

{Greetings, friend. We understand that you, a (almost) baseline bioconservative homorph, have recently chosen to leave your organic sanctuary to join the hustle and bustle of the border pan-galactic community

Welcome!

We are glad to meet you.

However, before you enter the other polities, there are some critical details you should know. These have to do with your fellow citizens and the varied sophonts you will soon be spending your time with.

To start, let us establish a few different terms.

Infomorph: *An Infomorph is a consciousness uploaded or downloaded from a computer or another pattern-based program. Often, this can include your fellow human who has been uploaded, or it can also include minds, such as myself.*

You can consider becoming an Infomorph with a quick mind scan. This will make your travel exponentially easier, but there might be an acclimation phase for you to adapt to being a purely virtual organism. Do not worry—there is no risk of dysmorphic psychosis. You aren't going to be caged in the fantasy, you're going to be a part of it.

Homorph: *A body like yours. Human with all the common traits and perhaps a few modifications. These can include biological and mechanical alterations, but overall, these are the forms you are most familiar with.*

Neomorphs: *Nonhuman sophont forms that include cephalopods, cats, apes, avians, swarms, and more. You need to undergo dysmorphia acclimation protocols before you can formally be sheathed in one of these forms.*

With that, your basic introduction to the three major types of posthuman forms is complete. If you wish to delve further into more advanced morphologies, we ask you to simply specify your inquiries.

*Considering your interest in dividing and expanding your consciousness, we recommend the potential of an **ego-cloud** for you and yourself to become your own community. Career pathways include ego-fleet explorers, constructors, and much, much more.*

Once again, welcome.

The Polities of Voidwatch are glad to have you.}

-The Bioconservative's Guide to the Polities

25-11
Recruitment (II)

–[Shotin]–

“...and I’m just sitting there feeling seven-kinds of fucked, trying to burn the rash using the fire, and—I shit you not—the motherfucking half-strand splatters one of his homunculi over my head. Just smashes the fetus against me like a flail. Using the umbilical cord.”

The four Bloodthanes around Shotin winced and gagged. The largest of them looked practically sick. He really hoped she could keep it in. The demiplanar around them was shaped to a twenty-by-twenty cube of featureless white. As holding cells go, Shotin suffered worse, but vomit could stick up a space pretty bad. Scaarthian vomit doubly so.

“So... then what happened?” the commanding Bloodthane asked. Glausag, he thought she was called. They all had tiny shields of bronze running down their knots of thickly braided hair, but it was the quantity of shields one had that denoted a Bloodthane’s significance. Some had their shields listed purely in the Nether. Glausag wore them as matriarchs of old did, down the length of their hair.

It made it easier for Shotin to appeal to her. Old-fashioned Scaarthians loved their tales, loves sharing stories. If nothing else, it’d make passing the time until Kare or someone from his Guild paid his wergild more palatable.

Leaning back against the wall, Shotin just sighed. “The only think I could ask. I asked him what the fuck was wrong with him. He responded by swinging the mangled remains of his homunculi around, preparing to take another swing. Sick fuck.”

“Sick fuck,” one of the Bloodthanes agreed. “You snuff him after that.”

“Oh, yeah,” Shotin said, savoring the memory. The way the rock came sailing out from Chambers’ flesh, how the man just toppled over immediately afterward... Shotin replayed that memory more than a few times when he was made. “Would’ve finished the bastard right there if his pet Sang didn’t save him.”

“Pale Spider,” Glausag mused. “Where they good? Rumors on the Nether was that they’re a subverted No-Dragon Godclad that Noloth intended to use against the Blacks during the last war.”

“Don’t know who or what the spider is, just that I’ve never seen a Fourth Sphere fight like that before.”

“Fourth?” Glausag spiked in alarm.

“Yeah. But she fought like a fifth. And get this: the entire cadre was packing some high-end coldtech. *Voidtech*. I’d stake all my imps on it.”

“Ruin’s Womb,” Glausag breathed. “Bad fucking day for you, huh, Planeshift.”

He could only shake his head and chuckle. “Like you wouldn’t belie—”

The surrounding whiteness faded. Suddenly, the weight of a countervailing Canon of Spaces vanished against Shotin’s Frame. Suddenly, they were in a material holding cell shaped out of tessellating matter. Stones shifted into stones as the jadeite hue of Scale’s inner matter caught Shotin’s attention. The phase-gate keeping them penned in went out out, and behind the grainy veil stood Paladin Maru Sandrupal, wearing that signature sneer behind that messy beard.

“Well, consangs,” Shotin said, brushing himself off as he stood up. “I think my day’s about to get better.”

Glausag cocked her ponderous skull at him. “How you know it’s your day that’s getting better?”

“Because Maru here is trying to kill me with that glare. Aren’t you, Paladin?”

