

23-2
That Which Lurks (II)

-[Draus]-

Draus examined the snakes she tore out along with her eyes and studied them using her Specter phantasmic. Their corpses were strings of matter fused with strips of chrome, each nearly a meter long before she slit their guts open.

Initially, she assumed this was just another rogue miracle assailing her flesh. Plenty of those out here, however, after dissecting the snakes via blade of glass, she found their insides to be filled with a mix of gore and sparking circuitry, and thus assumption turned to suspicion. It was one thing to mutate into existence using someone's optical cords as a catalyst. It was another to have fully functional cybernetic organs.

Then the attack on the enclave began, and all the pieces came together.

The space had been a mountainous region mere moments before. The only miracle present was some kind of pattern-based smoke that twirled up into the atmosphere, forming spiraling columns of gas before descending as arcing tendrils to burrow through the land.

A mist coated the ground, and using the tendrils as cover did she make her approach.

She understood little of the Domain of the Heaven nor its canons, but aside from the bioform mutated from her right eye, little else seemed amiss—positivity tame for the Sunderwilds.

The mountain itself was carved in the visage of a face. Not a human one, but a skull of some kind of creature, almost dog-like in its shape. Within the open jaw's the mountain were countless shimmering lights bathing steeped temples of stone with dimming brilliance. Their interiors were dotted with countless accretions, and she spotted more than a few patrols walking the trails running to her left and right.

For twelve minutes, she and the Fardrifter surveyed the area. She directed the God of Air to position several pockets of air for her to travel across—along with two points of egress should either of them be unable to escape through their own means.

And now, as the decloaked warships began their assault on the population, more of Draus' cybernetics began to twitch and warp as discordant notes of music filled the air.

"Ain't a dull moment out here in the Sunderwilds," she growled, vitrifying her reflex booster before it too was compromised.

The thrilling thing about dealing with thaumaturgy was that sometimes there was just no defense. If you weren't prepared, you weren't prepared. If you were on the wrong end of asymmetry, the world would reap what it could from you.

And so it did. And so she dealt.

As she cast her Specter out to better study the attackers, she counted three twelve-kilometer-long carriers spewing swarms of glinting shards free from their opening undersides. *Drones*. And with how the anomalous music was wreaking havoc on her body, she had a good guess who was crashing the enclave before she could.

"Fuckin' Omnitech."

The what, how, or why they were doing here was irrelevant to her. Instead, growing ire began to rise, all externally directed at. It took more than a little self-control for her to resist manifesting the Arsenalist and making it known who this place truly belonged to. With her Metamind unable to detect any unknown Souls, she probably had pretty good odds of just shattering the raiders.

Still. She exercised caution. Getting into an engagement before fully gauging enemy capabilities was a great way to end up snuffed without knowing how.

"It is an ill thing," the Fardrifter said, their voice whispered through the wailing winds. ***"They are killing the children, the weak. The people inside, they are fleeing. I can feel them rushing through the mountain's tunnels—machines are chasing them. Starching the walls into glass with blossoms of flame. The people do not know what's happening. They are on their knees in the temple. They are praying. They are praying."***

The God of Air's last words sounded almost mournful. Perhaps it was thinking of the people it once had. People that were long gone.

It was strange to view a god as a "glass jaw" but Draus really didn't know how else to feel about it. The damn thing was always whining about this and that. Complaining about the world. Breathing and sighing when it couldn't go somewhere. Was almost like a depressed child sometimes.

Invoking her canon of **Diffraction Chain**, she created shards of glass across the horizon. They bounced from outcropping to cliffside to the interior of the mountain stronghold itself. As she constructed a slotted passageway using a panel of glass she made in the stone, she studied the interior of the enclave and the assaulting forces.

Just as she did, a hefty presence slid into her mind, and Draus reflexively acknowledged Avo's arrival with a grin. "Thought you'd keep me waiting."

+Sounded urgent. Decided to be quick. Left Marlowe with Kae. Giving her a tour of the city. What do we—hm.+ His voice trailed off with a note of surprise. +Omnitech?+

“How’d you know?” Draus asked.

+Techplaguer can understand the noise its hitting you with. Some kind of... tech-jamming distortion. There’s another Heaven of Signals here. Or at least it has a Domain of Signals.+

“Shit,” Draus muttered. “Good to know. Glad I didn’t decide to jump the gun then.”

