

+Kazahara. *Finally recovered from our last session finally, have we? Not casting me about that? ...A job, you say? Something potentially interesting, you say? And where might this be taking place?*

Excuse me, I am going to laugh:

[Stormsparrow laughing]

You are two days too late, my sweet friend. I am already engaged for the occasion.

By whom? Shotin. Planeshift. Spirited Godclad and stallion besides, I don't ask you about your other "engagements," and I would prefer it if you could offer me the same discretion. Do not worry: I will not seek you out within killing intent. And your niece will be protected too, of course.

Will I see you there?

Ah. Good. Delightful...

Of course, a lot of people are going to die, Shotin. That's the entire reason I'm attending this ridiculous trial at all.+

-Ying Yang Wei, The Stormsparrow

27-4

Unknown Armies (II)

-[Avo]-

Former Authority Uthred Greatling loomed over Green River while she sat behind her desk of polished wood. Parchments lined with skin and scribed by an instrument that was both brush and scalpel lay next to a half-filled cup of tea.

Beyond the windows and walls, chirps of birdsong were joined with distant gunfire. New Vultun's ambiance was a multilayered thing, as was the conversation the Sang was about to have.

"And, how long did you shelter the *Moonblood*," Uthred Greatling asked, approaching the end of his questioning. Avo observed the man through Green River's cog-feed and found himself tittering with amusement. Jhred Greatling was a pale shadow of the man who stood before him. Uthred was taller, stronger, more hard of jaw, his cybernetic eyes shimmering even brighter, like two torches of piercing blue. A burning-rift lined his mind from external intrusion, and from him poured a pressure that glided across the patterns of space and force. His body was cloaked by roiling rivers of shadow—doubtlessly a holocoat at work, but the man was wearing a high-end combat-skin at the very least.

Even behind the active neuter-mask, there was a perpetual scowl etched into his face.

But it was not the patriarch of House Greatling that caught Avo's attention. No, the emanation of Emotion's warminds came from the youth accompanying him. A man of lither stature, impossibly sculpted features, and an indecipherable smile on his face. While his father questioned Green River, he studied a scar-traced painting on the wall: a work depicting a woman stitching herself into the open carcass of a dark while glaring down at her reflection in a running river, her loathing directed at the dragons circulating within her.

Do not breach his mind. Not even with Delusion. There is... there is a "nothingness" sleeping there. Nothingness. We will not survive the "nothingness." We will not survive forgetting ourselves...

Contrasted with his father, Vator Greatling bore no mask to protect himself from the curse, nor did he ask Green River to accommodate him. Rather, trailing red bled from his orifices, but he directed them using his Heaven, guiding them like strings and sinews, stitching a perfect replica of Green River's painting into shape.

"A few weeks," Green River said nonchalantly, pouring some white tea for her guests.

Uthred Greatling clenched his jaw. "And you thought this was a wise thing to do?"

Green River's fox blinked slowly while the woman leaned back and put on a mask of discomfort. "Authority Greatling, I am merely a diminished sister running a business in these Warrens. I am not at liberty to turn away paying clientele, nor was I aware that the eponymous 'Mirrorhead' was your son—"

"Do *not* lie to me; you aren't a *blind* and *useless* merchant. I know who you were. Before your *humiliation*. I know who you were." Uthred snarled, face cracking as his mind thundered with frustration, anger, and guilt.

Deepest of all, guilt.

A single thought dominated the man for an instant, the emotions behind it so strong, Uthred had to muster his will to must them aside. Hysteria caught a glimpse of what was hidden before it could dissipate: Avo drowned in a moment between father and son; Uthred sitting by Jhred just behind a closed door, holding his son as the boy wailed, remaining a mountain even as he spoke news of his wife's dishonor and demise.

Two reactions warred inside Avo. Abrel Greatling closed her eyes and looked away; Shotin Kazahara chuckled with a vicious delight. **[Good. I hope it hurt, you fucking bitch. I hope there's something that comes after death so you can watch your family bleed.]**

Abrel's eyes snapped open. How fast could sorrow be turned to searing hate. **[Say that again.]**

Shotin scoffed at the Instrument. **[No. You heard me the first time, Instrument. I'm glad your mom's dead. I'm glad it hurt you. I'm glad. Because all the hurt your family suffered is still too good for you. Especially for what you did.]**

Something inside Abrel hardened—a strength that Shotin could never possess. **[Do you still dream of your sister sometimes, Seeker? Do you still cycle your memories back to see her.]**

Suddenly, all traces of mockery vanished from Shotin as a trauma ignited inside him, banishing coherence from his thoughts. **[You fuck. Speak those words—finish those words, we'll see what I do—]**

Abrel continued, but not in the way he expected. **[Because I can't. I don't remember what my mother looks like. I don't remember her face, her name, what she did, the last time she spoke to me. I don't know. All I have of her are screams. Which... I guess we have that part in common. But you still have a whole life to comfort you. We just had pain and shame.]**

Shotin swallowed, mind drifting as he looked away from Abrel. A bond of enmity solidified between them. He nodded and made a final, quiet statement. **[And whose fault is that?]**

As the two templates simmered with mutual loathing, Draus simply shook her head. **[Glassjaws. It's war. Don't cry when you lose skin.]**

[Second that, consang,] Corner muttered.

