

Diplomatic Vulnerabilities (III)

The Paladins left the Elysium of Nuurhein with ten additional Bloodthanes arrested and a media frenzy rising in their wake. Observing Naeko through Kare's eyes, Avo found himself glad of his prior achievement.

Revealing Zein and delivering her unto Naeko had been a risky, ultimately worthwhile, poly. Pain still emanated from the Chief Paladin's mind, but there was a drive to him now. A drive that could be cultured, nourished, and directed.

Leaving a submind to monitor Kare, Avo directed the bulk of his cognition to scour the Nether. One he cast down into various lobbies and mindscapes he subverted. Another stalked egos passing through high-traffic areas. One more scouted for potential targets worthy of subversion, while his base mind haunted the Exorcist Oversecs to see how deep the Nolothic infestation ran.

[This is a waste of fucking time,] Peace said, sighing as Avo coursed along sequences and brushed through minds. Splinters darted through memories of places, melodies, and sensations without friction, and with each passing second the tension only grew. **[Are you listening to me, you stupid shit? Emotion won't waste warminds trying to ambush you this way. He's not going to risk exposing his nodes to someone who might capture him—you're the target. Only you. He can only create so many warminds—not like we had a lot of them fucking working in the first place.]**

+He's different. Changed now.+ Avo drew from Peace's memories, trying to establish habits and capabilities for Emotion, but reaped only disappointment.

In many ways, Ori-Thaum and Noloth weren't so different. The cells and the nodes were all meant to be outward-facing. Made to compromise enemies yet bottlenecked internally. There was something about the Nether that made one ever so wary of betrayal.

Avo kept his splinters in motion and changed his trajectory. He sought a mind he subverted almost a month ago—Elder Mwaba D'Rongo of Ori-Thaum: the source of Clan D'Rongo's subversion. If nothing else, he needed to scan her mind and take her off the board somehow. Or keep her monitored.

As he dispatched a splinter toward her, the Nether whispered to him in novel and familiar ways. The warmind of Hysteria resonated with passing minds, memories, and thoughts like an intercepting amplifier of cognitive frequencies. The accentuated aspects of mindscapes around Avo shifted in correspondence with the memories he chose.

Infusing Hysteria with memories rage altered his perception, revealing to him constellations of fury that lined the egos around him. What's more, his awareness stretched far beyond the

Oversec, expanding to receive thoughtcasts from all cognitive emissions of a shared nature. Changing the primary emotion to sorrow made the constellations shift as well, but the effects remained. As he channeled sequences of richer detail through his newest warmind, the number of minds he resonated with diminished like stars dissolving into the black. When he finally assigned a memory unparalleled in its uniqueness, he stood alone in a space of stillness, the Nether an unmoving ocean.

Despite how far Avo had come, it occurred to him that though he dove deep, he was still but a swimmer of the waters rather than the sea itself. But with each warmind he subsumed, the division between him and the Dreaming Unsea drew closer.

Testing his newest evolution further, he channeled additional recollections connected to his initial encounter with Elder D'Rongo.

Reality vanished within his perception. The Nether unshaped by memories and thoughts remained devoid of geometry or shape, rending all entities relative to each other by likeness alone. Across the cognitive vacuum, a single halo shimmered in the Dreaming Unsea, its presence known to Avo—calling to him across the distance of light seconds.

The old rules still applied: true stealth was impossible in the Nether—not unless possessed a warmind of Delusion. Mwaba D'Rongo couldn't hide, but distance and ambient noise could mask her presence. Such things were rendered inconsequential with Hysteria.

Hysteria, which elevated memories and emotions to absoluteness. Hysteria, that fueled ghosts with repetitive sequence alone.

Parts of its function made Avo consider its potential relations to the Auto-Seance phantasmic. There shared aspects that couldn't be denied. As he changed his memories to those pertaining Emotion, the Hungers, and the Low Masters, the Nether returned to emptiness once more.

He expected this, but disappointment still followed. Of course, Emotion wasn't going to make it easy. But could they use the warmind to track him?

[No,] Peace replied bitterly. [Your Conflagration. Ignorance. Your twisted nature let's command these Daemons. Use them like... like]

+Heavens?+ Avo finished.

