

BREAK FOUR

FOR THE FIRST TIME, Ljubo considers the horrifying reality of these Cans. A person is trapped inside each humming metal cylinder, a criminal of Pip's Cross sentenced to immobility, insanity, and eventually death by old age or a broken mind.

And they only get to rescue five of them.

Shapes and faces pulse in the Krotenschwamm dough beside each can, scenes animated from the imaginations of the prisoners inside. As they pass these pulsations, fear grips Ljubo's stomach. The fear comes in waves. As he moves forward, the fear twists inside him, causing his stomach to lurch. His emotions soar and then ebb. The Krotenschwamm—he realizes—is eating his fear, sucking it down with greedy contractions. Psychic digestion.

The Snap brothers gather around the bank of central crystal computers nestled in the roots of the tree of wires. The vibration of the Krotenschwamm is not as strong here. Ljubo can still feel the mushroom gorging on his terror energy, but he can deal with it now that he knows what is happening.

"The cans aren't made to be opened," says Darko. "The psychics inside will be shocked. We might kill them just by setting them free."

"We have to choose the correct five people," says Ljubo.

“That probably matters more than anything. We have to think about this. We have to get this exactly right.”

“I think about everything,” says Darko, archly. “All the time.”

Darko puts his hand on one of the control globes under the tree of wires. The globe spins beneath his hand, emanating a dusty blue incandescence. The glyphs move too quickly for Ljubo to read. Ljubo tries to thoughtsnatch his brother, to Share with him as he works, but Darko’s mind is moving too fast for Ljubo to keep up.

Aleks leans against the bank of computers as Darko works, slouching. His eyes are narrow like a wolf. Clothilde hovers beside him.

“So you eat pain,” Aleks says to Clothilde. “You eat bad feelings.”

“It is hard to describe in words,” says Clothilde. “The Krotenschwamm feeds on the emotions generated by intensity and also on any residual psychic energy leftover from powerful events.”

“Yes, I understand already,” says Aleksandar. “You are ghosts.”

“I am human,” says Clothilde. “Only cleaner, calmer, and emptier, like you said.”

“Will you stay this way forever?” asks Aleks. “Don’t you want to finally move on to your eternal rest?”

“I don’t know what that means,” says Clothilde.

“I have seen ghosts like you before in this city,” says Aleks. “No one ever believed me. It would be underground, while waiting for a job to finish. I would see someone like you watching me and then I would go and get smashed and then fuck some living slut. Felt good. Being so near death.”

At this point, Aleks is openly leering at Clothilde. The feeling seems to be mutual. She is compelled by the erotic timbre of his fascination.

“We need to focus,” Ljubo says, picking up his brother’s amorous intentions.

“There are thousands of prisoners here to choose from,”

says Darko. “We have to find the right ones, meaning the ones who can help us the most.”

“We want real threats,” says Aleks. “We want dangerous legends.”

“What if they are all too fucked-up to help us?” asks Ljubo.

“Yes, that is a possibility,” says Darko. “Their own minds provide the torture. Or, as the School would have it, their guilty consciences provide the punishment.”

“Can they hear us?” asks Ljubo.

“They’re quite isolated,” says Darko. “I believe that the length of time that each candidate has been imprisoned should be a factor in our decision. Some of these psychics have been here for hundreds of turns. There are even a few who have been here for much longer than that. I don’t understand how that is possible, but that’s what I see here.”

Hundreds of turns. Ljubo cannot imagine it.

“So how does this Krotenschwamm fight?” asks Aleks, moving closer to Clothilde, close enough to inhale her scent and marinate her in his own funk. “What powers do ghosts have?”

“The greater Krotenschwamm can absorb a creature utterly,” she says, “It fills the organs and lungs of a victim and dissolves them from the inside, deliquescing their macromolecules for nutrients. We dissolve bones and skin and hair. Anything toxic or indigestible to us sinks through the bottom of the Krotenschwamm, digested into gray powder.”

“So you get inside a motherfucker and you liquefy him from inside out and you slurp him up and then shit him out,” says Aleks.

