

“I know what the notes said,” I tell Kimera when she glares.

Amnesiac Kimera contemplates me with a mixture of disgust and disbelief. I don't blame her. This is our first meeting from her perspective, after all.

“Did my deluded alternate self inform you of what the notes say?”

“You betrayed yourself last time in a moment of weakness. I actually don't know exactly what you tell yourself in your coded notes exactly, but yeah, we were together. But that doesn't mean we have to be now. This will be my third year learning under you. How you proceed is and will always be up to you.”

“What if I proceed to throw you out on your ass?”

“You're free to do so but that wouldn't strike me as the optimal move. Aren't you curious?”

She considers me in silence for quite some time, dark eyes narrow and arms crossed over her modest chest.

“Very well. At least until we see if the Visage of the Meek does what you claim. My... disciple.”

To my immense surprise, Kimera starts by going over everything I know over a period of two days of intense examination during which I feed off tea and anxiety. And the occasional nutrient bar. Only after thoroughly testing me does Kimera show any sign of relief.

“Everything is as you said, and as I told myself in the note. Your understanding of gut microbiota is solid despite the guild's regrettable neglect of what I deem to be a vital aspect of health.”

She crosses her arms. I lean back against my chair in our living room, considering if I should go out for a run.

“I'm more surprised that you would give up your experiments for all of two days,” I note.

“You just saved me literal years of testing, and a fortune in funding. The least I can do is spend two days to assess your progress.”

“But that was our deal. Teaching for research.”

Kimera grows distinctly uncomfortable. She's already letting her mask slip, all of her emotions written plain on her sculpted face.

“Yes, well, this was perhaps not my best decision. A disciple's only duty is to learn, or that is what I currently believe. And the guild's guidelines state as much. I had no right to make a demand out of you while I should have taken you under my wing. You would have

obligations towards the guild afterward, but as far as learning, disciples should be taught unimpeded. I must have erred in judgment to treat you so unkindly.”

I shouldn't tell her about the 'allowed to kill me' pact.

“Regardless,” she continues, “your theoretical knowledge is... adequate for your level of learning. We will move to body modifications after I've evaluated your trauma healing abilities.”

“Gene mods?” I ask with some excitement.

“Not quite yet. The first step to modifications is the control over human forms. In olden times, some of us specialized in infiltration because of it. Before the guild came and standardized complete training.”

She frowns. Her unguarded soul radiates a slow burning anger, which makes me curious.

“You already mentioned it, that before the guild fleshcrafters often turned to Transformation for knowledge?” I say.

“I must have told you before that among all affinities, flesh is one of the most demanding in terms of time, knowledge, and effort in order to reach its full potential. Even nowadays, we still trail behind the Sallurians or major sects like the Sevens Suns in terms of military might, but now, at least, we are strong and rich enough to defend our own people no matter what. No one touches a fleshcrafter and prospers.”

I'm not sure if Kimera's belief is shared by all of the grandmasters, though it is the case I guess Antea was right, and I might get the guild's support for my bid should they really stand for one of their own.

That would be quite nice. For a change.

“But I digress. Self-modification with our own species' genetic material is the easiest first step on the way to true modding. The first material you will master will be your own.”

“So all fleshcrafters can return to their original forms at any time?”

Kimera makes to reply 'yes', but then she stops and considers her words.

“To be specific, the sum of the observable physical traits you're exhibiting now is called the phenotype. The phenotype results from the expression of your genes, called, the genotype, and your environment. Your scars, bone structure, muscle structure, size, general health and so on are the result of practice, food, and just... life in general. I can rebuild a version of myself from the genes I have but I would have to make a conscious effort to redraw my scars, adjust my weight and so on. Your training in trauma healing was the first step towards this. Once you know how to mend a bone, it doesn't take that much effort to learn how to extend it. Disciple, do not try to extend your bones by yourself or you experience brand new pains you've never felt before.”

Oh, hey, free qualia.

“Does it mean that I could just, for example, seal someone’s mouth and nose shut? And let them suffocate.”

Kimera rubs her chin for a couple of seconds.

