

*+We're taught how to mend before they start instructing us on traumas. There's a point to this. It instills in you a kind of... appreciation for the mind's structure. It's not like the body—there's a lot more commonality between meat. Every mind, however, is a bit different their own way, governed by internal obsessions, beliefs, shaped by differing memories. Every person is a little kingdom unto themselves.*

*And every person breaks different as well.*

*The first person you learn to mend is yourself. That's the qualifying course, actually. An experienced Incubi cell cracks you just enough to leave you on the verge of madness and catatonia, and you find your own way back. I spent the better part of a month crawling through the broken recesses of my own mind, remembering what emotions went where, rebuilding my sequences like something between an architect who only had demented puzzle pieces to play with.*

*Even after spending an entire lifetime as myself, I still found me a stranger. I still failed to put certain pieces back. I fill those with other things. Or remembered them. Some like to think of it as the first real battle scar they get to wear, but I disagree.*

*It's a lesson: what isn't precious enough to retain is lost, and everyone loses something when they're broken.*

*Because short of you being able to rule your own mind like a tyrant, how do you define what memories have value until they're gone.+*

-Osai Norogambe, Incubus

27-5

The Coming of the Hour

As Avo stepped through the open doorway, he felt himself pass from one threshold of space to another. The Heaven at work in this place was Sphere Two, and the miracle it performed as a simple one: creating a one way path for a physical entity to travel across. As his step finished, the doorway behind him became a wall, he suddenly found himself standing in a pristine, white chamber with multiple holocoated figures casting commands into hovering loci consoles on the walkway above.

More consequently, his position on the DeepNav shot from a gang-run megablock in the Spine of the Warrens to the *Hailuo* district in the No-Dragons majority owned Veinsea Sovereignty. It didn't take much deduction—mostly thanks to Hysteria giving him more than a few overt glimpses into their minds—to know that most of the twelve shrouded individuals working in this room were No-Dragon assets moonlighting for Tavers.

Overhead, Avo spotted a massive organ composed primary of augmented gray matter. It's been some time since he dealt with an exomath—since his Bone Demon sheath augmentation. Tendrils of flesh extended from it, and synaptic oscillations danced through its many limbs, splashing the room in intermittent flashes. A few in particular stretched as a series of cords, fusing with the eyes, nose, ears, and skull of a nude man left submerged in amniotic fluids. From them, Avo read the faintness of a Frame from them using his **Conception of Ontology**, and knew them to be Eurun Tavers — a Godclad.

Just as his mother claimed.

Taking in his mind, Avo had to suppress a chuckle. Compared to the Gatekeeper, the boy was practically intact. Sure, there were entire sections missing from his accretion, and some of his sequences swayed free like tendons unlatched from an arm, but Avo had expected far worse.

The old squire herself was standing just a few steps away from the thaumaturgically altered organ. She angled herself to face him without fully turning and shot him a grateful nod. “You got here quick.”

***“You called. I answer. Least I can do. And not really much time for peace left. Going to make things right for whoever I can before what follows.”***

Tavers let out a breath. “You know, I survived four of these damned wars. Knew there was going to be a fifth coming, but I just didn't quite expect to be so directly acquainted with the one planning to set it off.”

***“Acquainted. All we are now, Tavers?”***

The old squire had a habit of squinting her eyes when she laughed. “This is practically a declaration of love, coming from a squire. Most of the ones worth their salt, anyway. There are no permanent allies or enemies. Just interests, players, and the game.”

Her words implied one thing, but her mind sang with an alternate resonance—its melody one of hope and gratitude. Legend though she was, Tavers was human, and by fulfilled want would Avo cement her loyalty to him in ways, absolute, righteous, and pure.

“Don't mind the help,” Taver said, gesturing to the Sang. “They're *eunuchs*. Don't got eyes, ears, noses—nothing. Got 'em as part of a promised package for this job. Their minds are tied straight to the exo-math, and keeping my boy's the only reason they're still around.”

**[A better fate than most,]** both Elegant-Moon and Green River remarked concurrently. It took a considerable transgression for the Sang to condemn one to endure the fate of a eunuch. Most had what remained of their life spent in experiments, while others were partially lobotomized—*thought-castrated* as their specific subtype was referred—and tied to a specific system.

For all of Ori-Thaum's dominion of the Nether, Avo increasingly found himself preparing to face the No-Dragons. Of all the Guilds, they were the ones he understood the least—and thus was the least ready to face.

