

***Do you feel it wielder?***

***Did you sense the change?***

***Something is in the veins of history.***

***A new entity has entered the paths.***

**-[REDACTED]**

21-3

Those That Stray (II)

The gathered doublethinkers shifted uncomfortably. With two sentences, they stood unbalanced. “You have... chosen to aid us?”

“Yes,” Avo said. “Will annoy the Hungers. Break the city apart. End this farce for good.” He scanned their faces once more and peeked into their inner worlds again. They were still holding to the deception. “Will know if you’re lying to me. Close enough to escape that you can’t cage me. Something tells me you’re not lying either.”

“We’re not.”

He grunted. “Then tell me what you want. In goals. Things to happen. Acts to achieve. No process. No complaining. No history. How does this realm work? Why can’t I get any thaums or ghosts here? How do I break the Hungers?”

The child that initially manifested was the first to speak. “We remain partially tethered to the material. Jaus, in his deception—”

“I remain *partially* tethered to my *patience*,” Avo spat. “Not history. Not old grievance. Don’t care what Jaus did to you. Is done. Is history. And not mine. Only want to know what needs to happen to what? What works with what? I don’t care who. I don’t care why. I want cause and effect. I want mechanical solutions.”

The girl closed her mouth and just blinked. “I... see.”

No. She really didn’t.

“This is a partially finished suprareality,” another of the chorus spoke. Some bald woman veined with white tattoos, the paleness of ink sticking out on the dark of her skin. “It is not an override like a Heaven is. Not an infestation twisting the patterns of the world. We are above the structures of existence. We channel the settings that are into new structures. Stable structures. Nothing clashes here because the fundamental laws have entwined mind and matter. Memories

can be channeled and utilized by any citizen. That's why you're not getting the components of our minds or deaths. *We are this reality.*"

Ah. So all the phenomena he fought earlier were people. Good to know. "Can't kill you. Not unless break this existence." He paused. "Is that what will happen if I unmake the pillars inside the ziggurats."

"No!"

"You must not!"

"Please!"

The cries of terror came as a chorus.

An old warrior mastered himself first. "Many will suffer if you do that. Our minds and egos will spill over into each other. But all will be restored with a cycling. The world will be reloaded, though we will suffer great harm."

"But not destroyed," Avo finished. "Only tortured."

Even that had its appeal.

"The only way to unroot us from this world safety is to undo the mechanism keeping us fused in place and extracting the lodestones at the intersection of each cycle."

Avo considered what was being said and an epiphany came to him. Ah. That was why the dragons were eating into each other. Of course. Perpendicular timelines feeding loops into one another. If the city across one timestream was destroyed, another would bleed into it.

The Hungers were thorough at avoiding a permanent demise. Too bad they weren't any good at doing much else.

"What is the mechanism?" Avo asked.

The chorus suddenly fell silent. Apprehensive. He shook his head and turned to the looming wound spilled up into the sky. Threads of chronology streamed upward with the inversion of reality, the stuff of mind and time mixed into a new cocktail, pooling in the fissure leading back over into the Nether.

His exit was less than a full **Boltstride** away. He could leave now. If they didn't say anything, he was going to.

Lightning surged through his veins.

“The Heaven of Truth!” The cry sang out from them in unison, his pressure cracking them. Cowards that they were, constitution was not their blessing.

Then, the disruptions and bombardments surrounding them suddenly stopped. Spearing a splinter into the doublethinker, Avo found their internal world breaking, but in the process of mending thereafter. His pressure had caused a lapse in their focus. A second passed as everyone waited to see if their deception was exposed.

A heartbeat passed. The bombings resumed.

Faintly, Avo felt a sudden exhaustion flood his mind. It felt odd. Some the muscle he didn't know he had was spent.

*Took all I had... used their lapse... we're hidden for now...*

“The Heaven of Truth,” the chorus said as one. “It was the base of our Ark. And the chain that holds us in place in the Nether.”

