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**[BREAKING!]**

*BREAKING RUMORS: UTHRED SONGLESS—FORMERLY AUTHORITY UTHRED GREATLING OF HIGHFLAME— HAS OFFICIALLY RESIGNED HIS POSITION AND PRIVILEGES*

*THESE LEAKS REMAIN UNCONFIRMED. AS OF RIGHT NOW, WE HAVE NOT MANAGED TO OBTAIN ANY CONFIRMATION FROM THE LEADING MEMBERS OF THE CHOIR*

*HOWEVER, AN AERO-VEHICLE LINKED TO THE FORMER AUTHORITY HAS BEEN SIGHTED CROSSING A CHECKPOINT ON THE EDGE OF THE TIERS.*

*IT IS UNKNOWN IF HIS DISSENT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH HIS DAUGHTER'S UPCOMING TRIAL OR HIS SON'S DEATH.*

*FOR MORE UP-TO-DATE REPORTS ON GUILD-BASED AFFAIRS, STAY TUNED TO HARK THE TIERS.*

**[CAST CONCLUDED]**

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*-Hark the Tiers, Special Report*

19-14  
Change the Doors (I)

Fifty-two thousand arrowhead markers circulated the sigil-like channels of the Maw, each representing a smuggler barge carrying human cargo. Displayed as a dynamic three-dimensional map of New Vultun via the George Washington's systems paired to Avo's DeepNav, the cadre saw what he saw, and learned what he already knew.

Currently, he had mem-locks to 4.9 million refugees—now smuggled slaves signed to various Syndicates. So long as they remained alive and the FATELESS remained in Nether-stable environments, he would be able to track them without difficulty.

**Heavens gained: [Waveraider] (Signals/Space) x1; [Flathider] (Geometry/Boundaries) x1**

**GHOSTS: [26,557,563]**

**THAUMIC OUTPUT: 16,099**

In the end, subsuming and killing the squires proved more lucrative than even the two Heavens he claimed from their golem and the barge's core. Through them, he now had access to new contacts: Necros operating beyond the border, making their trade as memory dealers,

secondhand Metamind installers, and cognitive enhancers. Wilders who had memories worth trading or potential worth investing formed the bulk of the Necros' clientele, but other clandestine services could be provided as well.

Say, to a group of enterprising street squires who hired said Necros to mark some of their other customers in bulk, allowing the "smuggled goods" to be tracked when they resurfaced across the border.

"Ah, a play on the old 'tagged imps,' scheme," Quail said. The old squire chuckled under her breath as her eyes jumped from point to point on the map. Bathed in the vaporous glow of the phantoms, the ground stood and studied the routes Avo drew. Sections of the border were already pinned. Points where barges consistently stopped were isolated as well—suspected to be hidden hanger bays. "These gimmicks usually don't last long. The problem—for both sides—is with the Necros. Sooner or later, they might just sell you. Leave you staring at a Syndi Knot waiting to ambush you instead of an unprepared barge."

"Was kinda surprised about them just openin' fire," Draus said, a frown painting her face. "If they're gunning to snatch some product, the whole run looks like a damn mess. Could feel the kind of munitions they were using. Pulled some of them into my Arsenalist. High-Pen to punch a hole through the interior of the barge. Shattershots follow up. Took a peek inside a couple of seconds ago; looks like a fuckin' slaughterhouse. Or if Avo was the one to do 'em all in instead. Gonna need more than a pressure hose to clean the compartments. Damn waste, even by Syndicate standards."

Tavers shook her head. "You're looking at it wrong. The crew Avo snuffed aren't movers, they're squires. The FATELESS are just more eyes that can be used to track them if someone uses a Registry. The crew needed to be handled because fuck boarding action and close-quarters combat."

"**Why]** both instances of Draus asked, within and without Avo's consciousness.

The legendary squire stared blankly at the Regular. "Because some of us see a job well done as 'we completed our objectives,' not 'I murder-fucked an entire block empty of life with nothing but a nu-dog's jawbone and a can-do attitude.'"

Draus snorted. "Sounds like some y'all are pussies."

The rest of the cadre stared at Draus, most dubiously, Dice attentively.

"Regardless," Avo said, righting the conversation. "I have run some cognitive simulations. Calvino helped. Triangulated several points of potential compromise along the border. Also burned the sessions the Waveraiders used to contact their Necros into Chambers. New assets for him to spoof. Will compromise more through them. Continue to mark the FATELESS for us now."

“I’m surprised you didn’t just burn those bastards instead,” Tavers said.

“Tempting. Had to reshape my mind more than once to resist. But they’re more useful as compromised assets. Can perform their tasks autonomously. Just requires some encouragement from Chambers. And maybe White-Rab. Tavers. Want to meet with him soon at the Easy Armistice. Ask him to accelerate arrangements.”

“Synced on that,” Tavers said. “He’s been spotty the past few days. Turns out, the Incubi hold a hell of a godsdamned grudge when you help null a few of them. The shits just had to be good at their craft too; Rab said he got nulled once already. He’s been keeping himself real quiet.”

