

Do you know what it took to set the foundations for the Guilds to be born? The amount of dissent Jaus had to sow? The machinations he never mentioned?

Let me tell you something about forming an empire: It's easiest born from the corpse of a preceding order. Harvested legacy, in a word.

Before the Guilds, there were the faiths, the middlemen to Godclads, guiding shackled civilizations surviving under the pantheons' rule. Of these faiths stood seven that shadowed the others. Seven traditions that remain to this day. Seven reforged during the final calamity.

Jaus, more than anyone, knew the importance of continuing culture. The culturability of our humanity—our desire to seek bonds. That was why he decided upon a usurpation instead of a destruction, a restructuring of patterns instead of a scouring.

Chains from chains, if you will.

But chains are more than bindings. Chains are also the instruments of our progression. Leashes we can use to drag others. Chains are patterns. Connections. Links. Like tethers running through our minds and cultures, keeping us bond as if zeitgeists were plagues of symbology, and civilization was just a mass expression of aligned symptoms.

We treat it completely, then? Why not quell the worst, and cultivate the best?

It is also why the Guilds fear losing control. Why they oppress anyone who steps too far beyond their ideologies? Because they fear mutation. They fear the change of their patterns—that something new might be birthed from their bodies, slipping out from the fractures of internecine.

The Chivlarics and Meritocrats; the Ori clans; the seniority feuds of the Sang; the battles to become administrators for the children of the Mandate; the treachery between the lodges of the Longeyes; the inner conspiracies woven by the dilation of the Sanctites; the urge to succumb known to every child of ash; and the desperation to endure by the minds in the void.

All are vulnerable now. Made more vulnerable with each passing day. Peeling the cocoon of culture from their bodies, afraid of what they might become before the end—that fragmentation now would deny them victory tomorrow.

But they lie to themselves. They lie to themselves, and Jaus would have wept for them. Because it is already too late. A cell dividing will not share a fate, let alone a dream.

And sometimes, it is best to let a chain break before an infection crawls across the links and leaves all in ruins.

-Excerpt from the "Changing of Ways" by Osjane Thousand

HEAVEN/HELL UPDATED - [SIMULACRAE REPLICA]

HEAVEN/HELL UPDATED - [ARSENALIST]

HEAVEN/HELL UPDATED - [FUCKTOPIA]

HEAVEN/HELL UPDATED - [RUNEBREAKER]

HEAVEN/HELL UPDATED - [MAELSTROMER]

“So, you’ve still got that Heaven of Darkness floatin’ inside you,” Draus asked after her final resurrection. “Got something special planned?”

“Could say that,” Avo replied. He turned his attention inward and felt at the Heart of Noloith—felt the Soul that came with it, bereft a cycler. He could have grafted it onto the cycler he took from the Instrument earlier, but he had other plans for the ouroboros. “Will wait until I have the thaums before including it. Want to keep it as its own Heaven. Wake it. Speak to it. Get insight into Noloith. Times before. But want to wait. Wait until we get more thaums. Wait until I can breed more cyclers.”

And as the strands of his blood coiled inward, a thinness of gold followed them, delving into his Liminal Frame to pluck the unattached cycler.

Grasping it with his newfound influence over Chronology, Avo showed Draus the seed of his labor—the seed that would soon be incubated in the enclavers. Soon, this shrunken ring of gold would multiply and bloom with each reshaping of the city’s culture – reshapings that would unfold at Avo’s will.

As one of his subminds worked to untangle the flats, their coming lives would soon flourish to everyone’s benefit.

“Funny how the No-Dragons need entire complexes to do what you’re doin’,” Draus said, eyes narrowed at the self-eating dragon. “Been inside one of them ‘dragon hatcheries’ before. Godsdamned madhouse is a word. Literally raise entire generations of juvs in a false world. Make them experience false lives for culture. Or whatever the fuck it takes to trigger a dragon’s growth.”

“Close.” Avo retracted the cycler back into himself and peered down at their city of light. From outside the open windows, the first bubbles of accretion were reformed from their deformations. He would begin the embedding when the population reached a stable ten thousand again. “Good thing for us is that we don’t need to force things. Can just make them understand. Push

them to arrive at similar conclusions.”

Draus snorted. “We’? Ain’t no we doin’ this, consang. It’s just you.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Hells. It’s been just you for a bit, hasn’t it? All the shit that your pa did. All the things you took from the Hungers. Ain’t no one else can do what you did to the Guilds. Ain’t no one else can bled ‘em like you.” She gave a resigned snort. “Can’t lie, I’m startin’ to feel like the one that’s obsolete now.”

He grunted in acknowledgment. There was little point in denying it. His Necrojacking made him by far the greatest threat among his cadre—was the primary reason they lasted against Zein at all, and could do half of what they managed.

But that was only part of the picture. The other part was that he wouldn’t have gotten so far without her. Or any of them. His ascent into the Deep Nether would have seen him nullified if he didn’t have her template. They would have been undone by Shotin without Abrel’s instincts guiding him—or Chambers’ willing degeneracy. They would be operating sub-par Frames without Kae’s guidance; absolutely lost without the Columners or Aegis.

