

*Make no mistake: we're in the war-making business; the heart-stealing business. Fuck this and that about entertainment, role models, or whatever the shit for the children, this is about getting people into the cause, and then driving them against the Massist fucks.*

*Do you wanna know what people want to believe more than anything else? They want to believe that they matter. They alone. They wanna believe they are the ones who are going to be in control, that they will be heroes and Godclads and drive their arms all the way up reality's asshole and use it as a rag to—*

***[Sounds of vomiting]***

*Agh. Anyway, democracy and unity are cutesy and nice sounding and all that, but you wanna know what? We don't imagine cities as heroes. We don't imagine armies as heroes. Sure, they can be "heroic" but we think rooted in ourselves. As ourselves. Projecting ourselves. That's why we're the ones in the pilot's seat of all our fantasies. It's why we're pretending to be the Stormsparrow in the final match of the Supremacy Games. It's why we're Zein Thousandhand during the Miracle Minute. It's why we're Samir Naeko burning the fucking fathers and gutting their children in front of them, and it's why we're the ones fighting, fucking, and winning at the end.*

*We don't dream of our neighbors winning the lottery, right? It's us. It's always been us. Our lives. Our dreams. Our Ensouling. Our apotheosis.*

*It's time to face facts: both reality and thaumaturgy have a Santist bias. We stomach the people we live with in so much as they improve our lives and keep things easy for us. Society is a big fucking nipple that we keep healthy so we can suckle on for another day, and get big and strong enough to live on our own.*

*Because that was the dream, wasn't it?*

*Utopia.*

*Too godsdamned bad that none of our utopias can coexist with each other. But hey, at least we'll have the pictures in the end.*

*-Vaedin Kasmét, Head Producer of ThrillMax's Action-Epic Division after fifteen doses of nova and briefly dying of a heart attack*

19-5  
Show Biz (II)

It began when Chambers saw the coat, spotting the horrid piece hanging around a mannequin's shoulder on approach to the set proper.

Passing through the cluster of jack stations made for technicians and camera jockeys, the hall curved as glass exhibits lined the walls, memorabilia of previous works completed using said stage. Most of them contained noble Highflame warriors clad in plates of gleaming gold, soldiers from war propaganda pieces accompanied by Sang bioforms while wielding Omnitech-produced weaponry—an image of material solidarity that also offered a hint of the power hierarchy between the trio.

Titles such as *+Romance at the Siege of Brasson+* or *+The Last Stand at Wall Nine+* flickered over the glass, keeping with the themes of epic action. Such was the case showcased within every glass display except for the third one down.

Here, Chambers spun to a sudden halt, facing the plastic model staring him down through the thin layer of glass.

“What is it?” Avo asked. As he turned to check what the man was looking at, he too saw the mannequin and realized what captured Chambers’ attention so.

Imbued with the half-strand’s memories, flashes of horrific sex acts exploded through his mind. The other templates roared with disgust, some desperately trying to empty their minds while others hurled slurs and insults at the cause of their trauma. No longer did Avo need to ask Chambers what he was looking at. He knew just as well.

That didn’t stop the elaboration from coming. “I never thought I’d ever get to see the coat with my own two eyes,” Chambers whispered. The title hovering over this display was the aptly titled *+UNSODOMIZER.* “It’s Dannis, Avo. It’s the coat he wore in the single most action-packed vicariness of his career. You know they used fourteen nukes to film the final scene? And they had to spend two hundred million implants enhancing his sheath so the spikes wouldn’t pierce through his pelvic floor and stop him from performing?”

Regrettably, Avo did know these things. It was one of the greatest downsides to having Chambers as a template.

