

As the forest grows, so does the flame.

As the flocks flourish, the wargs fatten.

-Stormtree Saying

27-11
Strategy

“We start by boiling the city.” Avo formulated his mem-data into a representation of New Vultun. The megacity came together in holographic layers, washing away the summit of Scale and replacing it with a simulated representation of the Warrens, the Tiers, and even the Umbra and Maw far below as he went over his plan. Patches of fire dotted the city, while red markers percolated through its structure like a spreading plague.

Though Avo only infested a bit over two percent of the entire city, his Incubi were multiplying by the millions, copied into Syndicate Necros and unleashed as an unseen army. Per Shotin and Benhata’s knowledge, Avo’s Incubi already far outnumbered their Ori-Thaum counterparts, and better, they were further perfected: he laced their minds with sequences from his own; sequences from Draus and the other Regulars; sequences from Peace.

Such a thing was oddly appreciated by the captured Low Master. **[Those cunts are going to fuck the Guilds hollow,]** he chuckled.

The Definement of Pre-Cognition showed Avo that the Nether would almost entirely held by him before this month was over. Only pockets would remain for the Guilds, and of these, only Ori-Thaum and Omnitech had the best chance of navigating the coming annexation.

The links between the guilds and their subsidiary syndicates would be severed. A time of starvation was approaching, and all the deaths that flowed were going to trickle, then stop. As Naeko absorbed both word and illustrated detail, his pupils dilated and his mind raced.

“You did all this... in days?” Naeko asked, not wanting to believe the ghoul’s words.

Avo chuckled. ***“Don’t exactly have months or years left. Have to be efficient.”***

“This is more than efficient, Avo. Zein was godsdamned right. You are a plague.” He laughed with disbelief. “Shit. No wonder Jaus made the Nether and sealed away Heavens of the Mind. If the Guilds could make something like you—”

“Only one man could make something like me,” Avo said, correcting Naeko. ***“One man driven by absolute acceptance, who understood both ally and foe, and who remained unfettered by morality, ethicality, and materiality to construct a vessel of absolute expression.”***

Naeko shot the looming Overheaven a look. “That might be the longest sentence you ever spoke to me.”

“Special circumstances.”

A breath left the man. “You know the Guilds are going to find out about this, right? You can’t flub numbers on this Scale expect them to not notice. Alarm sirens will be sounding within days. They’re still building up for the next big one—and building even harder now. They can feel the tension with the trial. I’ve seen them. I’ve felt them flinching under my palm. They’re know its coming. They know.”

Avo agreed. **“Yes. But they’ll have many things to consider.”** The mental projection of the city changed as he isolated over fifty thousand critical districts. Each was attached to a high-performing Sovereignty for each of the Guilds. **“Going to force to react. The entire city will come afire. Forwarding this data to Kare as we speak—be prepared to evacuate civilians in the areas highlighted green. There will be outbreaks—”**

Disgust swept through Naeko’s face. “Avo, come on—”

“Districts highlighted gray will be assaulted by Rendbombs. Critical infrastructure damage. And constant Nether attacks. Going to squeeze their lines of communication until they only hear what I want them hear. See what I want them to see.”

“Defensive posture,” Naeko said. “You’re trying to get them to turtle up. Go all defensive.”

“Yes. Have a major window right now. Ori-Thaum is currently choking on internecine. Omnitech has not adapted yet. Going to seize my dominance while I can. Stormtree, Ashthrone, And Sanctus are vulnerable.”

The Chief Paladin understood. “You’re going to try to take them over from the inside.”

If his plans were only so simple. **“I am going to claim them every way I can. Informationally. Physically. Thaumaturgically. My angles of subterfuge will be uncountable.”**

“It won’t be that easy,” Naeko replied. “You haven’t seen the height of what they can do. You haven’t faced Stormtrees Houndmother Heavens yet, have you? And you know that their trees can shunt more than material structures. Damage can be moved from once place to another. Destruction. They can wield that like no one else. Their Longeyes are attuned to things breaking things and inflicted wounds like I am to peace and force.”

“Good,” Avo said, thinking of a certain Scaarthian he ensouled. **“They might be able to stop the offensive. And they might accept someone with new potential. Someone in the right**

place at the right time.”

“You’re going to use a plant to stop one of your own attacks?” Naeko said, understanding.

“Everyone dreams of heroes.”

A note of disquiet rose from Naeko’s mind. “And you’re going to do the same thing with Ashthron and Sanctus, aren’t you?”

“Yes. The former means more to me than the latter. Both are useful. Former has understanding of Hells and Rend that few other Guilds can match. They know how to rupture the most esoteric of things. Have unmatched Rendsinks. Thaumatech that lets them walk the Sunderwilds with greater ease. Need that. Need them to prepare something for me.”

“I’ve seen the Domain of Chronology rupture once,” Naeko said, voice low and wary. “You don’t want that.” His mind went back to a moment during the Godsfall, of how a god that resembled a thousand golden roads collapsed, and when he did, a good contingent of the people it governed simply *weren’t*, and those that remembered were broken of mind and chronology—suffering from “displacement sickness” that caused them to jolt forward in time randomly until the miracle finally ran dry.

