

23-1  
Borrowed Insight (II)

Fear. Confusion. Surprise. Suspicion. Recognition.

Such were the dominant emotions reigning in Cala Marlowe's mind as she laid eyes on Avo, and as transparent splinter sank through her accretion, he too regarded himself vicariously through her insight.

His monstrous visage loomed over her even with meters of distance between them. The phantoms molding his body caused him to radiate with ethereal light. His presented sheath was a contrast of monochrome, the white of his Bone Demon mixing with exoskeletal circuits of blackened silicon. The floating shards of his Echoheads extended out from behind him like the disconnecting appendages of a spider, and the brilliant glow of his halo lent additional paleness to his nightmarish scleras.

**[Let it never be forgotten that we're living inside the mind of one ugly motherfucker,]** Lip muttered. A good percentage of the other templates agreed.

*{Ah, shaming other morphologies with subjective judgments. How quaint.}* Calvino hummed with bemusement. Kant merely sighed.

The moment stuttered to an awkward halt. Marlowe's mouth opened and closed several times, her gaze swinging between him and Tavers. Her mind was vacant of proper thought and her throat channeled no noise comparable to words.

Until a heartbeat thereafter when everything clicked into place at once.

"I think I know you," Marlowe said, squinting at him. Casting her own phantoms out, she expanded small interfaces—windows containing downloaded sequences, portraying projected vicarities. Flashes of his encounters against Abrel in Nu-Scarrowbur, of him fleeing across the skyline of Light's End, of him and his cadre battling Shotin at Veng's Stand all played concurrently. "You're the Acolyte's monster... The—the *Pale Spider*."

+*Pale Spider*,+ Avo said, muttering the name to himself. He did recall White-Rab saying something about that. He didn't think much of it at the time. The Nether was a place of information, but also an endless ocean of falsehood and conspiracies. The matters of social forums and interactive mindscapes were things he had little interest in.

**[Marketable name,]** Corner said. **[Sounds like a Deep Name. Or street name. An identity a Necro, squire, or circuter might give themselves to build up their rep.]**

Considering his ties to Chambers and the man's explosive notoriety in New Vultun, such a thing wasn't surprising.

“I didn’t expect you to be involved in cult stuff, Tavers,” Marlowe said, now addressing the squire. “With all you said to me about keeping the right distance with the people you associate and making sure your back was covered—”

“It’s worse than you think,” Tavers interrupted, chuckling under her breath. “You—you have no idea what I just pulled you into, juv. You’re gonna love this shitstorm. Trust me.”

Marlowe went quiet. She looked back to Avo. “So. Mysterious nine-foot-tall monster is your vibe, huh? What are you? A rogue Color? Running destabilization ops for the Sang? Or are you some kind of Fallwalker? Are you just... something Noloth cooked up? Guilds say they smashed the old empire flat, but honestly, the Guilds say a lot of shit.”

*+I am operating under my own interests. And yours. And the ciity’s. Not a Color. Not a Fallwalker. Something else entirely.+*

“Uh-huh,” Marlowe said, the shock receding from her mind, replaced by apprehensive skepticism. “So. Why the terrorism? Why are you with the Acolyte.”

More like why Chambers was with Avo, but Marlowe was poking in the right direction all things considered. *+Could spend minutes telling it to you. Or I could just show you. Show you the truth behind things. Show you the real face of New Vultun as well.+*

This earned a snort from the host. “Really? That’s how you’re pitching this to me. You know you sound like one of those, accept-casts hiding Rash-bomb mem-cons, right?”