“It’s not that simple, but it’s possible. Remind me to get you into shadow training later.”

The reversal goes very smoothly. By now I can visualize every aspect of my body, and I have it ‘saved’ in my mind. I know it’s an aspect of flesh affinity, yet I still find it bizarre. The ‘memory den’ isn’t quite like the sort of mind palace I imagined from watching movies back on Earth. It feels much more visceral — halfway between true memory and just a collection of sensations. Kimera informs me that it will grow larger and more defined as I become more proficient and expand my collection.

“Right now you are like a child blindly searching for his toy in a tiny box. When you reach my level, you will twist and rearrange strands in your mind like a conductor leading an orchestra, switching the instrumentalists around with a mere thought. Right, enough of this, let us head to a more... suitable spot.”

“Is it the white rooms again?”

“It is. You will be seeing a lot of them before we’re done.”

As Kimera promised (or threatened), we begin with some healing. I’m an old hand at getting my humerus broken by now, and Kimera helps me shunt my nociceptors first anyway. It still takes a few hours before she’s convinced I am proficient enough in healing my own wounds in under two minutes each. I’m still left a shivering wreck.

“We can now -” she begins.

Kimera frowns, taking in my sweaty state. I might have a few tears on my cheek as well.

“I believe we should take a break before the next step. Here, eat this.”

“Oh, sweets!”

“And drink this.”

“Oh, tea!”

“And you can listen while I speak. Ahem.”

“Wait, how did you know those pastries were my favorite?” I ask, realizing Kimera didn’t pick at random.

“I... heard you were on friendly terms with the group around that soul-awakened sunshine, Lumie. So I asked her... about your preferences.”

Kimera averts her eyes. She also blushes.

“Thanks a lot. I appreciate it.”

“You have been very helpful, disciple, and a very pleasant surprise. Think nothing of it. Where were you all these years? Hmm. Now quiet! The first and easiest technique directly derived from trauma healing technique is lengthening.”

She waves her hand around. As I watch, the limb expands from elbow to fingertips until she could basically touch the ceiling while sitting.

“After that we will get on with shortening.”

It shrinks back to normal size. I kind of wanted to see her with a baby arm; it would have been funny.

“Thickening, strengthening, even splitting..”

One arm becomes two, then five and now she has a bouquet of properly formed hands. It makes her look like someone wanted to draw a demon or a biblical angel and just couldn’t decide.

“Human genome alterations.”

The pale skin becomes blue, then dark and mottled, reminding me that Enderlith has much more diversity than Earth. Kimera proceeds to multiply and change more of her body as I watch.

“This is some body horror stuff,” I reluctantly say after she grows three extra pairs of breasts.

I must have said something wrong because her soul snaps back into focus the same instant as her dark gaze zeroes on me, and her face twists with annoyance. Her body returns to normal in under a heartbeat.

“Oh, I have heard that one before, disciple. Body horror this, unnatural that. So let me make one thing absolutely clear.”

She leans over the table, standing, until we are nose to nose. Oh, rant mode!

“Your mind sees my skin and my eyes and labels me as some sort of ‘whole’ entity that is Kimera with an ‘appearance’ and a ‘personality’ and while this is true, it is the truth that only exists in our minds. I am a complex structure of water, protein, lipids, hydroxyapatite and

carbohydrates. At the lowest level you will mostly find oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus. At any time, any of the people you come across, no matter how beautiful and majestic they appear to be, are the same: fat coursed with electricity, sloshing meat tubes filled with food and shit and fibrous tissue contracting because they were properly zapped, and that pretty eye is a crude lens system placed on viscous goo. You think what I did was body horror? Steve.”

The entire skin of her face peels off from chin to forehead, revealing pulsing pink muscle. Her eyes are two enormous, lidless orbs staring right into my soul. Her entire face turned into a living anatomical display.

“All body. Is horror.”

I place my hands on her shoulders. I can't help it.

“Founder, you're so hot when you're passionate.”

Her composure cracks, passion replaced by guilt, fear, and desire. A certain curiosity. The skin reseals in a breath, blood reabsorbed until I could have just been dreaming it. Her eyes grow half-lidded with the thought of something that makes me smile and make her a little angry.

