

Can I light up some hiflass? You mind? No. Alright, good.

So. Trafficking. You can't stop it. You can never stop it. You wanna stop it? That's a problem for the Agnosi. Ask them how many Heavens there are. Ask them how many gods there used to be.

Right now, New Vultun's perimeters? The liminal borders you can restrict at any time? That's nothing. It's bullshit. Liminal space that doesn't let directionality in or out blah blah what the fuck—you have any idea how many Fallwalkers can walk right through? You know how easy it is for a specialized golem to make a gap?

Easy. Really easy. And if the last big brawl between the Guilds didn't provide enough of a surplus, you got plenty of Fallwalkers willing to take on some Rend debt to keep a golem running. Truth is you half-strands have so many leaks to plug it's hopeless.

The way I see it, the only chance you guys have of reducing this—not stopping. That's impossible. Reducing. That's a more attainable goal. is that you start getting smugglers to flip or start a whole series of gutter wars between the Syndicates funding them. 'Course, that would need you to step on the toes of your Guild-masters, and we both know how good of a stomping they gave your dog-asses the last time you got uppity.

So. Best solutions I can think of off the top of my head. You can risk it big and go for the Syndicates. Try to breach the trading rooms they host in the Deep Bazaar and bust up their key figures. Messy. Hard. Requires a calibur of Necro your Exorcists aren't. Or. Or you can start poisoning the water. Start seeding some squires or 'Clads among the FATELESS and shred smuggling chains up from the inside, making my associates paranoid or worried about their supply.

You do that and I'd say you can really cut down the trafficking across a few districts. But you gotta know that tricks don't work twice here and the chains of each Syndicate far-o-part. Rumors will spread and Mawdivers will learn.

Just the way the game goes.

Supply. Demand.

All you can do is gut the former because, in New Vultun, there's always a need for more people to do the dying.

-Paladin Interview of Arir Moradin, Former FATELESS Trafficker

"I want to talk about the future," Avo began.

His cadre was gathered before him, half of them in seats newly grown from the ship, while a few others occupied stray spots in the room. Draus, Kae, and Denton were among the seated, and behind them, Chambers had his back against the throne. Cas leaned against a nearby wall, his eyes distracted while he flicked messages across Threshold using his ansible. Tavers had found a place next to Dice and was rabbling about how the girl could improve her craft.

Even Essus was among them, though he remained a cold presence in the room, standing far and away from the others, his eyes locked on Avo.

Only a shame the Sunrise could not be here. A thing to be remedied in the future, if possible. Their capabilities would be more than appreciated for this undertaking.

"Our time together has been short. But frantic. Efficient. *Promising*. Changes have befallen all of us in the weeks we shared. Souls. Opportunities. Lives restored. Pasts lost." He watched Kae in particular and knew the effect of his words was successful as she shuffled. Running Benhata's mind as his primary template, he infused himself with years of rhetorical refinement and sequenced away all his deficiencies using traits taken from other minds. His mastery over the spoken word came suddenly, and Avo was increasingly appreciative of the boons his softer skills offered.

"We have enjoyed ourselves. Enjoyed our powers. Pressed our teeth on soft flesh and unbreakable armor. I have... grown during this time. Found apotheosis. Climbed higher. Become more. More than something like me ever should have. I am... grateful."

The admissions of his gratitude made Draus' eyes widen in alarm. She shot Avo the closest thing she had to a worried look and he shook his head. "I am well. Wanted to state things plainly. I am more than indulged of flesh. I am learning *satisfaction*. Happiness. Actualization at a level beyond description. Still. Want more. Will always want to change and become more. But it is a joyous obsession. A good chase."

He placed another pause between his words.

"But that is I. And perhaps you are different. All of you. Some of us are bound by chance. Others by machinations of outside powers. I can't change the past. But the future is unclaimed. A new force is entering the battle for the Ladder. One the Guilds don't know about. One growing inside them; a burning plague. I want to make sure the future we seek is one shared."