**[Aw, come on, consang,]** template-Chambers muttered inside Avo’s mind as he enviously watched his real self gawk at the coat. **[Just let me have this.]**

“Why’re we stoppin’” Draus asked, turning to glare at them from a few steps away. Walking back over, she affixed the coat draped across the back of the mannequin with a frown. “The fuck’s this shit? Are those... tubes running out the back? Into his...” The Regular blinked. “Well, they’re definitely goin’ up his ass. What kind of shit do you two have me lookin’ at?”

“It’s the ‘Shroud of Sodoz.’ A special bio-coat variant designed by the nefarious Madam Zhu in her conquest to impregnate all the men in the world. But it ended up getting freed by *Mas Stronger*, played by Dannis Steelhard, and formed a symbiotic bond with him to save both of their lives when they were caught in a nuke blast. When they regenerated, they found Madam

Zhu had taken over half of New Vultun with the help of Ori-Thaum, and discovered that the only man who could face the bio-coat menace unsodomized, is a man with his asshole already filled.”

A long silence passed. Both Draus actual self and her template glared hard at Chambers, as if willing her perception to burn a hole through his skull.

“What?” Chambers asked.

“We’re goin’ in. Don’t show up wearin’ that or I’ll real death you.” The Regular shook her head and waved for the others to move on. A twitch of disgust passed through Kae’s features as she ushered Dice away.

“What is ‘unsodomize’?” The girl asked.

“Something I hope continues to be the case for all of us,” Kae replied, not even missing a beat.

As the Essus walked by, the last of their cadre to leave, Avo stood next to Chambers as he continued taking in the coat. Honestly, the design wasn’t particularly special. It possessed skin-like wrinkles down the shoulders, beard hairs sprouting between the beads of enamel serving as zippers, and feathers lined its back. Comparatively, the sinuous organs connected to the figure’s eyes, ears, mouth, bellybutton, and posterior had an insectoid look to them.

“Chambers,” Avo said. “Let’s go.”

“Yeah, sure,” Chambers replied, blinking. “You know why I liked Dannis, Avo?”

The ghoul knew, but he let the man speak. It was less that he had something to say, and more that he just wanted someone to hear him. “Tell me.”

A few heartbeats passed. Chambers didn’t speak immediately. The reason behind this was known to Avo as well. Flashes of his childhood came back, of a father drunk with rage as he caught his son watching something he wasn’t supposed to on the family locus. Blows struck twenty years in the past echoed through both man and ghoul.

“He got hurt all the time in his films,” Chambers began. “It was practically his thing. He wasn’t the strongest, or smartest—well, he wasn’t really smart at all, but Dannis could *take it*. Whatever *it* was. And by the end, after the blood, sweat, snot, and other shit covering him, he’d still smile and move on to the next scene like nothing had happened. His body was more than killable, but his mind was indestructible. And I wanted it. Was so fucking jealous of him for it. Plus, he has like, sick abs and shit.”

Hearing the words made Avo chuckle. He regarded Chambers once more and thought back to Calvino’s advice after the Shotin encounter. Self-acceptance could be taught. People could be

guided away from their fixations. All it took were the proper levers. And since he could simulate the man's very thoughts...

The glass dissolved into red motes. Chambers blinked and twisted to face Avo, shocked. "You mean... You're letting me..."

"Not letting you," Avo said. "Helping you. Wanted the coat? Means something to you. Fine. Can have a replica cloned in on the Washington. Draus can replace the glass."

Chambers pressed his lips together as they quivered. His eyes misted as he looked away. "Sure. Thanks, consang. But, uh, the Reg gave her warning."

And he was right. Draus didn't like it. The template would judge him. But the Regular's judgment was the lesser reason that she thought so lowly of Chambers. The fact that he wouldn't push back, or would bend painted him as someone inconsequential. Easy to break. Barely a person.

"What about her warning?" Avo asked.

Chambers went still.

The ghoul continued. "Going to be killing each other anyway. She won't real death you. Just threat. And her judgment of you doesn't matter. Can't impress her. Not like you are right now. Can't be liked by everyone."

