

Authority Uthred Greatling

You have been marked for a personal audience in the Paths with the High Seraph. Before official proceedings begin, she would like to hold a personal dialogue with you with regard to recent incidents.

Only your presence has been requested, and you will be drawn into the paths in one day and three hours from this time. Prepare yourself appropriately for any and all danger you might encounter, and see that the matter of your will be handled in case of unexpected outcomes.

Blessed be the worthy.

-The Voice of the Choir

17-8

Squire, Seeker, Flame (II)

A nervous trill sounded from the nu-kitten as a subtle coating of red stained the air. Particulates of blood, smaller than even flecks, wash past the edges of the door and over Dice.

The weight possessed by the master was immense. Staggering. There was a similarity in their power to her—a symmetry of capability. But they were capable of more. Much more. If she were to liken them both to blades, she would be a makeshift dagger staring up the length of a spear capable of piercing the clouds.

Then came the fire. Each crimson mote flared as ghosts danced between them, leaping from through the air alongside sparks of cracks of electricity matching the flow of ichor rushing through veins. A new pressure settled around her, the voice of the master reaching out from beyond the sealed doors. *+Come. Come. Ask me your favor. Ask me what you want. I have gifts for you.+*

It was as if the fire itself was speaking, its voice the thunderous rasp of a sword unsheathed from a storm. Phantasmal winds poured through her in an echoing torrent, the flavor of the master's mind brushing hers, beyond her words to describe. For most that walked the city's streets, the stretch of humanity flowed clean. Joy, grief, hate, addiction, madness, anger, want, and longing were but a few of the moods that leaked over. All understandable. All known to her inherent empathy.

The new master, however, felt *beyond* these things. There were aspects of human emotions here, fragments and distortions of their make. But there was also something else. Something colder. As if it stood above her, judging her, studying her, understanding the foundations of her nature but was in turn beyond being comprehended.

The old master was touched by the power as well. A god lived inside him. A god of light, capable of holding the dark and forming beacons that burned those who lied to him. But they were human. They were understandable; wants and needs synonymous to the ephemerals they ruled over. Compared to the new master, their flame felt like a candle before a storm, the flame dancing for mercy.

That, how they never struck her, yelled at her, forced them into a cage and made to fight dogs made them different. Quite different from the old master.

She felt ashamed that she liked them so much already.

The old master kept her safe for years. Fed her. Gave her clothes to wear and replaced her teeth every time he broke them during his rages. Gods could be troubled. Gods could be unkind. But he tried afterward.

The path his heart took was always toward the light.

Stepping forward, she felt the cat scratching against her blood-made harness, its head peeking out from her inner coat as the door disintegrated into crimson petals, granting her entry.

The room before her was awash in death. Bodies littered the ground, limbs missing and innards strewn across the softness of the carpet. More than a few of the dead were only half-dressed, missing shoes or other pieces of attire. Only their heads were left relatively intact, and that was likely more due to their skulls being mostly chunks of weaponized alloy than actual flesh and bone.

She thought she had good odds of covering the entire space in ten great strides or so. If she were to assault this place, it would be easy work—unprepared enemies and no impediments to block her strikes. A phantom sprinted past her, firing what looked to be an ancient gun across the field at incoming armor. The ghostly figure seemed to lack any implants or mechanical suits like those found in this city. Something told her the scene on display was of a bygone time.

+Ignore them, the master said again, flames unmaking the surrounding illusions. Scenes of war vanished abruptly as flames licked them from her sight, drinking the essence into the blood itself. Could the master devour ghosts with their blood? Were they truly that powerful?

Would she somehow come to match that?

A force was building inside her with each step, in the place where the great fire lived. She saw it every time she died, its presence serving as her body as she waited for the numbers to grow. It flashed a few times when she clashed with a golem—one that had the same abilities she did. Her control over blood seemed limp thereafter—like something on the surface of reality just wasn't working right anymore.

She avoided reaching into the master's domain. If a meager machine could make the power inside her recoil, then what would she suffer from a god greater than she?

No. No. She was not a god. Dice chided herself and shook her thoughts away. She was a good girl. She made her master happy. They would make her happy if they were happy. That was the best life. Thinking about other things would get her hurt. She didn't like that.

Compulsion bade her to look down as she stepped across a hardened mirror of bright red. Looking across the ground, she saw that trickles of blood were still flowing out from its sides, with each of the bodies providing the materials for this structure to manifest. Despite the deepness of the crimson, the mirror-like ground she treaded possessed unparalleled reflectivity. She gazed upon her disguised self, holographic shroud casting her more like a distorted demon than a person and frowned.

She wondered if she could get her coat to emit another look. Something that didn't have so much static. Maybe something that could make her look like a shadow. She would like that. That might be the shadows at home confused.