*+I know you have two Necros protecting your systems. I know one of them lives in the Spine. In the Sovereignty of Hearsehold. District: Muriceid. I know he has two nu-dogs. Five newborns children with accelerated toddlerhood treatments in all of them recently procured from a vat. I know he did that recently because he lost some money to a local Syndicate. Trying to make up the losses as fast as he can.*

*+I know his name is Henge Gracis. I know he’s going to come begging you for imps in approximately two days—held up between stress crying. Screaming at the children. Straining about how he’s going to broach the question.+*

The smirk on Marlowe’s face vanished. Her mind, likewise, ran dry of bemusement. “How the fuck did you—”

*+Don’t cast them,+* Avo said. *+The ghosts won’t reach them. And they won’t remember.+*

Again, the host looked towards Tavers.

“Relax, Cala,” Tavers said, shaking her head at Avo. “The ghoul here’s just having fun.”

“Ghoul?” Marlowe said.

Avo glared at Tavers from within her own mind, but the squire was unshakable. He read the point of her revelation from thoughts alone.

*+Yeah. A little more tact, Avo.+*

“So... am I getting strong-armed into something? Are you about to crack my mind or what?”

*+No,+ Avo replied. +Nothing of the sort. You tell us to leave. We leave you and the others alone. Find other means. But would like to talk with you first. Think you can be a great help to our mutual cause.+*

“And what’s that?” Marlowe said.

*+Making the Guilds miserable.+*

A sharp exhale escaped the woman as she rubbed her face and stumbled back toward her desk. “No. No. I—I’m not interested in doing any cult shit. Been there, done that. It doesn’t work. The Guilds are—”

*+We’re not a cult. I hunting the remnants of Noloth too. Not that much different from Guilders in the ways that count.+*

Marlowe paused a step away from her table. “I’m sorry, did you just say that you’re hunting the Nolothi too?”

*+Your mind might have felt a little... disconnected two days back. Apologies. Was greeting my former “god.” Messy family affair. Will probably get even worse next time.+*

Marlowe looked over her shoulder and just blinked at him. “Alright. Sure. Why not. You’re the one that caused the *Cog-Crash*. I’m nowhere near fucked-up enough for this conversation. But let me have it. Let’s hear it. What do you want from me, and why the hells would I be interested.”

*+Need someone to interface with the city. A face and mouth to speak through. Not as a puppet. Just someone to tell the truth. To leak what’s actually happening between the Guilds.+*

“And you have these insights?”

*+Was the reason why *Thousandhand* is currently in Naeko’s pocket.+*

“I ended up driving a knife through the sow’s skull,” Tavers added.

Avo grunted a laugh and manifested the memories he had of the moment. A holographic recreation of Tavers materializing behind Zein and driving her frequency blade through the ancient Godclad's skull played before Marlowe's unblinking eyes.

A beat followed. She spun on her heels and came marching back. "Okay. Right. It's like, seven in the fucking morning and that's a whole lot of shit to dump on someone. Hi, my name is Cala Marlowe. Alcoholic. Druggie. Thoughtcaster. Self-loathing citizen. Do you got an actual name besides 'Pale Spider.'"

+Avo.+

"Avo. Right. You're trying to tell me that you caused more than half the godsdamned messes I've been reporting on recently, and... and that she called you a ghoul? What? Is that some kind of insult between consangs?"

+No. *It's just what I was.*+

Another slow breath escaped the young woman. "I'm *really* trying not to think you're lying, but you gotta know it's hard."

"Yeah," Tavers said. "Like hearing about someone spotting Jaus. Real urban legend stuff. But Avo here's real. Real as real can be. And if you don't believe him—"

Marlowe waved the squire off—her focus switched back over to Avo entirely. "So, let me understand one thing here. You want to set up some kind of business relationship with me. Feed me direct scoops to whatever crazy shit you're doing."

+*More than just that,* + Avo said. +*Classified mem-data. Guilder troop movements. Details about inner politics. Which Syndicates are tied to what Guilds. How they're running slaves through the Maw. Everything.*+

"And... you get what in return?" Marlowe asked. "Propaganda? Good publicity? Recruits?"

