

Do you know how the Sunderwilds got its name?

It's quite simple.

“Sunder” to describe the damage, for cracked is the tapestry of existence.

“Wilds” to express how the entropic madness leaks, the patterns and laws of reality bleeding into a festering wound and spilling out into broader stability beyond, creeping forward as slithering vines; roots of impossibility spreading deep into the bones of the material, giving rise to forests of madness.

The Guilds make efforts to trim them sometimes. Prune the branches of entropy that stray too close. But they are not eradicated. Not completely. Not when so many serve as good testing grounds for new weapons. Or clandestine locations to mask military checkpoints, scrying installations, or an easy way to fill up Rendbombs for the next war.

Mostly, however, the Sunderwilds keeps itself contained, for the entropic foliage spreading from each break is not of a unified front, and like there cannot be a single ruling dream, so too can't there be a totally commingling forest. These woods devour each other as much as they do us, and one ruled by pithy cynicism might find themselves remarking: “Hark. See existence. See all is at war—the natural state of things.”

Such is the consolation of a FATED living in their... cultured grooves. For the Elysiums and Tiers are tamed madness, in fact, and the impossibilities there are merely engendered to convenience humanity instead of forcing them to suffer inimicality.

For the wilders who live in the depths, their natures and habits are strange and savage to the outsiders, for the sky they know is not one we share, and the rules that bind them are not ones we know.

In my travels, I have encountered many enclaves. But there are more things out in the roiling swaths of madness. Tribes unmoored from broader arms of humanity. Places so broken that coexistence with the denizens that reshaped themselves to survive will be impossible in the axiomatic sense. Wretched dregs of humanity that would be better graced with euthanasia than continued existence.

But still, there is beauty in my endeavor. For beyond the false histories provided by the Guilds, I remain a chronicler of great truths. A new history of a world after the fall.

If you are cycling through these memories, if my memories are not destroyed or suppressed by the Guilds, I ask that you spread them far and wide. Let the others know what plights our kin-turned-cousins now face. Let all know just how much of the world we lost, and of the greatest atrocities committed by Jaus.

-[Redacted]

19-22

Horizon Lost (II)

HEAVEN: [SE-7777]

->CANONS OF (REFLECTION), (BLOOD), (BIOLOGY), (LUMINOSITY) UPDATED

Building the faults into SE-7777's Heaven ended up being a straightforward task. Interlacing the oscillations of his Soulfire with the threaded patterns representing each Domain, he rebuilt a few canons to include certain caveats to ensure his cadre could pass this section of the wall without issue.

All it would take is a triggering of a corresponding miracle to exempt them from the touch of SE-7777's metaphysical-spatial restrictions. Draus' reflective passages. Avo's haemokinesis. Kae's spatial containment. Dice's invulnerable luminosity. Chambers bioform generation. Even Essus' gateways were included.

Now, the final obstacle between them the world beyond New Vultun stood open, and spreading fissures Avo left in the walls belonged solely to them.

"And that should do it," Kae said, looking at their successful alterations, a note of satisfaction and pride in her voice. "There were so many details—So many Domains and canons to look through. I thought I was going to get lost after so long but... I should have never doubted myself."

Avo heeded her words and examined the stretching chains of ontology flowing through the Heaven. It lacked the cultural themes and concrete aesthetics ingrained in most Heavens, seeming more like a multicolored ball of chaotic yarn than anything else. Its structure danced between solid, gas, liquid, light, and particulates. Every Domain exhaled an aspect of their canons through its structure, creating an unstable miasma of shifting effects.

The key detail here was how each border Heaven seemed to interact with another. As Avo attuned his awareness to the very edges of his Soul, he felt the links stretched on still, but breaking and spraying out in all directions, spreading over the city not as if a fence, but more like individual links of straw making up a nest. The border walls were communicating with each other through slight vibrations, each capable of redirecting some of its miracles to reinforce a distant Heaven—or to connect to anchor should one of its current binding fail.