“Are there any Builders in here?” Ljubo asks Darko, trying to change the conversation.

“No Builders,” says Darko. “Sticking a Builder in the cans would be a colossal waste. The School always puts Builders that it captures into new Bells, opening up their Fetishes by force and making them into portals. The most common crime of the criminals in here being punished is

for Forcing. However, obviously Forcers are too unpredictable for us. In my estimation, some of the Circumjacency rebel leaders in here would probably be our best bet. We want people who are already on our side, philosophically.”

“Come on,” says Aleks. “Who knows which side anybody is on after a hundred turns alone in a fucking can?”

“That’s a good point,” says Darko. “I agree and I don’t think we should open up any cans that are older than ten turns or so. We simply can’t be sure what happens to somebody stuck in here that long.”

“I disagree,” says Ljubo. “Somebody who is still alive even though they’ve been locked up for a hundred turns in this place? That’s a survivor.”

“They might also be so powerful that we would not be able to deal with them,” says Darko.

“I definitely want to know who has been in here the longest,” says Aleks. “I definitely want to know which can is the oldest.”

Darko’s fingers slide around on the control globe.

“I am sorting by sealing date,” says Darko.

The computer hums. The lights dim for a moment. The Krotenschwamm churns below their feet.

“Wow,” says Darko, frowning at the glyphs that burn in the air.

“Which one?” asks Aleks. “How old?”

“Column 40, row X,” says Darko. “That can has been sealed for ten thousand turns.”

The brothers stare at each other, trying to imagine. Aleks whistles.

“A goddamn superstar,” asks Aleks. “A goddamn vampire or something. Who is it?”

“The can is tagged as a Shifter,” says Darko, frowning. “There isn’t any other information. It’s all just blank.”

“Ten thousand turns,” says Aleks. He bounces on the balls of his feet and then sets off, walking the rows. Clothilde follows behind him, swept into his gravity by her erotic enthusiasm.

“This is very exciting,” says Clothilde, catching up

with him. “Things are happening. It is so nice to be part of something.”

As they pad along the top of the mushroom, Aleks lets Clothilde pass him so that he can watch her walk, craning his neck to stare at her ass in a way that Ljubo finds maddening. Can’t Aleks forget about sex for five minutes?

“You know, I’ve never fucked a ghost before,” Aleks says with a wink, unwilling to let even minor desires go unspoken.

Clothilde stops in front of the ancient can. It is so old that it looks like the stump of a blighted tree. A calcified shell covers the entire coffin. Unlike the other cans where the tormented souls within are spilling out—animating the contorted faces and mysterious scenes in the surrounding dough—this patch of Krotenschwamm is smooth and calm. Despite the can’s age, a modern crystal computer interface glows beside it, streaming vital statistics and measurements that quantify the intensity of the can’s psychic output. In this way, this ancient can is no different than the other ones.

Aleksandar puts his hand on the can’s crust.

“Feels tingly,” says Aleksandar. “You sure there’s somebody still alive in there? After ten thousand turns?”

“That’s what the computer says,” insists Darko. “A Shifter.”

“We should only get Burners,” says Aleks. “We should Burn this whole city to the ground. What does anything matter now?”

“There are still plenty of people alive here that the Oth can’t absorb or doesn’t want,” says Ljubo.

“If we can only get five, preferably we want somebody who has fought Indrix before,” says Ljubo. “We want some kind of Circumjacency rebel hero.”

“Are there any fairies?” asks Asfodel, piping up for the first time.

“Asfodel wants to know if there are any fairies,” says Ljubo.

Aleks snorts. Darko closes his eyes, as if in pain.

“I say we each get one vote,” says Darko, opening his eyes again. “Including Asfodel.”

“That’s only four,” says Ljubo.

“And then one wild card,” says Aleks.

“We don’t want any wild cards,” says Darko. “No wild cards.”

“It only seems right that we let the person who has been in here the longest go free,” says Aleks, knocking on the ancient can. “We can’t just leave this old can here. Wild card.”

Darko rotates the control globe around, scanning the glyphs that appear in the air in front of him.

