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SYNCHRONIZING MEM-CODES...

100%

CLEARANCE GRANTED TO FATE-SKEIN: [SAMIR NAEKO]

Report No.: CATZENITH-002-CELEDON

Date: 28-IV-233 PF

Subject Name: [REDACTED]

Physical Description: [REDACTED]

Height: [REDACTED]

Weight: [REDACTED]

Eye Color: [REDACTED]

Hair Color: [REDACTED]

THREAT CATEGORY ZENITH

HEAVENS: [REDACTED]

WARNING: SUBJECT HAS A DOMAIN OF (CHRONOLOGY) AND AN ESOTERIC DOMAIN OF (WAR)

THEY ARE ALSO UNPARALLELED AS A COMBATANT

AS SUCH, CONTINGENCY //CELEDON\ IS IN FULL EFFECT

ALL EXORCISTS AND PALADINS CURRENT HANDLING THE HANDLING AND SECURING OF THE SUBJECT WILL BE SUBJECT TO NINE-STEP AMNESTICS OVERSEEN BY [REDACTED]

ASSIGNED NECROS WILL BE SEALED IN CONTAINMENT PLANE ZENITH-002 ALONGSIDE SUBJECT

ZENITH-002 PRESENT ANCHORING LOCATION: CHIEF PALADIN SAMIR NAEKO'S LEFT POCKET

ATTENTION: SPECIAL NOTE FROM CHIEF PALADIN NAEKO TO INCUBI AND OUTSIDERS:

+I know you're there. I know I've already splattered some of you. Let's not bullshit each other. You know who I have. You know what's going to happen if you make this public before we do. I'm really tired. I haven't played a match in nearly twelve hours.

If you're going to try to get to her, you're gonna have to come to me. If you come to me right now, chances are I'll kill you.

I'd make my apologies beforehand, but I'm feeling pretty honest today, so I'll just say I want you to do it. I want you to make me kill you.

Piss me off. Piss me off and I'll show you what happened to my old consang Sister Karakan.

...

What else was I gonna say? Oh. Right.

Veylis. You're a lying sow. You told me she died fighting. You told me.

You lied again.

Again.

See you at the trial. +

[REPORT ENDED]

-Containment Report of **[REDACTED]**

22-5

Reorientation

"Well, that shit escalated pretty fucking quickly." The understatement left Chambers alongside a rasp of air. The man was drinking a bubbling greenish substance under the cool shade of branching foliage. He claimed it was some kind of mushroom-fermented liquor, but Avo was still ghoul enough to sniff the bitter-acidic tang of adrenaline-soaked muscles. Sourced from a dog, judging from the pungence.

Most of the cadre were scattered about the deceased Fallwalker's estate. Yakozitrin's personal mansion was built as if five enormous cubes stacked over each other. It was maybe a tenth the size of a normal megablock, but considering the population sparsity of the enclave, most of the room was little more than empty space.

Few places exemplified that more than Yakozitrin's rooftop garden, festooned in a private enclosure at the very top of the structure. Marble beams imbued with light bathed the interior in unceasing radiance and a canopy formed from bone-white needle-thin branches wreathed the top like a thatched tent.

The calming ambiance of running water coursed from a network of pipes running through the mansion—even through the enclave's many layers. A steady gas-produced pressure created miniature rivers between landscapes of white and green. The waters came together as two pools, each perfectly symmetrical in shape and length. When viewed from above, the bright, running waters came together as an artistic portrait of the Fallwalker himself; the witness formed his skin, the green his hair, the waters an outline, and the pools his eyes.

The portrait was partially defaced, however. Left damaged after Dice uprooted the chiseled boulder meant to serve as her former master's jaw from the soil and flung it across the entire enclave with a flick of her wrist.

An understandable action on her part. Perhaps even still a bit muted.

Sunrise's humming drones were scattered along the branches while Chambers sat on a stone stool not far from the leftmost pool. His eyes were on Kae as he spoke, the Agnos soaking her feet in the waters, ghosts spilling out from her halo as phantoms, playing scenes from her past, bygone memories of a life lost, friends lost, lover lost. The drifting currents slowed as they entered her proximity as if compelled to by her very presence.

