

I don't know what the fuck hit us. I just know it wasn't Ori-Thaum. Soft as they are, they don't have the firepower to break a Reg all at once, let alone an entire barracks. They're quiet, but not absolutely silent. You feel them when they sting you. Feel an echo of their mind.

What I felt today was more than an echo. It was tangible. And it was tearing out from our minds into reality. I know that should be impossible. I know. But that's what it is. That's what I survived. Just me and a fistful more.

What dwelled within us was power. Power like I've never felt. Power that ruled over thought that made it greater than just something that was inside us. Dominance. Hells, I felt like a conduit for a while. Couldn't tell the difference between myself and the others.

And neither could reality, I think.

...

Gotta tell you, consang: it's more than a little crushing to realize you're just clay in someone else's dream.

-Guard Hannata Kanders, Regular and survivor of the "Twelve Minute Offensive"

25-7

Return Fire (II)

-[Avo]-

The Kolot gigafactories was where it all started.

Supported by a grid of twelve techno-thaumic reactors that amounted to a total of twenty thousand deaths, the factory district was a succulent raid-target in of itself even if a few other options remained richer in resources.

What compelled Avo to strike here was simply how subverted it already was. The sheer brutality of the workplace conditions and the destruction of all other industries beyond those run by Highflame left the workers seeking solace through "alternative" means. With drugs, illegal streams or vicarities, and bootleg mem-sims, the Syndicates had rendered the district pre-porous for infiltration, and the foundation for Avo's intrusion was made all the easier.

It took him mere seconds to filter out all the memories he needed to form a full map of the operation and isolate key figures to subsume among the leadership. It took him half that time to get his ghosts in position to breach the reactors and drain this place hollow.

The gigafactories were primarily supported by a system of fifteen million drones piloted by shifts of workers, three times that in administrators, and a third that in security. Its twelve Heavens

were rooted in Domains of Matter and Light, with the reactors alchemizing brightness into an inventory of physical materials.

But the critical aspect was the three liminal thresholds housed at the center of every four reactors. There, transports would shuttle an endless stream of supplies over to three of Highflame's hidden demiplanes for Heavens to be grafted unto golems and drones to be primed and deployed for war.

Those were the installations that would truly hurt Highflame if lost. They were also places for Avo to enrich the patterns of his ontology. His Overheaven required Heavens to subsume, and these were just the feeding grounds he sought.

The only issue now was the constant stream of thoughtwave disruptions they channeled across the portals to keep their cargo clean of pesky Necros.

Thankfully, Avo didn't need to come up with a solution himself. He didn't even need to crowdsource advice. Not when he possessed Kae as a template.

[We can modify the reactors,] the Agnos stated plainly. **[Use your ability to reweave ontology to give yourself a parallel path. Something like that. Modify a Canon slightly instead of taking something away. Try it!]**

Her thoughts were bright with enthusiasm as his ghosts twirled out from drones and sank into each of the reactors. Curtains of mem-data began to spill through his mind as Heavens unveiled their Canons and Avo began to twist their structure. Before, he needed direct contact to affect another Soul. Now, he was thought ascended, and his being was stitched from the substance of ghosts wed to Soulfire.

The tapestry revealed itself, and he ran his senses along their patterns—felt the grooves and knots that defined them before he set about altering a few Canons of Space. It was a delicate process. Slow. Demanding that he shuffle or reconnect countless other existential expressions for his reshaping to work. Never was he frustrated, though. When he worked on thaumaturgy, he was more Kae than himself, and something inside him *sang*.

There was nothing that could mean more than this work. Nothing. This was the art of changing reality's self-expression. This was the salvation of mankind—and more often than not its damnation as well.

+Truly enjoy this,+ Avo stated.

Template-Kae hummed a soulful note. **[There is nothing that means more to the world. And nothing that means more to me.]** A flash passed through her then. Friends. A lover. A life. Gone. **[Anymore.]**

Avo didn't say anything. You couldn't fill the emptiness left by misery with words or emotions. Loss was just loss.