[They don't break after you touch them,] Peace continued, refusing to offer any concession. [They don't go insane or collapse while you're connected to them. Fucking Defiance. He must've done something to you. Like all the other somethings he did to you. You weren't supposed to be capable of this, but I guess he fucking stole that Helix and imbued it inside you for a reason.]

+Perhaps,+ Avo replied. +Was planning a lot of things. For year. Maybe since the very beginning.+

Peace snorted. **[And now Emotion finally has part of the cunt inside him. Shit. He's probably putting the cunt inside my new nodes as well. If I even have new nodes. Maybe it's just Emotion now.]** A twang of anger followed that thought. **[Fuck me, I might be getting replaced.]**

A splinter slipped past surveilling Exorcists and hidden Incubi to arrive within Mwaba D'Rongo's mind. Before it went any further, Avo attempted a final test with his Hysteria. Amplifying his awareness once more, he tried to reach into the elder from a distant splinter. Tried, and failed.

The potency of his ghosts was magnified. His cognitive senses were sharpened. His ability to scry was on the threshold of omniscience. But he couldn't interact with the elder. Not without using a phantasmic or one of his splinters. Not without physical contact.

As sound as sound, resonance was resonance.

Change had to be inflicted by hands and force.

Scouting her sequences, Avo considered having another conversation with the Ori-Thaum Elder in the guise of Emotion. Some among his templates saw the choice as inspired. The ones with tradecraft experience made him know that it was an unnecessary risk.

Of course, the fact she remembered nothing about the Famines—or even her initial meeting with Avo proved to be disconcerting. Someone had cut the memories out of her. They took anything related to the official orders she dispatched to her clan, telling them to install and distribute Emotion's fragments of Delusion as well.

As things stood, D'Rongo could only recall being bored for the past few weeks. Bored, with a limited line of contact connecting her to Ori-Thaum keeping her mentally active while various golem-satellites projected across the Unwhere, bouncing her metaphysically stored body around the near void.

[Great,] Corner muttered. **[The Nolothi half-strands could have turned her at any time.]**

+Probably just the last few days,+ Avo said. There was a good chance that a few of Delusion's shards were dormant inside her, waiting to strike. No sense in giving away his hand right now. Not when she still had a use.

When Necrojack's fought, it was a game of patience, deception, and control. Avo had the advantage of reach—needed to spread him across the districts, lobbies, and mindscapes to spread his influence. But he had to do it quietly, lest he found himself countered by another Conflagration once more.

Leaving a splinter within D'Rongo, Avo checked in on Kare and the Paladins once more and found them on the way back to Scale. He extracted the submind he left in her with a whisper promising his return after things were calm. He didn't need to risk triggering the Heaven of Truth—to be cast back into the Deep Nether now would be certain death.

It was folly to assume surprise would serve him twice.

As the rest of his consciousness swept through the city, multiplying like a hyper-charged plague thanks to his additional subminds, he found himself considering his next steps.

Expansion was a necessity, but it would be wise to leave false trails or decoys to lure Emotion's attention. Subverting and imprinting his own memories on expendable egos could be an option. Syndicate Necros were a plentiful resource in this regard. He could use volume and noise to his advantage. Force uncertainty on Emotion with all his active puppets.

Just as he was sure Emotion would be coming for those associated with him. White-Rab. Draus. Kare. Shotin. Chambers. Anyone they knew was in danger now. That meant he needed to help the Paladins and Ori-Thaum keep watch over Ambassador Valhu Kitzuhada, and maybe assign a few additional shards to linger near Marlowe as well.

Whatever the case, strategy shouldn't be conducted alone. He needed additional perspectives—and to *incubate* some helping Heavens.

Casting the members of his cadre, he called for his own little assembly and instantly found his consideration turning to Highflame.

Right. Veylis was going to hold her own get-together soon.

Abrel sighed in the back of Avo's mind. **[The rivers of running shit don't seem to ever have an end, huh, Avo? Welcome to politics.]**

AMOUNT OF NEW VULTUN INFECTED - [0.799%]

"No, Captain Draus, 'shit happens' is not an acceptable response to two thousand innocent deaths!" With each syllable Kant Was a Prick pronounced, their avatar reverberated with agitation. Projected as a particularly ugly man adorned in a strange dress and sporting tufts of white hair on the sides of their skull from the tower's information center, the EGI representing the so-called ethics committee made a whole spectrum of despairing noises as the debriefing progressed.

