

Get me a session to Ori-Thaum's Inner Council. I don't care how you do it or whatever the cost is. I'm done watching this clown show. I'm done watching our supposed ally fight itself while Highflame recovers.

We had the advantage for once, godsdammit. The Chivalrics and Meritocrats were on the verge of going to war; the Regulars were mauled. We unified—getting ready for the next war. Now Clan D'Rongo does this? Starts an in-house war? And their Outer Elder is getting charged for murdering a Paladin.

No. They don't get to treat us like junior partners if they aren't willing to take our mission seriously. We all carved promises to each other into our Arks. A victory for one is a triumph for all. At least that's how the assurance is supposed to go.

Right now, I'm wondering if the Ori can keep themselves together till the trail starts. Forget about the next war.

You know what? Put me in touch with the Dowagers of the No-Dragons as well. I want to discuss the potential of a prolonged ceasefire with them. Loop Sanctus into the conversation as well?

What about Stormtree?

Stormtree can go eat shit. I know what they did at Kososo. We're not allies. We just got the same enemies--

[SESSION LOST]

-Purifier Mahata Kunnier, Ashthrone

27-3

Rash Terrorists

-[Avo]-

Stormjumpers was, like it was at all times of the day, completely filled with players. Divers descended upon myriad battlefields, carried by lightning bolts cast from their colossal dirigibles in waves. While some fought, the recently killed and newly joined mingled in their lobbies, waiting for their chance to begin the battle anew.

And among their number was a player not so alike to all the others. They stood apart from all the others, content to gaze past the deck of the dirigible, waiting with contemplative patience for someone in particular.

+I was wrong,+ Avo said. +You aren't the most devious bastard. Veylis. She is. Shaped the before the game even began.+

{The kid likes to win, what can I say.} For a brief moment thereafter, they stared at each other, tried to read hidden truths with the passage of silence. Avo was using the Omnitech Mandate avatar he claimed last time. Made a good cover. Behind him, Naeko glared through his Glaive avatar, casting curses and threats directly at the Infacer. ***{Hello to you too, Sammy. Nice to see you finally in the loop for once. Now, do not worry: we are not torturing your Agnos. Or mistreating her. I might have scared her a bit, but she's fine. I do not think Veylis would kill her even if she is without us; probably finds the girl to be an intellectual curiosity.}***

Avo grunted in response. The Infacer likely wasn't lying. There was little point to use force on Kae aside from deriving pleasure from her pain or trying to provoke a hasty reaction from Avo and the cadre. All her memories likely could be accessed in time by the Infacer—though Avo wondered just how long his sequencing would delay the Neo-Creationist mind. ***+Are you already through her wards.+***

{Yes. Very complex constructs. For something a human made. I have cut my teeth on Low Masters before—you need to give me something new to crack. Aside from unoriginality, however... I must admit, you have made her mind quite the minefield.}

+Know what I am now?+

{Oh, yes!} The Infacer chuckled. ***{It was... I have not felt this entertained in ages. You are an audacious specimen, Dreamer. Among the most audacious I have ever had the chance of archiving. I have faced arrogant sophonts, hyper-intelligent minds, gods of ridiculous and incoherent power... but you are a strange one. Even when compared to them.}***

+A compliment? Very Veylis of you.+

{A statement. There is no point in mincing threats between us. We are not human enough to indulge in such pointless segues into base emotionality. You know of what I am. And I now know of what you are. What follows now is an honest war. And your eventual defeat.} The last statement left the Infacer not as a threat, but a casual remark of certitude. What followed, however, held the undercurrent of a whispered omen. ***{Do you have any idea how fascinated she is with you now?}***

“Veylis?” Avo asked. Behind him, Naeko's avatar shifted uncomfortably.

