

## Diplomatic Vulnerabilities (II)

Naeko's complete arrival came with a sudden spike in metaphysical pressure.

It was as Zein had once said: once one rose beyond the Sixth Sphere, the potential operating with thaumaturgic subtlety changed from a question of difficulty to impossibility.

Even without his Heaven manifested, Avo could still feel Naeko—feel him someone could feel a giant stepping down on them. Feel them like a man trying to bear the weight of a falling mountain; hold still before an encroaching storm.

The surrounding mists shivered and parted, and Avo's Metamind came alive with wailing klaxons, warning of an identified Soul contained within an Eighth Sphere Liminal Frame.

The Chief Paladin approached the scene with a blank expression on his face and outside of his normal apparel. Wearing a sleeveless athletic jumpsuit instead of his uniform, Avo did a double-take as he pulled up memories, trying to determine if it was a trick of perception that Naeko's biceps seemed two inches larger than before. In fact, the Chief Paladin was looking more muscular in general—which went beyond the point of absurdity because he was already shaped like a literal wall.

**[How does this man get inside aeros?]** Abrel muttered. **[Jaus. He's getting to be as wide as a Scaath.]** Her thoughts flowed, and the new pin-sized ego that Hysteria materialized within her shivered. Avo felt his Lustaway trigger, and Abrel's mind went from awed to horrified. **[Oh—oh, fuck—it's—he's clearly been—]**

Roaring laughter poured forth from Lip. The Scaarthian Fallwalker's cackles were joined by a legion of other templates, gleefully seizing the opportunity to mock the Instrument. **[Yes, yes, Instrument Greatling. We're sure you got a cute little excuse. You like large boys, do you? Ones with more meat.]**

**[Go fuck yourself, half-strand,]** Abrel said, forcing her thoughts away from the situation. Especially Naeko.

**[It's been two days,]** Benhata muttered in disbelief. **[What the hells did he jump on to gain that much mass in two days? That's just not natural.]**

Considering the Chief Paladin was a Godclad, anomalous surges in mass and muscularity fell on the low end of coldtech, let alone the use of miracles.

Behind Naeko trailed a cohort of other Paladins. Maru was wearing the same gray-black jumpsuit and looked like he was about to fall over. His messy hair and beard had been trimmed,

and weariness seeped out from his mind like sweat. Next to him were a half dozen uniformed Paladins that Avo didn't recognize at a glance.

Scanning the district using Kare's cog-feed, Avo noticed approximately twenty-three other Ensouled signatures forming a kilometer-wide perimeter around the scene of the battle. The Paladins were forming their own quarantine, and as the crackling branches of the stormtree slithered back into the surrounding structures, Avo found the sky covered by a few thousand Knots.

## **WARNING!**

### **Multiple Heavens Detected - [13,000]**

The number made Avo wince. There were moments when hubris still whispered sweet nothings in his mind, making him think that he could face even a single Guild alone and bring them down as he was. This show of material and metaphysical force reminded him of the game he was playing, and how much more he still had to take.

He needed to spread wider. Subvert more of the city. Liberate more enclaves. Maybe even capture a Guild from the inside if he could. Before, he assumed that he would have the time to acclimate himself to his changes and keep to a careful pace. Now, with Emotion evolving to match him—actively hunting him in the deep, he needed to move with both haste and vigilance.

The D'Rongos were already compromised, but Famines' true reach remained a mystery. And with aspects of Walton absorbed into Emotion's newest node, wariness gnawed at Avo as he gauged his odds of overcoming the man that created him.

"Chief," Kare said, drawing Avo's attention back outward. She was holding a fist to her chest in a reactive salute. Exhaustion and instability continued to assail her mind, but Avo kept the worst at bay as he resequenced her memories. "Permission to—" "You alright?" Naeko said, sighing as he looked her up and down. A look that bordered the fringes of sympathy pulled at his features, and he took in the debris around them; the bodies of citizens and D'Rongo Seekers on the verge of resurrection. Letting out a sigh, he shook his head.

