

+Every major war between the Guilds was preceded by a series of lesser catastrophes.

The betrayal—or ascension—of Jaus Avandaer.

The infiltration and siege on Scale and the Longeye Revolt of Stormtree.

The Massist-Voidwatch Coldtech-Embargo and the subsequent No-Mother Cradle-Plagues.

The machinations of Noloath followed by their final—and disastrous—Uprising.

Dramatic as all previous wars were, perhaps for the Fifth Guild War to come, we are due a more somber conflict as internal discord among the greatest powers reaches simmering pressures.

As things stand, Clans D'Rongo, Kazhara, and Kitzuhada are on the brink of open conflict with each other as the rest of Ori-Thaum scrambles to keep unity.

But their great rival is in no condition to take advantage themselves. Highflame finds its Meritocrats and Chivalrics due a grand reckoning in the aftermath of unresolved travesties, with an assembly called for tonight.

And though less scandal wrought than the Big Two, Stormtree, the No-Dragons, Sanctus, Ashthrone, and surprisingly even Voidwatch have all released conflicting messages about recent times, with major factions within calling for a declaration of open war right now, to cooler heads wishing for an enduring peace and diplomatic solutions.

The disharmony on display has caused some among the populace to theorize that a major reorientation of the Guilds might come due, with entire factions switching or revolting to stand of their own accord—a moment that Stormtree might much be familiar with their switch from a ruling tyrant to a governing coven of Longeyes.

Whatever the case, the only true winner at present stands to be Omnitech, which has boasted record-breaking advancements in planetary-based technologies, much improved standards of living, humane mass euthanasic programs, and expanding citizenship pool...

-The Awakener Initiative, Independent Thoughtcast

[Glavie Mem-Note: Independent my fucking ass, this half-strand's been getting 50,000 imps a show from Omnitech]

24-6

Diplomatic Vulnerabilities(I)

-[Avo]--

The Conflagration imploded and swept across the battlefield like a falling tide.

Wards shattered into dust. The flames poured past broken Metas and consumed the minds they housed, claiming both ego and will at once. The fires of the Nether sang with a renewed chorus of laughter as the thoughtform that wielded forced his victims to withhold their Rend as death finally took them.

Soulfire joined the inferno as Heavens writhed against waves of prying radiance, tearing Liminal Frames free from vacant sheaths.

Ghosts - [100,134,996]

Liminal Frame (VI) - 144,870 THAUM/c

Ontologics Obtained

->[6] Cyclers

->[4] Souls

->[1] UNIDENTIFIED [DAEMON]

->[1] Conflagration

->[7] Heavens

->[7] Hells

->Heavens: **Steel Magnolia (Nature/Space/Steel); Ravager of the Depths (Biology/Water/Force); Dawngazer (Fire/Space/Radiance); The Charioteer of Directionality (Direction/Space/Speed); Nightgouger (Shadow/Space/Feast); Skygrasper (Sky/Space/Hands/Alloy); Censor of Details (Vision/Sound/Information/Space)**

ACCLIMATING SUBMINDS - [2]

Avo cognitive awareness doubled. The last lingering sentiments of internecine housed within the new Conflagration shattered as they were joined to Ignorance—and therein Avo. His ego fragmented in four directions as he grew to be ever the hydra. Tendrils tore out, seeking the members of his cadre, mending the broken and supping bounties from the dying.

A tenth of a second before Naeko's palm flattened the district, Avo returned to wholeness once more. The Nether shivered as he sank ever deeper into its embrace. Though fragmented from the distortion, his fires poured deeper into the damaged war mind of Hysteria and smelted its fractured shape back into a functional construct.

Tremors passed and washed through him as memories and thoughts flowed across the Nether. He felt his ego expand and shrink, transforming like a lung cycling breath.

A child was crying fourteen kilometers away. Her mother promised she would be home by now—she was just going to have lunch with a friend. Lunch at *Flavors of the Deep*.

Twelve Sovereignities away, a man was desperately trying to reach his son as a broadcast played across his cog-feed, the scene it played drowned beneath a descending palm of clouds.

Emotions. Thoughts. Ghosts. All called to him. Asking him to feed them more of *themselves*, to be enhanced through symmetry; elevated to the Nether by way of exponential expansion.

Ignoring the throbbing tightness conveyed by his new warmind, Avo began to mend the damage sustained by Kare, White-Rab, Chambers, and Draus at once. As he reached into their egos, he found the potency of his phantasmic and thoughts amplified. Sequences symmetrical in memory and emotion boosted his presence in the Nether by exponents, and as he began to unmake the traumas lingering inside Kare's mind, he felt his extra-cognitive expanding beyond the scope of a district, stretching to the cover an entire Sovereignty.

