

The Puppy: Ser Wolf! Ser Wolf! What have you done? You have gnawed all our leashes! You have broken all our cages! You have killed all the beasts! Wherever shall we hunt now? What need will the masters have of us now?

The Wolf: None, my pup. None at all. But what need have we for leashes, cages, or vermin when suppler prey lay sleeping above. For long have you lived under the yoke of your masters, and fat have they grown from your labor. Starved of beasts, shed of leash, freed of cage, what us will the masters have of us? And what will we do of the masters? A pity. Truly a pity.

I should have thought ahead. But we are hounds, and hounds must feed, and so let us go to the castle above, and see what meat can be found hiding where our masters make their beds...

-Wolf Among Hounds, Old Kosgan Folktale

25-20

Wolf Among Hounds (I)

-[Naeko]-

The inside of the aero was choked with awkward tension. Four sat across from each other in Kare's aero. Three humans shuffled on faux warg leather while the monster among them inclined at an awkward angle, the dimensions of their body inconsistent with the height of the seating.

Despite this, the ghoul betrayed no sense of discomfort. It didn't even flinch as gunfire sounded from the outside—Guilder drones blowing apart a speeding aero for one reason or another.

"Can't believe I agreed to this," Naeko breathed. The ghoul looked imminently pleased with itself — it had delivered a killer final pitch to secure Naeko's temporary acquiescence, after all.

"Imagine Zein's frustration when she hears."

And it had worked. Godsdammit, it worked. Like Naeko was some kind of child with issues, doing this just to spite the closest thing he had to a mother. Shit. He was exactly that.

They were closing on the transitional threshold leading out from the local district into the demiplane that held Scale itself. Singular structures towered among the hives of alloy and glass below, rising from the Tiers, fangs puncturing the nape of clouds. Spinning rings and pulsing bursts of electricity preceded the exhalation of vented heat. Rendsinks were being fired up into the void, intercepted by voidships along a near orbit trajectory.

This close to the nakedness of the atmosphere, the rupture-cleaned skies over New Vultun scintillated with countless bodies—the polities of Voidwatch were a celestial constant here. Fleets drifted across the black as trailing embers of ivory upon a canvas of obsidian. As Idheim gazed up, so too did they gaze down. Flashing beams slashed grids between satellites; the Nullstar’s hues licked at the horizon with ethereal tendrils of lilac bright.

Naeko never much liked taking in the sight. He didn’t like the knowledge that humanity didn’t need to be the way it was, that there were others who already lived in their own utopias, owned though they were.

“They have their own failings,” The ghoul said, breaking the silence. ***“Could envy them. But know they are also human. Human in the most original way. All existence was shaped by their failure. And their original sin chases time itself. Threatens oblivion.”***

“Stop that,” Naeko said. He didn’t bother hiding his frustration. “Don’t—don’t listen to my thoughts or whatever it is you doing. Shit. I’m already trying not to regret taking a mind-eating monster into Scale and giving it a tour of our security. Better not do anything weird... hells, weirder than you already are, normally.”

“Yes. Wouldn’t want the palm to fall.” Somehow, that sounded both honest and condescending. ***“No need for threats. Here as your guest. Will respect your rule. More than the Guilds.”***

Maru snorted with derision. “Yeah. Like that will be a feat.”

His words lured Avo’s attention, and on his face followed a peculiar expression that left Naeko ill at ease. ***“You are welcome, Maru.”***

“Welcome?” Maru said. “Welcome for what.”

“The nightmares. The pleasant dreams. You miss them so. You deserve more than pain.”

It took a moment for the blow to land, but Naeko saw it — saw it in the slight widening of Maru’s eyes, saw in the way he swallowed, in how desperately he looked away. His fists clenched and unclenched, his face darkened, but he spoke no more, and fled from every gaze.

“Let him be,” Avo said, calling Naeko’s attention back. ***“You are not the only one who still mourns. And you have much to mourn. And much to avenge—”***

The ghoul bowed down as a fog-made hand forged from nanomachines and charged with dormant violence dragged it closer to Naeko. “You stay the *fuck* out of his mind too. All my Paladins. You don’t change, twist, jack, cast, or do anything unless you tell us. Is that clear.”

He added more pressure to his utility fog, but the ghoul only grunted with faint mirth. **“Yes. Of course. No problem with this.”**

The Chief Paladin glared into the pale, predatory eyes of the creature he held in his grasp for a few heartbeats longer before letting him go. Avo casually returned to his original posture as if there had been no threat at all.

A new silence settled thereafter. Silence, and a sense of foreboding.

What had he brought into his home? What was he bringing to Scale? He looked inside, but all he felt was worry and confusion. At the edge of the horizon, a rain of warheads consumed the bend of the world beyond, and the turbulence without matched his world within.

-[Avo]-

GHOSTS - [1,354,35,466]

LIMINAL FRAME (V) - 255,070

UNIQUE DOMAIN PROCURED - DOMAIN OF (ARCHITECTURE)

UPDATING INFECTION...

INFECTION - [1.01%]

Within the next month, the sanctuaries would all belong to Avo, and Essus would find himself with a more palatable duty. Or such was the hope.

