

*+We don't have a census for how many people are living in the refugee sanctuaries.*

*You want to know why? It's not because we don't have the logistical means to count them. No.*

*The Guilds, if anything, are more than competent logistically. All it takes is a few divisions of dedicated Necros and a little bit of time and they will have every true living person surrounding New Volton counted and catalogued.*

*That is not the issue.*

*The issue is if they are listed, if they are counted, then the weight of what we're doing settles in. Make no mistake, we are ignoring people dying on our doorstep. We are ignoring them because it's easier to turn away when they're smuggled in as refugees as death fuel for the city.*

*"They knew what they were getting into."*

*"Risk is the name of the game."*

*Bullshit. It's just easier for us to swallow them not being actual people. Just fools who wandered into the gutters looking for death. Fools for selling their agency and handing themselves over to the Syndicates.*

*They must be because anything else is too unpalatable.*

*You think about that the next time you watch a vicarity starring these "fools." You think about what kind of life they were leading to force them to risk the Maw, the smugglers, the Crucibles and the Syndicates to get into the city. You think about that the next time you enjoy another snuff stream.*

*Or maybe just apply for a border pass. Take an ex-route shuttle and tour the sanctuaries. Look down at them from the skies,*

*You think about that the next time you enjoy another snuff stream.+*

*-Cala Marlowe, The FATELESS Thoughtcast*

20-1

Interrogations

All children born under Highflame's banner learn early that there are some beatings you just have to take. It was this understanding that filled Abrel's spine with steel and turned her nerves into titanium.

Shame coursed through her person, but in her existed a draught of fear or sadness, for the lesson of the beatings came paired with another of the High Seraph's teachings.

Pride.

Pride in one's wounds for the scars to show what they survived and an understanding that there was worthiness to be regained when one rose to redemption's call.

Uthred took a moment to gather his thoughts before he spoke, the shape of his face finally stabilizing. Circles of discoloration ran below his eyes and his optical implants gleamed with an intense glow. Beside him, Vator smiled deeply at his sister with open affection, his hair flowing as waves of silken gold, his left eye purple while the right remained blue. He stood a few inches taller than their father and was dressed in a fine suit of ash white.

Upon closer inspection, she could see movement under the suit. Flicking legs and brushing palps. Abrel did her best not to roll her eyes. Of course, this being Vator, he probably had his pet spiders weave the suit around him on the way over. Always with his artistry—constantly trying to get her to keep one of his pets for the sake of “fashion accessibility from biodegradable resources.

“I will keep this direct,” Uthred said, an unexpected softness just beyond his glare. “Effective as of two days ago, House Greatling was dissolved, and my position as Authority was resigned.”

Both admissions hit Abrel like flechettes to the gut. The consequences of her actions were beyond extreme. But how? Though dangerous, she didn't see how this action could force his hand so severely. There were other factors to consider, such as the provocation behind the matter, and the details of the case.

Uthred Greatling wasn't a man to avoid responsibility, but he wouldn't just bear punishments bestowed without ensuring the sentences were deserved.

“‘Was resigned... was dissolved.’ Seriously, father, it's like someone else did these things for you.” Vator tutted, unaffected by Uthred's side glare as usual. “I told you I could have applied for the Writ if it bothered you that much. There was no need for you to be in such—”

“Enough. The duty was mine. Do not interrupt.” Uthred shot his youngest a final look before turning back to Abrel. Vator simply sighed, surrendering to his father's will but completely unshaken by the chastisement. Turning his gaze back to Abrel, Uthred continued. “The severity of your actions—the recklessness with how you pursued your target. And how you deviated from the dispatched task.”

A shadow blanketed Abrel's thoughts. If she had secured and brought Jhred back as she was ordered, things perhaps would be different now. But she left love win over duty, and now he was truly dead, and she mental pawn under the creature that killed him.

“Instruments Zenna, Alphim, and Melt.” Every name Uthred listed was another stone plunging into her gut. The members of her cadre. The team she led. Her friends. All gone now. Each and every one. “They have been recognized with honors. Their service and distinction have been recorded and eulogized at Axtraxis for heeding the commands of their leader in the most dire of circumstances. Even unto death.” A near-silent sigh followed. “But I do not need to tell you about the social repercussions. I know you were close to them. Zenna as well. I was fond of her too. She was always a meritable friend.”

Abrel nodded and did her best to distance herself from the searing pain inside. “I couldn’t ask any more of her. I failed her. I saw her to an inefficient end.”

“Yes,” Uthred agreed.

Vator frowned at the both of them, but his disapproval was directed more toward his father. The display was unnerving touching in a way. Abrel knew that her brother loved her, but it was in a fashion most unnatural. There was something that didn’t fit in Vator like he was a puppet pulled by inhuman whims. Most things never bothered him, but there was a dynamic he sought in his family. A kind of perfection that was missing.

Uthred was supposed to support her. To offer his kindness when she self-criticized. But he never did. And Vator never failed to show his open disapproval.

