

*+Seeker. Mondelles here. Moon's Meta just came online—location: gutters, below...
Nu-Scarrowbur, Yuulden-Yang Sovereignty. I tried her session. She isn't responding.*

*Might be a trap, but she was moving and then stopped. The area around her looks to be some
kind of housing complex. Drones detected squatters and light Syndicate activity. No other
hostiles were spotted.*

*Meet me at Xin Yunsha **[DEEPNAV MARKER PLACED]** in four hours.*

Handle your business. We'll secure the surrounding area first.+

-Instrument Santanado "Starsinger" Mondelles

18-9

Catch and Release

Aratnids made the most splendid flowers if you twisted their flesh the right way.

The red and white lathering their muscles glimmered with the sheer oxygenation fueling their blood. These served as the perfect petals but needed to be folded out from beneath the skin. Hair and fur were to be turned to the steam, while the palps and legs clutched the spreading flesh like a cage. Bones were to be smoothed, turned from structure to receptacle at the center of these bastard roses. Ribs and spines ran down within the stem. The organs, finally, were to be fused into a singular cancer, with a cord made from the intestines connecting it to the rest of the flower.

Pitiful screeches of pain sang from the nub-like heads of the creatures poking from the teratoma. Beneath the blooming parts of their altered biomass, they swung and swayed, suffering without dying like tassels from lanterns, lining the hall leading to her room.

Around her, twenty bodies were left strewn and spattered in various states of mutilation. They began this day as thugs of a kind. Syndicate enforcers and masters. Slavers and cattle drivers of them. They ended it as victims of a singular entity they could have never fathomed—a beast of twin flames and divergent sinew.

Elegant-Moon smiled when she thought of the monster that had subverted her will.

Avo. An enigma of thought and vessel. A final—if renegade—triumph of old Noloth, turned against its creators with intent on playing its own game.

As banal as most ghouls were, his existence alone made it worth it.

Color had returned to her being—colors she assumed were lost to her since the ruination of her ego. Connected to his gestalt, she felt as they felt, their human facets transplanted over to

complete her damage. It was enjoyable to be merged with another. Euphoric. Now that this self of her had been parted from the flames, a yearning ached inside her, wishing to go back.

She comforted herself with the knowledge that a version of herself would live on within the ghoul's mind. Her memories had been altered otherwise. Avo had taken much of what she could recall away and locked the few snippets of truth behind layers of intricate wardings that not even she could fathom. It had restructured her entire Meta in seconds, fire culturing new constructs from burning sequences, ghosts modified and directed in perfect harmony.

A new progression of events formed the spine of her near-term memories. A false conflict—this she knew in the depths of her mind, but would never be able to admit it. A fantasy where that hopeless fool, Chambers, was a cold-eyed, psychotic mastermind desperate to strike the Guilds, and was working in tandem with powers within Ori-Thaum itself.

These memories were not hidden in the deep of her thoughts. Rather, they would be easy to produce and could be gleaned via a thoughtscan.

It didn't take a political operator to know where this false trail led, but it made her smirk all the same.

She had spent her life playing the Great Game—politics wed with power—surviving as both player and pawn.

But never had she truly been used like this: bait of a more insidious variety. Something freely returned yet already corrupted; an agent and a gateway into the Tiers and Guilds.

The thought tickled her as she noticed the light outside ripple. *Ah*. Finally.

A single body materialized in her awareness, her Weaveress sensing them from skin to cell.

Santanado. Come to be part of this play as well. Poor man. Poor unfortunately comrade, about to go from player to pawn.

Seated upon a gnarled couch dipping a few steps below the living room floor, she was at eye level with his armored chest when he burst through the door, stitching himself over physical matter using his threads of light. She clapped politely at his entry and hid a chuckle as the problem buried his foot in a corpse's skull.

A flinch of disgust passed through his face as his luminous sinews spread out to encompass the thirty-square meter room, blotting out the cracks in the walls and cracked windows, sealing away the collapsed bathroom. He took his time scanning the surroundings, sweeping everything with his perception before finally turning to face her.

She regarded with her fingers clasped together, gesturing at the bodies on the ground. “I managed to resolve matters.”