He needed to find more angles on them. But that was for the future, right now, he had a debt to repay.

A salvo of splinters broke free from his mind and injected themselves into Eurun's cognitive wounds. The man's inner world mingled with Avo's Soulscape as templates, ghosts, and Heavens poured forward.

Beginning the dive through a relatively intact memory, Avo found himself nested within Eurun when he was but a toddler. A resonance trembled from this memory, and along its length extended more sequences, some severed, some intact. It began with the boy staring up at his mother, Quail Tavers, who looked down at him with a wry grin and folded arms. They were standing on the second floor of a large two-story apartment, and below, hundreds of aratnids were scurrying out from the boy's former playpen, had entered the room through a hole in the ceiling...

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—[Eurun]—

The child that was Eurun hiccuped as he finished with his fear-triggered tantrum. As his breathing calmed, his mother ruffled his tuft of hair, and then proceeded to hand him a stick. "You feeling raw?"

"Y-yuh," Eurun managed, though his stomach still felt unsettled. Every time he blinked, he saw those legs crawling all over him, the eight-eyed rats screeching at him. His screams brought mom to him, same as they always did, but this time, she moved faster than he thought she could—faster than he could see.

Mom was the best; mom wasn't afraid of anything. Mom was going to get rid of those horrible spider-rat things.

"Looks like someone's going to be getting their ass kicked later. Dumb fucker lied to me when they said this place was vermin-bombed. Ah, well. Looks like it's you and me, kiddo. Think we can get this done before Hester gets home."

Hester. Eurun's older brother. He did stuff with mom too. But mom said he was a "jock." He was a lot older than Eurun—a lot bigger too; he only came home at night usually, and he smelled pretty bad then. He and mom yelled at each other a lot. Eurun didn't like that.

“Eurun?” mom said. “You listening.”

He looked up at her and shook his head. She told him she liked honest little boys. She closed her eyes and just shook her head. “Well, you had to get something from your useless bastard of a father. Try to pay more attention, juv. It’ll keep you alive someday.”

Years later, when Eurun accepted a session from an unknown benefactor, he would learn the true weight of his mother’s words in full. “Okay,” he said, nodding right after.

“Now,” Tavers’ said, kneeling down next to him, showing him her *metal spitter*, “here’s what we’re going to do. I’m gonna get the big ones, and you can get the little ones. Now, the first floor is sealed off, and I got sensors placed in the space above, so I’m guessing they probably came in through one of the pipes. What we’re going to do first,” she pointed across the room, back to the hole above his playpen. “Is plug that up. Then you and I are going do some mommy-Eurun bonding time. How’s that sound?”

Below, the spider-rat things made loud noises. A bigger one was biting into a little one—shaking them. Blood. So much blood. Eurun whimpered and stepped back away from the gaps between the rails. “No. No.”

But mom only laughed at that. “Yeah, they’re pretty nasty critters, I’ll give you that. But thei city’s filled with people like them.”

That statement was beyond horrifying to Eurun. ‘They’re... everywhere.’

“Oh, yeah. Even sneakier too. But the thing is, Eurun, if you don’t kill them, they’ll spread across your house, piss, shit, breed across everything. And then they’ll get it in their heads that you belong to them too.”

“Me?” Eurun whimpered.

“Yeah. It’s real bad out there. But you want to know something? You can make those nasty shits fear you too.”

Eurun just looked at his mother. She held up a finger and told him to wait. A moment later, she came back from her other room, and she held something out to him. It was knife. One of her singing knives. The kind mom slapped his hand for touching before. “Singing knife!” he cried, excited.

“Yeah. *Singing-knife*. Remember our deal, alright. I get the big ones. You get the little ones. Keep your hand around the hand and cut them slow. *Slow*. No thrusting. No wild swings. You don’t do it like that, you’ll be stepping on them. You step on them, and we’ll have to get you new shoes. And you like these shoes right.”

Eurun did. He nodded. But... part of him understood his mother wanted him to go out. To help her kill the monsters. But there were so many and the legs. "I'm scared."

"I know. That's why we're doing this. Because everyone's scared. But not everyone does something about it." She guided him back to the edge of their second floor balcony and pointed to the corner of the room. There, she made him look at something he left behind.

"Naeko," he muttered. They forgot his Chief Paladin plushie when they got away. "Oh no."

"Not 'oh, no,'" Tavers said. "'Now what'? If we don't get him, the spiders get to have him. Are you going to let the spiders have your friend, Eurun."

