

## The Strix and the Ravens (III)

--[Kare]--

*Flavors of the Deep* was a pretentious restaurant befitting a pretentious district populated by pretentious people. It was quite a feat to make Kare think in such a way, considering she was FATED herself.

Of course, the name of the restaurant being a very thinly veiled reference to cunnilingus didn't help.

How very typical of Uncle Sho to choose such a place.

Truth be told, there were differences even among the FATED. Some among the Colors performed different roles for their Guilds, serving both material and immaterial efforts for the great struggle. Those were the people who earned their positions, who climbed from the Warrens or distinguished themselves through action.

And then there were the people who dined in this restaurant—the people who lived in the Nuurhein Elysium in particular. While the lower city spent their days ravaged by one calamity or another, this Guilder-populated Stormtree district flourished under auroral skies, housed people within buildings forged from a union of matter and lightning, enjoyed the crispness of mountain air, and provided the most luxurious establishments made to cater to the most ridiculous clientele.

Case in point, the Scaarthian woman currently blocking her way.

“And as I told you, I consider these dogs *part* of my sheath. For me to obey your policy against bioforms is an affront to my personhood and dignity. Is that what your restaurant stands for? Bah! Enough of this. I will not speak to a child. Summon your superior. I wish to spit upon them—I fear the wetness within my mouth will drown the likes of you. *Hark! The Tiers* will be hearing about this!”

Kare folded her arms as she watched the scene play out. She could have said something. Could have pushed past the Scaarthian woman and stepped in, but she wasn't exactly looking forward to lunch with her uncle either. Besides, silly though the Scaarthian was, the view she presented was plenty amusing.

It wasn't every day you got to see a woman wearing a suit made from living nu-dogs. Two panting heads protruded like pauldrons from her shoulders while the flat skull of a mastiff growled at the overworked attendant like a living chestpiece. Their fur shone like clean strands of velvet, but the smell was something south of atrocious.

Most people from other districts would have already started complaining. But this was Stormtree territory, operating under Stormtree culture, living by Stormtree norms.

If a fully grown Scaarthian wanted to wear a pack of dogs as apparel, all the power to her. It's not like they weren't already used to the scent of nu-dogs considering all the war beasts they fielded.

The thought made Kare frown as she reflected upon herself. Maybe that was a bit prejudicial. Maybe *she* was a bit prejudicial. Maybe watching a three-meter-tall woman point a paw at an empty-eyed man barely half her height made Kare more than a little prejudicial.

Whatever the case, there was one thing that was certain: when Jaus envisioned his dream of humanity rising from the ashes of the gods, this likely wasn't a desired scene playing in his mind.

"This was not the dream," Kare muttered, making herself grin.

"Kare Kitzuhada?" A voice pulled her attention away from the spectacle. A drone hovered overhead, its shape smooth and bulbous, with a holographic smile projected over its exterior. "Many apologies. You don't need to stand in line. Your seating has already been reserved. Please. Follow me. Your companion is already waiting."

The drone's thin ventral wings left distortions in the air as it curved over the towering woman to proceed down the narrow entryway. A pulsing grid swept over each guest when their number was called and they were allowed in. Fancy establishment, though this was, New Vultun was still New Vultun, and the last thing people needed at dinner was some maniac detonating an implanted warhead or something even nastier.

Just because you were in an Elysium didn't prevent terrorism sponsored by a rival Guild.

"Excuse me, citizen," the drone toned, speaking directly to the Scaarthian. "Might you step aside and stop threatening the attendant with physical and mental trauma? The guest behind you has priority."

The Scaarthian whipped her head over her shoulder as her nostrils flared and her eyes widened. Her thick hair ran in corded knots and Kare saw that she had a cluster of irises in each of her sockets. She was from one of those biomodder cliques then. That explained the odd nature of her bio-rig. Doubtlessly trying to chase some aesthetic trend or another.

The dog-clad Scaarthian puffed her chest and each of her hounds snarled. "No. No I will not. Priority? How can she have priority? I have been here since—"

"Of course," the drone cut her off, sounding as agreeable as ever. "You are entirely right. Your rage is truly justified. However, we wish to inform you that you argue at the inconvenience of a

Paladin.”

“I care little if she’s a Pa-pa-Pa-*uck!*” Suddenly, the haughtiness drained from the woman’s voice. “I—I see. I—this would be my honor! I respect and honor the deeds of this city’s great defenders. Why—why Chief Paladin Naeko’s return has been much lauded. Much lauded.”

