

+Mag? Mag? We're coming in rough, what's—+

[Moment! No! Run! Stay away! Don't do this! Don't use me like this!]

-Final thoughtcast between Moment and Two-Mag, Syndicate Forgotten Lance

18-7

These Bodies Be Our Prison

Hubris: Neither of the organisms that the user is melding must not be destroyed during the process or thaumic backlash will be triggered

Avo and one of the bioforms fell into each other like toppling towers, bodies crumbling with tumorous debris. Yet, collapse did not follow. Hardly. Their structures held as the biologies of ghoul and prototype pressed together, entwining skeletons and melding sporelings into Avo's blood.

Linked to the creature he was absorbing, he felt the bioform melt away into thin air as the Weaver wove it into him, infusing his flesh with the best parts of its design.

From two bodies emerged one. From divided architectures rose a sheathe sporting a new shape. New pattern. The Woundshaper caressed Avo's material form with curiosity as new senses bloomed from his mind.

With his next exhale flowed a cloud of sporelings, and as they spread, they joined his Sanguinity as another expansion to his cognitive perception. He could *feel* the metal around him. Sense the matter he could grip and those he could. Imbued with a Domain of Lightning, a constant, *unnatural* power lingered within his field, ever-charged, never-diminishing.

"Avo..." Kae breathed, looking between him and Elegant-Moon. The Sang just leaned back against the seat of her cell and smiled at the ground.

"It is a gift that can be offered to any," Elegant-Moon said. "You have shown me new life to twist and twist it into you I shall. Our flesh is a garden. We need but the proper seeds."

Jack sighed as his phantasmal avatar studied Avo. *+As I said. Raw damn woo-woo bullshit. We had to cut him open for that stupid implant. Here she is waving her hands.+*

Looking upon himself using Elegant-Moon's eyes, he let his Meldskin sink back beneath his cordyceramite plates. Once, paleness reigned absolute across his body, his sheathe the hue of naked bone. Now, contrast ruled. Neat rows of ebony discs lined his spine, collar, ribs, and limbs. A second skeleton had grown over his sheathe, its rubbery interior threaded to his bioelectrically charged mycelia.

The greatest change fell upon his Echoheads. Once likened to blade-headed serpents coated in armored scales of midnight, each tail now floated behind Avo in segments. Sporelings spewed from the divided pieces and hyper-conductive nodes lined the spines of the transplants. Volts arced down each of the Echoheads, imbuing it with thrumming power. Now, his tendrils would be as if shots loosed from a railgun more than a spearing piston.

Drawing a stream of blood from his body, Avo watched as sporelings growing within him wriggled with the coursing red, nursing themselves on his haemophage. He formed a helix, and a single pillar danced between linking curves of blood, black bisecting red.

+*Beautiful...*+ Ruveca breathed.

+*Impossible,*+ Jane said, sternness betraying her unease. +*The casual mixing of biological properties is...*+

“Woo-woo,” Kae whispered, unable to hide an impish grin. “Cold science may have its wonders, but thaumaturgy can be everything.” Her grin broke into a shy smile. “Which is why I should granted access to deeper knowledge! Think of it. Think of what I might be able to do if I only knew what you knew. What other creations we could see elevated? Synthesis of knowledge, old and new. Just like we’re seeing here.”

Essus looked a bit more than disturbed, and fascinatingly, the once-flat’s rubbery skin proved to be like magnetoreceptive camouflage.

The voider grafters shared a likewise disquiet, but their wariness was directed more toward Kae.

+*Lady, you have no idea how much what you just said scares me,*+ Jack muttered.

+*Indeed,*+ Jane concurred. +*Oh, no. Look what you’ve done. You made me agree with him.*+

{Another one of our “eggs” disappeared,} Draus said, sweeping through the room with her glass shards, blasting all corners with her perception to ensure there was no one using an Incog. *{Rest of the hostiles are down. Good number are still kickin’, but their rigs are dead and done.}* She paused. *{Felt its field yank on my implants. Not my Meldskin though. Nothing there. Guess that voidtech just built better.}*

{That,} Calvino began, *{and the fact that its omnidirectional thrusters work through the manipulation of gravity and magnetism. Interference is interference, and electromagnetic pulses are a vector of attack as old as the atomic bomb. To us, anyway. This shall be a novel thing for some of your foes to experience, hm??}*

Avo grinned, and his teeth glinted in the light. “Science and discovery. Wonderful things.”

{Indeed.}

With a twitch of his finger, Avo splattered the surviving Syndicate forces.

The assault portion of the run was done. Now came the time for interception and extraction.

A barge awaited them. As did its crew and the slaves it carried.

Thinking back to his first resurrection in the Maw, Avo looked down at his claws—digits now lined with silicon circuits—and then at those around him. This was one of the moments where he felt life's rhyme. An echo of who he was calling to what he was becoming.

How far he came. How far he had yet to go.

