

If your piss seems golden enough, some half-strand will be there to catch it with open lips.

-Shit Quail Tavers Said Once

25-15

Patron of Divinity (II)

–[Req Tnaqin]–

Req Tnaqin flinched when he heard the noise.

Curling into a ball wouldn't make the torture stop, but it would give him a few moments before they buried the cables in him. It also made it harder for them to drag him out of the dog pen. A few seconds without pain was paradise enough in this hell.

Several more clicks followed as fresh air filled his cramped little prison for the first time. Regret came with every inhale thereafter, for the scent of his bodily wastes were contrasted with the outside's comparative fragrance. He got used to the filth after his first few hours— all he could breathe, anyway. Choice just made things worse.

Hell, choice was the entire reason he was in this hell again. His choice to live in the way his savior showed him over a month back. To hunt the Syndicates. To play the butcher to his former owners and abusers. How inspired he and his fellow migrants felt after their rescue from the Scalpers? How motivated they were to return the favor.

They thought they blooded themselves with the gangers they killed; the cheap implants they had grafted. Hope deluded them. Hope was a thing with broken wings, and they were plunging from the sky instead of soaring.

Fools. Damned fools. They were pigeons playing the role of hawk. Without material means to enact his retribution, revenge was but want, and he and those few who came with him all but sold themselves back to bondage within weeks.

And now, his new masters were going exact both capital and pleasure from his suffering. They already took his left kidney and right leg. He doubted they were going to send him to a Crucible, but he saw the streams they broadcast. Live dissections. Live torture vicarities that made him a vessel for guests with particular tastes.

A hand reached into grab him. He whimpered and went rigid. Again, he thought of biting off his own tongue, but there wasn't the strength in his jaw, and there wasn't enough fire in his heart.

His wings were broken. False wings to begin with.

All that was left was the fall.

This enforcer pulled him out with more gentleness than the last. Too much gentleness. The lack of screaming and cursing also made his heart clench. What were they doing now? What demented games were they trying to play?

But then he felt it. The warmth ran slick along his face and he tasted a flavor he knew all too well: *coppery metallic*. Blood. Squinting out from a swollen eye, he mustered what remained of his strength to lift his neck—barely managing the action.

As a strobing light flickered above, he saw his own reflection and winced. Nose broken. Every odd tooth pulled out. Hair shorn. Ears clipped. Gods, he must've blacked out a lot more than remembered. And then there was the figure looming over him. A shadow, but its contours were not of a man, but that of a monster.

A monster Req saw in both memories and dreams.

Its body was the color of night's soft illumination resting upon naked bone, and somehow its fangs glinted brighter. Eight obsidian serpents extended from his back, and their tips were caked in flesh and shredded alloy.

A sobbing laugh escaped Req. He didn't know if his mind had finally shattered or if this was actually happening. The savior was with him. The savior had returned.

He was a pigeon. Hope was a thing with broken wings. But where he fell, a guardian beast awaited his descent, prepared to catch him before he could greet oblivion.

A groan escaped him as he pushed himself over, turning to greet his savior properly. He fought back tears and worked to swallow the lump in his throat, cracked lips stinging with each lick from his tongue. "S-sorry. Don't want to keep meeting like this."

"It's fine," his savior said, that familiar hiss still present. "Unfortunate what happened to you. Your consangs. Tracked you through the stream. Wish I would have kept a closer eye. Would have resolved this sooner."

Req didn't have the words for that. Looking around, he saw the mangled remains of his former torturers. Flayed flaps of flesh dangled from mangled exoskeletons. Organs and limbs littered the ground, and what few enforcers that were left enough of a countenance shared death-masks of abject horror.

Then, there was the faint sound of screaming. Somehow, somehow, Req knew the massacre went beyond this room, that the Syndicate was the voice behind the ambience of agony.

Once again, he was saved. But once again he had to be saved.