Mondelles swept the room again and bit his lip at the sight. Savaged corpses and crimson puddles left his radiant strings dappled with gore. Spilling out from the aura emanating from his body and the gold-plated combat skin he wore. Curved angles and the aesthetics of the now extinct and obsolete midthunder griffon decorated his chestpiece. The front plate of his triangular helmet lifted as she saw his face.

Tanned skin and a thick mustache came into view. Pale blue eyes were squinting at her, and the tendons in his cheek were tight. He really needed to do something about that habit of biting down when he was nervous.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Quite unharmed,” she said. “Alas, the same cannot be said for my mind.”

He grimaced at the implications of her cognitive compromise. “Is that how they got you?”

“Indeed,” she replied. Compulsion swelled within her as she spoke the next words, drawing her longtime comrade and sometimes adversary into a plot that might see him soon claimed as well. “But one would expect no less from Ori-Thaum’s finest, hm?”

His lips drew tighter. As did his squint. “Is that who they are now?” He flicked one of the bodies onto its side using his Heaven, the light struck the corpse like a pulled band. She couldn’t help but smile when she saw the face of the victim as the scheme continued.

She didn’t remember it, but the ghoul had used to alter the appearance of the dead before decreating their bodies. Their bones and blood were changed as well. Replaced by means both thaumic and coldtech. All they lacked were Metas. Things to confirm their cognitive identities. A deliberate act as well.

Filling in the gaps, she guessed that these dead were supposed to resemble members of Ori-Thaum. A very No-Dragon tactic, if she were to say, sowing chaos through cloning and masks of deceptive flesh.

As Mondelles scanned each intact face using his cog-feed, Elegant-Moon watched as his thoughtstuff surged faster, more and more ghosts cresting and diving into the roundth of his halo.

Shaking his head, he let out a breath. “Dammit, Moon. What a mess.”

“Have some idea who they are?” she asked.

“As you said. Ori-Thaum. *Incubi* to be exact. Our ‘new consangs’ did me the favor of confirming their identities. I can feel his piss running cold across the link. Shit. Not just Incubi. A few of them are directly tied to D’Rongo.”

“Oh,” Elegant-Moon whispered. “And aren’t we...”

“--Yes,” Mondelles barked, cutting her off so he didn’t need to hear the problem out loud. Another sigh escaped him. “The Seeker is swearing he doesn’t know anything about this. That they were hit too.”

“Is he?” She asked. “Do you believe him?”

He shot her a flat glare. “I don’t believe anyone. But I’ve never seen a mess like this before. They could’ve hurt us in a dozen different ways and we them. But this... it doesn’t make any sense. And the Silvers hate losing their Souls. They won’t risk them in some kind of low-success ambush.”

She prodded him further. “So, what? In-clan warfare?”

“I don’t godsdamn know. You’re the one who got snatched. Give me something.”

Putting on a display of vulnerability and letting out a breath of air, she placed her fingers across her face and drew her rig tighter. The bones of the symbiotic armor laced to her flesh and nerves cracked. She stared at Mondelles from between her fingers. “Memories. They cling to me like smoke between my fingers... But I remember the moment I was freed. When their Possessors broke—a flash of chaos and confusion. The presence of another person. Another mind.”

“Another mind?” Mondelles said sounding confused.

And so she cast out her ghosts and configured them into phantoms. And so they began to portray the visage of one Aedon Chambers, robed in the tattered greys belonging to Low Master acolytes, pointing a vivianite specter down at the ground using his left hand while holding his right, flesh and sink ablaze.

+Well, consangs, I gotta give you my props for helping me bag a ‘Clad. ‘Cept for not warning my associate about the Golds in the drone with your guys. That was rude.+ The phantasmal mirage of a blonde-haired man grinned, revealing a set of pearly white teeth as he slipped from his robes, body enhanced and strong, muscles taut and glistening—

Scenes from Elegant-Moon’s cog-feed were broadcast and played through Chambers, monitoring the situation through a hidden session planted in the labyrinth Avo fused to her mind.

His own phantoms were connected to the George Washington's systems and a vast room-sized screen was constructed around them, displaying every detail in the room. Especially all the muscles the actual Chambers didn't have in the real.

