

+Wah! Everyone likes to talk about freedom, freedom, freedom. You kids spit this and that. It's all funny to me. Saintist this, Massist that. It'll shit. I was there at the start of this mess, and it didn't mean anything then. Just like it doesn't mean anything now—

Left! Watch the left. Dammit, Juns, how'd you get wiped by that guy.

Anyway. This "Death Farm" map we're raiding now? I was born in one of those. A bit cleaner than this one. They also don't keep people open air either. We lived underground in a maze so no one could escape.

My ma and da? Never knew the former. The latter was a real bastard. Still loved him though. As much as I could anyone.

They had him on so many drugs he was barely a person. Cased him in armor and had him run around keeping the rest of us slaves in check. Shackler, they called us. Slaves to be hated by other slaves.

I had masters too. The Keepers of the Vow. Old Kosgan fathers that enjoyed a bit of flogging and torture from time to time. Wasn't that bad compared to other places. I was lucky.

Hey, man, watch the southwest corridor. We don't need to get overrun again like last time. Yeah. Yeah. Kill more of those FATELESS in the cage. We just need five more deaths to call in a Sunshield.

Huh? No. You get scripture, scripture, and more scripture. They wanted you good and faithful when you were sacrificed. They didn't need any heretical slaves tainting the pits. Of course, we weren't stupid. Well, some of us weren't. We saw people going missing, made up a language based on knocking on walls. Gossip still slipped around 'cause the sisters were a den of snakes—always trying to mess one over on each other.

Why? Because the only people who failed out of Kosgan society ended up running the farms, and most of them were just trying to get one over on each other so they could find a way back.

That's how I escaped the first time. A low sister called Sister Karakan got up to some tricks. Framed my father for something or another. Or maybe he did do it. Doesn't matter. The outcome was the same.

Let me tell you, the other slaves hate us Shacklers. When they got the go from their sister, oh, did they do things to him. I tried to help him. I got the same. Didn't matter none to them—hates a drug and we all wanted a hit.

Anyway, my own "people" gelded my father in front of me and killed him slow. One of you were asking why I spent more time killing fathers than freeing slaves? Well. I hated them. I hated the bastards. I still don't like them.

Anyway. Sister Karakan came in promising justice to be done and order to be restored and everyone under our cairn was getting a day off and double rations. They cheered. I cried. Then they took me away and tortured me some more.

You ever hurt so much the light starts singing to you? Yeah. You start admitting to things you didn't even do. You just start talking and apologizing to anything for some peace.

It didn't really mean anything to Karakan, right? She was just trying to make my direct overseer look bad and mess up the Shacklers under his command. Anyway. I was supposed to die there on the wooden plank they had me nailed to upside down, but the light just kept singing and singing, and eventually, it started speaking to me.

Turns out, it wasn't just Sister Karakan who wanted to play. One of the Seraphim were getting in on the action as well. A lowly god in the Kosgan Choirs. Not even good enough to be one of the Chorusers.

Not without some major changes.

It end up laying its hand on me and changing my flesh. Blessing me with a miracle. It decided to enlighten me about a few things regarding the faith and my place in it. Telling me about the lie that was my life and the whole sacrifice thing.

No paradise awaited poor Naeko.

You remember being told that stories aren't real? That everything you believed is a lie, and you're just meat for the killing? Yeah. Pretty rough.

Go for guard tower c. Watch the griffon riders.

Anyway. That's how I managed my first breakout. Because a god wanted to power-climb same as any FATED or wager in the city. I didn't start a rebellion because it was the right thing. I started it because my da's screams folowed me in my dreams, I couldn't take crying alone at night.

So, I got the faithers in on my hurt. And a bunch of the other slaves.

Then, after I escaped, my "benefactor" pointed me in another direction and told me to keep going.

Yeah. Stories make it sound better than it does. I was still a slave. Just one playing a darker game.

Guess that's the way it would have probably stayed if old lady Zein didn't-

Aw, no. We lost c already. Back. Back before they start spawning in.

