

***Art is how you betray yourself to an enemy. Art is the fullest expression of who you are, of what you desire, of your expression released into the world.***

***You live. You are shaped. And you shape thereafter.***

***And in your wants and flaws, your greatest defeat will be shown.***

***To want is to war, and therefore, all art will inevitably lead to conflict, for another will learn to hate you by the nature of your work alone. Just look at how the priests are braying for your blood. And for what? A dignified sculpting of one of their gods. An absolute improvement of divine aesthetic — a thing supposedly beyond the point of improvement.***

***But not us, dear poet. Not us. We wish to be with you. And you can be with us, learn with us in this place free of judgment.***

***This city eternal welcomes you. And you have no choice but to accept.***

-The Hungers of Noloth

27-12

Vessels of Flesh and Mind

-[Vator]-

"I would like to understand something," Vator said, pausing his words as he focused on parting the flesh from the ghoul's face. Poor, wretched, horrible creature. So limited in design: made to be the nightmares of children. Pointed fangs; pale, translucent skin; those scleras; and their elongated dimensions.

How painfully awkward. How terribly boring. A monster blessed with but stray traits of inhumanity, yet clearly still bound to the shape of man. For the longest time, he thought the Low Masters devoid of creativity.

As it turned out, they were just constrained.

"Why?" Vator asked, using his Heaven of Biology to scoop the festering tumors pulsating within the ghoul's exposed brain matter. Nasty little plague—their regeneration was hyper-accelerating these cancers, bringing them to an even earlier end. "As in, why serve the Hungers if they are so *banal*? Why serve them when they refuse to let you live to your fullest potential? You're a curious sort, Emotion. I can hear it in your words — your observations. Did you not feel the ache of being constrained? Did you not want to make something beautiful?"

The youngest of House Greatling gestured at the deceased monster he was vivisectioning on the

maple table. The *Deep Mariner's* deluxe suite leased ample six rooms to him and his father during their stay. Located in the Vulget District in the Hallowmile Sovereignty at Light's End, it had become their place of stay while they conducted their operation. Worked to redeem their house's honor.

With crystal mirrors, marble floors, leather padded walls, and Highflame-specific decor, it was a fanciful place. A genuine attempt to leisurely living, if such a thing was possible in these Warrens.

Vator also despised it. It was boring. Expected. And embraced none of the uniqueness within the locale. Where were the circuits? Where were the makeshift technologies assembled by the locals? Where was the street art staining his walls?

Alas, his father had "standards," and Vator prepared himself to deal with things in dull determination.

But as they were investigating poor Jhred's ruined hovel, a most *fascinating* character greeted them and offered himself in surrender.

*+Beauty is shaped by conception and culture,+ the Famine of Emotion said. +The Hungers and Guilds concern themselves with dominance and force. Dominance over concepts and culture. Solitary reign over all. You speak of beauty. Have you thought of what might remain when only one force stands?+*

The Low Master projected an avatar from the locus that held his mind. He resembled a tall man with stitched eyes and a dead *bird* of all things lodged in his chest cavity. Quite symbolic, but also a cry of outrage. The Famine of Emotion: a heartless, blind man.

Subtext was truly for cowards.

Still. They were fun to talk to. They didn't recoil from Vator's ideas like the "other children" up in the Tiers. "I think, like a body, the one force will mutate and change, and I will be a part of all the trends and glories to follow." Vator sighed. How he longed for the day when this pointless warring could be done, and he could glory himself in work and creation beyond the threshold of time. "Look here. Monsters can be beautiful. Your ghouls—they could have been so much more. And yet, your master leashes them. Leashed you!"

Vator grew a hand out from the side of his face and flicked away that single solitary tear rolling down his right eye. "So much potential... denied." He tapped the ghoul again, and invoked his **Domain of Flesh**. The monster spilled apart before his very eyes, a cocoon of biomass forming over it, digesting itself. He wanted to see how a ghoul's expanded digestive tract would affect their system — if that would destabilize these ever-growing tumors.

This one was used up. He was getting close to understanding why so many of them were

getting premature cancers. Something about their cells seemed almost *intelligent*. Or organized to fail in a certain way. Such coherence pointed up beyond the clouds.

Voidwatch was ever lawful. Especially in the work they left behind.

