt the faint caress of another Domain of Space sliding against his Parallelist, but it wasn't creating any heavyweight miracles. "Is he in?"

"The ambassador is," she said, soft voice sounding both polite and disgusted at the same time. "He, however, is currently occupied with scheduled business as he has a duty to his Guild and alliance." Shotin winced playfully. Vaeg eyes narrowed. "Seeker Kazahara, I must implore you to leave. Or at least take a number this time, and wait in accordance with protocol."

"You implore, huh?" He said, eyes shining with mirth. "I'll just be a second."

Already, her thoughtstuff was shifting, and he could see her sequences restructuring behind the inner wards of her halo. She was probably syncing over with Valhu. Giving him the heads-up.

You couldn't grow a more loyal nu-dog than Vaeg. But war had a way of forging bonds just an inch shy of being unbreakable.

"Anyway," he said, knocking thrice on her crystalline desk. "Tell him I'm going in. And, uh, I like the hair. You look good with it short. Makes it easier for me to tell you from your brother."

If eyes were weapons, he would be ash before twin fusion burners by now.

Stepping past Vaeg, he eyed the rest of the room as he heard the complaints began.

"What's this, a personal favor?"

"I've been sitting here for hours and he just gets to walk in."

"Clan nepotism at its finest."

Scowling at the rest of the room he shook his head and shifted the doors out of existence. As he was about to pass into the final hallway leading to the ambassador's office, he looked at the vivianite tympanum over the displaced doorway and took in the creed of his Guild.

+UNITY IS DESTINY+

Yeah. But this destiny was going to cost a hell of a lot more lives before it came true.

From a bland waiting room, he found himself in a bland hallway embedded with shards of loci, each one projecting the animated recollections of accords, treaties, speeches, and general scenes that fit the criteria of political masturbation.

The scenery was just godsdamned miserable. So, Shotin made a few more changes, swapping pieces of reality with those formed inside his Heaven of Space.

His path brightened immediately. A wooden walkway creaked beneath his feet, dappled sunlight spilling through a nest of foliage, the lily pads choked with frogs and low-flying dragonflies. Three steps later and he changed the settings again, now finding himself trekking through a rainforest with groping vines and stalking beasts.

A beachside was weak—a hit of sunlight sobering Shotin for the conversation to come before a brief jog up the side of a hurricane-swept mountain got his blood pumping a bit faster.

By the time he opened the door, his veins were pulsing with life and he felt in the zone.

Then, with a final shift of his Heaven, Shotin stepped into the room and promptly found himself face-to-face with another Godclad.

Seeing her here wasn't a surprise. He already knew who she was from spoofing his way into the embassy's lobbies before he arrived. He also knew that the ambassador was due to a meeting with the leader of the Bloodthanes present at the Nu-Scarrowbur incident. There were things that needed to be accounted for before the trial began. The lives of countless subjects and two Highflame Instruments had been claimed.

Reva Javvers regarded him with a blank stare. Shotin reacted with a genial smile as he took in her seated figure. Her hair was metallic silk, gleaming in the ethereal light. He traced the scar running up her lips and studied her teardrop of a face. Hm. The wound had significance to her. The only reason why she shouldn't part with it.

The rest of her—and her cadre by extension—was not so interesting. Sure. Whorling runes and carvings of a storm decorated her Scaarthain-standard armor. *Bindyger*? Was that what they called the model? Shotin was too lazy to look up the details via his Metamind.

Regardless, what spoke volumes about her was the fact that she was probably a woman of mostly baseline descent in charge of two Scaarthians and a Sang.

"Planeshift, I presume." The words left her casually, showing no hint of intimidation. She knew about him. But clearly, she didn't know enough. "I've reviewed your engagements during the Fourth Guild War."

It's good to finally meet you, he expected her to say.

But she didn't. She just stopped and nodded. And then turned back to Valhu.

Oh, good, she was one of those. A conversational *blue-baller*.

Snorting as he shook his head, Shotin looked at Valhu, leaning back in his comfortable little chair on the other side of the round mahogany table. "I'm guessing you too really hit it off already."

Valhu Kitzuhara. Rhe Ori-Thaum ambassador to Stormtree. The primary appointed point of contact between the Greens and Silvers. Brother-in-law to a legendary Godclad, widowed bondsman, father to a Paladin, and all-around stick in the mud.

He was wearing his grey jacket, white collar, power-armored anti-kinetic vest, and bow-tie combo, completed with slacks and combat boots.

Shotin never accused his brother-in-law of having any fashion sense, and neither should anyone else.

"Shotin," Valhu said. The light hit his spectacles at just the right angle, hiding his deep brown eyes beneath pale lenses. His square wiggled as if he was chewing something disgusting for a

moment, but he always responded like that when Shotin was around him. “I see we’re going to be working through another one of your tantrums today.”