+Augs?+

‘Fuckin’ bricked. Glassed ‘em. I’ll do a suicide after.”

He grunted in acknowledgment.

“Not sure how they managed to find this place,” Draus replied. “Managed to chart my own way here usin’ the memories you cast over to me from the refugees—the new ones that Essus has been dealin’ with.”

+The family with stones where their eyes should be?+

“Yeah. That one. Somethin’ about them stuck to my thoughts. Just got finished building a route over to another enclave in the area, and decided to take a peek here before heading southwest to hit the next spot. Reckon it paid off.”

+Reckon it did,+ Avo agreed. +Omnitech probably bought the memories from a Necro. Or picked it up somehow.+

{More likely they just have an outpost nearby,} Calvino answered. {Their signal seems to be... literally washing out like waves of water, with more coming southwest. New Vultun’s currently under Paladin lockdown, so I doubt in-city units are involved here.}

To complement the mind’s words, the Techplaguer sang a shrill screech. **“Ah. Directives received. A broken [TERRAFORMATION MODULE] has been LOCATED.”** The Techplaguer erupted into static cackles. **“Procure the [MODULE] and integrate it into our [SYSTEM] administrator. We must return the [BROKEN THINGS] to function to watch over the children properly. Presently, it is taking eyes. This is a severe infraction. THE EYES ARE NOT IT’S TO TAKE. Diagnostics are in order.”**

{Terraformation?} Calvino replied.

A whimper sounded from Avo's mind. Draus was almost taken aback when she realized it originated from a template instead of the ghoul. A soft voice—vacant and distant—hyperventilated.

[Fuck. Sleeper. They found a shard of the Sleeper. A piece of the Infacer. Inface. I have to inface. Face—face—face the wall face the wall. Don't make me face the wall.] Glitch—the rogue Omnitech Fallwalker who was once the user of the Datacaster—descended from senselessness into mania.

“Got any clue what she's jawin' about?” Draus asked.

+Mind was broken and fried by drugs when I found her.+

Draus scoffed. “Course it was. Can't have anything be too easy for us.”

A flicker of tungsten snapped free from one of the ships circling the enclave. The shot pieced into the spewing free from above the mountain and with that act the tendrils began to writhe. Once block-thick and district-wide, the enormous fibrils of gas seemed to inhale as they took on a more intact shape. Shifting from the vagueness of gas into fog-made fingers, Draus' understanding of their surroundings changed.

She hadn't been hiding behind walls of fog but actual digits sinking into the soil. With a lurch of force, the ground beneath her groaned and began to rise. Ahead, the mountain enclave inched upward as well, the ground fissuring along its sides as the submerged aspect of its main body revealed itself. Slipping free from the parting soil was the undeniable shape of a voidship encased in countless tons of rock. Its hull was moss-coated and damaged, with open rents spewing dirt packed within. More fascinatingly, the fog seemed to be emanating from the voidship, and the misted fingers raked the land as began to close around the true heart of the enclave in defense.

“Well,” Draus breathed. “Wasn't expecting that.”

“[TERRAFORMATION MODULE] has been LOCATED.” the Techplaguer laughed.

{Jesus Christ,} Kant—or some new EGI-squatter Draus didn't bother to remember—said. She also had no idea what a 'Jesus Christ' was but it sounded like someone's name. {That's a Neo-Creationist colony settlement ship. What's that doing here?}

+Probably crashed,+ Avo said. +Buried in the land. Crew's likely dead. Can't see any accretions.+

“Well,” Draus said, watching skittering gun-headed mechhounds her the surviving enclavers. “Suppose we best raid the raiders, then?”

“Yes,” the Fardrifter said, winds taking on a rumble of thunder. **“No more of this. We tear them from my skies.”**

Avo simply laughed. *+Sending out splinters to scout. Preserve a warship if you can. Want its patterns. And technologies. See if Calvino can access the data too. Going to be doubly useful if we can hit their local installation.+*

“Fine,” Draus said, as she began to manifest her Simulacra. **“I’ll be gentle.”**

One of the Fardrifter’s heads swallowed her, drawing her over into its shifting labyrinth. Three other streams swept over the unprepared carriers like suddenly formed typhoons crashing down from the skies above.