The exhausted bitterness leaking from her mind impressed the same on anyone who dared to approach.

Beyond the marble pillars, Denton stood overlooking the city, casting messages from her ansible in rapid succession. Mostly, it seemed like she was sending messages. Rarely did she receive anything. Tension gripped the spy's posture, and she seemed more human to Avo than she ever had been.

[They got to work through it their own way,] Corner said, offering no judgment. **[Process. Shit hits all of us. Except for certain thought-tuning monsters. But not all of us are so special.]**

Avo offered an internal huff of acknowledgment.

When first returned and remantled his sheath, he cast his most recent memories into his cadre and found himself pleased that Draus already built a series of asymmetrical combat positions. The Regular wasted no time in creating a complex grid of trenches and passageways using glass and mirrors. Planted as curving walls into the foundation of the city were paper-thin sheets of glass that Draus could call up at any time. There were over a hundred sheets for each level of

the enclave, and at any time they were attacked, all she needed to do was draw a reflective pane up from where it was fused and they would pass elsewhere.

Some led to defensive positions: aforementioned trenches dug in coordination between Chambers and Draus. Others led directly into the worst parts of the Sunderwilds in their near vicinity.

Providing labor and protection were ten-meter-long bioforms born from Chambers' flames. The chimeric swarms could be heard even now, passing over the skies, their shadows flitting across the ground as they kept him apprised of the enclave's conditions. It was a suitable addition to the haemokinetic circulatory system Avo wove into the city during the takeover.

But though they prepared, though they waited for Zein—or *whoever* else—to strike at them across space and time, the assault never came. And after an hour of tense anticipation, the group settled from active alarm into passive paranoia.

Now, they were watching. Waiting. But otherwise learning to relax once more.

Avo had wanted to convene with the group immediately after. To review their present circumstances and begin preparations for things to follow, but surprisingly, Draus halted him before he could sync their minds.

"The people need a moment," she said, eyeing Chambers, Kae, and even Denton. "Things went all the ways to hell back there. Gonna need to give them some time. Let 'em reorient and think first."

She had been thinking about the Agnos in particular, but there was a brittleness to Chambers as well, though the man hid it better. And despite Avo's urgency in wanting to further their ascensions to apotheosis, his templates also cried out in concurrence, with over seventy percent outright begging him for a few moment's reprieve or outright deconstruction.

[Ah, but the intact fear collapse,] Elegant-Moon murmured. She let out a soft laugh as other minds drifting around her whimpered. **[It's not so bad. Look upon me. It's not so bad.]**

Her words, somehow, convinced Avo to let them breathe. Recover. Resurrect.

While they did, he checked in with each of them, observed them mentally and environmentally as mem-data siphoned by his embedded splinters back in New Vultun continued to surge into his consciousness in constant rapids.

[THE PALM DESCENDS - EXPERIENCE THE MOMENT WHEN CHIEF PALADIN NAEKO'S HEAVEN PASSED THROUGH LAYER THREE]

+Holy fuck, he saved my life. Those psycho-fucks in the gutters were going to fry me. He just... turned it back on them. It was like a torrent of fog and then suddenly the electricity was torn away from me.+

[BREAKING: OMNITECH LOCATE AND SECURE ANCIENT ARTIFACT STOLEN BY NOLOTH, VOIDERS FALSELY CLAIM OWNERSHIP]

That one made Avo wince. He would have much preferred Voidwatch to be the one that secured the George Washington, but he was too busy trying to settle things with Thousandhand to focus on that.

