

23-2
That Which Lurks (III)

–[Draus]–

Every Guild warred differently.

Highflame's cadres are the tip of their war hosts, punching through while golems, Regulars, and armor flood in to hold the land.

Ori-Thaum relies on Nether supremacy, high-concept Heavens, and hiding behind Stormtree's skirts while the Scaarthians do the dying for them.

Ashthrone and Sanctus are a one-two punch; the latter moves and fights guerilla across space and time with their chronoframes, bringing with them the former to spew their entropy and render entire districts Rend-choked.

The No-Dragons are decay and attrition combined—fighting them's always a two-front war as your own flesh betrays you while their endless swarms of bioforms blot out the skies.

Out of all the Guilds, though, Draus found Omnitech the most displeasing adversary. The lack of actual killing she got to do bothered her. Theirs was a force that was all golem; all metal; all mech. At best, she might get to scalp some modified jock entombed in one of these machines. Judging from the scant dots of static within the carriers, it seemed like her near future was going to be filled with dead metal.

It didn't help that whatever anomalous signal they used bricked her implants. She was operating at less than half-capacity before this even started. But there was a consolation to this problem. A new understanding.

If, at this moment, she was just a mortal again—a street squire—there wouldn't be anything she could do. Her augs would betray her, eat her hollow from within. And she'd either have to pull out or get snuffed. In the actual present, however, she was a Godclad. And getting a new Heaven of Signals to counteract whatever weirdness they inflicted on her today was going to be a reward unto itself.

There was nothing like turning your enemy's weapons back against them.

As the Fardrifter's torrential **Yondergales** tore the carriers off course and splashed dispatched drones against the ships' battered hulls, Draus speared down the **Nine Streams**.

Each of her "selves" sailed forth like gleaming flechettes. Her **Replicas** sprouted metaphysical artillery pieces in the shape of wings, and she accelerated with each round they loosed.

Waterfalls of ammunition christened her as she tore into the scattered drones with space, glass, and gunfire.

She faced each carrier as a lance of five. Five prismatic titans edged with shimmering pathways, with hovering spears jutting out in place of wings, and three hundred orbiting mirror-bright shields redirected any and all assaults on her person.

With the improvements Kay applied to her heavens, she came as a prismatic knight, blade held aloft with pathways shimmering along the edge. Lacking a head, her **Replicas'** reflective chestpieces were aglow with a triangular cluster of fractals, and through the transparency of her glass poured the unceasing ordinance of every gun she held since possessing the Arsenalist.

Slugs, flechettes, beams, and missiles blossomed out from her changing lances. Shockwaves of devastation tore through the oncoming drones, cleaving gaps into their formations, and sending their slagged debris falling into the maze beyond the **Yondergales** as molten droplets.

As one, each of her **Replicas** dove into the thick of chaos. Wrecks of falling metal vanished through the passageways of her shields. Thinking ahead, she vitrified missiles and projected them along the periphery of the battlefield. They would circle the engagement, slowly encompassing the carriers so where their defensive screen of drones thinned first, she would be there to exploit the breakthrough.

The only thing she couldn't do was turn her foes to glass. Though she tried, it felt like she was prying at something that wasn't there. The matter comprising the carriers and drones felt distant from her grasp. As if she was trying to clench a fistful of water.

As klaxons sounded from each carrier, wavelengths of static filled the air while integer-filled rivers overflowed the warships and infested the airspace of the Fardrifter's inner reality.

Well. If she had to guess, that was why she couldn't just shatter them. There was another canon at work. Another Heaven to contend against hers.

REND CAPACITY [SIMULACRAE REPLICA] - 7%

REND CAPACITY [ARSENALIST] - 4%

WARNING: HEAVENS DETECTED

->STALKER OF STATIC SYMPHONIES (SOUND/SIGNALS/TECHNOLOGY/BIOLOGY) x3

The numbers leaking from each carrier condensed, spreading out into a vaguely humanoid figure. It had twelve limbs—all of their arms and hands—and as it clawed for purchase, the oscillating notes of the carriers' alarms made its contours reverberate.

Even with reflexes magnified by her **Replicas**, the pulsing of the wavelength seemed a blur to Draus.

+*They're trying to undergo metamorphosis,*+ Avo said, and over from his mind came the maddened murmurs of the Techplaguer, rambling about the need to shift its form. +*One of their canons is like my **Skin of Virtuality.***+

+*Can you peel it off?*+ Draus asked.

