

Okay. So. You've survived your first five runs. Good for you. Good, good, good. Maybe you are made of more than luck. Maybe there is a lick of skill or potential inside you. Maybe you gonna be more than just fighting meat bound for the Maw.

Seeing that you made it this far, let old lady Tavers give you some advice.

Up to this point, you're probably still alive because you're not like the other idiots. You notice things. You anticipate. Plan ahead. Prepare. Learn the terrain—who you might be facing. You invested in the right kinds of consangs, equipment, training, and intelligence instead of vanity augs or drugs.

And now new thoughts are crawling up your head. You think you're ready for the big time. You think you wanna start hunting big game; hitting Syndicates or stealing from the Guilds.

Keep yourselves steady now. It ain't that easy; this game's about more than just killing.

First, your last few runs were probably pretty straightforward affairs. Go here, hit that, snuff him. Basic shit with objective parameters that even your average ganger can understand. Going up though, things get complicated, and you need to invest in "compilation preventatives."

Besides being able to fight, what will keep you standing at the end of the day is understanding. Knowledge. Politics is nasty bullshit but it's nasty bullshit you're going to learn to navigate if you don't want to end up getting betrayed. For every idiot squire, there is a dumber middler trying to screw everyone around them over. Do your own research. Figure out the angles you can. Keep yourself insured both operationally and intellectually. You don't get to be "the muscle" or "the smart one." Specialization is for bioforms and insects, and we're not either. Know your gigs.

Know who to trust. And always have a plan to break and run.

The second is for the run itself. Fighting is performance-in-action. That's how things get done—and circumstantially, how you get out of a fuck-up. Most of the time, I don't like fighting. I don't like being in an active gunfight. That's bad business. I'm not an assault team. I'm not a Godclad. I'll be snuffed or nulled in seconds if I go in hard and recklessly. Be flexible, be fast, and be constantly creating variables for the opposition to deal with rather than being a variable to be dealt with.

More than planning, you have to understand the concept of control. You can buy all the weapon in the world, have all the intel you need, have the backing of an entire Guild, and still fuck up your gig because something unexpected slipped your grasp. That's life. Shit happens, but you need to catch the shit with your hand before it hits the fan and paints you in yesterday's undigested goulash.

Control. I say again. Control. More than just preparation preparation. When you can exert control, that's when you can call yourself a real squire. That's when you can be considered a vet.

If you can actively change the situations on the ground or influence mass amounts of people on a strategic level. All it takes is a few select hostages related to a certain Syndicate lieutenant for you to walk out of one of their strongholds instead of needing to risk it all in a messy shootout.

Take the time to learn the key factors behind the success of your run and influence them however you can.

This isn't a lesson that anyone can just teach you. Dive the vicarities. Live other people's mistakes. Make your own. And if you're still alive by the end of this, I might just be able to congratulate you in person.

-Quail Tavers, *The School of the Warrens*

19-15

Change the Doors (II)

Avo had to admit his uncertainty. What he requested of Essus treaded the edges of the man's trauma. Deploying him as an on-site coordinator in refugee encampments or gutter settlements to protect others like him from Syndicate predation seemed the most optimal use of his talents. Still, much of the ask hinged on how well his mind state was, and if he was even willing to leave the city at all.

Essus had suffered much to see himself and his son brought into the city. And instead of reaping any final rewards upon his arrival, he found only misery and death. The severance of his love and legacy. The desecration of his mind and body. Everything traded for more loss.

Returning him to the place where he made his greatest mistake seemed an insult, but it was where he offered the most use.

"Your choice," Avo said. He directed his attention at Dice who was in the specially-fabricated meeting room as well. "Both of yours. Won't force either of you into anything. Will listen if you have other ideas. See if they're good."

Avo had a private space generated to offer both former refugees privacy. His socially astute templates advised hosting this meeting away from the attention of the others. Somewhere the two wouldn't feel pressured into decisions they would otherwise not make to fit in with the group. Despite how warped humanity's clades were compared to their baseline selves, that tribal lingered still in most; a want to belong, a need to fit in.

{A trait naturally shaped by eons of persistent survival,} Calvin had said. {Considering how you can affect minds, however, you can probably burn that mechanism away. The question is what replaces it thereafter, and what changes befall the altered. Keep that in mind before you change anyone: the stars were once littered with the bones of countless peoples who modified

themselves into extinction. Systems are deviously subtle. I suggest that you build if you can, break if you must, but bear the structure of what you're changing in mind always.}

The words resonated in more ways than one as Avo considered the two former FATELESS seated on smart-matter chairs before him. Between the two, Essus looked more uncomfortable by far, his pudgy cheeks expelling thermogenic sweat, the oily substance adding a slickness to his curled hair. In contrast, Dice was stone-still, unblinking eyes locked on Avo as the face of her sleeping nu-cat peeked out from one of her coat pockets. The two of them were both survivors in their own right and through Avo's Conflagration and canons, they could be forged into people stronger still.

