

+Hey. I got a personal message for all you consangs striving and struggling at Light's End.

You know you guys have the highest suicide rate in New Vultun if we separate the Warrens across all its layers, right? It's rough out there, being so close to the light, but not really part of it.

Don't disconnect. I'm not here to try to hurt you or anything but... I've always found all of you beautiful, you know?

You're like moths. Moths to a flame.

I know how you feel. I know what it's like to be taunted with perfection and glory beyond your reach while you live in its shadow. It's an affront to your own life. Who can bear it? Anyone who's felt your pain knows why you lose to that siren's call.

But fight it. You have to.

Listen to me. Just listen.

The Tiers... They're not the utopias you think they are. Sure, you won't have to worry about Syndicates or gangs or wandering monsters dumped by the No-Dragons or left by the Low Masters, but your life stops being yours once you get owned by a Guild.

A sponsorship is just that. Being owned. If you can't say no to your master without suffering repercussions that break you, that's being owned. If you can't resist or fight back without being destroyed, that's being owned. If you can't live or own life and have to have "monitors" installed into the back of your mind to watch everything you do and correct your habits and scream at you from the inside of your mind every time you lose focus or want to do something other than what your father or mother or master tells you to for the glory of the fucking Guilds, that's! Being! Owned!

...

Sorry. Sorry for my outburst.

There are miracles of such immense power that you just... find yourself unable to describe them. Unable to even understand what's happening to you. There are places of such joy and tastes filled with such pleasure that you'll find yourself addicted for months. If any one of you is ever lucky enough to win a trip up into the Elysium, you'll come back changed.

And those are the ones who will be irreparably broken.

A moth that has touched the flame but is banished back to the darkness thereafter, condemned to never burn in its lifetime, is owned.

Is a moth that's going to seek an end because it knows... it knows there is a better life.

But it won't have it.

Well. Here's to me trying to save you from that dream today...+

-Cala Marlowe, The FATELESS THOUGHTCAST

17-1

A Sickness in the Bones

+ *Anyway, Here's: Down to the Gutters' new hit single, "Guildless."* + A noise followed Cala Marlowe's words, the sound of a guttural shout dragged on for far too long. Deeps riffs vibrated through the Nether, drowning the joy-den with noise.

A shame only two people were present to hear it.

Bloodless bodies littered the ground in pieces, and a pond of blood trailed after a waifish figure, rising to coat the walls in windows to prevent herself from being killed by a sharpshooter from outside the bounds of the block.

Again.

Reaching into her jacket's inner pocket, she produced a particular fang threaded through by a flesh-made necklace belonging to a local gang—the Exsanguinators. They were an exclusively Sang outfit decorated themselves around a theme of blood and wore the carcasses of modified nu-bats during their midnight raids.

It was because of them that Dice drained these bodies. It was to frame them that she left something of their signature.

Striding past overturned tables and discarded guns, Dice didn't draw the blood back into her until she was already out of the room and heading to the garbage disposal. She made her escape down where bodies and trash were thrown, her haemokinetic limbs digging into the metal as she slid down before additional reinforcements arrived.

If she unleashed the full potential of the god dwelling inside her, she could have destroyed this block. Killed almost everyone in it.

But that wasn't what the new master wanted her to do. No. The new master spoke to her in her dreams. Gave her choices and targets of opportunity—people like the ones that killed her old master and captured her. Sold her.

Syndicates, they were called. Syndicates and gangers. They were like the once-men of the wilds. Misshapen effigies of humanity in body and mind, knowing only harm and predation.

The only difference was the once-men of this city had a preference for chrome and madness came more from the curving halo's around their heads instead of the vileness of their deeds.

The group she attacked today was called the Silver Tongues. They belonged to a larger enclave—or something of the nature—called *Ashthron*e. One them managed to hit her during the ambush earlier, and she felt the shot spill over into her Hell without wounding her person.

He died without leaving a body when she vented his waste back into him.