"I—I am unharmed," Kare said, sounding uneasy. She wasn't sure if she should tell him about Emotion—about how her mind was breached.

*+Do it,+ Avo said. +Cleaned your sequences. But better not to risk anything. Let him know. No one should be able to find my splinters. Will still be able to contact you even if they do.+*

Kare caught herself before she could nod. Drawing in a breath, she continued. "I was cognitive compromised, sir. I sustained ego damage."

Naeko didn't seem surprised. "Yeah. Well, whatever the priests did, they must've used one of their tamer Daemons on you." Surprise blossomed through both Kare and Avo. The Chief

Paladin just chuckled and patted his right pant pocket. “Got a little shortcut leading back to Scale, and the Heaven of Truth might just be having a bit of an *overreaction*.”

“I... see,” Kare replied.

“Well,” Naeko continued, “it doesn’t look like they *twithed*—*twisted* your mind too much, rook.” He swallowed some spit. “Still. Protocols are protocols. Or so Maru says.” Part of Kare knew this was coming. It didn’t help the anxiety inside her. “Understood. Am I pending review?” “Yeah,” Naeko said, making it sound as if no big deal. “You. That one there.” He meant Shotin. “And the rest of these unfortunate fools.” To the cue of his words, the first of the D’Rongo Seekers resurrected as active manifestations. Clawing their way out from their subrealities as Heavens unleashed, reality wailed as light, space, sound, and biology began to warp. Geometry groaned. A field of force lashed out in an attempt to cleave through everyone present. Pinpricks of pain danced down Kare’s nerves as if someone else was reaching into her flesh and tearing at her from the inside.

A block-sized palm of fog came down and put an end to all that.

The blow was immediate—emerging like effect without cause. The D’Rongo cadre were beginning their assault in one instant. They lay scattered and broken the next, Naeko’s metaphysical backhand their ephemeral bodies free from vessels of manifested divinity. The sheer absoluteness of the strike rattled against Avo as well.

He bit back a gasp of discomfort as the fog passed through Kare—biting into him.

With how Naeko’s eyes suddenly flicked back to the Junior Paladin, he must’ve felt something too.

Taking two steps closer to her, Maru shot his superior an uneasy look and tried to communicate something to Kare through a series of eyebrow movements. Avo had no idea what he was trying to say. Neither did Kare for that matter.

Snarling, Shotin stepped forward to cut the Chief Paladin off as he called upon the power of his Parallelist. Spatial reality parted around him, splitting into shifting stacks as he tried to stare down the Chief Paladin. It looked like a signpost getting in the way of a moving building. “Back the fuc—”

A fog-made hand materialized, then closed around Shotin’s face. Whatever else the Seeker had to say turned into a muffle of indignation. Shotin tried to struggle, but force wasn’t his Domain. Violence was not his ally.

Naeko let the Parallelist fall without concern as he squinted at Kare. Planes of light and fire consumed reality, but Naeko’s palm expanded into a temple and suppressed the bright into a muted shade. They were transported to the depths of an ocean; the cold vacuum of the void; the heart of the storm. Naeko’s palm didn’t even part. Not until Shotin finally gave up.

Closing her eyes in embarrassment at her uncle, Kare tried to hide the shame on her face but Naeko waved her off. "At ease, I just need to..." Avo realized then that Naeko was looking directly at Kare's Metamind. A thoughtful expression slid into place. It would've been a tense moment if not for Shotin's muffled cursing. "Hm. Is your, uh, *informant* in there with you?"

Avo's attention shifted to Maru. Ah. Right. He supposed that was how he seemed to the Paladins. Perhaps guardian or manipulator was better title, but he did enough informing to count.

