

23-1  
Borrowed Insight (III)

--[Dice]--

"I told you that you couldn't kill people anymore," Dice said, staring the Dogmother down.

She chastised the aged flat beside a pristine fountain. Behind her Ivory—Dice's aunt—stood huddled with the rest of the former concubines on the veranda. Lanes of perception from splinter-embedded phantasmics down from the surrounding rooftops, and in the skies above, a constant buzzing could be heard as swarms of Bioigniter-birthered bioforms patrolled the enclave.

The two days since Avo untangled their minds, the local population awoke to a new status quo.

It was a time of change. It was a time of new order. It was a time of rising health and awareness.

It was a time that some adapted to better than others. Despite all of the cadre's attempts to preserve peace in the city, despite Avo's mem-coms slowly instilling knowledge into the population—revealing to them the world beyond and the depths of Yakozitrin's depravity—some still desired vengeance above all else.

Case in point: the Dogmother attempting to blow up some of her older rivals via gas-made explosives.

Dice didn't know the specifics about the woman's history, nor did she particularly care. The ultimate fact of it was that the Dogmother was a *problem* in the way of them achieving lasting stability. She was a very disobedient woman; contrary to the creatures she raised in the kennels of the lowest layer.

Of course, the fact she named herself "Dogmother" did not favor her when it came to Dice. The girl despised the snarling hounds. Kittens were so much better.

"And I told you that until my debt is settled," the Dogmother said, pointing her finger at each of the concubines, screaming her words at the people gathered outside their houses. "I will not stop. You or your new master will have to kill me." Her voice trailed off near the end as a hitch of fear entered her breath, but defiance remained behind her eyes.

The woman was short and worn. Time had not treated her kindly. Stress and age wrinkled her face while white intruded on strands once silken and black. Her eyes were bloodshot with dark bags hanging below, but the piercing green of her eyes blunted the portrait of her exhaustion with intensity.

It was a testament to her rage that she still felt this way even with Avo's mem-cons, even with the disfigurement of Yakozitrin's image and the benefits they've been offered. Most of the people succumbed to a state of shock in the aftermath. Stunned by all they were learning.

Not her. Not her at all.

For a few moments, Dice simply stared. Her sensory unit turned with a mechanical whine as she narrowed her perception to glare the Dogmother. Though she dwarfed the woman, the little flat's stubbornness drove her to continue this play of defiance.

But what little did mortal defiance mean in the face of someone who could wield absolutes?

After a few moments of staring, the older woman wilted and turned away. "You know what they did to us, what they did to you. Why don't you seem to want revenge? Why don't you seem to hate?"

Dice's kitten meowed from below and batted at her alloyed legs with its ape arms. "Hate didn't help me kill your dogs." Reaching down, she picked up her kitten and ignored the Dogmother's glare. It meant nothing to her. Nothing at all. "Yakozitrin is dead. He was a god. He couldn't keep himself safe. He had the city. He had everything; he couldn't stop someone from tearing his mind apart and harvesting his Soul. I think... I would hate him now. If he was still here. I would kill him. Slowly. But he's gone. Gone for good. I can't break him anymore. So it doesn't matter."

The Dogmother bit her lip and looked away. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. He was supposed to return. He was supposed to see what I was worth. I was supposed to have my life back."

The woman was delusional. Even Dice could see it. She wanted something that could never be again—was never going to be hers in the first place.

"None of us will have our life back," Dice said. She turned and looked at the concubines as well, studying the mansion they now shared with their former servants. "None of us."

Housing was being redistributed. People had to share their spaces. Though Avo's Woundmother had created new structures for housing across the city to suit the strained population, Calvino offered another suggestion.

The mind stated the people needed to pursue unity and reconciliation, to reforge their relations with each other, and come to terms with what was done during the city war. The entwining of their minds left them with a deeper sense of shared empathy, some atrocities weren't so easy to forgive, and some amends could not be made.

