

*Hiring a squire is either the best or worst investment you'll ever make depending on a variety of factors.*

*The easiest of which is separating the professionals from the chaff. The ones that light the wick are usually stone-cold snuffers prepared to face and overcome anything. These guys do their own intel, source their own gear, and plan their own runs. Don't gotta hold their hands, just give 'em the mem-data for the run and make yourself absent until after shit goes down.*

*Of course, sometimes, good killers aren't going to be enough. Sometimes, you need a bit of extra. Source jocks for support. Necros to scrub the rub or crash a lobby. Might even need make a visit to the Bazaar for some "missing golems" to supplement your snuffers if you're making a go at a 'Clad or something insane like that.*

*Either way, you want to control your spending but don't be cheap.*

*And do. Not. Fuck. Us.*

*This one especially goes out to all you middlers out there—do not play fuck-fuck games. Your ass is the neck that everyone goes for. You burn a squire and leave them out to dry? Well, squires got consangs, and unless you got a real nova Necro on your end, your vanishing act is going to be a very literal one before the end.*

*But say you're powerful enough to be spared Squire retribution. Say you're a 'Clad or High Guilder. Well, now your name is poison. No professional is going to take a gig from someone who sees 'em as Soul-fuel, so you're hiring from the desperate, the chaff, or the green. Not a good range.*

*It's also something that's going to get made known to every one of your Guilder rivals. They'll know you're a traitor, and you'll live with a gun barrel against the back of your neck.*

*You middlers just keep that in mind is all I'm saying.*

*-Quail Tavers, The School of the Warrens*

17-7

Squire, Seeker, Flame (I)

Growing up in the Sundwilds granted one a particular set of instincts that protected them from the things in the dark. The feel lived stronger in Dice than most. It started as a coldness in the pit of her stomach that spread through her tendons, slowly flaring to a burn. Her heartbeat gradually rose and she began to draw deeper breaths.

There was something wrong about this place. Something off.

The house where her last targets dwelled was a tower growing amidst stacks of shanties and cheaply fabricated structures. Leaving the most prosperous district of Aromang for Veng's Stand, she found the thunder noises, chattering ghosts, constant crowds, and intermittent aerial dogfights traded for broken slums built from the scraps of a half-ruined fortress.

A skeletal frame remained of the colossal dome that covered the streets below. Dwarfed by the other districts in the Sovereignty, Veng's Stand only amounted to fifty-two kilometers in space, containing three megablocks surrounded by sprawls of cheap-fabbed shanties. Whatever infrastructure remained was rooted to each of the blocks, and through them ran the only skylanes, few though the aeros were.

Blow bridges ran between the towering structures, casting lines of shadow over the people below. Most who lived here were fully organic, untouched by the blessings of alloys or other enhancements. Most of them were of the Nyong people—once regarded as a subspecies to the Sang, now a member of the Ori after a successful rebellion.

Blending in with the populace was easier here. Most were of her height and build, not towering or misshapen like so many who lived in the heights of this city were. Their attire was a mix of rags and holo-tech, with some wearing holographic projectors they stole stripped from some machine or another, bolting it over the rags they wore and shielding themselves with light-made lies.

Everyone wanted to look special here. Even the poor. The act was just so *alien* to Dice.

You didn't want to be noticed in the Sunderwilds. You wanted to move. You wanted to get back behind the master's walls quickly. You don't want to be caught in the dark by the unmarked or the things outside. They did more than kill, and there were torments to suffer beyond the reach of death.

Here, people chatted loudly and openly, playing games using the ghosts that nested in their minds, waving their weapons but exchanging slurs and curses instead of gunfire, laughing and smiling as they lay in the filth, a bright, viscous fluid leaking from their needle-wounds.

Her heart built with ineffable anger and envy at their lives. So defenseless, yet so satisfied and protected. What soft lives they lived. What protections the city afforded them. If not for the gangs and their masters, who could have said these weren't the privileges of the age.