More voices exploded into his mind and the egos they were broadcast formed shadows in Avo's inner mindscapes. The templates studied their new guests with fascination, as well as their own augmented presence. A greater tangibility outlined each of their minds, and to even Avo's astonishment, a pin-prick of accretion was forming within them, expelling strings of ethereal smoke tethered to Avo's memories.

Deep within his being, a bundled cord of layered recollections drank in passing sequences and cycled them out like a loom. Every string left the warmind of Hysteria thicker—more *exaggerated*.

Quenching his flames, columns of phantasmal steam dissolved into nothingness as Avo's being scattered like petals in a hurricane.

ATTENTION

New [Function] Detected

Adapting structure of cognitive labyrinth...

Reducing necessary sequences required...

Cog-Cap - 0.0001%

[Pleasing,] one of Avo's newest subminds said.

[Extremely. Must reward Chambers for his efforts. And Emotion for this "donation."]

Yes. Avo was going to reward the Low Master. By peeling the will out of his ego and making him watch as he devoured the Hungers from the inside. Call it a liberation from false faith. A fitting torment for the Famine's transgressions.

[Control,] the four submind chided. **[Peace was right. Master yourself. He saved you from capture. Chambers and the others saved us from defeat.]**

+Yes,+ Avo replied, turning his attention to Chambers' template. He was trying to slide the man's perfectly stalemated mem-cons back together, but something had changed about the man's ego. His self-perception had restructured some of his sequences substantially, and Avo spared those aspects any alteration.

Leaving Chambers be, he restored Kare using her template and nested himself within her mind just as Naeko's palm landed hard. All the moving dust and debris planted themselves against the ground in supplication. Along the wreckage-strewn street outside two bodies rose from puddles of water, their figures bathed beneath a phantasmal sign that once hovered atop the restaurant's aquarium.

FLAVORS OF THE DEEP

Directing a submind to sweep through and remold Kare's mind to sever her from Emotion's subversion, he turned his focus back to White-Rab and Draus. Combining Hysteria with his free-shifting cognitive structure, he slotted cognitive components back into Draus' open wounds. Using her template as a mold, the fix arrived in a microsecond.

White-Rab took a bit longer—but not by much. As three subminds diverted themselves to stitching his injured mindscape back to form, a coherent reply from White-Rab left Avo surprised.

+Did you get him?+ White-Rab asked. There was a lull in his words. A slight delay within the thought.

+No. Jacked out when he realized—how are you doing that? Only twenty percent of your—oh. Using proxy servers to support the damage. Hm. Very clever. Time-consuming.+

+Yeah,+ White-Rab replied. The chuckle came too late. The Nether lag was clearly affecting him, but using external mindscapes to make up for your own missing architecture was quite ingenious. If difficult and risky. Usually, it took hundreds of Necros thousands of hours to make something like this for a single individual. For White-Rab to achieve this on his own was remarkable—and potentially even a bit questionable.

Maybe Walton had a hand in this as well, but Avo held himself back from finding out. Better to ask White-Rab later than to intrude and risk offending him. It would also serve as a useful bonding moment. Deepen their ties.

+Took you... long enough,+ Draus said, mind returning to coherence. Avo winced as he surveyed her damage. That would have been enough to leave most people a hollow shell. Her damage was focused within the core of her being, with critical memories outright obliterated.

The other Regulars endured the worst of Peace's assault from the outside. White-Rab bombarded her core.

+Did you get the bastard?+ Draus asked. Peeking across her cog-feed, Avo saw she was already halfway back to the enclave, and was diving through a reflection as the Sunderwolds flashed along her periphery. Dice was already jumping through another passage ahead as Draus followed. +Fucker hit me with somethin' nasty. Did Rab make it?+

+Uh, yeah,+ White-Rab said, coughing awkwardly. +The fucker that hit you? That was me. The Famine managed to get one of my Auto-Seances, and between you, me, and the Paladin—+

Draus just laughed. *+Shit. It's fine. Good call.+*

A twinge of Emotion passed through White-Rab as his thoughts slowed. The moment was reminding him of something—of someone.

A flash of Reva crossed into Avo's memories, followed by the name "Kososo."

Taken aback by his growing hypersensitivity, Peace just snorted with derision. **[Why not crack the cunts open? Why not? Why the fuck the reluctance now? Do you see how much Emotion stayed his hand?]**

+Did you see how Emotion was undone by Chambers?+ Avo asked in retort. He met Peace's scorn with his own. +He is changing. Like me. Evolving. But still making old mistakes. He assumes. He fears. He is his only resort. Can only die or flee when he fails. Should have risen himself a cadre.+

[You got lucky this time,] Peace snorted.

Abrel sneered at the Low Master. **[Yeah, but that makes it what, now? Three? Four times that the ghoul just sent you running? That's a lot of luck in the ugly bastard. Maybe we should check if Defiance hid a Heaven of Luck in him too.]**

[Bitch,] Peace said, ending the conversation.