A pang lurched inside her. She corrected herself for the mistake.

Home was gone without the old master. There was no home.

But maybe the new master could give her one.

Then, suddenly, something shifted in the air as the motes came together, forming a towering figure that loomed over her. Dice took a few steps back and fought the urge to draw on her power. She could feel the concentration of blood and matter both in its composition, but there were structures in it beyond her understanding.

Her Sangeist could but align its properties to a single piece of solid matter. What the master possessed was well past the hundreds, the body before her coming together as complex architecture in more ways than one. Being little more than a shivering shell of blood, the best she could describe its design was that it was red, and gleamed like flowing metal and light-struck glass. But then she caught sight of the eyes and her stomach fell. There was a fire in those eyes. Fires that revealed flicks of ghosts behind them, flashing images of other places and people; deaths and atrocities on a scale she could not conceive.

She guessed this wasn't the true form of her master, but the assumption only cultivated her awe further. Were they so far above her that she couldn't even gaze upon their true shape—like with her old master bade everyone return home every night, for to stare into his full light unleashed rendered a person lame of mind or barren of thought.

+Dice,+ the figure rumbled, its ichorous body reverberating with every syllable. +*Done well. Done very well. Surpassed expectations. Didn't die. Kept surviving. Kept killing. Kept living. Very good.*+

Pride swelled inside her and she fought the muscles on her face to stop herself from making *the expression*. The old master didn't like it—she couldn't risk the same thing here.

But then the new master spoke and all her assumptions turned to dust. +*Don't need to restrain yourself. Smile. Cry. Rage. Scoff. Frown. Not the master of your body. Not even the master of you.*+

A coldness passed through her. It was like a candle just went out. "I don't... did... what was wrong? I can keep going? I can kill more."

+*No.*+ The figure's voice silenced her. Dice bit her bottom lip and looked up to stop her eyes from misting. The old master didn't like *the expression*, but he absolutely hated crying. +*Don't want to be your master. And you don't need one. Going to be your benefactor instead. Have things for you. Gifts. Choices. Opportunities. And truths.*+

An ember returned to the candle. She didn't understand, but it didn't sound like they were rejecting her. What did they want then? Not a master. But a *benefactor*.

"What... is a benefactor?" She asked, trying to sound out the words. Her voice quivered as she spoke and she hated herself for it. The dogs knew you were scared by your body, sound, and scent. They mauled the scared ones the most. She couldn't be scared.

+*Someone that gives you something in exchange for services. A lot you don't know. Language. Aspects of the city. The people. Gave you some understanding before. Gave you protections. But used you as a distraction. Wasn't sure how long you would last. Expected little. Got more.*+

Dice just blinked, unsure what to think.

+*I want to recognize you. Recognize what you've done. Give you more choice. Was distracted. Busy with other things after I Ensouled you. Elevated you. Expected you to be a diversion. Make an opening I can exploit. Became a true asset instead. Shouldn't suffer the fate of a pawn. You make your own choices. Decide your own fate.*+

{*What a wonderful speech,*} Calvino said, with a wry hint of distaste at the end. {*It would've been better if you didn't engage her as an expendable child assassin paid in deaths and reality-mutilating powers, but I suppose that still makes you a nobler character compared to her previous "master."*}

Avo considered the EGIs words and just shrugged. *+Gave her power. She survived. Proved herself more deserving than most. Best life she could have had.+*

{Well, no, not really the best life she could have had, but I understand what you're trying to say.}
Calvino sighed. *{Short of creating a Heaven of Orphanages or some kind of memory contagion that distributes therapy instead of torture, what else is a man-eating monster to do?}*

Glib remarks coated in more potential ideas. The EGI took constructive critique quite literally.
+Why can't Voidwatch take her?+

{Because of the treaty,} Calvino said. *{Because she's technically a "ward" of the Great Guilds, and taking them from our mutually shared custody is an affront to another's sovereignty.}* It sighed. *{It's always the smallest lives that pay for the folly of giants. No one asks how many ants die when a titan stumbles. You should also manifest her template more—it'll help you remember that she's a person instead of an asset. Keep this cult of yours from ever degenerating into a Guild.}*

+Not trying to rule, Calvino,+ Avo said. *+Just trying to eat the ones that do.+*

+You took the cat with you. Why?+

The question the figure asked left Dice feeling startled. How did it know that? Was it watching there too? Was it always watching? What were the limits of its sight?

As if on cue, the nu-kitten began to fidget, meowing furiously as it struggled to free itself from Dice's grasp. Its tiny head swung and swayed, hissing as it went. There was no hiding the presence of the creature, and it wanted to leave—to be free. And Dice couldn't blame it.