Avo grunted. Ensouling his progenitor was wise, then. But the penalties of drawing him into Ninth Column affairs were already making themselves known. If he had refused Avo’s offer or postponed it, White-Rab would be dead now. Nulled in retaliation for the aid he offered in the cadre’s time of need.

There were still too many risks with everything they did. Too unpredictable threats and hidden adversaries. Incubi. Highflame’s political troubles. Omnitech Heavens. The Low Masters.

For all the power they were gathering, for all the upgrades Avo infused into the Frames of his comrades, it would take but a single mistake—an undetected variable—for everything to be undone.

His mind flowed with contrasting thoughts, the euphoria of further apotheosis coming mainly from the Fallwalkers but tempered by Abrel and the Paladins.

**[Yeah, ride the high but don’t be pulled down by it,]** Kassamon said, bitterness coating his memories as he recalled the night he was banished from Sanctus—of the family he killed in self-defense. He joined the Paladins the day after for the sake of his own continued survival more than a drive toward justice. **[Focus on what this can help you do. Not how it makes you feel.]**

**[Or become me,]** Elegant-Moon interjected. **[Not so bad a fate, though I taunt.]**

Abrel added her own words to the sentiment. **[Dad had a quote for this: “A nu-dog augged out of its environment always dies in a warg’s den.” Paladin Kassamon is right. I—I was just so angry when I was trying to kill you but... I didn’t know what you could do—who you were. And now my team is dead, the real me is about to be paraded as a terrorist before the city, and here I am playing advisor to a...]**

+Ghoul?+ Avo finished.

**[I don't think I can call you that anymore, Avo,] Abrel whispered. [I wouldn't believe it even if I said it. The things you can do... The time it took you to do them... I hate you. I've always hated you. But before it was for what you did to me. Now? Now, I wish I could be you. Be my own master. Absolutely. Learning my lessons just by willing it.]**

In recognition of her words, Avo plucked the regret from her mind and internalized it, weaving another pillar of discipline into his character. *+Consider this flattery.+*

The Instrument's template chuckled humorlessly. **[Fuck you, rotlick]**

Focusing on the powers of his Conflagration, Avo brought up the positions of his subverts and viewed them on the DeepNav as well. Kare and Kassamon were at Scale-planar headquarters of the Paladins rooted in the thermosphere high above New Vultun itself. Abrel was currently even further beyond, stationed aboard a specialized voidship named "*An Unkindness of Sailors*" by its governing EGIs. Elegant-Moon was currently missing. Doubtlessly being mind-scanned somewhere by Highflame or the No-Dragons. Draus, Dice, and Chambers were there in the Command Nexuses alongside him, but they were companions instead of assets.

*{Not expendable,} Calvino quipped. {I will not lie. We minds also have favorites but I think that is where the similarities between us collapse. Remember that though they might have started as your foes, they remain people even as you have turned them. Not things.}*

*+Another ethics lesson?+*

*{Just a recommendation. One that I am **99.834774%** sure you will take.}*

*+What's happens in the other sub-one percent?+*

*{You decide that this whole "becoming more than monster business" is rather droll, and decide to see how much of the city you can eat in a day instead.}*

The ghoul chuffed a quiet laugh. Intrusive thoughts of slaughter and cruelty lingered still, but they were more curiosities than compulsions now.

Shaking off his contemplative stupor, he turned his attention back to the map and highlighted four specific markers. The points rose as pinned pillars from the projection, and streams of mem-data began to expand into their own sub-interfaces within the larger map. Avo extended the hovering tip of an Echohead toward the first point, a specific section of the border. "Have new ideas. Was considering doing a direct border run. Sneak through using my new Canon of Luminosity."

"We're... not doing that anymore?" Kae said, disappointment creeping into her voice.

Avo grinned. Oh, if she only knew the idea he conceived.

“No. Was inspired by the new minds I subsumed. New thought processes. Epiphany came to me earlier. About a larger opportunity. One we will manufacture.”

“Okay...” Kae said, her dark eyes narrowing on him, interest piqued.

Avo continued. “Was considering just shifting my through a session. Use the Necros as a potential means of evading the border. Nether isn’t blocked. Can’t be. Too many avenues of movement. Problem here is the rest of you. Dice. Essus. Still need to get through somehow. Might be able to ferry you across with my Heaven. But inefficient. Ineffective. Too much reliance on one person. So. Considerations changed. Easier to alter the environment instead of ourselves.”

Directing the tip of his tendril using his bio-magnetic field, Avo pointed to the first of the risen markers. “Here. Wall-section **[SE-7777]**. Twenty-eight percent of smugglers pass through this point. Sections **[NW-0008]** and **[W-0010]** follow at nine and eight percent. Gateways for the Washington far from them too.”

“The border wall?” Kae mused, mostly speaking to herself. Shifting her weight on her heels, she began to tap her exocortex with a fingertip, the tic kicking in as her accretion surged. Avo paused here and waited. The Agnos was smart. Knowledgable about this. The others would understand soon enough.

Most of them, anyway. Chambers might need some help. Maybe Dice too.

