

+Another day, another outbreak. Pour one out to the unfortunates at Veng's Stand today, consangs.

It's looking pretty bad. But what's different about today?

[Hiccup; sound of cup hitting a table]

Details are sparse and censors are chewing up any leaking mem-data as best as they can, but my on-site sources and my Exoricsts contacts are talking about a 'Clad on 'Clad incident. Three Ori-Thaum Knots playing gangbusters.

Why? Who? Well, I can't tell you about the former, but it seems that the group was led by none other than Seeker Shotin Kazahara. "Planeshift." Part-time Ori-Thaum war hero and full-time tabloid icon. Seems another one of his operations has gone off the rail. Or on it.

You can never tell with that asshole.

Trust me, consangs: he's the type to leave even before he's done fucking you because he has a hair appointment at seven and he's running late.

And yeah, if that sounds like it's personal, that's cause it is.

It's not every day that you get to report on the piece of shit that pushed your parents into a divorce.

Especially when they were both cheating on each other with him at the same time.

Fucker.

Shotin. Mom. Dad. You're all whores, I got you get the rot. But at least you guys got to rub bits in the real. Not like the rest of us kids. Our intimacy is secondhand. We try what you did and we'll be spewing homunculi from every pore.

It's all a godsdamned joke.

We can't hug our friends.

We can't fuck.

We can't even hold our children. That is if we decide to grow a bastard at all.

What's left? The Nether? Alright. Sure. Fine. But I'm tired, everyone. I'm tired of looking misery in face and knowing that I am subhuman, knowing that no matter how good I get to be or what I do, I will always live a lesser life than the one my mother did, my father did, my ancestors did.

*Call me an ungrateful bitch, but I want warmth. Actual warmth. No to soak in the memory of it.
Or think of how Fated Kazahara got to feel it with both my parents.*

Piece of shit. I hope it hurt for him. I hope one of them got their cords bundled up.

Jaus, I am so godsdamned tired of all this shit. I just wanna...

[Sigh]

Sorry. Onto the next track...+

-Cala Marlowe, the FATELESS Thoughtcast

18-2
Initiative

Revealing White-Rab to the others was a strange act, like giving away a secret that wasn't even really his.

He trusted Draus and Kae. Dice and Chambers were chained to his will by the boons he offered and the approval he granted. Tavers was the only true unknown among them, but her very presence bestowed a lightness upon his templates—the very essence of hero worship.

Much of his base mind remained wary of the squire, but considering White-Rab had tasked her with being Avo's shadow, the foundations of her integrity must've been close to unbreakable.

"Basically, he was doing what I taught him to do. Best practices in this city. I mean, I get not looking a gift-ghoul in the mouth—mainly cause the fucking thing will just bite you most of the time—but Souls aren't easy to come by and if someone's going around handing them out like candy, well... You wanna figure out their deal. What they want. What's at risk." Tavers paused and took a breath. "Once again, running into you all wasn't the plan. I was just gonna shadow our young friend Dice here until she ran into you. Didn't know you were about to hold your little cult meeting in a ganger hideout."

"Jaus," Draus groaned. "You got that close, huh?"

Tavers snorted. "My ass was right around the doorway. I was trying to figure out just what was going on when we all got jumped. Godsdamned Silvers. Never 'em coming."

"Yeah, cause they do a lot of dyin' in a straight fight," Draus said, voice thick with derision. "Still. Nasty run for someimps. That's some hard business, ma'am."

"The imps are a professional courtesy," Tavers said. "And this business is good as it's always

been. Rash aside.” Chambers shuffled in place. “Besides, I needed to see about this ‘miracle ghouL.’ It just so happens that I need a Soul, along with someone who can rebuild or transfer an entire mind, if the need calls for it.”

The implications behind her words intrigued Avo. Slowly, a guess took shape in his mind. “Said you wanted my gifts for someone else? Family? Want to make them a ‘Clad? Fix something wrong with them.”