Flipping past the edge of the chute and encasing herself in an armor made from her own blood, she avoided the incinerator and made her way back toward the place where she carved a hole into the building. Pulling the hood of her jacket over her head, she clicked a button on its wrist and immediately a shroud of light sparked over her, masking her figure with the look of a skeletal figure cloaked in darkness.

She got this jacket from one of her kills too. The only one that really fit her size. The other girl didn't even see her death coming. One second she was sneering at dice, pointing to a new shiny piece of metal poking out from along her spine, the next her insides were pouring out from her body, her flesh shredded by blades grown in her very veins.

That kill was a memorable one; a moment that spurred her to practice more with her new abilities.

Stepping out into the midday light, a smoking aero tumbled down past the reach of her sight past edge of the ringed streets fused along the side of the block as a hailstorm of gunfire followed it to an explosive crescendo. The actual people walked the streets clustered protective Wights—the cheaply reanimated corpses offering little more than cloth against weapons in this city.

People liked to lie to themselves here. They wore these lies in the light-emitting clothing they dressed in, in the substances that deluded their minds, in music that clawed at the edges of their thoughts, at even the fakeness fo the sun that shone above.

Turned and disappeared into the crowd, the smallness of her figure allowing her to between the crowds as she began her wandering.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw it—evidence of her master. The only other person in the room. A single fissure of blood spread along plascrete walls of the block, trailing behind her. Between the cracks, the embers of an ethereal fire burned for a moment, then faded entirely, the blood likewise leaking down a moment thereafter.

The master was here. The master just left.

Turning away, Dice considered what other deeds she could do today to please the master. They had promised her more power after last night. Perhaps she would get something greater if she showed more initiative, just like how her last master rewarded her with a nice chicken leg instead of the usual grubs when she hurt one of the other kids enough in a fight.

New Vultun was a city of peeking eyes.

From beyond the threshold of the atmosphere to the heights of the Tiers and down into the brutalist ravines running between every block in the Warrens, someone was watching, someone was waiting, someone was working some angle for some gain.

In this regard, Avo was very much just another citizen of the city, living and acting as his fellows did.

Unlike them, however, he moved without the limitation of needing a body, the hints of his presence could only be seen as a traveling inferno made up of burning ghosts. Where most traveled via arovec or using what few G-tube stations were still operational, he was growing his own system of transit using the very infrastructure of the Warrens.

Infusing his ego into a single thread of blood, he spread to create his hidden empire. His haemokinetic circuits flourished when nursed by matter—and there was *so much matter* in New Vultun. If the city was a slaving beast, he was a parasite slowly eating away at it from within, rising from and across the gutters, the Spine, and the Throat. Light's End remained a distant prospect as of yet as he focused on solidifying his foundations.

It wouldn't do for his subterfuge to be discovered and his flame to be extinguished before it could fully set New Vultun ablaze.

Dice had done well today. With any fortune, the Exanguinators and Silver Tongues would soon be at war, diverting their resources and creating the opening Cas needed to extract his trapped asset.

Supposedly, the street squire he was trying to save had dealings with members of Ori-Thaum. Potential contacts to get in close.

Any angle was worth trying now after Avo's attempts at re-entry failed.

The Silvers, for all savaging they suffered at Oversec-C1 and the Travesty at the Trident, were not slow to adapt.

Within the span of days, they completely altered their functional landscape in the Nether—protocols engaging across their lobbies and spaces placing them on war footing. Sessions across the Guild were changed. Broad-scale use of proxies went into effect. Thoughtscans went from routine to constant. And Incubi hunter-killers nulled a hollow wound into the Nether.

For all the mem-data Avo claimed and the names, faces, and FATE Skein information he had of the people who participated in the ruination of Kae Kusande's life, he now found himself facing the very simple problem of how he was going to re-enter the Ori-Thaum space without being discovered.

So, while they schemed, and between endless matters to master and countless choices to make, Avo picked up a new pastime all his own: circulating himself through the veins he cultured into the city and studying the people he was supposedly created to kill.