Suddenly, a shape pushed against the edges of his Sanguinity. Beyond the reach of his new magnetoreception, only his Heaven caressed the arriving barge and the two hundred and twelve bodies manning its cramped confines. The vessel emerged from nowhere, tumbling out from the light itself and scraping its sides against the leftmost edge of the hanger's opening. He had to right its course using his haemokinesis to prevent it from crashing hard into one of the nine mag-rings meant to anchor it in place.

Whatever the condition of the crew, they were clearly unprepared for their arrival.

A beat later, a session-link request from "Moment," the barge's captain spilled across Avo's cog-feed—the memories sourced to one of his newest acquisitions: Two-Mag.

[No!] Two-Mag screamed, breaking from his traumatized silence as he realized his part in Moment's coming end. He was there to witness the massacre of his comrades. Every time he fractured, Avo reassembled him. He felt like he was on the verge of breaking. It didn't matter. He would break only if the Conflagration allowed it. He felt only because Avo willed it. **[You can't! You fucking can't. Moment! Don't! Cut the call! Don't sync!]**

His cries were in vain, for this template was but a simulation of a man that no longer was. Moment wouldn't hear him. At least not now. Perhaps in the seconds thereafter, Moment would come to appreciate just how much Two-Mag tried.

Avo activated his Auto-Seance, and his burning ghosts burrowed across the Nether, striking their unprepared counterparts like an ember falling upon oil.

+Mag? Mag? We're coming in rough, what's—+

The captain's Meta exploded outward in a ball of phantasmal flame. A new ego was added to the gestalt, their confusion stark; made worse by Two-Mag's howling words, thick with despair.

Pouring the bulk of his consciousness across the link, Avo's cognition rebooted as he felt his mind stretch to occupy a lesser sheathe. As his cog-feed loaded, he devoured Moment's phantasms and took the Sheathe BioMonitor-III for his own use.

His temporary body was a picture of imbalance. Soft flesh laden with heavy chrome. Armored bones are failed by human lungs; powerful kidneys torturing a half-melted bladder. Moment was a desperate fool, gambling constantly, winning and losing augs between every bid. There were more scars on his body than there were scratches on his ship. But he couldn't walk away despite how much he suffered. No physically. Not spiritually.

So, he continued gambling. Betting on fights in the circuit or the New Vultun Grand Prix. So, he continued dealing with human cattle, more than once reduced to holding a pistol underneath his chin in his personal bathroom, facing himself in the mirror as he battled madness and courage.

Too late now. Too late for him to decide. His life was gone, and a new master rode his flesh like a steed.

[Oh, *shit*,] Moment choked as his current reality struck him like a kinetic harpoon. **[My crew... Don't.]**

"Boss?" a phlegm-thick voice sounded behind him.

Avo didn't even need to turn to know who it was. The ship's specialized blind-nav, *Sockets*, was an oddity. Someone who lived without sight by choice. Instead, he realized on sound and cognition to travel, and by chance alone did he encounter the crew of the *Vanisher*—the name of Moment's Maw barge.

At the ship's core burned something. A signature as faint as the one Avo encountered when he first awoke. This one, however, brought warmth to his Domain of Luminosity, as if it was near to its ontology, though not exactly the same thing.

"Boss? You alright? You jumped there pretty good. Your ghosts are—"

Sockets made the mistake of linking his ghosts to Avo, and he burned all the same. Another lifetime of memories cast into the flames for kindling. Another template delivered to the growing congress within the Conflagration.

He remembered charting jumps through the light. Using ghosts to judge where the ship could surface, how long they had to stay in the brightness to avoid the No-Dragon Nimbuses.

In essence, that which powered the barge was no different from the thaumic investiture imbued in a golem. Two massive Rendsinks kept the ship flying while a third drew up the entropy rising from the Maw. The cost of the operation was immense, and their rotations were constant.

Trafficking was one of the few lucrative options left to freelancers operating in the gutters. It was also a miserable life—one hounded by Guild or Exorcist patrols and rival barges that sometimes made their trade raiding their fellows instead of carrying goods.

It was just the Vanisher's misfortune that it found itself in the hands of a new predator. One it could never have prepared for.

Reaching out to snuff the ship's crew, a voice from within made him hesitate.

[Allow me,] Elegant-Moon said. Avo turned his awareness to the Sang, and found her buzzing with new joy. **[You move too quickly, monster. You must learn to appreciate things. Indulge in sensory pleasures. Killing the crew and feeding your Soul is the outcome. The process can be so much more. Have you felt the cattle? The FATELESS cages in the bowels of this metal beast.]**

Shifting the focus of his haemokinesis away from the crew and to the paltry bodies that existed in the periphery of his notice, Avo examined the bodies of the slaves, and Elegant-Moon's Weaveress instilled within him the finer details.

The way they writhed spoke volumes of their pain, but feeling it through his own body buried the torment deep. Burning spikes pressed against each of their groins—machines spading and castrating while spine-piercing needles forced them to heel. The Vanisher was a professionally run ship. Far superior to the embarrassment that was Aseleri's outfit. The "cattle" here were uniformly gelded and secured to the floor of hovering cages designed for easy transference.

