

Two-Mag: Where the hells are you? It's almost morning. No-Dragon Nimbuses are going to be passing through soon—they tag us and that barge is for the slugging.

Moment: Calm down. Nine kilometers [5.59 MILES] out. Flying low. Had to duck another Guilder drone patrol. Highflame's really coming out in force these days. That's almost a month they've spent grid-sweeping the Maw. Wonder what the fuck they lost.

Two-Mag: It doesn't matter what they lost, hows our cattle doing?

Moment: Yeah, yeah, good haul this time. About six hundred people in the hold. Gonna be breaking from real space soon. Going under. Something's wrong with our reactor. Every time we bright-jump the thing whines. It's been getting louder—

Two-Mag: I cast the techs about that. Just get—Fuck! Nimbuses. They're here! Already here! Shit! Fuck! Jump now! Jump now! Course to secondary coordinates.

Moment: Yeah, okay, It's gonna be an ugly jump! Just make sure the room is dark when we get there.

[SESSION DISCONNECTED]

[ACCESSING SESSION—JAID RIVERSON (DOCKING)]

Two-Mag: Jaid—Augwhgh, fug! [ERRORrrr] Hugggh! Awarrgguh!

[SESSION LOST]

-Thoughtcast between smugglers under the Forgotten Lances Syndicate

18-5

Seize the Roots (II)

*+...Hugggh! Awarrgguh... **Agh. What the fu-huh? What the hell just happened? What... oh, gods. No. No. No no no! I can't be dead... I can't be!***

A detonation of trauma passed through their mind, but Avo undid the damage and fused the man's mind back together.

Two-Mag wasn't taking their subsumption very well. Most people didn't. Flashes of another life passed through Avo, the experiences his and not at the same time. He remembered the block that was "his" childhood home—a gnarled Sang-grown organism called the grovel. He remembered the chittering creatures that clung to the walls and ceilings, serving as wardens and defenders both. He remembered the squires they captured and seeded during the block war, butchering and dying in equal measure.

The memories spiraled up from there. The death of his mother at the age of ten during the chaos of the Fourth Guild War. Starvation and pain followed. He hid in hovels. Survived by catching aratnids and purifying his body by only eating at midnight. He thought of the first apartment he truly rented, of the joy-fiends that broke in and forced him out. Of the organs he had to sell and the favors he did just to survive. The time after was a blur, misery at the front and pleasure at the back. Gang after gang. Fight after fight. Job after job. Two-Mag had no gift in the ways of violence, but he was a good organizer. A manager of people and things.

A quality that elevated his gang from the rabble.

Something that saw them consolidated into the Forgotten Lances Syndicate—a militia of Ori-Thaum loyalists formed initially to ensure their block's survival during the ghoul Uprising.

For the last eight years, he served under them, and his most recent promotion placed him as a lieutenant in charge of procurements and smuggling. He ran three different barge crews and was the direct liaison to each of their captains. Never once were his deliveries late. Never once did he fall short of monthly projections.

Until today.

Everything was going to hell today.

Disgesting his new template in an instant, Avo let out a quiet sigh and studied the carnage his cadre inflicted on their newest victim.

The Forgotten Lances were expanding. Swelling in numbers and resources after overcoming their district rivals, they made to spread their influence across the Leser-Tannan Sovereignty itself. So great were the waves they made that squire lobbies buzzed with gig after gig, the requests supplied by rival powers to stymie the growth of their foe.

Chambers caught the noise and, using her reputation and connectivity, Quail managed to set them up for a sabotage run. Apparently, the Forgotten Lances managed to completely occupy an unfinished gutter-level arcology and reactivate what little of it still functioned.

Serving as a source of commercial aero production before the war, the Syndicate instead repurposed the production facilities within the block to serve as a combat drone production line and also hollowed out the dormant waste disposal system. Hollowing the waste pipes and widening the entrance of their dump port overlooking the Maw itself, they retrofitted a crude dock large enough to accommodate Maw barges and ensured their place as an essential smuggler's nest in the city.

One that now belonged entirely to Avo and his cadre, along with all the other bounties it conferred.

THAUMIC OUTPUT - 9,001 THAUM/c

GHOSTS - [91,334]

HEAVEN OBTAINED: SANGEIST (BLOOD/MATTER) x6; SPRINGSTORMER (BIOLOGY/LIGHTNING) x3; GALESLITHER (AIR/SPACE) x3; FULGERHOUND (LIGHTNING/MATTER) x3

The cadre had selected the Forgotten Lances because of all the golems in their possession—spoils collected after overrunning their retreating rivals. That, and capturing the smuggler's nest would put them in a position to intercept multiple shipments and discover how the Syndicates were slipping through New Vultun's supposedly impenetrable border restrictions.

Their middler had sent them mem-data detailing the layout of the arcology itself along with suspected defensive assets. They advised starting the operation by deploying a few squires equipped with Incogs or other means of stealth by sneaking in through the Maw dock. From there, the objectives devolved into identifying key chokepoints on the DeepNav and crippling the Forgotten Lances' defenses in the face of a coming raid.