That, Avo did not know. Not even with the memories of Peace accelerating through his mind.

“Explain,” he said.

The chorus continued. “Our pantheon, our collection of heavens, all the miracles we amassed, all our histories and lore were dismantled and taken after Jaus’ betrayal...” Their voices trailed off as Avo glowered. A few swallowed. Good: Fear motivated people to focus. “...After our betrayal, most of what we had was dismantled. Part and parceled, given unto the other Guilds. But not that. The heaven of truth remains to be our anchor to baseline reality and stability. To keep our partial ascendance from collapsing. It also holds us in place, ensuring that we cannot move freely through the Nether. Ensuring that we have to stay within our parameters.”

Avo wanted to ask how, but that would devolve into a delve into thaumaturgy. That was what Kae was for. The Agnos was far more useful and trustworthy than these turncoats anyway.”

“It is more than just a Heaven. It grafted to the *Gatekeeper*.”

Around them, the scenery changed again. The air peeled slightly to give Avo a glimpse of what they spoke. A familiar scene took shape. Memories of the place he fell through—the LGI reactor core that Kare recalled. Through open chasms in space, Avo stared into a room bathed in dark red lights, but instead of seeing a massive spherical machine, he saw a complex cage formed from vivianite, patrolled by ghosts, and shimmering with a translucent doorway composed of flowing scripts.

Phantasmal threads flowed through its center, spools of Nether-bound substance whistling through the cracks.

It was a cage to a prison. A door on an oubliette. A portal between places.

**[We've been keeping that?]** Kare breathed. Evidently, she was ignorant of the reality resting at the base of Scale—the Heaven that likely caused their current exile, at least in part.

**[Holy fucking shit,]** Kassamon agreed.

“Are those statements of truth?” Avo asked, inquiring about the statements forming the contours of the doorway.

“Merely distillations of information. And binding agreements.” Now, the smell of amusement filled the air, sneering smiles plastered on faces as they elaborated. “

After our triumph over the Pantheons, Jaus desired all the great cultures, sign an accord of peace and prosperity, seeking to benefit all of us mutually.

“The accords...” The words escaped from Avo as a rising whisper.

He had first heard it from Denton. It was part of the arrangement she invoked to stay Naeko's hand. But in truth, he had long wondered how mere agreements kept the Guilds in check. For those who controlled aspects of reality, mere words seemed insufficient to bind them to another's will.

Now he knew.

Words tied to heaven. Words tied to the foundations of the Nether. Words and truths enshrined by thaumaturgy; made laws above sacrosanct.

He should have always suspected.

From the start, a Heaven of Truth was close enough to intrude on the realm of the cognitive. What was truth, after all, but sometimes interpretation; subjective in meaning or understanding. What absolute truth was there when even history could be broken in this world? What absolute truth was there when canonicity could be overwritten or imitated?

“There are penalties if these truths are defied?” Avo asked.

The doublethinkers' lingering smiles were the only response he needed.

“So. This Heaven is connected to a Frame,” Avo asked. “Gatekeeper? Is that what its pattern is called?”

It's not a Frame but a mind, a fully functional one, not this limited governing intelligence that they use to deceive even their own Paladins. So precious this secret was to the Godbreaker and his hounds. The Gatekeeper is our perfect warden. It is an artificial mind built toward specific intent. An experiment on the part of Jaus to create an *Exemplar*. An entity with the power of pantheons but the wisdom of the minds that rule the voiders.”

Avo turned his mind inward, but the information was as novel to Calvino as it was to him.

*{Jaus Avandaer,} the EGI breathed. {He hid more than I thought from us.}*

“It was made from parts of our Ark. Aspects of our pantheon. That is how it can host an world entire. It is a partially created super-structure made possible by... by...” They want to say the Ladder. Avo knew somehow. Knew from raw intuition alone. “That is how we are built above the world that is. How we remain connected but exiled, the substance of mind flowing to us for processing, our city eternal little more than a recycling plant to remove impurity and enforce structure.”

