

The Nether was never meant to be a prison, but it served as a perfect one all the same.

Alas, the masters of Noloth were as much slaves to their nature as the gods were. So desperate were they to see the world conform to their desired delusions that they revealed their hand preemptively.

Was it hubris that made them think we would not notice? That I would just trust blindly? Or was their failure something simply lesser? Baser?

More human.

I thank you all for your prompt responses. For ceasing your squabbles to settle matters. We will keep the remainder of the Nolothi population intact. But their masters must be banished. The worst of their culture must be repressed.

I think as I grow older, as I study the world, study our behaviors, our natures are entwined with the divine. Mirrored in a way. We are the way we are, for we are singular silos of awareness. consciousnesses that have been molded by society and in turn mold society.

Our gods are cultures distilled, zeitgeists unleashed, and powers absolute. Hubris and madness cannot restrain them, for they exist beyond consequence. For a time, at least. Perhaps they are what we would be if everyone were to merge into an amalgam. A singular ego channeling the experiences of countless lesser minds, with all the potential to reshape existence, and no penalties for what they break.

It is an ugly thing to face. But liberating. For it shows the flaws in our hopes. And rights our path toward functional progress.

I called you all tonight to compose a summation of Noloth's dismantling. I am honored by your prompt responses. And the refrain you practiced during the pacification process. I understand it is not our usual way, but that is to change if we are to live better lives. But as for the matter of who will serve as warden for the city eternal...

Here. Allow me to show you.

[MEM-DATA MISSING]

This is the Gatekeeper. It is unfinished, but as a prototype, it will serve my point. It lacks many aspects we can see in a human. Indeed, when I dreamed of its inception, I desired something that... was apart from us. Devoid of our insufficiencies.

I formed the Gatekeeper as a concept. It is "purity" empty of all thoughts beyond its designated task. Cultureless. With little personality beyond devotion to its function. Capable of imbibing information from the world without succumbing to corruption.

It is beyond the avarice of any man, beyond the foolishness of any warrior, beyond the cowardice of any craven.

As of now, it bears the fundament of the Nolothic Ark and acts as an anchor for the threshold.

I have never been one to hide my thoughts from you. Not even when it was to my own benefit. I see the Gatekeeper as the development. A manufactured caretaker to blunt our habits of self-destruction.

Even with the power to channel the various Heavens tied to the realm of minds, it has only done its duty. Only held itself in refrain.

In it, I have seen the path ahead. Glimpsed what we must do.

We cannot bear this power. Already, I see the corruption of hearts. Already, it is too much. Even for the greatest among us. In breaking the gods we have ended one tyranny. Now, we must suffer the agony of surrender to avert another.

For the final design to be realized, power must not be held in our hands. We are not ready. We may not be ready for a long time.

We are to rebuild a house from these shackles. A community for which we are to flourish and learn. Spared of death. Governed by purity. Educated by our prodigal kin.

Such are the immediate steps I desire. In simplicity: the surrender of our Heavens over to proven custodians, followed by their mass manufacture once the [REDACTED] is finally rooted in existence.

We are melting our shackles down. Making new chains. But this time, it will be a fence instead of a collar. This time, it will save us instead of oppressing us, pulling us back from the brink to keep us from falling, rather than our necks.

We have come too far to be undone by our nature.

-Mem-Log of Jaus Avandaer to the Gathered Representatives of the Remaining Guilds after the "Trial of the Hungers"

21-6

Blood of Dragons (III)

Nine different minds. Nine new Godclads under his sway. Four of Stormtree. Four of Highflame.

Not a bad haul for a brief dip across a subvert.

Avo wanted more.

[Oh, Jaus,] template-Kare groaned, suffering from a clash of feelings.

Indeed, without Avo's intervention, the Bloodthane and Instrument would have reignited hostilities, and Kare herself would have been drawn in. Not ideal, for her or the city. The best outcome there would be their incapacitation, but even with the greatest among the Guilders being a Sphere 4, it was still only her and Paladin Sandrupal.

Avo's influence made sure things didn't come to that. Escalation was prevented and order was upheld.

The cost, however, was leaving nine Godclads under the sway of an increasingly incomprehensible monster. If Avo could even be regarded as such a meager thing anymore.