“I also know you would have never lost yourself to such a rage if you weren’t provoked.” Uthred’s voice softened. “I know your sins. I know your flaws. As Jhred was... *her* son, I am your father. I fought the rage too. Even demanded that the trait be kept within you, in light of all the times it sustained me—propelled me.”

“But I failed to master it,” Abrel replied, whispering.

“Yes. You failed. But now I want to know the reason. I want to know what caused your assigned task of retrieving your brother for his dereliction of duty to degenerate into an open conflict against Reva Javvers and her Bloodthanes.”

Abrel’s eyes widened. “Javvers?”

“Yes. Niece to the head of the now destroyed Scalpers. Vincintine. Current listed as missing. Irrelevant to the current topic. I wish for you to elaborate. To explain your missteps.”

A dryness suddenly filled Abrel’s throat as the words refused to leave her. There were parts that she was physically incapable of revealing, for the blocks the ghoul built into her mind dammed such dialogue from flowing. And more than that, she was compelled to reveal half-truths. Partial insights into the chaos of the situation to better manipulate her father—and Highflame itself.

“Jhred was attacked,” she said. “That’s why. That’s what provoked my downfall. I have no excuse for my first failure. I offered him too much choice. Too much opportunity. He was—he had plans to attack the Fire’s Height. I think. It seemed his time as a Syndicate head was building up to an assassination from the intelligence I gathered.”

A nearly imperceptible twitch passed through Uthred’s lower lip. But Abrel saw, and so Vator definitely felt it too.

Like a hound sniffing blood, the youngest Greatling seized the opportunity to speak, joining the conversation as if an actor entering stage right. “Ah. Poor Jhred. If he could have only parted his potential from the pain of losing mother.”

“Enough!” Uthred snarled, countenance cracking into incandescent rage. The shape of his nose cut toward his son like a slashing blade as he stepped close. “I do not know what urge has consumed you this day, but it ends now. No more of this. No more excuses for him. It was his life, as he always insisted. And so it was his life to waste. And our shame to bear.”

All the while, Vator was looking at her, grinning as if she owed him a favor. She understood then what he was trying to do; he played the role of antagonist to grant her an opening toward an alliance with their father. A unified front would see an unnatural camaraderie engendered, and place father and imprisoned daughter on the same side.

He was trying to reduce the heat on her.

“Yes,” Abrel said. “It was Jhred’s fault. I should have known that. He didn’t want to get better. All he wanted was Ambassador Valhu Kitzuhara.

Suddenly, Uthred went very still. “I see. He said. And he was... going to attack the Fire’s Height then?”

“I can’t be sure, Au—uh, father.” Abrel felt her heart break as her father’s shoulders rounded. A display of relief.

Losing a son was one thing. Needing to fight him, to kill him personally because he was at the diplomatic convention you were attending to kill the host would have developed into a trauma pattern even for one such as hardy as Uthred Greatling.

“Regardless, after I made the mistake of giving him more time, the attack happened. The crippling Nether offensive compromised the districts, and the Thoughtwave Detonation took the Nether down. During this time, I found myself wondering if Jhred was in danger—or if this was part of his operation somehow, and returned to detain him.” Abrel paused here, letting the tension build up for effect. “But when I arrived, he was already on the cusp of death. Tortured.”

“Tortured?” Uthred stepped around the table and came to her, the human almost slipping

through from the Godclad. Abrel always thought her father shared eyes with Jhred, and it was almost as if her oldest brother was here in spirit, mourning his own fate. But such were fanciful delusions. If even Jaus could not be granted such a reprieve, who then was Jhred Greatling to be blessed?

Catching himself halfway, Uthred froze approximately three footsteps away. “Tortured,” he forced the words out, anger audible. “Who did it? Who shed Greatling blood?”

*Avo. The ghoul beyond ghouls. The beast that burns dreams and twists wills. The monster that scours the Nether.*

There was so much she would have told her father. So much she wanted to reveal. But her words found release along another avenue, and she spoke to portray a twisted history of what unfolded. “It was a team. A cell. They were responsible. They managed to ambush Jhred in his own base. When I got there, his mind was already compromised... there were two not wearing any armor. One of them might’ve been Jhred’s personal attack dog. Some FATELESS. The other—”

“Yes,” Vator grinned gleefully, interrupting. “‘Aedon Chambers.’ Supposed acolyte of the Low Masters and quite the interesting specimen. His genitalia is oddly large.”

“Oh, wow, thanks, Vat,” Abrel deadpanned. “The knowledge that the half-strand who murdered my brother has a huge cock is super useful.”

“You’re welcome, sister dearest. Would it benefit you to know that he is a Godclad?”

This she already knew, though it came as a surprise when she first engaged him at Light’s End. Just another one of Avo’s many impossible tricks. Almost all the Souls he burned into his companions that day were taken from her cadre. A pang of disgust followed, and her hatred boiled, but she continued the ruse—the sequencing of her mind at Avo’s hands demanded it. “No. How? Wait, how do you know this?”

