

+Hey, hey, consangs.

It's your girl, Cala Marlowe, coming at you this morning with a special episode of the Fateless Thoughtcast. Hope your minds are screwed back on after whatever the fuck just happened earlier because we got some news and tunes to get through.

The city's been heating up recently. The real city, up in the Tiers. I'm not sure if all of you deep down in the Spine or lower have even noticed, but all is not well in paradise.

In case you haven't – In case you're one of those "no-divers" who's managed to avoid the eruption of buzz leaking out from the Nether – we are living through history right now.

Several times over.

A surprise participant has been added to the trial: Zein Thousandhand, the Godslayer herself. Thought dead, now supposedly stored in the pocket of our esteemed Chief Paladin Naeko. With the trial postponed by a week, lots of Nether dwellers are casting this and that, trying to guess if old Thousandhand's going to be on the chopping block too.

My Deep Bazaar bought rumors right now say: who knows?

To make matters more concerning, Highflame's hosting their own internal get-together later tonight. What's on the itinerary, you ask? What's being discussed?

Who knows?

My contacts certainly couldn't tell me, and if they don't know, well, all I can guess is that the High Seraph decided to host this on short notice. Probably something about how one of their Authorities just dissolved his House in shame due to recent events, and a fiery shitstorm about to fall on the Chivs like a ton of Rendbombs.

Across the Saintist Massist divide, Ori-Thaum would normally be tap dancing with delight with all the messy domestic affairs Highflame is suffering, but word from the deep is that things are not so numb among the Silvers. Old clan rivalries have picked up at an ugly time as multiple true deaths have occurred in "unrelated incidents" between the D'Rongos, Kazaharas, and Kizuhadas.

If I didn't know any better, instability seems to be jumping around like a bug. Or some kind of mem-con.

Check your Metas, consangs. Never know who's diving in.

Anyway, more news coming after the track: Longeyes placing one of their own Bloodthanes under watch; Shotin Kazahara caught scheming with his bond-brother; Ascenders new optics leaking feeding your visual input back to Highflame.

All that and more after "Raise the Stakes" by the Mountain Thieves.+

-Cala Marlowe, The FATELESS Thoughtcast

23-1

Borrowed Insight (I)

+...and more after "Raise the Stakes" by the Mountain Thieves.+

A growing staccato of drums hammered in the insides of Tavers' arovec as they passed over the district of Fountaintale. Fittingly, the intensity only grew when they slipped beneath the shadow cast by the Tiers, the risen memite mountain separating not only the FATED from the FATELESS but the face of a new dawn from the Warrens.

Slipping free from the nest of metal and carbon that comprised most of the Grave Valley Sovereignty, the urban jungle thinned as bright green knolls parting expansive parks became the landscape below. The foot traffic of wandering families far outmatched the density of aeros here, and as they drifted closer to The Lots, Avo took in the few hundred thousand accretions in his vicinity and considered their objective.

Ghosts: [57,384,143]

*+You're sure about this one?+ Avo asked, speaking directly from within Tavers' mind. Such was how he resided now—as ever-growing splinters buried in the minds of his cadre. Parts of him were constantly snapping free from her halo, darting out to find roots in passing Metas or logistically essential loci. *+Still don't really see the need for this. Have the means to—+**

"You got the means to jack and dive into minds," Tavers interrupted, casting orders for her vehicle to make its descent. They were coming in over the studio lot they used that time, the mag-clamps to an executive parking dock unfurling its arms to embrace their approach. "What you don't have is a public-facing asset—a real one. I'm not talking about that Skin-Haver or whatever that clown's called."

*+Skintaker,+ Avo replied. *+And we can't count him anymore either. He's dead. Chambers told me a few minutes ago. Died after he cooked and ate a ghoul.+**

Pure disgust and confusion slipped out from the squire's mind. "What? Why the hells would the half-strand do that?"

+Was trying to build more views. Watcher challenge. Recruitment drive for the cult.+ The Cult of

the Unborn to be exact. Considering its yet diminutive size and isolation from Zein's machinations, it wasn't surprising the cell survived Thousandhand's fall when so many others were purged. Still, the loss of their shock jock was unwelcome. Made worse was how the man ended up dying.

"So," Tavers said, sighing the aero's engines shifted vertically, preparing to dock, "how'd he get it?"

+One of the ghouls he ate had a tumor. Fast-acting tumor. He ended up choking on it. A result of one of my choices. A modification I had hired grafters make to my brothers' biological architecture, Contagious cancer. Something I wanted to use to kill the rest of the mistakes off.+

"Yeah, what goes around comes back to blow themselves up while fucking you in the ass. Tale older than time. Good thing good old Tavers can get you societal rejects an upgrade, huh?" She chuckled. "As I was saying, though, you guys need someone to play the crowd to your advantage. A media type you can trust. There will be people you can get to easily, but a good, popular thoughtcast will go a long way in spreading a cause. Besides, another set of eyes at the trial is always useful."