The base of the Warheads was erected in the darkness cast of a megablock. The gang did work for the Three-Fingers before, serving primarily as smugglers and raiders deployed to harass rivals. As the Syndicate collapsed, however, the power dynamic between the two groups shifted and the Warheads seized their chance. Enacting a scheme more on impulse than vision, they invited a surviving Three-Finger enforcer on the run from their enemies, presenting themselves a safe haven on account of prior dealings.

The jock, desperate or foolish, accepted and brought with him his team alongside seven technicians left over from Dice's many massacres.

They found themselves embraced as kin during the day, lavished with food, entertainment, and a place to rest. When night came, the Warheads did what any self-respecting gang would do: ambushing their guests before disposing of them as snuff vicarities.

It would have been a shame to let those imps go unearned.

The remains of the Three-Fingers were left on pikes, their heads missing and replaced with mechanical appliances as a warning to any trespassers. As such, Dice found herself scurrying across the street alone when the chance came, taking advantage of a drone crashing against the side of the nearby block to make her move.

Using an overturned street cleaner for cover, she studied the rents puncturing the chassis of the rusted brick of a vehicle and frowned. She felt a presence brush against her Heaven, sensed things around her to mimic with her blood. There was metal and plastic and silicon and... and...

She reached out with Sangeist's and tendrils of blood sprouted from her wrist, digging through the asphalt until she finally found the anomaly weighing on her mind. Reeling her haemokinetic tethers in, she caught her item of interest between her fingers.

A glass flechette. Still fragile, but somehow unbroken. How did it manage to get embedded so deep in the ground? And the dried blood clinging to it...

She peered through the bullet holes lining the cleaner and saw five unmoving bodies inside. There were symmetrical points of entry damage on the other side of the vehicle, and further still through the Warhead headquarters' plascrete walls.

Someone had taken these shots from the inside. Someone had killed her prey before her. The shiver inside her grew and she considered retreating. Staring into the darkness of the building's entrance, she flinched and remembered how she had to walk the Blackways at home, of how the dark would know you were there and take bites from you if you moved too fast.

Only master's light could keep it at bay. The coldtech spotlight lights weren't enough. They were only strong enough to hold while he vented his Rend.

Now master was dead, and the dark would win.

Her home was gone.

Her home was gone.

Nowhere to return to even if she managed to leave this city.

Suddenly, Dice very felt cold.

She pressed on despite herself, seeking the only solace she still had left to claim. There was a new master now, and they were giving her a choice to kill and a choice to grow. Perhaps through them, she might even find a life worth living.

What could one do but seek the flame in the absence of all other lights?

Avoiding the front door was a simple decision. Too many gangers—the likelihood of ambush was too high as well. The path she took led her around the structure along the side walls. Starting at the neon painting scrawled across its length, her mind rattled as the new master's protective thought-walls shielded her from harm.

That was what killed the old master in the end. The ghosts. The demons that fed on minds. She only caught faint murmurs of what was supposed to assail her cognition. The bulk of the harm broke against her outer thoughts and dissolved into nothingness.

Drawing again on her power over blood and matter, she constructed additional appendages and clambered up the sides of the wall. A few floors up, she found a fissure running just below a window and slipped a haemokinetic lever between the vulnerability. The structure burst off the frame but her blood muffled the noise as she continued dismantling the impediment, slipping into a foul-smelling room like a ghost unseen.

Dirty articles of clothing and piles of rubbish littered the ground. Fat corpse flies the size of her index finger buzzed past her, their six wings droning angrily. A tendril whipped out from her. The corpse-fly parted in halves, greenish sludge splattering out from its thorax. The room was a cramped ten meters—made even more narrow with stacks of furniture lining up the space. Turning her attention to her left, she noted the unmoving figure resting on what looked to be a slab of some kind.

He wore some kind of gel suit around himself, and there were needles connecting his skull and spin to the machine he lay on. Flesh was peeling from his body and his empty veins were stained dark like someone had painted them with coal. Only the metal fragments embedded in his eye socket still shone, twin glimmering beacons in the gloom of the room. His body was being eaten clean from the inside by rot and a cluster of flies had made a nest in the tissue that once composed his throat. A many-faceted crystal spun within the slab beneath, a few whisks of phantasmal substance circling counter to its path. Empty elixirs and needles littered the ground.