Where pylons only dotted New Vultun's borders in the material, its metaphysical emanations domed the city entirely. All that moved, all that existed, all that was within the threshold of the city had to capitulate to the laws of the thresholds if they wanted to pass. With almost every Domain in existence included and build patches persisting over years, only the esoteric

Heavens created through clandestine means or paired from reclusive Fallwalkers granted bypass.

All others faced a choice between capitulation, bribery, or an outright struggle against more than a few thousand Heavens, with eight among them bearing an extremely high spherage.

The benefits of Rend dispersal that the Maw provided, likewise, did not even need to be answered.

RESURRECTION - 23%

“Done here, then,” Avo said, watching as his resurrection filled. “Any other things to review? Adjustments needed.”

“No. I don’t think so.” A beat of hesitation passed through Kae. “But I think I will stay here a while longer and observe things. I wish to study the border Heavens more deeply and discover if we might be able to affect all of them from one point. Or there is any other benefit I can claim for us.”

Such was a wise plan. Technically, with Kassamon subverted and Chambers in their systems, they could have logged their visit as lasting a full eight hours and then just left without anyone being the wiser. Or caring. But still, somehow Avo expected this of Kae and was passively glad that her passion and his interests coincided so neatly.

“Won’t hurry you,” Avo said. “Can stay as long as you want. Take in all the details. Know that you can extract at any time using the mirror. Or just manifest your Heaven and get beyond the border. If our changes are in effect.”

“Yes. If.” Her Soul turned to his and he felt a wry hint of amusement radiating from her. “Would you mind testing it for me? I would like to do it myself, but I prefer someone else suffering the backlash and rupturing on my behalf.”

Avo chuffed a note of affirmation. *“Of course. Chambers will be deeply missed.”*

“Will he, though?” Kae asked, teasingly.

A pause actually followed. Despite the mockery, the answer was one easily given. *“Yes. He has been... more than what I expected. All of you have.”*

Kae didn’t quite know how to reply, and so she just turned her attention back to SE-7777 itself. *“It will feel odd when I resurrect. I wonder if I will return with the proxy attached still, and if that will affect my memories immediately. The moment I died, I remembered everything about who I was, and lost my cover memories.”*

“Probably not then,” Avo said. “You don’t forget yourself. Or the Soul doesn’t. Not really. It can even pick and choose.”

Kae hummed. *“Indeed. Indeed! Very true. But... why can’t your consciousness exhibit both the traits of a stable Metamind and the Conflagration?”*

“Not fully sure,” Avo replied. “Suspect the war-mind the Low Masters used on me to be the main factor. Might be metaphysically binding. Ignorance. Also think it the reason behind my lapses.”

“Yes... We should do some testing for that as well, once we are in the Sunderwilds,” Kae said.

“Expect to be doing a lot of that. Testing.”

“Of course.”

Silence followed a comfortable wordlessness settling between them. Avo sank into the depths of his Soul and accelerated his resurrection to maximum capacity. *“Call us if you need us.”*

She hummed a note of affirmation as she tuned the pace of her own resurrection to the maximum amount it was capable of while still observing SE-7777. *“I will be resurrecting soon as well. Without the Stillborn bridging me to SE-7777, my metaphysical access will be lost.”*

Avo hadn’t thought of that. And even with her at full capacity, her Frame was still slower by far when it came to uploading her ego back into reality. Difference in cyclers. Regardless, they existed peacefully in one another’s orbit for the remainder of their shared time, remaining wordless until after Avo ascended once more.

RESURRECTION - 88%... 100%

IMPLANTING NOUS

ONTOLOGY REVERTED

RESURRECTION COMPLETED

MEMORY RESTORED

SOUL ONLINE

IGNITING THAUMIC CYCLER: 17,888 THAUM/c

LOADING [ERRR]----

Ghosts - [26,793,352]

Reslotted in his sheath, Avo felt his senses flash into existence and found himself looking up at the protective lining of the dome. Pushing himself off the floor of the reactor room using his Echoheads, he channeled his **Haemokinesis** and the flagging folds of spatial reality peeled away from him. It was like the waters of an ocean parting unnaturally away from one's body, the sensation uncanny and liberating at the same time.

