

Ball your fists and stand for who you are. The Guilds might kill you, my son, but always remember that death is never far.

For what worth is a man if his words were not? A life lost in the attempt of righteousness hurts less than a dream never sought.

There comes a moment where one must choose: wick or flame; to stand and deliver, or refuse.

And when all is done, when the gates open and call you home, it will be your deeds and declaration that the angels make into your throne.

The road is hard, the road is bleak, but more than everything, the road is all we can seek.

-Cas eld' Canduir "The Ballad of Those Before"

27-13 (IV)

Last Days of the False Peace (IV)

{This is what I'm talking about. This. This is what civilization was made on. War. Monetized war. War as entertainment. People love war—especially when it doesn't affect them. Especially when their families don't get killed by artillery, or die from disease, or die because the water pipes are destroyed by bombing so they have nothing to drink, or are tainted by some nerve agent that turns you blind and deaf so you strain the city's logistics to collapse, making it easier for the invaders to gun you and your families down afterward.} Only Way To Be Sure sighed. {Ah. Good times. Anyway, this was a great idea, Avo. I strongly support this}

{I have a question?} Kant asked. There was a reluctance to their voice, as if they didn't truly want to know the answer. {Where did you source all these uh... bodies from? For your copies, I mean?}

A half-continent away, where the coasts of Noloth trailed off upon shattering waters toward the rising teeth-shaped mountains of the Skuldvast, a thousand Avos faced a thousand Draus with fifty meters between them.

In a few seconds, they would tear into each other, bleed and butcher until none were left. For now, the calm remained, and stray schools of fish swam upward into the sky, growing thinner with every moment until they slipped out of reality entirely.

+Took them from Crucibles. Had compromised Syndicates send off all their hunters. People who like torturing the Fateless. People who exploit the refugees. They made their choices. I made mine using them. Will spend their lives toward better ends.+ Two thousand was also coincidentally the most Avo could draw from their existing pool of "recruits" without affecting the coming war too much.

{Right,} Kant said. There was a bit of disappointment in their tone, but the protests were minimal.

+Was expecting you to criticize me. Complain about how wrong this is,+ Able remarked.

Kant simply sighed. *{Avo, I am part of the ethics committee, and we've had many disagreements. But frankly, this is far more than I expected from you.}* The EGI's voice took on an exhausted quality. *{It's far more than I got from Zein a lot of the times. That woman doesn't believe in collateral damage.}*

Over the enclave, the battle was broadcast and projected along the curve of the dome, extending beyond even the horizon. What's more, the enclavers interested in the view could have their minds patched into one of the sheaths at any moment—choose to experience the fight from the perspective of ghoul or Regular; switch between survivors at ease. All it took was a mental request from the person, and Avo would connect them thereafter.

What started as a nostalgic bloodletting between Avo and Draus turned into something far more sophisticated with a suggestion from Marlowe. As he and the Regular were trading insults after their initial agreement to the little war, the rest of the cadre caught on and started taking bets, while the Thoughtcaster brought up something important.

+Hey, Avo, remember the whole thing about taking over the Syndicates? Well, if you're going to stop them from killing the FATELESS, there's just one problem about that. See, the FATELESS are a source of death, right? And if the Crucibles end and people stop dying, well, the thaums stop flowing too, right? Won't that get the Guilds to take note a bit too early?+

Avo had considered this before. Originally, his plan was to simply jack into their lobbies and networks, alter the mem-data. However, with what he could do now, and the opportunities presented, a new option could be chosen. One where the deception aided him doubly as he continued falsifying Guilder data while funneling the deaths that were meant for them to himself instead.

+Are you trying to suggest I create my own snuff vicarities? Run my own Crucibles using enforcers or captured enemies instead? Overwrite their minds and bodies so they seem like FATELESS still?

Everyone else went silent at that.

+Huh. Right. We can corner the snuff market,+ Chambers mused.