This was expected to require four months at the very least—a timeframe the middler apologized about, acknowledging the shortness of the operational window.

Instead the site was identified, compromised, and then assaulted in less than two days.

[This can't be... what the fuck are you? Why? Why?] Two-Mag's anguish filled Avo with bemusement. A slave trafficker wanting fairness in their life? He supposed everyone desired existence to bend their way before the end.

+The same reason why you ship your "cattle,"+ Avo replied. +You have something I need. And I had the ability to take it.+

The Syndicate lieutenant moaned as the other templates in the gestalt welcomed him with words of muted sympathy, mockery, and outright insults.

[Another weeper,] Corner spat. [Watch your diet, ghoul. A good number of these Lances are bitch-made. We are what we eat and all that shit, so mind your diet. It'd be shit to end up trapped inside a sow.]

Squeezed back into his own body as Two-Mag's session fully collapsed, Avo found himself back in the Manta as his ansible injected scenes from an active siege into his very mind.

The entire exterior of the arcology was sheared deep and clean from gutter level down fifty floors. Ostensibly, the breach was caused by a high-yield bunker-buster delivered via drone. The blast,

however, was just a cover for Avo's haemokinesis—in case there were any unseen eyes observing the scene.

A phantom army of Manta-projected holograms moved in thereafter, their shrouded forms hiding Draus, Tavers, and the *prototype*. Credit went to the Manta's sound systems as well, capturing all the noises needed to simulate the cacophony of a warzone. To the naked eye, the moment must have seemed like a raid with gauss fire and missiles filling the air while rigged fighters dropped out from diving carrier drones. In actuality, eighty percent of Forgotten Lances were already dead.

Some were shredded by constructs of blood and glass while the flesh of others simply burst and tore without rhyme or reason. Limbs were claimed and control was seized. Fingers curled against the will of their hands, and triggers were pulled as the lances murdered each other at the behest of unseen puppeteers. Drenched in Avo's Sanguinity, each kill fed his Frame with thaums and ghosts.

There were thousands when this began. Now, only five hundred and six remained, sealing themselves in an elevator silo as they prepared for a final, and desperate stand, casting their headquarters for help.

It didn't matter. Reinforcements weren't going to arrive in time. And the structure would be little more than rubble by the time Avo was done.

The assault itself was mostly a show—something to put the other local Syndicates on edge and make them point fingers at each other. After all, who else would have the capability to conduct such an operation?

Miracles were kept as close to subtle as possible to keep their desired masquerade. After Dice's discovery and Shotin's ambush, Avo changed his methods. Adapted to approach things with increased caution, secured a perimeter stretching fifty square kilometers before even beginning their encroaching.

Only after their certainty was absolute did they engage.

{Movin' to entry,} Draus said, looking up at the six-hundred-meter chasm Avo left in the structure. Where the upper section of the arcology once jutted from the ground like the hilt of a dagger, now a deep crevice stretched across cracks in the street, the opening allowing Layer One to shine its light on the floors deep below.

With the delicate parts of the operation concluded and the golems disabled, only two objectives remained.

Number one was a field test: the first deployment of Subject One.

If Avo were to be honest, the weaponized bioform didn't exactly make the strongest impression, despite the oddity of its morphology.

As the nanite mists cleared from its cell, he witnessed its true shape for the first time and found himself confused.

The creature looked like a porous, dome with limbs sticking out from it. A sleek and smooth ebony coated its exoskeleton, and the core of its body was taller than its wide and ridged along the sides. A faint glimmer of bioluminescence flecked its ridges while its limbs were built from hundreds of segmented joints. What captured his notice thereafter were the smaller versions of itself that dwelled within its pores and thickened the air around it.

Sporelings, Jane had called them.

Acting in a way not too different from his Sanguinity or Sunrise's swarm, the smaller creatures moved as if a flowing swarm with perfect cohesion, something even the grafters were pleased about—only achievable with Elegant-Moon's aid.

Contained within a personal cell aboard the Manta, the Sang Godclad sighed and left her touch buried within the prototype.

He had released her from her confinement at the behest of Kae so they might properly review her ontologies. She stayed out to provide a resolution to Subject One's missing mind when called upon by the grafters.

At present, she, along with Chambers, Kae, Avo, Dice, and Essus were seated within the Aegis stealth ship watching the "raid" unfold through the ship's holo-haptic interfaces, the system simulating on-site conditions using data taken from Draus' Neurodeck. Supplementing this was the organism Elegant-Moon was growing out from the crown of her skull.

A monochromatic representation of Subject One occupied the center of the square frame unfurling out from her forehead. Faintly, Avo noticed twisting and warping fields emitted from the bioform, its curls, and movements directing sporelings. Each individual organism was also surrounded by a smaller, personal field. Avo wasn't sure how it worked yet, but he could feel it in Domain of Lightning, a soft trickle brushing his mind.

+The magnetoreceptor-enhancers we cultured inside the prototype are working fantastically,+ Ruveca said, her ghosts spilling out from Chambers via a joined session. The man himself looked excited as well—he would get to burn the bioform into his inner zoo if the test was successful, after all, and he would be getting additional improvements after the golem haul was distributed.