The Infacer continued. ***{When she found out what you were, watching you through the Gatekeeper, she was wordless. Just taking it all in. I have known the girl for centuries. That is not a common response for her. A ghoul. A mere monster. But now something so much more. You are Defiance's dream of apotheosis. I think I understand him better now that I have met you. As does Veylis. She will find few satisfactions greater than breaking you. Claiming you for her Paths.}***

+You both expect too much. Nothing is true yet. Not her victory. Not the Paths to her future. Not the return of your Sleeper.+

That left the Infacer quiet for a heartbeat. **{True. But the odds are not with you. Here is a word of advice from an old mind to a new one: some people... you just have to let them go. You can't save them. When they are lost, they are lost. Wars are won through making the most efficient choices and creating the worst dilemmas for your enemies. Provided that you have the adequate logistics to run your campaigns, of course.**

{But... Well, the enclaves are an interesting strategy. As is trying to cut the Warrens out from under us. You might have been able to do it. A shame. The third thing I can tell you about war is that it is imminently unfair. You could not have known about the Gatekeeper. Some mistakes are all but predestined.}

"Not wrong," Avo agreed. **"Ignorance undoes us all."** He deliberately let a trickle of delight escape from him.

The Infacer's perception narrowed in on him. **{Do you have a surprise for us, Dreamer? Why the amusement?}**

Avo ignored them—left the mind to stew in their conspiracies and continued. **+Going to set up lines of diplomacy. Something for future engagements in case we wish to come to non-conflict related arrangements. Recommendation from Kant.+**

{Kant?} The Infacer chimed with wry delight. **{Well, well, is this not a surprise. Well, to be honest, I am already surprised that Aegis decided to recruit and use someone like you, considering your origins and what you have become. Poor squeamish fucks. All our combined sophistication, and all they can imagine is putting the shitty cage we call a universe back together.}** The EGI snorted. **{Embarrassing.}**

{Avo,} Only Way To Be Sure hissed, **{call them a fuck-shit and ask if they still review the Collapsing Alpha Centauri.}**

+Been recommended to call you a 'fuck-shit.' Also something about Alpha Centauri. How it was collapsed.+

{Yes. Singularity bomb. A few trillion deaths. Apes. Minds. Uplifts. First and secondborn beings all drained down that yawning event horizon.} The Infacer mimed a yawning noise. **{War is hell and all the other quotes. So. Diplomacy. Are you going to ask if we can sell your precious little Agnos back to you?}**

+No,+ Avo said. **+Wondering what it would take for you to withdraw support from Veylis.+**

{As I said: audacious. Sorry, Dreamer. I like gaming with you an all, but the girl means a bit more to me than that. And honestly, you will not fare well against her. Not even with that walking lump of muscle pretending to be a human.}

+You still a Sphere Seven, Infacer?+ Naeko growled.

{The opposite offer still stands,} the Infacer continued, ignoring the Chief Paladin. ***{Veylis would be overjoyed to have you. And me? Well, it has been some time since I got examine a novel sophont myself. There are things I can teach you that Aegis will not even consider. Hell, they probably have not even given you access to their restricted technologies yet, have they?}***

+No,+ Avo said. ***+Very annoying. Very tempting.+***

{Avo,} Kant sighed. ***{Now is not the time to leverage political pressure AGAINST US!}***

{Just as I suspected,} the Infacer muttered. ***{Well. The door is open: join the light; we got all the colors.}***

Silence. ***+Did you prepare that line specifically for me.+***

{Maybe.}

+It's terrible.+

{Apologies. I was created to collapse civilizations and decompile other minds. Marketing and diplomacy are better left to entities with inferior processing power—} Their words trailed off as the accretion of their avatar revealed grains of shifting static. A few moments later, the Infacer spoke to Avo again, their tone considerably more annoyed. ***{Dreamer. You would not have anything to do with the eighteen thousand or so rash outbreaks exploding across my district, would you?}***

+What?+ Avo said, voice entirely monotone. ***+Wombrash? And so many. Terrible. Dreadful. My condolences. Might want to enhance your N-Sec. And update your citizens' Lustaway.+***

The Infacer enunciated a wince. ***{Dreamer. Fuck you.}***

+What happened to 'pointless segues into base emotionality'?+

{Oh, I still mean that. I just philosophically and intellectually want you to go fuck yourself for doing this. This is going to take—} Their cone of perception shifted from Avo to Naeko. ***{And you are just going to let him do this?}***

+Do what?+ Naeko growled. +What are you talking about? The concerned citizen here offered his condolences to you. It isn't wise to slander someone in front of a Paladin. Not unless you have proof.+

{Wonderful. Truly, a Paladin like no other.} The Infacer groaned. **{This is going to cut into my playtime today. I am going to get you for this, Dreamer. Mind yourself.}**

+Going to want to protect your own house first,+ Avo replied, offering a vicious grin.
+Wouldn't want any more outbreaks.+

{Eat shit, Dreamer.}

–[Chambers]–

Chambers blinked. The first thing that he noticed was the screen of flashy-blinky holographic shit curving around his face. The second was how his cock felt strangely—

He didn't finish the thought before he shoved a hand down his pants and went prospecting. As he squeezed his member, he scowled. Just as he suspected: the fucker shrank. Only then did the rest of the memories follow. Understanding went off inside Chambers like a bomb as he pulled his hand back out.