+*Intend too.*+ A pause followed. Three transparent splinters unlatched from her mind. And then she felt the blood in the back of her head begin to twist and move to the whims of an outside will. +*Reconstructing your deck and ansible. Need a catalyst for the Techplaguer. Going to hit them with **Datarot**. Leave them to you after. Enclave secured. All invading liquefied. Enclaves downed. Nerve agent. Need to see if I can keep them alive.*+

+*Synced,*+ Draus replied. A weight settled in the back of her head, but then her animated blood washed down the damaged reflex booster on her spine and restored it as well. She triggered her Accelero and Volant implants without prompt, and her reflexes went into overdrive.

Suddenly, the Omnitech Stalkers slowed and the numbers became almost comprehensible. The drones were almost at an utter standstill, and she dove through their destroyed lines to get at her true foes.

As she drew close, her ansible lanced out like a needle—a thin broadcast escaping from her implanted exocortex. From it came a festering chaos that began to eat through the numbers. It repeated twice more to prick the other two carriers as well, and a festering entropy began to spread within the shivering membranes of each Omnitech Heaven.

The thaumic poison was fast-acting. Within a heartbeat, she watched as Soulfire detonated around her hulls, masking their backgrounds in incandescent coronas. Drones tumbled and twitched as biology and technology began to weave between one another. Actual cybernetic limbs erupted along the spine of the carriers, their forms lurching between manifested Heaven and tower-sized ships struggling to stay steady as the Fardrifter tried to wrestle them from the sky.

She launched new projectiles through the glass-tipped missiles she fired earlier, taking advantage of the chaos to strike a decisive blow before the carriers could reorient. Glass shards escaped from glass missiles as she invoked a new canon Kae designed specifically for her.

Shattershunt was a high vulgarity miracle. In the words of Kae, what it did was very, very much against the stable fabric of reality. That was why Draus kept it in reserve until she was certain to get an opening, for each invocation of its power came with a full five-percent increase in Rend.

Considering that it utterly shredded both space and matter, it was a small price to pay.

Twelve **Shattershunt** shards went out in total, each imbued with a two-way passageway. Slipping through the gaps left by the drones, her attack did not strike the carriers head-on. Instead, she encompassed them with her shards, passing above, below, and from the sides, four sets of shards for each carrier. As luminous diffractions of light passed through the forms of the Stalkers, Draus triggered **Shattershunt** and cracks began to spread out from each missile as spatial reality itself unraveled.

Where most passageways were stable demiplanar environments that one could travel through, **Shattershunt** inverted the idea to achieve maximal devastation. As each shard externalized their passageways, an unstable bridge of liminality formed between them and their connected pair, passing clean through the hulls of the Omnitech carriers. Then the real damage came. Both anchors of the passage shattered, and all that was between found itself compressed.

The entire thing was like using the Domain of Space as a pair of scissors. Except the scissors only cut when you blew up two ends of a bridge. When the Stalkers came apart, it was more with an unnatural *squeeze* than a visible cut, and the best part was when things were severed with **Shattershunt**, they stayed apart.

Because that was just how that section of space functioned until her Heaven decided to vent.

REND CAPACITY [SIMULACRAE REPLICA] - 38%

The waves of faus-data broadcast from the carriers vanished with the peeling of their ships. As they died, Soulfire continued to detonate out from their Heavens, sustaining backlash after backlash as Avo's **Datarot** ate through them thaumatically as well.

Their ambush proved to be total. Overwhelming. And synergistic.

Draus still didn't like breaking dead metal, but as she saw splashes of blood twisting aspects of the crumbling carriers, she saw flashing ripples of radiance sweep over each of the Stalkers and pull them into the orbit of a thaumic presence vastly more immense than they, she couldn't help but grin.

Bagging Heavens was the biggest game there was, and she was only too happy to play.

As the towering carriers fell in severed meteorites of metal, the drones were followed, most already hollowed by the **Data-Rot** themselves. The Yondergales parted as the Fardrifter dove beneath the rushing winds.

A rushing mist of crimson swallowed most of the falling debris. More patterns for Avo's Woundmother. One he let impact against a hillside, the thunderous collision ringing loud for kilometers and sending dirt high over the lands.

Over the horizon, ashen trees flapped their branches and took flight, their behavior an imitation of birds.

+Stalkers secure,+ Avo said. He sounded less pleased than she expected. +Enclavers dead. Biologies twisted by invasive technology. Couldn't stop it.+

The information passed through Draus like a status update. People died. That was war. That was life. *+Got their Heavens now. Can bring 'em back to Kae. See what she can make of them. Good haul. Domain of Tech ain't common.+*

+No,+ Avo agreed. +Neither is a Neo-Creation voidship.+

Her attention turned to the prize he hinted at, and she found the mountain enclave melting into rivers of blood. Haemokinetically constructed claws were prying the ancient voidship free from the crystalline cage that once encased it. As Avo unsheathed it from the mountain's base, the winds around them burrowed deeper into the land as her Metamind detected its Domains.