He was scared. But Naeko wasn't. Naeko was still flexing. Naeko had the biggest muscles, and his face didn't change even when one of the rat-spiders jumped on him. Right then, something solidified within Eurun—a foundation of character that would follow, sharpen, change, and grow for all his memories to come. "No. He's mine. We go get him!"

His mother laughed again. "That's right, Eurun. We go get him. Now. You stay in front of me so I can see what you're doing. I'll be right behind you..."

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The outline of Eurun's template began to form. The broadness of the man's behavior was imprinted within the Soulscape. With this, Avo had an understanding of who he was rebuilding. An imprint to follow.

**+Hello, Eurun,+** Avo greeted, layering his Splinters over missing artifacts and carrying disconnected moments back to where they belonged. **+Let's see how whole I can make you. Would be interesting to introduce you to the Chief Paladin as well. Maybe he can sign your merchandise.+**

Inside Avo's mind, Kassamon snorted. **[Yeah, I doubt it. Naeko hates those things. He refuses to even look at them.]**

**+Na—Naeko?+** The faintness of Eurun's thought followed, and the man's mind was mostly lost in an instinctive haze. Where their awareness was scattered and drifting upon tides of incoherence, the structure Avo was returning to them began a light on the surface of the water. Consciousness was slowly returning with each piece of Eurun that fused back into place.

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**-[Essus]-**

Essus watched the last smuggler's mind come asunder with a vindictive delight.

For over a week, he worked without sleep, making contacts with the various outfits trafficking things and people between the sanctuaries and New Vultun proper. It tore at him every time he had to deal with the vultures, but it tore at him more to leave the children of this place unprotected.

With the cadre's most recent compromise—and the horrible news of Kae's capture—he committed to seeing his task done, even at risk to himself. Where he was enduring in the face of pain and trauma before, now, he found himself feeling beholden to the people of these miserable outposts. People like him with too much hope or desperation, and not enough sense.

Fathers. Mothers. Children.

There was purpose in his deeds here, something he never knew in his life.

But he never expected his work to be approaching its end so soon. And, to his bitter awe, the merit belonged more to Avo than it ever did him. The monster that Essus once regarded as his savior and friend was evolving too fast for the former refugee to keep up. As Essus stood at the open doorway, he watched the six smugglers seizure on their jack stations, minds shattering and reforming. A new substance filled their halos as they ceased their struggles, and the yolk of their thoughts smoothed.

As one, all of their heads rose and looked to Essus. ***“Good job.”*** Avo's echoing voice thrummed more from the minds he seized than the bodies he puppeted. ***“Have a trace on the children they're smuggling as well. Haven't been sold yet. Casting the information to one of the Chamberses. He will intercept.”***

“Good,” Essus said, nodding quietly. A flashing grid of neon swept along the foil-wrapped windows. The housing unit felt cramped to him, and after his tenure under Mirrorhead, he preferred more open spaces. With the Heaven Avo granted him, he was always a door or gate away from escaping. By simply stepping through, he could pass from one threshold to another. But what did that say about him, that even as a god, the greatest gift he deserve was to be the lord of escapees? The lord of cowards.

***“You've done a good thing. A brave thing.”*** Avo's voice was low and calming. He was increasingly good at understanding Essus's moods now. Too good; too much insight. Uncannily inhuman in an inverted way from the impatient monster he was before. ***“Was still a lot of risk letting you skirmish like this. Even if you are passing in an out of sanctuaries. Even with me watching you.”***

“Did you truly need me for this?” Essus asked.

***“Need? No. Wanted. And you helped. But you needed something more than pain.”***

So, in the end, it was pity.

***“It was more than pity. It was purpose. You are still here. There are still more choices to make. Even when the sanctuaries are cleared. Especially when the war begins.”***

Essus gave a flat laugh. “I am no warrior, my friend. Not unless you make me one.”

***“Only if that is your desire.”***

And to his shame, Essus didn't desire it. He had no taste for the blood, hated every life he took while enslaved. If there was the need, he would fight. He would kill. But short of there being anything else he could do...

***“A lot of people are going to die,”*** Avo said. The statement held a tone of expectation behind it. ***“We'll try to claim the Warrens. Establish foothold there and through Scale. But there are the helpless. Children. Families. Those who can't fight. They will need a place to go. And our enclave is exposed right now. Migrations might be in order. New places for people to stay. New sanctuaries. True ones this time.”***

“And you wish for me to be a part of this?” Essus asked.