*{Looks like it **worked**}* both iterations of Draus spoke to him through his ansible and from within the Conflagration.

He just grunted in response and cast a new directive toward "Nandu." *{Need you to stay here. Keep an eye on "Iomae." Keep perimeter secure. Can follow after us once she returns. Remove your proxy then. Or stay here. Up to you.}*

{Synced,} Nandu said.

{You're not watching some messed up shit on the job, are you?} Draus asked joining their call.

{What? No. Wait, am I that much of a fuck-up usually?}

Draus chuckled lowly. *{If you only knew...}*

{Shit. Can I stay me right now but get a new face?} Nandu asked.

{Decide after you take off the proxy mind,} Avo answered. *{See how you feel then. Need something from you right now. Open a path back out for me. Leaving back through the mirror.}*

"So," Draus said, encased in the latticed flows of a liquid matter cocoon as he boarded the Manta through a panel of glass, "way's clear?"

"Seems like it," Avo said. He linked his Neurodeck to the ship's systems, the static of his Sprites bleeding into the local network. High-tech sensory feeds expanded windows in his cog-feed and multiple heads-up displays formed in his mind's eye, capable of being called up with but a thought. "Triggered my Haemokinesis earlier. Border's Heaven peeled away from me."

"I saw," Draus said. "Think it's trying not to touch my glass either. Guess that means there's only one thing left to do."

"Yeah. Peel the paint. Seek the horizon."

Draus had her Meldskin active so he couldn't see her face, but her template knew the original well, and both sported a feral smile at that statement. "Is Kae or Chambers comin' along?"

"Maybe later. Kae wanted to continue studying Heaven. Might discover other exploitable aspects."

The Regular snorted something of a laugh. "Fuckin' nerd."

"Tell her you said that," Avo replied.

"I'll tell her myself," Draus said. "Used to tell her all the time back when we was in the Tiers." She paused. "Didn't think I was ever gonna see her again. Well. Who she used to be."

An awkward silence followed. Some of the smart matter opened beside them, allowing Tavers, Dice, and Essus to peek their heads through.

"Is this the wondrous fucking moment in the show where the cold, mean Reg thanks the tall, dark, and not-so-handsome cannibal?" Tavers asked.

"Nah. His ego's big enough as it is. 'Sides. He's already got another of me runnin' inside him. Ain't no compliment greater than that to give."

Essus' head swung between them, his face torn between a look of incredulity and exasperation. "How did you two get here? I remember... I remember I had to stop you from killing each other."

"Failed there," Avo and Draus said concurrently. They shared a mutual smugness thereafter.

"Snuffed him plenty of times," Draus said.

"Took out her eyes," Avo added.

The former FATELESS just blinked. "I see..."

Tavers reached over and clapped him on the shoulder. "Son. You're too mentally stable for this. Just stop thinking about it."

The Manta's grav-drive projected a cone of force from the rear of the vessel. The smart fluids comprising the exterior of the stealth ship rebuilt themselves to fit a configuration of speed as the tip of the ship grew shaper, and a wall of large nozzles formed behind.

Grav-System stabilized

A countercurrent of force settled on Avo as his own protective gimbal formed around him. With a thought, Tavers commanded the Manta to soar, and they plunged forth, whipping out like a spear seeking the horizon.

Much like a high-end aero, the internal grav-systems counteracted the spiking g-forces as they sped outward. Presently, they were going at a steady [352 Kph]. Nothing remotely absurd, except that it hadn't even been a second since they started accelerating. Sailing over the SE-7777 pylon, Avo expanded his Haemokinesis around the ship and braced for any final surprises.

A long valley ran far beyond them, past the curve of the horizon, intersected at points by other parts of the outer Maw. At the very limits of New Vultun, a vast concentric ring separated the wilds beyond from the megacity within, and not a few kilometers past that were the first few refugee sanctuaries, their layouts and denizens forming in Avo's awareness. He felt the matter that comprised the local environment, the biologies and bodies of the people, the heat in the air, the static between ferromagnetic constructs, the flow of the winds, the placement of shadows, and even the transmission of signals.

