

*Lives.*

*It's all we really have to offer.*

*We're already less than useful for labor. Been that way for years. Wights obsoleted us before. The new mechs and drones coming out are just going to make the process faster. The Guilds offer all the public education we might need in public lobbies, but that's useless as well. They don't need the most of us to think or learn or become experts. They just skim the cream of the crop.*

*The rest of us aren't worth shit from fuck.*

*Cheaper than vivianite priming and with our own memories. I suppose that's something of material value to us as well.*

*Sure, we can find other things to do. The ones with charisma might make it to Light's End by being entertainers, the ones who got the fire in them could become squires or Necros or ride the circuits to the top.*

*But the rest of us?*

*The most of us.*

*No. We're here for one thing and one thing alone.*

*All the free miracles and benefits and comfort promised by New Vultun is a rigged game. This isn't a death farm, but a self-resolving menagerie—a self-run slaughterhouse.*

*Are lives are like this by design. They can't get better. They shouldn't. Because once again, we're just here for the dying.*

*Even with all the concessions the voiders forced our masters to make and the false front of public security presented by Exorcists and Paladins, we're just duped into the nest to spend our years. Our children's years.*

*"Scratch your lottery ticket today! You might just be a lucky winner! Also, if you schedule a childbirth from your local paedia-tech and choose to bring home more than two children, you will be given a stipend of twenty-two thousand imps a month with a free lottery draw, along with a special chance to be gifted the new Ascender Dynamo Aerovan today—perfect for a family outing!"*

*...We're pathetic. We are. Because even if we all know, where else do we go? Where else offers anything better?*

*People say this is not the dream, this is not the dream. But this is material reality, and the reality is that beyond all the shit and misery, there's still a shadow of a life here.*

*Same can't be said for the world left behind outside the megas.*

*-Yun the Cynic, FATELESS*

19-1

Harvest

The massacres were conducted as a subtle symphony, seeming as if a string of disconnected events lest one was aware of the unseen hand behind the killings.

Across the over thirty-five thousand death-taxable sovereign territories spread over New Vultun, the bulk of expendable life was concentrated in the Warrens. Mostly Light's End and the Throat beneath it with an estimated four-hundred billion people occupying their space. Lower still, the Spine and the gutters suffered far less congestion, amounting to a hundred and five billion counted through thoughtstuff documentation compiled in annual Exorcist reports.

With such a bounty of life came opportunity and risks in equal measure. Eyes lingered in the light and darkness, dangers noticed and not. Hence, the city also proved to be something of a theater for those privileged enough to afford veils of privacy, watching and studying the ecosystem of the Warrens in detail, learning the habits of its inhabitants, and the pillars of power they built for themselves.

To this end, gangs and Syndicates were like micro-cosmic fiefdoms unto themselves, offering employment and resource distribution to the FATELESS that relied on them. Trade ran as favors and debts accrued, refugees and destitute signing over their lives, bodies, or whatever services they could provide.

Through these means was control truly established. A toxic providence offered by uncaring hounds that evolved beyond merely hunting, striking pacts with the most desperate of lambs.

Thus, the fall of a Syndicate was always a matter to note, the waves of their collapse rising to swallow entire communities, and signaling the encroach of lurking rivals.

It was when a Syndicate fell that deaths truly began to spike. Local gangs, inter and intra rivals, remnants and survivors, or newly established factions all out throw for their bid for power, seeking to claim the vacancy for themselves.

Such a time was also when diplomacy and force were wielded in equal measure to the benefit of the wildcard. The unnoticed. The unexpected. For when seats of power topple and the fragments of their pillars fall, even the unlikeliest people might be able to ride the chaos and assume control, rare though these instances were.

Then again, what was chance but the culmination of all variables and outcomes, and what was opportunity than moments to transpire at the behest of a hidden master?

Such were Avo's thoughts as he stared through the looking glass, orchestrating another slaughter. Encased in haemokinetic plates infused with the Twice-Walker's miracles, he acted through Draus and Dice as they tore the megablock's hangars.

Railings screamed and crashed. Bodies burst and splattered. Husks of now-drained golems lit the backdrop of their blitzkrieg, the attack catching the Hawk-Daggers Syndicate completely unprepared.

*+Nine fireteams. Eight nu-dogs. Four nu-bears. Three Necros. Two Heavies. Two leaders. Three levels above.* + Avo highlighted the targets using Draus' Neurodeck as he continued to burn through the Sang Syndicate's Nether lobbies, his Conflagration igniting another five hundred minds nested within the sequences. Over fifteen hundred combat-design bioforms were nulled with them, the egos of the beasts dissolving utterly in the same fire that smelted their masters into Avo.