+*Tell him you're not sure. Tell him I might have something hidden inside you.*+ Securing Naeko's aid would be invaluable, but Avo wanted leverage and assurances before he made his approach. There was no way to contend with the Chief Paladin in a direct confrontation, and the idea of being a weapon under the employ of the Paladins just didn't bode well with Avo when he had his own dreams to manifest.

As Kare conveyed his partial truth, he found Naeko's gaze slipping past her, looking high into the sky. A twitch passed through his features. His thoughtstuff jolted with a spike of activity, and Hysteria tasted a shadow of rage.

A shroud formed in Avo's consciousness. A partial memory, imprinted by sheer intensity.

## **ASSIMILATING SEQUENCES**

The world beyond dissolved momentarily as a vicariness played. Rage and pain thundered in Avo's chest. But this wasn't his sheath. These weren't his emotions. His hands were the size in cinderblocks, and to his chest was clutched a motionless woman. Her brilliant blue eyes were vacant and marred by glistening tears. Blood poured from an open wound on her neck. From her corpse gushed a constant stream of Soulfire—her Frame sliding free from her destroyed ego.

The structure they were in was partially collapsed. Shredded spatially and materially from the outside. The skies beyond were awash with force and fire, the dying embers of a conflict raging still, claiming thousands of lives with each exchange. Reality wailed for mercy as Heavens shattered and golems broken. The horizon was a broken mirror and lapping tides of entropy dug furrows down from the chaos above.

It was as if the Sunderwilds were encroaching, reaching down from the void to swallow the world. Before the stretching fingers of madness was another presence. A crawling pattern of golden that drowned all that existed, that wrapped the sky in a net, holding desolation at bay.

"*Why?*" Avo remembered Naeko screaming. The words left him like rage-filled scream and ended as a broken sob. "*Why, godsdamn you! I loved you. I still love you! I would have done anything—we could have just—*" The hurt was too much. He wasn't breathing fast enough. It felt all the pain could ever feel was hatching out from his chest—his throat.

Naeko wanted to tear his heart out. Only the screams of his Paladins kept the thoughts at bay. The urge to give himself *peace*.

As he wept, the golden cage that consumed existence shivered and broke, peeling away before his eyes. The immense presence fled. Fled and left him alone in hell. Fled, abandoning him in a ruin that *she* made.

The present snapped back into place, and Avo found Kare looking off in the same direction as Naeko. Confusion filled her mind as her perception swung between clearing separating the Stormtree Knots and Naeko's trembling bottom lip.

She couldn't see what Naeko and Avo did. She couldn't see the pulsating orb of gold that burned in existence like a metaphysical dawn. She couldn't feel the faintness of *her* ontology circling the Elysium like a shark.

Aware that it was noticed, the chronological presence receded, seeping behind the towering silhouettes of the cityscape, seeping across the horizon's curve.

Coldness filled Avo. Coldness and frustration.

*Veylis.*

She was watching. How much had she seen? How much did she know? Did his use of Chronology incur her attention?

"I'm placing you under watch, Paladin," Naeko said, prying his eyes away from the sky. "You got eyes on you. Eyes you don't want." His left hand engulfed her entire shoulder as he began to lead her away from the scene.

"Sir?" Kare said, shooting a nervous glance at her still struggling uncle. The hand clenching Shotin drifted along behind them as if it was clutching a small ball. Shotin snarled slurs and curses all the while, separated from all that was happening. Clutched in similar vaporous constructs, the D'Rongo Seekers hovered through their behind him, all of them groaning from how viciously they were torn out from their Heavens. "What—is there—" "Maru," Naeko said, ignoring Kare's questions. "Contact Ori-Thaum. Have them put a protective detail on Paladin Kitzuhada's immediate family. Tell him we are willing to provide protective assets per the... whichever line in the accords that matters." "Got it." Maru swallowed, seeming more ashen than ever before. He gave Kare a reassuring nod. "Don't worry, kid. We'll make sure that you—" He didn't quite manage to finish the sentence. The pain in him cast another shadow into Avo's mind. Flashes not too unlike Naeko's formed within Avo's consciousness, but these captured moments from an ego driven past the point of insanity.