But this, like the tasks he offered, was something they needed to choose.

"I accept," Essus said, a long-held breath finally leaving him. "I will do this. I want to do this. It is where I will serve the most good." His gaze dropped for an instant before he righted himself and met Avo's eyes. "I... wish to confess something. I was afraid."

Avo tilted his head. "Understandable. Not unnatural. I can take it away. Change that part of you. Is that what you want?"

The man shook his head. "No. It's just... I was afraid you were going to ask me to leave. That you would request a parting and take back this... this gift you have given me." Essus brought a shaking hand to his chest. "I cannot... I have only given you words of thanks for what you have done. For what you have tried to do. If not for you, I would have never witnessed this city. And understood the depths of my failure."

"Wasn't your fault—"

"Please. Let me continue." The ghoul grunted in acquiescence and gestured for Essus to continue using an Echohead. "I have been... speaking to members of Voidwatch. Menders of mind and spirit. They have been very helpful in attuning my mind away from the emptiness I desired. But something inside me still aches. And it is more than grief. More than the death of my boy."

Essus took a moment to steady himself. For the first time since the meeting started, Dice blinked and looked away from Avo. Awkwardly, reached out with her elongated arm and gently patted Essus on the arm as one would a nu-dog. The man seemed to take heart from the action.

"I have told my son stories of the great cities many times. Things I heard from other travelers. Fantastic tales to keep his hope. And mine. I knew that things would not be so... *idyllic*, but whatever was ahead had to be better than the madness of the torn lands. There was a future there. A place for us to live instead of just surviving."

“And then you got in,” Avo said.

The former father sighed. “Yes. And then we got in. I confess: the smugglers were... kind, and I knew there was something wrong when I first spoke to them. But I drank in their words of hope and safety because we were so close. Right there. And the camps... They are strained as is. So many people. More every day. Not even Voidwatch’s machines can protect us all. So I took the risk. I signed our lives to a stranger. And he did not lie. He brought us in. But not as people. As cattle.

“What followed... I broke more than once after my boy’s death. I broke when you stopped me from killing myself. I broke more when they said you were dead, and I was alone. I broke when that... that *demon* Mirrorhead peeled me apart, forced his metal inside me.” And Essus looked down at his cybernetic limbs—something he kept in his ontology from his tenure as a Syndicate attack dog. “But the power he gave took away some of the pain. I wasn’t the only one to suffer. I could make someone else know. Even if killing them hard. I thought they understood.” He shook his head. “When we escaped, when we rose up the layers of the city and glimpsed the sky, I broke once more. I saw it. I saw the Tiers. I saw the utopia I dreamed of in my lies—the place I promised Aurrie we would call home. And I hated *it*. I hated how it loomed above me. I hated the lights and the colors and smells that filled the sky, close enough for me to sense, but never to taste.”

A thousand humorless chuckles sang as a bitter symphony in Avo’s mind.

[This was not the dream,] Corner muttered.

[This was not the dream,] Osjon agreed.

[The dream is not yet dead,] Kare whispered, her mind desperately trying to believe.

“Such is how we are,” Avo said. “A dream is a mirage in the desert. A thing that draws us to move. To live. To become.”

“Or fall,” Essus replied. “I do not think I will dream anymore. But I have a new wish. This thing you have planned—spread our influence through the FATELESS. Saving them from the FATELESS. I will do it. But I want to do more. I want to work inside and outside the city. To build true sanctuaries. So no more jackals can prey on fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. So that we need not choose between one damnation or another.”

Calvino’s sigh drifted through Avo’s mind.

+*Sight make you sad*,+ Avo asked.

{*No. But it should make you proud. You are looking at one of the main reasons why Aegis accepted you.*}

Avo regarded Essus, taking in a man exhausted in expression and spirit. *+Couldn't save his son. Couldn't save most of him. Only a shell left.+*

{People have rebuilt from ruins always. It is chief among human traits. But such a path is only possible for him because of you. Because a cannibalistic monster that was never meant to be anything more than a failed weapon decided otherwise. And tried. The little miracle is that you tried. I suppose in a way, that means everything.}

"I'm sorry," Essus said, hunching over as he audibly breathed again. A rare note of laughter escaped from him thereafter. "I told myself I wasn't going to vent to you, that I was going to be composed." He shrugged as if he was helpless.