Everything mattered. Everything was always in flux. The world flowed back into him. Became him.

And now, with his Delusion-born splinters, he was becoming the world, leaving parts of himself elsewhere as well.

He took in his cadre, then, scattered about the tower. He took in Chambers stoking the back of Dice’s kitten as he spoke to the girl. He took in Cas and Denton asking Kae how she was doing. He took in Tavers chuckling at Sunrise. He took in Essus, manifested from phantoms like Cas, and parted from them in the flesh.

But not alone. Not abandoned.

“No,” Avo said. “Not obsolete. Essential. Source of our victories.”

The Regular scoffed. “You know something, consang? Ever since you’ve started eatin’ more minds than flesh, you’ve started sounding a hell of a lot more like a propagandist. I’m talkin’ real motivation woo-woo bullshit. Damn strange to see comin’ out the mouth of a nine-foot-tall monster.”

“Meant it literally. Literally drawing from your mind—everyone’s minds to make better versions of myself.” He paused. “And you are right. I have been... selfish.”

“Well, don’t go feelin’ bad about it now,” Draus replied. “Your habits have kept us unsnuffed so far.”

“Don’t mean that. There’s something I want to try. Something that I have been thinking about.”

Draus paused. “What is it? You got that look on you. Kind you get before you show me something nasty.”

“Am a thoughtform,” Avo said. “Not limited by sheath. Am limited by thaumaturgy right now. Can’t use miracles in New Vultun without drawing Veylis’ attention. Not until I manage to overwhelm her attention. Or learn to travel the paths better. But have been thinking about things too limited. From my own perspective.”

“How’s that?” Draus asked.

“Took your template into me when I burned you,” Avo said. “Stacked who you are into me. Made me more. One way. From you to me. From all of you to me. The fire could only consume. I only knew how to consume. But now I can do something else. I can *give*. I can give myself to other people.”

“Like with your splinters?” Draus asked.

“No,” Avo replied. And he showed her.

Expanding six hundred ghosts in her mind, he layered new sequences into her palace, broadened the foundation of her ego, and granted her insight and skill into all he could do. He had to anchor himself to the exterior of her mind as that was the only place where he could find purchase – the vacuousness within the Regular sparse of soil for him to bury his roots. As a dormant version of himself calcified around the walls of her accretion, Draus blinked and let out a breath.

“Shit,” she said, years of Necrojacking condensing in her mind and new perspectives coiling around her own. “Ain’t like gettin’ broadcasts anymore–this is just a straight-up sequencing. Still. Don’t see how this is better than your splinters.”

“Going to work with them,” Avo said. “My gifts. They aren’t just for me. They are for all of us. They can serve all of us. Can adapt any of you on the go. Give you whatever you need to achieve our goals. Not just from me. Not just from the cadre. But anyone we can seize.”

Avo gestured beyond, motioning to the enclave. But he also meant Abrel. He also meant the templates. He also meant all the people they would soon subvert.

They were themselves. But they could all be more at any moment. Given more than just expertise, but understanding. Greater awareness.

And then there was the other thing.

“Chambers,” Avo said. The man turned away from the nu-kitten chewing on his index finger and blinked.

“Yeah, Avo?”

“Want to try something,” Avo said. “Might need you to die.”

Chambers sighed. “Here I thought we were getting past this.” A flat stare followed from the ghoul. The man just laughed. “Alright, alright. What’re we doing? Kae already juiced my dicks up, so if you got anymore—”

“Want to see if I can shift one of my Heavens over onto you,” Avo said. “Transfer from my Frame to yours. See if it stays conscious.”

Now it was Kae’s turn to look at him. “Wait, Avo, what are you trying to do?”

“See if we can maximize our potential even more,” Avo said. “Been doing this with me as the nexus of the group. Enhancing my Heavens most of all. But all it takes is a death for the Stillborn to shift ontologies around. And I’m more useful as a Necro right now. Spreading from you like a plague. Want to try a few things. But first.”

He turned his attention inward again, but the Heavens were waiting this time. And one in particular leaped at the opportunity.

“Let me do it,” the Fardrifter said. **“I wish to see if my self-awareness endures across Souls. But I have... a request.”**

+Speak it,+ Avo replied.

“If I succumb to cessation, do not restore me. Let me rest in oblivion. Give my Domains to the Heart. But let me sleep. Such is better than awakening to a new prison.”

The Woundmother scoffed. **“Do not allow this, master. The mule is merely... addled. This is unwise. We do not know if the architecture of the others—they do possess living Souls! Their foundations are questionable.”**

“I want to stay! Stay! Stay!” The Techplaguer was the most direct of all, but there was a desperation in its voice. A fear of demise that veered uncannily close to humanity.

“I will do it,” the Fardrifter said. **“Let me do this.”**

“Mule,” the Woundmother seethed.

“Be quiet, red one. Another will awaken soon enough after my departure. You will have another to cajole.”