He couldn't disagree about that. He was just dubious about a proparazzi's uses beyond being a major vector for his splinters to spread.

+Ain't convinced we can trust this one,+ Draus said, echoing Avo's earlier sentiment. Her physical sheath was some twenty thousand kilometers away, building new routes through the Sunderwilds. In two days since Avo reforged the Fardrifter into an intact god, the Regular had taken on auxiliary tasks related to enhancing their travel options and securing additional enclaves.

Working in tandem with the unleashed Fardrifter and Dice—whom Avo was helping make the new icon for the city of light—and tracing new Scar Charts from sanctuary-procured memories, Draus was already shaping the conditions to raid three new enclaves.

Presently, she was midway through building multiple spatial routes that would make it easy for them to assault or retreat from said enclaves. As she worked, the Fardrifter peeked at things behind the walls, its perception offering deep insight into what lay in wake.

"Trust me," Tavers replied, speaking out loud as if the others were right next to her, "the hate she has for the Guilds is something special. And no one will even notice if we use her to wage an information war against the Guilds. She's perfect."

[Yeah, something special's a way to put it,] template-Abrel interjected, not bothering to hide her derision. [Everyone knows about "Crying Marlowe's" problems. Wahhh, my mommy and daddy don't wanna be together anymore. Wahhh, my mommy is a war criminal, and her work for Highflame ended up getting my oldest brother nulled. Wahhh, my daddy's a

war profiteer from Omnitech and after some cultist shitheads kidnapped me to squeeze him for some imps, I ended up falling cunt-over-mind in love with the cult leader in the totally sensible way all fourteen-year-olds too. Which is why I'm still super fucking broken inside that they killed him.]

Abrel's mockery made Tavers' snicker. "Anyone ever tell you that you're a real piece of shit, Greatling?"

[Sure. But it's a bad habit to heed the unworthy.]

A chorus of boos sounded in his mind. Multiple other templates jeered at the Instrument's arrogance.

The squire just shook her head as a magnetic field wrapped around their aero, and a green tick-shaped hologram pulsed over the windshield. "Alright. Alright. Settle down. Jaus, your mind's like a madhouse, Avo. Is this what it's always like to be you?"

The ghoul grunted a laugh. *+Actually suppressing it. Only hearing the direct responses to Abrel. Not hearing the constant fighting between the Regulars. Enforcers. Draus. Paladins. Not hearing the Woundmother demanding that I destroy all the buildings we see. Or the Techplaguer asking me to "decompile" Calvino and the other one.+*

At the mention of its name, Zein's former handler—and monitoring mind—chirped a note of distaste. *{I am not "the other one." My name is Kant Is A Prick. I've even introduced myself personally to you at the meeting in detail and emphasized my title several times—}*

The Techplaguer screeched. **"He bores us master, CORRUPT HIS DATA FOR THIS AFFRONT."**

"Okay, yeah, okay," Tavers said, massaging her temple as she began to disembark. "Turn the rest off. Fuck me, how the hells can you focus with all that going on at once?"

+Enjoy the noise. Like there's a city inside of me. A growing world.+

"Yeah? Well, you already own an enclave, so let's stay rooted to reality."

A pause followed.

{Squire Tavers,} Calvino said, {do you often forget who you're speaking to?}

The woman pinched the bridge of her nose. "Only when they're a disembodied mind-hopping cannibal that now lives part-time in my head, apparently."

The music had grown to become persisting thunder as they approached Cala Marlowe's set. As the dim amber of morning leaked in through the windows, Avo found it odd that the lot was as vacant as he remembered.

Only a single accretion greeted his cog-feed. Located behind a closed vault at the far end of the hall, Avo sensed Marlowe before he even saw her. She stood about one-hundred and ninety centimeters tall and the blood in her flowed slick even through the joy congesting her veins. Delving further into her flesh, he isolated additional narcotics and hallucinogenics from her blood, apprehension with each of Tavers' steps.

+Didn't mention she's an addict,+ he said.

"We're all addicts, Avo," Tavers muttered, reactively checking their surroundings. Even though Avo had two Skimmers manifested over them as overwatch, old habits died hard for the squire. She kept a Specter pointed behind her to cover her blindspots. Trust was one thing. Certainty was another. Best to always be a little involved yourself. "She'll handle. She's been handling all her life."

Avo didn't like it. He never thought much of drugs, and Zein's intrusion into his life only made him despise the substances more.

Ghosts coiled out from Tavers and interfaced with the locus tethered to the door's controls. Her thoughtstuff churned as she channeled her commands across. A hissing sounded thereafter, the door opening to unveil what lay beyond.

There, inside a transparent booth with her boots propped up on her table, Cala Marlowe swayed from side to side on her hovering chair. Her left foot bobbed in pace to the tempo of the music while her right arm poured more Numb down her throat. So lost was she in her own mind that she didn't even notice the intrusion.

+Sloppy,+ Draus said, peeking across the link.

+We're not trying to recruit a snuffer,+ Tavers replied, annoyed.

