

[REDACTED]: *There is another... there is another... there is another...*

Chief Paladin Naeko: *What's it talking about.*

High Agnos Jakuta Ajayi: *Chief Paladin. I believe I asked for no one to disturb me or my Agnosi while we—*

Chief Paladin Naeko: *Save that for someone who cares, Jakuta. I asked a question that might concern the safety of the city. I want to know what it's talking about, if I need to announce to the city that the Nether's going to be down for a few days until we can finishing shoving Noloth back in its cage.*

High Agnos Jakuta Ajayi: *...No. It should not be the Hungers. They are sealed. The [REDACTED] remains in their path.*

Chief Paladin Naeko: *So why's it screaming then? What else could it be.*

High Agnos Jakuta Ajayi: *I do not know. It spoke of a breach earlier, but its mem-data and patterns are stable. There's been no spike in its outputted Rend either. Whatever is happening does not seem to directly affect the [REDACTED]. But it has sensed something. That, I am absolutely sure of.*

Chief Paladin Naeko: *More cryptic problems. Just what I want after an entire afternoon of being yelled at by some Longeye. When you figure—*

Paladin Kaeders: *+Chief. We have a problem—lots of problems. Someone just launched attack on—o-over two-thousand districts. Highflame's been hit. So has Ori-Thaum. Omnitech... Multiple lobby breaches. Military installations—golem depots are getting hit—h, gods another hundred districts are flashing red. Calls are coming in from Sanctus and Ashthrone too. No-Dragons as well. It's happening everywhere.+*

Chief Paladin Naeko: *-[Sigh of abject suffering] +Synced on that. Get the Exorcists on it but disconnect us from the Oversec. We're probably compromised too. Contact Voidwatch for emergency logistical support.+ Jakuta. I'm gonna kill myself for a few moments of peace and quiet. Keep your tears out of my body.*

High Agnos Jakuta Ajayi: *Chief Paladin, wait—*

[Sound of flesh splattering]

Agnos Anamen: *Oh, Jaus. [Retching]*

Paladin Maru Sandrupal: *Naeko? Naeko? Shit's getting fucked, we need to—[Sound of Maru slipping on viscera] FUCK! [Wet splash; body hitting the ground] Godsfuckingdammitfuck—Oh. He killed himself again. Lazy shit.*

High Agnos Jakuta Ajayi: He requested a few moments of peace.

Paladin Maru Sandrupal: [Scoff] He already had a century of paid leave. We have shit to do now.

-Memories jacked from Paladin Kaeders on the day of the “Twelve Minute Offensive”

25-6

Return Fire (I)

While his base mind suffered the toils of diplomacy, the rest of his consciousness embarked on a shared adventure of extreme material harm. The decision was made even before the conversation began. Through his newly absorbed Conflagration and warmind along with his ascension to Overheaven, he now had an unparalleled advantage in operational tempo and asymmetry.

More importantly, he wanted to give Veylis and the Infacer something to be paranoid about. Something to make them question every shadow that lurked in the dark, that would demand they expend both resource and attention with every following breach to come.

Retribution was but a part of the equation. They’ve come closer to killing him than almost any other, and in so earned both begrudging respect and lasting resentment. But he knew better than to approach them directly this time. In fact, he was going to implement even subtler measures in his subverts—quiet revisions of memories to have his puppets act under his script while thinking they lived under their own accord.

No more would he waste valuable splinters on piloting egos. Not when he could simply guide his victims along a path of destruction forged from their own volition.

Thus became his primary means of striking at Highflame. Their culture was individual. Competitive. Vicious. Though their Godclads and forces numbered many, the feud between the Meritocrats and the Chivalrics was ripe for exploitation. It was time to cast fuel upon fire and additionally turn the Great Houses on themselves if he could do so.

With Highflame’s critical players occupied by the assembly, their lessers would be Avo first tool of revenge.

Ambition cultivated rivals and establishing conditions for a crossfire would serve him as a smoke-screen for his more direct actions.

But despite bearing the source of his vitriol, Highflame was but Avo’s secondary target. While one submind would wreak chaos across the Gold’s districts, two other subminds would be devoted to devouring Ori-Thaum from within.

They were the Guild most susceptible to him, after all, and the treasures they possessed nourished his ontology like no other. Through the marriage between his war mind and their Conflagration did his evolution from Ensouled beast to divine thoughtform take place. And now, as the Embodiment of Conceptualization, he found himself slaving for more of their fire, more of their cognition-enhancing secrets.