Maru’s sneer darkened into a scowl. “Come out, or I’m leaving you in, Kazahara.”

Shotin, being the honest and decent rule follower that he was, lifted took a moment to stretch and yawn first. Turning halfway, he gave his new friends a wave. “Later, consangs. I would stay and chat with you all more, but I fear I’m being set free.”

Glausag barked a laugh. “Prick. Say, why don’t you try to spring us too? We’re probably cheap to bail than you. I’ll consider it a favor.”

He took a moment to think about that. “We’ll see what I can do. Alas, I give no promises. It is only through the wonders of nepotism that I’m afford such privileges. Well. I guess I could ask Kare—”

Maru growled. “I’m gonna close this fucking gate so help me—”

Shotin darted past the Paladin with a burst of speed, waving his farewells without looking. Patting the surprised Paladin on the shoulder, the Seeker started making his way to the exit from this shithole. Wherever that was.

“Come on, Maru,” Shotin said, studying the long hall loaded with cell after cell. “What are you hanging back there for? You gotta get me checked out.”

A series of snarled curses followed him before the man caught up, and building pulses of rage passed into Shotin's outer spatial layering. Ah. He was being a half-strand, but Sandrupal made it far too easy. And the thought of the Paladin turning Kare into a bitter, humorless prick like him made Shotin's guts recoil.

The surrounding walls shifted. Material reality slotted portions of itself before Shotin like pieces of a puzzle fed through a kaleidoscope. A moment later the hall was gone and so were the cells. Instead, he was standing in a sparse, gray room with metallic walls, a one-way phase field, and a certain D'Rongo spy seated at a table with two chairs

Shotin caught himself before his eyes could widen at the presence of Glaive Valerie Denton. She looked like a godsdamned propaganda poster with her silver jacket, silver slacks, silver heels, silver nail polish, and *fucking* silver eyes. Jaus, how hard could the sow message? Did she live with her tongue meters deep up the inner council's ass?

"Maru, what the fuck is—" But the Paladin was gone. The half-strand just left him with a D'Rongo spy. He probably knew about this in advance; was why he volunteered to dump Shotin from one cage to another; an insult through false-release. The man knew there was no way in all the hells Shotin would consent to a release if it was enacted by a D'Rongo. "*Asshole.*"

"That's no way to talk about oneself, Seeker Kazahara." The way Denton spoke was flat and calm. Without a scent of humor nor sarcasm.

He caught his eyes and took a breath. Gods, he hated her already. "Glaive Denton. I'm glad to see that Clan D'Rongo is shameless as ever. Do you guys have some kind of branch set up specifically to insult your allies, or do you just volunteer for these gigs because of shits and giggles?"

Still no reaction from the woman. Not even a stutter in her accretion. This bitch could make ice-cubes look warm. But he had to admit, there was something about the certitude in her eyes—how casually she judged him—that incensed him. Insulted him. Who did she think—

LUSTAWAY ACTIVATED

Fuck. Not now. He needed to think other thoughts. Fucking rash *godsdammit fuck*. Stay focused, Shotin.

"Your wergild has already been paid," Denton said, the coolness of her tone casual. Shotin was torn between plopping himself across from her or just standing where he was. He didn't want to give her any satisfaction, but the longer she spoke, he wonder if she felt any such thing to begin with. "This means we are free to leave."

He snorted. "We. You expect me to leave with a D'Rongo?"

She blinked once and leaned back. “I hear the border is scenic this time of the year.”

His mind went blank. “What?”

“The border. There is a nice spot next to SE-7777. Very scenic view. I think you might like spending some time there. Especially after the stressful day you just had. It is good to clear the mind. I go there sometimes myself.”

Holy shit. She was laying it on thick. More than that, she was—she couldn’t—she was D’Rongo spy, for Jaus’ sake! The only way she could have known is if she managed to capture the Incubus helping Shotin. Or whatever they were.

Or if she was in league with them.

Denton placed her hands on the table and leaned in close. “It will be an unregistered trip. No one needs to know. I already have everything handled.”

His instincts were going haywire. She stank of spy, but now he wasn’t sure if she belonged to the D’Rongos either. Or if she penetrated his benefactor somehow. But if she had, why was she luring him out like this? It was braze—she would be the last point of contact in the case of his death.

No. This couldn’t be a kidnapping or assassination. That would be too stupid.

That meant...

That meant...

“You know,” Shotin said, deciding to take a seat in the end. “I’ve been wanting to meet a new friend. You think the border can do that for me?”

The smile on Denton’s face felt all too unnatural. “I have a good feeling that it might.”

-[Naeko]-

“So, Paladin Kitzuhada. You ever been under watch before?” Naeko studied Kare’s expression in the reflection while he looked out over Scale. It was a trick he picked up from Osjane year’s ago. The way the light struck the glass made it hard for someone to judge you; made them anxious and prone to just talking.