*+Have you found the problem yet?+* Emotion asked.

“Hm. Yes. I found the problem four hours ago, but I haven’t quite solved it. It’s a vexing problem. Definitely not something of thaumaturgic origin. Not purely, anyhow.”

Vator let out a tired breath. Time for a break. “What does ‘Avo’ mean?”

The Famine of Emotion cocked his head at that. A faint aroma of citrus drifted through the Nether, then vanished. *+Nothing anymore. But in present context, it is a reference to past regrets. And lost yearning.+*

“So. He represents a tragedy.”

*+He represents a mistake. But also an opportunity.+* A faint smile formed on the Low Master’s face. *+Without Defiance’s transgression, with the Burning Dreamer’s continued ascent, the Hungers would have never unbound me so. And I would have never been free.+*

“Free to betray them to the High Seraph and Highflame?” Vator asked, cocking an eyebrow.

*+Free to provide for them what they need, rather than what they want. They are afraid. A city in disarray. But they can be made better once more. They can be elevated to their fullest potential if they are preserved. Our war is lost. But a bargain can still be made. A partial victory can be shared. This much is obvious to me.+*

“My father doesn’t believe you,” Vator said. “He doesn’t trust you. That’s why he marked me with his flame. That’s why he has that barrier fire lining his Metamind at all times.”

*+He is right to be suspicious. But we are bedfellows of desperation. Both unleashed by the acts of a singular being.+*

“Avo, Avo, Avo,” Vator said, testing the name on his lips. “Hm. No. I think I will call him the Burning Dreamer instead. It sounds more fitting.” Vator wove a stool from his tailbone, calcium expanding out from behind him from splitting skin, paired with *delectable* pain. He sighed as he sat across from Emotion, steepled his hands as he regarded how he might’ve changed the other man’s look — perfected him more. “My only point of confusion with you is how actively willing you seem about testifying at the trial. Offering yourself over to the Paladins seems dangerous. It might give them the way to track others of your like. You said you have many nodes, correct?”

*+Yes. And they will try to stop me. But have seen the way of things. There are only so many outcomes left. And this way will guarantee a place for my culture, at the very least.+*

“Honorable.” Vator nodded. “Unbelievable. But considering all the unbelievable things that have happened since the beginning of history, perhaps this was merely another turning point. The body was a living piece of architecture, after all. Pillars broke, weight shifted, and the structure warped.”

*+An apt metaphor.+ Emotion went silent as he began to study the Instrument. +Are most Highflame children like you?+*

Vator smirked. “No. They’re usually even greater disappointments. And they fixate on these... trifles.” He thought back to the time when he reshaped Modad Hekkier’s nu-dog. The thing had the flattest face and the most laughable nasal passage. And its body screamed for the hunt, but its embarrassing little legs couldn’t carry it.

He didn’t understand why she screamed when he gave the good boy what it wanted. He didn’t understand why she was so horrified when it tore into her — forced her to kill it. Strangest of all was how she refused to speak with him afterward. He offered to mold a new bioform. Something that suited her gaudy aesthetics. But no, instead of getting pleasure or satisfaction, she chose avoidance.

Even after Abrel tried explaining things to him, he found it all so ridiculous. Of course the dog wanted to be something that could express itself. Didn’t anyone?

The door to their living room clicked open, and Vator turned to greet his father with a smile. Behind him, service drones cleaned and swept the rest of the abode constantly. Uthred Greatling slammed the door shut before they could get a proper glimpse inside.

Turning a glare on the Low Master, the former Authority regarded the mangled bag of sizzling flesh that used to be a ghoul on the table with a look of disgust. “Vator...”

“I’ve almost got it,” he said.

“The drones will not touch this table. Before we leave, you will make sure it is absolutely spotless.”

“Of course, father.”

But now he was no longer the focus anymore. Uthred Greatling had a new plaything to examine, and his name was Emotion.

“I just finished talking to Green River,” Uthred said, tone deep and flat, betraying nothing to the Nolothi. “She has offered to provide every resource possible to ensure that ‘I find every success possible in my mission to see my daughter saved.’” The scorn in his voice was palpable, but there was also something else there. “You are certain this ghoul has subverted her.”

