

We're gonna be tested in this life, Cas. You know this. You know that we have a burden. A responsibility. A crusade. You how hard the struggle is. Know that it was going to cost us. Has cost us.

I know... that it's hard to have faith sometimes. Especially after what they did to your father. Your brother. What they're going to do to me. I know this is going to break you in ways—oh, Cas I'm so sorry. I'm so, so, sorry.

I didn't mean to get caught. I didn't mean to leave you alone in the end. I tried. I really did.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry's all I can give.

You're the only one left of us now. The only one that can still carry our fire. That bears our faith.

This world is sick. Wrong. The Fallen One's influence seeps here, tainting not only the false angels that were but also the people that remain.

This world is sick, and it needs someone to make things right, whatever it takes. Whatever the cost.

I've given all I had. You've given too much. But the people are suffering. The flocks are still lost—denied the path to providence.

The knives are falling, and someone has to be bled for the lambs. Who else but us? Who else but the martyred few?

[CRACKLING GAUSSFIRE; MOMENTARY DISTORTION]

Be the herald. Be the change. Be the noise for the silenced. And someday, when the dam falls, when everything comes crashing down, the flock will hear their Shepherd's cry, and His light will shine on us again.

Make it right, Cas. Take this pain. Make it right. Make it loud.

[GHOSTLINK DISCONNECTED]

-Marriet eld'Canduir's last thoughtcast to her son, Cas eld'Canduir

22-11

First Comes Lightning...

Unleashing peace was like setting a wolf free in a daycare.

The Famine was an avatar of destruction – ruin in motion. Under his touch thought ruptured and minds shattered, the damage total and delicate, striking deep to sunder egos whole. He unleashed traumas that astounded Avo, reaching into minds, grasping cracks in psyches, and delivering on optimal devastation as a conjunctive act leading to the strike.

The entire process was ingrained. Refined. But that was the purpose of the Low Master in the end: breaking people.

As Splinters wove themselves into traumas, relief settled upon Avo as he realized just how fortunate he had been—that he never suffered a direct engagement against Peace. It was more than the potency of harm inflicted but the impossible skill he directed them. Crude and vulgar though the Low Master was, the way he used the art was exquisite—the gnosis he possessed would have taken Avo lifetimes to master.

The first to shatter were the detected Necros. Highflame, long used to facing Ori-Thaum, treated the Nether more as unpredictable wilderness, deploying fast-moving assets they could pull out at a moment's notice should they attract the Incubi. Their own mindscapes were fortresses layered in protective wards and separated by nodes.

Their composition in the Nether ensured their forces would only suffer partial subversions, and Omnitech's Noosphere support allowed them a secondary network in case of a total route in the realm of thought.

Unfortunately, this also made them easy to isolate and ensured they could be defeated in detail.

Traumas detonated within their minds, but Peace seized the parting detritus of their mem-data, analyzing the information and feeding it into their next attack. The pace at which the Low Master worked was gut-churning. Under the template's command, splinters shifted into Auto-Seances, bridging him from one mind to another, burrowing through them as a chain of detonations.

The ambiance of the physical world remained as it was: a steady stream of sound, patterns unbroken, violence forthcoming. But should one peer down at the Nether, take in the connected mindspaces of the district, they would see bubbles of accretion popping, and the substance of their mem-data imploding—prevented from becoming shrapnel.

In the span of a heartbeat, all the field Necros were hollowed at their cores, allowing Peace to guide splinters into their open wounds, melding Avo's consciousness over the missing aspects and effectively mantling the broken egos as false shells to confuse whoever the Necros were connected to.

From their commanders' perspectives, it would seem nothing more than a brief disconnect. Perhaps a thing of Nether lag. When they learned the truth, it was already too late.

[You see it now,] Peace said, bitter pride swelling inside him. **[Do you see what I could have done to you, little shit. What I could have fucking made you and your bastard cadre if life was just. If I was ever given the chance.]**

Screams echoed through Avo from fifty-three different minds. A half second later, four-hundred and thirty-three were nulled, and the rear line support for the Regular squads sent to capture Cas was effectively decimated. Another heartbeat passed, and Highflame's jocks, Necros, and commanding units were all little more than drooling vegetables, the sixty MPP "Mortality-Pattern" long-range thauma-kinetic assault drones now bound to Avo's Metamind as a final reward.

Yet, through it all, Peace revealed his greatest flaw as well. His inability to do anything but destroy. His unwillingness to abide by empathy rendered him less than incompetent at stealth and absolutely worthless for subterfuge.

Avo chuckled. *+Must make you feel pitiful. How Defiance's shadow still hangs over you. Even though he's dead.+*

What phantom joy Peace felt turned to bitter fire. **[Cunt! Fucking cunt! I nulled the bastard! I shattered all his nodes! Broke him again and again and again-]**

+And that's all you're worth. You hurt. You destroy. But you never win. You are a good instrument. But nothing more. Called you master. You're just a slave above other slaves. No more replacable than a ghoul. And that's all you will ever be. Unless you wish to change.+

The hint Avo dangled made the Famine flinch, and he turned from the conversion, giving himself fully to wiping the Regulars that remained.