Draus was right there with Dice, but also three hundred kilometers away, fighting a separate battle below the gutters themselves as she shattered a chamber filled with formerly living hostiles. Casually walking down a spiraling staircase overlooking a former drone bay now serving as a barge hanger, the Regular announced her arrival by firing shots through a shard of hovering glass. The shots snapped out from the reflective sheen cupping Dice's form, counter-sniping the shooters blasting through their own walls to get at the girl.

Even as Dice turned, her momentum stayed constant, inertia lacking any hold on her. The dragon-curse pried at her blood, but Avo wrenched control back using his Heaven.

Twitching entities of chitin and fur roared at her from the walls and ceilings. Amalgams of bear, centipede, and cyborg, the incarnates—Sang-modified bioforms—carved through the scenery trying to cut her down, flak-canons once meant for anti-air now reduced to in-block urban combat.

They wouldn't be enough to stop her from getting to the final Knot.

The floor shattered beneath the hammering of her feet as Dice backhanded a four-ton repair drone aside with a casual swat. Wires and servos exploded. Fragments of industrial orange filled the air and eviscerated one of the centipede-bears stalking her. What few personnel remained fought to board the golems and aeros, desperate to flee, not knowing it was already too late.

Four more flechettes zipped out from Dice again and four sprays plumed from six skulls.

The Regular was bored again. Peeking out through the glass around her, Avo found she had already boarded the barge and was now busy scraping what remained of the captain's skull from beneath her heel as she walked past a dumbfounded mod-slave.

Back with Dice, Avo found the waif begrudgingly tearing a nu-dog apart, the whines and whimpers the animal made disturbing the waif more than the several hundred people she killed so far. Reaching using her haemokinetic armor, he claimed the remaining Lushburners for his Soul and then fired Draus a message. *{It's done. All Knots claimed.}*

*{Synced,}* the Regular said. Through her visual feed, he watched as the air chilled instantly as an ursine paw-some twelve meters manifested from the cold and swatted the maw-charge's deck clean of any survivors. *{I'm gonna snatch this one too. Have Kae do some comparisons. I think this crew is a vendor instead of in-house. There are males among them for one. Guessing organics have a hard time diving the Maw.}*

Avo grunted. *{Good. Grab Dice and extract when you're done. Going to synchronize mass-liquefication with the warheads.}*

Draus laughed. *{I'll get a move on, then. Wanna see the fireworks.}*

A shard of glass shot out from her to hover over the barge and stretched out into a pane that was ninety by twenty-five meters in dimension. The reflective surface flashed and snapped down, the Twice-Walker stealing an entire barge in an instant. Without leaving her Liminal Paracosmos, Draus—manifested as her Heaven—tugged Dice out from inside her armor, leaving only an inanimate husk of blood-made glass behind. Then, two new passages opened. One for the barge, delivered to a warehouse owned by Tavers, the other to the Manta hovering over the Hawk-Daggers' local megablock.

The moment the twosome were cleared, Avo reached out with his Sanguinity and licked away what few egos remained before he bade his Woundshaper to bite. The old goddess sighed with satisfaction. ***"Blessed libations."***

**Ghosts - [17,313,887]**

**Liminal Frame (V) - 22,753 THAUM/c**

**Total Heavens Gained:**

**->[SANGEIST] x18; [LUSHBURNER] x9; [GALESLITHER] x9; [FULGERHUND] x12;  
[SNAKE-KING] x2; [SPRINGSTORMER] x4; [SHATTERHEAD] x10; [BULLET-BREEDER]  
x1**

Bodies parted into fading patterns of red as his metaphysical fingers closed. All four hundred and fifty levels of the building were hollowed from the inside. Then, with a single thought, Avo commanded twelve tactical yield nuclear warheads to launch. Soaring up and out from a nondescript hab-block window three kilometers away and a full district over, a dozen streaks

slashed through the midnight sky, slicing through ads and empty skylanes above, and over the gaps leading down into the Maw below. Without any active air defense or Nether-security to impede the missiles, their graphene tips punched through the plascrete walls before detonating inside the target.

Flashes of sight-cleaving brilliance bloomed out from around the structure, and a cascade of nuclear fire gushed from every gap, crevice, dockpoint, or doorway as the insides of the block were atomized utterly.

Nested safely inside the Manta, Draus and Dice watched the lovely devastation through the ship's feeds, the girl feeding a beef slug to her kitten as she looked on, wide-eyed in wonderment.

*{Pretty damn loud, if I say so myself,}* Draus said.