Tangled locks of platinum parted auburn swung like pendulums with each shift her body made. As Tavers closed the set door with a mental command, Cala finally completed a full spin—and noticed she wasn't alone.

She jerked in the chair and righted to right herself. The joy in her blood made her reactions slow. Sluggish. Her pupils were dilated. There was another empty canister of Suncloud on the table. Crumbs and stains dotted the purple blouse she was wearing beneath her ragged overcoat. She nearly toppled as she rose, the balance still compromised by the filth she had rushing through her bloodstream.

A constellation of spinning loci danced above her—three main crystals of vivianite supported by a half dozen others. Ghosts darted to and fro between the facets, releasing a phantasmal radiance with each transition. Cala Marlowe looked ethereal in the light. Her eyes flickered and turned to brilliant sapphires as an unidentified organ secreted a mess of chemicals into her blood.

In seconds, the active effects of the drugs she was taking broke and dissolved.

“Quail? What the hells are you doing here this early in the godsdamned morning?”

The squire laughed. “Came to check up on you. Isn’t this usually your bedtime?”

“Yeah. Maybe. Fuck.” Marlowe groaned and rubbed at her bloodshot eyes. “Couldn’t sleep. Decided to... to make a special sesh. Know how it is.”

“Suppose I do.”

A beat passed. Avo took the opportunity to take in the room. Most of the set was left in darkness, with the only light coming from the spinning loci. The recording stage was approximately twelve meters wide with plenty of room for one to move and dance, and the entire length bridged by an absurdly long desk. A sleeping bag and several crushed cans of alcohol were cluttered in the corner of the room—she spent time living here. Treated this place like an abode.

Marlowe shook her head. “So. Is this... is this about that pleasurable business we discussed the other day.”

“Yeah,” Tavers said, nodding wryly. “Let’s call it that.” Strings suddenly joined the musical accompaniment, loud strumming between each beat of the drums. “How long is that track going to last? Gotta go deep again soon?”

Marlowe sniffed. “Nah. No. It’s a Mountain Thieves song. Pretentious sows can’t end anything to save their lives. We got another five before they finish embarrassing themselves.”

“Right,” Tavers said. “Then let’s get introductions in order. This is Cala Marlowe. Host of the FATELESS Thoughtcast. Pain the Guilds’ collective asses. Massively popular counter-cultural icon. How many listeners are you up to right now?”

“Nine-hun-mil,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s too early for most. Rest’ll have to pull the ‘cast from the sequenced mem-data.” She looked around the room and narrowed her eyes. The sapphire of her irises changed tints, becoming an electronic blue.

+*Jailbroken Murakami optics*,+ Tavers said. +*No one will be spying on us through her. I checked.*+

A squire was ever-prepared.

“Is... is our new ‘consang’ in here with us? Incog? Cloak? Or... or are they—” She gestured at Tavers’ halo.

“It’s a bit hard to explain,” Tavers said. “He’s uh... bit here, there, and everywhere, to be honest. Might be best for him to elaborate on things himself. Have you to talk for a bit? Get to know each other. Figure out what services you can provide. Bond over how you feel about a certain Seeker.”

Marlowe went very, very still. “He knows Shotin?”

+*Wouldn’t say knows*,+ Avo said, casting his thoughts out at her. Marlowe frowned. +*More like had an unfortunate run-in.*+

The FATED woman pressed her lips together as she thought. “You, uh, I wouldn’t have to be guessing right if I called you Acolyte Chambers, would I?”

Avo paused.

Tavers bit back a snort.

How close she was. How far she remained.

Chambers presently was burning his way through a Syndicate slave ring down in the gutters. He, Cas, and Denton were all operating in different parts of the city, supporting and spreading Avo’s splinters.

Packeting the present memory, Avo cast the moment over to Chambers and earned a distracted laugh from the man. But amusement gave way to something closer to *amorousness* and Chambers found his attention drifting from combat.

+*Holy shit, we’re recruiting her?*+ Chambers breathed.

+*Something wrong?*+

+*Nothing. Nothing at all. I mean, the Skintaker was ugly as a fucked wound. This... this is a real upgrade. This is... godsdamn, consang.*+

[LUSTAWAY ACTIVATED]

+*She's not that pretty, Chambers,* + Kae said, muttering her thoughts. +*Control yourself.* + The bulk of her focus remained on the newly "declassified" information Calvino provided to her. Something related to advanced physics.

Taking Marlowe's almost triumphant expression, Avo hesitated before revealing himself.

He was going to modify Marlowe's memories anyway. She wouldn't recall exact aspects of this conversation when they were done, and the Necros she hired for N-Sec—who were hiding in the loci—weren't going to notice a thing either.

Ejecting a splinter from Tavers' halo, Avo molded his own likeness from phantoms and materialized as a new presence in this bleak place. As he rose, dwarfing the woman with his nearly three meters of height, Avo grinned at her widening eyes and stumbling steps. +*Not quite, Citizen Marlowe. Not quite.* +