That didn't mean they couldn't coexist.

To this end, Kae suggested that they be made to mingle. To share space and communities. Face common struggles and overcome common trials. According to Draus, it was a “very Ori-Thaum” solution. But it worked as a whole.

Other than moments like these. And that was what Dice was for. To come in. To intervene if necessary. For the past day, she spent her time living among the people, walking the streets, traveling the layers using the platform, and ignoring the stares.

Most enclaves looked upon her at first as if she was the new master. A god.

She was more interested in familiarizing herself with the home she never knew. She spent her whole life here, but only as an attack dog. A creature of cruel amusement. Her former master had culled her childhood of childhood, and she was looking to fill the wound.

Hate.

Hate wasn't what dwelled in her.

It was regret.

She wanted to live again, but she didn't know how. She barely knew how to be a person. Barely understood what she wanted most days. But right here, between the Dogmother and her concubines, she felt purpose.

What was doing here was *right*. Something of change. Making changes felt good after a lifetime of choicelessness. “Would you like to come on a walk with me?” Dice asked the Dogmother.

The older woman seemed uncertain. Afraid. “Are you going to...”

“No. I wouldn't kill you. Killing you is... it means nothing. It's like stepping on an insect. Draus said stepping on insects is a bad habit. It makes you weak. It deprives you of the feedback. It makes you retreat into your own mind and stop facing the world. You don't really... feel the weight of the act.”

Faintly, she was aware of the growing fear spreading across the woman's face.

Dice struggled not to sigh. She was never very good at talking to people. They always got so scared in the end.

“I'm—I'm sorry—I didn't mean to... to... you.”

Dice shifted to stare wordlessly at Ivory. It was growing increasingly evident that her aunt wasn't a very smart person. A smart person would break the silence and re-draw the notice of someone who tried to kill them.

Just as anger reignited in the Dogmother's eyes, Avo's voice came aloud in Dice's head, his cognitive weight merging with hers. *+Dice. Have more refugees coming in. Need you to make a round. See which ones have incubation potential.+* A beat passed. *+And it was a good idea. Take the Dogmother with you. Give her new purpose.+*

If Dice had lips, she would have smiled.

"Okay," Dice said as she reached out and grabbed the Dogmother's wrist. "Let's go."

"What? Where?" The Dogmother's features filled with alarm. In times past, such an action would have constituted a coming punishment—certain death.

Now?

Things were different.

It was time for the Dogmother to see that.

"We're going to be meeting some future residents. You're going to help me help them." Pulling her away from the concubines, the other women stared after Dice, looking on with stunned uncertainty. "We can't have our lives back. But we can still change someone else's."

**--[Chambers]--**

*+Wait, you actually worked for Jhred fucking Greatling,+* Marlowe said. *+Seriously? That wasn't a cover? You were literally a Syndi enforcer?+*

"Yeah. He was kind of an asshole," Chambers said. He chuckled as he thought back to his past, absently directing his bioforms to guide the traumatized slaves through the reflection in five neat rows. "He's like... maybe the second shittiest boss I ever had. First was a guy who tried to sell me off to a Scaarthian called Naga 'Manglove.' And before you ask, it wasn't some cute nickname, the fucking sow would literally shove her whole fist up a motherfucker's ass and use him as a glove to beat his consangs."

Cala's barely suppressed snort glid through Avo's splinter. The ghoul regarded their conversation with passive fascination as thoughtcast host and once-enforcer continued their dialogue.

*+So the whole acolyte thing--+* Marlowe began.

*+--That's bullshit,+* Chambers explained. *+It was easier to sell some Nolothe infiltrator than some up-jumped super ghoul master Necro-slash-Godclad-slash-Jaus Reborn-slash.+*

Avo grunted with disapproval at the comparison. Chambers ignored him.