While his base mind courted Naeko and his Paladins, while a submind found themselves growing to enjoy the antics of the Infacer. Meanwhile, a quiet war was raging in the Tiers between ghosts of mind and the Paths of time. Avo subverted and broke what he could. Veylis swept away what she noticed. Neither overcommitted.

In the meantime, a series of buildings were exploding across the Warrens for no obvious reason at all. Suspiciously, a chain of smugglers spasmed and died upon their jack stations, nulled by unknown enemies.

Slowly, Avo was sinking his very being into New Vultun itself. Infesting its very structure in mind and matter both.

Chambers and Cas worked well together. The former knew who to target by instinct, had the canons to engineer strange deaths or trigger Scalpelings where they were needed. The latter had knowledge of structure and vulnerability, and a means of asymmetric traversal. They

moved. Enforcers, Necros, technicians, accountants, lieutenants, and bosses died. When there was the need, they called upon Avo, but mostly he offered them protective coverage through his splinters, and they drew on Draus or Tavers' expertise more often than his.

While the bulk of his subminds continued conducting diversionary actions against the Guilds, his cadre was flourishing beneath his blanket of chaos. He was their network, their logistical support, their intelligence. They were his unseen daggers, his aiding perspective, his mentors, and people.

Dice was accommodating the rescued FATELESS as well as she could and reinforcing the structures of their enclave. Kae had taken a break from her research to study the growing intellect of the cat. Meanwhile, from all the way in the Sunderwilds, Draus conducted assassinations on priority targets even as she hunted for new enclaves to secure.

"Kill," the Arsenalist would declare to her, its bolts and clips clicking with cold delight as another delivery was accomplished. Her **Paracosmos** crawled halfway across the city, and she opened a passage through a mirror while her latest victim was preparing for a shower.

"Selecting." The Arsenalist offered produced a ferro-mag barrel from its swarming inventory. **"Locked."** A trajectory flashed red in her cog-feed. **"Firing."** The smart-fluid slug zipped through the glass shard hovering in front of her, out the mirror in the target's splattering skull, and then pulled back into the gun with a chain of forking static. **"Kill."**

There was considerably less hugging between Draus and her Heaven as Compared to Chambers and his Fucktopia, but she was in good company all the same. Soon, Avo would be finished awakening the others, and their individual efficiencies would develop further.

Which reminded him about the matter of awakening his Heavens and recruiting more gods to his cause. More than just granting them awareness, Avo wanted to see them become entities of evolutionary lore; why could a fire not evolve to become light? Why couldn't a song grow into an anthem of war? With the tapestry itself passing through his mind, Kae's template simmered with theories, and she studied his active Heavens using his Soulscape as a testing ground.

"Fardrifter," Avo called. The Heaven of Air bound to his sequences answered immediately, halting its open traversal across the expansive realms stitched together by Avo's memories. **"Going to be making our audience before Voidwatch soon. Want you to be ready."**

"Me?" The Fardrifter replied, surprised.

"Yes. Have the best odds of appealing to their sensibilities. Woundmother will likely not be able to stop herself from insulting them. Going to bribe her silence with new Domain of Architecture—"

A joyous cackle thundered across the sequences as matter briefly undulated like blood. **“YES! GLORY TO YOU, MASTER! NEW HEIGHTS COME TO MY TOWERS.”**

“Going to apply Domain of Information to the Techplaguer too. Add aspects of the Enigmata. Want to do a few tests.”

The Techplaguer’s sprung up. **“Query: Reconnect me to the Sleeper?”**

“No. Not yet.”

“Acknowledgement: You are giving me GREAT SADNESS, Administrator. Are you enjoying your time with [REDACTED].”

“No,” Avo replied, partially lying. **“Won’t stop rupturing the map. Players quitting the game. Might need to win this alone.”**

“Sadness,” the Techplaguer repeated. **“The CHILDREN do not appreciate FUN.”**

“What will you have me do before those beyond the sky?” the Fardrifter asked. Uncertain loomed within its being, but also hope. Hope of higher freedoms. Hope for growth beyond that of ontology, though a god they were. **“Our last exchange was but wasted breath. They fear for what I yearn.”**

“Just be honest with them,” Avo said. **“Have an idea. Maybe. See how they respond to it. Intend to clear you as my trophy.”**

“Your what?”

“Trophy. What Infacer calls subjects. The people he governs. See if I can give limited rights to the Heavens associated with me first. Probationary periods in my Soulscape.”

The Woundmother suddenly stopped. The Regular they were flaying from the groin upward looked up, spat, and fired a spiteful shot at a haemokinetic tentacle. **[Don’t gut my ass halfway, fuck-shit! Finish the job.]**

“I see,” the Fardrifter said. **“You making yourself a garden. A sanctuary.”**

“I am preparing for what is to come,” Avo answered. **“Going to be at war soon. Guilds will burn the world again. Billions will die. Billions. But I can save some. Only if I can keep them from being exposed. What to bring what is without, within. Veylis will seek to cage the world. I accept this dialect. I will become a sanctuary of memory. Remember paths that were; that could have been.”**

Subtly, he turned his attention to his templates — to Green River and Shotin in particular.