“Nothing wrong with trying,” the savior said. Their halo rippled, and from it trailed ethereal claws carrying a blinding flame. “But there is a problem with you. Problem with readiness. Problem with capability. Not ready to feast on game so big.”

Req bit his lip. He tried. He really did. Disappointing the savior somehow felt worse than all the torture. Well. Not really. But it still emotionally hurt like a motherfuck. “I know... I tried. Lots of us tried. Walked right into an ambush.”

“Know that. One of you was a traitor. Dealt with him already. Need a Necro if you want to do this.” The savior paused. The flame dancing upon the ghostly claws dimmed. It looked like an animated flame leaking from a fracture; its brightness was the most devastatingly beautiful thing Req ever beheld. He wanted it. He feared it. He wanted to vanish into the cracks. “Do you still want to keep doing this?”

Req blinked and turned his attention back to the savior. “What?”

“Do you wish to feed upon the Syndicates still. Do you wish to make things right? Despite what you have suffered once more.”

“Yes!” The words left Req with all the strength he had left. His head splashed against the pool of blood. It was all he wanted. All he could take. Something inside him broken. His face scrunched and the tears he thought himself dry of began to flow again. “Gods, yes. Anything... I’d do anything to be... to be you.”

A beat followed. The chorus of screams only grew, and slowly, Req traced its origin back to the savior’s halo.

“Good,” the savior said. “Glad to hear it.”

And then, one of their Echohead’s threaded through the ghost-carried flame, and buried itself in Req’s chest.

He died for the first time that day; more deaths would soon follow.

–[Avo]–

GHOSTS - [1,023,133,564]

LIMINAL FRAME (V) - 228,555

ENSOULING...

ENSOULING...

ENSOULING...

ENSOULING...

ENSOULING...

REMAINING SOULS - [7]

REMAINING CYCLERS - [21]

HEAVEN TEMPLATES - [108]

UPDATING INFECTION...

INFECTION - [0.89%]

Each Godclad Ensouled filled Avo with ineffable glee.

It wasn't just the fact that he was literally repurposing Guild assets to be used against them—he was also giving people choice. More than they had before. A chance to inflict their own difference upon the world. Make the changes they desired.

While Shotin and Green River were winnowed of ignorance, while Gaei was given the might she so truly deserved, while Req was granted another chance at retribution, a new power was rising in the gutters of New Vultun: a hidden empire joined of melting minds and a common ethos.

Avo granted his favor more than few of Cas' candidates as well. Two in total. The third he subsumed then killed for being an Ori Sleeper. The Silvers had a frightful amount of those operatives planted all across the city, and the annoying thing was that their minds would remain partially locked upon he discovered their activation.

This necessitated more dives against the Silvers. Hopefully, he could use Shotin to insulate himself more from Emotion's machinations and penetrate the inner walls of Ori-Thaum.

As for the Infacer and Veylis, he would take a more meticulous approach. Keep his raids fast and random. Force them to be eternally on the defense. If he did this right, they wouldn't sense their stream of deaths slowing to a trickle before it was too late. To this end, Chambers, Cas, and Essus were already playing an essential role.

By current estimations, the sanctuaries would be entirely subverted by the start of the trial, and a considerable portion of the gutters and the Spine would follow suite. Marlowe had been quite useful in this regard—spreading out using her thoughtcast and other thoughtcasts besides

granted him more channels to expand. More invaluable were the memories possessed by the people: the secrets held by individual minds exposed vulnerabilities and targets of opportunity denied most others.

Through these means, he was recolonizing the slaughterhouse of the Guilds to something between a curated garden and the frontlines of the next war.

On the day of the trial, it would be as if the uprising again. But he would strike from within and without. And he would lay bare the sins of the Guilds to the ones they exploited. That would prove to be his offered ember; the Souls and Heavens he stole from the Guilds would then follow as oil for the blaze.