And then, Avo understood, this thing was more than a dungeon, more than a crevice, more than a box. It was source and generator alike, the world it generated made absolute by its connection to the Ladder.

And then another consideration exploded inside Avo. Another startling thought. Was this the anchor for the Flayed Ladder as well? A designated marker for it to rematerialize. The Hungers had to be ascended up beyond the Ninth Sphere of thaumaturgy for them to overwrite existence so utterly—even in another plane.

And Scale was a fortress above fortresses. Scale was at the center of the Tiers...

“And that’s why you can’t be destroyed. Because you are all rooted in something else. Bound to something else. I am interfacing with miracles right now. Canons. Not the ontological source itself.”

They stood silent.

*They... don't know either...*

*Ignorant.*

The barge arrived at the edge of another alleyway, the hull digging into streets made from cobblestone and dirt trailing toward a partially liquified cityscape, sections of the horizon rising as smears of gold.

Faintly, Avo felt a resonance ringing off his Frame. He didn't fully understand the nature of thaumaturgy, how everything came together, but he knew what to seek now. Where to go if he desired to see things changed.

"What will happen to the Nether if I destabilize the Gatekeeper?" Avo asked. "And is the path even open now? Without the Ladder?"

Another silence. They didn't know that either.

"The what?"

Avo sighed. Of course there were preventatives in place to ensure their ignorance.

The only thing he remained confused about was how the Hungers were getting to act unchecked inside their uplifted prison. Perhaps the war between the Guilds created divides in intention. Or perhaps whatever Veylis did to her father altered things as well.

Questions for Kae and *Zein* for when he next encountered her. What joy.

"You have pledged to free us," the doublethinkers said. "To end our banishment."

Avo waved an Echohead in response. He was too deep in thought to truly acknowledge them. Too many potential variables to consider.

**[Whatever the case, we need to infiltrate Scale,] Abrel said, her curiosity also burning hot. [We might not know everything now, but it seems like the base of the Paladins is a stronghold of secrets. We don't even need to burn any minds to get in anymore. We're wind. We can just drift. See for ourselves.]**

And that ensured Kare and Kassamon didn't need to be his linchpins anymore...

"Please, Dreamer," the chorus said. They were speaking in that mournful tone again. Like beaten dogs. "We were not among those who demanded the atrocities. Our sin was silence. We were not those who pushed schemes and forceful policies. We were merely weak. Our entrapment in this city has become unbearable. We wish only to leave. Leave. And be allowed to live again. Leave. And atone. Leave. And not be forgotten. Or remembered as traitors and monsters."

Avo exhaled. And nodded. "Very well."

"You will do it?"

Briefly, he turned away from his exit and faced the gathered doublethinkers. There was such hope written across their faces. Such desperation. Did his first iteration look the same way when

Walton found him? Extracted him from the wasteland? Was his feebleness comparable to theirs?

"I will do it," Avo said. "I will do it because it will break this city. I will do it because it will change the shape of Noloth's history. And you will face every deed you have done. But this is more than that. I will do it because it will cement my power. And for my father. I will serve you in a way he never could. And I think... it would have pleased him."

Some of his templates responded with surprise.

Corner disapproved. **[Seems pretty fucking pointless to me, consang.]**

"Look at you," Avo said, replying to everyone at once. "Look at what has happened." Both chorus and templates regarded him with confusion. "You strayed. Strayed from divinity. You cannot be man and divine at the same time. You cannot build your own idealization while living as base creatures. You turned away. You strayed. Strayed from power. Strayed from responsibility. Strayed from who you wished to become. Stayed who you were."

All were silent, and Avo gave unto them his scorn.

"I see your mistakes. I see it. I will learn from it. I will internalize it. And I will not stray. I will become all that I can be. All that I can envision. And more. This existence has been failed enough by people pretending to be gods. Absurers collapsing into victims because they couldn't always win. Enough. Enough. I will walk this road to the end. I will find the point where apotheosis ends. And you will all have to face me when I do."