[There,] Kae said, examining her changes. [This should get us past the threshold safely.]

APPLYING DOMAIN OF (SPACE)

->CANON: LIMINAL THRESHOLD (II) - THIS THRESHOLD CONNECTS FUSES TWO POINTS IN SPACE ACROSS REALITY. ADDITIONALLY, ENTERING THIS THRESHOLD ABOVE ANOTHER OBJECT PLACES YOU IN A SECOND PLANAR LAYER.

He ignored the hubris and turned his focus to seeding the transports with splinters. He would penetrate as deeply as possible for as many areas as possible before officially beginning his feast. More, he was also actively seeding memories of these present locations over to expendable minds. Egos he could strike with **Pattern-Nullification** when it came time to vent his Rend.

Veylis will notice him. Veylis will hear him. And Veylis will reap the consequence of taking his respect.

As transport after transport began moving past unsealing bulkheads, three translucent pools came into view, and Avo's anticipation rose. The method would be the same when he got to the other side: identity weaknesses and spread using them. Cut the command structure before any acts of subversion fully began.

Before his fire ignited, he was to play the plague.

Hysteria became Clan D'Rongo's undoing. Once, they served as Emotion's vehicle to direct the warmind against Avo. Now he was going to use it to turn them against their own Guild and deny the Low Masters their new slaves.

It took little time for the D'Rongos, Kitzuhadas, and Kazaharas to adopt an alerted posture against each other. They were the first to hear whispers of the event but already were drones being masses and Knots moving across the city.

A spike of reports followed into the Oversecs detailing street-side brawls or Nether-based skirmishes. Individual outbursts channeled on behalf of their Guild. High tension, but with Mirrors and elders keeping the soldiers and belligerents in check—succeeding by all metrics.

Until Avo started yanking on specific emotions.

With Ori-Thaum's N-Sec capabilities, it was hard to track specific cells and critical individuals for each clan. But skilled as they were, most suffered from a fatal weakness. Human relationships. Human emotions. Feelings they all shared.

Symmetry, in another word.

Fear. Paranoia. Loathing. These were the emotions that guided Avo to the cracks in the armor. He traced them using Exorcist drones and compromised loci. Hunted them from across districts. Their minds howled with a shared resonance, the noise so starkly different in intensity and note that their outrage couldn't be masked. And when Avo knew he had enough "volunteers" to make a fire, he gave them a little *push*.

->DEFINEMENT: HYSTERIA (IV) - "I AM A MOMENT ABSOLUTE. I GRIEF-CONSUMED, JOY-DROWNED, ADDICTION-CLAIMED, RAGE-UNFETTERED. I AM A SHARED MOMENT ACROSS MOMENTS. I AM A FORCE BUILDING ON FORCE."

He wove memory of hate upon hate, fear upon fear, dread upon dread. He did this, and he drew ever closer to them. Whispered thoughts into their minds, asking if they were just going to wait, to let their clans be attacked and savaged if there was any ounce of loyalty in their bones.

The part he played in the shattering of their self-control was only peripheral. He hinted. He implied. He amplified. But he never controlled. Never commanded.

Just as the D'Rongos, Kitzuhadas, and Kazaharas were joined by the symmetry of shared animosity, so too was their reaction a universal one.

The first orders filtered down from Mirrors to their cells. Examples were to be made. Non-essential targets were to be struck and nulled. Businesses were to be burned. Memories were to be leaked.

Escalation. But within acceptable parameters.

Or so they hoped.

One could come to a halt after stepping forward on a path. The same could not be said about stepping over the ledge of a building.

Avo shadowed the initial Necro cells as they engaged each other, trading traumas and infiltrating mindscapes. All the while, he collected their memories, tightened the strings of their stress through Hysteria, and fanned the flames.

Only when one side seemed to have a distinct advantage did he slip in to ensure a stalemate—or when there was an added risk of unnecessary collateral damage. When

someone's mind was shattered, he filtered the reports directly through the Exorcists, fully aware that Ori-Thaum was also there with him, hiding among the sequences.