+I was going to talk my brother down. I was going to—he was going to put the gun down. He wasn't going to shoot our mom. Samir Naeko killed my brother. Samir Naeko left him a—a smear in our bedroom. I was going to talk him down...+

HIGH TRAFFIC LOBBY DETECTED - [THE SUNDERED SAGE FANCLUB - AVAILABLE MINDSCAPES FOR CHATTING: 1,034]

+Did anyone see who he was trying to get? I think he was fighting someone. Caught a glimpse of him crashing through a sub-block down there before the Exorcists censored everything.+

+Probably just some half-stand Fallwalker trying to make a run on the city. Or it's those Low Fuckers again, seeing how the Nether just totally shit itself earlier.+

+Yeah. Jaus. Hells of a godsdamned day, huh consangs?+

No active reports came through regarding Thousandhand's situation, but Avo deduced that she was in custody when over five hundred **[REDACTED]** golems and a classified cast from Naeko called an entire team of Paladin to convene with him.

Included among them were Kare and Maru. That guaranteed he would at least have eyes and ears into the meeting later.

With that known, he assumed Zein temporarily handled and released a quiet breath. Killing her would have been much more preferable. She was too uncertain a variable. And too lethal a threat.

[If there was one good fucking thing that came from being fed to you,] Peace snarled, bemusement tinging his mind. [It was that I got to watch that Thousandhand cunt die twice. Dumb fucking sow always thought of herself as something special. We sure made her eat shit tonight.]

Avo ignored Peace and continued with his thoughts.

Even with how overwhelming Naeko was—how totally he could control the Domains of Force and Violence, she still bled him. Cut him deep and nearly killed him when a single opening presented itself.

Thaumaturgically, he dwarfed her. But in a mundane test of skill? Or if the paths and schemes of the Great Guilds grew muddled? Who knew how that would go? Especially with the new openings Veylis could exploit.

Of course, Avo's actions merely resulted in a shuffling of counterbalances against the High Seraph. Where Zein and her daughter were engaged in a guerrilla war across time, the Chief Paladin himself was as if a pillar of absolute denial, the absolutes of his canons able to stand against his former lover.

That would be useful to an extent. Give Avo and his cadre coverage. An umbrella to operate under if they could find out how to remain undetected. But he also needed to get his Heavens upgraded, begin seeding the chrono-material of his dragons in the population of the enclave to breed more cyclers, and replace all the equipment lost with his voidship.

Kare's current despondence substantially delayed the first two necessities while the last was partially stymied by Calvino's continued absence.

Denton was unable to raise the EGI as well, their ego locked away in another part of Threshold, a meeting among minds occurring at this very moment.

So it was that Avo found himself hovering in placing next to Chambers, holding himself aloft using his Echoheads as he directed his subminds to the peripheral projects of spreading further across New Vultun's underbelly and weaving defensive lattice along the exterior of the enclave—a phantasmally-conductive shell capable of supporting an Incog should uninvited eyes somehow stray to these parts.

Curling a long arm over to Chambers, Avo wiggled his claws in a silent gesture for the man to share his drink. While he did so, he peered through the splinters he had embedded in his cadre. Draus and Tavers were chuckling at Zein's post-mortem expression after getting a frequency blade buried in her skull. The Regular was warming fast to the squire. As much as she could warm to anyone.

Dice was walking the city with the kitten draped over her shoulder. Somehow, the little creature just kept surviving cataclysm after calamity. Perhaps it would be wise to conduct some experimental testing. Things Calvino might be dubious of, if he ever returned.

The girl did once ask for the kitten to be uplifted, after all.

The ceramic cup vanished into Avo's palm, compelling him to turn and frown. He needed to use his **Haemokinesis** to even hold it properly. "Small," he growled.

“Yeah,” Chambers snorted. He shot Kae another look and shook his head. “World probably seems that way to some people, doesn’t it?”

Avo took care to clench the drink between his index and thumb claws. Bringing it up to his mouth elicited another frown from him as he constructed a blood-made straw to aid him. Capable though he was, human lips always looked rather silly to him. Like chunks of made made perfectly to be bitten.

[Don’t worry, everyone, still plenty ghouls left in him,] Abrel deadpanned. Sardonic though she was, even she appreciated a moment of halt. The past day had been overwhelming. Even for her. Especially after beholding Zein and Naeko. She was going to ask him about updating her Heavens as well, though she hated herself for even wanting it.