“You're taking liberties, disciple.”

“Nonsense. You love a man who knows what he wants.”

We pause barely a headspace away from each other, an instant suspended between two choices. She's the one to kiss me this time. I return it and then let her feel the longing and love I feel for her, how I was hoping for this, yet aware I could be denied for it was her decision to make. The kiss turns passionate and now I feel her drink the refreshing water of those emotions like a traveler parched for far too long. The ground cracks when her feet grow claws, then with one hand, she rips the table between us apart. A long mantis blade emerged from her shoulder blade to slam the door shut. She falls on top of me. Her hands brush against my chest, trailing waves of pleasure which I eagerly loop back with my soul.

“Oh that is... quite nice,” she says, breathing hard.

“Wait until you do that thing with your tongue,” I whisper back.

She jerks up and for a moment I fear I've said something bad, but she's just surprised. Well, shocked, even.

“I learnt the Udulu tongue twister for you? Oh, disciple.”

She frowns, offended.

“I must have loved you very much.”

“You did! Let me show you why.”

This is my third year. I'm now a well-trained research assistant, as proactive as I am rigorous. We're on the verge of a breakthrough! Kimera identified some huge unicellular organism from a nebula she manages to repurpose as a sort of macrophage: a white blood cell dedicated to hunting down and eating foreign invaders. Her trick is pretty cool: since worm eggs cannot be easily tracked down, instead the modified predator releases proteins that stick to the reforming walls of the egg, acting as a sort of marker. So the cell that kills a worm larva can find all the eggs it released. Kimera is justifiably pleased, but not satisfied.

“Prolonged therapy will see a subject completely cured over the course of perhaps a year, even in the most advanced cases. Unfortunately this is still slow and expensive since only the macrophages that killed a specific larva can hunt down its eggs. I need something more virulent.”

“Work goes on,” I reply.

When I'm not helping her, she's teaching me how to change my body to the limits of human abilities and sometimes a bit beyond. Kimera refuses any help from Antea in her quest to turn me into her perfect disciple, or that of most tutors for that matter. She has me operate on her because 'she can give real time feedback' and doesn't complain even when I extend her bones into the articulation. I spend much less time with Lumie and the group during this loop and I don't regret it a single second. I've never learned so much, so fast. I've never felt like I was making this much progress before. After a month I can slowly increase my height to over two meters, and reduce it to under one fifty. I can stitch a mortal wound shut on myself or someone else under one minute all while holding the blood in and numbing the pain. I can grow an extra, functional finger which feels extremely weird and ticklish as my brain adjusts to its presence. Private tutors slowly teach me how to cure auto-immune diseases and cancers but that's a secondary concern. After months of mind-numbing training and practice from dawn to midnight, I'm finally ready for the novitiate exam.

It starts with three days of theoretical testing, something language acquisition helps with but mostly it's the result of two years and a half of merciless crunch. After Kimera has me tested to *her* satisfaction, I operate increasingly difficult wounds on herself. I feel rather pleased with the results until we reach the last part of the test. We have worked so hard for this. I push the excitement I feel through my soul but, though she mirrors it briefly, she then closes herself.

“Steve, I will be honest and tell you that I have submitted you to my own standards so far, not those of the guild. You have proven yourself every step of the way, but now I must ask you if you're willing to take that final step and prove to the world and yourself that you don't just have the potential to be a brilliant fleshcrafter, but a master-ranked one as well. This is something I will only do with your consent.”

“Show me what you've got,” I reply with perhaps a bit too much of a cocky smile.

Kimera's stress escapes from her grip for just one moment, but then she steels her resolve and grabs my hand.

"You are worthy to be my partner in research and in life. Oh, and the archon as well."

And then I lose consciousness.

I wake up to pain. Immense pain. I'm lying on...

"Is this glass?"

I jerk which makes things even worse. A forced rush of cortisol and adrenaline jolts me full awake and panicked. This is a white room used for training. The door at the end has been left ajar.