A beat followed. The templates chattered, suggestions forming and disintegrating inside the dancing fire that was Avo's true self. "Essus. Apologize less."

The man blinked. "Sorry."

"That. Don't do it as much. Spare yourself the shame. Don't care to judge you. Would rather you didn't judge yourself."

Something about the last sentence struck deep and Essus bit his lip, bowing his head and nodding as he processed his feelings in silence.

"What about you?" Avo asked, turning a question on Dice. "Are you willing to go back to the Sunderwilds? Reclaim your enclave. Raid others. Hunt Fallwalkers."

The waif just stared blankly at him for a moment, her thoughtstuff spinning slowly. If Avo didn't have her template burned into his consciousness, he probably wouldn't have been able to guess her thoughts at all. Even inside him, template-Dice was a quiet fire, watching and learning more than speaking and offering. She was a child raised as an attack dog learning to be a person years later than she should have started. In some ways, that made her damaged. In other ways, it made her unbreakable—especially in a world such as theirs.

Perfectly broken. Little wonder she shadowed Draus so much. Like called to like.

When her question finally came, she sounded almost too scared to ask it. "Can I come back? I don't want to say out in the dark. I like the city more. I like it a lot here. I want to say. Can I please stay?"

[Godsdammit,] Two-Mag choked, cringing as he begged Avo to look away from the girl.

[What? All that slave driving coming back to haunt you?] Abrel taunted.

[Fuck! You!] Two-Mag screamed. [Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you fuck you fuck! I didn't want to live that life! I didn't want to ask to be born in the Warrens. Don't pretend this shit is all on me! I'm just shoveling the shit you pass down—your people fucked the world! Your people are why she exists! I just have to deal with it! I am not good enough to climb the Tiers! Alright! I was born less than you—I would have been less than you probably even if I wasn't! I don't have it! I don't! I was just... I was just...]

The former slaver began to sob, and the softer of his cohorts likewise shuddered with trauma.

Empathy was like poison when injected into a cruel vessel. Matter. Antimatter. Destruction.

“Can do you whatever you want,” Avo said. “Was wrong to use you as bait. Should have brought you in earlier.”

“Because I was a good girl,” Dice asked. “Because I killed the targets?”

Yes. Yes, it was because she was useful. Because if she wasn't, the Paladins would have likely interned her, and Avo would've never thought of her thereafter. “Yes. But things shouldn't be this way.” He reduced the empathy radiating from his templates to recompose himself. “And together we can change that.”

Dice only nodded.

“Do you want to do anything else?” Avo asked.

The girl frowned. “I'm... not sure. I don't know. Not one asked me that. Before. Ever. Can I think about it?”

“Have time. Think.” Avo noticed Essus looking at the waif from the corner of his eye, a haunted pulling at the man's features as if he finally noticed Dice's youth and her casual acceptance of the horrors that broke him. “Primary matters over. I am pleased with the conversation. Now. Onto potential improvements.”

“Improvements?” Essus mumbled, not understanding.

Avo gestured at his arms. “Augmentations. Modifications. I can make you more. In mind. Body. Soul. Only questions are what you want; what you might need.”

Essus opened and closed his chrome fingers unconsciously, shivering as the servos whirred. “I... I don't want more metal.”

“Fine. Can't do metal directly anyway. Will require a cybernetics station. Tavers still getting that set up. But biology is another opportunity. Don't even need to look different. I can just give you standard improvements. No deformations required.”

Essus swallowed and nodded in thanks.

Dice shot the man a brief look like he was strange before looking at Avo again. “Can you turn me into a gun?”

Even with her template inside his Conflagration, the question the girl asked caught Avo off-guard. Calvino sighed. Draus’ template guffawed violently inside his mind. **[Ah, shit. She’s probably got that from me. Juv’s trying to make me blush.]**

Uncertain how to reply, Avo simply grunted. “Can attach a gun to you. Can make your entire sheath like a gun. Very extreme morphologies available. Can look over some choices later.”

Excitement lit up behind Dice’s eyes as she nodded vigorously, her effervescence bubbling up in her template as well.

Again, Essus eyed the girl, jaw slightly agape at the things that pleased her. But more than that, however, her boldness spurred a bit of boldness out of him as well. “That... seems a bit extreme but... I... I suppose I should be a bit more *adventurous* too.” He tried a small smile, fake as it was. “It would not do for a child to be brave alone.”