“Oh, I did a little research,” Vator said. “Our mutual nuisance resurfaced a few days ago at Veng’s Stand. Also in the Warrens. He had an... let’s say ‘interesting encounter’ with one Seeker Shotin Kazahara whereupon he triggered a wombrash outbreak to cover his escape when the Paladins arrived. I did some more investigation into his past as well. The media he consumes is so delectably degenerate.” The youngest Greatling threw his head back and cackled. “The *“Soft Master Collection.”* Ah. Priceless.”

And there was her brother’s fascination and amusement with the concept of smut again. He was engineered to be unaffected by such things, the human urge to procreate—the urge of any animal to procreate caused him to devolve into half-indignant laughter more than once.

She never quite understood why. Nor was she inclined to ask.

“I—” Uthred trailed off with a scoff. The head of what once was House Greatling shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Abrel. Tell me everything. In detail. Leave nothing out about your encounter. Vator. You will inform the both of us on what you know about this Chambers. What that is done, I speak on the duty I have been entrusted with, and the potential for our family to be atoned.” He leaned in close. “I fear that Jhred might have been in contact with something of greater worth than even he knew.”

*Avo. His Frame.*

“What?”

Uthred shook his head. “That is not for you to know. Nor is it your task. You need simply tell us of your encounter. Nothing more.”

Abrel understood, and so she continued painting a disfigured truth.

So, the city was determined to make a target of Aedon Chambers. She could use that. Use him to pull attention away from Avo, but still give her father, brother, and Guild someone to go after.

The wrong person.

\*\*\*

*+First. There is a problem. You need to come down now. To the Circuits.+*

Bright-Wealth’s harried message came with a splash of heavy anxiety. The ghosts leaked from Green River’s active session in a constant flow as a progress bar filled her cog-feed, memories being transferred. The time was just before dawn. She wondered what matter so important to demand her attention now.

Yawning slightly, she slithered through the darkness and reattached herself to the rest of her body, feeling the “human” component of herself draw a sharp breath of surprise as the memories loaded in the same instant the vessel activated.

She wasted no time thereafter and took flight down her penthouse, glad she kept her dress on tonight instead of cleaning the body and putting it to bed.

Regardless, her mind cleared more with each step. She should have known things were awry considering all the dread in Bright-Wealth’s mind. The younger Sang wasn’t someone she would describe as anxious or easily terrified, but considering the situation, she was holding together rather well.

The Second Fortune ostensibly had its doors open to any and all guests, but the presence of a certain few was as if a silver bullet for businesses, and a bad omen for their continued operation.

She found him reclined at the very edge of the audience seats overlooking the Circuit area below. As the sounds of a fight continued, she noted that three entire rows had cleared out behind him, with guests fleeing up the walkways, making for the doors. Layers of intersection perception left him bathed in the notice of countless minds, but none dared to offer a single utterance related to his presence.

Her heels clicked with every step and she readied herself, pulling her lips in a wide smile while casting emergency orders to the rest of her sisterhood running the establishment. *+Wealth. Have Lucille temporarily lock the doors leading to the upper wings overlooking the arena. Thank you.+*

She didn't bother turning around to watch hallways swell and close themselves off. All her focus was needed for a single task, a single conversation.

As she came to a stop at the very final row of seats, she briefly glanced at the two bioforms fighting below. One was a large simian creature—a *gorilliod incarnate*—facing one of Ruveca's new snake-centipede designs. Dragging her attention away, she greeted the unwatched guest with a bemused smile, though her thoughts were tense with uncertainty.

Blood was pouring down from his eyes, his nose, his ears, and his mouth. But he sat there, blinking, eating roasted meatballs in a bag using a toothpick, and shaking his head every time an impact sounded from below.

"Chief Naeko," Green River said, greeting the highest-ranked Paladin in New Vultun with a slight bow. "I would have never expected one of your stature to visit our humble establishment. You do us a great honor."

Languidly, the man turned his eyes away from the fight and over to her. He returned her false modesty with his own lazy smile. "Nah. I'm just being trouble. I know that." He patted the seat next to him, the size of his hand enough to close around her skull. She needed to be careful. She needed to be prepared to lose her expendable vessel and dive for the shadows. "Come on. Sit down. Let's talk. Don't worry, I'm not busting you up or shutting you down or anything. The paperwork would kill me. I just have some questions."

She didn't sit down. Not immediately. "Will these questions you ask see me killed then, perchance? Something that my superiors will not want answered."

Naeko ran his fingers through his short crop of black hair and shrugged. He smeared the blood constantly pouring down from his face and snorted. "Well. Suppose we're about to figure that out from whether you say anything to my question or not."

Green River nodded. "The question, then?"

"Have you had someone under your employ conduct a..." the Paladin paused as his halo spun, ghosts pulling mem-data across the accretion. "...a '*Bone Demon*' graft for a customer? Should be a sheath from the details I got."