

To successfully breed a dragon, you need two groups— two populations: one to be placed in stasis as a party ignorant to the outer world, and the other to operate as their exposure.

This, more than anything, is the most reliable way to engender a zeitgeist.

To this end, most farms exist in a closed society – children or ignorant people separated from other outside influences from birth or via mental adjustment. They must be in such conditions for at least five to seven years before the exposure group is introduced.

[SPECIAL NOTE: THE METHODS ONLY TAKE EFFECT WHEN ONE HAS PARTIAL ACCESS TO THE CHRONO-CURSED BIOLOGY OF THE SANG]

The members of the exposure group must always meet the criteria of being mentally stable and homogenous among themselves. If they offer too many contrasting influences or concepts, the stasis group might fragment in several directions, resulting in cultural dissolution rather than zeitgeist formation.

As such, it is also important to have a division of Necrojacks on duty at all times. Dreams and thoughts must be monitored. Wrong-think is to be corrected before it can spread.

When things are planned, the initial material can be harvested from existing dragons and seeded into the stasis group.

The “foundation” will condense after approximately a week, and the spinal tissue of the wyrm will spread into form between the “carriers.” After about a month’s time, the structure will be stable enough for further injections of material. During this process, cultural development and history made in these small communities will nourish the dragons and bring them to maturity

Only then can the desired symmetry be established—can a group come to a shared expression of culture, and the seeds of dragons embedded with them grow linked from points of past to present...

-“A Primer of Breeding Dragons,” 01:35:55 (No-Dragons)

23-2

That Which Lurks (I)

-[Kae]-

“Attempt number nine,” Kae said, speaking out loud for posterity’s sake. Verbal notes were essential for review. Ghosts spilled out from the surrounding walls to embrace her, threading ethereal trails through her Meta’s accretion.

Information ran like a current from her mind, accelerating through all the haemokinetic arteries fused into the city of light as if they were copper. After the modifications Avo made, there was little she couldn't see or command inside the city—or in the lighthouses and installations beyond.

Seated within an enclosed watchtower rising from the enclave like a spire, phantoms formed a wall of screens around her, created from mem-data collected by Specters and Skimmers monitoring the world outside. A mere thought was all it would take for her to cast her perception across kilometers. The Sunderwilds surrounding the city was a cloudless, mist-wrought expanse. Creatures still writhed in the dark, held at bay by beams of light refracted via modifications Draus made to the lighthouses.

Three hundred meters above the ground and with the surrounding walls translucent, Kae's took the environment of the Sunderwild in manifold ways as she primed the next pair of missiles for launch. Lines of data spilled across her vision as her Neurodeck and Metamind worked in tandem.

Overview:

- >**Missile Type: Universal; Non-Newtonian; Neumann-Capable**
- >**Model: Teardrop-VI**
- >**System Readiness: 100%**
- >**Propulsion Online: Cosgrave-Interior**
- >**Launch Readiness: Operational**
- >**Navigation System: Online**
- >**Ansible Link: Stable (No disruptions detected)**
- >**Launcher Charging...**

OVERVIEW

- >**[HARVESTSEC RETRIBUTOR]**
- >**BLOCK-BREAKER-PATTERN WARHEAD**
- >**SYSTEM LOADING... 55%... 100%**
- >**PROPULSORS ENGAGING: [MADACK-REACTIONLESS]**
- >**GHOST-LINK ESTABLISHED**
- >**METAMIND PAIRED**
- >**JOCKEY INSERTED**

Another two perspectives opened in her mind's eye. One was a missile of the coldtech variety. Something Voidwatch used as a multifunction asset, capable of acting as a survey drone, missile, and a colony construction unit.

The other was its thaumaturgically made but informationally simpler counterpart created by Highflame's HarvestSEC weapons manufacturing subsidiary. For the last nine or so times, the tests were singular launches, with each missile offering a baseline of mem-data to collate. Now, she wanted to do a comparison.

A weapon meant to operate in the so-called natural world against a rival forged by the fires of thaumaturgy.

Both missiles were positioned just below the enclave, planted upon panels of glass. There were innumerable others besides them, stored for now in Draus' **Paracosmos**. Presently, they had over five hundred warheads and one Voidwatch *ferro-fabricator* in their possession. In time, their munitions were certain to multiply.

For now, however, Kae was more interested in putting knowledge into practice. Advanced physics was such a fascinating thing. The terrestrials had learned much during their time—projectiles were a fundamental of war, after all, but Idheim's interactions with the “foundational laws” left different cultures and scholars to different—and often incorrect conclusions.

Basic physics was known to all. Trajectories and velocities were easy to calculate. Things like relativity, thermodynamics, magnetism, and *quantum* physics, however, were a bit more obscured.

The documents and simulated classrooms Voidwatch offered her were a thought away through her deck. Even now, concepts like particles, atoms, and tachyons made her thoughts race. There was still a curtain preventing her from fully understanding the finer sciences—still apprehension on the part of her benefactors.