Pain returns and with it disorientation. It fucking stings, sharp needles contrasting with a dull burn over my legs. I twist with a cry and fall on my arse. Now it hurts too. Blood. I staunch the flow in panic. Kimera is there, standing in front of me. I want to call for help but she must know and I remember agreeing to a test and why does everything fucking hurts so much what the absolute -

"Fuck! Gah!"

"I need you to focus."

Kimera has closed herself to me. Her soul is guarded over bleeding distress but now I remember: she did this to me.

"This is it," she says.

Her face is grim. She takes a few steps forward and I realize her legs are bare under the knee, devoid of any crafted shoes. I can see every pore and hair which means those are her unmodded legs. Her soles stand on some crushed pebbles of glass, blood dripping in thin rivulets. I look up to see her face red, eyes moist, lips tense: she isn't shutting her nociceptors. She's feeling every bit of the pain.

"This is the final test," she continues with her voice barely wavering.

Fuck I'm spreading my entire weight on the ground while she has all her eighty kilograms of modded body driving shards into soles. I can't imagine it. And then I see my legs. She flayed my knees. There's no skin there.

No wonder it burns, heh. I feel slightly light-headed.

"Steve, I need you to focus."

“I’m here.”

“This is the true test of will. When I wanted to prove the strength of my will to my instructor, this is what I did, and this is what I ask you to do. I believe in you, Steve. You’re different from those who only see our craft as a means to an end and not as a sublime art to be pushed to its limit. The flesh *will* comply; it *will* bend to your will. Starting now. Move. Forward.”

I do so, hands and flayed legs scraping on the glass with the sharp edges digging into my bones with a white pain, blinding, sublime, almost enough to make me mad but I don’t. I pause if I must, I look to the side if I must, because she’s still there, standing on her raw soles and taking dainty steps to stay by my side, always. Keep the bleeding under control. Blood oxygen levels too high because I’m hyperventilating. I could heal myself but it would be admitting defeat. She’s right. I’m the Avatar of Time. I need to get a fucking grip and carry on. Come on.

Pain is a strange beast. I can see every detail in the pristine glass in front of me, I can feel the blinding agony every time my shin comes down but I can also see the panicked burst of information, adrenaline and cortisol flooding in the red of my inner self, and all of this is an ocean in which I’m swimming, still swimming, one movement at a time. I don’t dare look up to see how far the exit goes but I do look to my left where naked legs stand on the pain we share. She did it before. I can do this. I have to do this. I need. To be. Better.

And then we reach the end. The half-open door is just in front of me, invitingly. This is the last meter. I’m right there. But I do not cross it. Instead, I extend a hand to Kimera. She takes it. That’s what I needed.

I think standing up now is the hardest thing I have ever done, physically. That brief instant when I put all my weight on one foot almost makes me faint, but then I’m here, vacillating but standing.

Kimera nods, then her form changes until she’s a three-meter tall horror of fast blades and sharp edges. Her form has reversed articulations on its legs but beyond that and additional blades rising from her back, she’s surprisingly humanoid. The war form picks me up gently. Embedded glass shards pop out of me, pushed by healthy new flesh when she heals me. Her face is now a cruel mask, but the voice has stayed the same.

“I recognize you as a novice fleshcrafter and I will let Antea know as much. You’re not my equal yet, disciple. But you will be. You will be.”

We’re reaching the ninth month. Antea’s office never really seems to change, apart from the varied heights of documents and electronics occupying the desk’s vast surface. The grandmaster thrones behind it, delicate fingers flipping the pages of her manual’s latest iteration. Strangely, she radiates disapproval.

I don't get it. I've been working my ass off — literally in one unfortunate case — to get there. At this speed I'll have completed the novitiate by the end of next year! Shouldn't she be pleased with my progress?

"Disciple Prentiss. Or do you prefer Avatar of Time Prentiss?"

"Disciple. Calling me by my avatar title would be like using my full name. I would assume I'm in trouble."

She doesn't react. I might be a little nervous now.

"I believe this is our third meeting without your master's presence, or knowledge. Do you remember what I told you last time?" she asks.

"Err. You were asking my opinion of her?"