Calvino giggled, laughter filled with incredulous disbelief. *{You're going to do this out of spite.}*

"No," Avo said. "Out of scorn. Out to make a final canon for all to face. That it took a monster to save New Vultun. That you all let a cannibal beat you to the discovery of virtue." He looked at their faces, broken between shame and hope. "This was the dream. This was the dream because you *failed* yourselves."

One of the doublethinkers opened his mouth to speak but as he locked gazes with Avo, nothing followed. Nothing.

"Can I return the same way? By triggering the same memory?" Avo asked.

They looked at each other.

He scoffed. Useless. He will discover for himself. As he had to more and more these days.

"I'm finished here," Avo said. He shook his head and turned to the streaming wound. Staring into the ichor, his Woundmother gasped as a distant sensation made her blood quiver, made his

cyclers pulse, made his Frame rattle. “Thanks for the passage. Will remember that. Will do what I can for you. Will do what I can for this world. Because some should *realize* the power they possess. For once. Just once.”

And Avo felt tired. More tired than he ever had before. How did he alone see the depths of their descent? Did the heights call to no one else beyond offering the basest aspects of wieldable power?

They have failed their godhoods. All of them. All the Guilds. All the Hungers. Even himself for so long.

No more of this. He couldn't exist submerged. He needed to rise higher. He needed to see what was possible. What could be realized without the impotence of human failure? Was *starved* for it. Like he needed air.

“Thank you, Dreamer,” the chorus murmured. “We... for the truth that it is worth, we did not wish you to be either. We had hoped our legacy would be children. Our children. Not a... monster.”

That made him laugh. “You're children would have failed. They would have grown under you. Shared blood with you. Been shaped by you.” He took his first step toward the point of his departure, and stormstuff coursed through him once more, deliberately neglecting to look upon them a final time. “What would they know of Heaven when you yourselves want to flee from your supposed paradise?”

Whatever reply never reached him. He gathered his splinters and shot out, ontology forking free in streaks of lightning. Within the confine of a second, he pierced deep into the currents of rising ichor, his Heaven expanding to clench the dragon's flowing lifeblood, the rivers he now swam in washing him away utterly—drawing him across the passage of time.

**“Master... I feel it... I feel... I understand...”** Euphoria became Woundmother, but Avo himself was enchanted, swimming through the currents of history. Swimming through chronology, history, cognition, and culture distilled.

His ontology flowed into the progression of existence as it did back into him, and as he cascaded down through the shallow Nether, through mindscapes and zeitgeists formed of culture and thoughtstuff, he felt a new pattern fuse into his Heaven of Blood, into his cyclers, into his very Soul.

Glitches blossomed across his cog-feed. Strings of incomprehensible mem-data seared his perception.

His Fardrifter enjoyed the weightlessness, letting the flow take him.

His Techplaguer sang. **“Timeistimeistimeistimeistime.”**



The histories of people and places resonated with him. Fractals and expansions of who they were—how they arrived passed through Avo’s consciousness. His ego yawned across Idheim, across all who could think, and all that has been.

For the briefest of instants, Avo glimpsed all that had been. And all that would be.

And it scarred him *rightly*.

**ACT–AC–FDIND’t–Yuulden–**

**DOMAIN IDENTIFIED: (CHRONOLOGY]**

**ADAPTING LIMINAL FRAME TO CURRENT METAPHYSICS - 11%... 35%... 56%... 78%...  
94%... 100%**

**DOMAIN INTERNALIZED (CHRONOLOGY)**

**UPDATING HEAVENS**

And in an instant, time, space, mind, and matter collapsed inward, and Avo plunged backward along the route of his chronology, backward through the Deep Nether, backward through his simulated mindscape, backward through the lapse, backward finally into his old body.

His mind and Frame slammed down hard into his unraveled sheath, and as his reintegration was completed, the glass-made cell containing him dissolved with his reawakening, reflective glints melting away to specks of quivering crimson.

And flowing gold.