Do I sound sad?

I'm not sad. I just... I don't care. And you shouldn't either. Someone's gonna tell you that if you just listen to them, the future can be yours and life is gonna be different someday.

They're lying. Stay home. Play another match. Don't be me. Took me nearly five hundred years to figure that out. And only barely.

It didn't matter in the end.

None of it.

The dream died.

Nothing changed.

We're all still slaves in somewa—

*Death Pits! They're rushing the Death Pits! Mender! Hey, don't call me that. I'm the Chief of the Paladins. I'll have you detained... Don't send me Rashable material either. Come on, son.
Come on...+*

-Recording of Chief Paladin Naeko playing Stormjumper

18-8

The Scheme

Avo watched Essus weep.

The man didn't try to hide his tears or wipe his flowing snot. He just stood there, sobbing openly, nakedly, honestly, unashamed of showing everyone his pain.

All it took was seeing the state of the FATELESS slaves. How they were so neatly packed and sedated in their prisons, each cage an ovaline pod barely big enough for their bodies. Dull, drugged gazes stared on through the hardened glass as the purple and grey of their bodygloves caught Avo's attention next. Along their collars was the holographic tag listing them as "PROPERTY OF THE FORGOTTEN LANCES."

It seemed the Syndicate wanted to use their cattle to do some merchandising as well.

Corner snorted a bitter laugh. **[Can't forget to enterprise. Hustle. Hustle. Hustle.]**

[You know what, ghoul?] Paladin Kassamon said, letting out a breath of satisfaction. **[When you burned me a few days back, I thought I was going to be hell for the rest of my—uh, well, I guess I'm still alive, but this is pretty shit. Whatever this is. Or I am. But... if we're going to be spending time preying on gutter scum and smugglers... Yeah. I'd say you'd be winning me over a bit.]**

Kare's remained quiet, more disturbed than her senior colleague regarding the scene, but resolute in her convictions. **[These poor people...]** She turned her attention on Two-Mag, Moment, and the rest of the smugglers and lances. **[You are all filth. Feeding off the vulnerable. You desecrate Jaus' dream.]**

[Fuck right on off, glasser,] Two-Mag replied. **[You don't know what it's like—]**

[I do,] Corner interrupted. The once-squire smirked. **[I hate the glassers. I hate 'em. But I hate them because it is my job to hate them. You hate them because you're a subhuman that was never strong enough to take life by the throat and be someone. Smuggling... Syndicates... Where did you find the spine to spit back after living and dying as a bitch.]**

Abrel cringed. **[This was what my brother was financing? This? Oh, Jhred... why...]**

In the corner of his vision, Avo watched Chambers awkwardly shuffle over and pat Essus on the back. A tight expression pulled the former enforcer's face into a wince. "This, uh, ain't that bad, consang. These pods are keeping them fed and healthy. None of them look all that sick. We'll pop those caskets open and give them some fresh air. They'll be... *alive*. Shit. Avo, what are we doing with these people."

Draus had deposited the barge in an abandoned warehouse some sixty kilometers away. With thaumically cloaked landmines hovering in the air and an infestation of mind-gnawing mem-cons leftover from the war, most made themselves sparse of the area, abandoning it to the ghouls and arantids.

For Avo and his cadre, it served as an exploitable opportunity and a place of respite.

It took him little effort to devour most of the mem-cons, and he found them wanting compared to the hellscape that was Chambers' mind anyway. The mines were left where they were, however. It was good to keep some discouragement present.

Dead conveyor lines ran through the warehouse. Boxes and packaging lay scattered across the ground, buried beneath dust-coated webs. Plascrete supports lined the ceiling above them like ribs, and in the darkness, the sound of screaming vermin echoed through the room. Along the rebar ran Dice with a smile on her face, following her nu-kitten as it indulged in pest control.

Lit by a soft glow emitted from the Manta, constructs of blood left hundreds upon hundreds of pods stacked across the floor of the facility. It would be a place to keep them for now. Easier to keep them alive, fed, and protected until a more permanent residence could be provided.

