

A Soul is a fire, but not a forge. It does not create something new but rather breaks the shape of what is.

What we call canons are disfigurations. Mutilations of reality. Distortions and dislocations. And this is why the entropy stains you. This is why you must breathe your sickness back into reality. Because it is unnatural. Because everything you do wounds the tapestry, and the use of a Hell patches the damage by destroying. By unmaking. You force existence to bear your sacrifice.

It disgusts me. What I do disgusts me.

Domains. They are like ontological cancers. Their sigils are warning signs of what concept is experiencing a junction of collapses, of unified compromise.

I have stared into the tapestry.

I have seen the wrongness of the flow.

I have seen the wrongness of the flow.

I have seen the wrongness of the flow.

This power was never meant for the likes of man.

-Suicide Note of Agnos Greyr Timbe (Fifth Knowing)

24-15

The Tapestry (III)

“What is the condition of my damage, administrator?” the Techplaguer asked almost tentatively. ***“Am I mendable? Will I ever be conjoined with the Sleeper again?”***

The question slipped by Avo as he found himself overwhelmed by the sheer chaos of the tapestry instead. Acting under the directions of Kae, he inserted his Soul into the Techplaguer’s depths to find the chain of ghosts still connected to him. Strings of incomprehensible mem-data scrolled across his cog-feed as he did, and wondered just what it was about thaumaturgy that confused his construct of mind so.

That thought lasted a meager when he found himself greeted by a tide of gold. No more did the inner world of the Heaven of Signals look as it used to. Instead, fractals were peeling from place to place, coming loose like panels pried free in a hurricane. Silicon and wiring were tangled with sinews of chronology, and the subreality looked as if a shapeless mess layered in countless veins. The patterns of reality were in constant motion, slithering out and down through a fissure as countless templates began to cry out from the disorientation.

Buffeted by his enhanced cognition, Avo stared into the ontological wound for the second time and found himself consumed by the fundamental nature of totality.

His senses screamed as he witnessed the ineffable. His Soul shivered. But something about it called to him, urged him to approach...

+Oh, gods,+ Kae whispered. Her mind was whirling, struggling harder than Avo to make sense of the mess before her. *+I have no idea how your Heaven hasn't fallen. This—I've seen more stable fallen Heavens. The patterns of existence are fully flooding in, the fact that the Techplaguer has any coherence, let alone canonic—what did Omnitech do to this thing?+*

+I'll ask the Infacer next time it tries to kill me,+ Avo grunted. *+Going to access the breach. See if I can disentangle things somehow.+*

Pain welled up inside the Agnos. Pain, frustration, impotence, and anxiety. *+Avo. Listen. I don't... I can't promise you anything. I don't know what might happen or if I can come up with something to help you or fix your Frame—+*

+Kae...+

+--for all I know, you could be unraveled immediately when you slip in. Be dissolved by overflowing entropy somehow. I—this has never been done, and I—I can only guess. That's my only use now. Guessing! Reduced to guessing!+

+Kae.+

+You did so much for me. You fixed my mind—you gave me some measure o-of revenge and... and I don't know how to fix you, Avo. I don't know how to fix your Frame. I don't know if I can save you.+

The Agnos did her best to hide the coming sob and wasn't half bad at it, but Avo knew how she felt. Her emotions were bleeding over. Her worry. Her exhaustion.

+I know,+ Avo replied finally. *+It's okay. Doing all you can.+*

+It's not enough—I should have—+

+You should have been happy,+ Avo replied. *+You should have gotten to live a good life. With someone you love. In a world worth fighting for. Fixing the damage afflicting reality. Surrounding by friends. People who care for you. "Should have" isn't. We don't have "should have." We have what is.+*

She swallowed back bitterness. *+It's not right. None of this world is right. I don't know if I can... can survive this. Without you or the others. I don't know if I can face them—face the Guilds. But I can't run away. There's nothing left. There's nowhere left. I'm too scared but also too angry and*

I...+ She took a moment and seized the reins of her raging thoughts. +I want you to know that... that you mean much to me, monster of mine. I want you to know that in case...+

