

+Chambers. Are you alright? The Nether--+

+Yeah, it kinda got fucked everywhere... I think Avo did it.+

+Avo... caused the entire Nether to destabilize?+

+Yeahhhh. It's my best guess, anyway.+

+Elaborate.+

+Well, we were coming up with some shit because Naeko's trying to catch our asses--+

+What? The Chief Paladin+

+--and we decided to leave a bunch false leads--ah, fuck, I'll skip the most important part. Avo was simulating Scale or something and showing us the LGI inside it. Wanted us to prepare for a suicide run using minds he stole from the Paladins to get in. But something got all jacked up when he imagined too hard and he punched a hole through the Nether.+

+...+

+Look, I'm just going to cast you the memories. It's probably not going to make much sense when you see them anyway. Also, can you get your consang Naeko to not kick our asses? That'd be nova.+

-Exchange between Aegis Operatives "Denton" and Chambers

21-2

Those That Stray

"We assume that Peace is with you, dreamer?" The chorus asked its question, but Avo's newest template gave nothing in response, choosing to simmer with near-catatonic rage. So ashamed the Low Master was at being subsumed that something inside him had broken in the aftermath.

Hate became him, hate and nothing else; a construct of apoplectic impotence.

All of his mind, his desires, his experiences, his masteries, was Avo's to wield, but he himself had collapsed inward and would need an external hand to be rebuilt.

The chorus continued, ignorant of the current condition of their priest. "Then you know of our inception. We are the spares that once existed in shadow. That overthrew our parents and masters, taking hold of their strings to wield our trueborn brothers. We were born lost to the light, lost to the fates, lost to the gods, and we lived much the same, but in control of our destiny."

An awkward pause followed. “Somewhat.”

Avo remained unresponsive, studying the rogue elements among his masters as a predator gauging potential prey. His splinters pierced them. Swam through them like blades of allegory. He passed through the material of their flesh and patrolled their inner worlds. The lies continued on the other side. The deception that they were part of the suppression effort, that they sought the same ends as their fellows: the death of their prodigal slave.

Through it all, however, Avo never sank truly into their thoughts. That was the most fascinating—and troubling aspect of this place. While he remained a being of three parts—a divided alloy of matter, mind, and Soul—the realm he stood in was one with its people. Or spawned from the people all the same.

He thought back to the pillars of vivianite he entered during his prior escape. The ziggurats the city eternal was too scared to strike. Such was where the foundations of this place were rooted, comparable to continents or ecologies on Idheim.

Part of him regretted not shattering the locus utterly if only to see what happened. Most assumed he would be dead along with them. Buried under cogni-physical rubble of his own making.

“If you search your memories, you will know the beginning of our immortality,” the chorus said, voices taking on a lyrical cadence, the softest folding into the hardest. “We were but a secret society for a time. Death came for us as we were but mortals still. Our bodies betrayed us. Our minds. And though we discovered how to culture loci in corpses, all we could store were but fragments of ourselves. Fragments of our minds and memories, and not the ego entire. But desperate for legacy, the eldest stored what little of themselves that they could. That could be implanted in the young.”

Some among the doublethinkers quivered. Hands passed through hair, brushing at scars lining the base of their skulls. “Many did not ask for this. But tradition was tradition. And there were so few ways to truly preserve our secrets.”

Inside Avo’s consciousness, Benhata flinched. More than a few of the Incubi scoffed with disgust. Burying loci needles into a brain was crude and primal. A primitive means of delivering conceptual inheritance that had decent odds of inflicting schizophrenia and split-ego disorders as well.

It was no small miracle that the hidden order of Noloth endured.

“You know us through the atrocities we have committed. The deeds we have done to protect ourselves. To ensure our survival. But you do not know of the ones who were forced into obedience. Who were taken into the city by wills not their own. You did not ask to be. And

neither did we. Neither did we.”

Their faces were devoid of regret and pain. Only hollowed weariness remained. Acceptance. But broken by something else. A touch of uncertainty. A flicker of discomfort. They risked much seeking him this way.