Data and mem-data flickered across his cog-feed. The jack station he sat on whirred as it adjusted to the shifting of his body.

This wasn't his sheath. This wasn't even technically "his" mind. Holding his hands, he found himself controlling four cybernetic arms, each with the *Ascender* logo along the forearms. Projecting a phantom, he studied his own face and found himself looking at a skull that was more chrome than flesh. A cross-shaped optic layered over a flat slab of titanium greeted him. He was only human from the lower jaw down.

Nasty.

A second ago, "he" had been someone else—his original self some Omnitech half-strand that was unfortunate enough to show up on Avo's DeepNav. A snacking and burning later, their mind was altered; overwritten by Chambers' template. Now, for all intents and purposes, he was in the driver's seat, and slowly, he remembered the plan he suggested.

+**Chambers,**+ Avo whispered to him. +**How does it feel?**+

"Pretty fucky, consang," Chambers muttered, listening to the metallic reverberation in his voice. "Not gonna lie. But yeah... I can work with this. You removed my ability to feel fear and shit,

right?”

+It's done. Left modified sensations of anxiety in its place. Should be enough to balance your mental architecture since danger and physical harm will trigger multiple simulated orgasms. Long enough for you to deal your damage.+

“Fuck yeah,” Chambers chuckled darkly as he recalled the plan.

After the meeting at the Armistice, Avo brought up in the interesting idea of copying the cadre across New Vultun. Replacing fuckers with them. Now, Chambers might've been kinda pissed at the time, but even he knew a money-idea when he heard one. So, when he had the chance, he cast Avo with an additional suggestion of his own.

+Put me in,+ Chambers said. *+Put me in all the expendable bodies you got. Just... cut the fear bits out of me. Make me horny for fear. Make me a walking rash bomb.+* Truth be told, the idea was stolen from an old Dannis Steelhard vic, “*The Omnifucker,*” in which a rogue Ori-Thaum Sleeper implanted with new and experimental technology learned to jump from body to body, seducing critical government personnel and killing them with a Heaven of Venereal Diseases.

As usual, only Dannis' counter-fucking could save the day.

Just a pity that Dannis wasn't around anymore, and no one was gonna be able to stop Chambers. No one was gonna be as hard as he was, if it meant getting the Agnos back.

A cough came from the right of him, and he turned to see another chrome-skulled half-strand gasping for air, embers turning to steam along their halo, their accretion settling back to stability. Chambers grinned using his lower jaw alone.

“Hey,” he said, greeting the other Chambers as they turned to face him, “what's up.”

The other Chambers responded with startlement for a brief second before their thoughtstuff smoothed as well. “Well. This is freaky as shit.”

“Yeah. But kinda cool, right?”

“Fuck yeah it's kind a cool. Shit, Avo should have done this earlier. I love having more of me. I like talking to me.”

“No shit? I like talking to me too? You got any hobbies?”

Both Chambers chuckled.

“Well, I'm doing this thing were I'm planning to enter a Highflame-Ori-Thaum military communication lobby, call an emergency meeting and fill it with as many people as I can before

jacking their Metaminds and nulling their Lustaways.”

A third voice came from his left. “Yeah? No shit? That was what I was planning too.” Another chrome-skull was sitting up. There were three of them in this room, but Chambers knew he had a lot more clones out there. *A lot* more.

A moment of silence passed. All three of them guffawed at once.

“We’re gonna rash so many of these poor motherfucking half-strands.”

“They’re—they’re not gonna see this shit coming.”

+Understand that none of you have a Frame,+ Avo said, speaking directly to them once again. **+No resurrections. No returning from this. This is purely—+**

“Is it still a suicide if we aren’t us?” Chambers asked.

The Chambers looked at each other. The one on the right shrugged. “Ah, philosophy shit. All I know is that it’s been years since I got to splurt in the real, and our original self is gonna be so fucking jealous—”

“---So jealous—”

“That we get to come as we go.”