Kare swore she could hear the larger woman gulp. Seeing a giantess turn to a terrified child was quite the delight—another newfound benefit gained by the Chief Paladin’s showing over the past few days.

The reignition of his spirit caused the palm to fall through entire Sovereignities at multiple points over the past few days. Searching for **[NAEKOSLAP!]** vicarities in the Nether would deliver upon one a surfeit of vicarities—all of them with views in the millions.

“I thank you for your courtesty, citizen,” Kare said, walking past the shifting Scaarthian with her head held high. Streams of perception were spilling over her from behind as well. The revelation of her identity had drawn more than a few eyes.

“Of course,” the Scaarthian said, now beaming. “P-please send my highest regards to the Chief Paladin. It is chil—uh, *men* like him that keep this city great.”

The point one’s privilege ended was where the enforcers of order would no longer intercede on her behalf. Ridiculous as she was, it seemed the Scaarthian understood that.

She wasn’t as air-headed as Kare assumed. A prejudicial judgment on her part. “I will be sure to let the Chief Paladin know that.”

Stepping down the hall and allowing the scan to pass over her, a swirl of ghosts spiraled around her accretion before two flashes of green confirmed her access. A frosted doorway hissed as the path into the restaurant opened and then the world went from the blandness of a pale-bright antechamber to a stronghold beneath the waves.

A mountain of glass rose to encase the entire establishment. Holo-marked lanes lined with numbers trailed down to the thousands of tables on display and families of patrons ate huddled around hovering tables.

Four pedestals rose to bear chrome-skulled musicians. They sang in frequencies that Kare could barely hear in material reality, but the melody they made in the Nether was sweet and high, merging synchronously to a building climax. A ringing sounded from the glass surrounding the venue, and on the other side danced an undersea kingdom of bioluminescent biforms.

The largest was the kraken gripped the glass with its massive tendrils. Kare’s heart almost skipped a beat when she finally noticed the leviathan, so subtle was its camouflage. Through its gill-slits flowed schools of fish twirling down its many limbs while sword-headed shards jostled

in the foreground like Kosgan knights of old performing their customary tourneys for their Lord-Faithful.

The Nether, likewise, was awash with noise. A miasma of lapped against her wards. Kare's paranoia screamed. Her eyes glared down every passing ghostly wisp as she followed her drone.

+Avo?+ Kare thought. *+Are you there?+*

+Yes,+ the ghoul responded. *+Always here. Don't worry. Clear right now. No intrusions detected. Already buried my splinter in the restaurant's lobby. The head chef is a serial killer and one of his assistants will probably get the rash after mating with a corpse. Only notable concerns for now. Minimal risk at best. Keep going.+*

Kare wasn't sure how to respond to that information so she didn't. She didn't know how the ghoul learned half the things that it did. Frankly, she didn't know how Necros stopped themselves from going insane. There were so many minds around her. So many angles of attack. So many secrets.

Ignorance was bliss. But ignorance was also death. Knowledge was a revelation. But knowledge wore one down. There was no good choice diving into the depths of the human mind.

Avo hearing her thoughts, offered a casual response. *+Not that bad if you can accept yourself for what you are. Accept others for what they are too. Certitude of ego. Acceptance of the alien. That's what makes the best Necrojacks. Don't get nervous. Be prepared. Be better than the opposition. Or be nulled. Not so different from being a squire.+*

+Yes. *But a gun doesn't destroy your personhood.*+ Kare exhaled. No. A gun just took everything that a person was. Fundamentally, both ends were pretty similar, but there was something comforting about still being yourself when your cessation came.

+Ah. *That's why you'll never be a good Necro. Not unless your mind is altered.*+

+*Because I fear loss?*+ Kare asked.

+*Because you cling to yourself absolutely. Desperately. Instinctively. Have to give yourself away from the animal. Have to swim as a spectator.*+

The drone led her through crowds and past the public tables. It brought her to a private capsule on the far side of the restaurant—a tube-shaped room fused into the ceiling and parted from the cheaper seats by a layer of smart glass. As she approached, the door went from opaque to transparent and slid open to allow her entry.

Inside, she saw strips of fish and meat already sizzling on a convection stove and smelled aromas of cooking spice and the sourness of soy-lathered riceballs. Uncle Sho had already begun eating.