+I wish my father never destroyed you,+ Avo replied. +I wish I could make things right for you. Glad I met you. Glad Draus saved you. Glad you're here with us.+

TOTAL TEMPORAL COLLAPSE: 53%

Time was quite literally running out, but if he was to go now, it was better to give his friend whatever solace he could offer. Something for the future. *+This world. This existence. It's made for monsters. But you're still here. Everything is ruined. But you're still alive. And the future is coming. You still matter. Your duty isn't done. There is still a difference to make. Still a Fallen Heaven to mend. We're here for more than ourselves now. So burn. Burn for yourself. Burn for all you want to fight for. Give all you can for what matters. Die empty. Die clean. Go no other way. Make things right.+*

Kae released a sigh. *+Okay. I... I'll miss—+*

+Yeah,+ Avo replied, interrupting her. +I know.+

Truly knowing that you were wanted, that your absence would wound someone imprinted something in Avo. Something that was more than a feeling. All the moments they shared might be but memories when this was over, but her restored existence was a deed he could be proud of. An act of genuine good.

He turned his mind to the present members of his cadre as he prepared himself.

+See you soon, consang,+ Chambers said, chuckling. But the man was scared. His mind was screaming. He wasn't ready. Human. Like Kae. Like Marlowe.

Avo gave what release he could to Chambers as well. *+You're worth dying for, Aedon. Worth living for too. Never give up on yourself.+*

For the second time that day, something inside Chambers' broke.

Dice and Draus' minds formed a symmetrical discomfort as took in his passing. Neither wanted to see him lost; neither would be broken by his passing. Good.

Good soldiers. Good weapons. Good comrades.

The waif passed a memory into him, of him speaking to her back in the George Washington, asking her about her sheath. Giving her a choice. Making her a person.

There didn't need to be words. The deed spoke for himself.

Suddenly, he found himself wishing he had the time to speak with Cas and Denton again; White-Rab, Essus, and Calvino. Not Kant or the ethics committee. No need to sour his death.

But before his possible end, he found his thoughts not consumed by fear or hunger or rage, but lament. He needed to see more colors. He needed to win this war. He needed to watch over his cadre; his people.

His people.

When did he start having a people?

When did he start caring about that?

When did the humanity settle so deep?

[You know, Avo,] Abrel said, making her voice heard over all the other templates. **[You–You’re a long way up from being a monster. A long way up.]** She didn’t hate him any less for murdering her cadre, but hate was not the only thing she held for him. Respect. *Adoration*. Hope. Hope that he wouldn’t die. **[Yeah. Look into my heart. Be half-strand one last time. Now, come on, Dreamer. Let’s see if you can stand and deliver one more time.]**

A chorus of agreements sounded inside him. His other Heavens trembled, the Woundmother struggling against his potential fate, asking him to remember apotheosis’ glory; the Fardrifter taking in the moment with calmness, like a storm finally settling; the Techplaguer somehow anticipating its own restoration rather than worrying about its coming end.

He was on another precipice. Just like when he plunged into the Deep Nether. Just like when he first faced the Low Masters in the Oversec. Just like when he died at the hands of Little Vicious. The threshold called to him; a moment of irreversible change.

Only one path left. Time to take it.

+Avo! Wait!+ Kae’s call made him pause.

TOTAL TEMPORAL COLLAPSE: 54%

+D-do it,+ she said. It took reading directly from her mind for him to understand. The choice she was making now—what she was permitting him to do. +If it can help you at all.+

The very act would crack her from within. She wasn’t ready to deal with the trauma, and would almost certainly need to be killed and resurrected after. But still, she was resolute. And more importantly, willing.

+Still up to you,+ Avo said. It took more than he was comfortable admitting to resist burning her immediately. But he was the one who fixed her. Something felt wrong about being the one to ignite her again. +It will hurt you.+

+Pain’s bad. Losing you will be worse. N-now, please, I’m getting—+

He seized the moment. Within his Soul combusted a second flame as he detached his ghost from the rest of the cadre. The link binding him to Kae flared and swept through her entire ego. Her subsumption was nigh instant and so unprepared she was that Avo had a chance to stabilize her against the pressure.