"Yet," Chambers said, point to the body he had Avo generate for him. "You guys got a bunch of cool graft shit, I want that!"

The rest of the cadre just stared as things progressed. Draus snorted. "Arms are kinda small. And your dream body's got shitty calves."

"Come on, Reg, don't ruin this for me," Chambers whined. "Avo! Tell her to stop."

"No," Avo said, more focused on how Mondelles was reacting.

They had Elegant-Moon organically reconstruct a few of the bodies to look like certain Incubi Avo had killed—their templates offering all the data he needed to reconstruct their appearances. Blood and other forensic details were tweaked with the aid of the grafters, and the deception appeared to have succeeded.

Now, they just needed to sell Mondelles—and whoever was watching through him—on the Low Master threat and their fragile alliance with parts of Clan D'Rongo.

Ultimately, it didn't even need to be conclusive. They just needed to bury seeds of doubt and sow paranoia.

From how things were developing, he thought the plot was unfolding nicely.

But yes. Draus was right. Chambers' idealized form still had rather small legs.

—and Nolothe scripture scarred across his body. +*Just a shame about the plant you left in her head. Yeah. Thought I wouldn't notice, huh? Heh. D'Rongo always did like to use fools. Suppose they're easier to lose. Oh well. Thank you for your service, eh.*+

And then the air around him started shrieking and the phantoms spilled apart into oil, dissolving and splattering into mem-data.

"I think he used me to kill them," Elegant-Moon concluded. "And then he nulled me."

For a good while, Mondelles just stared off into the distance. "What's with the, uh, taking the robes off?"

"He's a porn-addled nudist, I suspect. I... seem to recall him exposing his genitals to someone.

Triggering the Rash deliberately.”

The Instrument grimaced in disgust. “Jaus.” He placed a finger on his temple as another tide ghosts pulsed out from his Meta. “Yeah. Yeah, I know, I saw it.” His face fell. “Our partners got another hit on him. Aedon Chambers. Low Master acolyte. He ambushed Shotin Kazahara. Planeshift. Low Masters. Low godsdamned Masters. I thought we were finished with those bastards.”

“Nothing is done until all is dust, I’m afraid,” Elegant-Moon said.

His body stilled and he nodded. “Come on. Let’s get you to isolation so we can get a Mender to look through your mind.”

“Worried if I’m compromised,” she asked.

“No,” Mondelles replied, as tendrils of light began to crawl over Elegant-Moon. “I *know* you’re compromised. The question is just how much.”

She didn’t fight it when the light took her, but she cast what pity she could at Mondelles as he faded from her sight.

Poor fool.

Poor fool.

If only he could see beyond the veil, of the creature that lingered past the threshold of falsehood. Oh, if he could only see Avo—see the fires.

Then he would know.

And he would despair.

And what would be a sweeter sight?

“Agh!” Naeko said, tumbling off from his DEUS-X HYPERFOAM gaming station trying to get away from the exposed penis manifesting just an inch from his face. The phantoms generating the genitals followed him as he disconnected from Stormjumper in the middle of a match. He felt a fist—a weak, soft little fist—bounce off the back of his head as he wheeled on his attacker, preparing to palm them into a smear with his—

He paused and frowned. Two more fists crashed into his jaw, and he felt the man’s knuckles fracture.

It was just Maru punching him. And here was thinking that there was someone actually trying to make an attempt on his life. Still, the physical violence wasn't anything new, but what was with the Rashable material?

"Hey, come on, man," Naeko said, brushing the blows away from his face. Looking over Maru's shoulder, he realized the man had smashed through one of his walls to get in. Huh. When did that happen? Naeko also wondered how he missed that. Maybe he needed to tune down the sound settings for the game—or make the audio transparent. "This is coming out of your pay—"

"Fucker!" Maru growled, trying to work the body.

Naeko looked down as his junior in rank continued his attempts at harm. "Stop..." Maru didn't. Naeko calmly reached over, gently placed his fingers on the smaller man's shoulders, and pressed his thumbs down into the collar bones, detaching them from their sockets.

Maru promptly gave a choked gasp of pain as stopped attacking.