And drinking from the stinging scent of liquor.

“We have arrived at premium capsule one. We hope you have the finest dining experience here beneath the waves.” Finished with its task, the drone turned away and slid into a queue above and vanished with a flicker of strobing light.

*+Drone’s clean,+ Avo said. +Has one of my shards in it. Cleared the others before.+*

Her eyes widened in disbelief. *+All of them?+*

*+Yeah. Terrible N-Sec.+*

Kare blinked. Her understanding of what it took to qualify as an Incubi was vague at best—knowledge gained only through allusions and references on the part of her uncle and father—but something told her what Avo was doing here was far beyond even the greatest of Ori-Thaum’s Necrojacks.

Shaking her head, she stepped into the room and found her uncle downing liquor straight from the bottle, his shoes on the table. He quirked an eyebrow at her arrival and flashed a smile as he extracted the drink from his lips. “Hey, hey. I was beginning to think you’d keep me waiting forever.”

“I considered it,” Kare said, starting the conversation with honesty. “But I decided to spare us both some pain.”

Shotin’s grin only grew. “You’ve always been a smart girl.”

He was wearing his white suit today. White suit with no shirt underneath. Light accentuated the gene-enhanced musculature revealed by his deliberate cleavage and Kare found her seat with a disbelieving breath. “I can’t believe they let you in like that. You look ridiculous.”

“I look like money,” Shotin said, unashamed. “Tell you something, Kare, with enough imps, most rules are just suggestions.”

“Said the shameless rake to the Paladin,” Kare deadpanned.

Her uncle threw his head back and laughed. His mane of silken obsidian splashed down his shoulders as took another drink. “Your mother used to call me the same thing all the time. Shameless rake. Of course, it was a bit more true back in those days. None of this Nether-only-pleasure shit. Gods, I miss actual sex.”

It took all she had to not put her head in her palms. “Thank you, uncle. For the delightful topic.”

“What?” Shotin said, unabashed. “Fucking’s normal. Everyone fucks. Well. Everyone used to fuck. Now we just pretend to fuck mentally.” He let out a mournful sigh. “Godsdamned tragedy. Sorry. We’ll make it right for you kids someone. Actually—”

Horror coiled inside Kare’s stomach. “No. No. We’re not talking about my—”

“Are you seeing anyone?”

“--no! And I wouldn’t tell you if I was.”

He rolled his eyes. “Kare. Come on. You’re a grown woman. I’m not going to be threatened by whatever poor boy or girl that you might be dating.”

Uncle Shotin Kazahara was a dirty, dirty liar. “Oh, so now I’m a grown woman. A grown woman that you keep calling and calling—”

The joviality vanished from his expression in an instant. “Listen, you can’t blame me for being worried, alright? The city’s gotten its sack kicked up into its guts twice over the past month. It’s been a clusterfuck of a time, and now the godsdamned Peace-Breaker’s back—fucking old lady Thousandhand is apparently alive... I just want to make sure you’re alright. I—”

He planted the bottle down on the table and sat himself properly. “I’m giving you the space that you want. I—I spoke to your dad.”

“Oh, *gods*.”

“And I’m trying. I respect your choices. I’m trying to anyway. But I just... don’t want anything bad to happen to you.” Saying those words deflated him a bit. Watching the ever-confident Shotin Kazahara wilt was a discomfiting sight. Even the thinness of his Metamind’s halo seemed to twitch. “You’re in the middle of a lot of nasty shit and it scares me. I mean, I didn’t see the day I’d be cheering on Samir Naeko in a fight against one of the legendary Ori elders but hey, if he’s the big stick keeping all you Paladins safe, all my props to him.”

Kare’s expression softened. “I’m fine.” She paused. “Well. It’s complicated.”

Shotin’s eyes narrowed. He leaned in. “Explain. What kind of ‘complicated.’”

She pressed her lips together and cast a look once more. *+Are you connected to him yet? Can you speak to him yet?+*

A lull followed in both the Nether and the real.

“Kare?” Shotin said, tilting his head. “It this an ‘I need you to dump someone’s ass into the sun, Uncle Sho’ problem or an ‘I want to talk to someone about my feelings’ problem. I’ll do both, but, uh, I won’t lie—I’m much better at the former.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “I know.” +Avo?+

The ghoul responded. +*Working on things. You’re fine. Keep talking. I’ll be with him soon.*+

--[Avo]--

Avo had no idea what was destroying all his splinters.