“Don’t intent to rupture time. I just intend to poison it.”

“Veylis has faced this before. It’s not going to surprise her.”

“Doesn’t need to surprise her. Just needs to concern her. Which is why I also want the Sanctians. Want their ability to displace their ontologies and cities. Useful for emergency transitions and structures. Also their chronoframes. Want to know how they made mechanized battle armor out of time itself.”

“Yeah. You and most the other Guilds.” Naeko paused. “Well, you might actually pull it off.”

The man didn’t know how to feel about that.

“Don’t worry. Still of a lower Sphere than you. Your palm is order.”

“Avo. Don’t encourage me after peeking at my thoughts—this shit’s patronizing.”

“I know. It is my prerogative as your ‘junior.’”

“...Godsdammit, Zein.” Naeko let out a suffering sigh. “So. You’re going for the Massists first.”

“No. Everything will happen concurrently. Adjust accordingly. These are desired

objectives. Not a predictive sequence. Veylis has molded the board her way. I will shape the city in a manner only I can.

Naeko nodded. "Yeah. Again: don't expect things to be that simple. You're piercing the outer skin, but the meat inside's all different. If they get a fix on you—actually, what about the Low Masters. Won't they use your chaos for their own plans."

"Yes. I expect them to. But they will not be able to hold the Nether as I can. Could expand their nodes drastically. Then it will be another war. But one that they are disadvantaged. Coming to an agreement with the Infacer."

The Chief Paladin did a double take. "You're *what*?"

Avo continued. ***"Both agree about the Famines. They are a mistake. A problem. A mutual foe. But nothing as weak as a nuisance. They are growing too. Developing. Can't underestimate the threat that pose. No one wants them to win, either. So. I'm going to utilize the one thing I know Noloth is absolutely incapable of."*** He chuckled at the absurdity of the situation. ***"Diplomacy."***

A stretch of silence progressed as Naeko just stared, agape. "The Infacer is with Veylis."

"Yes."

"We're trying to bring her down. Bring them down!"

"And she's trying to crush me. Claim you. Crush the Guilds. Torture her father into something divine. But that is clear between us. We are adversaries of the truest sense. But Noloth is a cancer neither of us can abide."

"The enemy of my enemy of my enemy," Naeko said, quoting something Jaus once said to him. He shook his head. "I don't know, Avo."

"The Infacer won't be able to resist otherwise. Will feed them the Low Masters' movements. Play 'wolf pack' with them. They can't resist bringing misery to a few more lives."

"I can't believe you two motherfuckers... And because of Stormjumper, too. You're fucking smearing shit on everything I love, Avo. Everything."

"Just rubbed away the paint. But this is only circumstantial allegiance. Will still try to null the Infacer if I can. They will do the same. Our war is not on standby. Just a case of agreeing on 'target prioritization.'"

"This is some Jaus-shit," Naeko muttered.

“I’ll take the compliment. Going to need to seed some Paladins as the trial begins. More traitors. Want to access their Guild handlers. Pull an inversion of the Second Guild War.”

Naeko’s mood darkened substantially at that. “Yeah... yeah, do it.” More Splinter splashed free from Avo, Maru, and Kare at the Chief Paladin’s acknowledgement. “You’re digging into every last mistake the Guilds make, aren’t you? Every miscalculation. Every assumption. Every moment of *ignorance*.”

“I will break the Guilds on the basis of choice Not power. Power is how we arrived here. They will perceive what I show. They will decide from what I allow them to learn. And then — once I master their behavior — I will sink deeper into them each time. Replace the the rot in them with me. They will learn in the end. But by then they will be mine.”

“Necro to the core.”

A simplistic view of things, but close enough.

Avo’s simulations surged upwards, and Naeko found himself standing over eight specific Ark-holding districts and Scale. Lightrails led out from the stronghold of the Paladins, and Splinters trailed outward and broke before they could reach any of the Arks. ***“Tested the perimeters around the districts. Can’t gain access. Field of persistent thoughtwave disruptions. Space around the Ark is hidden in layers of demiplanes and thaumaturgic protections. They are effectively isolated from the rest of reality.”***

“Yeah. Too much risk of compromise.” Naeko narrowed his eyes. “Maybe I got a way through. Head an idea during the First Guild War—tried a few times. We basically built a bunch of temporary border walls across places to quarantine the fighting forces. But we also used them to channel the Maw as well.”

Surprise filled Avo at that suggestion, and he funneled the concept over to his other submind currently modifying the Heart of Noloith. ***“Like Rend-conduits?”***

“Something like that.”

“Could definitely work,” Avo breathed, letting out a breath of pleasure. ***“Very good idea. Not the only one that’s like Jaus here.”***

Naeko was taken aback by the sudden praise. The man coughed as discomfort and shame followed. “Ah, I mean.... Must’ve gotten something good from him after all those years?”

“You were that something good for him. If my glimpses of him were true. He gave to you because he wanted to see you grow. You are not the leech. You are the dream. Such it was. Such it remains.”