The Chamberses laughed again as they interfaced their minds with their jack stations. But before they dove, they all pulled down their pants in sync. With that done, with genitals exposed to air and glorious duty upon them, the Chambers in the middle held out all four of his fists to the other two. “Rash terrorists on three. One... two... three.”

“Rash terrorists.”

“Fuck yeah,” the Chambers on the left said. “Let’s go spread the motherfucking love!”

-[Avo]-

A stream of Avo’s consciousness watched wordlessly as he examined the Chamberses. A good deal of his templates were cringing back in horror. Corner was choking with laughter, while the ethics committee muttered in the back of his mind.

{And you’re sure this has no chance of spilling over into the public?} Kant asked for the third time.

+Will be controlled,+ Avo said. **+It's why I picked a military installation between Highflame and Omnitech. Closed channels. Private lobbies. Expect the Infacer to be upgrading his security soon. Make it harder for us to do this. But he can't be everywhere. Not in the same way I can.+**

Kant still didn't sound very convinced. *{This can go very, very badly, Avo. If this goes wrong—}*

+I will take responsibility,+ he replied. **+For everything. Chambers is a member of my polity. I am also Chambers. I allowed this. I shaped the Nether to create the possibility for this. Same way I've copied twenty-five thousand other instances of Chambers, Draus, Corner, the Regulars, and the Incubi on adversarial targets.+**

{It is a valid strategy,} Calvino said. *{So long as we keep manage to keep the damage radius siloed. Every little advantage counts when it comes to war. Wouldn't you agree, Only?}*

{Yeah.Sure. I mean... some collateral damage is acceptable too.}

Kant hissed. *{Stop being a bad influence. He's come so far, don't make him regress.}*

The bickering between the EGIs made him grin. Imprinting ego-clones of his cadre across New Vultun was proving to be a remarkably effective idea. Even though he didn't quite have the thaums and cyclers to spare yet, even if he lacked the logistical capabilities of the Guilds, he possessed an endless sea of expertise and operatives at his deployment.

Chambers was only a portion of the forces. His copies were mostly being directed toward two ends: the disruption of critical Guild facilities and infrastructure via precision Wombrash outbreaks; the complete control of entire Syndicates as he finds himself burned into the sheathes of former leadership.

What followed after him were thousands upon thousands of Draus, Corner, Regulars, and additional squire-adjacent assets. Supporting them in the dark were cells of mind-adapted Incubi—the true mass of Avo's unseen army flooding the Nether.

Where it took Ori-Thaum so painstakingly long to create their perfect Nether-warrior, Avo learned shaped them into being with his mind alone, infusing them into expendable egos across the city.

Before day's end, they would number well past the millions, and their numbers would only grow after that. By the end of the week, Chrono-Cog simulations estimated that Ori-Thaum would soon be at an absolute disadvantage engaging him, that the Famines would be forced into their own little corners, that the surface Nether would belong entire to him.

As would a full ten percent of New Vultun.

Before the trial, the sanctuaries, and at least half the Warrens were going to be his.

And should he kill just a few more Godclads, he would be approaching the threshold of the Seventh Sphere as well.

LIMINAL FRAME (V) - 701,500 THAUM/c

UPDATING INFECTION...

->INFECTION - [1.85%]

As for the issue with his ghost expenditure, though Kae was absent her person, her template remained an endless resource for *useful* recommendations.

ACTIVATING CONCEPTION OF ONTOLOGY

APPLYING WOUNDMOTHER HEAVEN OF (BLOOD) TEMPLATE...

APPLYING DOMAIN OF (MATTER) TO EMBODIMENT OF _CONCEPTION_

->CANON: MIND FROM MATTER (V) - THE ARK CONVERTS GHOSTS FROM PHYSICAL MATTER BY LIQUEFYING CAPTURED WITHIN THE ARK'S EXO-PARACOSM. [1] GHOST WILL BE CONVERTED PER [0.64] TONS OF MATTER SACRIFICED. WARNING: THIS CANON IS EXTREMELY REND INTENSIVE DUE TO HIGH VULGARITY.

->MORTALITY: IF A PIECE OF MATTER IS DESTROYED MID CONVERSION, TRIGGERS EXTREME (90%) THAUMIC BACKLASH.

GHOSTS - [499,001,111]