+Don't worry,+ he replied, delighting himself as he coursed through their memories, an invisible virus swimming carried along trains of thought. *+Won't hurt your mentor. But need him. Need his insight. We're going to all do wonderful things together. Great things. City is going to be safer because of you.+*

He cast the truth of his intent into her, but his words still failed to assuage. If Kare had a body, she would be biting her lip right now. Instead, she found herself bothered by festering thoughts—inflammations of doubt and worry. A lack of trust still existed between her and Avo, preventing them from achieving true cooperation.

[I trust you about Paladin Sandrupal,] Kare said, mastering her worries. **[There are many things you could have done. To me and the city. Terrible things. But you are... more than a monster.]** She attempted a diplomatic note, mustering her strength for more uncomfortable territory. **[But the others...]**

+Need them,+ Avo replied. *+No promises for them. We're at war. Even if they don't know. They want the world to be their way. I have another design. A better one. Will consume them if I need them. Will use them however I have to. Not going to lie about that. And they won't be the last.+*

Kare wasn't sure how to take that. **[I just wish you asked me first. Isn't that what you believe? Giving people choice.]**

+Yes. But you were losing control. And I wanted to test my new changes. Indulge.+ Avo admitted his hypocrisy openly. Easily. He supposed it was both a good and bad thing. But his encounter with the Hungers had taught him better of denial. And *self-delusion.*

To achieve his desired idealization, he needed to face these problems and consider if he wished to alter the world—or himself.

One could lie to the world. Peddle whatever poison they wanted. But to turn the same act inward was an act of self-harm all the same.

+Haven't done anything to them yet. Only inside for now. Taking looks. No plans cemented yet.+ He paused. +Could negotiate limits in the future. Deeds we can provide each other. Will take time to consume them. My mind isn't flame right now. It's moving emptiness. Will take patience to tatter all the sequences in a palace. You have time. Do some thinking.+

And with his piece said, he buried the dialogue into real-Kare's mind.

The Paladin lurched with a start, suddenly aware of all that was happening, of the hidden hand behind her recent success at diplomacy.

Her ghosts twisted inward, grasping at phantoms that weren't there anymore.

Still, he watched here. Through nine sets of other eyes, nested within nine different minds. He sequenced Auto-Seances inside them as well. Something to ensure he could access them again even if a disruption managed to unmake his splinter.

In time, they would be new patient zeros. Spreading his influence. Feeding him constant streams of intelligence and understanding.

Right now, he wanted to make his gains exponential. Discover what he could truly do when not hunted by the Hungers and their Low Masters.

Centuries of Necrojacking experience reverberated within his ego as Avo called upon Peace's memories. Skills he couldn't have mastered in a single lifetime fused into place and the nature of traumas became bare to him. Memories sang out to him. A billion minds shattered by the Famine of Peace sang their lessons, fed his Ghostjack with an archive of patterns, an inventory of torment each more exquisite and unique than the last.

More than that, he felt his intuition sharpen, the sensation as if a new sense was growing out from his mind. Avo *understood* what broke a person now. Better than ever before. All the little details necessary to apply maximum leverage when disfiguring one's self-perception.

It was a glorious thing.

And one that he desired to share.

Chambers lacked the taste for this, but White-Rab? Well, the man was due another gift. A mind like his shouldn't be obsoleted and wasted, but amplified and cultured. The same with the rest of his cadre. The same with his subverts.

If the greatest color to behold was the materialization of one's own ideals. But even so, a single being could only do so much, constrained by the narrowness of perspective and the limitations of their material attributes. Such a boundary was vanishing for him in mind and body, but still, he could only possess one Frame, and the decisions came from his base ego, personhood was, if nothing else, a legacy of experiences.

Drawing his awareness back to the near waters of his sheathe, he considered his cadre.

He considered Denton: more machine than woman, inscrutable still to him.

He considered Chambers: once little more than a thug, now a man amidst change—within and without.

He considered Draus: a Regular fighting a greater war than she ever dreamed; he was certain to make her greatest desires come true.

He considered Dice: A prodigal daughter returned. A shadow of a human. But a mind unshakable.