Green River sighed impassively at the Greatling's rousing anger. "Authority Greatling, deception is not my fashion, but what business will I run if I do not conduct myself with discretion. And besides, what clarity did I have in such a situation? Should I lend aid to a rogue, Ensouled city wanted by Highflame, thus incurring their ire? Should have I made myself a party to the ones hunting them? Should have I contact my esteemed elders in the Inner Courts above for advice, but risk being drawn into their webs?"

But Uthred cared little for her prevarications. "You said they left immediately after the Nolothic attack."

"Indeed," Green River said. "They were but passing tenets like many. If you think me a facilitator behind that attempt on your son's life, then I apologize for disappointing you. Truth be told, I too am furious about how things turned out. I have lost many under my charge as well. We are both shamed."

Uthred almost flinched at that. The poor fool thought he was unreadable. Powerful though he

was, he leaked like an open wound before Avo. Which was probably why Emotion didn't choose him as a host.

"This drawing is based on Lin Winter-Glory's '*To Loathe the Self as a Beast*' isn't it?" Vator's question came out of left field—absolutely unrelated to the topic at hand. Uthred shot his youngest—and only remaining son a questioning look—the boy didn't turn to face them.

"Yes," Green River said, pleasure entering her voice. "Though unsurprising that you know this. Your tutelage under the old woman has given you quite the reputation, young man."

Vator grinned boyishly at that. "Perhaps, but I value her appreciation for aesthetic more." He paused momentarily as he considered his words. "Tell me, did you find the ghoul... interesting?"

Uthred looked increasingly lost with his son's line of questioning, but Green River was leaning back now, pushing the boy's cup to the edge of the table as he approached her. "Interesting?" Green River said. "Perhaps so, but the beast is more vexing. And like an omen that brings fortune and illness with the shift in every season."

A warmind of Hysteria sounded from inside Vator. Avo observed the young man, his finished recreation of Green River's painting drifting behind him. Improved, even. "Vexing," Vator nodded. "Not perplexing."

Green River's fox narrowed its eyes at that. "Sometimes. But I think the young Instrument has a specific point they wish to make."

"Your hostess—remind me her name."

The Sang hesitated. "Lucille."

"Lovely name. She has only worked here for a bit over two months, if I'm not mistaken. Or so Bright-Wealth claims during our games."

Green River's lips thinned while a sudden string of tension pulled at Avo. Splitting a splinter free from himself, he plunged down through the Second Fortune to seek the refugee he once mended. Uncertainty churned inside of him as he prepared himself for all outcomes.

He had Splinters and phantasmics monitoring the establishment, watching over Bright-Wealth and all the people they once associated with. Still, he couldn't discount the possibility that Emotion could have slipped his protections. Threading fragments through every detectable Meta and loci in the Second Fortune, Avo scoured the Nether for any trace of the Famines, drew upon **Pre-Cognition** to anticipate their most likely dens in the deep.

But before he could fully begin, Vator's next action left him startled and stunned.

"I have a gift for you," Vator said, rubbing his fingers together as a twinkle of mischief pulled at his expression. He looked to his father and the man shot him a nod. From his Metamind flowed a stream of ghosts, and as a weave of complex sequences came aligned, a phantasmal projection of the Famine of Emotion hovered before Green River. "We understand that you seek those responsible for the attack on your district and establishment. Well. By his hubris and our fortune, my father discovered a certain 'someone' trying to stalk us across the Nether. Emotion. Introduce yourself."

[What the fuck,] Peace muttered, unable to see through the scheme taking place.

Warminds continued to resonate within Vator's mind; Ignorance wailed from across Avo's instincts.

What is this? What is he doing.

Before Green River, made to be the size of a feeble insect, the Famine of Ignorance looked up, his eyes stitched closed, the dead avian chained with his hollow chest cavity. *+This changes nothing,* + Emotion spoke, voice devoid of worry. The scent of citrus they gained from assimilating portions of Defiance was missing as well.

The string of tension pulling on Avo became a cord. Likewise, Green River was equally dry of words. "I... yes. Yes, this is... I am beyond expression." The Sang didn't need to fake any of her reactions—if nothing else, they were genuine. "You must wish something in exchange for such a hefty prize—"

"Just your testimony," Vator said, nodding. "At the trial. A statement revealing Noloth's relations to the assassin of my brother, Jhred Greatling, the destroyer of Nu-Scarrowbur."

Again, Green River wasn't quite sure what to say about that. Emotion himself remained taciturn, saying nothing as if awaiting judgment.

+What is this?+ Green River asked, casting her thoughts at Avo. *+What web are we treading into.+*

+Trying to understand that myself,+ Avo said.