+*Your thoughtcast is a major Nether-traffic hub. Currently targeting those. Want to spread through the minds of the FATELESS. Empower them. Spread through them.*+

"Define 'spread'? Because I'm not letting you proliferate some kind of mem-con through my show."

Draus briefly let her attention slip across the splinters and snorted. +*Let. She ain't got no ability to decide.*+

+*Not mem-cons,* + Avo replied. +*Just fragments. Of myself.*+

He promptly showed her the memories of his descent through the Deep Nether, but the sheer chaos of traversing the roiling subconscious of Idheim left Marlowe overwhelmed. “Right. Sure.”

*+Don't want to twist the minds of the people. To bend them to my will. Can. Would be easy. But I have a greater design in mind. Want you to help with that. Want you to speak to the city. To make it realize things. Conclusions they can reach. Decisions they can make on their own. Let them witness the real war. The true war approaching.+*

“The true war,” Marlowe said, murmuring slowly.

Her hesitation made Avo smile. Slowly, his phantasmal self held out a clawed hand. *+Come with me. I want to show you something. Accept my Ghost-Link. Want to help you see.+*

A chain of ghosts extended from Tavers' accretion, and the thoughtcast host flinched at its approach. Looking to the older woman for guidance, she got only a shrug in reply.

“You're going to be diving in deep, Cala,” Tavers said. “I will not bullshit you: once you catch of glimpse about what the Guilds are doing—what's actually happening behind the scenes—you're either gonna stay on with us, or ask Avo here to pluck out your memories. Don't know what choice you'll make, but I can tell you this—there won't ever be a chance like this again. To take it to the Guilds. To make the kind of difference you always dreamed of.”

The host swallowed. “Honestly, I'm still a bit worried that your friend here might just eat me.”

*+Would have just done it instead of speaking with you in the first place,+* Avo replied. *+Save your fear for later. There are things far worse than I. Far worse.+*

The outgoing request for his Ghost-Link blinked across his cog-feed another moment more before Marlowe made her decision.

## **GHOST-LINK ACCEPTED**

Avo grinned, and as their minds synced, he let her hear his templates, poured a concentrated drip of his experiences over the past month, and relished as she gasped.

“Holy fuck,” Marlowe groaned. “All that shit? In a *month*?”

*+And two weeks.+*

“What the hells are you? And—your Frame.” Noise became Marlowe's mind. Noise, and exhaustion.

Good. Now he was going to show her the true face of New Vultun, show her just how bad things were—and who was trying to fix the damage.

With simple thought, he shifted her with him as he shuffled his base mind across his various splinters, and they plummeted from Light's End to the gutters below.

\*\*\*

### **—[Chambers]—**

Chambers recalled his fire from the last defender's orifices, and a stream of winged aratnids followed the flames. The Syndicate enforcer twitched his last to the backdrop of various other bioforms devouring his comrades.

Blood spilled down from the railing overhead as insectoid monstrosities and devouring swarms stripped flesh from bone and emptied the complex of Syndicate presence. As the place was once a meat processing plant, all the gore and viscera that fell slipped through the open grates along the ground. The way the place was built made the whole killing thing easier.

It was also the reason why the Syndicates used the location as a transplant harvesting facility. Something Cas managed to discover from one of his informants just a day ago after they got back into the city.

Staring down at the unmoving body of the enforcer he just killed, Chambers chewed the insides of his cheek as he struggled to wrestle his thoughts into compliance. A little over a month ago—a whole lifetime before he became a 'Clad—he was pretty much the same piece of shit as the man he just killed.

He'd done the same gigs before. Slave transportation. Organ delivery. Hells, the score that decided his fate was over some nice implants he squeezed out of that half-strand Shred. As dying shrieks and final pleas for mercy filled the air, Chambers directed his bioforms to make things quick and spare the suffering.

The sooner he finished snuffing the bastards the better. That's all he had to think about that.