+Yeah!+ Marlowe declared, suddenly excited. *+More than that. Don't you got like a hundred million Incubi flooding the Nether now?+*

+About that?+

+So you can use them to capture the lobbies. Crush what's left of the competition. Make sure every stream is yours. I swear—Imagine this, right? You can copy minds using whatever weird god shit you got going on. And with this, you can collect any assortment of egos and put them in sheathes and have them fight each other—this is gonna be great—and you can do any variety of things. Fuck the Syndicates, the studios would have glassed Kososo again for someone like you on their payroll. They wouldn't even need the lots anymore. Wild.+

+Point is not to perpetuate old mistakes.+

Marlowe scoffed. +Yeah, but you want to exploit every advantage. Look. There are a considerable portion of the city who just want pleasure and entertainment. Their minds are basically Numb-hollowed, and you'll be able to tap into any number of them for propaganda and whatever else we need. Avo, we're about to fight a war. We need to use everything and everyone. Cornering the entertainment market will let us twist shit against the Guilds so bad, those half-strands will be burning trillions of imps trying to combat the misinfo.+

She moaned as her Lustaway activated. +Just thinking about how hard we can fuck them is getting me mentally wet.+

Chambers' Lustaway triggered immediately thereafter. Across the link, a childish guffaw came from the Fucktopia. **"Careful miss, you just splashed my host."**

+Jesus Christ,+ Cas muttered, horrified. +I'm gonna cut the link and tune my arm. Cast me again after this is over, Avo. I don't wanna catch the Rash.+

And so it was that Avo prepared to become the first and only major producer of semi-ethical Crucibles. There was much he could do with this concept as well. The Guilds would pay good imps to watch their enemies butchered in these games. Maybe he could start doubling up on payments down the line.

What's more, he was on the cups of reaching the Seventh Sphere. Just eighty thousand more deaths.

GHOSTS - [901,411,345]

LIMINAL FRAME (VI) - 920,000 THAUM/c

More than just raw power, Marlowe's words also fine-tuned his focus. The coming war wasn't simply one that would be won on logistics, or thaumaturgy, or even necrothurgy, but one won on information, individual decisions, and the slightest bit of influence helped.

And so another facet opened in his theater. He would spread as many truths as he could, reveal as many secrets people hid from one another as he could. Truth was a bomb, fueled by lie after lie, and across New Vultun, there was enough truth to tear this city asunder.

Back in the present, the moment arrived, and Avo sent out a mental command to the arrayed forces; a call for combat to be joined.

+Charge.+

They needed no further prompting.

The Drauses moved forward in organized legions befitting their training. The Avos, meanwhile, imbued with all the knowledge the original possessed up to his transformation into a thoughtform, spread out wide, trying to box their foes in.

Chrome-enhanced bodies further boosted by exo-rigs greeted spearing Echoheads and fungal-cermaite bio-armor. In seconds, blood was drawn and the vanguard clashed in a blur of claw, fist, feet, and Echoheads. The first to lose their life was an Avo—his tendril seized by an impaled Draus, before several other copies of her pulled the ghoul over, each seizing an additional Echohead and pulling—ripping him in half.

Corner laughed in the back of Avo's mind as the death trickled over. **[Shit, consang. Might've been wiser to do what I told you: give your old selves some fighting knowledge. Cheat.]**

Avo didn't like what he was seeing, but that defeated the purpose. **+No. Should learn to live in reality sometimes.+**

"Won't need to worry about the Warrens soon," Avo said, casting details about his progress. ***"About to reach five percent infection across New Vultun. Sanctuaries already mine. Gutters will fall a few days after the trial begins at most."***

The Chief Paladin merely grunted as he walked up the stairs of his penthouse. Casting a thought into a locus hidden in the walls of his second floor bedroom, the underside of his bed hissed and clicked, magnetic clamps unlatching. The piece of furniture lacked a mattress, and in its place was a slab of mahogany upon with a film of dust over it. It was clear that the Chief Paladin did very little sleeping—likely chose resurrection like most Godclads for refreshing his vigor.