With his three Heavens, the gatherings of humanity were as if beacons competing for his attention. Beside him, Draus was likely the same way, already scying and spying on the locals, using the light around them to root herself in new reflections.

As they sped past SE-7777's area of effect, Avo formed a lattice around the ship and triggered his Incog. Now, they were effectively unviewable by all accounts, a lone vessel slicing along the bottom of Layer One. The sections of panels simulating parts of the sky were long left behind, made only for the districts and nowhere more. Here ran stretches of naked alloy, the bones of the structure showing, the frayed edges allowing natural light to seep in from the curve beyond.

"You all know something..." Tavers said, sounding strangely unlike herself. Avo felt her swallow.

The Woundshaper hummed. ***"Curious. She is nervous. But no rival huntresses are present to occupy the old one's worry."***

"...I've never been this far out of the city before," the squire said. She looked at the others for solidarity, but with Dice, Draus, and Essus, she found only blank expressions or uncertain blinks.

"Me neither," Avo finally said. "Furthest beyond." His words seemed to offer some reassurance but with legions of other lives simulated within his Conflagration, his familiarity with the world beyond was already present.

"Well," Tavers breathed. "Here's to us New Vultunites exploring lost horizons, huh?"

"Yeah," Avo said. "Lost horizons."

And as the Manta amped its velocity up further, the sound barrier shattered around it with a sound akin to a whipcrack and the members of the cadre surged forward, into the rising

pre-dawn light, charted for the sanctuaries clustered along the outer perimeter, and the Sunderwilds beyond.

SETTING LOBBY TO PRIVATE

INITIALIZING SIMULATED MINDSCAPE

LINKING TO METAMINDS

->[ABREL GREATLING]

->[UTHRED GREATLING]

->[VATOR GREATLING]

Abrel phased into the mindscape's existence with a blink and found herself seated at the end of a long table in a featureless gray cube built for Nether-based interrogations.

Truth be told, she had expected them to start conducting these sessions a long time ago, but instead, the Paladins had mostly left her alone. Banished to her solitude within the voidship's cell with nothing but her own thoughts to keep her company.

Her own thoughts and memories. And dreams of the creature that claimed her. The monster that burned her mind and reshaped her to his will.

Avo. Her mind was a forest when it came to the ghoul. Her brother's murderer—the devourer of her cadre. A complex mix of hate, confusion, awe, and despair filled her when she thought of him, but the seed of his will had been planted deep, and he had designs in mind for her that she couldn't refuse.

It was with him in mind that her nerves grew taut with tension as glitching phantoms painted two newcomers into shape just across the table.

Abrel phased into existence and found herself seated at the end of a long table in a featureless room. As their shapes were stitched together before her eyes, the avatars of the twosome formed, and Abrel instantly knew who they were.

The first was broader in the shoulders, but shorter. That was not what revealed his identity. Instead, it was his perfect posture and the stillness in his stance.

The other individual was glancing off at the walls beside, their attention drifting. Ever-moving. Trying to take in every detail in the room. He had always been something of an enjoyer of the grand show that was life, absorbing the scenes like he watching an opera. But there came moments where he himself ascended the stage, and that was when he changed from audience to artist, and what an ugly artist he was.

Abrel let out a false breath as she steadied herself. This was going to be worse than any Paladin interrogation. She had no idea how her family managed to secure a private conference with her, but she knew the favor couldn't have come cheap.

As the artifacts composing the two finally finished loading, Abrel met the gaze of her father, Uthred Greatling without flinching and assumed her role, folding her arms behind her back as an Instrument greeting her Authority.

"Authority Greatling," she said, keeping her voice firm and clear.

"No longer," he replied. A sudden confusion spread through her as he shook his head. "At ease, Abrel. I must speak to you. As father to daughter. And I must tell you what you and your brother have cost this family."