Tubes ran through each of their orifices, nutrition flowing and waste leaving. The sickened got injections of rainwater, and those that had cancers died quicker. Acceptable collateral. Not even advanced coldtech or limited thaumaturgy could save everyone. The ceiling of their cells were lined with tags laced with mem-cons. Things blunting their sexual desire, crippling their will to resist.

Most were beyond speech now. Just moaning sakes of semi-sophont meat. Anesthesia was cut from the budget as a cost-saving measure. Pain grew hard to distinguish when it was all there was. Pain. Suffering. Madness.

Such was life as delivered cattle.

[It is an ill thing to let such maltreatment go unshared, I think.] Elegant-Moon's intent was clear. She sought his permission to perform a single act. Something preceding his kill. An atrocity wrapped in a lesson of mutual sympathy.

The concept was so novel Avo couldn't help himself. He allowed it.

And the Weaveress laid its hand on all the lived within the barge.

Canon:

(Sense)

->THIS ACHE BE OURS (II): Allows a user to connect the senses of one organism to another; each connected organism exponentially increases the sensitivity of their senses and other stimuli.

Hubris: If an entity lacking a shared sense is linked, thaumic backlash will be triggered

The Domain of Sense was invoked, and each of the FATELSS was linked, the pain of the refugees compounding and building. When all the victims were collected, the first of the crew was added. The weight of several hundred suffering souls crashed down on engineer Yurens Nulty. The shriek that tore out from her was sudden and sharp, body crashing to the ground without a hint as to why.

Her fellows tried to help, but when they touched her, they found her torture to be contagious. More began to fall. The shared pain was a storm, and Avo felt it through Elegant-Moon, who gave but a serene smile though it assailed them as well. Burning away the torture, it was a shadow before the wounds inflicted by the Wombrash.

This, at least, could be ignored. Burned away. Just a thing of sense and secondhand nerve.

The Heaven of Love was not so easily denied.

Through the barge did the bodies writhe, and when a slave groaned in the corner of the hold, a technician echoed their pain forth, face down on the metal flooring, breathing the same moans.

{Avo...} Calvino chided, disappointed at the atrocity inflicted.

The ghoul breathed. "Sorry. Couldn't resist it. Was poetic."

{Yes, in a degenerate-psychopath way, I suppose. But come now...}

Avo grunted in annoyance, knowing the EGI was probably right. Poor behaviors formed poor habits. Still, it was interesting to discover he could be persuaded toward regression if the fancy struck him.

"Alright," Avo said. He clenched a hand. The Woundshaper squeezed. Bodies burst. The crew died. The chain of agony shattered, and in its wake followed new templates welcomed by a sobbing Moment.

[Ah. Farewell, new memory,] Elegant-Moon said, genuinely sad. [May we be rejoined.]

Shifting back over into his original sheathe, he took a moment to reacclimate as his senses returned and turned to Essus. "Many are in a bad state. Mutilated. Broken down. You will see. If

you come.”

The man’s eyes widened and grew unfocused. But his brows furrowed and he hardened what remained of his resolve. “I must face this. I must face this wrong. I remain for a reason. I am here to help...”

Regarding Essus a moment longer, Avo sent another message over to Draus. *{Barge secure.}*

{I saw,} she replied. *{Had glass in the air. What the hells were you doing.}*

{Knotted their senses together. Starting with the slaves.}

{Old habits don’t die, huh, rotlick?}

{Elegant-Moon is a bad influence.}

The Regular snorted. *{So what now?}*

{Now I help Essus. He needs to extract the slaves. Good for him. New purpose. I’m going to cycle through new memories. Understand how they’re jumping the borders. Then examine the barge.}

{Synced. I’ll pull it through a passage. Tavers is planting a tac-nuke surprise for reinforcements.}

That made Avo laugh. The old squire was growing to be an endearing figure. *{Good. We move out of the district after this. Hit someone else. Don’t want to leave too much of a trail. Have to be careful.}*

{Yeah. When you cutting the Sang free?}

{Soon. Probably two days. We’ll have harvested Heavens from golems by then. Want to get some more deaths though. You and I can work in tandem in our spare moments. Focus on killing for a few days. Bring us up to Sphere Five.}

{Shit. Thought you’d never ask. Still. We’re gonna have to figure out what to do with these FATELESS. Ain’t got a place to keep ‘em. Too much noise.}

Avo paused and considered his choices. The answer, came as he thought of Dice. The girl was huddled in the corner of the Manta, wary of the ship and all its inhabitants. Her speech continued to be restrained, but there was a growing interest building behind her eyes.

He would see her freed. Returned to the wilds that spawned her. But for every Fallwalker, there was an enclave and people to man its walls.

Many of them would die in New Vultun. Many of them would die outside its walls.

If such was the case, then perhaps all that needed to be offered as a choice of location.

{See about that when the time comes. Hide them in the gutters for now.}