*+He is more than a mere ghoul now. But yes. I felt his warminds. He felt mind. We are known to each other. But the nature of our presence remain masked. He will doubtlessly be watching you*

*and your son, but the same thing can be turned back against him. You should involve the Sang more in your matters. Keep her close.+*

“You do not command me,” Uthred growled, towering over the phantasmal projection of the Low Master. “Do not forget your place here. You surrendered to us. We are to offer you first to the Paladins, and then to the High Seraph when what you promised is delivered. But we are no equals. You are a valued prisoner that can be made a guest, or a *redundancy*.”

*+I have not forgotten,+* Emotion said, unshaken by the former Authority. *+Just as you remain truthful to yourself. I am the only one that can turn your daughter from damned fool to valiant victim. I am the only reason why you or your son have a trail leading to your foe at all.+*

Flames erupted from Uthred’s eyes. “You—”

*+Will do everything to see Highflame achieve its every goal during the trial, and you begin the Fifth Guild War on dominant footing. I will be the difference between a final struggle of attrition and sorrow, or a victorious campaign with all the world aligned beneath the supremacy of your High Seraph.+*

Uthred scoffed. “So long as you are preserved.”

*+I am irrelevant. My fate was sealed centuries ago. But through me, Noloath will survive, and the city eternal will remain and be protected in a paradise under oath of a singular master. We are all desperate, Uthred Greatling. You and I. Despite me if you wish. But accept the symmetry for what it.+*

“Enough of this.” Uthred turned away from the Low Master with a barely suppressed sneer and addressed his son. “Have you isolated the ghouls’ afflictions yet?”

“Almost,” Vator said, annoyed to be repeating himself. “I believe the engineering is voidtech in nature. Entirely natural at its base.”

“Voidwatch,” Uthred grunted. “I have contacts in Omnitech, do you—”

“No!” Vator snarled like a dog trying to protect his bone. A flush tinted his cheeks as he watched his father flinch away from him. “No, no, I mean.... I can do this. No need to trouble them. There are other matters they should concern themselves with. When I am done, I will see the *Old Woman* and offer what I have learned to her. Perhaps she can make something of use out of it.”

His father regarded him for a beat before giving a curt nod. “See it done before tomorrow if you can.”

Vator did so love a challenge. “I can. I will just need to... do more testing.”

A flash of discomfort passed behind his father’s eyes. For a second, Vator expected to be

refused, but then the look faded, and Uthred seemed merely resigned. "I understand. Do it quietly. Keep your noise to a minimum."

"Of course, father. People go missing in these Warrens all the time. I will be sure to put some of the unwanteds to better use."

"I will leave the process to you," Uthred muttered as he turned to leave the room. "I will be leaving for the Second Fortune in an hour. There are additional things I want to discuss with the ghouls' slave."

"Will you bring Emotion with you?" Vator asked.

Uthred went still just as gripped the door. Turning slowly, he eyed his youngest son with the harshest glare he could. "Vator. He is not a *toy*. Do not treat him as such. I have him contained, not pacified."

The Famine offered no commentary about this.

"So, no, then?" Vator said. His father promptly stepped out and left, all but slamming the door behind him. The youngest Greatling sighed once more. He turned to face Emotion again. "Forgive him. He is under a great deal of stress."

*+And shame. And sorrow. Your brother has left a wound in him. As has your sister. And he wants to truly connect to you, for you are his greatest inheritor. But he is unable to understand you, and he fears you on an instinctive level.+* Emotion let out a soft breath. *+I empathize.+*

This surprised Vator. "You do?"

"Avo," Emotion said. "You asked me about the meaning behind his name. It is derived from Avohakten. My son. The son I killed."

Rapt fascination rose within Vator like bile, he was leaning forward, eyes aglow with glee. "Tell me. Tell me."

But the Low Master pressed their lips together. *+A reward for you. Separate the sickness affecting my ghouls, and I will tell you everything about my wayward boy.+*

The young Instrument threw his head back and laughed. An order from his father and an offer from a Low Master. What a day. What a thrill. Reabsorbing his tailbone-forged stool back into himself, Vator tugged at his suit lapels as he placed a palm against the boiling mess of flesh beside him. "I'll be right back."

And then he injected himself into the squirming biomass and tunneled across the city, clawing his way out from one of his many existing *art pieces* left in the gutters.

Time for a little more testing.