Currently, he and a party of seven other active minds were suffering a particularly extreme conniption following an off-hand response from Draus.

Draus, meanwhile, was actively reviewing combat footage from their prior engagement, ignoring the animated expressions of despair playing across Kant's face.

"Over two thousand dead. Two thousand! The sheer amount of attention—the controversy! And—and the High Seraph noticing the ghoul too—Zein would have never allowed this to happen!"

Avo hissed at the whining mind. "Yes. She keeps casualties low. And I don't get arrested. Both have our strengths."

Kant's eyes widened in disbelief. In the back of Avo's mind, Calvino just sighed. *+Oh, dear, they're not going to like that.+*

The absurdity of the moment was interrupted when Draus threw her head back and barked a laugh—the noise so loud it sent Dice's kitten jolting upward in fright. A shame no one else seemed to appreciate his attempt at humor.

+You promised me comedy would be advantageous,+ Avo said, directing a glare at Kassamon. *+Take the tension off.+*

[It does! But sarcasm sounds different when it's coming from a giant man-eating monster. Maybe change your fucking vocal cords next time—I don't know. You sound like you clean your throat with sandpaper.] The Paladin's template sighed.

{Now, let us consider that there are a great many unforeseen elements,} Calvino said, hovering above Avo like some kind of ethereal defender. The molecular dawn that severed as his avatar shivered languidly with each word, and as the ansible tied to Avo's sheath activated again and again, another conversation was happening in the Nether at speed unfathomable to the terrestrials.

The cadre was convened atop Avo's tower of blood, with those in the area seated around the information center in person and those beyond substituted by their phantoms. All were present in one form or another, and the mood of the present conversation could best be described as "overwhelming."

+Jaus, Avo, I didn't know you had bosses too,+ Marlowe said. Avo discovered the worst thing about bringing a thoughtcaster into your hidden conspiracy was the risk that you might pick a particularly nose-y woman with too much spare imps and spare time. At least she listened when he warned her against initiating a public thoughtcast. It would be a shame to lose another media so soon.

+*Not bosses,*+ Avo replied. +*More like... benefactors.*+

+*Sure. I called the ones I worked under different things too. Fuckers. Sows. Cunts. Assholes. Rash-bait. Rusters. I get it.*+

She really didn't.

Kant continued arguing with Calvino about the portrayal of events. The former was banging his fist against a table he just manifested. The latter was trying to place the blame where it properly belonged: with Emotion.

Through it all, Kae swallowed repeatedly, worried that she might lose some of her newly provided privileges. Cas, Denton, Essus, and Sunrise were phantasmally projected into several other seats, and each sported an indifferent expression. The father in particular shot Avo a sympathetic look.

+*This isn't special,*+ Cas said. His actual sheath was in the crate being smuggled out of Omnitech territory. +*Zein would get us into one of these meetings every time she went on a drug binge.*+

+*How often was that?*+ Avo asked.

+*About twice a week.*+

The ghoul winced. Gods. The Paladins should keep her forever.

As Kant winded down with a final exhausted sigh, they turned their attention to Avo. And then their expression twitched. "Do what you can to avoid high-density areas. Or reduce risks to bystanders. Two thousand people—I know that you are fighting a war, but still we must strive to preserve. Those are lives, Avo. Lives. They matter. Now all their experiences will left unfinished, and all that care for them will be left alone."

The pain in the mind's voice was palpable, and more than a little discomfiting for Avo. The fact they cared to such a degree while not being human at all seemed unnatural. Deliberately vulnerable.

Such a construct couldn't have possibly been made on Idheim.

"I know," Avo said. "Trying to hunt Emotion down. Contain him. But can't lie. Won't. More will die. More. Because he's going to do whatever it takes to claim me. And I won't hesitate to unmake him. Will do all I can for choiceless. Is all I can offer."

A silence befell the gathered parties.

Draus stretched her arms high and yawned. “So. Now that the whimperin’s finally done, think we oughta go over what the fuck comes next. Start with Denon. Reckon you got the best look at how fucked Clan D’Rongo is—how far the rot’s spread through the Silvers in general.”