Shotin chuckled and nodded. “Tantrums. No. *Clan business*. Something you’ve been ignoring while playing with the outsiders.”

“Bloodthane Javvers is a valued member of the Massist cause. She has given for the ascent of the people as much as we have. You should show her some respect.”

“Oh, I have nothing against her,” Shotin said, working in a wink at the Bloodthane. She found the bowl of fruits between her and Valhu more interesting. “In fact, we can have this talk in front of her if you want. The D’Rongos already have informants everywhere. Hells. Maybe we have one with us right now.”

Valhu removed his spectacles and tucked them into his breast pocket. “Well. Before you interrupted our dialogue, this supposed ‘informant’ was very helpful in providing me with additional context on the events at Mazza’s Junction and Nu-Scarrowbur. Helpful knowledge for the trial.”

Oh. Right. The Paladins’ newest freak show: the “Naeko finally fucking gets out of bed and does something” edition.

What a godsdamned mess.

“Will you excuse us for a second?” Shotin said, masking his statement as a question.

“Would it matter if I said no,” the Bloodthane replied.

Shotin grinned. “Yes. You’ll be more disappointed that way.”

And then he promptly shifted himself and Valhu a hundred stacks of demiplanes.

They rematerialized atop a cloud-piercing mountain, seated on stone stools and alone but for each other. The coldness of the sunless sky licked at them with its rustling winds, but both their bodies were enhanced enough to suffer little more than discomfort.

“I see we’re being rude today,” Valhu commented glibly.

“Rude is not answering when I cast you.”

“Some of us have real duties. And listen to orders.”

“Yeah. And some of us win battles and do what needs doing. Have you heard the news?”

Valhu's lips thinned to a line. "Be more specific."

"Akade Kazahara and his brothers were found dead up in the Chimes. Along with his wife and a half-dozen other D'Rongos. Scratch that bondsmarriage, am I right? So much for keeping peace between the major clans through matrimony."

The ambassador betrayed nothing in his expression. His halo, however, came alive with activity, thoughtstuff churning around his Meta as he began accessing the Nether. "How long ago?"

"An hour, maybe? Recent. Initial reads from Ciphers deployed at the scene show mostly frequency blade and kinetics."

"Kinslaying. In an Elysium." Valhu let out a breath and sighed.

"Yeah. Shit's fucked, as the juvs might say."

"Understatement," Valhu said. He clasped his fingers together and took a few seconds to think. "The fact that you're here indicates that you suspect the D'Rongos initiated this?"

"Of course they did. They've been coming for us. Hells, they might even be working with that—" Shotin's face darkened when he thought of the man—the bastard that gave him the rash. "The *cultist*. It explains how the half-strand was so well-equipped. And had a mid-sphere cadre supporting him."

"These are unsubstantiated accusations," Valhu began.

But Shotin cut him off. "Have you talked to your daughter recently?"

The ambassador's flat stare turned into a glare.

Shotin continued. "She volunteered for Rash-suppression duty recently. Was real brave. Even got herself nulled by—"

"I am aware of Kare's efforts to serve our city," Valhu said. "And I am proud of her for it." He met Shotin's eyes without difficulty. "I am also capable of giving her the space she asks for. Because she is an adult and not a hapless child."

"But you still know what's going on," Shotin said, catching his brother-in-law. "Does she know you have shadows watching over her?"

"I suppose she suspects, but has ultimately accepted the fact. I respect her personal space. That doesn't mean I won't try to keep her from undue harm."

Shotin scoffed. "Well. That's something. At least." Pausing, he leaned in closer to Valhu,

paranoid of even the winds around them. “I think we’re in a quiet war. And I think the D’Rongos are in bed with the enemy. I’ve been digging around myself. Asking questions... and questioning people.”

An actual gasp of displeasure escaped Valhu. “Shotin, what have you—”

The Seeker held up his hands, imploring the other man to let him finish. “Things were rough going until one of my consangs from the war cast me. Three loci worth of separation. Full-on proxy mind. But I knew it was them. And they had suspicions of their own. In-house questions that couldn’t be answered. Something’s happening inside Clan D’Rongo, and it’s happening deep.”

Valhu stared impassively for a beat. “What did they show you?”

“Accusations. And memories related to Aedon Chambers. Apparently, he mentioned the elder. By name during a dispute with our operatives.”

The ambassador spent a moment taking in that knowledge. “Do you have the mem-data with you right now?”

Shotin answered him by initiating a ghost-link request and transferring the details over.

As the information loaded, phantoms spilled over Valhu’s eyes as threads of information expanded and blossomed, memories growing into memories, theories connected to evidence. “Did you put all this together,” he asked.

“Most of it,” Shotin said. “I was tracking the acolyte on my own time. Trying to figure out how he ticks when the thing at Veng’s Stand happened. Ran smack-dab into a psychopath.” His mind recoiled as censors within him triggered. He knew of the events that had happened that day, but he had his own cognition laced with depersonalization so he could distance himself from the horrors.