An uncharacteristic silence came over the Heaven of Blood. ***“But what if they are weak? What if they cannot endure my words, cannot let my barbs pass through them as you do? Is this your ploy to render me frustrated?”***

“Do you think the world built around you, old one?”

“Do you claim it is not?”

The Fardrifter neighed something that was almost a laugh. ***“I will not miss these conversations. And your constant insults. But I will remember one thing... and that is how small you were in the end. So small. A little tower.”***

“Fine. Gallop toward the freedom of nothingness. Waste your divinity and indulgence of power. What scarcity is a steed in this realm of plenty? We will find another! Another!”

{Avo,} Calvin said, {I know what you’re thinking—and what you’re planning to do with all their Heavens. All I’m saying is that it is not a wise decision to awaken a new pantheon. Especially when one of them is called a ‘Fucktopia.’}

Avo grinned. +Not even sure if I can yet. Just in the experimental phase for now.+

{I pray this fails.}

+Faith? From a machine?+

{You’ve inspired a great many things in me. Mostly fear and anxiety.}

“So,” Chamber said. “We doing this murder-suicide or—”

“Yes,” Avo answered. “Let’s try this. Let’s see if this works.”

And with that, Avo abandoned his sheath and funneled all he was into Chambers’ mind. As he gathered in place, he cast his confirmation to Chambers, who then promptly responded first by projecting a disruption inward before detonating his own skull in a geyser furling flame.

RESURRECTION - 1%

No time was wasted. As Avo plunged into death’s comforting embrace, he drew Chambers into the orbit of his Soul once more and began his work. The commands he sent to his Soul came into effect immediately, and once again Avo marveled at how reactive the Stillborn was at reconstructing itself.

Rippling flames sheared the Fardrifter free from Avo's Soul, detaching not only the Heaven but the connected cyclor and Hell as well.

"Oh, okay," Chambers' said, his Soul quivering as Heaven of Air went rigid. *"Here we go. Here we fucking go."*

Animated radiance poured out from Avo and enveloped Chambers. As one Liminal Frame washed its Essence over another, Avo injected a donation of thaums to go with his ontologies, watching with satisfaction as the Fardrifter's cyclor fused over Chambers, locking in place a few degrees away from the Fucktopia.

ONTOLOGICS TRANSFERRED

->1x HEAVEN [FARDRIFTER]

->1x HELL [FARDRIFTER]

->1x CYCLER

->20,000 THAUM/c

Then, the presence of another Soul caught his attention. Another death. Then two. Then three.

Dice, Draus, and Kae entered as well, each drifting close to take in the moment.

As the Fardrifter settled into place, Avo drew his Soulfire away from Chambers and left the Heaven of Air unbathed by his light. The waves of animating radiance receded, and Chambers drifted just beyond the boundary of Avo's Soul. As he passed, the nine wind-shaped heads of the Heaven of Air turned to face its fellow prisoners—and unwanted master—one more time.

"My last thoughts—if these are what they are—will be of today. Today, when you set me free." The once-god went beyond the light now, and a slowness settled over its ontology. ***"It was glorious to ride again. To seek the... horizon."***

And then the Fardrifter went dark, went silent, went still.

RESURRECTION - 2%

Everyone watched. Moments passed. Chambers coughed. *"Hey. Horse. You—you broken or something."*

The Fardrifter didn't move.

Immediately.

Slowly. Almost imperceptibly. It craned one of its heads and turned. ***"I... am still here."***

“What?” Kae hissed, her Soul surging toward the borders of Avo’s Soul. “But—how—you didn’t... We don’t have any Imitators inside us. Our Heavens haven’t woken after exposure—how is it still aware of itself? This... I don’t understand!”

Avo, however, was more curious about another factor. *“Chambers. Check something. See if has any active Canons of Chronology.”*

Another pause. *“No? Did you add those in earlier?”*

A grunt of bemusement followed. *“Yes. Something else for Kae to think about.”*

A frustrated cry sounded from the Agnos.

“And to think I worried for the mule,” the Woundmother said.

“And to think I was expecting final freedom,” the Fardrifter sighed.

“So...” Chambers said, unsure what this all meant. *“We can move Heavens between each other really easily. We know that. But what does it mean?”*

“Means we adjust, pool, change our Spherages on the go. Means we change ontologies whenever we need. Means my Heavens can still be used by all of you. That your Souls don’t have internalized Chronology. Shouldn’t be that easy for Veylis to notice. And it means that my Heavens stay awake after residing in me. And can exist outside. And can exist outside...”

This led down another track of consideration. Another possibility. Avo drew upon the Soul he took from the Instrument—and also thought of the Soul rooted to the Heart of Noloth.

“Fardrifter,” Avo said. *“Want to make a new bargain? One we both might find palatable.”*

“No,” Kae breathed. *“No. The Stillborn—the gods are broken, it shouldn’t be able to... to...”*

“Suppose we can find out,” Avo said. *“Time to see if the steed to ride free if we give it a personal Soul.”*

Draus let out a quiet chuckle. *“The mind’s gonna be mighty pissed about this.”*