[I—what?] Kae muttered, her template forming. Knowledge expanded within him. Years of thaumaturgy, of experiments conducted and Heavens created, of Souls grafted and canons perfect, of a life lived and lost. Of friends and a love now gone and dust.

Walton couldn't have known what he was taking from her. Couldn't have known what Kae's life meant to her, who she could have become. The loss within her was filled by her efforts, by survival. But there was an absence there that never had a chance to heal. But before, were only despair was her companion in those quiet moments, there now kindled a fury, and with it simmered hope.

With a casual thought, he had Kae tear all the water out of her body and cast her into a resurrection. The template stayed though. Would be staying with him for as long as he lived.

Which could be less than a few more minutes.

[Alright, Avo,] the Agnos breathed inside him. **[Let's see if we can be our own miracle today.]**

With her encouragement, Avo gave himself unto the tapestry and thrust the entwinement of his Soul and mind both into the breach. Yet, his perception did not unravel, nor did he die. Instead, he found himself falling, pulled into the ever-changing nature of reality's architecture along rivers of rushing gold.

Time traveled forward evermore, spreading through all other aspects of existence, forming a frame to contain all things alongside the concept of space. Where Chronology shone, the nature of correspondence was shapeless and colorless—a vacuum to encompass all things. They existed around other patterns, accomodated them, shifted in relativity to them, and as Avo plunged further into the tapestry, he felt more than he understood and learned the vibrations of reality.

His cog-feed flickered while his ghosts grew faint. He was but a droplet falling, and falling, and falling, but the void never approached, and he never moved beyond the temporal currents carrying him onward, always shrinking before the totality.

The totality.

And then Avo noticed something. Noticed a transparent chain linked to him, like a line clinging onto a diver from a distant surface. As he looked up, the realm above was not a sky but a parallel sea roiling with its own variant of chaos. Beneath its translucent, Avo saw clusters of countless accretions, watched as ghosts painted trails through the dim of the Nether.

In this, he took in the fullness of reality's nature. The Nether was a barricaded realm above, and the rest of existence splashing constantly below.

Through Avo, however, the layers of existence were bridged. Connected, and from him began to flow a new color into the tapestry, spilling out as threads from his consciousness. Where once he was weightless, he now felt himself coalescing in existence, scarring the supple fabric of all that was.

There were no words to convey being ontologically transformed. To conjoin the thresholds of mind and matter once more. If compared, Avo would paint himself as a new conceptual expression; a collection of traits, of matter, of deeds reforged by an eldritch flame into a living embodiment—a metaphysical Domain.

His templates began to melt into the tapestry, and bit by bit, Avo came apart with them. As he did, he felt his awareness expand and broaden, and a pang of symmetry resonated within him, calling to a single other entity across the breadth of this broken universe.

Standing apart from the rest of reality, another bridge extended upward into the Nether, another entity that trespassed the borders between cognition and baseline existence.

The Gatekeeper... we're changing. We're becoming something else—something like—

But Ignorance's soft whispers were as if breaths given to a hurricane, and Avo heeded little. Instinct became what guided him. Instinct, and something more.

New branches began to spread out from him, burrowing across the flesh of reality and conjoining with other patterns. Echoes reverberated within him, called to him as if voices bouncing off the walls of a well. He was still being drawn across the currents of time, but no longer was he only being carried, rather, he was merged.

He was a part of time.

He was a part of force.

He was a part of space.

He was a part of reality.

Slowly, he began to part the writhing turmoil of the tapestry, feel the patterns that became the world around him, that became him as well. He found himself a skein made from threads of interwoven metaphysics and separated himself easily using the viaduct feeding him into the Nether. From him sprouted new patterns—ones different from all the others, ones rooted solely in him, and he found his thoughts infused with a weight that wasn't there before.

More than that, however, he found the sickness gnawing at his own ontological structure—threatening to shred the patterns composing the very roots of his existence.