Chambers had scouted through each of their minds and found that few among them were related. Old to young, most were isolated and scattered. Castrated from familiarity and comfort. No one to rely on.

Again, this was a more professional operation than Aseleri's. But in some ways, it was even colder.

A low reverberation pulsed through the air and Avo found himself looking upon the Subject Ones. The surviving bioforms were being examined by Draus for damage, and off to the side, and within their bodies, Avo felt the presence of Elegant-Moon's Weaveress—its greatest canons soon to be his.

"Grafters said they'll be auging our eggs up," Draus said, not even looking at him. She was plucking flechettes from where they were embedded, observing the damage. "See the Sang gave you a bit of a makeover. She stick one of 'em in you?"

"Merged our characteristics," Avo said. "Will be able to do it myself soon. Have any bioforms in mind? Preferences?"

The Regular snorted. "I always preferred chrome more myself. 'Cept for insects." She paused. "I always did like them wolf spiders. Hornets too. Mean fuckers." She grinned. "I was digging through Threshold's archives the other day. Looking up old wars they fought. Tryin' to wrap my head around how things used to be—and somehow I stumbled on a hornet raiding a bee hive. Just pulled the little shits apart." She laughed. "That was something."

A disquieted code escaped from Calvino. *{Highflame... what did you make of this poor girl?}*

+First time anyone called her girl,+ Avo said. +And I doubt they made her. Just found her. Refined her.+

{I suppose,} Calvino said. {You know what bothers me about her? She doesn't want anything else. Just to fight and die. With you, that was by design. But her... how much humanity had been chiseled out of her? Such a shame. She would have been a wonder in so many things if only she was interested.}

+Kae would be happy if her life wasn't ruined. Lover wasn't murdered. Chambers would be better if his father wasn't a half-strand. The FATELESS would be together with their families. Would be. Might be. The only thing we can ensure now is what could be.+

{...Right.} Calvino agreed. {Pardon me. Dealing with slavery has put me in a bit of a malaise. It is one of our oldest sins to come back to roost again. Sentimentality is traitorous.}

The EGI put on a good performance, but Corner's mind smelled bullshit, and Avo's instincts told him that this, like almost anything the artificial mind did, was directed toward a finer purpose.

Avo knew the feeling. He knew the feeling when he watched his brothers debase themselves.

"Good news," Tavers said, walking over from the Manta. "I got places where these folks can be housed. They'll have to work or volunteer as servers, but they won't be harvested. Also, Raldi's back. Managed to scrub his presence and avoid the Incubi. Sent me a heads-up a couple of seconds ago. Says he wants to meet again. In person. You guys know the Easy Armistice?"

Draus turned. "Been there. Once."

"Good. I don't need to explain the gimmick to you then." She coughed. "So. Kinda terrifying how a couple of you fuckers managed to butcher an entire portion of a Syndicate in a day. Especially you, ghou. That Meta of yours is giving my nerves the shits. This would've taken a couple dozen damn good squires and four times that in Necro cells to pull off. Still, fun as this is, hitting these Syndicates gets to be a real glutton for time. And the Guilds replace them faster than we can kill anyway."

"That's fine," Avo said. "Don't plan on destroying them in the end. Just infecting. Burrowing my control deep in the Syndicates. And then Guilds through them. This isn't extermination. It's a replacement." He pointed one of his Echoheads at the barge occupying the center of the room, and the floating pieces of his tendril clicked together and thrust out. "Reviewed the memories of the crew. The Heaven inside. It's a thing of light. Canon specifically lets the vehicle sink into light itself when the crew are made to close their eyes."

"That's how they're hoping the borders?" Tavers asked.

"One way," Avo said. "Need to replace golem core every few months. Constant arms race between Paladins and the Agnosi against the smugglers and the Fallwalkers outside. Unregistered Heavens. Primal. Old. New ways in. For every barge that gets captured and has its core cataloged, others slip through unnoticed."