*{Loud is good,}* Avo replied. *{Loud is what we want here. Are the bodies of the Hawkeaters in place?}*

*{Yeah. Same as were we left 'em.}* The Regular scoffed. *{Fuckin' Sang, consang. Sometimes, I think they like fightin' each other more than the enemy.}*

Avo thought of Walton and the Low Masters and chuckled. *{Think we practice hating our own families first sometimes.}*

*{Thank Jaus we're orphans, then. Ain't that right, killer? Wanna do another one today?}* Draus was speaking to Dice now, the girl's eyes widening as she shook her head responsively. She didn't quite smile when she looked upon Draus, but there was a calmness to her regard, as if the two of them had some kind of understanding.

Maybe it was the "perfect brokenness" that it took for one to become a Reg resonating. Seemed like Draus was getting her recruit after all.

*{Alright, kid,}* Draus said. *{We're windin' down for the day. Hell of a haul. Couple more runs like these and we'll have enough thaums to make Fifth Spheres out of all of us.}*

Avo didn't respond immediately, instead taking a few moments to just listen to the nine thousand new templates joining his gestalt. Confused screams and sobbing cries filled his mind while old tenants welcomed their new companions. The fires of his Conflagration were growing, ghosts rising high, their undulating forms something between the flickers of a torch and the spikes of a crown.

He was crowing to enjoy the noise, enjoy the cacophony of countless minds filling every canal of his thoughts. It instilled in him a growing sense of completeness.

**[Horrible,]** Kare mused morosely, feeling the other templates spilling into the Conflagration. **[All these massacres, these false-flag attacks... They are pointless. There are so many Syndicates, and the Guilds, they can keep them supported or replaced easily. What good is this killing supposed to do? You should direct your efforts to stability. Control. Even if you don't want to reveal yourself, you can have *that bastard*—]** because she refused to ever mention Chambers by name, **[--forward the evidence needed to our Exorcists.]**

+No,+ Avo replied. *+Need new Heavens right now. More deaths. Saw and created opportunities to feed. And also to start a war.+*

**[But why?]** the Paladin trainee asked.

Abrel sighed. **[Because he wants the Hawk-Daggers and Hawkeaters to be destabilized enough for him to replace them. Or for their leadership to be so atrophied that he can install his own puppets via the half-strand and turn them to his means without even directly controlling them. You know. Complicated cult shit.]**

**[But... why can't you just have their memories resequenced?]** Kare was disgusted just thinking of such an infringement, but still, at least the lives harvested today would live in that outcome. **[You have the means to—]**

**[Two problems,]** Abrel deadpanned, growing increasingly annoyed at the topic. **[First, he needs to put on a show. Keep the No-Dragons from asking why the behavior of their subsidiaries is suddenly so different. Something that can be explained through casualty-induced turnover and replaced leadership. The second is that he's setting them up as in-city death farms while the Agnos finishes with the Heavens infused inside the barges so we can jump the border and go Fallwalker hunting instead.]**

Kare fell silent at that, not sure how to feel about her part in this entire affair. Her senior comrade, Paladin Kassamon, committed to the role of gestalt warden to keep his mind centered, directing the arrivals and doing his best to keep them calm. With so many presences inside him, factions were forming. New cabinets and alliances between the various templates trying to jockey for his attention, fighting for him to take their advice.

This, above all other things, was something he never expected to enjoy: politics. Battles of policy and struggles for his favor from the fires of his mind. Already, the perspectives to consider were vast, and the options they offered varied and helpful. But his templates were still only in the thousands. The population of a large block, perhaps, but still just a block. A new yearning dawned inside him, and he wondered how much more complexity he could ingrain if he simulated the population of a district.

**[Please don't,]** Corner groaned, uncharacteristically annoyed. **[Damn place is loud as shit already.]**

“Jaus.” the voice pulled him out of his own mind. The speaker was right next to him, her back turned as she looked up at the holographic representation of the Point\_12 Sovereignty. Tavers studied their progress over the past fifty-eight hours. She was unarmored, dressed in a heavy synthleather coat with a cluster of holo-projectors dotting the shoulders and arms. Fishes swarm up her limbs, neon waterfalls defied by koi, determined to climb the currents.

“Jaus,” Tavers said again, giving a soft laugh of incredulity. “Crazy.”

Avo drew all of his Conflagration back into himself then, his halo roaring as ninety percent of his consciousness receded out from his Auto-Seance. Burning ghosts erupted out from his accretion like coronal ejections, jets of phantasmal spearing upward like spikes on a crown. “Something wrong?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I didn’t know I was getting into the world domination business.” She pointed at the red arteries sprawling across fifteen districts and thousands of holographic structures. Overhead, a shining “2%” hovered over the Sovereignty. Minimized markets dotted the overlapping rings upon which the districts were built. “I go off and take a nap, and now I come back to this. I swear, half those icons weren’t there last time. And why’s that flashing.” She pointed to the Hawk-Dagger megablock they just hit.