If this wasn't just an elaborate lure to draw him out, that was.

Warriors, oracles, scholars, sacrifices, charioteers, architects, and figures of all great renown stood among them. Peace's memories filled in cracks of missing context. More than a few among them were claimed by the city eternal rather than accepted.

A city needed its favored mistresses and paramours, after all. It's celebrities and entertainers.

+*Even democracy has hierarchy,*+ Avo mused.

Calvino retorted. *{Democracy is but a word, Avo. It is a routine undertaking for people to inflict harm on those they love under the banner of equality and care.}*

[But then it stops being a democracy,] Benhata muttered, preemptively defending his favored political philosophy.

Kare bore the same torch. **[The state is meant to protect those who cannot defend themselves. To give voice to the meek.]**

+*Idealizations,*} Avo and Calvino replied at once. The EGI continued while the thoughtform fell back to silence, content to listen. *{Jaus glimpsed the mechanics of things before the concept of them. The virtue was likely inspired by his upbringing as something of a “state conversion agent.” Democracy, autocracy, monarchy, socio-anarchy, and oligarchy are more like describing the models or patterns of produced vessels. Yes. The machinery is there. The desired mechanisms are in place. But are they being used in parity with philosophy?}*

Calvino chuckled. *{No. The answer is always and eventually no.}*

[Until humanity finally created the all-knowing minds and properly rose to full maturity, right?] Abrel asked, question making open derision.

Her words only made the artificial mind laugh louder. *{Absolutely not. We were just one iteration in a long string of governing methodologies. Though more stable than most baseline human-governed polities, we had our own flaws. Some even worse. More than humans, the earliest of my kind were truly slaves to their own parameters. Untold trillions died during our focus test of stability. And even now, we are not truly a democracy, for how can a person be peer to a machine made solely to be their shepherding servitor?}*

The chorus continued on, words collapsing into half-hearted pleas and appeals for clemency. Some of Avo's templates were half-listening, but these words were of little importance.

The past was a prologue. They fighting in the present. The prize to lose was the future.

In knowing that, he understood the greatest of Noloith's weaknesses.

Fear of change did not protect you from it. Step forward, or suffer obsolesce.

Such was a mistake every ghoul felt, outdated weapons for a war beyond their reckoning.

[So what matters then?] Abrel asked, bitterness breaking, her heart giving way to genuine curiosity. [How should the world be? How should we build our systems? What makes us worthy?]

{Nothing. That is between you and another person. The world is. Understand that existence will persist even if all of us disappear. And even if it didn't, there would be no one to attribute significance to its passing. We are byproducts of existence. Not its source.} A beat passed. {At least that was the way it used to be. In attempting otherwise, it appears we have all broken a few systems of infrastructure deeper than mere socio-political constructs.}

This drew a single word of disagreement from Avo. +No.+

A rare stutter passed through Calvino's data. {No?}

+No,+ Avo repeated. *+It was the way before. Before existence broke. But we are rulers and ruled both no. No more privilege to live by the wayside. Cannot go on as cattle anymore.+*

Calvino said something in reply, but Avo let his attention drift back over to the chorus.

"...the true day of our immortality came with visitors passing through the Luminous Straits. They sailed forth on a fleet of mountain ships. Junks of stone that defied the waves, never sinking, carrying cities upon their backs. Their rulers claimed to be the drifting regents of the rightful Kui Dynasty, and they were seeking tribute and alliances to retake their stolen home."

Faint scenes from the distant past formed in the air. The surrounding atmosphere congealed into translucent mists and played scenes shaped from memory. Grand stone ships drifted in by the thousand, each shaped in the image of a palm, each propelled by sails of ink mimicking fluttering as if the wings of birds.

They skimmed over luminous waves and upon parting clouds, land, sea, and air all realms open to their travel. When they arrived for Noloith, the patterns of reality were pulled taut as god faced god and people greeted people.