**[Hey, fuck you, consang,]** template-Chambers moaned. **[Real-me’s better than that.]**

**[You know somethin’, Chambers?]** template-Draus said, a sneering smile pulling at her features. **[The greatest miracle you got is that you’re somehow still able to believe half the shit you say.]**

Abrel guffawed loudly. Template-Chambers scoffed. **[You both’ll be kissing my ass when real me proves you wrong.]**

**[We can’t kiss shit, half-strand]** Abrel said. **[We’re simulated figments of someone else’s mind.]**

Kae’s squeak interrupted the internal argument and made everyone face her. “Oh my gods, Avo. You’re planning to alter the Heaven for that section of the wall! Wait? Is that what you’re planning? Please say that’s what you’re planning instead of overloading that section of the border to trigger a rupture cascade as its Rend overflows and destabilizes its adjacent territories as well.”

A sudden note of surprise pulsed through Avo as just stared blankly at the Agnos. “I can... do

that?"

Her eyes widened as she planted both her hands over her mouth. "*Oh no.*"

"Yes," Avo said, an unwilling chuckle escaping him. "Going to have a new conversation after this. Personal tutoring. Thaumaturgy."

Kae narrowed her eyes as she pouted. "Stop teasing. We're not going to do that."

"Yet," Draus finished.

The Agnos wheeled on the Regular. "Never!" She turned back to Avo. "So. We're going to alter the Heaven of that border wall section. This is the goal?"

"Yes," Avo said. "Want to... rephrase a few canons."

"I see," Kae said. "But the annual patches—"

"Can be expedited," Avo continued. "Especially if a barge detonates its Rendsinks trying to cross it. Make it seem like a paradox."

Tavers unfolded her arms and gave Avo her full attention. "A loud emergency. Something the entire city will notice. Especially the Syndis and other smugglers."

"Yes," Avo said. "Goal is twofold. Remove all smuggler traffic for that point in the wall. For our use only. Deployment of Agnosi to fast-patch potential weaknesses will give us an opening."

Horror became Kae's expression. "Avo... you're not going to... eat my peers, right?"

Avo considered his reply. He considered how to phrase his feelings on the matter. "If an Agnos directly harms someone else. Yes. Immediately. But don't worry. Is something I want White-Rab to help us with. Shouldn't even be any actual Agnosi when he intercepts the commission."

"Huh," Kae breathed. "So, you're saying we go instead."

"You. Chambers too. He can jack in person. Going to use him as my conduit to interact with the Heaven. Want to compromise that section of the wall completely." He pointed at the second risen marker—this one connected Scale via a phantasmal string. "Use Kassamon to oversee the operation. Remove all chance of discovery."

"They know how I look," Kae said. "My memories are also—"

"Maskable," Avo said, pulling up memories from some of his Incubi. "Our consangs at Ori-Thaum have stashes across the city. Programmable proxy minds. I will alter your biometrics

using Woundmother. Been wanting to enhance your biology for some time now. You will get through.”

“En-enhance,” Kae whimpered.

“Won’t hurt. Can graft them painlessly. Use Canon of Biology.”

“I regret helping you build that.”

“Will thank me soon,” Avo said. The third marker he highlighted was at the same place as the second.

Kare sighed. **[No. What are you going to make me do.]**

+*Get you promoted*,+ Avo said. Turning his attention back to his cadre, he elaborated on his plot. “Going to be leaving mem-data in the overloaded barge. Paladin Kare will fortunately discover it. Along with several major smuggling routes.”

Draus smirked as she nodded. “Plannin’ to elevate one of our puppets, huh?”

“She has too much potential to be wasted as a pawn,” Avo replied.

The last marker grew higher than all the others, its rushing mem-data forming active memories of a refugee sanctuary two hundred kilometers beyond the external Maw that formed a rung around New Vultun itself. “Going to be our bridgehead to the world outside. Have Necro contacts there. Calvino can also make us invisible to all of Voidwatch’s drones operating in the area. Essus. Want to talk with you after. You and Dice.”

Both former refugees looked at Avo and blinked. The latter would likely take little convincing. Essus though... Avo wasn’t sure how he would feel about the role Avo conceived for him. Ultimately, it would be their choice. In the end, no one person would be essential to the success of this endeavor. Especially with how Avo could burn whatever Fallwalkers or unsuspecting Guilders into being his perfect agents, but Essus and Dice were already shaped to present purpose. And there was a poignancy in deploying them that couldn’t quite be conveyed with words.

“Draus should be able to create a usable passage beyond the borders if everything goes right. And this section of the wall will be secured. Only ours. Too compromised for anyone else. Ran and rebuilt the plan with my templates many times. Welcome additional concerns. Improvements if any of you have them.”

A brief silence followed as bands of thoughtstuff circled their Metas. Then, among the cadre, one arm was risen.

“Chambers,” Avo said, regarding the man sitting atop the locus-embedded throne.

The half-strand nodded. He drew in a breath and spoke: “So... I’m still a little confused about, like, *everything...*”

**[Oh, you STUPID MOTHERFUCKER!]** template-Chambers roar at his true self, anger buffeted by a chorus of laughter exploding across the Conflagration.

**[Kissing your ass, huh?]** Abrel taunted.