“There aren’t any fairies,” says Darko. “However—and this is surprising—there is one human in here. One human, still alive.”

“A human?” says Ljubo. “Locked up in one of these things?”

They all consider this for a moment: the horror of it. A human. It is too awful to imagine.

“Maybe it is more important to figure out which psychic has been in the Cans for the shortest amount of time,” says Darko.

“That’s easy,” says Aleksandar. “Last person who went in was that serial killer. The Quark one. Uh...Felderel... something. Last turn?”

“Felderel Phap,” says Darko, frowning and pulling up the dossier.

“Yeah, he was a really powerful Shifter,” says Aleksandar. “Went in just a little while ago. He only killed Orlocs. He was harvesting their parts, keeping their pieces alive in a salt bath. He was trying to connect them up in ways that they weren’t meant to fit. He was keeping honeybees in them. Filled up his whole apartment with Orloc parts, a goddamn maze of fizzing Orloc organs and rose-fat honeybees. He sold the honey to all the bovor carts in Shiftside. He was supplying most of Shiftside with sweet honey and crunchy delicious honeycombs all made in his dancing hell-maze of screaming Orloc flesh. Sort of an

artist, really.”

“I remember that now,” says Darko.

“It was pretty good honeycomb,” says Aleks. “Good with a glass of tea. Just the right amount of crispy.”

“All right, let’s see who has been in here the second shortest amount of time,” says Darko. “You have persuaded me that Felderel Phap will not advance our cause.”

Darko rolls the control globe around, frowning. He spins the globe and then scratches his head, staring at the ceiling.

“Here we go,” says Darko.

“Who is it?”

“She’s a Razzarii,” says Darko. “Flizz is what the School named her, according to this dossier. Some kind of political prisoner. She’s only been in here a turn and a half. There aren’t any more details, but a Razzarii could certainly be useful. That seals it: she’s my pick.”

BREAK FIVE

“SO YOU’VE GOT YOURS,” says Aleksandar. “Now I want mine. I’ve been thinking about it. Search that thing for me. I know exactly who I want.”

“So you get to pick the wild card and also your own pick?” asks Ljubo, dubious.

“Be grateful I’m not picking all five,” says Aleks.

Darko looks expectantly at his older brother. The tips of Darko’s fingers graze the control globe, all anticipation. Aleks cracks his hairy knuckles and leans against the tree of wires like a lazy lion.

“I want the Sanct of Fire, little brothers,” he says. “We can’t mess around. She must be down here somewhere. She is eternal. Her flame can never die. Now how do we wake her up?”

Ljubo groans.

“You and your fucking STORIES,” says Ljubo.

“I was right about ghosts,” says Aleks. “Ghosts are real. The Sanct of Fire is real, too.”

“Ghosts aren’t real,” says Ljubo. “And the Sanct of Fire is just a myth.”

“I will look,” says Darko, hesitantly. “But who am I even looking for? Does she have a real name?”

“Red Aster,” says Aleks. “Red Aster, Sanct of Fire.”

“Give me a cigarette,” says Ljubo. Aleks hands him one.

He has saved every pack that they have scavenged from the dead, stuffing them in every pocket.

Darko searches through the database of doomed souls, cross-referencing Burners against the time period when the Sanct of Fire would have lived. They all agree that it would have been several human lifetimes ago. Darko tunnels through the crystal banks, periodically looking at his older brother's manically grinning face and flashing him a sympathetic, condescending smile.

Ljubo smokes in silence.

"I have never heard of Red Aster," Asfodel Shares to Ljubo while they wait.

"Don't worry, it's just a myth," Shares Ljubo. "It's a myth for fucked-up murderers. Mom used to talk about her all the time, and that's where Aleks got it. But she isn't real. It's all just a story."

"But I don't know the story," Shares Asfodel.

"Well, most normal people don't go around praying to mass murderers."

"What is so compelling about her?"