With a whir, the entire thing folded upward, revealing a hidden locker built into its underside. Interlocked grips parted from each other in a series of snaps, and the entire thing popped open like twin doors to a bank vault.

Inside, Avo found himself looking a combat skin made to accommodate Naeko's considerable musculature.

At first glance, the armor looked substantially like Zein's. Exoskeletal. Gridded cells of plating constructed from voidtech. They were master and apprentice, after all. A shared aesthetic was the least surprising thing between them. What was different, however, was the personal touch to the armor. Avo's Domain of Biology sensed that the bones lining the outside of the armor were actually extracted from people. Ribs lined the underside of the armor's abdomen, and a second external spine was layered over the first. Skulls were placed on his shoulders like additional

padding for his pauldrons, two massive plates came together to form Naeko's chestpiece. The helmet was made to resemble that of a warg, and his visor was lined within its open jaw.

"They have a skin of your old armor in Stormjumper?" Avo asked, half serious.

"They have skins of all the shit I wore before," Naeko said, taking in his ancient armor. Much like the bed, it had been untouched for years, and the discomfort in his mind only built as he took it in.

Hysteria intercepted a memory. He was thinking of the last time he wore it, in the aftermath of the Second Guild War. After Veylis betrayal, he tore across the skies of the city in a rage, hammering New Vultun in furious anger. For a month, he punished everyone that dared break his peace, killing them slowly, brutally, grinding their bodies away as a particularly cruel juvenile would scrape a bug against plascrete with their heel. Everyone hid from him during that month, with more than a few choosing suicide over his ire. But in the end, he was only hurting the weak, and the one that hurt him remained protected upon her throne of time.

Eventually died to ash, and despair took its place. Naeko hid from himself thereafter, retreating into the glorious world of Stormjumper.

"Does it have a name?" Avo asked.

"Hm?" Naeko said.

"The armor."

The Chief Paladin simply shook his head. "No, it's just armor. It's got a model number or something. Never bothered remembering that. Just know that it works and works good."

"Naming things is symbolic. Significant. Gives what you possess meaning. Meaning is power."

Naeko snorted, and a slight laugh escaped him. "That might be the biggest mouthful of shit you said to me yet."

Another memory resonated within Naeko. The Chief Paladin had said these words before, spoken them to Jaus himself. The savior simply threw his head back and laughed uproariously, not expecting such a harsh rebuke from his ever-loyal hound.

"Lots of people are affected by meaning," Avo said, seeing if he could get any more glimpses into the man's past.

"Lots of cunts," Naeko finished.

"Rude."

"Yeah. Are you gonna do something about it?"

Oh. The hard man routine. Avo grinned. **“Your Stormjumpers accounts are very vulnerable.”**

Naeko suddenly went stiff, then turned to glare at Avo’s avatar. “Half-strand. You touch any of them, and I will actually kill you. And stop smiling at me. Piece of shit. I’m your senior. I deserve some respect.”

“Apologies. Zein taught me too well.”

A sharp exhale escaped Naeko. “Avo.”

“Yes.”

“Fuck you.”

“Duly noted.”

Reaching behind the armor’s neck, Naeko’s Metamind pulse once, and the entire front section expanded like petals. Turning around, he stepped back first around the expanded combat-skin, and it collapsed around him thereafter, clasping his body and encasing him in its protection. A dark crimson glow ignited along the sprawling articulations across his armor, and Avo thought he resembled some kind of fractured metallic nu-dog wearing the bones of a human.

Might be a deliberate vibe regardless.

“So,” Naeko said, shifted awkwardly behind a visor of translucent orange. “How do I look.”

“Uncomfortable.”

“Hells yeah. Exactly how I feel. Time to make make things worse again.” Naeko closed his eyes and grimaced. “Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Avo said. He vaguely understood how the man felt. It was hard to convey his sympathy through a one-word agreement, but that was all he could offer. **“Should we see Zein—”**

“No. We keep her in the dark until the last minute. The last thing I need is her crone ass stealing our plan and making it hers somehow.”