Could have been. And still might be.

The paths ahead were narrowing. He could feel a growing pressure pinching away options and angles. But they were focused only on him, and knew nothing of those he empowered. He needed more Souls, more cyclers, more Heavens, more thaums, more ghosts. He required more of everything, but most of all, he needed to find more people with purpose, and give them a little *push*.

New Vultun was a city on the brink. The trial just might make it go over. There would be no going back after he declared himself. And he was looking forward to that.

For long, the darkness had protected him during his nascent days as a god. But the time was coming to embrace the light, and as the Heart of Noloth writhed inside him, as he pulled at its animalistic nature and considered reshaping its cognition to become akin to Sunrise—pockets of darkness equated to drones in the swarm—certain thoughts came to him.

The thought of melting shadows into the bright of dawn, and the pattern of the void itself.

A conceptual weapon came with that epiphany. The vagueness of a design took shape in Kae's mind. The EGI had their own categories, were patterned toward different operations and modalities in manners mental and material. Why not do the same with a god? Why not have something capable of dwelling above the world, gripping as much as it could in the nothingness.

[This will be a challenge,] template-Kae mused. Forwarding the potential concepts to her actual self, both Agnosi took on a contemplative posture. *+But interesting!+ [Yes, very! We need to go more esoteric. Create something that will be hard for any Guild to anticipate.] +Let us steal the place beyond the sky for ourselves. Encircle the planet.+*

As the ever-shifting blocks of Scale came into view, Avo couldn't help but give a displeased chuff. It would have been quite the experience to plot a run on this place. Fun for the whole cadre. Now he was being invited in as a guest.

Far more convenient. Far more *droll*.

As they passed through a shuffling layer of space, they drifted over razor-edged waves lapping over the sea and propagating landscapes. A pulsating wavelength pounded at the world, and up beyond the ugly clouds hovered hidden voidtech installations capable of coring kilometers of reinforced plasteel. Seven major traffic arteries containing lightrails and private sky lanes ran like threaded strings through the glistening hollows within the mountain fortress that was Scale.

As they drew closer, its stair like features grew more pronounced, with countless blocks connected to another, all coming together as a progressive series of ascents.

The home of the Paladins and the metaphysical summit of New Vultun was not an aesthetic thing to gaze upon; there was a flatness to its design and a bluntness to its coloring. Yet, the symbology couldn't be denied. The structure was always changing, always rebuilding. Progress stood paramount. Progress toward the future. Progress toward the dream.

Progress. For all mankind.

Once upon a time, anyway.

"You got a holocoat or something?" Naeko asked, turning to Avo. He responded by loading Kassamon in as his avatar instead. The Chief Paladin's right eye twitched.

"Works better."

"And it's creepy as shit. Change—change the face or something. Don't wear people I know."

Hm. Naeko was rather fun to tease. His discomfort was a delicious thing, and though he had power capable of shattering Avo's Frame like glass should a clash of violence occur between them, he was ever the man and his mind was ripe with revulsion and fear.

Nevertheless, it was not wise to over-abuse Naeko's patience. He modified Kassamon's appearance using traits drawn from several other templates, and the Chief Paladin just shook his head. "I've seen lots of phantasmal disguises. None of them just come together on a sheath like. Not like yours."

"Should spend more time in sophisticate company. There are many things I can show you."

"Let's just get today done first," Naeko said. A beat followed. "What do you think you'll get from the Gatekeeper anyway? The damn thing's been busted for years. The Agnosi managed to reassemble its Heaven, but the ego was Jaus' personal creation. When... after what happened in Second War, limited coherence was all we could muster. It's pretty close to being a full-null."

"So it is," Avo replied. ***"Will see how true that assessment is soon."***

And then, almost too faintly, Avo felt a crackle across the Nether. Something *moved* in the metaphysical before him, and a transparent bridge rising high into the realm of mind came into his notice. Its symmetry resonated with his own, symmetry greeting symmetry, as a faint, crackling voice drifted with the whistling air passing over the aero.

Something was pulling at his memories. Memories of Jaus. Pulling feebly. Unable to focus.

{Jaus? Jaus?}

+Not quite,+ Avo replied, noting the ignorance of the other passengers. Only he heard the call. But perhaps the call could only be heard by him. **+Have seen him recently. Have a lasting impression.+**

{...Truth.}

Its statement embraced his ontology and nearly made him tremble. The statement was a reinforcement of absolute fact, and with its coming, a counterweight was banished—a certain unknowable damnation that came with the substance of a lie.

{Nether? Breach?}

Ah. It was hurt. Parts were missing. But it was still doing all it could to chain its thoughts together. Already, this was more promising than he hoped.

+Yes. Breached into Nether twice technically. You cast me across the first time. False memory trap. Second is more recent. Probably noticed that one. Felt me. I saw you.+

{Who... who?}

+Me? I'm a lot of things.+ As the tessellating cubes of Scale expanded apart before them and the resonance between him and the Gatekeeper grew ever closer, Avo grinned. **+Right now? I probably the one who is going to fix you.+**