"Her story flatters Aleks's perverse sense of justice," Shares Ljubo. "The story goes that once upon a time, there was an Orloc assassin named Red Aster. One day, after a lifetime of doing the bidding of the School, she made a solemn vow to the heavens that she would never kill anybody weak and defenseless ever again. You can see the appeal here already to someone bitter and simple-minded. According to the story, she was quite serious about it, which was terrible for her business. Assassins aren't really supposed to be picky about clients. Word got around, however, that she was on the side of the downtrodden, and so people in the Edge Fevers started pooling their money and hiring Red Aster to Burn up their landlords, their Populats, and their local gang lords. People on the Edge did the math and discovered that it was cheaper to have Red Aster Burn their oppressors than it was to pay into the system of corruption that makes this city work. This was a huge problem. Shut the whole economy down."

“Aha,” Shares Asfodel.

“It didn’t take long before the Shiftat got involved, trying to flush her out,” Ljubo continues. “The Shiftat iced everyone that Red Aster knew...her lovers, her friends, her former clients. It worked. She got mad. Red Aster went ballistic and started setting fires all over Pip’s Cross. According to the legend, she killed hundreds of people in the city, Burning up whole Fevers. She was an Orloc, and the modifications she made to her body over the years made her just about as dangerous as they come. She was basically just a big boiling bag of fire in the end. Supposedly she was molten through and through...just a translucent sack of pure unkillable magma. It didn’t matter: they caught her eventually. They always do. On the orders of the School, the General Traveled into a freezing cold Fetish. Pretty standard procedure for hunting malcontents: make them hole up, make the city hate them. The cold also made her sluggish, and once she got sold out, some School psychics eventually took her down. But Pip’s Cross assassins like Aleks still pray to her, invoking Red Aster when they are trying to do something particularly gruesome that will result in a lot of innocent casualties. She justifies mass death, as long as there is sufficient passion and some kind of reason behind it. Idiots like Aleks claim that anybody who ever Burns in this town now draws on the eternal flames from Red Aster’s unkillable molten heart...flames that can never die and that always spread to Burn up the crooked double-dealers. It’s all pretty ridiculous. Obviously, Aleks is a huge fan. Did I mention that she managed to kill the Shiftat who went after her? Well, she did. One last murder before they hauled her away. All part of the story. None of it real, obviously.”

“I found something,” says Darko. “I can’t believe it, but there is actually something here.”

“You’re shitting me,” says Ljubo, looking at Aleks who irritatingly waggles his eyebrows as he pats his cock. “Oh Lord, here we go.”

“There are only three Orloc Burners in here,” says

Darko. "And one of them is listed as female. It says she's been in the Cans for a hundred and seventy turns, which would be the right time frame. There's no name listed."

"It's got to be her," says Aleksandar. "Let's wake her up."

"Right now?" says Darko.

Aleks hesitates.

"Maybe we'd better wait," says Aleks. "Prepare a little."

"I will flag her," says Darko. "You sure that's who you want?"

"This is a bad idea," says Ljubo.

"It's a great idea," says Aleks.

"What we need is somebody with a strategic mind," says Ljubo. "Somebody who knows what's going on. We need some kind of real Circumjacency rebel, you know?"

"Look for Sharers," Shares Asfodel. "Just pure, regular harmless Sharers. If there is a Sharer down here in the Cans, they must be dangerous for other reasons. Look for Sharers from the last few turns."

"Maybe Darko is wrong," says Ljubo. "Maybe a Forcer wouldn't be so bad."

"No, we can't trust Forcers," Shares Asfodel. "Although I wouldn't be surprised if some of the Burners in here have learned to Force while locked up."

"Like I said, there's actually a human in here," says Darko. "She's a Sharer. She got canned for rebelling against Razzarii slavers. According to her dossier, she's been in here for three turns."

This makes them all stop talking again. It is too horrible. A human? The Snap brothers consider this again in silence, each one trying to imagine what being in here for three whole turns might do to a human soul.

"You probably can't even jack off in one of these," mumbles Aleks. "Right?"

"We have to let her out," says Ljubo quietly. "She's human like us, and she's trapped in here, and she's still alive."

"What good will she be?" says Aleks. "After three

turns?”