Yes. That sounded like quite the Zein thing to do.

“What you can do is this: the moment the trial starts.” Naeko paused. “The traitors?”

Avo’s attention was captured. “Yes?”

“When the time comes, squeeze everything you can out of them. And then kill them whenever you want. Keep their ontologies and Souls.”

“Are you certain?”

“Oh yeah.” A growl entered the Chief Paladin's voice, and an anger seeped from his body like pus oozing from a wound. “I'm not letting the Guilds have a second go. Scale's my motherfucking house. Traitors burn. Order stands. You tell the conniving shits that before you give them the flame.”

“It will be my pleasure.”

“Good. Now, let's go take a walk around the Gatekeeper. See if we can get Veylis thinking...”

By the second hour of the war, the Draus had made a crude fortress out of all the dead ghouls they killed while the Avos struggled to manage an encirclement. The biggest deciding factor in the brawl wasn't the Regular's superior skill at close quarters, but how easily she communicated amongst her selves without even using thoughtcasts.

Avo's had made a good attempt, jabbing the Regulars from apart, blinding them, slicing open throats and dismembering limbs. More than a few hundred eyeballs had been eaten already. But eyeballs didn't win wars, and the Drauses fought on blind indifferent to their own fates. They were here for the fight itself.

Stacks of bodies were planted high in rows as the ghouls tried to manage their advance. At first, the Avos thought they were pushing the Regulars back and breaking the line, but then they found Draus' copies retreating upward, start stabbing down at them with harvested Echoheads turned spears.

The attrition—already bad for Avo—grew worse when the open brawl turned into a siege.

[That's a nasty trick to pull off using your backline while you're already engaged,] Abrel said. She did everything she could to reduce how impressed she felt—and also avoided the thought of her mother. The Greatling still didn't much like Draus, but the bitterness there was mostly one way.

The ex-Regular existed as a symbol of shame against her family name. For Draus, the Greatlings were just a pack of fuck-ups and nothing more. Indicative of the political rot consuming Highflame.

+Well,+ Cas said, taking in the battle with more interest than the Overheaven expected. *+It was a good and messy brawl, but I think I'm calling it for the Reg.+*

+Me too,+ Dice said, watching from the streets of the enclave. The uplift just liked watching the Avos die, and for that reason, Draus was their second favorite person in the world.

For the Overheaven himself, he cringed at the choices made by his former selves. So many acts of blind impulse mixed in with half-way displays of ingenuity. His backline assailed the Drauses

using their trauma-patterns as well, trying to use Necrojacking to tip the scales. Disruptions put an end to that, and the attempts at flanking were also anticipated.

Simply put, Draus had a plan for war; his younger self only had a plan to kill her on an individual level.

Given time and distance, perhaps he could have subverted her army, but this brawl was going to end the same way the Uprising did.

At least his copies performed better than his brothers did, though. Small consolations.

+*Well,*+ Draus said, doing her best not the sound smug. +*Plenty of you left. Didn't reckon that'd be the case. Hope you enjoyed them eyeballs 'cause I sure as shit like watchin' the mes kill all the yous.*+

+**Arrogance is unbecoming,**+ Avo said.

Everyone in the cadre shared a laugh at his expense. Even Kae's template joined in.

+*Speakin' from experience, huh?*+

Avo grunted with displeasure.

[**Still like living in reality?**] Corner asked.

+**No. But that's the point.**+

As the fight continued on, however, a ping sounded across the Nether. One of Avo's subverts received an in-game message for Stormjumpers. The contents pulled his attention away from the ongoing war entirely.

+**Hello. SerialsExperimentsLonginus here. I got something for you. Something that belonged to your father. Never managed to capture him intact. Want to meet in the game one more time. Talk about things before hostilities formally begin.**+

Walton.

Avo directed the information over the White-Rab without hesitation and dispatched his base mind to Stormjumpers.

And thomight just be a trap; but when was that not the case?