Pushing herself back up using an overturned aero, Kare was braced from falling by her uncle as Avo turned his attention on her. *+Avo?+*

+I'm here. Threat repelled. For now. Resequencing your mind. Rebuilding it. Need to make sure you aren't compromised.+

She nodded. Shotin leaned down and whispered to her: "You alright."

The noise she made was almost an affirmative. Her uncle's thoughtstuff was racing as he swept

his gaze across their surroundings. Distant sirens grew louder and louder but weren't sufficient enough to hide the ambient screaming. The entire street was vacant, with sparking branches of lightning forming a thicket around them, establishing an effective quarantine just outside *Flavors of the Deep*.

As the water continued to gush out from the open door of the establishment, bodies came tumbling out. Faint fragments sizzled along their skulls, broken Metaminds whistling away to nothing.

Staring into the vacant eyes of a mind-dead girl wearing a dress of tasseled silver, Kare looked away and struggled not to throw up.

Her mind turned to horror. Of the death toll she and her uncle brought to this place. Of the war that was being waged, and the hidden players that cared nothing for citizens or subjects. Of how her father was certain to suffer from this, being Ori-Thaum's ambassador to Stormtree.

Four meters away from them, three scabs sprouted free from mangled bodies; Seekers dead, but resurrecting.

At least the Paladins could bring someone into custody. To build a new case against Clan D'Rongo. Hunger and greed beckoned Avo to see if he could claim them, but with the Naeko's mists congealing over the area, it would be best to give the city its offering. To subvert and use against Emotion.

The war just got a lot more complicated. Another had come to take the Nether away from Avo.

This couldn't be allowed. The Low Masters couldn't have the city, couldn't have the minds of its people, couldn't even have a chance to turn things around. With Emotion now willing to change—to apply sequences from Walton to himself, a tenseness tightened inside Avo.

The Hungers were loosening their leash. Giving more agency to their slaves. This wasn't a development he expected, but then again, he did desecrate them in a way no other could.

Perhaps this was just them using their own act of defilement to spite him for his.

The heavy mists around Kare and Shotin began to shiver. Fingers of moving mist conjoined and swirled, toppling inward to become a thickening sphere. "Chief's coming," Kare said, announcing the situation to her uncle. "He'll jump in once I hit something."

"Yeah, hold on for *just* a minute," Shotin said, eyeing her Metamind with suspicion. "Is your 'consang' back?" Another wave swept out from his Skimmer. A realization came to Avo then: Shotin was looking for him.

+*Never actually left*,+ Avo said, casting his words through Kare's Metamind.

“Great. Good. Perfect. So,” he coughed out a disbelieving laugh. “Who the *fuck* are you? What the fuck was that? You—you’re not just some spook. Don’t bullshit me on this. I’ve been doing this shit for along time and I never—never! Saw the Conflagration do that! And what the hells happened to the other fuckers.” He gestured at one of the dead Seekers behind him. “Where fuck did his Frame go? What the hells was that ripple?”

Ah. Not the best way for Shotin to get his first glimpse of the Stillborn. For a heartbeat, Avo considered revealing certain things to the Kazahara Seeker. Showing him just how deep the actual war went.

But he stopped himself.

Not yet.

Not until he had something that gave him power over Shotin. Or curried his favor. The man was still Ori-Thaum, through and true.

But that didn’t mean he couldn’t be *shown*. That didn’t mean trust couldn’t be built, that he could be persuaded towards an alliance.

Sometimes, Necrojacking required a bit of social engineering.

+I have answers,+ Avo replied. *+Answers to all that you want to know. Do you want to know the truth? About me? About your Guild? About the real war being fought?+*

Shotin shook his head in confusion. “Real war?”

Avo laughed. A low hissing chuckle passed out from the Nether. *+You’re still walking in the dark. The D’Rongos are little more than a mirage. They might not even be a real clan anymore. Things are so much worse than you think.+*

Avo extended a Ghost-Link to Shotin, offering him a mem-package. *+Will give you what you want to know. But not here. Not right now. Go to the gutters overlooking border wall [SE-7777]. Will talk to you there. In person.+*

In a sheath, at least.

Ameoliarated for now, Shotin turned to look at Kare and she gave him a nod. “I trust him. Completely. I know he’s... strange, but he’s the only reason I’m still alive. The reason either of us is still alive.... The... the reason Thousandhand hasn’t killed me.”

Shotin’s eyes grew wide. “What?”

"It's a lot to explain," Kare said.

An exhausted expression became Shotin. "Jaus, kid, the fuck are you caught up in?"

+It's a lot to explain, + Avo reiterated. +Later. At the border. Kare. Call the Chief in.+

She nodded, slammed an elbow into the aero behind her, and the mists parted around her with a sudden thunderclap. "Lots of *shit*, Uncle Sho. Lots of shit."