But as Chambers guided Cas through the interior of the megablock, compromising the Metaminds of bystanders and the building's internal security to give him a clear route towards escape, Peace's second limitation was made known.

As he directed his pattern against the hundred and fifty-six Regulars in the field, their wards shattered and their inner mind fortress came apart in chunks, but the soldiers kept coming. Unlike their Necrojacking comrades or their superiors, the mind of a Regular was a thing of *wrongness* birthed from human heritage.

Peace's traumas threaded through them like a string of explosions, some small and delicate, others nuclear, cataclysms unfettered. He chained them together—the death of a sibling from Lucille to another template's failure to stop their brother's suicide to the guilt of a murder who could never forget the accusing eyes of his victim. He struck with cognitive weapons forged from guilt, hate, anger, sorrow, despair, and disgust. He struck using sequences harvested from thousands upon thousands of minds supported by the impossible efficiency of Avo's Conflagration. He struck over and over, parts of the Regular's egos disappearing in chunks.

But in the end, only nine succumbed to nullification. Nine out of one hundred and fifty-six. Nine and no more as disruptive waves pulsed out from their minds, shredding away the concert of splinters Peace directed in his offense.

Tides of perception emanated from Avo's Skimmers once more, and he found himself studying the approaching Regulars, converging on Cas' position from all sides, encompassing without breaking stride.

There was no panic to them. No hesitation. With thirteen in a squad, they moved with inhuman cohesion, communicating without need for thoughts or even words. They executed their nulled comrades without breaking stride, without regret. Nor did it take them long to disassemble the sessions they had connected to their Auto-Seances, effectively severing themselves from Highflame command.

The actions were performed instantly. Autonomously. Reflexively.

+*What the fuck*,+ Cas muttered, disbelief rising as Avo synchronized his memories with the rest of the cadre. Of all that were present, only Draus and Tavers remained unmoved—the former alike to the hounds approaching, the latter someone who swam in similar waters.

Some described Regulars as having nothing left to break. Sampling the fragments he devoured from the few Peace managed to destroy, Avo disagreed. They were effectively beings of externalized purpose, driven by an urge to fight, indifferent to the idea of death or cessation.

As sophonts, they weren't beyond being unmade in sanity, having their thoughts overloaded until they simply weren't themselves anymore, but aside from Avo or another form of asymmetrical consciousness, they were as close to trauma-resistant as a mind could be.

Little wonder the Low Masters failed. Little wonder why Highflame was so confident in sending Regulars to clear nests of ghouls or ingress into Ori-Thaum's territories. To Avo, they stood more thesis to Highflame's true philosophy than even the Godclads.

+*Blessed be the unbreaking*,+ Avo said. He considered saying something to Peace, a question or a taunt but decided to let the template seethe in his silence.

Quibbling was for later. Right now, they still had one of their own to extract, and though Avo couldn't strike at the Regulars through the Nether, nor risk exposing his presence to Veylis through the use of a miracle, that didn't mean he was impotent.

Assuming full control of the high-flying drones once deployed to support the Regulars, Avo turned their light-guided spatial-kinetic cannons on the units below.

The Mortality pattern was a thing of novel design. Used more often in times of peace rather than amidst the flame of war, the drone was a lightweight assassination platform capable of making

precision shots from afar while being small enough to reliably maneuver through dense urban environments. These specs, however, are secondary to the “Dawnseer” Spatial Precision Cannon it has a solitary armament.

Mounted to the spine of the star-shaped drone, the thaumically altered reactor of the platform gathers light using a layer of panels, allowing it to stay cloaked while also projecting a spatially affixed firing lane through its dorsal cannon.

In simplicity, wherever its lens-focused beam lands, a dual-stage gauss rocket will follow, allowing express deliveries from up to 55 kilometers away.

As things were now, the sixty drones were less than three away from Cas, and the approaching Regular.

Modern thaumatech was a lovely thing to possess.

*+Target the ones in the middle,+ Draus said, marking specific accretions using Avo’s Metamind.
+They’re squad leads. Drop them and the rest will default to skirmishin’. Make ‘em easier to pick off.+*

Aligning Phys-Sim firing trajectories...

Strings of light pierced through the motion and chaos of the district. A bubbling weight was building in the atmosphere, the resonant chronology of the present population molting as bodies shifted, unaware of the ongoing battle. Shifting gears and the swinging clock handles defined the local architecture, and between the mechanisms in motion were shots lined, skipping off the hoods of aeros–reflecting off glass—to finally brush the armored exoskeletons of the Regulars.

Twelve canons sang out with sharp cracks. Twenty-three more followed. Three shots struck home against miracle-treated alloy. A squad of twelve were the first to be hit. The durability of Highflame’s chemically-manufactured armor couldn’t be understated, but short of being a Godclad or piloting a golem, there was only so much that could be done.