“We can’t just leave her in here,” says Ljubo.

“We sure could,” says Aleks.

“Fine, she’s my pick then,” says Ljubo. “Out of fuckin’ simple human mercy.”

“What happened to finding somebody with a rebellious yet strategic mind?” asks Aleks.

“She’s human,” says Ljubo. “We have to get her out of here. I don’t want to argue about it.”

Aleks smirks. He shakes his head, giving up on the fight.

“I get a pick, don’t I?” Asfodel Shares with Ljubo.

“Yes, of course,” Shares Ljubo.

“I think we need someone who will know the Tower of the Sharat,” Shares Asfodel. “I am convinced that one of the old Tower guards will be the most useful. One of the School’s old experiments in mechanical life.”

“What are you talking about?” asks Ljubo.

“Just search for the Tower guards. You will find one.”

Ljubo walks over to his brother and leans down, momentarily entranced by the crystal glyphs.

“Asfodel says we should wake up one of the old guards from the Tower of the Sharat,” says Ljubo.

“Ah yes,” says Darko, pausing. “Very smart. Such a wily fairy. The School used to create machine hybrids out of their dead Quarks to guard the towers. They were engineered to serve for a short time and then be recyclable. However, the Quarks started to feel uncomfortable about seeing their old dead loved ones on guard duty. It’s against some of the oldest Quarkish religious taboos to reanimate the dead, so the program was ended. But yes, there very well might still be some down here in storage in the Cans. Perhaps they would even know how to access the Continuum. Yes, look! The fairy is right: there’s a bunch of them down here still showing vital signs.”

“Seems like a waste of a pick,” says Aleks.

“The School’s old databases were hardwired into a guard’s brains in the same place where you or I would have

memories,” says Darko. “However, there’s no guarantee that one of these Tower guards will listen to us or take orders from us. It might consider us to be a threat.”

“I’m the Sharat,” says Ljubo. “It has to listen to me.”

“Maybe,” says Darko.

“So that’s it then?” asks Aleksandar. “All five picks?”

“Yes, I’ve flagged them all,” says Darko. “The Sanct of Fire, Flizz the Razzarii, this human rebel, and an old guard from the Tower of the Sharat. And then there is our wild card, which is whoever might be in this can that has been sitting here for ten thousand turns. That’s our five.”

They consider their choices, looking around at the churning white mushroom that covers every surface.

“This isn’t good enough,” says Aleksandar. “We need an army. Instead, we are just getting more liabilities.”

“Show us the cans I’ve flagged,” Darko tells Clothilde. “I actually want to see these cans in person. We don’t want any duds.”

Clothilde moves around the room, leading Darko around to each can on his list. He dusts each one off, making sure the life support signals coming from each one are still strong.

“These all seem to be in order,” he says. “But it’s not like we can see inside.”

There is a hiss and chortle from the darkness around them, a sudden quaking that unsettles them all. Clothilde merges with the floor for a moment and then reconfigures, cocking her head to the side, frowning at them.

“The Krotenschwamm wants to know if you are satisfied with your choices,” asks Clothilde. “Things are becoming more turbulent on the surface, and we should move quickly.”

“What we really want is all of these cans open, every single one, and no fuckin’ playing,” says Aleks. “We aren’t satisfied with this deal. Not a bit.”

“That is not a scenario that the Krotenschwamm is willing to entertain,” says Clothilde. “Nor is it the deal to which we have agreed.”

The Krotenschwamm rumbles again, and the noise echoes throughout the chamber, thundering through the tunnels carved into the General's head. The Krotenschwamm's hiss chills their bones.

"Do we have an accord?" asks Clothilde.

"We're good," Ljubo says. "Do your thing."

"Then the Krotenschwamm accepts your choices," says Clothilde.

"Wait just a moment," says Darko. "Even if you won't let us open them, the rest of the prisoners in the Cans are a threat. If the Oth comes here, it will absorb everyone left and use them against us. Is there some other place you can send these prisoners? Some kind of holding facility in another Fetish or something? How are we going to keep them from being recruited into the Oth?"