He considered Tavers: a squire embroiled in machinations that overshadow even her own legend, seeking salvation for a son she thought broken.

He considered Kae: the Agnos owed in revenge and knowledge. Both of which he could provide. And beyond.

What *couldn't* they do? Who couldn't they become?

The questions made Peace inside him slither, the Low Master awakened from his stupor in outrage. **[You stupid fuck. You rot-cunt bastard. You take from us. You take from the people that created you—the culture that made you, and now you're thinking of giving parts of us away? Using our warminds to improve your "friends"]**

+Yes,+ Avo replied. It was the easiest answer he ever gave.

[You have no idea—]

+I do,+ Avo said, sinking to the truth of the matter once more. +I want people to tell me I'm wrong. To fight me. To fight for what they want. I want to understand them. Kill them. Break them. And then I want to give back to them. Or the other way around. I want us to emerge.

Changed. Better. Or different. +

Peace sneered. Avo added tears of rage to his face. It suited the constant whining better. **[They're going to destroy you. The Guilds—this world is going to break you down and destroy you.]**

+Maybe. But that will be my fault. My failure. My defeat. And that doesn't scare me. Not anymore. Learned to separate sensation of pain. Understand it now as feedback. Loss is meant to hurt. Injustice claws at our minds. There is a language to this. A pattern. But a pattern is only real when there is something else. Something other than it. A contract. An antagonist. Or companion. +

Avo inhaled. Time flowed around him. And when his focus slipped, so did his awareness. *+You are hurt. That is most of what you are by now. But you lie to yourself about why you suffer. Couldn't separate your physical defeats from philosophical degeneration. Or maybe you just don't see. Maybe you're just too human. But it's too late now. Need to step out of the cradle. And do more than dream. +*

He banished the Low Master before the creature could further whimper. Days prior, Avo would have simply silenced the Famine. Derived joy from his impotent rage. Now? Now he had grander designs to manifest.

Diverting only a trickle of his cog-cap to the nine splinters enmeshed in his newest subverts, Avo committed threw himself toward seizing other opportunities.

Kare had been a bountiful start, but the city was still in disarray.

There was looting to be done while the smoke was still settling, and he went about doing just that.

Elegant-Moon's proved to be an immediate disappointment when he found her unreachable. There was a faintness of presence there. Trickle of thoughtstuff. He felt sure she wasn't gone, but it felt as if she was drowned in a field of constant distortion on her end.

[Perhaps I am dead,] template-Elegant-Moon mused without much rancor. **[Perhaps I have finally been killed.]**

Avo doubted it. She was still far too useful an asset for the No-Dragons to be cast aside in such a way. The more likely truth was that her Metamind was temporarily disabled somehow. Persistently disrupted in the aftermath of her "escape."

Kassamon, contrarily, was quite easy to reach. Updating himself on the man's memories and studying the scene playing across the Paladin's cog-feed, Avo found himself intruding on a pursuit in progress.

A blurred cityscape flickered past Kassamon as he closed in on his target. He traveled as an accelerating ripple, a wavelength thinning to a rising needle. All things in motion moved contrary to him, caught in the riptide of his Heaven of Speed. This included the lashing bolt of lightning that as the manifested Fulgerhound—and the payload of warheads it was trying to deploy.

Peering into the Paladin's memories and out using his senses, Avo learned that he was currently directly above the luxury district of Meddhamet up in the Throat, a place with its death tax primarily assigned to Sanctus. Curved structures of matte-black plastic formed the locality's equivalent to a megablock, the complexes all leaning against one another, a network of streets and ramps built between gaps separating each curve.

The pilot of the golem had been trying to strike the city center for some reason or another.

Their presence was noticed by Exorcist patrol drones, and Kassamon was already moving to intercept when the Nether was disrupted.

After recovering, he somehow managed to locate the target once more without Exorcist support and was about to end whatever plots were in motion.

The Fulgerhound had tried to flee, and lightning was a spear that sundered skies and crossed horizons. But its movements happened on a canvas of relativity, and Kassamon's control was absolute.