She took that as an expression of flattery.

They should be scared. She created the Stillborn. She turned their Imitators into the nightmare it was today—made the cadre the threat that it was.

And when she finally understood existence unaltered, the Heavens she would spawn would render all others inferior by far.

The Guilds should have adhered to their oaths. The Agnosi should have stood for her instead of capitulating to threats. The Paladins should have done their duties.

They didn't. A shame. Now it was her turn to make things right.

Two confirmations flashed in her mind as she gave the order to fire.

The launcher for the Retributor was a rail-cannon platform. The Teardrop's primary mechanism was a floating orb of nano-ferromagnetic materials.

Both fired at the same time.

The Retributor punched out across the bed of the miracle-dried ocean that surrounded this patch of the Sunderwilds. It sailed free like a silver sling and a corona of light erupted from its spinning driver as its reactor came alive for the second stage of its acceleration.

Comparatively, the Teardrop shot out like an arrow, and though it initially matched its counterpart's acceleration, the moment Retributor's propulsion came online, it slowly began to pull ahead.

"Expected," Kae said, continuing her documentation. "As the minds have stated, Idheim's thaumaturgically produced alloys give us unnatural advantages in terms of material integrity, and the 'deviant' way our reactors are made produce higher spikes of speed as well. Contrarily—and negatively affected by the damage inflicted on reality, there is a greater fragility to coldtech components. Even with smart matter, an operating system requires—"

A weight sank into her mind distracting her. A beat passed before she realized who the intruder was. "Ah. Avo! You're just in time. I'm running comparatives between coldtech and thaumaturgically produced missiles."

+*Going well?*+ Avo asked.

"Quite. I will not say I fully understand what they've shown me. In fact, some of the things—tell me, doesn't *Newton's Third Law* sound like a canon to you? 'For all actions, there is an equal and opposite reaction.'"

The ghoul grunted his agreement. "Sounds like it."

A choked noise of disgust came from another voice—the new mind monitoring them. Kant. The *complainer*. *{We didn't create the law, we simply observed it. And Issac Newton wasn't a god, he was a man. A man that—}*

{Kant,} Calvino said, sound all too amused, *{please control your outburst. We don't want Avo to send this snippet over to the others again, do we? You've been mocked enough for one day, I'd say.}*

The other mind grumbled their way to a sullen silence. *{Madness. Absolute madness.}*

Kae hid a smirk. "So. Is our new 'recruit' still with us, or did Chambers finally scare her off?"

Marlowe's voice chimed in for the first time with a cough. +*You know, the "Soft Master Collection" really isn't that bad.*+

The Agnos didn't quite know what to say about that. "Is it too late for us to return her?"

+*Need someone who can interface with the people,*+ Avo said. +*Someone trust. Her brand fits*

us. Tavers said so. Will also be useful to have someone else we can rely on at the trial. Good for you. Good for Draus.+

Right. The trial. Just the reminder made a block of lead form in Kae's gut. Returning to New Vultun. Facing the city—facing the people that did this to her, that failed her.

That failed Dawton.

There were moments when she wanted to ask Avo to sequence the anxiety out from her mind, to strip her clean of weakness. She always stopped herself before she asked. She was afraid he would take her anger too. The rage she felt.

If she was going to do it, she would do it as herself, face the hounds as herself, and spit in their face with her own mouth.

There was going to be no chrono-puppet on her part. She would come in with the Incubi and Glaives. She would make her betrayal known. She would put the Tiers to the flame.

Marlowe cleared her throat. *+So, um, what's it like, going from Agnos to terrorist? Counter-Guilder revolutionary? What are you guys, anyway? I've known cults and they... don't really operate like this. Or with Voider support.+*

Kae regarded Marlowe's presence with apprehension. Tall, porcelain skin, beautiful eyes, grafted hair, and a drug habit. The woman was media as media came. Sure, she hated the Guilds and was a more counter-cultural figure, but her type was always brittle when it came to pressure.

The climbing velocities of her missiles pulled her away from the conversation. "Talk in a minute. I need to focus."

Teardrop accelerating to 4,103.6 kilometers per hour.

Retributor accelerating to 4,507.3 kilometers an hour.

Both were streaking across the land, one inching ahead of the other. Racing down an entropy-free pathway painted by the beams of several lighthouses, the comparison continued as the dark approached, signaling the coming phase.

Spinning rings around the Retributor flared as it fired its in-built rail launcher. Its speed doubled in an instant—snapping ahead no unlike how the Railjumper sheath performed. In the back of Kae's mind, she heard both EGIs sigh.