"But—"

"Stand in your own corner for once. Never mind the others. Do what Dannis might. In spirit. Not literally. No Rash today. Or I'll snuff you."

The half-strand laughed and nodded. "Okay. Okay. Yeah... Thanks, Avo." His face fell. "I know I'm kind of a fuck-up, but I just want to say—"

"Say nothing. Put the coat on. Be who you want. Find your apotheosis. Become who you want to be. That is the purpose of living. I think. That is where power always leads. Do not drown in your addictions or emotions. Soar beyond them. Seek the horizon."

And with the necessary words spoken, Avo left Chambers alone to follow after the rest of the cadre. Inside his Conflagration, the template of the man was uncharacteristically silent amidst the murmuring massings.

From the Neurodeck flowed Calvino's wry amusement. *{I must admit it pleases me to see you exercise the uniqueness of your thoughtform for outright positive benefit. Your psychotherapy potential might just be boundless even if you don't actively reshape the minds with your fire. Perfect knowledge of how someone might act means a perfect understanding of what to say*

*and do, after all.}*

But the EGI's words now inspired another train of thought in Avo. If he could mend a heart with his limited omniscience, it likely also meant he could break someone's spirit the same way. For what were words but a contagion of meaning across which he could inflame pre-existing traumas?

*{And there's that spot of darkness that follows the rainbow. Ah. What a delightful monster you're becoming.}*

"Avo! Wait!" Chambers called out.

Avo turned and found the man dragging one sleeve over his shoulder, chasing after him. "I just got an idea! A terrible, *terrible* fucking idea."

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The set was almost an exact imitation of Kososo before its fall. The district was portioned by five immense battlements extending from the enormous tetrahedral prison arcology that occupied twenty percent of the total space. The streets ran like wire meshes between the leftover ruins of bombed-out blocks, and the hot wind rustled as trash and debris sang a skittering ambiance.

Yet, it was obvious this was a vicarity set from the lack of aeros and people. Draus guessed that was something to be added in the post-production anyway. The main point of the landscape was to increase performer immersion and allow for reversible wanton devastation that couldn't be achieved in the natural world. She didn't know what kind of Heaven this demiplane was supported by, but she could feel a pressure resting against her Domains of Space and now Matter.

Transitioning herself, Kae, and Dice to the top of the acology immediately after entering the scene to claim the high ground, she peered through shards of glass at the trapdoor leading out from the production space.

A minute passed. The ghoul didn't show. Neither did that idiot Chambers.

"Should we go back," Kae asked, Meldskin already formed over her body to ward her form against the wind. "Maybe they found Essus."

"Maybe," Draus said. But she doubted it. Essus was currently jumping between open doorways across the city, trying to get more used to his own abilities. He declined to participate in the festivities, and Draus felt no loss in that.

The man didn't have it. Not even a little. Violence carved pieces of him away. Whittled him down. He would have been wasted as a soldier.

She was just about to move her shards closer when the light above the entrance flashed green. A full sixty kilometers away and nested between two partially collapsed blocks, Draus spied the opening hatch through a few of her local reflections, and discovered—much to her annoyance—that Chambers had indeed done what she explicitly requested him not to.

He was wearing that stupid coat. And even had the cords tucked into his pants.

“Godsdammit Chambers,” Draus muttered.

Someone else might’ve respected the man for taking a stand, for this naked act of defiance. Not Draus. Draus interpreted non-compliance in a more direct, more hostile way.

“Kae,” Draus said. “Get your rains ready. Form a dome around us and slowly move inward. Squeeze them deeper into the city. I’ll fling a few shards into you as well. Keep ‘em from trying to paradox their way through.”

“Okay,” Kae said, drawing an anxious breath. “Got it.”

It was best use for the Agnos. She was more than a bit better than Essus at handling combat, but that didn’t mean she was any good at it. What she was more than capable of, however, was operational management and shaping the environment. Duels and active slaughter would likely never be true to her nature unless Avo altered her, but she had plenty of potential use on the tactical and strategic levels.