Sobbing and intermittent wails sounded from the slaves. Chambers briefly shot them a glance but the bioformers were keeping everything in order. Most were too catatonic to resist, and, mended by his thaumaturgic fire, they, on some level, knew that he was here to help rather than further their abuse. The unruly were already gone. Taken through the shimmering glass by the first of Chambers' heat-forged monstrosities.

With each subsequent update made to his frame, Chambers' chimeric bioforms evolved as well. Once, they were but tumorous masses of mishappen. Things of claws and teeth, fangs and venom; a nightmarish mesh of all the creatures he encountered. Now, however, his creations were graced with greater complexity as his thaums rose.

Sunrise inspired most of his current creatures. A mesh between an animated inferno, a widower aratnid, a burrower wasp, and an ursa from the frigid wastes of the Skuldvast, his new monsters moved to the will of his Heaven, the metaphysical aesthetics of his Bioigniter turned from crucified phoenix to a burning hive fused to a festering mountain of flesh.

He even incorporated magnetic stingers using the silicon-based prototype the grafters were still trying to upgrade. And perhaps more flatteringly, there was a bit of ghoul in them as well.

*+That's a hell of a Heaven you got there,+ Marlowe said. +Is that more because of his Frame or... uh... or the Agnos.+ She coughed. +Look, you guys are already a lot to take in, so you'll excuse me when I gawk a little bit about Kae Kusanade being with you too. The Guilds still have hidden contracts out on her head—hells, half the city's squires were still looking for her half a year ago. Was she with you this entire time.+*

*+Draus has her means,+ Avo answered.*

*+Right. Her too. Fuck me, you guys are just a rag-tag band of renegades, rejects, and urban legends, aren't you.+*

"We also have a kitten," Chambers finished. "Well, it's Dice's kitten but—ah, hells, you'll meet everyone soon enough."

Stepping past his monstrous procession, Chambers crossed into the reflection and gave Marlowe a look at Draus' passageway. Slipping past his own reflection, they emerged in a wide and radiant expanse. Tessellating mountains of glass intersected and refracted light across each other. As Chambers drifted alongside rescued refugees and chattering truck-sized bioforms, his image was reflected vertically and horizontally as if in a hall of mirrors.

Meters away, a blade of light flicked over empty space and another passageway opened.

*+Thanks Draus,+ Chambers cast.*

The Regular didn't respond—most of her current focus was devoted to cutting out a sight-hopping *murder worm* that had materialized in one of her optics and was currently trying to eat its way up her skull.

The Sunderwilds made the gutters look downright inviting sometimes.

Passing through three spatial thresholds, they finally stepped into a sprawling dome-shaped chamber. Its size was comparable to that of a district, but its infrastructure offered only the bare necessities.

Stacks of haemo-constructed megablocks rose in rows. Doorways and aesthetic detail were missing from the architecture, but the buildings were recently made and most “residents” wouldn't linger here for long.

Avo had dubbed this place “Processing Module One,” and its purpose was twofold. The first was the restoration, rehabilitation, and transportation of potential recruits and refugees. Here, people were sorted into five quadrants. Those with emergency medical needs; those with emergency physical needs; those shaken but stable; those utterly unharmed and ready to be seeded with a splinter.

Presently, the space was sparse of people. With all that demanded their attention, drafting new agents for the cause was only an operation at its inception. The organ-slaves would be among the first. A *test run* in a sense. Others were certain to follow.

“Welcome to Processing Module One,” Chambers said. “The name is shit and the space is unfinished, but trust me when I say that this might just be one of the safest places in all of Idheim!”

+*Where are we?*+ Marlowe asked.

+*Beyond the reach of the Guilds,*+ Avo said. +*Beyond their ability to notice at least.*+

+*Sunderwilds?*+

No one gave her an honest answer.

+*So... what is this? Some kind of... super-sanctuary? Like the ones outside NV?*+

Chambers nearly wheezed. “Yeah, sure. Except we're not deliberately designed shitshows designed to funnel in as many people into the Maw as possible. We're patching people up here. Fixing their bodies. Fixing their minds.”