{That's not how things work,} Kant lamented. {It's just not.}

Calvino concurred. *{We live in dark times. It's best not to devote too much processing power to this.}*

The Teardrop itself climbed in speed at a staggering rate, but it lacked the raw reality-defying explosiveness infused into the Retributor. However, as they both ran beyond the cover of light, tunneling into the hunger black that lay beyond, another difference was revealed.

Creatures of tooth and shadow tore into the Retributor immediately as passed into the darkness. Its rail-launcher fired again, but a tsunami of hunger monsters blunted its speed and swallowed it from existence. The ghosts fragmented as the missile's locus was lost.

Meanwhile, the Teardrop splashed into the fog of black and immediately began shifting on its sides. Jets of propulsive force allowed it to twist and weave in awkward directions. For one second—two—and three it lasted, threading gaps between the creatures. Then, the light grew too dim and it was taken as well.

Signal Lost

Ghost-Link Lost

"Very interesting," Kae said. "I will be interested in seeing if exposing voidtech to thaumaturgy can change its inherent properties. Is it recreation that allows such naked defiance of physics? Hmm... discrepancies in gradual acceleration. Fixed... *air friction* for the Retributor."

There was so much she had to go over.

+So...+ Marlowe interrupted. +*The Highflame missile won the race?*+

"What? No. It's not supposed to be a race. I was trying to see how certain factors in our physical environment can affect the speed of a projectile. That, and Aegis won't let have any of their *relativistic* weapons."

{The answer continues to be no, Agnos,} Kant said. *{The last thing we need is you people launching mountains or continents at near-c speeds. You're too young to be trying the Lensmen special.}*

Kae didn't quite understand the last part. Probably just some other law named after a dead ancestor. A pity. She would have made a Heaven capable of much more than just slamming two masses together. "Fine. But I already have an idea; Avo, I require a Heaven of Speed."

This incurred the ghoul's approval as he let out a hiss of pleasure. +*What's the concept.*+

"Two concepts. The first is an inertial-inverter. If I can properly narrow down relations between two bodies in motion, I think I can create a canon that allows a Heaven to tear the speed from

all entities traveling in its vicinity. A simpler concept is affixing. Something we can even do with a golem. A Heaven sets a speed limit. All others caught in its wake must follow. Perfect for paradoxing rival Godclads with Domains of Speed.”

+*Like Shotin,* Avo said.

+*What? That can fuck over Kazahara?* Marlowe snorted a laugh. +*Fuck yeah. Do it.* A beat followed. +*He... was screwing my mom. And dad. At the same time. They got divorced.*

The Agnos sympathy toward the other FATED suddenly spiked. “Oh. Oh.”

+*Yeah,* Marlowe said. That was all she needed to say. +*Anyway. Can—can I get an interview with you or something?*

+*Signing on already?* Avo asked, sounding bemused.

+*Oh, fuck you, fang-face. You don't whisk a girl away with your bullshit mind-powers, show her your hidden enclave, evil genius Agnos, and humanitarian counter-Guild op, and expect her to stay out. W-what do you even call this place, anyway? The base? The city unseen? Outer haven.*

+*Outer haven,* Avo said, considering the title. That did sound interesting—

+*Avo.* Draus' voice interrupted all of them. Across the splinters, the Regular cast her near-term memories. Currently, she was holding a dead worm-snake hybrid that was somehow fused to her right eye. +*Might have eyes on somethin' interesting here.*

He grunted in reply. +*Be with you in a moment.* His attention turned back to Kae as he paused in consideration. +*Done for the day? Or more to do?*

“Always more,” Kae replied. “But I was planning on taking a break and getting some water and food—”

+*Good. Can show Marlowe the city while I convene with Draus.*

+*What?* Marlowe said, sounding almost offend. +*I want to see more of the Sunderwilds.*

+*No. Seeing is part of the reason why Draus lost her eyes. I don't have a sheath right now. No eyes to lose. You do. Going to be birthing bioforms from sockets if I take you.*

+*... You know what, I like Kae more than you anyway.*

Avo laughed.

“Agnos to tour guide in record time,” Kae muttered.

+No. Host. Just show her the city. The dragon farm mainly. What we’re trying to with the people. Rest is up to you.+

“Any reason why your subminds can’t take over.”

+One’s busy with Rab. Reva has issues. Another is with Kare. She’s heading to meet her uncle. Going to see if we can get more than one ‘recruit’ today.+

+What? What are you—+ Marlowe began. Avo’s cognitive presence in Kae’s mind lightened.

+--Do. Fuck. Rude. Does he always just up and leave like that?+

“Don’t mind him. He’s easily distracted by new and interesting things. You had your time.”

+Fucking double ow. First I get dumped by a ghoul and now the supposedly mind-fried Agnos is launching trauma patterns at me. I think I might change my mind. Hells, I might even cry.+

Kae’s lip twitched. Despite her misgivings about the woman, there was one thing she had to admit: Cala Marlowe had a certain easy-going charm to her. That, she most definitely couldn’t deny.