+Avo,+ Tavers casted. The memories hit him before her words did. White-Rab was alive. But on the run. Position jumping across several districts—likely his various proxy lobbies. *+Rab's alive. Golds made a run at him as expected. Three of his decoy apartments got imploded. Some dead-eyed heavily auged types were also lurking about. Regs, by my measure. Says you'll find where you had your first outing together. You, him, and his "friend."*+

Ah. The raid where he claimed the Fallwalkers. Understandable. Avo dispatched a submind to locate White-Rab immediately. **+Synced. Thanks for the notice.+**

+Yeah. Hey, Avo, listen—+

+Your son. Yes. Will be there when you cast me. Try to mend him. Have a Soul to prevent his death. Going to see if I have the capability to mend his ego. Will have Voidwatch support as well.+

The Squire let out a quiet breath. *+Much obliged.+*

+More obliged to you. Wouldn't have even made it this far if not for what you did with Zein. But want you to keep quiet. Keep moving. Things are going to get loud.+

+Hells. Don't worry about this old sow. I've lived through the first four, I'll make it through this one. Going to go dark for a bit now. Need to make some private arrangements.+

For her son. Arrangements she didn't even want him to find out. Understandable. **+Cast whenever you need.+**

SESSION DISCONNECTED

EGO-ID LOST

Along another branch of consciousness, Avo gazed down at Shotin and Green River, their templates barely intact from all the knowledge seared into them. Kare had pushed out from the crowd to keep her uncle from falling. Her presence lessened the effort required from Avo to keep the Seeker from breaking, but the weight of truth was a torturous weight to bear.

“Fuck,” Shotin whispered, blinking rapidly, echoes of Jaus’ screams leaking from the pinhole that was his mind, outlines of the Famines dancing from his shadows. Green River fared no better, but she endured wordlessly, her focus directed inward instead. As the Seeker’s focus returned to the present, his gaze suddenly swung to Kare, who was the only reason he hadn’t collapsed. “Kare—how, you—”

His expression twitched. His rage returned. His rage exploded.

“Uncle,” Kare pleaded.

“You *half-strand fuck!*” Shotin snarled, flinging his words at Avo’s titanic core. “You took her at Veng’s Stand. You used me—”

“She was a fortunate acquisition. Didn’t plan on her. Certainly didn’t plan on you.”

Arguing with Shotin was pointless; the man was pugnacious to the extreme. But he was also hyper-responsible, and his thoughts could be lead to uncomfortable conclusions. **“Only wanted to leave that day. She came there for you. I took what I could and escaped. Such is how things are.”**

The man clenched his teeth together, but couldn’t stop himself from peeling his eyes away from Avo to look upon his niece again—or at least a variant of her. “Godsdammit. Fuck. Kare, I’m—I’m sorry. I’m—”

She squeezed his arm. “It’s okay. I—Avo is—” She winced as the word “good” failed to follow. “He’s helping us. He’s been keeping the city safe. He’s been keeping me safe.”

“And there is no way for her to be spared from danger,” Avo continued. Shotin’s perception swung back to him, but Avo continued pressing. **“Zein. Veylis. Both sought to spend her life for different reasons. She is a fracture to them. A vulnerability to exploit. Something to trigger desired conflict. For their paths. Their desired future. You cannot stop this. You did not even know this. Not until I showed you.”**

“And what about you?” Shotin shot back. “You—you—I still have no fucking what you are. What you want to do. We’re... part of you now? Like slaves?”

“That is not my will. That will never be my will. I despise such weakness. I want to help you. I want you to know what I know. And then I want you to choose.”

Shotin looked taken aback. “What are you talking about?”

“D’Rongos are compromised right now. Their elder will be ruined at the trial. Ruined by testimony from Agnos Kae Kusanade. Ruined by direct testimony from the Glaives employed during the Stillborn operation. Ori-Thaum will experience a realignment. Same as Highflame. A restructuring for the coming war.