Again. Too much pleasure. Humans weren't made for so much pleasure, she thought. It drowned them. Made them lose themselves.

A few steps toward the rusted door, she noticed a subtle movement in the corner of her vision. She spun, blades of blood slashing out from her wrist, cleaving along the wall without hesitation or thought.

A creature, small and furry, flinched back with a hiss. Dice's eyes widened.

She released her power, blade turning back into mundane blood, splashing over the nu-kitten.

With its haunches raised and four ape-like arms waving violently, knocking the wood in an effort to scare Dice away, the modified feeling spat its disfavor at the waif again, its pink nose wrinkling, sharp teeth like beads of white. Small blue gems constituted the look of its eyes, and a mane of varnished gold clung to its body.

Scattered below the edge of the closet was a litter of corpse-fly wings.

That explained what the kitten had been eating. Not enough though. It looked thin, and its fur hung like a coat from its bones.

As the kitten lifted its paws and hands, swatting at the air in front of it, Dice tilted her head and looked at the man again.

He died and left something behind. Just like her old master did. Abandoning what they had to fend for themselves in the world.

Dice took one step toward the door, wanting to leave the path open and leave. Perhaps the kitten would depart afterward. Perhaps it would flee out into the building or the streets and live a long and happy life.

But more likely not. More likely it would move too fast and the darkness would notice and it would be eaten.

The waif bit her bottom lip. It wasn't wise. She was running from place to place, facing danger at every turn. It wasn't wise. But the kitten had no one else. At least Dice still had the new master to grant her direction and protection. Who was going to give this animal a chance?

Dice looked up and saw her holographically disguised figure reflected by a filth-coated mirror. A sudden flash rushed through its surface and faded as soon as it came.

She blinked. Who indeed.

Deactivating her holocoat's functions for just a brief moment, the kitten stopped hissing and tilted its head at her, confused by her sudden change of form. She sent a vein of blood out from her neck over to the body and dug into the corpse's throat. Clenching a fistful of flies, she

brought the writhing insects back over as an offering for the little ball of fur. The nu-kitten retreated at first but sniffed thereafter and bit the head off one of the flies, consumed by hunger.

Dice felt her face do that strange thing again. There was a light inside her. A brightness she could feel. Her lips were curving and her eyes squinted. A lot more people in this city made that expression than back at home. The master didn't like the look, so he banned it. Seems like the people here weren't so controlled.

"I used to be hungry too," Dice said, speaking softly to the cat while keeping her eye on the door. "But then I stopped staying dead. So now when I want to eat, I just kill myself." The nu-kitten continued chewing the prey she offered, uninterested in her words. "Think you can't do that thought."

Succumb to impulse, she grabbed the cat back the scruff of its neck and placed it in her coat. The animal, still with a mouthful of fly, went stiff with surprise as a cocoon of crimson sealed it in a protective bundle.

"We're just going to kill some people," Dice said, looking up. "If there are still any left. The master will speak to me again soon. When I sleep. I'll ask him this time. Ask him to put you somewhere safe. Or for you to get a gift like mine."

She imagined the cat being beyond death as well, coming back with her each time. The thought made the bright inside her intensify, and her face grew tighter with the good feeling. Then, she forced it away.

Hoping was bad. Hoping was poison.

She looked at the corpse in the room, unmoving on his plastic bed. Hope killed people here.

Dice needed to keep herself safe.

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Avo and Draus studied the girl through the looking glass as she pried the door open and stepped out. Manifested as the Twice-Walker, Draus looked down at Avo with her many eyes, and he had a sense that she was smirking. *{Avo... If she gives you that little thing... don't eat it.}*

"I'm not," he growled, annoyed that she would think of him in such—

**[Fuck me, consang, you were thinking about it,] Chambers said. [It was so cute.]**

Chambers was one to talk. Where his mind went to was someplace unspeakable. The ghoul didn't understand human sexuality, but if he ever met the Scaarthian who created the lube-cat run vicarity, he was going to kill them. Slowly.