Similar methods used on Highflame could also be applied to them. The D'Rongos, Kitzuhadas, and Kazaharas were already on the brink. A push was all it would take for open conflict. And such was what he desired. Internecine. Civil strife within all the Guilds. For their own cultures to be torn asunder by the weight of their atrocities and hypocrisy. And so he could provoke their Incubi into using their Conflagrations on him. To feed his very nature.

[Highflame produces a few hundred million Heavens,] the submind he dedicated to assaulting Highflame said, sweeping his perception across a cognitive rendering of New Vultun. From the Warrens to the Tiers, the city rose in layers, climbing from rot to radiance. There were hundreds of thousands of districts to hit. Hundreds of thousands of targets to source. But the limitations of the real didn't apply to him; if he seized the right memories, he could pave himself a freeway in the Nether with no need for deceleration or reorientation.

The thought bounced to the Ori-Thaum subminds that sorted through all the sessions he possessed. Of his many templates, the Incubi he claimed proved the most valuable. He was not the first to consider creating such a tunnel through the city, and with a thought, he simulated permutations of pathways available for the taking. **[Distance is not an issue. What we need to focus on is direction. Find all the districts with critical architecture. Focus on claiming as many golems as possible. Subsuming as many key administrators as possible. Starting as many fires as possible.]**

His Metamind adapted to these parameters and the options narrowed for each Guild. The Highflame Submind continued: **[Critical objectives. Compromise Highflame logistical pipeline. Kill as many Godclads as possible for ontologies and thaums. Tear through the Regulars too. Destabilize techno-thaumic reactors whenever there's a chance. Start with critical infrastructure and individuals before working down. Locate and destroy all thaumaturgic installations and golem factories.]**

Yet, his desires went beyond just devastation. He needed to strike at the core of Highflame's culture. Bleed them dry over time. And to that end, he drew upon Abrel's memories directly and found himself considering a hidden prize to claim amidst the havoc he would wreak.

Highflame possessed an extreme advantage with its institutional training. But such centers were just that—centers for the inexperienced and vulnerable. And so it was that Atraxis Academy became a point of penetration.

The Highflame submind hummed as they sifted through related to the establishment. **[Planar access only. And highly restricted Nether presence. Vulnerability: homes of Chivalrics and high-ranking Meritocrats. Use the trainees as subverts for entry.]**

[Yes,] the Ori-Thaum subminds agreed. **[One run won't leave Highflame broken. Too vast. Too many critical operations hidden in demiplanes as well. Won't be able to get to them all this time. But can apply pressure through its people over time. Should set metrics for our direct assault though. Things we want to get.]**

[A hundred Souls. Double that in cyclers. Ten thousand Heavens.]

The Ori-Thaum subminds chuffed with pleasure. **[High goal. Audacious. Good. Veylis will feel our compliment.]**

A chorus of hissing laughter went up among Avo's selves. A good portion of his templates shivered at the viciousness within his mirth.

[Every now and then I forget that I only exist as a figment of a monster-turned-nightmare's imagination,] Abrel breathed. **[But it never takes him long to make me remember.]**

[Yeah,] Benhata said, sharing a rare moment of solitary with a mortal foe.

[Ori-Thaum approach different,] the Ori-Thaum subminds said unanimously. **[Cells are inured against direct penetration. Protections and hidden assets everywhere. Want to cause as much confusion as we can. Force D'Rongos into open skirmishes in the real. Launch Nether attacks from their lobbies and mindscapes on rival clans. Will do this from all sides simultaneously. Make sure the fight in the Nether remains at an attritional stalemate between the clans. Escalate quietly. Lure out Incubi. Make them burn us. Then eat them.]**

[Very good,] the Highflame submind said. This wasn't only a display of Necrotheurgic dominance, but also his imbibed mastery of social engineering. Never before could he wield human behavior so subtle—

[Hey,] Draus' template barked with flat annoyance. **[You're gettin' close to growin' yourself a dick and suckin' yourself off.]**

[Hells, with his subminds it might just be a self-orgy,] Chambers added.

The Regular's template promptly stabbed the man in the throat.

Mood ruined, the Ori-Thaum subminds continued. **[Want to also seed ourselves among the Incubi we can. Will be actively engaging each other. Use the egos of subsumed Incubi**

and try to merge back with their cells somehow. Locate their Mirrors and take them too. Need to get deeper into Ori-Thaum's structure. Cannot let them remain an enigma.]