“Why?” Green River said, finding enough voice in herself to interject. “For what purpose does the Godslayer and Seraph play such games.”

“Because they are trying to prune the possible paths. The future is vast. Vaster than even a god. But there are only so many choices that can be made. So many choices that make sense. Removing options grants them more direct paths to victory. Think Zein was using the Massists against Veylis. Veylis is trying to cultivate specific developments out of her own faction; her allies. All of this is an attempt at manufacturing fate.”

“Manufacturing fate...” Shotin breathed. “You have any idea how ghouf-fucking insane all this sounds? The war—Jaus—all of this is because... *because* the High Seraph has daddy issues.”

“It goes a bit further than that,” Corner scoffed.

“I’m going to sync your memories over with your actual selves when you resurrect. What I want is simple: pathways to each of your Guilds. And for you to do what you think is right. What you believe to be just.”

With each exchange, Shotin’s incredulity grew, and Green River wasn’t far behind him.

“You... you want to use me to consume my entire Guild. Is that it? Have me set everything up for you?”

“Some will be subsumed. Most will remain untouched. Don’t want to be your tyrant. You don’t possess the ability to inflict in me such fear. Shotin. Chose you because you believe. You have an ideal inside you. Will fight me for your choice. Fight anyway. Like that. Want that. Only way to live.”

The Seeker’s expression was one of absolute confusion. What words could he give in response to that? Avo was beyond his comprehension, his expectations.

Green River, however, was remained bemused. “And... I? You appreciate me this way as well?”

That made Avo chuckle. ***“Appreciate revenge. Appreciate the opportunity you represent. And you are my spite.”***

The vulpine leaned back on her hind legs. “Excuse me?”

“Noloth enchained you. Made you a slave. Shame. Weakness. The Hungers are a travesty upon my dream. Upon my desire. I despise them for this. Will do all I can to corrupt their legacy.”

“And you need someone among the sisters.”

“Yes. But had another. Elegant-Moon.” The template drifted out from the crowd with a rattling of bones. She laughed as she waved to her ancestral kin, and Green River’s eye narrowed. ***“Veylis likely knows about her. Doesn’t know about you. No one will see you coming. Will take everything from our enemies together. Can only get so far alone.”***

“Speak no more,” Green River said. Releasing a contemplative breath, she nodded. “You are exactly like him, you know?”

She didn’t need to invoke Walton’s name for Avo to understand. ***“Think I will betray you.”***

The fox sighed. “Such a thing is an irrelevant consideration. What power do I have to compel from spending my life.”

“You can tell me no. Tell me no. You will resurrect. But I will take the Soul back. I will make sure you remain unharmed in matter and mind. We will continue was we were. And I will find another way. Accept. We will work as allies. I will be your benefactor. Not master. You decide objectives. Communicate with me for resources; intelligence. I decide what to offer.”

A moment of silence drew on. “You are *almost* exactly like him. There was a single-mindedness to him. A causal acceptance of the world. You... you intend to make a war of this, don’t you?”

“I intend to win.”

Just then, his session activated, and Avo found himself being summoned by Kare. Sipping from her memories, excitement dawned in his mind as he realized what was to follow. Naeko intended to speak with him. Best that the entire cadre be in attendance for this.

Right now, however, he wished to see what his newest “consangs” had—

“I accept,” Green River forced out. Shotin looked at her surprised.

—to say.

“Good. Delectable. And you. Seeker? Do you want to fight the true war? Do you want to protect your niece? To quiet your nightmares? Or will you leave fate in someone else’s hands.”

Shotin closed his eyes and snarled. “Fuck. You piece of shit...” When he opened his eyes again, the anger left him, and it was with exhaustion that he looked upon Kare—and saw a shadow of her mother. Ever frail were the hearts of men. Something inside Shotin gave. “Yes. Yes. Godsdamn you.”

Avo’s hunger had never been more sated.