[I'm in hell,] Abrel said. [I can't even enjoy looking at a nice, cute little animal. I'm in hell.]

[She should've just killed the thing,] Corner added. [It's going to be a problem. A weakness. She'll get attached and that always ends one way.]

[You're dead,] Benhata said. [You didn't have any attachments.]

Corner conceded the point. [It reduces the odds. We all die eventually.]

The last mind to note the creature was the newest. Elegant-Moon concepted new shapes for the kitten to take, and Chambers gagged in disgust. [No! No! No! Don't ever let her touch that. Eat it if you gotta but keep the Sang fuck away from it.]

Elegant-Moon smirked. [But I would merely make it more survivable, Mr. Chambers.]

He turned his attention away from his templates and back to Dice. The girl was proving a fascinating oddity he encountered along her path. He chosen her quickly from the mass of FATELESS as a viable—but ultimately and potentially expendable Ensouled.

On some level, he really shouldn't have been surprised with how she defied the odds.

Coming up the stairs, she scouted with threads of blood first, teasing out the environment and measuring the distance between places. She was estimating how wide the room was, feeling the shape and contours of what she could hide behind, and potential spots to avoid. As her Sangeist crept into the room before her, she found the bodies, and then his haemokinetically altered pool of blood.

Her Heaven brushed his as mutual pressure spread between their Domains of Blood.

He felt her stop then, halting in the hallway just beyond, hesitating.

+Come, + Avo said, casting a ghost through the reflection and channeling his thought-echoes at her. +Come. Ask me your favor. Ask me what you want. I have gifts for you.+

Her thoughtstuff shivered with anticipation, and after a passing heartbeat, she kept going.

{Be less fuckin' creepy too,} Draus said. {"Come. Come. You're lucky this girl's basically got her mind twisted by you. Ain't no juv with any sense walkin' into a room where blood talks.}

The ghoul hissed with displeasure. "Don't make this bad for me. Important moment."

{Ah. Time to promote your Renfield to a full vampire, eh, count?} Calvino hummed.

“Be quiet,” Avo grunted.

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Downstairs, visual data from the corpse’s Ascender *Glimpser-III* optics synced with the locus, and its mem-data was uploaded into a local memory farm along with another backup of a stolen Stormjumper’s avatar.

Minutes later, the data was pulled by an unidentified Guild source via Recollector Registry.

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Shotin Kazahara was having a nice dinner on the edge of one of Loathing’s megablocks when his session sounded. Wiser Nara’s identification filled his cog-feed, and he casually dumped his half-eaten bowl of aratnid dumplings over the edge before accepting the call.

He had a feeling he was about to be doing business. *+Cutting into my dinner, Wiser. Is this a social call or do we have another hit.+*

*+Another hit, Seeker. Just a few minutes ago. The source of the mem-data can be traced to a structure just beside megablock one in the district of Veng’s Stand; Vanhern Sovereignty.}*

Hm. Highflame heavy territory. Risky entry—definitely something that the Council of Elders won’t be able to approve on short notice. But then again, what they didn’t know couldn’t hurt them. *+Thanks, Nara. Let’s do dinner sometime. My treat.+*

A polite laugh came from the other side. *+You’re too kind, Seeker, but... You understand that you have a... reputation.+*

The Godclad smiled to himself. *+Whatever do you mean?+* He chuckled and refrained from teasing the officer. *+Thanks for the help. List me as... investigating a lead. Requires clandestine work. Not to be contacted.+*

*+I understand... Do you wish me to prepare some backup for you? A Knot of golems and a fast-response Incubi cell.+*

*+Absolutely,+* Shotin said without waiting. *+You’ve been wonderful, Nara. If it’s not too much trouble, can you also send a cast over to the Stormsparrow and have her on standby? Transfer the imps from my account. Premium holding fee.+*

*+Is that... necessary?+*

*+Probably not. But if there’s something one should suffer, it’s being overprepared.+*