"The Krotenschwamm shares your concerns," says Clothilde. "The Krotenschwamm agrees that such an occurrence would certainly not be optimal."

The Krotenschwamm hisses again. The Snap brothers stand in a circle looking at each other, feeling waves of emotions radiating from the walls. Pain. Sadness. Terror. Aleks seems to like it. He grins wolfishly at Clothilde, who looks away, crossing her arms.

Finally, the Krotenschwamm coalesces another lump of white dough from the ground, forming another Thalli fruiting body. This fruiting body grows to be ten times the size of Clothilde, looming over the bank of computers under the tree of wires.

"The Krotenschwamm wants you to know that as soon as the cans you have chosen are opened, the residual spike in psychic energy will draw the attention of the Oth," says Clothilde. "Therefore, the Krotenschwamm will be taking steps to protect itself. The Krotenschwamm insists that the cans you have chosen should be opened elsewhere, where the Krotenschwamm will be able to protect you. You have persuaded the Krotenschwamm as to the essential utility of your cause. But the Krotenschwamm also believes there is another way to prevent the absorption of these other

prisoners into the Oth.”

“We don’t understand,” says Darko.

The giant Thalli fruiting cap absorbs all the crystal computers under the tree of wires with its giant dough hands. Numbers and glyphs flash in the air all around them as sparks fly and electricity from the psychoducts sizzles the air. Darko suddenly realizes what is about to happen.

“Wait,” says Darko. “No, please, don’t—”

He is too late. All around them, spikes of white goo shoot up from the ground, enveloping each psychic coffin. As the walls of the cans are dissolved, there is high-pitched screaming from the prisoners within. All three Snap brothers fall to their knees, each of them suddenly nauseous, their hearts beating out of sync with their brains. Their mouths are as dry as desert crypts. Overflow panic washes through them.

“It’s killing them,” says Darko. “It’s killing them all.”

The Krotenschwamm pulls each can down into its glutinous mass. All but five are sucked down and destroyed. The remaining cans, their five choices, rest on the surface of the giant mushroom mass, red lights blinking. They can’t look away as a sea of silent carnage boils below them under the dough as the cans are opened and the prisoners eaten before waking.

Ljubo pukes. Darko pukes. Aleks screams until his red face turns white. Their heads spin, making them seasick and terrified, as the noises of muted murder echo from below. It is a brutal psychic shock and seems to go on forever. Finally—mercifully—the killing stops and all is silent again. The brothers collect themselves, leaning on each other to stand up.

“It digested them,” says Darko, wiping his mouth on his shirt. “It swallowed every single one of them.”

Clothilde returns, reforming beside them, her expression unreadable.

“The Krotenschwamm intends to accompany you on your journey to the Tower of the Sharat,” she says. “The news that you bring has been confirmed by other

independent Thalli fruiting bodies all over the city. We will be moving to the Tower of the Sharat shortly.”

“How many people did you just murder?” Ljubo demands. “That didn’t have to happen.”

“It is very sad, isn’t it?” says Clothilde. “I think it must be.”

There is a wrenching noise and the Krotenschwamm begins to ripple, heaving upward and then pushing sideways. As the ground lurches beneath them, the Snap brothers hunch down to keep from falling over. The mucus-like tendrils of the creature below them absorb their feet, steadying them, holding them in place. Now the entire body of the Krotenschwamm keels toward the nearest tunnel, like a massive string of snot sliding into a drain. The five remaining cans flip and fall among the rolls of white flesh, pushed like morsels across a tongue and coming to rest in a clump in front of them.

“The Krotenschwamm is thrilled by what is transpiring! It is giddy and supercharged by what it has eaten,” Clothilde shouts. “The Krotenschwamm is excited to be embarking on such a great adventure with such trustworthy new allies!”

The brothers rocket forward into the tunnel, flowing along with the Krotenschwamm. They move faster as the tunnel narrows, making them fall to their hands and knees. They shoot out of the cavern beneath the Gland of Glammering like dishwater down a drain, sliding rapidly away from the tree of wires.