+Can I see it?+ the benefactor extended a hand and she hesitated. She was *afraid*. Afraid of what it might do to the kitten. What it might do to her. But still, she obeyed.

How could she not after a lifetime of practice.

Rising out from the folds of her holocoat, the small animal swept its eyes over its surroundings before noticing the figure. A screech came from its little lungs, obviously terrified at the nine-foot-tall being looking down at it. The hissing intensified, but Dice found it interesting that the cat was spitting at the blood-made glass rather than the humanoid standing before her.

It was as if it could sense something there...

+What do you want to do with it?+ the being asked.

Dice's eyes snapped back to the not-master. She swallowed. "I think it should be safe. Or have a chance to live. No one gave it a chance. Its master is dead. He had too much pleasure. He left it behind. There's no one to give it a chance." A note of alarm rose inside her as she realized she repeated the same line twice. The old master hated that.

But the benefactor didn't respond. *+I can take it—+*

[No!] Chambers gasped.

[No, Avo,] Abrel agreed.

[Come on,] Corner said, in a moment rare accord. **[Don't. Just don't.]**

{I ain't lettin' that cat through,} Draus said, half-jokingly. *{So you can get that thought out of your head.}*

{Please don't eat the poor child's new kitten, Avo,} Calvino finished.

A low hiss of outrage sang out from him. "Wasn't going to! Too small! Tastes bad! Pointless! Stop mocking me!"

[No,] Abrel said.

Corner snorted and spat. **[I do what I want. Reshape my mind. Or don't. But I'll do what I want.]**

[Suck my ass, ghoul,] Lip added.

There were downsides to letting the minds in your gestalt speak openly. Avo sighed. "Can bring the cat over to the George Washington—"

{Bring the fuckin' juv,} Draus said. *{Stop wastin' time doing this mysterious benefactor shit. Girl's got the talent. We got the means. We can bring her in. Get Kae to make her something special and set her loose. Maybe give her a Heaven of Cat or some shit. We're burnin' daylight here.}*

+Fine,+ Avo growled. A low grumble escaped from him as he considered reshaping his mind and ending his sulking.

He decided against it. He never got to enjoy himself.

{But... you kill and torture people all the time,} Calvino said.

Dice's heart ached at the idea. The benefactor taking the kitten away would be safer than leaving it with her, but it still felt like a loss. She wanted to make sure it was fine. See it be fine. She wanted to feel responsible for it.

+...*Or I can give you more power. And you choose what to do with it.* + The benefactor paused.
+*You should choose how you'll protect it.* +

"Me?" she asked, unsure how to proceed. "But I—"

+*I can make you more,* + the benefactor continued. +*Make you stronger—*+

"Can you make it stronger?" she asked. "Give it power?"

All the blood stopped flowing as the figure paused.

Dice wondered if she just said something wrong.

Peeking her gun around the edge of the doorway, Quail Tavers studied the events unfolding within the ganger's den and found herself frowning. "And back to our regularly scheduled show of *'what fucked up shit is happening in New Vultun this Urscopy.'* Juvs making bargains with unknown Fallwalkers to protect their cats."

She couldn't help but chuckle with astonishment. This shit would've been a hard sell in one of them cheap drama vicarities. But seeing was believing, and what she got to see didn't lie. Checking her cognitive capacity again to make sure her Incog wouldn't overload, she continued observing near the edge of the door.

Her combat skin was primed for a phase walk; one of the golems had a spatial anchor attached to her, ready to pull her out at any time; she had enough charges to level this building and then some; she had a drone overhead capable of firing spatial-kinetic rounds straight at what her handheld was aiming at.

More prep could have been done, but it'll probably keep her safe for a recon run. She wasn't going to take a shot at the 'Clads, after all. She was here to observe and feed the details back over to her consang, White-Rab.

And judging from the words being exchanged, it seems his ass wasn't the only one being blessed by his magical ghoulish son-brother-whatever-the-fuck from his dead father figure. Who turned out to be a Low Master after all this time.

But who was she to judge? It wasn't like her family was any cleaner.

Outside the Warheads' hangout, Shotin emerged from the winding shanties around him, running his hair through his silken mane of hair and stretching his limbs out in anticipation of what was to come.

He wondered if it was the best idea to wear his best silk suit out to this place though. Sure, it was self-cleaning but... these streets... and the people.

He shuddered. He'd get them some proper aid after this.

And what was this strange *redness* leaking out from the building? Something told him he was wise for keeping his Incog running. Never knew what was going to kill you in this city.

The Warrens truly were a horrible place.

It had been a few years since the last time he fought anyone in earnest. He wondered how rusty he'd gotten in the meantime.