"There are too many possible canons," Kae said, listening though far off to the side. Done examining the core of the barge, she was now looking into the cage containing a particularly young slave with a troubled expression. "The borders aren't capable of covering everything. And the Guilds, well." A flash of a snarl passed through her features. "They like leaving holes. Something we will soon be able to exploit."

"Can we make more like it?" Avo asked.

Kae paused and looked at him. "What? The barge."

He grunted. "Not sure barge. Golems. Don't need a Soul or cyclor for those. Right."

She paused. "We need the Heaven. But that can be reverse-engineered by your Frame. Oracle glass... and some thaumic investiture..." She mumbled to herself momentarily. "It can be done. The difficulty is that we need a place of destabilization. A rupture, in a word. Somewhere reality is unbalanced."

"Like a Fallen Heaven?" Tavers said. "I know a few of those. Quarantined places in the city leftover from the war."

This captured Avo's attention. "Locations. Share them with Chambers."

The squire gave him a nod as wisping ghosts vibrated around her halo. Her Thorncrown wards looked modified. Complex. Something told him it was Raldi's work.

"Also. Going to cut Elegant-Moon loose. Planning to give her a staged escape. Implicate one of the Guilds."

"Oh, plannin' a little false flag, are we?" Draus asked.

"Trying to decide," Avo replied. "Both Ori-Thaum and Highflame have candidates. Clan D'Rongo. Chivalrics. Muddy the waters more. Trigger distrust for both Guilds. Within themselves. And against each other." He paused. "I'm thinking about *using* Chambers."

"Ah, shit," Draus muttered.

Hearing his name uttered, Chambers turned to stare. "What?"

"City already hates him," Avo said. "Two hundred billion imp bounty in total already. Will probably reach five hundred before week's end." The ghouls couldn't help but grin. "They think he's an acolyte. That the Low Masters chose him." A low hiss escaped from him. More than one of the templates laughed alone. Template-Chambers fumed.

"So, what? Like, what are we talking about?" Chambers said.

"So, what are you thinking," Kae whispered, conspiratorially. She leaned in and regarded Chambers from the corner of her eye. "I think it would be good to leave her with hints of a full conspiracy. That D'Rongos are in league with the Low Masters right now. That will cause trouble for three of our adversaries, right? Your... *fathers*. Ori-Thaum. And Highflame. All dealing with each other."

"Yes," Avo agreed. "But the nature of the escape itself is still in question. How does she

overcome her 'theoretical' Necrojack controllers?"

"Another betrayal, of course," Tavers added. Heads turned to her and she shrugged, her pauldrons clinking as her shoulders raised. "Look. This thing's supposed to be a mess, right? Have Chambers take a shot at Ori-Thaum or something. Put their partnership into doubt. Make it look like things are going south between him and Silvers. The Sang can escape while the fight's happening."

[Shit,] Benhata sighed. [This might just cause a clusterfuck inside Clan D'Rongo too.]

The glaive had no idea how encouraging his words were. "Good," Avo said. "Have concept now. More things to do. Keeping track of the Paladin. Abrel. Now Elegant-Moon. Harvest more Heavens in the meantime. Build our Spheres. Breach the border. Choke the Maw. Much to do..." In an instant, Avo shifted his mind and pitched his concept. "Chambers. You like *entertainment*? Want to feel like Dannis Steelhard instead of a terrorist?"

The man paused. "Well. Yeah, I'm mean... You know, I like performances. And arts. And shit." He nodded, body stiff, unsure where this was going. "You're not asking me to..." He vaguely humped the air.

"No," Avo said. "No pornographic. Dramatic."

"Oh," Chambers replied, sounding both relieved and disappointed at the same time. "Well. Yeah, I think I can pull that off."

Avo broadened his fangs and smiled. "Good. We'll be making you a star soon."

And tied to the ghou's thoughts, not even Paladin Kassamon could resist breaking into disbelieving laughter. **[Oh, this might just get that lazy bastard Naeko off his ass too.]**