A riptide of velocity tore the lashing bolt into Kassamon's grasp as he slammed into his—not even bothering to manifest his full Heaven. Currency licked at his skin, but he casually batted the ontology of the golem with a fist, his Heaven of Speed hammering deep. The blow swatted storm from matter as a long javelin-like vessel tumbled but remained in place, caught by the Paladin's grasp.

Kassamon buried his fingers into the frame of the vessel, fingers deforming alloy, shattering glass, chipping plastic. A loud squeal followed by a series of cracks followed. He opened the golem as it was cheap aluminum can, and inside, the pilot was waiting with a gun tucked against his own head.

It didn't mean much in the end. By the time Kassamon's head touched the man, Avo had already buried a splinter into the mysterious pilot's mind.

Understanding ignited in him. And grander machinations revealed themselves.

The pilot was one Thuen Diendur. A radicalized cultist of the *Unclaimed Sky* performing a suicide run. He had once been part of a FATED's entourage, but flashes from missing memories painted a portrait of betrayal and Nether-based infidelity.

Theun was given a firsthand education on why it was best to offend the hand that feeds. Especially not with matters of the heart. The standard suite of psychological and physical torture followed. Then, after all that, they left him in the gutters with parts of his body missing, and other transplants provided by his erstwhile “lover.”

That should have been the end of things, but sometimes, somehow, people live. Even when they have no business doing so.

Surviving packs of ghouls, slave catchers, juvie gangers, and more than a few encounters with thaumic phenomena, Theun made contact with an old consang in the Barrowers’ Syndicate and things went from there. Missing memories made it hard to fill in how Theun managed to purchase a golem from them along with a six-nuke payload, but whatever mem-data he had offered, it must’ve been quite the hit.

Thankfully, Avo didn’t need to suffer the indignity of detective work.

The man’s Metamind still had a session. One connected to the aforementioned old consang.

Drawing the sequences over and triggering his Auto-Seance, Avo waited to see if he would get lucky, and found himself alight with joy when he did.

A link formed. Thoughts from another mind were synchronized to his. They didn’t suspect anything when he swam out into their palace, studying the poorly arranged phantasmics and inefficient cog-cap distribution. Even at a glance, Avo could tell the sequencing was a mess before the Nether’s most recent bout of instability.

People took such poor care of themselves. Better that he claimed the mind instead.

Avo undid his first victim slowly, his splinter eating away like a fast-acting infection, performing far slower than his Conflagration did. If there was one major disappointment in his newest state, it was that it subsumed ghosts by overwriting the sequences within them. Investing more ghosts in a splinter made the process faster, but he still needed to shape his delusions into a symmetrical structure to devour existing memories without the host noticing.

A third perspective opened to him. Shadows crept away from his vision and new senses loaded into his awareness. He was in a dimly lit room, the light above him flashing, the fissuring cracks along the roof dotted by glinting eyes in the dark—families of aratnids staring down at him. Empty bottles lined the ground around him and a half-injected vial of joy made his blood flow like molasses.

A holographically presented action sequence hung in place before him, the scene paused as the protagonist loaded his pistol, an army of foes just around the corner.

This was the body of Duradel “Jawline” SchMedd. Lieutenant of the Barrow Syndicate under Omnitech and arms dealer on the side.

His mind hadn’t been clear when he took the call—both thinking it was nice to be hearing from his old friend while also questioning how he was still alive.

Theun had gone off to nuke a city center after all. Most people didn’t come back from that. But it would be a bigger and brighter end than most.

Now, it was Duradel who died first. Nulled without knowing as his ego dissolved within Avo.

New branches of comprehension are connected to his comprehension. Theun had offered mem-data on essential Sanctus personnel as well as schematics for a new Sanctus golem in the prototyping phase.

That had been more than information enough to purchase what he needed. Especially all he asked for was an old Fulgerhound golem, a couple of nukes, and some cheap intel.

[What the hell,] Duradel muttered, mind sobering. But not fast enough.

Avo expanded his influence. Veins of blood crept through the matter around him. Winds trashed through cracks and crevices. Signals drawn away from their paths—gravitating toward him. The aratnids in the ceiling skittered away, and Avo let them.

He was more interested in the **[66,412]** other people in the megablock around him.