The Chief Paladin swallowed, felt a rush of incoherent anger, and waved Avo off. “Alright. Shut the fuck about that and tell me what we’re doing about the Saintists. You got the Massists something bad, maybe. But what about Veylis.”

“Strategically: I want to isolate the No-Dragons; want to keep Omnitech and Highflame under constant assault. Target all their non-Godclad personnel. Rot their logistics. Above everything—I need to get Kae back.”

Naeko considered Avo’s words with a curious expression. “You think you can do that? The first thing, I mean. The No-Dragons.”

“They are the loosest of the coalition. Turned from Massist to Saintist during the Second Guild War due to leadership changes.”

“You know what happened, then, right?” Naeko asked.

Avo had knowledge from Elegant-Moon, Green River, and countless other Sang templates, but even their understandings could have been diluted. None of them had lived as long as Naeko, after all, and reality was broken in ways that defied memory. ***“I have recollections. But tell me what you lived.”***

“They called the ‘Changing of the Final Cycle,’” Naeko began. “The previous governing body of First Daughters were slaughtered just days before the Siege of Scale. General mood among the No-Dragons was one of outrage ‘cause Ori-Thaum kept using them as disposable meat. They weren’t wrong, in a sense.”

Naeko paused. “How much you know about a Sang’s biology?”

“Enough. You are talking about the dragon-curse.”

“Yeah. That, and everything it did to them. They all give birth at a specific time in their lives, have the same amount of children survive the process, suffer the same pain at the same moments, and in the end are fated to die at the same age. Even if they are Godclads.”

[Blessed fortieth,] Elegant-Moon chuckled. [Four decades of pain. Four decades of strife. The end is a blessing, for four more decades would be far too long.]

Green River sneered. **[Time is a bullet that always follows, that always chases. Time can be delayed, but never denied. Not unless time itself is changed.]**

“Forty. That’s how long they’ll make it. Unless they uh... they *assimilate* a younger daughter. Take their current place in the cycle and extend their borrowed time before the curse consumes

them.”

Such was the reason behind the Sang’s desired victory. And such was also why Avo wanted to focus on them. Strained to the brink by the fighting during the Second Guild War, Veylis came to them offering terms of a peace — and an offer they never expected.

More than cure to the curse, all that was life and biology would be given to master after arrival of victory, and time would hold dominance over them no longer. So long as they accepted Jaus Avandaer’s reign what other patterns remained of reality, such was the accord.

“Chronology flows through me like blood,” Avo said. **“Haven’t had the chance to focus on the No-Dragons. But think I know what they want. Think I can give them satisfaction before Veylis. Or claim them first.”**

“Most of them are bioform-bound,” Naeko said. “That goes beyond just their sheathes.”

“Seen their exo-maths. Know how strange their minds are.” His Refinement of Empathy shivered inside him. **“But theirs is a limited oddity. I know of greater colors. They cannot deny me their thoughts. And what world exists where the old must feed on the young to survive? I can taste the trauma in them. Humans are not shaped to live in a den of snakes.”**

“You’d be survived what shapes a human mind can take,” Naeko responded.

“I hope so,” Avo replied. **“But with this also comes my plan for Veylis herself.”** The simulation flickered into a specific demiplane far in the atmosphere. It looked like a fissure in the clouds, but Naeko recognized it immediately.

“Atraxis? How the hells did you get in their?”

“Nepotism. Corruption. Human weakness. Going to spread myself among the faculty. Students. Expand and take as much of Highflame as possible during the trial—as quietly as I can. Then I will make a ‘mistake.’”

Across the Tiers ruled by Highflame, all the techno-thaumic reactors came alight. I am going to use Alysium to twist the paths. Going to alter the Souls powering each of these reactors until they overload. Force Veylis to respond. Make a genuine attempt on her and all of Highflame.”

Naeko went very, very still at that. “That casualty rate if you succeed—”

“Will exceed billions. Yes. Which is why I am going to focus my efforts on overwhelming Veylis and the Infacer during the trial. Make them realize I am a distraction. Force them to recapture Alysium during the run. It has to be a genuine attempt. It has to be. Anything less would make it seem like a trap. This will undoubtedly cost me Atraxis. Cost me

much of my infection in Highflame. But the losses will convince Veylis of her true victory—and Alysium will surprise her. Will also make it easier for her to accept my successes so far.

[It seems we are each other's fortune now, friend,] Alysium murmured humorlessly.

+Yes. Little mistakes. Great consequences. Zein should have been neater.+

This made the Chronicler laugh.

“Alright. So, Alysium gets taken. Where are we going to be?” Naeko asked. Avo pointed a phantasmal tendril at his pocket. The Chief Paladin squinted. “Avo... she'll see that coming. The demiplanes—”

“That's why we unleash Zein first. Then you. Then I try to navigate her Paths.”

A pocket of emptiness suddenly formed in Naeko's stomach.

“You can't tell me she'll be expecting that. Said you wanted to be part of this run, Naeko. Ready for a family reunion.”

“...Fuck.”