And so one ambush collapsed before the weight of the other. Drones parted in disarray. Carriers fired into the maze-like wind tunnels of the Yondergales as a charging legion of glass-made knights flashed through their air as if fired from a railgun.

They came looking for plunder or a fortunate score. Unfortunately, no one told them they were going to be part of the haul.

Thing about unforeseen bullshit was that it cut both ways, and there was only one truth that stayed consistent on Idheim: the world was a *taker’s* market, and if you had the power and the opportunity, plenty could be made yours in an instant.

–[Kae]–

In the beginning, Kae wasn’t quite sure what to say to the other woman. Cala Marlowe was a media type, and media types were nothing but drama and trouble.

Kae knew that back when she was but a novitiate Agnos, and she knew that even more now. Her reluctance only built as Marlowe yammered on the rumor mill surrounding the “Kusanade Disaster.” Apparently, Kae was the talk of the town, and more than a few Proparazzis—especially those operating under Ori-Thaum’s colors—had painted her as the *definite* culprit behind the murder of her team, her friends, and her lover, the Paladin Dawton Morrow.

They even published fake evidence regarding Nether-based chat logs. False sequences on how she was planning to betray her vows and side with the Golds.

The entire thing left her feeling nauseous and bitter, but when Marlowe spoke her next words, Kae suspected the other woman was stringing her into a conversation she didn’t want to start.

+I never believed them of course,+ Marlowe said, taking in the scenery through Kae's eyes. Standing atop the tower, Kae half-heartedly directed phantom and pulled screens for each section of the city. *+It all sounded like conspiracy drivel to me.+*

+Very thoughtful of you,+ Kae replied, trying to keep her bitterness to herself. *+You truly must be one of 'the good props.+*

+Good? No. I can be a real bitch sometimes. But I just think the Colors are full of shit.+

Kae summoned another interface with her thoughts to bring the conversation to a swift end. A curved screen depicting the northeastern section of the enclave's first layer came into view. Here, seeds sown by Avo's chronology were being cultivated.

In the walled-off quadrant of the city—enclosed from the rest via haemokinetic walls—rested a quaint community populated by the young and ignorant. Women and girls. The ones with undeveloped egos, in general.

A cluster of mansions was given unto them, and their parents and caretakers were allowed entry a few times per day under supervision. However, at other instances, they were left to their own devices, their education slowly filled in by Avo's mem-cons and direct sequencing to ensure they were primed for what was to come.

The Agnos saw him seed each and every one of them with scales from a dragon. He had extracted his most recently procured cycler from his Frame and threaded it through the "stasis" group after slightly modifying their flesh.

"Need them to have some Sang qualities," Avo explained. "Going to take it out of them when this phase is over. Best keep them separated for now."

Such explained why no men lived among them.

Presently, she couldn't see anything odd about them, but Avo assured her there was a growing resonance in each one. They were being aligned on a similar cultural understanding, and supposedly, as their beliefs and behaviors grew over time—took on a similar trajectory, the bones, flesh, and scales of a dragon would sprout and interlace between them.

That, however, came after the exposure group from New Vultun was introduced into the community.

+So,+ Marlowe said, squinting her perception as she noticed how young most the stasis group was. *+Are these volunteers, or does the ghoul just like running old-school day cares?+*

"Mostly orphans," Kae said. "Some still have parents but... they are too young themselves."

+What? How does that work.+

"I... uh, it's not very—it's an ugly thing to elaborate on."

A beat passed as Marlowe tried to work things out, and Kae knew she understood when disgust began to flow. *+Oh. Oh. Fuck. The Fallwalker?+*

"Mostly him."

+Yeah. Most of them are half-strands like that. Huh. I just realized something: this people can—uh, could fuck.+

Unable to help herself, Kae threw her head back and groaned as she fought a grin. "No. You're just like him. Why are you just like him?"

+Like who?+

"Chambers! I heard you two talking about that—that pornography."

+Which one? Nu-dog or Soft Masters?+

Kae gagged. Avo had left a pervert in her mind. A pervert, a druggie, and a media. He must be punishing her.

+Alright, alright, I'll lay off you. I never expected you'd be a prude, you know, Agnos. Most of your type likes getting pretty wild in the Nether.+

A blush threatened to form on Kae's face. She denied it. *+Marlowe. We just met. I'm not having this conversation with you.+*

+Fine. Fine. Hm. Another question: how do you relive stress.+

"Thaumaturgy."