***“You walked the Sunderwilds. You've been a refugee. You suffered. Suffered true like so many others. And survived. You are closest to humanity among our cadre. Your mortality matters more than your divinity. There is a symbology to what you can represent. A hearth for people to seek. I want to give you a gift. I want to improve your Heaven. Grant you another one. And I want you to find a place for the helpless and build new homes for them. Homes. Many. Give them space. Give them room.”***

The sheer weigh of such a potential responsibility left Essus unbalanced. “I... I do not think I have the mettle to be ruler.”

***“Then don't be. Just be a guide. Just show them the way. I will help you. Dice will help you. Voidwatch will help you. Not alone. I can even expand your consciousness. Multiply your egos. But only you have the symmetry needed for this.”***

The man swallowed and bowed his head. A memory greeted him, a moment between him and his son after the tragic loss of his love. He told the boy stories of the great city of endless steel how the savior who broke tyrants dwelled there, and how miracles flowed like rivers down a stream. He didn't believe it at the time, but the boy needed something; he couldn't bear to see the light die in him.

And somehow, through that, he thought he understood Avo just a bit more.

*Preserve the flame.*

“Then, let us be rid of the rot first,” Essus said. “Let us be done with the termites before we speak of building a new shelter.”

As one, the claimed smugglers smiled. ***“Won’t be long now. Not long at all.”***

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**–[White-Rab]–**

The thug trying to drive his frequency blade into Raldi’s throat splattered apart the moment he activated Avo’s session.

One moment, the man was there. The next, a torrent of slaving ghosts erupted out from Raldi’s accretion, stripping his assailant from the world. Taking in a breath, the Necrojack known as White-Rab looked up and studied the rest of the junkies group. All of them were decapitated. Five heads near five bodies, severed clean by the straight edge of their aero.

Cutting people to pieces with geometry was never not going to be cool.

***+How’d this happen,+*** Avo said, a teasing tone thundering forth from their mind. ***+Didn’t expect you to nearly get murdered by some Joyfiends. Would be embarrassing. For me. Have to claim we are unrelated.+***

“Kiss my ass,” White-Rab sighed, rubbing at his neck. “It’s bad luck. Pure and simple. I spent the better part of two days dodging Incubi, Regulars—fucking made out Highflame and Stormtree cadres hunting me. You got all kinds of half-strands after me, you know that?”

A few steps beyond, the midnight streets flashed and dimmed with passing aeros. A nest of aratnids chewed on some grubs they found in the corner. Next to White-Rab was a door with a phantasmal sign stating ***+Private Invite Only.+*** Inside was a quaint little joint owned by one “Tungsten” Fragers—a place offering jack stations for rent and coffin cots for a night’s sleep.

Basically paradise for a Necro on the run. Or as close as one can get, anyway. White-Rab had just stashed his fleeing kit and created a session with one of the stations as a proxy when he ran into the druggies right outside. That was all it was: dumb luck. They were juicing Joy in the wrong place at the wrong time. He just so happened to have a call to make.

***+Though you were going to meet up with Tavers,+*** Avo asked.

“Too hot. Had to bail. Everything Light’s End and up is either huddled tight like a fortress under siege or crawling with hostile jacks. I mean, fuck, Avo, what did you do, other than ruin my good



name in front of the High Seraph.” He let out a shaky breath. Yeah, he was a bit pissed about that. He had a good thing going. *High fucking Seraph* thought he had her Frame. Jaus.

**+Past that now,+** Avo said. **+She knows about me. And she has Kae. Scale’s compromised. War’s going to be starting very soon.+**

Suddenly, White-Rab felt very happy about fleeing the Tiers. “Well. You didn’t waste any time escalating, huh?”

**+No other Path left. I seek to win this war. This is what follows.+** A beat followed. **+Do you want to spend a night at somewhere with more space than an aratnid nest.”**

“Hells yeah.”

**+Thought so. Going to arrange passage for you. And...+** Avo hesitated. **+Reva. Have you heard from her recently.+**

White-Rab’s gut tightened. “Yeah. But she’s under watch. Real tight watch. She’s going to be at the trial.”

**+I know. I’ll do what I can to keep her alive.+**

White-Rab breathed. “For a second I thought you were going to ask me to—”

**“Already know your answer to that. Won’t force that on you. And she’s already under suspicion anyway. Have another way to get at Stormtree.+**

“Alright, that sounds—*wait*, what? Who?”

**+Wouldn’t know her. Good with a guitar, though.+**