From Duradel’s memories, most of them were Syndicate personnel. And a somewhat sizeable one at that.

[Wait—] Duradel muttered.

Their main dealings were in experimental cybernetics and arms running. Crucibles and entertainment were tertiary programs to them, but their atrocities ran a litany all the same.

It made the act that followed simple.

[No!] Duradel cried. His voice was drowned out by a chorus of sixty-two thousand more.

The massacre was a deliberately messy one. Avo converted portions of matter across the megablock into fissile material and sparked them using his Domain of Fire. Shrouds of nuclear devastation expanded within the vastness of the architecture. Avo kept his bombing to a reasonable yield—made it look like a series of smuggled detonations.

Leaving nothing but liquefied matter and missing people was suspicious. But warheads going off inside Syndicate territory was just another war being waged in the gutters.

And with all his newest converts gripped by his **Haemokinesis**, Avo skipped the annoying parts of slowly digesting ghosts and deaths, converting his splinter into a channel for which to drink in all he desired.

The new templates screamed, wailed, and plunged into an expanse of emptiness.

Corner slapped his knee and laughed, finding their sudden deaths hilarious.

Ghosts: [1,581,001]

Thaumic Output: 83,352

The death yield was hefty—but Avo knew he would soon need more. His total ghosts on the other hand were a paltry trickle compared to what he possessed days ago, but that would be remedied soon.

A few more hits like this, and he'd be more than satisfied.

His momentum was building and building.

Who was to stop him now? Who?

As dust settled, as lights winked out, Avo held the structure together using his Woundmother in tandem with the Fardrifter. He funneled smoke and fumes out from the missing chunks of the building, and hardened its remaining supports to ensure it didn't topple down on the complexes beneath it. More importantly, he layered the families and unaffiliated living the structure in protective cocoons.

More than a few would be traumatized. But they would live. At least for today.

[Practically Guild-like in your generosity, ghou!,] Abrel muttered.

He grunted in agreement. Perhaps he *should* think more about how to handle the collateral. That was going to be a persisting issue.

As he mantled his newest body, he rose from the ragged couch and made to exit the enshadowed room. Duradel wept somewhere deep in Avo's mind, traumas wracking him over and over, unable to comprehend the suddenness of the massacre, or what had just happened.

Strangely, Avo found he pitied the man. Not for his death, but the powerless of it all.

How could they have ever protected themselves from something like him?

How could he have known the Heaven of Truth was more than what it seemed?

New Vultun was more than a slaving beast to him now. It was city built upon winding secrets and enshadowed by lurking horrors.

Just because he ranked among the unknowable dangers now didn't mean he wasn't spared from them either.

He melted the doors to his room away as he strode into the darkened hallways. He wanted to see the damage he had caused. To see if anything would change inside him dosing his mind with the proximity of his deeds.

If there was anything he learned from his encounter with the Hungers, it was that ignorance—

A sudden spike of pain pulsed through Avo's chest. All three of his minds flinched as he recoiled in pain.

Back in the enclave, his cadre spun to look at him, startled by his sudden hiss.

"I'm fine," he said.

That body was, anyway.

"Duradel," however, currently had a few inches of gleaming alloy protruding from his chest. Before there was something more there. Something else Avo could feel. Beneath the matter was something akin to his Delusions, the golden flow of time carrying the shape of blade and the act of its thrust forward from the past.

There was only one person he knew who possessed such capabilities.

She made herself known with her following stoke.

A cold bar of emptiness lingered on his chest as Thousandhand extracted her blade and swept it across his neck.

He let her—abandoning his head to decapitation while using his Domain of Biology to grow another. At the same moment, he turned into the attack, driving flesh, mind, and Heavens against his fellow Columner.

It didn't matter how she found him in that instant or whatever else brought her there. He had been wanting to have this talk, and whatever the case, this saved him plenty of time.

Around them, the passage of time manifested as a rising song, and as golden ichor flowed with the blood he spun, her temporal resonance met him as scars in existence, strokes slashing into places that there—or will be.

Once again, he saw her aged face, and once again, he delighted in the surprise painting her features as he failed to fall, as tore into her with splinters and Heavens and all.

Maybe the third time was going to be the charm.