[Agreed,] his last submind said. [Will conduct spoiling action at all the other Guilds. But indirectly. Syndicate spillovers and nuclear exchanges in critical districts. Personal feuds between individuals. Restricted memory leaks onto the public Nether. All happening at the same time. Increase chaos. Force all Guilds to on a defense posture until the trial. Leave them constrained by fear and suspicion. Reactive instead of proactive.]

Good. The overarching goals were in place and his primary subminds had district targets they wanted to hit. Drawing from Draus' memories, now was the time to make a risk assessment as well. What could go wrong? What opposition he might face? When to abort.

Veylis was one concern. He would have to make his run through Highflame fast, quiet, and sudden. The last thing he needed was to risk another confrontation with her and the Infacer. Their ontological mass was far beyond his. Only by sheer fortune was he not utterly slain during their last confrontation. This time, though, his ontology was changed. His dragons were stitched into him now. Were a part of him. He was an Overheaven—what it meant for an Embodiment to rupture, he did not want to find out.

With them, he needed to stay fast and jump often. Zein fought as a one-woman theater, and he would emulate her temporal capabilities using his mind. Keep his splinters wide apart and shuffle them through his session often. Never stay for a brawl if he felt the paths shifting either.

Then, there was the Low Masters. Emotion was embedded with the D'Rongos. Consulting Peace's template, he remained uncertain whether this new node born of Emotion stay silent during Avo's offensive or unleash new warminds to preserve his new acquisition. He needed to be aware and prepared as well. Let Hysteria be his eyes.

With the other Guilds as a secondary focus, he settled for soft targets only. No sense in risking his continued survival against an unknown No-Dragon Heaven or something of the like. As the city taught him time and time again, ignorance was fatal. What he didn't know continually became the source of his deaths.

From now on, he would adopt a blitzing-skirmishing posture. He would hold no long-term ground, cling to no specific mind or area. He would strike and move; disrupt and jack out; compromise and then detach. Even in situations where he thought a mind was secure or believed himself to be safe, he would remain constantly moving—swap thought patterns from his templates to keep himself unpredictable and become something the Guilds couldn't ignore.

A throb of growing annoyance pulsed over into his subminds from the base. The burning offshoots of his cognition pitied the original. **[Poor fool. Decided to be responsible. Talk diplomacy. Negotiate.]**

[Better him than us. Sacrifice shall not be forgotten. Will make someone eat their own eyes in his name.]

[Calvino might not like that.]

[Will hide the memory—they don't need to know.]

[Of course. But no extreme torture. Is pointless. A thing for a beast. We are more than beast now.]

[Yes. Have no time more importantly.]

Another laugh went up between the subminds. Then silence followed as they settled into focus, actively establishing and dry-running through the dives they were about to embark.

By the end of this, the city would be reminded of the days before the Uprising. Of what was to follow.

A final note of suggestion escaped one of his subminds. **[Will be getting lots of Souls soon. Might want to consider active recruitment as well. What about the refugees we saved a month ago? Or the Scaarthian we fought when stealing from Shred? Owe them a favor as well.]**

[One thing at a time,] he told himself. **[One thing at a time.]**

–[Director Caul Sennets]–

“You'll be noticed through your service.' Sure. Sure I will. Any day now. Any day.”

Administrator Caul Sennets muttered the words alone in his office. The room was pitch black with the windows rendered opaque. He paced across the smooth obsidian of his floor in frustrated agitation, walking through the phantoms steaming free from the locus bobbing just below the ceiling, serving both as his primary source of luminosity and also network to the outside.

A waterfall of updates streamed down a window open in the corner of his cog-feed. Most of the mem-data was colored white with a few critical details shimmering green. Every now and again, he catch a glaring red, but those grew fewer by the day. As report after report filtered in, the administrator's frustration only grew, for his primary attention remained on something beyond his grasp.

Secondhand details about the assembly were being filtered over to him via a childhood friend in attendance. Grateful as he was for her willingness to grant him vicarious insight, he couldn't beat the envy rising within him.

Year after year, he worked tirelessly, giving all the time he had, sacrificing any pleasure, any chance at having a family, to ensure his district was in the upper ten percent of Highflame's productivity leaderboards. He used every method and resource at his disposal to ensure his workforce was without compare. Invested in his elites. Sourced gutter-trash for the dangerous work. Stayed abreast of every cutting-edge development in the industry.