It was an ugly thing when your benefactor was also the murderer of your brother and close friends. But surviving desperate encounter after desperate encounter as part of someone else’s mind changed a person.

Just like the wretched taste of the mushroom beer. Avo didn’t swallow. He just spat. And instead of suffering the indignity of suffering the taste further, he bit off his tongue and promptly grew a new one.

Chambers threw his head back and cackled. The man’s hyena-like laughter made Kae jump, Sunrise scatter, and Denton turn.

The Agnos shook her head at Chambers, who was currently clutching his stomach, trying not to double over from laughter. She shared a look with Avo and gave him a nod. Somehow, the gesture was significant. The sign of a pall lifting, the inflammation of her misery subsiding, at least temporarily.

A slow wheeze announced the calming of Chambers’ mirth, and Avo stared flatly down at the little man next to him. Chambers took back his drink and shook his head. “Gods, but that was a great moment. I’m gonna save it as a snap in my Meta. Send it to the others.”

Avo grunted with displeasure. “Tastes terrible. Like fizzling clammy mucus.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda shit,” Chambers agreed. And then, paradoxically, he took another drink.

“Why,” Avo asked, not seeing the point.

“Because I’m used to it,” Chambers sighed. He planted the cup in the soil and looked down at the blades of grass jutting through the pearlescent grains powdering the dirt. “Because that’s always been my life. Shitty drinks. Shitty gig. Shitty implants. Shitty choices.” He shifted and faced Avo. “Till I got snatched by you and the Reg, I guess. At least I still get to deal with shitty

people.”

“Talking about Zein.”

The man’s expression tightened. “I was fu-ucking scared, consang. I looked into her eyes and I wish I didn’t. Somehow. Somehow, I knew she was going to kill us. I mean, her shoving your arm up my ass didn’t help, but godsdammit did I feel small in her eyes. She looked at me like I was nothing. I’m a Godclad now, and still, she thinks I’m nothing. It’s like I never stopped being a juv.”

Avo didn’t speak. He read the emotions from Chambers’ thoughtstuff instead. Turbulent drafts. Ghosts oscillating along the exterior of his halo, his Conundrum wards orbiting behind like satellites.

“You know my worst memory about my dad? It wasn’t after he made me watch as he beat my mom half to death. I wasn’t after... well, he started taking it out on me full-time after she, uh... You know.” He bit his lip. “It was after all that. There was a day when I was like. I don’t. I can’t remember how old. But I was only enough to know what a gun was. And dad just left his pistol on the bed. And I got to thinking... and I got to thinking...”

Shadows played behind Chambers’ burning eyes, the flames of his Heaven forming a faint corona around him. “I took it. I snatched quick and clean off the bed. Just like how Dannis did in his vics. Dad was piss drunk. He didn’t even manage to turn I pulled the trigger. Just squeezed quick. No struggle at all. Jaus, I hate him. I still hate him. I hope he died slow.” He nodded. “Turns out, the fucker didn’t replace the damn power cell for his gun. No juice. No current. No dead dad. I squeezed and squeezed, and his face went from confused to angry to... I mean, you have my memories, the half-strand just started laughing. Laughing at me.”

Chambers stopped talking then. The memories after didn’t need words. The beating was bad. Especially since it was done using the same gun.

“I remember him looking down at me when he was done,” Chambers said. “He was just looking at me. Like I was stupid. Like he was offended I ever I thought I could kill him. I just kept staring at the ceiling. I was praying. Praying for someone to kill him. Praying for a god because reality clearly liked him a lot more than it fucking liked me or my mom. And ma-ma and gran-pa were fucking useless. They just watched.”

“Saw him again. Saw him again in Thousandhand.” Avo knew the answer. Chambers just needed help facing it.

The man shook his head. “We were nothing to her. You were the only who could, well, maybe—if it weren’t for Tavers.” His hands were shaking. He hid his fear by bouncing his legs. “I’m supposed to be a Godclad. And still, she made me feel like I wasn’t shit. But you know what? I’m gutter rat. I’m trash from the Warrens. Who cares about me? Kae, though? She’s Agnos.