"And it appears that just like today, loyalty prevailed over... other considerations."

She pushes her hands together in a gesture that looks like a prayer, more specifically, a prayer for patience.

"I realize now that you are quite young, therefore you must have missed the subtext I added to my words. I remained subtle as a gesture of respect for your maturity and critical thinking abilities. It appears I was mistaken."

Holy shit, she's actually angry. Her soul smolders, not yet radiating rage but hinting at it.

"So I must be blunt because I cannot afford to let you continue on your course. Disciple Prentiss, are you aware of the flaw associated with our affinity?"

"... I believe it would be a certain drive for self-improvement."

"A maniacal drive for self-improvement. Now tell me, do you believe it is normal for a mentor to flay her student and have him crawl across a surface of crushed glass. Do you think this is normal?"

"Ah."

Her voice rises.

"Do you sincerely believe we would impose this sort of traumatizing ordeal upon trainees? That this is a reasonable demand for a display of willpower? Do you think we have our novitiate candidates operate on live, aware bodies as a form of training as *complete beginners*? Do you believe us incapable of building specialized soulless homunculi in the image of humans, so we can have them practice safely and without risk? Do you think having someone cram alone for hours on end for a daily midnight test is the best way to teach someone? Instead of properly structured classes that allow for social interactions and

occasional relaxation? Have I sent you tutors fit for sovereigns as an optional, pleasant distraction? Mr. Prentiss? Mr Prentiss. How can I be even more direct? Ah yes.”

Her next words are yelled in my face.

“Kimera is insane! She’s brilliant, but insane! How can you not see this? While most of us make at least an attempt not to slide down the slippery slope of obsession, she decided she doesn’t care, and now you’re sledding after her at terminal velocity! What are you thinking?”

“I... uh.”

“I cannot allow this to continue in future loops, Disciple Prentiss. You started the loop as part of a group of like-minded students and finished it in a fusal relationship, ignoring everything except sex and training. You practice self-harm as a matter of course. How much do you think it takes before a mind breaks completely free of basic socialization? Are you familiar with what ruling entails if you ever commit to being the archon? Talking to people, for one? No?”

“I... just needed to progress.”

“For what?! What is your purpose in getting stronger? Will it be served by what you’re currently turning into?”

I have to look up at that. Really? But by the time our eyes meet, Antea is already back to her placid self.

“I realize that you have been through a lot, Mr Prentiss. No one with this level of soul awakening at such a young age could have had a pleasant existence. I must still request that you take a step back. Reassess. You are going to lose yourself long before you approach the throne.”

“I... ok. I guess you’re right.”

She must be. Antea’s true agenda is probably more complex than she let on, but it’s in her best interest to see me succeed so... yeah. And she’s right, now that I think about it. I knew we were going a little overboard, but having someone in her position scream at me to slow down feels like a cold shower on my enthusiasm. If even the Dean of Research thinks it’s time to stop...

“Please bear in mind, disciple, that I am not asking you to choose another mentor. It genuinely fills me with joy to see our dear Kimera fall in love with someone who deserves and reciprocates her, ah, passionate nature. I merely request that you maintain a balance. Perhaps meet other people from time to time. As it is, you only exist for research and each other. I, again, kindly request that you bear that in mind.”

“Right. Yes, that is... probably better for her as well. I’ll try to make us take more breaks at the very least.”

“Please keep what I said in mind. My next iteration certainly won’t forget. Take the notebook. It contains a detailed plan on how to attack the Avatar of Malice, but I suggest holding on until you’re more proficient before implementing it.”

“That might be best.”

“Now go, you are dismissed. And do not forget.”

Kerentis made her move a day earlier this time, which might be a problem for future Steve. He’s got a lot of problems, future Steve. Poor lad.

I told Kimera I’d never been on a ship with atmosphere so we requested one and Antea granted me this wish, even with most ships mobilized to move troops around. This one is slow and not particularly large which is perhaps why it wasn’t used to begin with. It’s... a pleasure boat. A space yacht with large windows that give us an unmatched view of our side of the station in all its bloodied glory: the wound, festering with abominations, War’s final ships disintegrating near the tip, Kerentis’ gold-colored armada, Obis, her surface torn by the fires of war. Kimera turns down the artificial gravity and we float closer to one another. Our fingers interlock. There is a flash in the distance, near the port. A message blinks on a nearby screen.