Year after year, the factory district of Kolot grew. Not even being of the Warrens stopped it from outcompeting some of its "peers" in the Tiers.

On an average day, the gigafactories of Kolot produce over fifteen thousand golem chassis, two hundred thousand aerial drone frames, and thrice that in various multi-functional mech units. Absurd numbers compared to other factor districts in Light's End. Absurd numbers achieved by constant toil and management on his end, experimental enhancements applied to his workers' hypothalami, and constantly rotating shifts to ensure there simply was no time off.

He even had the factories built over the housing blocks—connected labor of life directly by stacking the structures together.

Sure, there've been a few disturbances, attacks, and intrusions, but his security was elite. Unmatched. His Necros were personally hired to make sure the minds of his workforce remained clean, and that any dissatisfaction would be removed while adjustments were made to tie their useless libidos to their key performance targets.

He did all of this year after year after year without fail, always growing, always producing more for Highflame. He did it tirelessly. Without complaint. Standing. Delivering.

Another memory slipped over from Annat—bless her heart and damn her fortune. This update was a few hours old. An Instrument was compromised. One Marisov or something. The Faithtaker was demanding they cast themselves into the flames. Oh, to be addressed by the Faithtaker—to even be placed before the rest of his peers as a face worth seeing—

Bitterness rose inside him. Was it because his line was weak? Was it because he was just a *chancer*? A citizen by lottery? No. Highflame wasn't like that. They cared about achievement over ancestry. Not that the latter didn't matter. Annat's certainly did. It was half the reason she had her Frame.

So, then what was it? Why wasn't he being called back up to the Tiers? Why was he burning his life down here in this pit just on top of the *vermin* and *scum* that couldn't stop killing each other—that wouldn't stop trying to raid his fucking factories.

What was he missing? What was he lacking?

With each thought, the pressure inside him grew. At first, he thought it was frustration. Or impotent anger. He knew those well. Knew them since his school days. But as it only continued to grow, the ache inside him parted to become genuine pain.

+Do you really want to know?+ A voice—deep and sibilant voice thundered within Caul's mind, and the sheer weight of the intruder's thoughts crashed his cog-feed.

“What—who—” Caul didn't manage to get any other words out as his consciousness was torn inward from his body. When his awareness returned, he was falling. Falling into a sea of burning ghosts. Falling as what looked to be a blazing citadel ringed with animated nightmares spread out its expanding tendrils to embrace him.

And then one such tentacle poured through him—drowned him in a flood of scalding memories.

Death after death began to sear themselves into Caul's mind. Deaths he was responsible for. Deaths of workers that died from overwork. Deaths from the families he left destitute after he crushed all other industries aside from his factory. So, so many deaths when one plant crumbled past unmaintained foundations, trapping thousands beneath tons of rubble.

He left them there. He cleared the damage on the topside and moved on. So few managed to crawl through the crevices below. From their trauma, he remembered the madness of hunger, he remembered weeping tears of joy as an aratnid drew close. He remembered hate. Hate for *him*. Hate for all he did to them. Hate for the sky he took from them.

Something inside Caul broke. He didn't want to know this. He didn't want to know any of this. “Stop! Stop! Stop!”

And it did. The ethereal currents curved away from his body, and he drifted to a stop before a baleful light.

A fissure of living fire glared down at him from behind ringed battlements born of torment and *existential* wrongness, it resembled an ignited crown with a nest of dragons slithering around its exterior. Eldritch radiance poured out as rivers of ghostly divinity and bathed in the immensity of the alien entity, Caul's mind howled with madness.

Yet was forced by another will to remain sane.

+And you know the most damning thing?+ the crown asked. It spoke at him with a voice of outrage. From every ghost. From every part of reality. **+You weren't chosen because you aren't special. You're just convenient. So many like you all over Highflame. Too boring for Veylis' interest. But that's okay. I want you. I'll have you. I claim you. You. And the opportunities provided by your factory's thaumaturgic pipeline.+**

“I don’t understand,” Caul breathed.

Another presence materialized beside him. Caul blinked. He knew this one—this was one of his hired Necros. “Neurokill” or something. The chrome-skulled woman with corded dreadlocks simply shook her head. “Doesn’t matter anymore, consang. We’re already gone. He already took us. This is what’s left. Welcome to hell.”

“Hell,” Caul squeaked.

“Yeah. Find a spot with me somewhere in the sequences. There’ll be lots more coming after us.”