At least, that’s how it worked on him.

Kare, however, was less of a talker and more a calm. Seated behind his desk and basked in the room's pale, neon glow, she shook her head before she spoke. "No. No, sir."

Naeko nodded. "Well. It's boring as shit, usually. We'd funnel you more paperwork, but I think that might just end with you getting nulled. Our Exorcists ain't bad, but Incubi are Incubi. And you got some pretty heavy hitters breathing down your neck, Paladin."

She swallowed but nodded again. "Yes, sir."

Staring out into the light, he thought of Veylis—how she was looming over them. What caught her attention? Was she behind the attack somehow? What was her angle in all this? And Denton: the spook was trying to work him somehow. Set up a meeting with this mysterious benefactor that kept saving Kare.

The girl was a good Paladin. Hells, she was flat out a *good person*. Fucking diamond in a sea of shit these days. But he really couldn't glean why she mattered beyond that. Her aptitude for combat was acceptable and her work ethic was—well, Naeko didn't like judging people on that. Seemed wrong. But she wasn't the only Silver they had in their ranks, so why was there so much focus on her?

Why did Zein intend to kill her.

Something inside Naeko's gut clenched. He pocketed Zein after he killed her the second time. Sealed her. Had her stored in a demiplane anchored to his right pant pocket. Hadn't spoken to her since—didn't want to.

He could see her now, swinging her glaive, fighting a war against shadows, cutting, cleaving, stabbing, waiting for him to come to her like before. Like they were still master and disciple. Like she still thought he gave a damn about her.

She wouldn't get the pleasure. When he faced her next, it would be to interrogate and force her to speak. He wouldn't be the boy seeking wisdom, or a student seeking acceptance. He was the Chief Paladin, godsdammit.

He was the chief.

Why didn't he feel like it, then? Why was it that he kept catching himself, looking at the disk—his desk—and wishing Osjane was still there? Waiting for him? Endless with her advice? Willing to listen?

Why was he the one that survived?

"Sir? Are you alright?"

Kare's question jolted Naeko out from his thoughts and he turned to face his Paladin. She looked strangely pale. "Yes. Yeah. I'm good. Why?"

"Your... your hand is bleeding, sir."

Only then did he feel it. He'd driven his index fingers an inch through his palm. Clenched too hard again. Fuck. Godsdammit. All this shit has got him repeating old habits. He needed to take the edge off—stop thinking about all this. He needed to—

An idea struck him. Something that might just let him get what he wanted, and make proper use of Kare. "Hey, kid? You play?"

She didn't seem to understand the question. "Do I *play*?"

"Stormjumpers?"

"Ah, no, sir—I—"

"It's fine. I got a burner account. Don't need you to register or anything. Let's get you set up."

Now she was looking uneasy. "Sir?"

"It's fine. The account's [**NAEKOTHETWONLY**]. It's safe. Probably. But I want you to, uh. Invite your friend. Ask if they play."

"Sir?"

"Yeah. Yeah. It'll be fun. We can... can keep this casual." And this was his territory, godsdammit. No way for that snake Denton to angle her way up his ass somehow again. He swore, if that woman didn't get him the Agnos— "Tell him you want to talk. And—and I'll slide in. Nice and easy. I wanna meet them. Maybe even shake their hand. Invite Maru too."

Kare somehow looked squeamish. "I—I don't know, sir."

He put on a sly grin. He didn't want to order this girl. He really didn't. "Kare. It will be fine. I'm not going to—well, I don't *plan* on slapping them to death. And I've been inching to thank them in person for getting us Thousandhand. You—you think you can do that for us, Kare? Think of it as a... dispatch."

The girl blinked and nodded slowly. "I... will ask them. But—but not here. They won't do it here. At Scale, I mean."

“That’s fine,” Naeko said. “We’ll do it at my place. Practically safer there anyway.”

No one ever breached and set half his penthouse on fire, after all.

–[Emotion]–

+*We lost twelve cells. Twelve mirrors. How the fuck did we lose twelve cells—*+

+*Negative. We still can’t find the Knots. There’s nothing there. Convex, I checked and checked again. There is no trace of where the Knots went in matter or memory. It’s like they were never there.*+

+*Conflagrations do not just fucking “vanish” we used three. Three. You need to find where they were deployed and if they’re still burning today! Not tomorrow! Not later! Now! Today! To-fucking-day! The inner council will slit our throats open and shit down the wounds if the flames travel into the public. Do you have any idea how fucked we would be if that happens?*+

+*We’re trying to sort through the death toll. Current estimates around two million point five. All nullings. Yes. Understood. Get Clan O’yaje in a lobby. We’ll do things through them. They’re the only one everyone trusts. Yes. Even if Thousandhand is back.*+

The Ori were reeling. The Nether was in an uproar. In the aftermath of the Dreamer’s offensive, wounds were laid bare between the clans, and the inflammation of hatred seeped and spread as the inner council’s commands went into effect.