The slugs declared their impacts in two stages: a ringing impact against armor; a conical burst of fragmentation. Unshaken by the assault and displaying incredible reflexes, the struck Regulars fired their thrusters and twisted, trying to get the shot to skip off their bodies.

Again. An admirable effort. But mortal flesh was a limited thing by design.

Explosions enveloped entire teams. Concentrated yield explosives made to pierce through megablocks or precision-kill golem pilots tunneled through combat skins and exploded internally. Alloy ruptured spewing puffs of crimson vapor. Five died immediately. Thrice more were maimed, missing limbs, or operating with major damage.

But not even that stopped them. It barely even gave them pause.

The squads dispersed, coming apart in teams of two, darting for cover as moving blurs. Fusion burners flashed, making entryways through the surrounding structures. In a heartbeat, the Regulars were in the wind even as Avo triggered his own Condyllostylus to match them.

Thoughtwave disruptions left pockets of vacuum in the Nether.

Avo drones dove down through the air like falling spears in close pursuit. Even now, he couldn't direct sixty different units with the fine focus demanded when traveling at high speeds through urban sprawl, but blanketing the area with splinters turned Skimmers was simple enough.

Shifting his attention briefly, he discovered Cas a good half-kilometer away already, moving fast through maintenance tunnels beneath the district. That alone would have been a positive thing to note, but the fact the Columner was bounding from wall to wall as echoing twangs of sound captured Avo's curiosity.

He knew the man had a Domain of Sound. Something to do with melody or music considering the curious strings sported on his prosthetic arm. Watching his canon at work was nonetheless fascinating and informative—sound and space working in tandem. Not suited for combat, but good for subterfuge or evasion.

A fine thing for a rebel to have. Or a spy—

A snap shuddered against Avo's Fardrifter. Spatial existence slammed together as an unseen bowl slammed down on the area, pocketing it away from the rest of the district. Eight full kilometers around the block shimmered a translucent dome. Aeros passed into the threshold and came out off course, still on the outside.

+Pocket,+ Draus growled. +They probably set that up before startin' the show. Too bad they don't know their rabbit's already slipped the noose.+

Cas continued reverberating through vents and crevices too narrow for even arantids, leaving the ambush far behind. As calm began to reassert itself on his mind, the Columner bit back an internal shout of frustration as he realized another of his assets was dead.

Another.

+Keep heading down,+ Avo said, letting his drones do another pass over the pocket. He collected the remainder of splinters still left within the entrapment and reassembled them in Cas' mind. +Need to get to the gutters. Tavers should have a safe house somewhere.+

Cas paused. *+I'm not going to one of the George Washington's gateways.+*

+*Blew it up*,+ Avo said, not feeling like giving another debriefing. Instead, he simply shared his recent collections with the Columner and this time the man cursed internally.

+*Jaus. Fuck! Did–did you need to do that?*+

+*Not going back under anyone’s leash. Zein’s handled. For now.*+

The exhaustion in Cas worsened. Then, he pulled up another session in his Metamind and began moving in a new direction.

+*Cas?*+ Avo asked, unsure why the man was deviating from his path.

The Columner didn’t respond, choosing to cast someone instead.

SESSION SEQUENCED

ACTIVATING AUTO-SEANCE...

UNABLE TO REACH [NUNA VELTERS]

+*Come on*,+ Cas said, growling under his breath.

Velters. Avo glimpsed memories of the woman earlier when he was rebuilding Cas’ mind. An asset. One of Cas’ personal spies. This one was related. A daughter. But that was all Avo’s mem-data had on her.

+*Probably compromised too.*+ Avo said.

+*Yeah, probably*,+ Cas replied, clearly frustrated. +*Sonnabitch, Avo, you should’ve–Zein was had the reason we could operate how we did–You... Now we’re all exposed. All the cells.*+

+*Know why I had to do it.*+

+*Yeah. Well, the rest of us are paying for your “freedom.”*+

Avo grunted. That was true. There was a cost. But even faced with the fallout, Avo remained absent of regret. Collateral damage was unavoidable in a war. Such was true between the Guilds, so was it true between Godclads.

That didn’t mean they just had to accept things.

+*Could be another trap for you*,+ Avo said. +*Highflame could be waiting for you there too.*+

+*Yeah? Well fuck ‘em. I’ve been waiting for them too. Waiting for a long time.*+ Rage and near

despair swelled in the man. Martyrdom called to the rebel in him often, but the shepherd he was loathed to abandon those he could still help. *+Don't even think of twisting my memories or changing my mind. I need to do this.+*

+I know. I understand. Going to help you. And yours isn't the mind I want to change. Still. Know that you're heading into danger. Know that you're walking the fire. Can't use my miracles through you. Risks exposing us to Veylis. Can only lend you my mind. No guarantee you might make it out.+

Cas gave a bitter chuckle. *+I'm absolutely fine with that. Someone's got to make things right, huh? Who else but me? Who else?+*

Avo heeded the weariness in the man's tone and his templates whispered to him a worthy reply. *+Who else but us?+*