"You lazy fucking shit," Maru snapped, even as Naeko held him down. "You rat-fucker!"

Naeko tilted his head. "Maru. You seem a bit madder than usual today. What's wrong? Got something you wanna talk about... a raise?"

The other man shrugged Naeko's hands off and backed away, grimacing as shrugged twice and snapped his collarbones back into place. "I *want*... I want you to do your fucking job for once."

But by this point, Naeko was already walking back to his gaming station. "Eh. Nah."

Dust filled the air, covering the rich brown wood lining the floor. They were in a corner of the wide-open five-hundred-square-foot loft overlooking the district below. Wide panes of glass shone with pulsing neon as phantoms drifted outside, materializing an advertisement for some kind of new soft drink. Distant blooms of nuclear fire flashed not too far away as more missiles streaked up into the sky, another block war starting at midnight.

Naeko's home was a mix between physical library, museum, and theatre. The corners of the room were lined with stacks and stacks of books stopping just below the second-floor loft—taken up entirely by a hundred-foot-long bed. A coldtech projector played old movies on a loop.

Most of them were action films from a bygone era, the flashing light spilling over the seven glass displays placed across the center of the room, each a suit of armor belonging to the major cultures.

With a swipe of his hand, Naeko undid the damage and flicked out the dirt. He also plucked the hurt he inflicted on Maru away and put it in his pocket.

He was gonna give that to the next person that called him a half-strand in-game.

Reaching out with his utility fog, he opened his liquor cabinet on the far end of the room and plucked some old *Tungsten Fervor*. Ashthroner brand he preferred and Maru hated. "Drink?"

"No," Maru said, rubbing at his collars. "I'm fine."

"Good," Naeko said, grinning. He yanked. A club of amber liquor sailed through the air and landed in his grasp. He used the callous of his right thumb to pop the lip off and took his first drink. Hm. Internating mint and bitter. "So. What made you attack me tonight?"

"I was doing some investigative work," Maru said, spitting the words acerbically. "Looking up a new suspect. Aedon Chambers. Ring a bell?"

"No."

"Funny. Because a few of our files had a match. Of him running for his life across Nu-sScarrowbur and Light's End. Without any pants on."

"Oh," Naeko nodded. "Yeah, I was wondering why the penis looked familiar. I'm docking your pay for that too. No Rashing your superiors. Come on, Maru. I know you're better than that."

"Take this seriously," Maru hissed.

"No," Naeko replied.

"You know he caused an outbreak, right?" Maru said. "Or you would if you read any of our briefs. Two million dead."

"Well, sounds like you contained it," Naeko said. "Good job."

"He did it as a distraction," Maru continued. "All those deaths so he could get away from Shotin Kazahara for some... clan warfare shit with the Ori. I don't know. The Seeker fucking jacked me. And Kare's his niece. I should've looked after her more... I would've—"

"You wouldn't have," Naeko sighed. He walked over the black leather sofa beneath the loft, facing the inactive coldtech movie screen. As he planted himself down in the middle, he patted the seat next to him as he continued nursing his drink. "Come on. You wanna watch something."

"This isn't a social visit!"

"Could be."

A disgusted snort came from Maru. But he still stomped over. Just like he always had. Just like when he was a boy.

“What you wanna watch?” Naeko asked.

“Nothing,” Maru said, collapsing into the seat next to him, sagging down. “I just...”

“Feel useless?” Naeko said.

Maru glared.

“Well, I don’t blame you,” Naeko said. “That Shotin’s pretty good. I’d give him even odds against most ‘Clads in the city—”

“This isn’t about that, this is about you. You go out on patrol for the first time in years, bag Abrel Greatling and an Ori-Thaum Elder—D’Rongo! And now you’re just... pretending like nothing happened.”

“I guess,” Naeko said. “There’s a trial coming up. And a moot. We’ll get things sorted there. I got us a few witnesses and—”

“And what?” Maru said. “We have no capability to hold either of these people. Highflame! Ori-Thaum! Either one can destroy us.”

A bitter smile played across Naeko’s face. “Hells. I guess if we’re looking at it honestly, one of them already has.”