The squire grew impossibly still for a few passing heartbeats. A faint trickle of melancholy escaped her mind, but with its scent followed traces of hope. “It’s... uh. My son. Third son. Eurun. He was in the circuits for a while. Ended up... winning big and losing hard right after. Now, he’s got a problem. Something that none of the Agnosi and Necrotheurges I’ve helped with know how to fix.”

A rarely encountered problem. His intuition told him that he might be looking at a case adjacent to Elegant-Moon. What else was beyond both cognitive restoration and the reach of resurrection? Still, it was an interesting problem. One he might fix if only to get more insight into what it truly took to real-death a Godclad.

“So. You’ve found me. Found us. What now?”

“Now?” Tavers said. “Now, I tell Rab the run’s done and put forth a commission of my own. Got plenty to offer, so you just name your price. I don’t know much need you have for imps or golemic weaponry—”

“Helpin’ her would be wise,” Draus said, words immediately following the mention of metaphysical firearms. Avo turned to glare at her. “She’s got contacts that take a lifetime to build. Hells, she’s probably a livin’ network by reputation alone. Think about that. Could use her. After we vet her that is.”

“You just want something new to shoot,” Avo said.

“Damn right, I do. But I’m also right. Do it, rotlick.”

“Wait, so,” Taver looked between them. “I’ve been meaning to figure this out but, which of you is in charge of this little outfit?”

Ghoul and Regular shared a glance. “Well,” Draus said. “I do what I want. He does what he wants. Sometimes we agree and do the same thing. Sometimes shit’s fucked and we have to cover our own asses. That one’s there’s green and untrained as shit.” Kae folded her arms even harder at Draus’ description. “That one there’s trained badly and needs to kick a porn habit.” Chambers stared harder at the ground. “That one there’s doin’ pretty good despite bein’ untrained as well, but we basically only officially met her today. And got her into this mess because one of us had to play ghouL behind the mirror.” A low chuff of displeasure sounded from

Avo. "And the last one we got is a cat. Ain't worth nothing."

Unburdened by the Regular's words, Dice continued petting the kitten as turned from person to person, trying to conceptualize just what exactly was happening before her.

"Well. How about that. Consangs, you might just be the messiest cadre I've ever seen." She shot Chambers a look. "And, uh, don't make a habit of that. You owe me a hit of woundhound, son. Really don't enjoy burning myself."

"I mean, it kinda worked," the half-strand muttered under his breath.

Kae glared at him. "I'm going to tear every droplet of water out of your body and fill your lungs with them."

[Aw, they grow up so fast,] Abrel said, sarcastically cheering Kae on. Template-Chambers was growing to be as sullen as his actual self. He had expected cheers and acceptance for his martial feat. All he got was scorn and loathing from someone who had been nothing but kind to him before.

"Wasn't something we anticipated," Avo said. "But fortunate encounter. Educational. Beneficial. Got several things we needed. Turned several people. Two Paladins. One's Kare Kitzuhada. Niece to the Seeker that attacked us." He regarded Kae specifically using his next words. "She's our way back up into Ori-Thaum. To that section of the Tiers. Didn't get a chance to resequence the other Paladin yet. Do that when he sleeps. Use him to be our eyes behind the scenes. Add them to Abrel Greatling and Elegant-Moon, we have assets spreading across the Guilds. A start. But more needed."

The Agnos just stared for a moment, shoulders tense and posture tight. "I... okay. Good. Good. We should also try and find more places to set up in the Tiers. I owned a few homes—"

"A few!" Chambers choked. "Owned?"

"No can do, Kae. Probably got Guilder eyes crawling all over them." Draus frowned. "If they're still there at all. Guessing they either tore 'em down or resold 'em by this point."

Kae nodded, needing to hear the words from someone else. She looked upon the nu-kitten with tired eyes and sighed. "I had a bird once. Pipi. I suppose she's gone as well."

"Everything," Draus said.

Tavers studied Kae for a passing moment. "You're... that Agnos. The one that murdered her team and seduced that Paladin."

"*What?*" Kae said, as if she was unable to comprehend Tavers' words. "What are you talking

about.”