“Killed everyone. Then nuked it. Thanks for the warheads.”

She waved him off. “Yeah, don’t sweat it. Got a few hundred more where those came from.” She turned and gave him a shit-eating grin. “Perks of raiding a Highflame warship during the war.”

Another triangular icon flashed as Chambers gave a whoop while sitting on the throne. “New cult member! Thank you for the sub!”

Tavers blinked. “What the hells does that mean?”

“Think the Skintaker just had another person pay to get into his most private streams. Chambers has been spoofing his way into them. Turning Syndicate personnel. Enforcers. Techs.”

“Huh,” Tavers said, wiggling her nose. “You kids get up to weird shit these days.”

Avo stared down at the aged squire. “You kids.”

“What? You think you’re not a kid to me because you’re people-eating, mind-burning, Heaven-stealing monstrosity.”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’d be wrong, juv.”

The stare turned into a glare. “Could burn you too.”

Tavers yawned. “Good. I’m sure your other templates will agree with me when I get moved it.”

A chorus of agreements sallied forth from his gestalt. Avo de-loaded all the traitorous templates and found himself left with less than ten minds. His frown deepened. He unbanished the turncoats and moved on.

“How’s Essus,” he asked. “You took him down with you into the Maw earlier. Scouting detail with you. Tracking smuggling routes.”

“Well, all things considered... yeah he’s a fucking mess,” Tavers shrugged. “The bees spent more time trying to keep him calm while we moved from point to point. Poor half-strand nearly had a breakdown when we came upon a mound of burned bodies. His Heaven’s useful though. You know he can connect anything that resembles a doorway with himself, yeah? That was useful, at least.”

“Find anything?”

“Not yet.” The lines on her forehead wrinkled. “We did encounter a big-ass Highflame patrol, though. Huge. I’m talking thousands upon thousands of drones sweeping through the Maw. Cast a few consangs of mine, and they’ve basically fighting Stormtree in the Maw over Yuulden-Yang. Heavy drone warfare. Severe losses, but they don’t seem to care. Or have orders not to.”

She fixed him with a knowing look. “I suppose all do funny things when we misplace our shiny new Frame, huh, consang?”

A pressure settled upon Avo’s shoulders, centering him. Highflame was moving away from playing subtle, it seemed. Dangerous. But potentially exploitable. A hundred thousand voices chattered in the back of his head, whispering how he could turn this threat to an advantage. The promise of his Frame was a lure. Perhaps he could direct them against Ori-Thaum or a rival power somehow if there was ever a need.

“Suppose so,” Avo replied.

A call flashed over his Neurodeck as Kae’s ego-ID appeared. Answering it with a thought, the agnos’ avatar filled a corner of his feed. Though his DeepNav couldn’t narrow in on her position, he knew that she was in her personal module—a new space the George Washington grew for her, mimicking the design of her old study in the Tiers using its smart matter. *{Avo. I think I know how to install the barge’s canons into your Heavens without requiring to removal of Luminosity.}*

*{Good,}* he replied. *{Fortress would be hard to replace. Got a heavy spike of Heavens and thaums. Enough to make some improvements.}*



Looking at the details he cast over, a small smirk spread across the smooth ebony of Kae's features. *{‘Some improvements?’ You are due another education, oh, ghoul of mine, for I have earned for myself new knowledge that would make me the envy of any of my peers.}* She giggled.

Avo tilted his head, and for the first time, slotted pieces from Chambers' template into his base ego.

Kae blinked. *{Avo?}*

*{Ghoul... of yours?}*

Her expression went stiff and her cheeks reddened. *{I—uh, it was a figure of speech. You understand! Don't tease me!}*

He grunted in acknowledgment. *{As you say... my dearest Agnosi.}*

She cried with indignation and cut the call, leaving only a frowning Tavers before him again.

“Been staring at me for a bit,” Tavers said. “Saw your thoughstuff needling too. So, either you just got a call or there's something wrong with my face.”

And with Chambers' personality still slotted at the forefront, Avo bared his fangs in a smile and lightly patted the squire on the shoulder using the floating tip of an Echohead. “I'm sorry,”

It took a moment for her to understand what he was implying, but then she threw her head back and barked a laugh. “Oh, you *fucker*.”

So, did his gestalt continue to churn, and evermore a furnace of dynamic humanity did the Conflagration become.