

Prologue

I awake.

All I see is a rocky ceiling.

Bulbs line what seems to be a large cave. Their fluorescent glow flickers murky green, illuminating little more than my immediate surroundings. I attempt to look around, but find my body unresponsive to what should be an effortless movement. My ears ring and my head pounds. Otherwise, I feel little else.

To my left, I hear a nasal voice speak in excited fanaticism.

"My Lord, the summoning was a success! Congratulations are in order, my Lord! Thou shalt carry our Order to new heights, I truly believe it be so!"

The reply comes from what must be a speaker. The voice is rich and deep, speaking slowly and deliberately.

"Silence, worm. The Order has surprisingly allowed—nay, prioritised—this research. Results are demanded, not flattery. This is the forty-third successful summoning, yet we have naught to show for it. My patience runs thin, meaning the council's has already run out."

"Of course, my Lord! The subject is awake, yet unresponsive. No signs of damage prior to transit, nor of any caused during transit. Subject is male and in the early stage of adulthood. Species is..."

The nasal voice falters.

"The subject appears to be human..."

The man's excitement gives way to something else.

Fear.

The shadows that flicker across the ceiling seem to grow darker, and the silence louder as it stretches. My headache disappears. My ears pop, and the ringing stops like a bubble bursting.

The voice that feels like gravel on boulder finally breaks the silence.

"Appears human?"

A pause.

"Are you saying we sacrificed enough Aêthum to produce two Archs, four Order magi and countless mundanes, that we cracked dimensional barriers, pierced the divide and set up revolutionary runic tunnels for a... human?"

"It... it appears so, my L—"

The man swallows.

"—my mighty, benevolent Lord."

His trembling is now painfully audible with every utterance.

I try to look around once more.

Nothing.

Feeling slowly begins spreading through my body, arriving in the form of excruciating pins and needles.

"Disappointing," the disembodied voice replies.

A faint mechanical hum follows.

"Run the standard physiology assessments for mundane sapients, as well as a superficial thumb reading. Assuming nothing out of the ordinary, send this tragedy to Absolution. He will officially become the biggest waste in the two hundred and thirty-nine revolutions this project has run for."

A sigh slips through the speaker.

"Two mining sectors' worth of resources is not something he would be able to imagine, let alone earn. We will not speak of this again."

Another pause.

"Report to the administration for punitive indoctrination within the hour. Have a disciple instructed on the duties of your position, as well as the ramifications of failure."

The voice hardens.

"An example you will set."

The cavern plunges back into silence. I strain my ears. Somewhere beside me, I hear a sniffle followed by a sigh.

The nasal voice returns.

"Do you understand me? Probably not..."

He sounds less frightened now. Just tired.

"It does not matter. We are both doomed men."

I hear something metallic clink.

"None woke as quickly as thou, so let us hope we find ancient magic in your bones. Or perchance a powerful parasite, dormant yet the intended summoning target?"

A nervous laugh escapes him.

"At this point, I would settle for tendons of steel or a hearty digestive system. The smallest anomaly might develop into a

boon."

The rising hope leaves me uncertain of my future. Somehow, the possibility of being extraordinary feels more frightening than comforting.

Click.

Darkness descends once more as my consciousness fades.

"...O mighty Aëther, why dost thou scorn me so? I, sycophant by trade, have religiously embellished thy might ad nauseam and grovelled as no other dares! Why dost thou despise me so?"

I'm not sure at what point during the wailing I regain consciousness. I feel cold stone against my back and warm, damp air on my skin. My wrists and feet are bound, but with a herculean effort, I manage to lob my head towards the grief-stricken man.

The cave seems carved directly out of the mountain. Unnaturally geometric. Clean, but spartan. There is little more than the table I'm lying on and a door of solid steel set into the rock wall to my left.

In one corner I spot my captor, supplicating before some unknown deity. His head is completely shaven. He is a tall, lithe man wearing all-black robes. What little skin peeks through the folds of his robe looks pallid beneath the eerie illumination.

I try to grab his attention.

"Hhha... o."

My tongue leaden, I barely manage a gargle.

The wailing stops, and the self-proclaimed sycophant turns to me. I realise his baldness isn't limited to the top of his head. He is missing lashes, brows and even the slightest trace of bristle. His crystal-blue irises are marred with spots of crimson, his eyes reddened and puffy.

For a moment, he simply stares at me. Then, seemingly finding solace in company, "Once more thou rises in record time," his voice cracked and exhausted, "yet thou fails in all else."

He pauses beside the table, "You may or may not notice a small incision and a missing bone."

Missing bone? Hopefully a rib...

"Do not fret. The incision will heal, and the bone was redundant." He says it with the casual assurance of a doctor explaining a routine procedure. "All required for your tests, I assure you."

He pauses again, eyes traveling over my body.

"Your body, while being well proportioned, is mediocre... in every sense of the word. Truly... mundane."

A heaving sob escapes him, followed by a sharp snort. The change in pitch suggesting the possibility of a meagre meal in the process.

"If we are to consider your thum, you have none. Your retention and channelling qualifiers are excellent, but nothing extraordinary. You could become an apprentice within a decade and perhaps an Arch after a couple of millennia under the right circumstances."

A deep sigh.

"But alas, so could many."

He looks away.

"Henceforth, I shall be indoctrinated, forever changed through the old ways." His voice becomes quieter. A glint appears in his eyes, making me doubt his initial aversion to his prospects.

"And you..."

He looks back at me, a smile slipping through his mask of despair.

"You shall live in Absolution