Whatever broke him had been removed. Cut out. But sheer damage inflicted on his ego remained. There were memories taken from Maru. Memories tantamount to traumas—not so unlike Essus.

Both his and Naeko's imprints began to harden, began to resonate with other feelings of pain. The warmind of Hysteria tremored, and the dimensions of the Nether deepened around Avo. He

could feel symmetrical emotions—minds and loci where he could harvest more sorrow, more hurt, more agony.

Curious, he threaded Abrel's rage into the warmind—and Nether around him came alight in new shades. As he adjusted the specificity, the wavelengths broadcast across cognitive reality were also narrowed. Refined.

In a sense, the warmind of Hysteria seemed to contain the absoluteness of an emotion; a moment; a sensation. Exaggeration was no longer a sufficient analog. It was cognition undistilled from understanding. Emotion unchained from control.

Thinking back to how the Famine nearly managed to lure him away, how he could barely control himself during his rage, Avo hissed with discomfort as he realized how rationality had been stripped from him.

He was being affected from the very beginning. Nothing short of a thoughtform could have resisted that—at it had taken him was a choice and transformation. But he *didn't* want to make the choice. Could only think about revenge until Peace broke his focus.

What other warminds did Noloth still have if they nearly undid him here? What other dangers still prevailed in the dark?

**[Joy and the Hungers are the only ones who truly know,] Peace said, sneering at nothing in particular. [Were might be the more accurate fucking word to use. You changed things. You made the masters abandon some of their own vows. We were blessed with immortality and cursed with eternal servitude after Avohakten. Our transgression nearly fucked everything. Our loyalty redeemed us. But we weren't supposed to be whole. Not ever again.]**

*+And then I hurt them,+ Avo said.*

**[And then you bled the cunts,] Peace finished glumly. [So where does that leave us now? We don't have many warminds. I know that since Joy whimpers like a sow every time we made him reel one in. But if they're willing to start using them—listen, Avo. You need to take Ori-Thaum. As soon as you can. As much as you can. Because if you don't, Emotion is either going lose it all to the Silver bastards, and we'll be dealing with a full fucking Guild with salvaged warminds, or he might actually win with Defiance planted inside him, making it a fucking Guild salvaged by Noloth. Gods denied, what a fucking mess.]**

Heeding Peace's words, Avo watched as a tower-sized Stormtree aero began to land on the intersection next to them. A holographic outline projected warning markers to let bystanders know how much distance they needed, and its sides opened up to show hulk nu-dogs laced with chrome and sporting various levels of wounds. Along their backs gleamed Woundhound injectors, and a Nether broadcast swept through the district.

+*Attention, Paladins of Scale. By the will of the Longeyes and in breach of the accords, we demand that—*+ The swirling mists around Naeko slowly, gently, casually reached up and snatched the Stormtree *Dropspear* from the air as well. +*Wait—stop! Put us down! Put us down, you fucking idiot child. Put us down this instant!+*

Maru snorted. The remainder of the Stormtree assets began to inch back. Additional imprints passed through the Nether—conflict orders to engage and hold in place from various Bloodthanes. The jocks and grunts proved wiser than their commanders as they refrained from any overt action due to *Nether interference*.

It had only been two days since the catastrophe. Aftershocks weren't an unreasonable thing to run into.

As nu-dogs snarled and bit at Naeko's ontological hand, they found themselves trapped like insects in a can as they were moved to the very back of the convoy.

"Are we booking them too?" Maru asked.

"Yep," Naeko said, indifferent to the political ramifications to follow.

"What charge?" another Paladin asked—a Scaarthian herself, but clearly amused at the humiliation of her clade-kin.

"Obstruction," Naeko replied. "Obstruction. And disturbing the peace."