“Ori-Thaum propaganda,” Tavers explained. “Highflame says differently. Same with the Sang and Omnitech. Stormtree another line still. Seems like the only folks that don’t have something to say about you are the Agnosi themselves. And Voidwatch. Seems like you ended up a piece in the great game, girl. Shit’s rough.”

“Piece,” Kae said. “Like I was ever meant to suffer such a fate.”

“Yeah. Well. Jaus wasn’t supposed to die either. But here we are. Yesterdays fucked. Today’s ugly. And tomorrow’s all we got left.” Holding her arms out to her sides, the four whorls lining the frontal carapace of her armor rotated as plates hissed and the exoskeleton opened.

Somehow, despite the brief time he spent with her, Avo was unsurprised to see Tavers dressed in another, smaller suit of armor that resembled a series of interlocking chains. Her helmet was gone though, and he laid eyes on her face for the first time. The first thing that stood out was her skin and how layered it was. There was a greyness to it that just seemed unnatural. Thick. Like it had been replaced far too many times. Her hair was an auburn fire and her eyes glimmered just as bright. Despite the obvious modifications made to her, she still seemed far more human when compared to Draus.

Maybe it was in the lingering femininity of her features. Or the coloring of her cheeks. The pointed tip of her chin. Or how her musculature was still mostly natural instead of being strands upon strands of graphene or hyper-tensile carbon. A tattoo—something that Avo thought was a scar at first—also ran diagonally across her lip. It was a thin red mark and nothing more, a single stroke rich with hidden significance.

With each detail revealed, the urge to burn her grew, and Avo resequenced himself every time. Here stood a wellspring of living knowledge and combat mastery. Years upon years of runs, battles, relationships, and epiphanies condensed into one woman. Leaning free of her molted rig, she greeted everyone in person for the first time and Avo found himself unnerved at how small she was.

Only a few inches taller than Kae. Dwarfed by Chambers and shadowed by Draus. Whatever augments she had under the skin, her sheath hadn’t strayed far from the reach of baseline humanity.

In this, there was a testament, that through the accumulation of equipment, proper planning, and elevation of skill, one could thrive in New Vultun from Elysiums to gutters. That humanity was enough to face all comers, despite its frailties.

[I know, right,] Abrel said, her mind aglow with glee. [What a badass. I still can’t believe the High Seraph never extended an offering to her.]

"I kinda figured you'd be... older and bigger," Chambers said, blinking. "You got that... 'fugee build."

"Yeah? Well, I got news for you, son. Before they started making freaks and monsters of all you boys and girls, most of us had to just deal with our heights because that shit was genetic. Now, they carve out your skull and spine and plant you in a new body." She looked Draus up and down. "Like this one. I doubt she ever went through puberty at all. A juv one day and nested in the bones of a killing machine the next."

Draus shrugged. "Doubt I missed anything."

"Yeah? You'd be wrong." Tavers shook her head. "Oh, Avo. I cast Rab a couple of seconds ago. He wants to meet sometime again. This time with the rest of your friends too. He's curious about your little rebellion scheme."

"Will Reva be there?" Avo asked.

Tavers paused and ghosts swam faster through her halo. "She can be."

"Good," Avo said. He fought to keep a grimace from his face. "Wanted to keep them separate. Use Chambers to direct him through the Deep Bazaar."

The squire laughed. "Oh. You wanted to be the puppeteer with the kid, huh? Sorry, *ghoulie*. Raldi's never played that way. He'll find an angle on you sooner or later and turn things around. You're just lucky in play and he didn't... Shit, I guess he can't jack you now, can he?"

"It will be a short attempt," Avo said. "Memories are really quite flammable." Regarding Dice and Tavers again, he found himself increasingly pleased. Things didn't start out well at all.

But now, regarding the changes he needed to make to his plans, his options were growing, and his personal contacts were expanding as well. He needed to keep thinking bigger. He wasn't just one person anymore. His reach exceeded that of his body.