Five times he tried casting a portion of himself into Shotin. Five times were his ghosts totally and utterly eradicated. It was chucking parts of himself into a constantly active thoughtwave detonation—which might very well be the case considering how instant demise came to his splinters.

Tapping into Kare’s cog-feed, Avo studied Planeshift’s Metamind with suspicion. Judging from the man’s accretion and thoughtstuff, he probably ran about two hundred ghosts for his Metamind. Two hundred, and hiding more using his Heaven.

The **Parallelist** was a nightmare to face—an ontologic that could actively alter environmental and situational realities in an instant. The fact Shotin could use it to augment his N-DEF didn’t come as a surprise at all.

Ultimately, this wasn’t a Necrojack problem, but an Agnos one. And that was out of his expertise. But not his cadre’s.

+Kae,+ Avo cast, jolting the Agnos out of the conversation she was having with Marlowe. +*Have an issue. Might need your eyes on this.*+

He gave her a moment to assess the situation as Kare’s conversation with her uncle continued.

The Paladin gestured at the half-empty liquor bottle and winced. “*Winter’s Fall 88’*. Over a century old. I’m not going to have to carry you home like last time, am I?”

“What?” Shotin waved his hand. “No. Just kill me this time. Let my cycler do the work.”

The Paladin squinted her eyes at her uncle. “‘Just kill me.’ What normal conversations we have, uncle.”

“What? You’re telling me you don’t suicide to refresh yourself every now and then?”

“Only when I’m in the field. I’m not in the field right now. And I usually try to stay alive if I can.”

“Yeah. Well, you have better odds of that now that the Peace-Breaker is out of hibernation.” Shotin took another sip from his glass and chuckled as he swallowed. “Gotta admit, I didn’t expect the old half-strand to make a comeback. I thought he was done-done. A bad Stormjumper’s match from solving his own equation and shuffling off to the Big Nothing. Looks like I ate shit on that bet, huh? Here’s to unexpected surprises, hm?”

*Unexpected surprises.*

The words opened a vacuum inside Avo and he felt his insides plummet.

+*Damn him,*+ the ghoul growled.

+*Did I just hear someone say “Here’s to unexpected surprises,”*+\_White-Rab asked, his tone incredulous. +*Avo. You need to end this dive right now. The law has been tempted.*+

+*No,*+ Avo said. +*Just superstition. Need to get into Shotin’s mind. Access more of Ori-Thaum from the inside.*+

+*We’re doing a dangerous dive, Avo,*+ White-Rab replied. +*I knew a guy who would cut-ops if he felt a tingle run down his spine. Kept him unnullled for years until he finally got snuffed by that falling refrigerator while out for a smoke.*+

Chambers’ mind snapped to full alertness as he entered the conversation. +*Wait. Did–did this guy live in Block-Nine at Karkane? Some... eight years back?*+

+*Yeah... yeah,*+ White-Rab said. +*You know him too? Deep Name was Stition.*+

Chambers coughed. +*I didn’t know the poor half-strand’s name, but I was in a small time smuggler gang at the time and–and I was supposed to deliver this fridge full of organs across the Sovereignty for my boss when this fucking glasser Tadpole comes out of nowhere and just starts chasing my ass–*+

Incredulous disbelief leaked from White-Rab’s mind as he began to laugh. +*No...+*

+*I shit you not, consang,*+ Chambers said, continuing. +*So... so I was like, fucking twelve or whatever at the time and didn’t wanna get picked up. So I decided to fuck my boss instead of get fucked by the glasser, and ended up booting the fridge out the back of the aero I snatched.*+

+*No,*+ White-Rab groaned.

+*Fucking, yep. I was passing low next to a block. Saw that shit paint him across the sidewalk. Man, I felt so fucking bad at the time, but had to skip districts because I just lost forty thousand*

*imps worth of organs.*+

White-Rab sighed. *+You godsdamned bastard.*+

*+Yeah. Only found out he was supposed to be a nova hot Necro later after the Nether started chattering about his death. Fucking saw a vic of it. Couldn't sleep for weeks.*+

White-Rab could only shake his head as he laughed again. *+This is... agh. Well. Stition would've found it funny.*+

Chambers sighed. *+Yeah. You seem pretty numb about me snuffing your consang.*+

*+Well, he wasn't my consang. We actually tried ending each other a few times over some mem-data. Just knew him was all.*+

*+Oh. Well, thank Avo you got a cyclor now then, huh?+*

*+He's likely affecting spatial reality around his mind,* Kae said. *+Judging from the slight oscillation of light around his halo... I think the ghosts leaving his mind and the ghosts going in are not traveling down the same paths. Or even places.*+

They didn't call him Planeshift for nothing.