"So, what, is this like the 'with me or not' speech?" Chambers asked, eyes flicking about. "I'm not—uh, comparing you to him 'cause you're like twice the man—uh, G-Godclad he is, but Mirrorhead also gave one of these and... we ended up getting jabbed the next day."

"Opposite," Avo said. "Not about me. About you. Your future. Your choices. Your desires. Have

my own interests. Perhaps someday ours will clash. But we've shared too much together for me to wish any of you in chains. I have... come to appreciate each of you. For who you are. And who you might still be."

These words were meant for Chambers, and they struck. The man looked away from Avo as if he was a truth too uncomfortable to face.

"New possibilities are open to us through my fires of mind and Soul. But I am more than my own selfish wants. I have drowned in gluttony. Brutality. Cruelty. But also honesty. Deception. And now I paddle upon the shallow waters of humanity. Want to go deeper. Want to understand charity. Unchain the wills of man but inflict their actions with consequence."

He looked at Kae, Draus, Dice, and all the others. "I can promise you bloodshed. War. Enemies worth killing. And unfortunates caught in the crossfire. I can take pain from your minds. Give you need traits—sculpt you into someone you wish to be if that is what you want. I offer choice. And I an acknowledgment of your existence. It may not be much. But the Guilds all seek control and some form or another. Chains from chains from chains. Self-made prisons because they fear the existential forest in which we live. This is... pathetic. Disgusting. They deny themselves a full course because they fear what they might taste. Fear what they might find. But I will show them their folly. I sink into them from the points where they are rotted. Purify them from the inside. Cauterization. They must face themselves before the end.

"I have broader plans in mind. Going to release our compromised Godclads. Use them to infiltrate the Guilds further. Burn more. Expand our reach in the Tiers. Influence through the Warrens must also continue to spread. Grow the cult. Break the Syndicates. Subvert and install our own operatives in their ranks. Snatch them from the Guilds. But our reach must be beyond the city. This war stretches the planet. What remains of existence. My fire seeks the roots of New Vultun. It dreams to light the Maw. To clean the bedrock of Noloithi's mythology—tainted in history and tainted now. I dream to devour the smugglers. The traffickers. To find a way out of the city and expand our bases of power."

Draus sat up a bit straighter. She knew what he was going for. "You want the enclaves and Fallwalkers, don't you? Gonna hit them. Take them for our own."

"I want the Fallen Heavens too," Avo said. These words lit something behind Kae's deep brown eyes. "Some for my Frame. Some to use as a veil for us to build up forces." One of his Echoheads pointed upward at Subject One. "To amass hidden forces."

"Building an army," Draus nodded. "Shit. We *are* becoming a Guild."

"Something in opposition to them. A destabilization and redistribution of power before the final war. Two major goals occupy my mind right now. Seeding the Guilds with our subverts; seizing the roots of the Maw and claiming the smuggling routes for our use. A path out of the city. Open frontiers hidden to the Guilds."

“A place where we can experiment with your Frame’s capabilities without being discovered as well,” Kae said, nodding. Her halo shimmered as he thoughtstuff took on a steady flow. New prospects for her craft sharpened her focus. “Using the ruptures, I think I can engineer the conditions required to build more *specialized Heavens*. Re-engineer and architect things that I have never... Yes... Yes! This is a tremendous opportunity! And I always wanted to see how things are in the Sunderwilderlands beyond the walls the city.” The excitement buried under the gloom of her resurfaced past pierced through. “Perhaps... we can also consider the void. I believe the Manta is rated inter-system travel. If we can get it beyond the reach of the city! Wait! We’re with Aegis now! I request access to knowledge forbidden! Entwine the natural sciences further with mythology.”

Her ansible activated as the static in her mind thinned to a needle. She was casting something over to Threshold. Requests perhaps. Calvino was chuckling with interest in the back of his mind.