Having half-formed infants splattered over one’s head scars a man.

“Do you have anything else on him?” Valhu said, his jaw unnaturally tight.

“Not yet. He’s in the dark again. But I’ll find him. I will. The immediate problem right now, however, is what we’re going to do about his consangs in our walls.”

“You don’t have hard evidence of that yet?” Valhu said, filtering through the recollections. “Memories can be faked and sequenced. You know this.”

“Yeah. But I dove them. And the standard flaws aren’t there. Sure, it could be a masterpiece of a forgery, but there are too many parts to the story that makes sense. My Knots were infiltrated

and hit from the inside during what was supposed to be my ambush. What's more, he had technology that no cultist, Fallwalker, or subject could get. High-end voidtech. The same kind of substance Voidwatch uses for their ships. You put that together with the Fallwalkers supporting him, and we're not looking at some mad survivor of a dead culture, but a weaponized terror cell fed intelligence and material by one of our own clans—their head a represent in the Outer Council, no less.”

Another bout of quietude consumed Valhu. “So. There is a reason you are showing me this information.”

“The trial,” Shotin said. “We have an opportunity there. A chance to spread light on the truth. And get ahead of this D’Rongo mess before we actually have to start fighting this quiet war.”

“Aren’t you already doing that?” Valhu asked.

All hint of warmth bled out from Shotin’s face. “No. Not even close. Look. You’re respected. Non-partial. And more, Kare might actually listen to you instead of fighting me. What we can do is use the Paladins’ Heaven of Truth on Elder D’Rongo, and see what we find in the dark. We don’t even need to pull any bullshit. It just takes a nudge for the questioning to go in the right direction.”

“And you want me to engineer such an outcome in person at the trial?”

Shotin shrugged. “I’d go in and do it myself. But that’ll probably just get me censured again.”

“Probably.” The ambassador sighed. “What you’re asking skirts the edge between treason and patriotism. The move against an elder this way is unconscionable. To allow potential rot to fester inside our Guild is lethal. There is danger in whatever we decide to do.”

“We?” Shotin asked, grinning slightly.

“Don’t take anything for certain yet,” Valhu said. “We still don’t know how proceedings are to be arranged.”

“Still? Aren’t things supposed to commence soon?”

“Three days. But the Chief Paladin is spending his time walking the Warrens now. I think he found something interesting as well.”

And this time, it was Valhu’s turn to thread an injection of intelligence over to Shotin. As the Planeshift accepted his brother-in-law’s link, he found his cog-feed populated by accounting documentation connected to various grafting establishments in the undercity. It took him little more than a second to find the commonality.

SHEATHE: [BONE DEMON]

PROCUREMENT BATCH ORDER [ACCEPTED]

Haze-filled memories parted slightly at Shotin's behest. He recalled facing what he initially thought was a No-Dragon bioform—the tall, pale monster exhibiting unnatural power and skill for a Sphere Four Godclad, dueling him across the skies of Veng's Stand. Using a Heaven of Blood Shotin couldn't fully identify, he remembered parrying matter-melting miracles using his Heaven of Speed and War.

He had felt something about that one. Something he couldn't place.

"An unidentified source also claims that the Chief Paladin spent some time talking to one 'Green River.' Former First Daughter of the Court of Scholars. Godclad too. Banished and stripped of her Frame after something she did during the war. The information is redacted. I haven't been able to find the details anywhere either. Not yet."

Shotin nodded. And then the name caught up to him, and his stomach dropped. "*Qing He?*"

His response didn't escape Valhu's notice. "You know her?"

"Kind of," Shotin said, trying his best not to think about it. Flashes of moments before the war. The first fight in the Tiers. Quiet wars. Conversions. His blood boiling inside him. Her shadow waiting for him around the corner. Hiding from patrolling ghosts. *Other things*. "That's not important. What does Naeko want from her."

"I can't rightly say." Valhu cocked his head, observing Shotin. "He simply had a conversation with her. And should still be in her district as we speak. She was among the vendors that were contracted to provide the sheath."

That made sense. In the few times he checked status after her banishment, he saw that she was working as the proprietor of a No-Dragon-supplied casino called the Second Fortune.

He had never approached her, though. Had always just kept things afar. Things were different now. And things had been wrong to begin with.

But there were details he needed to know. And he knew he could ask them better than Naeko.

"Well," Shotin said. "It looks like we both might have some things we need to consider doing. I'm going to... do a little digging. After Naeko leaves. Find out what he wants and what's with the sheath."

Valhu just stared. "Shotin. Please tell me your relationship with this woman was purely hostile."

“Well,” Shotin said, deciding on being honestly vague. “It sure started out that way.”

An exhausted exhale left Valhu. “Of course it did.”