From there, more splashes of fury would blossom across the Nether, and they would call to him. To Hysteria. And he would fine-tune its memories to prime his newest targets for self-destruction.

Within the span of an afternoon, what began as a few targeted hits and leaks spiraled into a rapidly escalating war in the Nether. Just as the daystar began its transformation to night, the first in-person assassination took place as a few Kazaharas spotted a D'Rongo elder's son partying at the same club, and decided that gunfire was their preferred form of percussion.

Something brittle snapped after that. Despair. Agony. Revenge.

The first Knots broke from a ready posture to an active one, but before them scrambled in-clan Incubi cells from all sides.

[Just what we've been waiting for,] the subminds whispered.

It was time to feed his flame.

–[Inventorist Ninea Kellows]–

+Shipment [G-1730-WARNING] cleared. Tonnage consistency check. Cargo consistency check. Transport condition check. Transport locus ghosts... check. Peripheral scan beginning. Primary review green. Deloading-Crew 30003 on standby. Cargo imminent.+

Ninea Kellows groaned as she stretched in her smart-foam chair. Studying the plow-shaped carrier from the perspective of five drones directly broadcasting their scans into her mind, the inventorist sighed and confirmed another transport for deloading. Number twelve-hundred and thirty-two today. Or was that since yesterday? Hard to tell these days.

Working in an Anvil-designation demiplane was a great honor for her family and her Guild. She might not have scored high on her physical aptitudes or even hit the reflex parameters required for the drone jock position she dreamed of as a child, but her organizational skills and perspicacity gave her another way to serve.

The job of an inventorist wasn't particularly exciting—especially not when compared to flying a drone through a swarm of missiles or punching through a failing defense grid while synced into a warhead—but it mattered. And it paid well.

Well enough for her to accept the stipulations of being away from her family for weeks or months at a time. Having her mind scrubbed clean of any memories relating to her worksite when she was on leave. Getting her thoughts blasted hollow every time she reported in.

Ninea groaned again. It was a great job if you ignored all the boredom and bureaucratic misery that came with it.

“Fucking Silvers,” she muttered under her breath. *Fucking management too.* These words she thought, but didn’t say. The last thing she needed was another reprimand from Instrument Gellend. Half-strand docked her pay the last time he heard her being “unprofessional.”

Unprofessional her ass. Rat-fucking Chivalric cunt. It wasn’t her fault she didn’t come from a line of heroes. Doubly wasn’t her fault that he was such a godsdamned embarrassment that Highflame didn’t even bother sending him to war—just kept him here to protect all their golems—

—[Instrument Juddick Gellend]—

Instrument Juddick Gellend, at that very moment, was enjoying a quiet piss in his personal bathroom when a session connecting him to the inventory department triggered in his mind.

He growled under his breath and just left it on standby until the last trickle left him.

A man had precious few privileges in this cruel world. If he couldn’t even finish pissing before one of those idiot Meritos tested his blood pressure, there really wasn’t much point left in living. Why even fight for paradise if these were the people he needed to share it with. Every day. Every hour. Something was wrong. Something needed his attention.

Godsdammit. Godsdammit all.

The session continued to thrum in his Metamind. Gellend clenched his teeth. “Running the Anvil is an honor. Running the Anvil is an honor.”

But it wasn’t. It was purgatory. It was a place where his potential was left to rot while his peers from the academy went off to claim glory. He wasted years of his life sealed here. Sealed in this place with few others worth speaking to—all of them barely a generation removed from the taint of the gutters.

Of course, there was Instrument Vnenic. Easy on the eyes, but hard on the balls. The woman knew nothing about being relaxed. Always just work work work, numbers numbers numbers. She and the rest of her cadre. And for what? They were barely being paid as it was. Barely earning any merits before their peers.

What was the point of all this loyal service if it wasn't recognized? Why was he even a Godclad? Well, his bastard brother would claim it was because of father, but what did that fuck know? Certainly not enough to save himself during the last war.