After two months of dying, fighting, killing, scheming, fleeing, and strategizing, after unraveling mystery after mystery, embroiling himself in conspiracy layered with conspiracy, Avo found only disquiet in the calm. Watching the daily lives of those who survived in the Warrens disturbed him.

Did the Syndicate actuary speeding across the skylanes in his new aero know that a group of near-feral refugee juveniles was fighting a personal war in the darkness of the gutter's alleyways using equipment salvaged from his organization to catch and sell ghouls for imps? Did the part-time mother and full-time vicarity star watching her nanny-mech rock her newly vat-birthed infant know that her neighbor was getting his throat slit past the soundproof walls next door for unpaid debts? Did the neighborhood children of Ox-Two back in Xin Yunsha know that Old Mama Zhu bred more than cicadas in her garden?

So many little lives danced and moved to their own rhythms, doing their best not to notice each other, blind to the rot that surrounded them.

And the monster that watched them through hair-thin threads made from blood.

Looking down from above, Avo found himself fascinated with the New Vultunites, high and low. He thought if he could massacre them in one fell swoop and squeeze the marrow of faith from their deaths, then the only Heaven that would sprout from the fires of his Soul would be that of delusion. Or blinds.

New Vultun was a city of eyes. But it also had a lot of practice pretending to be ignorant.

Perhaps the human mind could only take so much.

[Fuck,] Abrel muttered, growing increasingly morose with each passing day, her voice conveying the full weight of defeat weighing down on her shoulders.

+*What's wrong now?*+ Avo asked, studying the acceleration of a bioform ducking and dodging a thought-seeking missile over the skies of the Spine. The creature was a chimera between woman, sparrow, and serpent, with green scales coating its body, two heads stacked over each other, eight arms, no legs, and twelve blurring wings. It dove and rose through city streets as it ducked into an open aero hanger a second before the ordnance caught up.

The blast plumed out from inside the block as debris sprayed free from the entrance people passed to park their aeros.

Outside, the skylanes moved as normal, ignoring the havoc.

[Godsdammit,] Abrel hissed again, glaring at the scene before them. **[That. Just... that. How is anyone supposed to survive down here? These conditions are... random. Unfair—wasteful. I've seen no less than three people that should have been recruited into the Regulars die because their “consang” was too drugged out to shoot straight and got them all shredded by a nu-dog. It's just so... wasteful. These people could have been...]**

She didn't say worthy. The admission would have hit her like a trauma-pattern. Abrel, template or original, was much the same as the little FATELESS below. Same as most other Guilders and Godclads, really.

There were truths that damaged to your sense of self to see.

There were words that disemboweled your heart when spoken.

There were parts of reality so unappealing that Idheim created gods to alter its design.

[Warren's are the Warrens, juv,] Corner said, speaking softer to Abrel than he ever did. **[There was a saying on my block when I was growing up: two people choose if we live our die; us, then the city. I say live. I say live until you die. The game's here. Might as well play it.]**

As the wailing sirens of a volunteer fire brigade filled the Nether, Avo's consciousness pulsed as another mind synchronized with his. As he opened his session and foreign ghosts entered only to be set aflame, he found his simulation of Chambers and the original overlapping again. **[Hey, Avo! We got a hit. Come back.]**

The half-strand sounded excited, but then again, when wasn't he excited?

Taking a final look at the neon skylanes layered over the ponderous blocks of alloy and plascrete spilling as far his eyes could see, Avo poured the totality of his ego into Chambers' body. Knitting himself to his new sheathe, his senses and motor functions restarted.

He was back in the Manta cocooned in protective smart matter, staring at his uninhabited body sagging against the softness of the ship's interior. Casting himself back into his original sheathe, he killed Chambers just as he left and settled back into himself.