She's a real *girl*. Even she gets used like this?" Chambers' voice went thin. Vulnerable. Almost child-like. "There's no way out. Reality fucking hates us. There's no way out."

The templates inside Avo were quiet. A good amount of them flinched. Aedon Chambers' story was a painful one. And a common one. Happy childhoods were rare gems in this city.

But it was a gem Avo had, simulated though those memories might have been, patchwork though his recollections were.

Walton had cared for him. To the detriment of Kae, Voidwatch, Ninth Column, and even New Vultun itself, but he cared absolutely.

And knowing that was a certitude that few people would ever know, much less a monster.

"Do you know what it means to be a god?" Avo asked.

Chambers blinked rapidly, burning away his misted eyes as he shook his head. "Nah?"

"I think I'm learning," Avo said. "There is absoluteness in an act. Absoluteness in choices made. Actions. The smallest miracle. Will. A decision to do. A choice to believe. You chose to be there for Kae. To stand before Zein. That is true. That is true and it cannot be taken away."

"But she could have just—"

"You saw my memories," Avo interrupted.

"Yeah? You're talking about how the Chief Paladin stomped her shit in." Chambers snorted.

"Pretty nova. Yeah."

"Yes. But not talking about that. Did either of them seem like gods to you?"

That made Chambers pause. "They were tearing the gutters apart. Fucking, Naeko hit the whole city with his palm."

"I didn't ask if they were powerful. I asked if you would believe in them. If you would put your faith in them."

"No." Both Chambers and Avo looked to Kae, intercepting the question. "They're just people. Terrible, miserable, sad, broken, little people."

"Who can beat our asses," Chambers added.

Avo grunted in accord to both of them. "Power is important. But power without path always betrays. Zein was a fool. Zein was more powerful. Now Zein is a prisoner. Because she chose.

Then I did. And then she chose again. Poorly this time. Poorly with Naeko. Because she doesn't care about divinity. She doesn't care about godhood. She doesn't dream of a higher reality. Or to become something greater. She just wants what she lost back. She is fighting for the past. But the past is lost.

"The sacrifices to the old gods. To the Woundmother. To the Fardfriter. To the Techplaguer. They were all fathomed utopias before they were manifested powers. Heavens ascended from the limits of reality. Actualizations. Humanity and more."

"So, what," Chambers asked. "You're saying that Zein and Naeko aren't gods because they're soft? Psychologically kinda fucked? 'Cause if you are, that's like, all of us too."

"No. I'm saying they will never fully reach godhood because I think they are only human. They are only human. And they have no desire to move beyond it. They are only human. And they dream no further. They don't dream of who they might yet be. What the world could yet be. What they might yet do." Avo faced Chambers again. "But you didn't. Running would be human. Accepting Zein's authority would be human. Facing her despite your wounds. There is a spark of divinity in that. That is what I see."

Kae settled next to them, her face wan with exhaustion as she sat cross-legged on the grass, now fully drawn into the conversation. Chambers was rocking his legs faster, anxiety still coursing through his veins. "I couldn't have stopped her."

"Yes," Avo said. "And sometimes dreams die. People fail. Reality hates us. Reality hates us. But we can stand above it. We can grow. We can seek to become something greater than ourselves always. Actualize. Embody. Our Heavens become a statement through us. An idea made manifest. To force new rules on existence itself to see the impossible achieved. To let virtue and righteousness take seed in the hollow womb of the world that was."

Silence settled over them. Across his splinter, he discovered Draus, Dice, and Tavers listening in. A few of Sunrise's drones lay upon his shoulders, and Denton was facing them instead of the golden horizon of the city now, ansible going quiet.

It was a disgruntled sigh from Kae that finally broke the quiet. "Alright," she said, throwing up her hands. "You didn't need to say all that. I get your meaning: I'll look at your Frame."

Again, Chambers snorted, and this time, Avo grinned too.