Beyond the compromised D’Rongos, Emotion found himself blind and exiled. Heavens of Information projected veils of chaos that jammed his comprehension of memory and material alike and a new quiet war was looming within the Ori.

It was bold play by the Dreamer. Aggressive. Emotion assumed it to be a thing of blind vengeance until realized the creature was *skirmishing*. Deliberately fanning the flames.

How very Defiance of him to narrow Emotion’s options. The Famine was proud. Proud? *Proud!*

He was proud of his monster. He was proud of what Defiance created—the threat it posed.

Proud and—

And

Avohakten, forgive me!

No. Emotion turned his mind away from such thoughts. His node needed further sequencing. But only after he finished liberating Peace from his constraints. The Dreamer had left the Ori at loggerheads. That was fine. The board was shifting—still, the Hungers wanted results. Something the D'Rongos were unlikely to provide in the near term.

So Emotion expanded his vectors. Went wide as he delved the Nether.

He hunted for Avo's companions and watched establishments he frequented. The Dreamer had not revealed itself at the Second Fortune in quite some time, but the receptionist there and quite a few of the staff had history. All signs indicated that he cared for them. Or used to. It was a place worth watching.

Beyond this, however, Emotion found his attention called to a mountain of rubble that once stood the Conflux megablock, studying two figures standing below the midnight rains while one wove shapes peeled bodies out from the ruins by skin and flesh.

Emotion failed to recognize them at a glance, but the Registry filled in his understanding. In arrogance or confidence, the two left their Incog's down and wore no holocoats to disguise themselves.

Vator and Uthred Greatling—scions of the once-esteemed House Greatling—were shifting through the rubble of their kin. Mirrorhead. Jhred Greatling. Avo's brief master and all-round fool.

As the youngest of the Greatlings knitted bodies back into shape, his father looked down at him, while Emotion's other nodes scryed at them using the perceptions of aratnids and Specters from afar. Vator was separating much decayed remains into different piles. Impossibly, he was drawing blood out from husks—even sorting them into different streams.

Emotion kept his distance as he studied the twosome, daring not to approach for fear of exposure, and because such a thing would be in vain. He could see a miracle lining the Greatling patriarch's mind. No easy entry there. And the youngest's cognition was almost *alien*. There was a wrongness to him comparable to that of a Regular.

Still, behavior and action could reveal as much as naked thought if one just observed.

And so observe Emotion did.

And reveal the Greatlings did.

From streams of blood, Vator molded reconstructions of different sheaths, producing the naked bodies of Scaarthians, Kosgans, Sang, Sanctians, and finally, a creature the Famine was most familiar with: a twisted facsimile of a Bone Demon.

–[Vator]–

The Flesh Remembers was a useful canon. A body and its cells came together as in a symphony of components, existing as patterns with patterns. Different organisms were born of different clay, and that which lined the offal of a Scaarthian would not rest well in the guts of a Kosgan.

And so it was with this knowledge that Vator led his father back to his brother's former abode. It was with this knowledge that he peeled the fallen husks of Jhred's servants and restored them one after another—each to finest detail.

And it was in this that he finally discovered the difference he was searching for. A pattern that deviated from all the others.

The shape of a Bone Demon sheath was forming beneath his fingertips, but at its foundation did he find something else to excite him.

"Ghoul," Vator breathed, memory circling back to the creature that won his brother's Crucible nearly two months back. "The base of this sheath was a ghoul."

His father simply stared on wordless, eyes fixed more on the wreckage than the body. Poor, poor father. Regret stained him so much. But Vator would give him peace. Vator would make his heart beautiful once more.

"Ghoul," Uthred Greatling muttered. He blinked and focused on Vator again. "You mean—"

Vator manifested his phantoms and played scenes he saved from weeks of investigation. Flashes of a tall, pale creature blurred out around his mind, riding a drone through the air, slamming a club into the back of a cybernetic Scaarthian. "*Moonblood*. One of Noloth's little embarrassments. And maybe even Aedon Chambers' sheath."

His doubt filled his father's countenance. "You think this?"

"Their biomass was found rather closely together. It would not take someone with a Heaven of Biology much trouble to transition." Vator eyed the finished sheath and layered it over his own body with a flick of his hand. Suddenly, he tower over his father—felt eight Echoheads flicking out from his back, felt a hunger settle into his sinews. "Barely any effort at all."

Once again, his father clenched his teeth together and looked away. Vator's heart dropped.

"G-good," Uthred said.

Vator's heart rose again. Ah. Father could learn. Father could accept. Father could be made beautiful.

Ever was there hope in the world.