Opened and closing his claws, he felt prickling static run down his digits. There were certain flaws to having a body. Too many feelings. Too much that was capable of distracting him. But without his Celerostylus and the Neurodeck, he was effectively a diminished version of his full potential.

Free moving though his consciousness was, there were other aspects of still lingered beyond the confines of his mind and Frame's grasp. Calvino wasn't truly part of him, and being severed from his flesh meant being without the Meldskin or Aegis support. He had soaked in enough of the city. Now, he needed to return to the task at hand.

{How's our girl doing?} Draus asked via ansible, her virtual avatar manifesting in the corner of his cog-feed.

She was one step away from being on the ship and eight thousand kilometers distant at the same time. His DeepNav placed her within Layer Two itself, just above Mazza's Junction Mazza's Junction. That was promising. That meant she had something.

{How did you know I was back?}

{Chambers' vitals went did and yours started up again. You really should get to using the armor more. Get used to its full functionality.}

He grunted. *{Sure. Soon. Chambers said you found something.}*

{Yeah,} she said. *{I just might've.}*

Pairing her visual feed with his Neurodeck, he saw her standing on the rim of a glass portal looking down at maintenance drones darting to and about the industrial jungle outside. Magnifying her vision a hundred times over, she marked a particularly large drone carrier with red vertices but said nothing.

Several seconds later, the cluster of drones dotting the pore-shaped ports on its side rose into the air as a swarm. All except one. The wayward drone, rimmed four faint signatures of accretion departed Layer Two with its estimated trajectory headed for Mazza's Junction, and then—

Something slipped from his mind. What was he staring at again? He could recall why he was looking at that space—

Incog, he realized. There was something there that triggered an *Incog*.

{Now,} Draus said. {I reckon your mind's feelin' just as slippery as mine is, and if so, I think we just might've made contact with a Glaive cell or a group of elite squires. Whatever the case, we got ourselves ourselves somethin' to inves

That was worth cutting his sightseeing short. {How did you find them?}

{Voidwatch pinged a bit of anomalous data coming from one of their drone carriers after Chambers heard a little this and that from conspiracy boards in some Nether lobby called the "Snake's Pit." Might wanna check his mind for more mem-cons.}

{Already did. His old ones ate the new ones.}

{Fuck me.}

{Yeah.}

{How's Dice?}

{Very productive. Hit another three places for me today. Might do another. Going to feed her some more thaums later. Get her up a Sphere. New canons. Seems unshaken by the city. Just acts. Operates. Does it just because I tell her to.}

Draus laughed. {Shit, I'd scout her for the Regs if I was still with the Golds. She'd be star recruit material.}

{Better than you?}

{Hells no. She's a scrawny little thing. I would've eaten her for breakfast and asked for seconds. Alright. Enough banter. You comin' over and plannin' this run with me or what? See if what we got in our net's a couple of Glaives or somethin' less?}

{Yeah,} Avo said. {Open the passage. Call Kae. Chambers' just resurrected. Let's do this.}

Another Meta reached out to grasp his, the connecting gh

Unfortunately for the Guilds, "human" was a quality that didn't apply to Avo.

{And I got eyes on our squires...} Draus said. Her visual feed hovered in the upper left of his cog-feed as she marked multiple targets using her Neurodeck. As she zoomed in, information regarding the make and model of the aero spilled over, along with its current velocity and structural composition.

The *Ascender Kaskeiger* was a nu-bull of a vehicle, capable of seating twenty people—or maybe just eight heavily armed Scaarthian squires. Presently, they were flying over the

Infusing the foundations of the city using his Heaven, haemokinetic circuitry spread; an infection of vines crawling beneath the flesh. Draus helped him isolate and target vulnerable megablocks to subvert—structures that were both of the necessary height but also lacking in the required maintenance to care. More than the blocks, however, were the foundations of the Warren. The Layers themselves.

The design commissioned by the Guilds was geared for quarantine, surveillance, and segregation due to the rash. Being the people from softer times as they were, the voiders included extra features to ensure a certain quality of life for the unfortunates that lived beneath these holographic skies. Natural lighting. Day and night cycles. General things that made people forget they were living beneath a mountain worth of metal.