It would just take practice to bring it out. Practice, and more than a few deaths.

On the other side of the coin, Draus and Dice had blunt force more than covered.

Chambers wasn’t going to be the problem—he was a distraction. The real threat on their end was—

The half-strand’s mind promptly burst aflame. Draus barked a snarling laugh as everything slipped into place. Oh, she saw the game the ghoul was playing. He wasn’t just going to use Chambers to probe. No. He was going to use him as a conduit before coming in himself. “Kae. Box us in. Dice, sic ‘em.”

The Agnos disappeared first in a burst of spray of moisture, spreading wide to encompass the space just beyond the hatch. Her Heaven manifested more akin to a mirage than a physical entity. Sheets of heavy rain cleaved down from the sky as the air screamed and spatial reality twisted. The entire landscape itself began to churn and spin, things moving faster along the edges while the center was left unaffected. Faint shifting structures resembling eyes melted into teeth lined the limits of Kae’s ontology.

The Maelstormer was designed to choke and befuddle, affecting the spatial positioning, movements, geometric placements, and navigational capabilities of any enemies caught in its wake.

It was Kae's task to keep their foes locked in place.

Just as it was Dice's to be the hammer.

Shining plates formed around the girl as she leaped from the top of the arcology, the sound barrier exploding as her acceleration climbed with her growing brightness. Her Heaven emerged as a headless beast with leaking shadows from its wounds. Six blazing hooves trailed a fiery scar across the sky as nine humanoid hands pulled an assortment of bladed weapons from within Dice's blackened wounds. Pulsing runes lined the aero-sized Heaven, each symbol emitted from the darkness-spewing cracks that coated her body.

She bound from block to block with ever-increasing speed, each kinetic impact building her momentum, increasing the light around her. She was like an unstoppable bullet, the light granted her indestructibility while her Domain of Strength granted her velocity.

Yet, as fast as she was approaching, and caught in Kae's tides as Chamber was, the half-strand's ignition blossomed to swallow entire blocks, his Heaven's manifestation paired with the detonation of his Meldskin's reactor.

From the inferno exploded a betentacled creature of blazing vitality. Its head was a hive of eyes and mouths, sores weeping molten gold and the insides, transparent pimples pregnant with unhatched bioforms, and clumps of organs bouncing from its body like skin tags. Chambers moaned as he wrapped his forelimbs around a nearby block, unmaking the structure into a burst of blooming flowers and aerial bioforms.

Thousands of shrieking insects the size of aeros tore out from Chambers into Kae's approaching tide and Dice's charging form, spearing through the air like meteorites. A wall of explosions pockmarked the Maelstormer's surface, causing the entire district to shudder.

Kae gave a surprised yelp across her ansible connection but otherwise maintained her approach. *{Ah. It worked. Good. Chambers should be able to detonate any organic construct his flames touch now.}*

Good thing she no longer qualified.

Standing, Draus cracked her neck as an alloy canon she briefly touched before leaving the George Washington suddenly appeared in her hands. In the depths of her Frame, she could feel the metaphysical ammo belts of her Arsenalist shift and rumble, hear the first snaps of gauss fire begin to build.

A fragment of glass came to a halt before her as it expanded into a full pane of glass. Pointing her canon out from a broken window facing Chambers, Draus' gun began to fuse and infect her body, her physical form taking on aspects of its design and firepower. Her heart vanished. Her blood stopped flowing. Her skin ceased to be flesh and her bones joined the chrome of her canon.

As she stepped across the precipice between human and divine, her mortal being vanished into the heart of her subreality, and in its place rose the Arsenalist as what used to be a single Phy-Sim calculated firing trajectory grew exponentially.

With her shot aimed straight at Chambers, Draus squeezed her trigger and snapped out from her barrels, becoming gun and bullets both.