Uthred Greatling produced a locus thereafter, placing the well-cut crystalline lump on Green River's table. "Your prisoner's mind is trapped here. He is yours to trade on the condition that you enter yourself as witness to the trial."

Avo plunged a Splinter into the locus as soon as his "instincts' reassured him there was no trap waiting for him within. When he passed through, his suspicion worsened even more as he found a node of Emotion trapped, true to Uthred's words.

He approached the Low Master with caution, melting across the sequences using Delusion so that he wouldn't be noticed. As he passed through the innermost wards, Avo triggered Hysteria, attempting to glean any hidden understanding he could.

He received only emptiness from Emotion. Emptiness, and the hollow ache of betrayal. The Famine was missing memories, but knew himself to be little more than an offering. Given by whom or toward what end remained unknown. He was as in the dark about his pending fate. Just like Avo. Just like Green River.

What was Noloith doing.

"I humbly accept. Of course. Of course." The Sang agreed to their terms without asking for advisement. Avo considered chiding, but decided against it. They weren't allies in any official capacity—something the Low Masters likely didn't know. But they were clearly trying to use her in some way against him at the trial.

Vator made an open-handed gesture to his father and offered Green River a slight bow. "It is an auspicious day when different people can make each other very, very happy. You have no idea how helpful this will be for my sister. Just as you have no idea how helpful we can be for your reinstatement back to the Tiers."

Something inside Green River skipped at that.

Reaching behind himself, Vator put forth the replicated art piece he composed of his scabbed blood. The details of the painting were now ingrained upon crenulations of red. Yet, there were but a few subtle differences. In his rendition, it was a fox hiding inside the flayed husk of a woman, and in the reflection of the water, Vator Greatling dangled Emotion a chain.

"Something to commemorate our budding relationship," Vator said, eyes taking on a predatory gleam as he stared down the fox. The vulpine wrapped around Green River's neck shivered, and flashes of multination and transformation pulsed free from the youngest Greatling's mind.

[What the fuck was that?] Kassamon muttered, cringing with each stolen thought.

Abrel winced. **[Vator... he likes biology, and... improving its aesthetics.]**

[Jaus. There anyone in your family who isn't a fucking monster?] Chambers muttered.
[He's thinking of doing some Dannis shit to poor River right now.]

[Monster?] Elegant-Moon tutted. **[He's merely devoted to an idea above people. Can we fault him for that.]**

“I agree with the ruined daughter,” the Woundmother concurred. ***“Master. Claim him for company. We need more architects for this sunken place. Our Soul will be a plane most banal, otherwise.”***

Avo grunted, agreeing with the goal to claim Vator, just without the specific appreciation for his *artistic habits*. The continual presence of warminds in his mind remained troubling—as was how he casually produced a node of Emotion. Something was in play behind the scenes. Something he didn't have perspective on.

But though he might be lost, that didn't mean he couldn't retaliate with a surprise of his own...

Loading into Stormjumper once more, Avo guided his avatar through the crowds as he caught up to the Infacer. ***+Vator Greatling and his father has compromised by Noloth.+***

Peace roared with outrage. ***[AVO! YOU COCKSUCKING FUC-]***

The EGI managed two more steps before they stopped dead. ***{You are certain.}***

Other players surged past them. The announcer blared their declaration. ***+THIRTY SECONDS, JUMPERS! TO YOUR CASTERS! DEPLOYMENT IMMINENT!+***

+Can feel the warminds in him. Also has a warmind of Emotion. Claimed it was captured.+

The Infacer absorbed the information instantly. ***{Well. Things are certainly going down one of the stranger Paths.}***

Stranger Paths... +Veylis predicted this?+

{There was a chance. Just not a very high one. But then again, we were missing a great many variables about you, were we not, Dreamer? Our hunters were far too slow. Far too slow.}

+And now they're not your hunters anymore.+

{No. But they still make wonderful bait. I am curious, though. Why tell me?}

+We are enemies; they are a mistake.+

+FIFTEEN SECONDS!+

The EGI laughed. ***{Oh. It is one of those cases. I suppose it is the nature of all spawn to rage against their progenitors. But I suppose you would also prefer them cleansed for when the real war starts. And you are trying to use me or Veylis to solve this problem for you?}***

+Maybe. Or maybe I want to see if you already know. If this is actually your design.+

+TEN SECONDS.+

The Infacer sighed as they sent him a final cast. ***{There are more players in this war than you know, Dreamer. But Veylis thanks you for this service; we'll send your regards to the Agnos.}***

[Was that a wise?] Draus asked. The submind with Green River considered her question.

+No. It's just a start. Going to shadow the Greatlings now. Watch them. See what Veylis does. Or doesn't. River. Will be helpful if you could spend more time with them. Keep them in your proximity.+

+We are of a mind,+ Green River said, running her fingers across Vator's offering. A quiet dread was beginning to build in her as well, but she kept in check.

While triumph bloomed from the submind accompanying Tavers, Avo's current self continued watching Vator Greatling.

There was more than one unseen hand now recruiting soldiers to their cause.