To call the plates that divided the city across its districts and sections gargantuan would be an understatement. “Tectonic” might have been a more apt comparison, but such a term remained insufficient to convey the sheer immensity of the machinery operating within.

Constructed and assembled via Voidwatch’s heavy industrial capabilities, the intricate components that made up each Layer climbed higher than the billions. More than this, however, was a need to make the system robust and obsolete so no one would be motivated to crawl into its confines and attempt to re-engineer something they shouldn’t from their discoveries.

That didn’t stop determined smugglers, Syndicates, gangers, and squires from creating their own personal mobile safe houses within the maintenance sections. With passages made to accommodate block-sized drone carriers and tunnels barely large enough to fit a flat, each Layer was a labyrinth unto itself that required an equally complex ecosystem to maintain.

Guild politics was a funny thing sometimes. If Voidwatch trusted the other powers not to pilfer their coldtech via the Syndicates, the entire thing might’ve been made out of nothing but smart-matter instead of dead metal. Instead, hard games beget hard goods.

But from such an outcome flourished new ecosystem

{How’s our girl doin’?} Draus sent, inquiring about Dice’s progress.

{About to make her approach,} Avo replied, studying the FATELESS Ensouled as she clung to the side of the walls, waiting for the ganger aero to pass by.

After the extermination of the Three-Fingers, he directed her towards other assets rife for retribution.

Dice knew better than to attack the iron fliers head-on.

Because she was a *good girl*.

And good girls killed for the master.

There was an economy to the way the girl killed—a natural efficiency of violence that could only instilled from a lifetime of conditioning. Consider her youth and the casual brutality that made up the bulk of her dreams, Dice had more in common than a war-biform nu-dog variant than a juvenile girl.

Seemed their masters were no so different.

“Are you the master?” she asked, eyes wide and bright, her feature softening even as the blood ran down her chin.

“No,” Avo said. “Not anyone’s master. Can just think of me as a benefactor. Provider of purpose. And power.”

“Did I do good?”

He paused.

“What would you tell yourself?” Avo asked.

A sudden rush of fear spilled out from her mind as her eyes darted, her heart unsure, and her eyes seeking conceptual answers in the material world. “... I don’t know.”

Avo grunted his acknowledgment. “Want to do something for me?”

“Yes!” she said, conditioning kicking in almost instantly. “Yes.”

“Find out. Discover if you feel good about your own deeds. Discover. Decide for yourself. Will have another gift for you after.”

“Okay,” she nodded. A flash of something—almost a smile, though she seemed unused to the expression—spread across her face. “When... when will I see you again.”

“Seek the darkness. I will be there.”

“Proxies,” Avo said

A table rose to hold the ego-disguises.

“I think we should bring her in,” Draus said. “Girl’s got the make. Would’ve been scouted her for the Regs after seein’ her perform.”

“Like looking at a reflection?” Avo asked.

“Nah. Too small. Too skinny. Wants to be led around too much. She’s the type of dog you lead around a leash with a muzzle. Leg go when you want some half-strand mauled.”

“How’s that different from the Regs?”

“I got paid something more than vibes.”

“Chambers, what

“Gods fuckin’ dammit, Chambers,” Draus roared, a smaller version of herself tearing free from a sore rapidly forming over where her right eye used to be. “I told you not to—” Whatever she said next devolved into a vicious snarl as humunculi-Draus shrieked with ear-piercing rage and bit down on the bridge of her “mother’s” nose.”

Tearing the offending offspring out from her face, she flung dashed it against Chambers’ chest. A splatter of gore followed. The half-strand toppled backward, his Meldskin deactivating as shriveled twins spilled loose from his throat, umbilical cords melding over with his trachea.

Kae was screaming, spasming on the ground as

Avo took a bite. "Hm. Ripe."