The longer he dwelled on the whole "morality" thing, the sooner he end up spiraling into thoughts about why he deserved to be a Godclad. Why he was the one chosen when so many were already dead and done. Especially since he really, really wasn't that different.

Just lucky.

Aedon Chambers. Always saved by someone else's luck.

As he looked up, the guilt inside him didn't lessen, but grew. Strapped to a filthy gurney, kept alive by a clearly smuggled medical drone, Chambers looked at the slave's writhing body and felt his wards quiver.

The limbs, eyes, ears, and legs of the mod-slave were removed. Every "secondary" organ not required for the body to maintain its survival, basically. An empty disinfectant nozzle protruded above the stall, and an active conveyor belt moved along the corners in case anyone had some new "harvestables" to deliver.

Once, these stalls were filled with cattle-style bioforms. The faded logo on the ceiling placed this misery factory as one of Ori-Thaum's subsidiaries. *Nutri-Fresh*. Crashed out when the Guilds cut their development plans for most of the Warrens after the 4th Guild War. Now, instead of weird modified cows, the five thousand stalls were filled with tortured messes of people. Limbless, tongueless, eyeless, earless, with tubes going down their throats and up their asses and groins.

Well. Here was the other part of his job. The "product" he was supposed to keep.

Just his luck he was saved. Just his misfortune he was now among decent company – among people he actually liked. The resulting spike to his empathy receptors was beginning to make him feel like–

–[Avo]–

+*Chambers*,+ Avo said.

"Gah! Fuck!" Chambers jolted. All his connected bioforms shifted. Flames sprayed through the air. His Bioigniter flickered out from him with shock—a festering burning cross with infected porous and pulsating hives behind the flames. He collapsed it back into his Frame as he realized it was just Avo. "Godsdammit consang you scared the piss out of my ass. I was doing my deep thinking and shit. A little warning next time."

+*Connected to my splinter. Can see what my minds are actively doing.*+

"Yeah? Well, I'm doing things here too. Look at the horror show I gotta clean up." Chambers waved a hand at the body. "I can probably burn what's missing back into them but mentally—" Chambers looked at the thoughtstuff hissing out of the body. "I'm not sure if there's much there for a thaum ro ghost anymore even if we wanted to get some easy pickings."

+*Can put them back together*,+ Avo replied. +*Just cast Draus. Have her open passage. Get them across to containment.*+

As Avo spoke, Chambers sensed a trickle of raw disgust and fascination escaping into his Metamind. Checking his system, he realized there was another mind included in their network. A newcomer.

+So,+ Cala Marlowe said, clearing her throat awkwardly. *+I don't know if this is your first job interview or what, but usually, the fucked-up slaughterhouse comes after I sign the contract, not before.+*

+Extracting these people,+ Avo said. *+Getting the FATELESS out of here. Across to the enclave. Chambers. Cast her the Syndicate's mem-data. Show her what you're trying to do.+*

Coughing, Chambers pushed his prior angst aside and cleared his throat. *+Yeah. Yeah! These—we gotta stop these Syndicate bastards from hurting the innocent. That's why we're here. To do the right thing.+*

A beat passed.

+Chambers,+ Avo said. *+Why are you talking like that?+*

+He's trying to impress our "novitiate,"+ Kae explained, speaking absently across the splinters.

+What? No, I'm just fucking driven now. To—to do the right thing. The city is... full of darkness and evil. It has to end.+

Unbelievably, Marlowe snorted. *+Nice. Very Dannis Steelhard sounding.+*

Chamber's heart skipped a beat. *+You... you watch Dannis?+*

+Yeah. Seen a few of his vics. Honestly, it's not that extreme. And the plot for "Cuckholder" wasn't half bad.+

+Extactly! Exactly!+

+Chambers,+ Avo said, unsure how to take Marlowe and Chambers connecting due to degeneracy. *+Victims first. Questionable pornography second.+*

And in the back of his mind, he faintly heard Calvino chuckling.