+That's work.+

"Then I don't relive stress."

+Now that's just not healthy. Maybe I can remind you some vics you can watch—+

A sudden snort of laughter escaped from Kae. She couldn't help it. The woman was incorrigible.

+Alright. Come on. Stop half-assing this. Talk to me. Or... or show me the city up close, at least. Don't just make me watch through Specters and phantasmics. Go walk the streets.+

"I, uh." Kae winced as she remembered a moment from yesterday when she tried to take a walk alone to clear her mind. She came upon a group of children playing marbles. She studied them with curiosity and offered a smile when they noticed her. They fled from her screaming, howling about how she was shadow-cursed. It was slightly hurtful in a way she didn't fully understand. "The locals are a bit skittish. They think that I am not... *bright*, is what Avo said. My hair, my skin, my eyes. Only my Meldskin might—oh, maybe I use that. But... but yes, they think I'm cursed."

The Thoughtcast host snorted briefly. *+Yeah. I know the type. Fucking half-strands.+*

Kae frowned. "You're being very judgmental. I thought you were supposed to be a 'good' media. One that cared about the FATELESS."

The other woman scoffed. *+Listen. I can sympathize with someone and still think they're a piece of shit. Shit, most of the refugees and gutter trash are degenerate half-strand bastards who would fuck your corpse on a dare. Damn the rash. Damn them being scapeled by the glassers right after. The problem is if you keep them living like vermin and scum, then trash they're gonna stay.+*

A throb of anger pulsed from Marlowe's mind. *+It's about the future. It's about who we could be. Most people? Eighty percent of us? They'll become whatever their environment makes of them. Another ten are going to be pieces of shit. Doesn't matter if you mod them or give them a Soul, they're just ontologically shitty. But there's ten more left. And those fuckers shine. They shine no matter where you put them.+*

And that made Kae understand who she was talking to just a bit better. "I see. You... sound like you believe that."

+That's what life taught me. How about you, Agnos? You never did answer me about becoming a renegade god-maker.+

"I'm not a renegade," Kae said, pouting as she folded her arms. "I was—" She caught herself before she could answer. Damn. This one was good. Very good. Damn her, and her skill at conversation. "You are very tricky, Citizen Marlowe."

+You're pretty sharp yourself, Agnos Kusanade.+

A moment of silence passed between them. Kae sighed. "You know what? I am going to take that walk. I am going to half some breakfast. Or dinner. Whichever."

+Hm. Workaholic. Were you always like that?+

"No, I—stop."

+*Fine. What do you want to talk about, if not yourself?*+

Kae bit her lip and turned to seek the stairs. It was going to be a long climb down. Damn Avo and his hatred of elevators. "You? What's your life like?"

+*Ah. Me? I'm just your average Guilder-guilt FATED sow slumming it while making imps off the poor. Nothing special about me.*+

"Cala," Kae began, feeling very much like Draus in that moment. "Has anyone ever told you that you are often *full of shit*."

+*Yeah. Pretty much all my exes.*+

"Well. They were right."

+*Never said they weren't. You nervous about the trial?*+

Footsteps filled the spiraling haemokinetic staircase as Kae made her way down. "No. I am... tired. And I am ready to face the city. I have to face the city."

+*Why? Why do you have to face the city?*+

Kae paused on the stairs. Why? Avo offered her a choice. She could have him make a haemokinetic puppet in her stead just like Draus. But that wasn't what she wanted. Okay, that was a lie: part of her very much wanted that, but it wasn't what she needed.

"I think... I just want someone to stand for me. The Agnos didn't. The Paladins didn't. The Guilds hurt me. Only the cadre cared. Only them." She paused. "I want to stand for myself now. And them. I want to stay standing as the Tiers fall and burn at my feet. Is that a good enough quote for you, Citizen Marlowe."

+*It's a fucking fantastic quote, Agnos. You mind if I keep it in my memory?*+

A breath followed. "Why not? You are very *good* at this, you know that?"

+*Good at what?*+

"Talking to people. Making them like you. I expected you to be a..."

+*Stuck-up drug-addled Guilder bitch?*+

"...Not my words."

+Well, don't you worry: we just met. There's plenty of that girl in me, and you'll have all the time in the world to hate me after.+

"Is that a challenge?"

+Just what happens to everyone I know.+