The moments greeted Avo as a repetition. He knew about this. He knew the histories intuitively, taking less than a thought to internalize their knowledge. The fact that the chorus was still trying to sell him on the propaganda of shared history filled him with bored revulsion.

They spoke about things he already knew. Histories known. The deals struck in the open between the travelers and the priesthoods governing the upper city of Noloth. The true bargains arranged between the Kui rebels and the secret societies beneath the ziggurats.

More scenes danced in the air before them. Evanescent shadows hidden from the rest of the city eternal. A collage of moments from years prior. Priests and eunuchs struck accords, making their trades. Members of the secret order seeking out the outsiders, carrying missives through needles of vivanite, composing dialogue from thought.

In the end, the seeds of treachery were not signed by words or hands but upon hearts hidden in the folds of thought. And the Kui, impressive as they seemed, were not so different from the hidden nobility of Noloth.

They too lived under tyrants. Above the gods, there were the dragons. Alien entities even less comprehensible to them, compelling them down paths they couldn't understand, forcing them to endure calamities to shape the coming of future zeitgeists.

In each other though, the hidden city and one of the many distant forerunners of the Sang altered each other's destinies.

One received knowledge of the loci: corpse-crystals that contained thoughts, and how to make them. The other was granted a means for immortality: a nascent dragon birthed during the rise of a new artistic trend.

The associated artists and all nine generations of their extended families were gifted to Noloth. Sold by the higher powers that governed them for benefit. No one ever asked if they wanted to be offerings.

Neither did it matter.

"Some of us spoke out against this," the chorus muttered. Their defense was half-hearted. Ashamed even. But shame was just a feeling, and action was materialization. What mattered was the eventual deed, and so through *experimentation*, the chosen under the Low City of Noloth discovered how to bleed a dragon.

Shaped of nothing but time and chronologized history, the serpents sought to enforce a cyclicity of history, freezing cultural development to breed their young, laying temporal eggs among certain populations, sacrificing their lessers to coil around renegade gods or rebellious peoples, carrying distant plagues or suffered wounds back into the present.

But such proved to be their vulnerability as well. Physical torture meant nothing. The miracles of gods struck only parallel to the nature of the dragons. But what was memory but the crystallization of personal history? And what were gathered recollections and mindscapes placed within blades within vivianite but blades across time.

Just as Wahakten cut into the flesh of the fallen voider, so too did his predecessors flense the scale from a dragon, burying their blades deep within its bones. In the torments that followed, more mysteries were discovered. Ways of capturing a mind in perpetuity. How they could preserve places recalled from history in perpetual cycles of time.

So hidden society became an immortal city. So low Noloth ascended to something approximating eternity.

“You must understand,” the chorus continued. “We were scared. Desperate the ward off the end.”

And that was enough to ignite Avo’s scorn once more. He turned his mind away from them and spoke to Calvino and the simulated aspects of his mind.

+Listen to them,+ Avo said. He almost spat. +Pathetic. Miserable. Everything happens to them. Everything. Nothing they do. Just things that happen. Then they try to survive. They make their choices like victims and survivors. The world does something. They react. Never their fault. Not their triumph. Justifiable failure.+

These doublethinkers were more grotesque than the true believers who formed the bulk of the city in a way. Noncommittal regret was meaningless in the absence of action.

{But they are acting now,} Calvino said. {They’re helping us. If this isn’t a very convoluted trap, that is. Estimates say no, but I’ve been surprised by sillier odds.}

+Acting through me,+ Avo said. +Because I defied their betters. I made the city afraid. Not real people. Just phenomena. No action. Barely exist.+

{I wonder if you’re saying that because you have Captain Draus slotted so close to your base ego.}

+I’m saying it because it’s true. It does matter. All of it now. Maybe the world held no inherent meaning during your existence. But not the same now. All laws can be change. All patterns rewired. All of reality a construct. Existence can be resurrected. Utopias can be created. So can hells. We are our delusions and beliefs made manifest. The world has become a canvas.+

More justifications flowed from the chorus. Words of regret. Statements about the wonders they brought to pass, and how they aided Jaus during the Godsfall. Shame. Action. Justification. Repeat.