His battle against Veylis and the Infacer had pried the passage of time in two directions—two absolutes went to war, and his cyclers reaped the fullness of the damage. All beings were bound to time's vector, and there were but two directions. Forward. Or back. But golden ichor was spilling out from Avo like blood, and he realized the severity of his damage.

His Soul existed in its own liminal expanse, adapted new rules from baseline reality, and laid its own temporal track via its cyclers—the dragons.

The dragons were now bleeding, dying, and about to halt entirely and let the past wash over him.

Right now, his distended cyclers were spraying excess into the world around him, subtly accelerating time across the enclave. But they were increasingly coming apart, and soon, they would succumb, fail to loop back into themselves, to sustain their existence upon a perpetual revolution.

They had been torn. Flayed apart as Avo used them to pry against a superior force—a greater *skein* in the tapestry. Some parts of dragons were trailing backward like tendons pulled free from flesh and swaying behind a hyper-accelerated body.

That was the reason why his cyclers were still stained with Rend, why his ego wasn't outright destroyed. Parts of him were trailing backward into the past. Into oblivion. He was unraveling from the cyclers first, and if he didn't fix this soon, the rest of him would follow. But maybe this could be used toward his salvation.

Maybe he could cast these dragons unto the nothing that pursued and replace them with something new. Or perhaps he could patch them back together somehow—keep them while transferring the Rend he sustained over to his Hells.

A faint voice in the depths of his awareness guided him and called upon a recent memory. The visage of the Hungers formed in his mind, dragons fused to dragons, with wounds flowing back over into the real. He heeded the instruction and using the tendrils sprouting from his ontology stitched his will into the pattern of chronology.

The damage he sustained left his cyclers in tatters and warped his Heavens into their structure. There was no way to detach his cyclers because their patterns were collapsing into the other Domains now. Separation would be like untangling individual fibers from a thousand different strings, and even with the Agnos residing in his consciousness, he possessed neither the time nor the skill to achieve such a goal.

Instead, he moved to a simpler, more reliable option. One that would please the Woundmother if he succeeded. Or wouldn't matter at all if he failed.

He began directing all the loose and damaged threads trailing backward into oblivion over into each other. Unused to directly weaving his own ontology, it took more than a few tries to sense, locate, and seize his entropic strings of ontology and guide them into each other. As

Rend-severed end touched Rend-severed end, he felt a changing pulse through him as symmetry sang its notes. His cyclers were fusing back into place, the Rend colliding, recoiling, and blunted from their path backward seeking another vessel to unmake with disbelief.

A darkness began to percolate within his being. His Hells were filling. All of them. The build-up came gradually at first, but with each end, he connected, each dragon he transplanted onto another, the entropy climbed faster, and Avo found himself lacking the necessary capacity to content.

Yet, his ontological pattern held spots of emptiness, a skein that could thicken further. Drawing upon all the Heavens he claimed from the fallen Seekers and taking in the Heart of Noloth too, he found the Heavens greeting his presence and coming apart before him, embracing him as parted strings to coil around his building nature.

Yet, instead of his being expanding, instead of feeling the weight of new ontologies attaching to him, Avo felt only his thaumic mass increase, felt his awareness expand. Something had changed within him. Something had changed within his Frame.

But that was secondary to a new problem: his Rend was climbing faster and faster now that the debt afflicting his cyclers was being channeled over into his Hells. As the last few strings of his broken cyclers were joined, he found even his newly added Hells to be insufficient to bear the toll that was inflicted upon him.

The price of facing an ontologically heavier adversary in direct conflict was scarred into him. But there was a way out. He could feel his way out.

Instead of crawling back out of the crevice he entered, Avo simply *ascended* and found himself surfacing within his Soul. As his cognition cleared, he found the liminal space altered, and more than that, he found his Soulfire *churning* instead of rippling. Revolving. Like thoughtstuff.

And as he thought, his ghosts crawled across existence using spreading arteries made from blood, lightning, shadow, and light. As everything finally came into focus, he found his far mind more occupied, and a new layer locked directly above his Soul.

“Master,” the Woundmother peeped, taking in the burning mindscape it was now partially fused to. **“What have you done?”**