{You’ll need to find a stable point in your atmosphere first,} the EGI sighed. {There are parts of this planet that just make you disappear if you go in the wrong direction. I cannot tell you how many ships we lost learning where we could and couldn’t go. As for Agnos Kusanade’s requests... Oh, so many of these are going to be denied. Electromagnetism–gravity. Strong nuclear forces. Chemical bonds–hm. She’s been spending time through our archives. More than a few were restricted to the Agnosi before}

“Good,” Avo said, pleased there was something for Kae to thrive for. “Also plan to subvert Ori-Thaum in the meantime. Use Shotin against his order. They were unleashed against you as a borrowed blade. It would be proper to devastate them the same way.”

But revenge was a secondary thing to the Agnos’ mind right now. The promise of her craft consumed her thoughts and phantasmal essence was rising from her eyes like steam. She gave only a polite chirp that she heard something as she continued interfacing with the virtual noosphere. Her appreciation would follow after what he said settled in.

“Dice,” Avo said, looking at the girl who was supposed to be little more than a distraction. “Have done well. More than I expected. Would like to give an... apology. Used you to my ends. Arrangement was... *predatory*.”

She didn’t understand. The waif looked at Avo, eyes bright. The cat was nibbling at her cheek now, monkey arms swatting her on the nose.

“Will grant you what I should have earlier. Autonomy. Understand. Power. Also have a duty for you. If you’re interested in it. “You know what it’s like beyond the city. Know how to survive. Had a home before.”

“It’s gone,” she said. “The master died. Darkness wins without his light.”

“Can give you light,” Avo said. “Can give you anything you need. Master failed you. Masters always fail their slaves. That is the nature of the relationship. But I am not a master. And you are not my slave. You are your own master. I am just the maker of your tools. I can give you more Heavens. Make you better than your master ever was.”

Suddenly, she seemed more like a child than she ever had been. “But I’m... supposed to *listen*...”

“Listen now: you can be whatever you desire,” Avo concluded.

She blinked and wrestled with his words.

“Same goes for all of you. Rare opportunity has come. Something no one has right now. If you want to change yourselves. Mind. Body. Soul. I can do it. I have the ability. But I leave the decision to you.”

“You know what,” Draus said, sniffing. “I knew there somethin’ wrong with you back when I first laid eyes. Normally, I would just snuffed a ghouel but you... good thing Essus stayed my hand.” She gave the father standing far in the back an appreciative nod and the man just lowered his head. “I didn’t expect much from you. Not you bein’ a nova-hot Necro. Not you having a Frame. Not you being the godsdamned mind-made bastard of a rogue Low Master. I just kinda counted my fortunes and moved on. Gave me the means to throw myself into bigger and better fights, you know. Kill Jhred. Raise some hell. Hopefully die loud in the process.”

She paused.

“‘Cept that didn’t happen. ‘Cept you kept me from going off into the Big Nothing. Yeah. I hated you for that. Can’t help it. Me. The other Regs. We fought, bled, and died without question. All in the name of creed and conviction. All to live up to the High Seraph’s ideals. But when the time came for a good death, I chose to do my duty and was damned for it.” She snorted. “Blessed be the worthy. Ain’t that a lie.”

Then something changed across her face. A *smile*. A full and genuine expression, wide and feral. She looked like a war-made nu-dog looking down at a bone. “The weight came back, Avo. The weight’s back and heavier than ever. I felt it earlier. With Shotin. When we were in the Layer. When I was getting bloody with the Paladins. And all I needed to understand was bigger game to hunt. You’re asking us if we’re with you? If we want this? I can’t speak for any of them, but me? You just got me into a war so big it was beyond my dreams. This about fighting the real war. Against the real bastards. The last fucking duel that will ever matter. Us against all the Guilds. Us for the Ladder. Like echoes of Jaus. It ain’t about if I’m with you. I’m a bullet in motion. I’m punching for flesh anyhow? This way? Yeah. You can’t turn me from this fight if you tried.”