WARNING: SOUL DETECTED

->[TERRAFORMATION MODULE-2994.04.04-Tundra-Mountainous-Christmas Forever Standard] (Atmosphere/Mountains/Snow)

Draus' **Replicas** snapped back together before vanishing as she emerged from the panel of glass she left within the enclave. With her Heavens dormant once more, she took in the devastated homestead—and swept her eyes across the many bodies left strewn across the interior.

The space stretched deep into the mountainside, with countless huts stacked between the temples. A main pathway ran between the communal housing, extending for approximately two kilometers before stopping at a half-carved rock face. Counting two hundred structures in total, Drau estimated the dead to be about eight hundred.

Not bad comparatively. Barely any deaths compared to a usual day at New Vultun.

Here, though? That was the entire community. But that wasn't all bad either; more thaums and ghosts for Avo were always good, and so long as he touched them before they passed, they wouldn't be losing any details about the place. Not its history. Not the people's memories.

More than acceptable losses.

A shadow passed over her, causing her to turn away from the enclave's interior. Turning past the open jaws of the mountain, she saw Avo dragging the voidship free from the haemified soil. As she left the enclave, a thought occurred to her as she flung a shard of glass out to seek the downed Omnitech carrier.

+Omnitech'll probably send a scoutin' drone out here. Gonna leave a little something special in the wreckage so when they retrieve their salvage, we get to hitch a ride.+

Avo grunted in agreement. He was using her blood as the primary source of his catalyst still but directed the surrounding matter to serve him instead. Faintly, she could hear the Woundmother complaining about something. +Not going to subsume this one yet,+ he said, dangling the Neo-Creationist ship.

Up close, Draus stood witness to the relic of a bygone time as calcified clumps of plant-matter, moss, and clinging dirt rained from its edges. +Want Kae to have a look at it first?+

+No. Calvino. Something they could use to bargain for the George Washington's crew. Maybe. Strike a deal. After we take what we can from its database. Going to need a Heaven of Technology for that.+

"Yes," the Techplaguer cheered. **"Bandwidth! More is better."**

{Avo... let's talk about that Domain first,} Calvino began, sounding a bit more uneasy than normal. {There are risks using Omnitech's Heavens. Instability and... incoherence.}

"Lies! I am very coherent! Administrator! The sky-burner lies."

+Calm down,+ Avo said, prodding at the voidship using his **Sanguinity**. +Calvino is just scared. Like the rest. Afraid I might use it unwisely. Against them.+

"I support that course of action. Destroy the sky-burners!"

{Can you at least not graft the Domain of Technology to that one,} Kant murmured.

+No,+ Avo replied. +Techplaguer's fine. Don't want to waste any more time. Draus. Done for today?+

Her vitrified dagger curved around the side of a hill and vanished within the downed carrier's open wounds as the question came. +Yeah. What's up? You wanna incubate my Heavens now?+

+Arsenalist first. Simulacrae too essential for our efforts right now. Felt you planting a shard in the carrier. Good planning.+

+Yeah. Wanna see if we can chain this into another ambush if they come for the wreck. Be funny if we could keep that going for a while.+

+*And lucrative,* + Avo replied. His **Sanguinity** condensed around the voidship, fusing a protective cocoon in shape. +*Should find a separate place to store this.* +

+*I might got a few spots. Or I can just hold it in my **Paracosmos** for now. Keep it between places.* +

+*No. Risk too high. And might need you on standby soon. There are tasks that demand your... expertise.* +

Her curiosity was piqued. She had been listening in on the rest of the cadre's chatter as she worked, but they were more like background noise from a thoughtcast than anything. Considering his tone, she doubted this had to do with the media they were bringing in. Avo knew she didn't care about Proparazzi.

Unless he wanted her to kill them.

+*What're my runs?* +

+*Syndicate trouble. Some critical targets we should snuff. But something even before all that. Lunch.* +

+*Lunch?* + Draus asked.

Avo grinned. +*Kare Kitzuhada is going to be meeting her uncle soon. Think we should be on standby. Just in case. Been more than a few incidents with the D'Rongos. But they've gone silent. Even in the Nether. White-Rab's been trying to keep an eye.* +

+*Alright. An overwatch op.* +

+*Something like that. Need you to be ready for emergency response in the real. Just in case. You and Dice. I'm going to plant him with a splinter. See if we can expand our "recruitment" some more.* +

She let out a low breath. +*Ain't no end to the struggle, huh, consang?* +

+*Only for the dead. And only for the truly victorious.* +