A good day, all in all.

"I must confess to being envious, Sister Ruveca," Elegant-Moon said. "If not for our void-bound cousins, I would not even know the flesh to be capable of such a thing. I despise them for earning my envy. Ah, how I flesh I could feel their suppleness part between my fingers. What else do you

know? Do the furrows of your brains run deeper?"

+Hey, hey, creepy meat-suit lady, none of that,+ Jack said. His phantasmal avatar hovered next to Jane's, formed from phantoms leaking out from Chambers' Meta. The voider grafters had taken to working with Ruveca well, but their relationship with Elegant-Moon proved to be another matter. The ego-torn Sang indicated her desire to dissect a voider repeatedly. Jack and Jane were, understandably, against such a proposal. *+When are you getting rid of her? Can't you just—I don't know—fill yourself with her god-bits and do what she does? Your whatsit has the capability right?+*

+Liminal Frame,+ Jane said. *+You know what it's called, Brother Jack. Do not agitate without purpose.+*

Avo turned to Kae. "Destroyed their Knots. They were unprepared. Six Domains of Blood. Three more with Biology. Good grab of matter, lightning, air, and space too."

"It should be enough to replicate her strongest canons without expanding your Domains further," the Agnos said. "For the counter-plane you wish to design... I need to die again and see. This will require delicate modification on a mythological level as well."

Avo grunted. "But I will be able to do what she can soon? Could graft that first."

"Yes. But I recommend that you reach the Fifth Sphere first. With how many improvements we are going to make—it is best to have a surplus of thaums and not risk over-capacity, yes? And... more people must die if we are all to... be elevated." Kae tried to shrug away her discomfort. "At least we are using those who will not be missed."

Chambers head didn't move, but his eyes glanced at Kae as adjusted his posture to shrug away the awkwardness.

"Young miss, I do not mean offense but... there always someone that misses us." Essus' gaze was fixed on the moments unfolding before him, of Draus opening a mirror for Subject One to step through. "During my captivity, I saw... terrible things. But also life. My captors were beings of a multitude as well. They had friends and likes. Some were troubled by what they did. Others thought nothing of it." His face darkened. "It is something that made me hate them more. To know that they were no different from me, yet did nothing to aid me. Or end my pain."

The Agnos winced. "I'm... sorry you suffered so much."

Essus nodded. "And I, you. But we can do better now. Or at least try." He turned and faced Avo, letting out a shaky breath. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Not forcing me to go down with them. I know you gave me a gift and the power is beyond most men

but... I am not ready to see such slaughter again. Thank you for not forcing me to.”

“Can’t do anything to you. You are your own.”

Avo’s words granted more relief than he anticipated.

['You are your own?'] Two-Mag gasped in disbelief. **[He’s his—what the fuck about me?]**

[What about you?] Abrel deadpanned. **[You got a dead kid hiding somewhere? Did my half-strand brother capture, torture, and then make a literal slave gladiator out of you too?]**

[What?]

Abrel continued. **[Oh. No? No, he didn’t? Then quiet, slaver. This whining is pathetic. You smuggle people. You’re pretty much scum of the city. Sure, it’s part of the economy but I just know about it. You do it. And before you start the whole “I’m a human too speech,” let me tell you: no one fucking cares. You’re FATELESS too, bitch. And you’re actively taking people’s free will away from them. It doesn’t matter who loves you or what kind of person you are outside your job. Your type makes for good killing, and the ghoul needs more lubrication.]**

[Oh, gods,] Two-Mag moaned. **[Jaus. Jaus.]**

[He’s not here,] Paladin Kassamon said. **[But I am.]**

[As am I,] Kare added.

The Syndicate goon began to scream.

{Breachd,} Draus said as a wall of glass exploded from around the corner. Her cog-feed registered a firing line of contacts, accretions visible before their bodies were. To their credit, the enforcers began firing immediately, losing their flechettes at the unexpected breach. Layering both herself and Tavers in reflective plating, shots punched clean through plascrete, into their bodies, and out from another direction entirely.

Borrowing Mirrorhead’s gimmick ensured both Regular and Squire were all but impervious to direct kinetics, and with her vulnerable shard hidden, Draus had little risk of facing thaumic backlash.

A storm of fire fell, directed from every point in the silo. Draus looked over her shoulder and Tavers replied with an affirmative gesture. Opening another sheet of glass further down the hall, they released Subject One into the hallway.

The first bits of debris and shrapnel pelted its body. The impacts forced it to dig its leg into the ground for balance.

+Subcutaneous fullerene endoskeletal supports holding,+ Ruveca said. +We should consider increasing its mass. Or adapting its limbs more. It will not be able to plant itself down against heavy forces without a foothold or a gripping point.+

+Agreed,+ Jane said. +Let us put it in the line of fire. See how it deals with injuries.+

“Moon,” Avo said. “Keep it alive.”

“Of course,” the Sang Godclad said, lips twisting into a vicious grin. “You should pay attention too, *yao gau*. Let me give you an illustration of the potential you will soon come to possess.”