[Oh gods,] Abrel muttered. [I knew the Regulars were insane but... How the hell did we ever make someone like her.]

Avo never doubted Draus' conviction. But hearing her excitement was another thing altogether. And how much it symmetry it had with his basest self. In this moment, loneliness was a distant thing.

"I know... I'm kinda fucked up," Chambers said, softly at first. He looked around the others, oddly shy. "And that I don't think too good sometimes, but... these have been the best days of my life. And I... I'm scared. I'm scared that none of you will want me anymore. I mean, I know that I don't deserve a Frame. I know that! But, like, this makes me matter now, I gotta keep it because I can't go back! Please don't make me go back to being who I was. I don't wanna be like that anymore. I'll change. I'll do anything."

"You'll do," Avo said.

"I'll do what?" Chambers asked, trying to understand what Avo wanted.

"You'll do." Avo said, simply. "Not taking your Frame from you. Never taking your Frame from you. Might kill you if our paths diverge. But I've given you choice. You live and die a Godclad now. The rest is what you desire. Be change. Don't wait for it."

Chambers' mouth fell open and closed. For a few moments, he didn't have anything to say. "I, uh." A trickle of something fell from one of his eyes. The tear surprised Chambers, prompting him to swipe fast and look up into the Cloning Pools. "I'll never Rash you guys again."

"Maybe you will," Avo said. "Worked on Shotin. Could work on others as well. We just need more control Spare the FATELESS."

"Me and Val here were in this before you," Cas said. "You know where we stand."

"And Zein," Avo asked.

"She is more invested in the outcome of this war than any of us," Denton said. "She is beyond mistrust." The glance she leveled at Tavers implied enough.

"Don't worry about me," Tavers said. "I know the score. You can get one of your Necros to stay synced with me. Raldi's gone quiet after his dive earlier. Probably trying to shake any Incubi from tracking him. But his stake here is personal. And so is mine. I've run for and against the Guilds plenty. And that Frame of yours is too precious for them ever give me what I want."

"Good," Avo said. "Will talk to Sunrise personally. First order now will be to use Elegant-Moon to—"

"I wish to help." Essus voice was low, but his words held a weight to them. Heads spun and eyes fell upon him. A sliver of discomfort passed through his features but he endured. "You are speaking of liberation. You are intending to do for them what you have once done for me. What you died trying to give my son time and time again. I have not forgotten this. So, I want this path. I wish to help you."

Avo tilted his head. "Is this your choice?"

Essus looked down at his hand. The transplants Mirrorhead installed remained after his resurrection. Whatever trauma he endured, the Ember's ego now thought his arms to be artificial. Not his original limbs, now gone like his son was. "Yes. Yes. I think this is the first real choice I have made since I... since I decided to come here." He balled his fingers and made a fist. "I have no taste for bloodshed. And unless you destroy what I am now with your fire, I will never hold violence close to my heart. But freeing people. Sparing them what I faced. This is *purpose*. This is an atonement that would please Artad. Please me."

"Blessed be the peacekeepers," Cas muttered off from the side.

Avo nodded. The conversations with Voidwatch's specialists have done wonders for the man, it seemed. No need for a cognitive revision. "Pleases me to see you... with new purpose."

Essus shrugged. "One must do something after choosing to live, yes?"

"Yes," Avo said, turning to regard Subject One again. "We will use Elegant-Moon to finish our prototype. Then I will release her. Seed her back to Highflame and the No-Dragons. And turn our focus downward to the Maw. To the smugglers. To routes out of the city and the promises that lay beyond. Kae. Need to talk you soon. Have some things."

"About your ontologies?" She asked, attention returning to him.

"About all our Frames. New considerations. Upgrades. Countermeasures."

A soft smile crept across the Agnos' face. "Good. So do I."