The solution was a simple one. He'd have Kare establish a link to Shotin instead.

*+Kare. Need you to sync with your uncle.*+

His request incurred a twinge of discomfort from the Paladin. Something inside her felt like it was betraying her uncle, but she never showed it on her face.

"The problem I have..." she began. "It's better that I show you. Using my memories."

Shotin's gaze hardened. "Alright. Session?"

"Session," Kare replied.

Triggering her Auto-Seance, a bridge opened between her and Shotin, and Avo passed a splinter through the cycling memories. Satisfaction rose within him as he found himself inching closer to "recruiting" a valuable new ally.

The feeling promptly died when a subtle pressure shifted in the surrounding Nether and he found himself not in Shotin's mind, but a locus drifting deep below the ocean. A hiss of frustration and respect escaped Avo. The man had been communing with his niece through a proxy locus. What *marvelous* paranoia.

+Well, they don't call him a pro for n-o-o-o—+ White-Rab's voice grew distorted as another shiver passed through the Nether.

Something was wrong. The restaurant was secure. Even a ghost-bearing receptacle was seeded with a splinter—the Low Masters couldn't be attempting a direct attack. But what was this then? Why was—

And the Nether around him calcified—the waters beyond that of Shotin's protected demiplanes freezing solid in an instant. Lag spiked between Avo and the splinter he had nested within Kare's mind—with every other splinter active in *Flavors of the Deep*. It was like an entire portion of his being was frozen in place while the rest could still move freely. +Rab. *Something's happening.*+

+I know. I felt that. It was... I have no idea what that was. I've never seen thoughts just halt before.+

Warmind.

*This is unknown to us. It's not delusion. It's not one of me. Prepare yourself. Use the Silver as refuge. His planes offer safety. But right now, you need his cooperation.*

With Kare's cog-feed frozen in place and all his other splinters unresponsive, Avo attempted to send in additional fragments from the outside, but the lag took them too as they passed into the restaurant's vicinity.

Draus called for his attention. +Avo. *Got eyes on a squad of four coming in from the outside. They just killed their Incogs. Popped out on the street. Holocoat's preventing me from getting a good view.*+

Tapping into her perception, he found himself peering out from the reflection of a puddle on the street. Four distortion-masked figures vanished behind a doorway, their own Metamind's spinning unnaturally. Modified somehow.”

+Prepare for deployment,+ Avo said. +Dice. You too.+

The minds of the Regular and the girl sharpened to battle-ready alertness.

Back in the restaurant, Avo only had one splinter active. One entrapped within a locus that wasn't even his target's mind.

But he could use it.

He could still communicate with Shotin through it. But doing so would reveal himself before he had the Godclad under his control, and that could jeopardize everything this dive was for.

Avo pushed through his indecision. Time wasn't his ally. And he wasn't about to risk losing his Paladin to the Famines. He cast Kare's memories over to Maru and Kassamon first, instructing both of them to alert Naeko.

Then, he took a gambit. He spoke from within the locus, broadcasting his thoughts through the plane.

*+Shotin Kazahara. Need you to listen to me. People are coming for you. Possibly from Clan D'Rongo. For you and your niece. Have been helping her. Have been trying to help you. Need you to work with me now. Do what I can to keep you protected—+*

The planar stack holding the locus Avo currently resided in shifted. No longer was he under the waves. Now hung. Hung from a rope dangling from the clouds. Dangling above waves of thought-shredding instability.

The skies above him thundered as Shotin's thoughtcast spilled down. The rope holding him swayed threateningly. *+Incubi?+*

Avo paused. Yes. Technically, he did have more than a few Incubi inside him. *+Yes. Deep Sign: Shadow-12. Mirror-Concave is Benhata Veloso.+*

The rope went taut. *+Benhata? I know—he missing at the—+*

*+He was ordered to go Incog at the Trident. Inner Council affairs. There are traitors within our walls. There are Famines using our cells.+*

Cold tension flooded into the demiplane.

*+Fuck,+* Shotin said.