Denton nodded as her projected figure briefly flickered. *+The Nolothic infiltration is troubling and deep, but not total even among the D’Rong faithful. The elder’s influence runs far, but the cells subsist on paranoia. I’ve made contact with more than a few Mirror-Concaves that have remained uncompromised—or eschewed the dispatched “phantasmic” entire in favor of clarification from the Inner Council. Hence, I suspect the Low Masters’ influence to be mostly contained for now.+*

Not unexpected news. Ori-Thaum’s various clans were pretty much quietly warring with each other almost constantly. Suspicion and counter-intelligence was a way of life for them. As was the point of having an extremely segregated command structure.

“Keep watching them,” Avo said. “And be careful. Noloth has begun unrestrained us of warminds.”

+I’m aware. My contacts at Omnitech said they went on high alert three times today, causing the Noosphere to be quarantined.+

“COGNITIVE BREACHING is a category [10] risk,” the Techplaguer chimed. **“The Sleeper must be kept from [CASE STUDY] Nightmares.]**

{Every time you talk makes me feel like I’m having a stroke,} Calvino said sweetly.

“I WISH THAT YOU COULD!” The Techplaguer screamed.

“Right,” Draus continued. “So Clan D’Rongo’s fucked, but not that fucked with the Famines skittering back to their holes. Just gotta be careful about them dumping fire across the Nether. Or makin’ our consangs null us in desperation.”

A white rabbit flashed into shape next to Draus and glared at her. *+I’m not sorry; I was diving for my life.+*

The Regular sneered at Avo. “Yeah. No apology. Definitely related.”

The chuffed back at her. “Dealing with Emotion and the Hungers is now a new long-term objective. Going to need everyone to move under my cognitive umbrella. Disrupt your mind regularly if I’m occupied or absent. Hostile splinters almost impossible to detect otherwise.”

+Great,+ Tavers added. *+As if being a squire didn’t make me paranoid enough. You sure do know how to add spice to an old woman’s life.+*

“Doing his worst,” Chambers answered on Avo’s behalf. His breath was wispy and distant, and there was a flatness to his gaze. Seated on the far end of the table, there was an uncanny grin that pulled at his features, and so persistent was his expression that Kae shot him more than a few worrying glances.

Avo needed to talk with him afterward. See what could be done. The splinters he left in Chambers revealed one thing though—the man was fundamentally changing. The way he perceived himself had been altered after his encounter with Emotion. For good or ill, Chambers was growing, and unless he asked, Avo would let life take its course.

“More immediate concern is Highflame assembly,” Avo said, bringing up screens of mem-data. Profiles connected to the four Instruments he recently subverted spilled upward like inverted waterfalls, and the cadre’s attention drifted over to the information center. “Going to create a direct feed to their minds. See if I can get a splinter into an Authority. Or at least find out what Veylis is planning.”

A shadow passed over Draus as she turned to face Avo. “You sure that’s a good idea? You said she was lookin’ down at you earlier. Watchin’.”

“Don’t know how much she saw,” Avo replied. “Only that she probably followed my Canon of Chronology.”

It took a lot to make Jelene Draus uneasy, but the icon she once served under—the daughter of Zein Thousandhand and Jaus Avandaer was a titan of dread that cast a long shroud over all of New Vultun, and by the nature of her Heaven, that statement could even be understood literally.

“Don’t think she can detect my splinters,” Avo said. “Will jack out at first risk. Also going to be pulling up Bloodthanes too. See what they know.”

“Shotin’s in Paladin custody for now, but should be released shortly,” Kare said. “Oh! Maybe you can pick up some more Bloodthanes through the Oversec. Didn’t Naeko arrest a few?”

Avo grunted in agreement. That was a wise idea. “Yes. Also. Kae. Harvested six more Souls. Seven Heavens. Past the Six Sphere now. Think I also have a Domain of Speed finally.”

The Agnos’ face broke into a grin. “Good, *good*. I was going to go over something with you anyway. I have ideas I wish to try.”

“What about the Sang,” Dice said, breaking her silence. The kitten was seat on her lap, its head poking just past the table. It’s bead-black eyes stared disdainfully at Avo, and he fought the urge to hiss back. “The... the one you captured and released.”

“Elegant-Moon,” Avo said. “She’s currently pending release from a demiplane. Menders going over her. Final touches. They’ll judge her as stable and uncompromised aside from existing ego

damage.” He grinned. “Will have more than one use for her in the future.”

Time to see if he could rebuild an ego using his splinters soon. First Elegant-Moon. Then Tavers boy.

There was just no end to the work, it seemed.

But was there any other way to live