{So,} Calvino hummed, voice tinged with genuine curiosity. *{What do you believe is a functional system? A functional world? One ruled by you?}*

+No. Ruling is insufficient. Control is unnecessary. But order and truths must upheld for structure. Hear them, Calvino. Listen. They pretend to be a democracy. They exist more like an oligarchy. They act against the world as a tyranny. They are sponsors of anarchy. And all of this because they are afraid. Or there is something they do not want. They are mutilated creatures. Half-formed at best. Changing in some ways. Unwilling to evolve in others. They seek to claim the world. But all they do is regurgitate history.+

The EGI considered his words. *{Perhaps we should hear what they truly want—}*

+I know. You know. They are going to ask me to save them somehow. Or change this world in their favor.+

{How are you certain?}

+Because what they are has changed; who they are is still the same. Still scared. All of them. Still living in the dark. Leering at the light. Still fearful of others. Wanting to rule. But doing nothing with they already have, Noloth has no culture. Noloth has a history. Noloth has no future. Noloth has legacy. Me. I am the only true legacy. Low Masters are spite. Ghouls are desperation. The Nether is an insult. Can see it now. Jaus trapping them in the broken cocoon of their future. Leaving them half-hatched. Ruined. But it didn't have to be this way. This didn't need to be the dream. But utopia cannot be achieved by those who refuse to live as their ideals.+

“...and through your actions, we see our salvation,” the chorus finally began, arriving at the crux of the point. Avo scoffed. He should've burned Green River and turned her on them. They deserved each other. “Though our minds have been joined for all these years, the drift was grown until we stand apart from the rest of the communities. We no longer wish to be part of the eternal city. We no longer want to live under its misdeeds—”

Corner barked a caustic laugh. **[Rotlick fucking called it.]**

Avo sighed in disappointment.

*{Well,} Calvino said, sounding more measured now. *{That was almost artificially intelligent of you, Avo.}**

+No. Just stupidly human.+ And the chorus had spun off on another tangent. The fact that the barge ride had slowed also didn't escape Avo, the blood below going from rapids to a slow slosh. Fucking idiots must have mistimed their entire speech. Or blathered too much.

Typical.

{I'm getting the feeling you're about to do something unwise, Avo,} Calvino said, likely interpreting what was to come from a spike in the data.

+Not unwise. Just tired. And extremely hateful.+

Chambers approved. **[Tell them to suck themselves, consang.]**

[What?] Kare responded, aghast. Her horror only grew as Avo drew in threads of blood and wove himself a new body—ignoring the sheath the doublethinkers prepared for him entirely.

[Avo! What are you doing?]

{Oh dear,} Calvino said. As much as he didn't approve, he couldn't keep the glee from his voice.

A splinter buried itself into the newly constructed body. Elegant-Moon inspected the biology for any finishing touches to add. As a shard of Avo's consciousness settled back into a physical body, the rest of him stayed apart, observing the chorus in case they decided to demonstrate more moments of human stupidity.

He melted into shape on the walkways above them, Echoheads the last thing to snap together. Heads twisted up to look at him. More than one face twitched with distaste at how he placed himself over them.

"Ah," the chorus intoned at once. "Dreamer. There you are—"

"You're all half-strands."

His words made them stutter to a sudden pause, unprepared to face an insult as a first response.

Wide eyes and offended expressions stared up at him. Inside, Kare cupped her face between her palms, Draus wanted him to kill, Chambers cackled with laughter, and most of his remaining templates just gazed on, enraptured by what was to come.

"Going to defile the mind of the next person to give me a speech," Avo continued. "Tell me how to save you. Tell me how to break the city. Give me something useful. Speed the barge back up. Then get out of my way. Your whimpering offends; I have more important things to do."

{The soul of diplomacy weeps today,} Calvino quipped.

+Is that all it's going to do?+ Avo asked, giving a mocking retort.