Lilth has started her rampage.

Without a word, Kimera undresses me, her own gown reabsorbed in her flesh until we are floating together. Kimera’s despair mirrors mine and we drown ourselves in pleasure, flooding each other’s bodies with pleasure in a soul-fed feedback loop that allows us to crest at the same time. It takes me a good minute to remember which toes are mine.

“This... might be addictive,” Kimera says after a while, her voice rugged and cracking.

We say nothing else for a while, even as the memory of what Antea said haunts my mind. I think she’s right, and I need a break. Three years of studying have barely brought me to the novitiate. It will be a decade before I can call myself a master, I think. Kimera and I will burn ourselves out long before it happens.

I... I need to take a step back and think.

Another message beeps as we are still floating, one of Kimera’s blades sometimes pushing us away from the window. The message is from Antea, telling us she’s about to die and that our time is running out. I hug Kimera as tightly as I can.

Then, I reset the loop.

Death count: 1

Loss count: 3

Qualia points acquired: 197

Became a novice fleshcrafter: 120

Achieved basic body modifications. 22

Achieved professional level regeneration and induced regeneration. 24

Learned fleshcrafter lovemaking techniques. 5

Walked the Path of Glass. 26

Total qualia points: 3068

Morag gives me a glass of cold water.

“I, uh.”

Silence hangs between us three. The two gods never feel judgmental, only supportive. I think it makes it worse. The feverish energy that drove me to just keep going has been expunged from my mind, if only in this space. I feel like I can think clearly again, albeit slowly. There was such a lure to constant effort with constant rewards that I find myself already missing it. The world is still filled with so much to learn. I haven't even touched on true modding yet. But now that it's gone, I feel a strong urge to sit back and take a moment. It's like a hangover without the headache.

“I may have lost myself a bit here,” I tell the two gods.

And I did. And really the worst part is how I am already longing for it.

I can't allow that, not again. Antea was right. Kimera, at the end, was right. This was addictive. I lulled myself into a sense of progress and joy and forgot what it means to stay in control. And I thought I was an adult and in control of myself. What a fucking joke. I'm no better than my mother, even knowing the pitfalls of complacency and the steps to damnation. I'm just as blind and pathetic as she was.

“It will happen again,” Chronos tells me with certainty. Before I can say anything, he continues.

“Yes, it happened, losing yourself. I am sorry to tell you this, and yet you must already be expecting it in your heart. You will lose yourself again, my avatar, not just to the inebriating pleasure of power, but to other emotions as well. I plucked you from a peaceful land and threw you in the largest circus of the galaxy with enough toys to fill you with wonder and horror for the next millenium. So I tell you this: do not be afraid, and do not feel guilty. This is a harsh world, and I can provide but little guidance. Accept that you will fall, Steve, and I know you will rise again. As for your maddening union, what was it your people said? 'Tis better to have love and lost -”

“Don’t finish that sentence. You know very well what I think about the quote.”

I narrow my eyes at the flawless silver bastard.

“You’re trying to distract me again.”

“Not at all! Well, perhaps a little,” he shamelessly replies. “But maintaining a loving relationship through branches of probability is bound to lead to some interesting questions about love and identity.”

“Questions with answers I would have to find myself, I assume?”

“Steve, those are philosophical questions — dare I say, ontological questions? — about a situation that only you experience. As such, only the answers you choose for yourself would have any value. After all, this is your reality.”

He extends his arms in a careless shrug.

“Would any of those answers bring joy to the matrimony?” I ask.

Morag rolls her eyes. She groans, causing the space to shake a little, but it’s Chronos who replies with a knowing smile.

“If you don’t like something, change it. You’re the avatar of one of the two dragons.”

“Yes, yes. Just like everything, it will just take...”

“Some time,” Chronos cuts me off with a smile.

“I hate these jokes.”