With each footstep, his body fragmented, dividing into another instance of himself that moved of its own accord and occupied a parallel world in the nine hundred or so planes he had stacked within his own Soul. In the span of seconds, he went from a single individual to a dozen, then a hundred, each heading to their own position around the building.

Between then, spatial reality began to crack in a connected line, the local space detaching from its surroundings.

If the girl was still in there, it was best that he didn't give her the chance to surprise him with an Incog if she had one. He would drown the area in his perception after dragging this section of real space into one of his stacks and conduct his investigation at his own leisure. No sense in letting anything go to chance.

As each of his selves made eye contact, they each shot each other winks, taking solace that even if the worst was to happen, at least they would look better than the bastard that did them in. He considered buttoning up his silk suit, but decided against it, not seeing the need. He was going to make this quick—manifest his full Heaven and snap himself back down in the instance he left back in the Tiers.

No point in dragging this out.

As time slowed to a near halt with each instance of him generated accelerating his mind, he clenched his fist and pried at the fabric of space around him, fractures turning to tears as he began to lift the Warhead's building into one of his many, many stacks.

+*Alright, consangs,* + he said, dropping his Incog as he the green light to Wiser, and through her to the Incubi and knots on standby. +*Clear the block. Find that girl. Don't null anyone. Let's keep this neat.* +

[Cat-clad,] Chambers said considering the girl's ask. **[I dig it.]**

Elegant-Moon considered the theoretical procedures of inflicting sophoncy on the kitten, but Chambers didn't dig that very much.

[It is possible. Between my power and your flames. It is possible to install a mind in the creature.]

"Cat later," Avo said. "Girl now." Channeling his focus back into his construct, he spoke once more to Dice after a moment of passing silence. +*Give you power first. Consider it for the future. Now. Do you want to be more? To find ascension.* +

She wavered, and her thoughtstuff filled the Nether with a flood of doubt. It was like she thought *wanting* was a transgression, that he was to give, but she was never to ask. Her last master was had left her damage in ways Avo neglected to fix in the preservation of her mind. Perhaps that would be something he could provide as well. A removal of her mental shackles.

"|—"

Suddenly, Avo grew aware of a new shape in his Sanguinity—hundreds of people. Outside. Standing in a circle around the building and—

The metaphysical blow came suddenly and without warning. The Twice-Walker recoiled as if struck as Draus winced. A ponderous weight had landed upon both their Domains of Space as warnings wailed forth from the depths of Avo's consciousness.

WARNING: FOREIGN SOUL DETECTED

UNIDENTIFIED GODCLAD DETECTED

CLASSIFICATION: SPHERE VI [EST. 403331 THAUM/c]

->PARALLELIST, ALIGNER OF WORLDS

(SPACE/GEOMETRY/CORRESPONDENCE/CREATION/GARDENS/DESERTS/JUNGLES/CIT

IES/DAWN/NIGHT/DARKNESS/LIGHT/STRENGTH/WIND/WATER/STORMS/LIES/WAR/SEAS)

[Oh, shit,] Chambers gasped. [That's a fuck-ton of Heavens.]

{Avo. Grab the girl. We're leavin'.} Draus reshaped the glass within the plane of reflections. But as she opened a passage, her being erupted with Soulfire as a spatial paradox exploded and Rend flooded their Frames.

REND CAPACITY [ZEYPHR OF THE NINE PATHS]: 86%

REND CAPACITY [DATACASTER]: 55%

REND CAPACITY [WOUNDSHAPER]: 2%

Quail's combat skin sparked as her phase walk failed. Spatial reality was in tumult all around her as a single step forward left her two floors downstairs. She considered breaking her Incog and casting for her jocks, but figured they probably already saw shit going down.

It happened in an instant.

One second, everything was fine then the next, *complications* arose.

Her lips drew back into a vicious smirk. Not unexpected though. This was what made the job worth doing. Surprises. Havoc. Life and death and on-the-fly struggle.

Yeah. This was the juice.

Shaking herself off, she switched her rifle back over to hard kinetic, deactivating its spatial golemic module. It would take a few seconds for shit to go back to normal.

REND CAPACITY [PARALLELIST]: 9%

All of Shotin Kazahara's instances smashed back into him. Time snapped like a rubberband and he found himself ass over head, buried shoulder deep upside down into someone's wall.

His body ached. His ass felt broken. Wiser was screaming in the back of his head.

Wonderful.

Someone must have had a canon contradictory to his present in the area. And at least a Third Sphere Heaven at that.

Probably not a golem then, unless Sanctus or Omnitech were playing fuck-fuck games with the locals Syndicates.

Shit. That was a possibility.

“Alright. I guess it’s going to be one of those “what the fuck” days, then.”