Perhaps what's been souring his mood most of all was his knowledge that the assembly was happening today. He only found out through his contact in Axtraxis. Nether transmission back into real-space was specifically banned, but since he was shipping practice Knots to the academy, there were certain rules he could bend there, and his old consang Muruta was always willing to keep him lubricated with gossip.

The session kept sounding. By this point, Gellend was glaring down at his dry dick. He wished he had more piss. He wished he—oh, why did any of it matter.

He accepted the link.

And then for no explainable reason at all, Instrument Juddick Gellend's consciousness was torn from existence.

—[Avo]—

As the Instrument plunged into Avo's Soulscape screaming, the new memories he imbibed sparked a shiver of joy.

Good. He had been looking for a way into Axtraxis—expected to take longer to reach them, but corruption was always a pleasing vulnerability. As Gellend wailed before Avo's Soul, Avo turned his attention to the other Godclads stationed in the Anvil and considered his next steps.

The one called Vnenic was impenetrable. She stood a stark contrast from Gellend—an absolute professional. More than just Nether-reluctant, her Heaven left a vacuum of nothingness around her Metamind. It won't be easy getting to her.

Or maybe he could...

As he slowly digested Gellend's memories, he burrowed into the man's body and made his approach. He was technically her superior right now. Time to see what options he could create for himself here.

Stepping out into Gellend's office, Avo found himself walking past a panoramic window that overlooked the entire operation. The demiplane of the Anvil was massive. Half the size of a smaller district and built around an enormous techno-thaumic reactor, it resembled a nest of tunnels running through a curtain of fog.

Transports arrived as gems of light traveling down shrouded paths. Arriving at the base of a web-wrapped tower, cavernous dock bays chocked with drones and loading mechs infused the air with unending noise.

There were thousands of these Anvils: planar assembly lines scattered across Highflame's territories in preparation for the wars to come. So far, Avo had only breached three. But even losing three would leave Veylis with wounds to feel.

Triggering Gellend's Canon of Lightning, Avo turned himself into a current of electricity and surged through the infrastructure. He would eliminate all other Godclads before positioning himself at the reactor. And after that, he would infiltrate the academy and steal from Veylis Highflame's future.

—[Sabre-1]—

+Sequence subversion detected. Isolating artifact. +

Sabre-1 marked a vase in the memory while pretending to be a window. A mere moment ago, he was somewhere else, someone else, but the orders had come down from his Mirror: connect to his proxy and dive. Dive in defense of Clan D'Rongo.

All phantasmics cleared for use.

There was an uncanny force of rage entombed in the thoughtcast. Something had happened. Something bad. Sabre-1 had worked with his Convex for years—never heard them sound like that.

But it wasn't his job to question. It was his job to—

The vase loosed its trauma at Saber-2 first. Impossibly, the target knew exactly where they were. A scream of absolute despair funneled across the sequence. Sabre-1's partner never had a chance. Shattered without ever knowing what killed them. Sabre-1's mind went cold at the sight.

For a heartbeat, he considered jacking out, but there was nowhere to retreat to. This was a defense operation. Support was being summoned, but right now, it was just—

A torrent of horror swept through him. Saber-1's cog-feed flickered and his Quicksand almost shattered. Warning indicators flashed all around him as sudden changes to the mem-data were detected. Saber-1's stomach fell.

The vast was just a distraction. There were more. Much more. They were everywhere. Everywhere.

There wasn't any chance he could hold this mind.

All phantasmics cleared for use.

He set the conditions for the *weapons deployment*.

+*Conflagration away!*+

Flinging out the expendable Auto-Seance, the world bloomed into an inferno around him as he moved to jack out.

But the fire didn't spread. It splashed against the vase, the walls, the canvas, and memory's waters. It splashed and was *suckled away*—fire devoured by nothing. Or fire devoured by everything.

Disbelief was the last thing that Saber-1 felt when the entire sequence transformed and fell on him like the jaws of a beast.