+*And after that happens? What then?*+

+*Some leave,* + Avo said. +*The ones that want to re-enter the Warrens are placed in stable districts in the Spine. The ones who can stay—who want to stay are moved into the enclave for incubation.*+

+*Incubation?*+ Marlowe asked.

“Avo’s starting up a cycler farm.” Chambers giggled. “We’re—we’re growing dragons.”

Absolute nothingness dominated Marlowe’s thoughts for a few seconds. +*You guys are doing fucking what now?*+

“Ah, we’ll show you in a bi—” Chambers said.

“They’re still coming in?” The mechanical tone of Dice’s voice made Chambers jump as he spun and faced her.

“Jaus-fuck! Scared the shit out of me, juv. Yes. Yes they’re still coming in.” Chambers’ gaze slipped from her over to the Dogmother. “What’s she doing here? Did she try to do a terrorism again?”

“Yes,” Dice said. “She was pretty bad. Your bugs caught her almost immediately.”

The Dogmother wilted slightly. She wilted more when Chambers openly laughed in her face.

“Ah. Poor half-strand. You’ll learn. Guess you’re getting public service. Hope you like talking to extreme traumatized people who like to cry, because that’s gonna be your life—”

+*Chambers,* + Avo’s voice cut in. +*Stop taunting the flat.*+

“Fine. Guess you’ll be showing her the enclave itself now, huh? What about Torture Site Extreme? Are we showing her that too?”

This earned an annoyed sigh from Avo. +*Not calling it that. No torture happening there.*+

{*Technically, considering you are making Glaives and Incubi responsible for Agnos Kusanade’s burning suffer her nightmares—*} Calvino began.

+*Made it for rehabilitation,* + Avo growled.

{*So you say,*} Kant added. {*But the Ethics Committee has “suggestions.”*}

The ghoul’s ire grew. +*Talk with them later.*+

*{You should talk with them right now. Introduce your new, normal friend to the rest.}* Calvino chirped in a cheerful tone. *{We think she will be a good balance to your group.}*

*+Fine. Chambers... Good job. Stay active. Cas might need you later. Trying to set up some cells in a Syndicate. Your experience is needed.+*

Chambers grinned. "Well, you tell him not to worry. I'm always up for some 'Deep Penetration.'"

A beat passed. No one laughed.

"Avo," Dice said, sounding uncertain. "Is Chambers talking about sex?"

*+Marlowe. Going to the enclave now. Show you the rest of what we're doing.+*

"Look, you scared 'em off," Chambers' said, flicking Dice's alloyed exterior with a ping. The juv just looked down and shrugged. Hissing, her kitten smacked Chambers back. "And you really need to give that thing a name."

"I don't want to call it 'Nutsack.'"

"Call it something else, then," Chambers said. As Avo began to transition his base mind over to Kae's splinter, Chambers gave an awkward cough. "Oh, uh, Marlowe. You... you really should help us out, you know. We—we need some good publicity. Got real image issues here. The worst. I—I can tell you all about it."

Across the link, the faintest smirk played across Marlowe's face. *+I'm sure you will.+*

And with that, the pressure of Avo's mind vanished, and Chambers' Meta went silent again.

A heartbeat passed. A loud scream sounded as a bioform carried in a man suffering a breakdown. "I—I want my ma-ma-mother!"

"Yes!" Chambers said, throwing up both fists. "Fuck! Yes! I think I scored. Did you two see that shit." The Dogmother blinked at him. The triangular module Dice had for a head just bobbed. "That... that was scoring right? She was interested."

Across the splinters, Tavers gave a snort. *+You might just be her type.+*

Joy erupted in Chambers' chest. Joy as something more, as indicated by the triggering of his Lustaway. *+Really?+*

*+Yeah. Marlowe's always had a thing for pieces of shit. Recovering or otherwise.+*