He needed to intrude upon the highest and lowest reaches of the city, and with his current assets, what once appeared a struggle was now all too surmountable.

"Draus," Avo said. "Open a passage back to the Washington. Need to make introductions."

The Regular nodded. "Need Chambers to scramble her mind or somethin'?"

"He can try," Tavers said. "I think White-Rab will be interested to see how his wards hold up against a competent intruder."

Kae scoffed. “Competent. I think you will probably be fine.”

Chambers winced.

“Look,” Tavers said. “I know the score. I’ll eject the memories from my mind right afterward. I’ll even have one of you do a peek. Maybe not the ghoul since I actually like having thoughts.”

“Alright, then,” Draus said. “Don’t think Denton or Cas are gonna like this.”

“They’ll be fine once I tell them about Kare. Kae. Need your input for new ontologic upgrades. Chambers. Get to the cloning pools. Contact the grafters. See if we can get Subject-One completed soon. Want to take them on a test run.”

Vigor filled Chambers immediately, his body snapping to alertness. Avo already knew how he was feeling via the template. The ghoul was still being nice to him. Not insulting him. There was still some validation to be gained. If the Rashing of Shotin wouldn’t make everyone love him, then what if he helped make the biggest, baddest, meanest bioforms there ever were? Or amp up the new sheathes somehow?

All this to be liked. All this so that someone else could tell him he mattered—to ensure his continued position in the group.

Chambers was a dog desperate to be leashed. And that degraded him from becoming. That degraded his personhood.

An echo of Calvino’s earlier words passed through Avo. The restored EGI, deliberately silent through the recent dialogues, spoke once more. *{You know what you can do. Set him free.}*

“Chambers,” Avo said, holding up a hand. “Before this. Need to say something.”

The man’s face dropped.

Avo began. “You’re a fool. Selfish. Impulsive. Killed thousands of innocents today. But saved us. Shotin likely would have killed us all without the Rash. You didn’t think about the ones you killed. Only about making yourself matter. Consumed by your fixation with lust. You’re still the same jackal you always were. The half-strand at Burner’s Way. Casual murderer of FATELESS. And thank you for giving us a way out.”

Heads turned and confusion spread. Chambers wasn’t the only one who looked lost. “I, uh—”

“Didn’t feel what it was like to kill the FATELESS. But I did. Didn’t focus on them. Felt the homunculi bursting from them still. They’re getting scapeled now. A causal massacre born from unorthodox salvation.”

“So... I did I do bad or good.”

“Both,” Avo said. Drawing on the momentum of his words and guided by his templates, he turned to Kae. “Kae. Life you had is gone. Buried. Can’t have it back ever again. But you can decide your life now. Get revenge. And also stop Chambers when he does something stupid. Not a bystander anymore. Don’t need let this city degrade you. Attack you.”

Her eyes fell, unable to meet his eyes. “You don’t understand. The Rash—when it felt *them* coming out of me...”

“No. You’re right. Don’t understand. Won’t burn you for understanding either. *I* will let you stay yourself. But life won’t. New Vultun won’t. Can talk about this later. If you want. Will listen to whatever you have to say. But need you focused afterward. Need you ready to survive.”

“Okay.” He barely heard her say it, but something in her tone felt different.

In the corner of his eye, he noticed that Draus’ helmet was gone and she was giving him a shit-eating grin. “Got anything for me?”

“Yes. You have a gun addiction. Need therapy. Like Essus.”

She made the ground beneath them turn to glass with a rude gesture. A moment after, radiance flooded its reflective sheen.

“Dice,” Avo said. “Stay close. Might feel a bit of squeeze.”

Picking up the nu-cat and placing it in her pocket, the waif gave him a quick nod.

“So what’s this supposed to be?” Tavers asked. “Some kind of glass Heaven?” She froze. “Wait, didn’t that dead Greatling have one of those? What was it called—”

The Twice-Walker pulled them down, across, and back up in the George Washington.

Back in the gutters, an unnatural brightness faded from within an abandoned bar.