

*All of time is but a dream,
With blades bearing history, unravel the seam.
The serpent-tyrant screams its end,
Though vengeance is served, our flesh is never to be mend.*

*All our memories are but a lesson,
As are our bodies, gardens enchained to a question:
For woman and serpent are same-cycle bound,
Who then is the prisoner; the jailer, in this pattern round?*

-”Insufficiency of Vengeance” (No-Dragon Antithetical Poem)

21-4
Blood of Dragons (I)

Existence greeted Avo alongside the dissolution of his glass-made cell, revealing a new facet to its face previously unseen.

Patterns pulsed around him, rippling as if a pond struck by a falling pebble. His blood—within and without—sang, the Woundmother crooning every structure she made chimed with timbers of pealing resonance. The winds played an accompaniment, air rustling forth a million-million notes, the currents drawn across the passage of time like a bow over strings. Even that which was data thundered in existence, brushing Avo’s mind in the analogy of percussion.

He found himself aware of new and ineffable sensations, knowing the trail left by even brush of wind, every coursing stream of blood, every pattern of matter, every streak of lightning, every burst of radiation or composition of signals.

New threads tickled his gnosis, their manifestations soft and fragile against his Frame. Not yet something he could pull on. Not yet.

But they were there.

Had been there all along.

Only now was he close enough to perceive them.

Only now did he have the symmetry.

“Avo?” Draus tore him free from his reverie. He was back in base reality, the newest patterns in the tapestry blurring from his notice, escaping from sight. Avo turned his attention to his cadre and found himself displeased by their state.

Draus and Tavers were halted midstep. Both were encased in armor. Both were stable of mind. Apprehension gripped their postures, and Avo understood their uncertainty, their concern. His departure had been abrupt. Senseless. There was much they did not know. Much he didn't know either.

The others were loosely scattered in this room—on the highest level of the tower he made to oversee the enclave, red-tinged light creeping through the surrounding translucence.

Chambers' Metamind had patches lining its sequences. Cognitive cataracts, if a comparison had to be made. Leaning a partially installed console, Kae looked over Dice, the Agnos chirping constantly at the girl, the latter's mind a slowly mending bundle of misaligned memories. Drones filtered to and fro, moving overhead as trafficked a constant influx of components, assembling new machinery along the supports and walls. Sunrise warbled in mid-air, watching Avo from afar as a mostly completed swarm.

He felt them then. All of them. Their material and mental patterns, the air flowing in and out of their lung, the signals pulsing from their implants.

And dancing strings of time. Like threads unwound, leading to distant places—like vectors decorating their passage across time.

Avo shook his head and focused. He needed time to figure these things out. Understanding. But they didn't have time to dally. Conversation was a luxury he had no intention of indulging.

With a thought, his Conflagration—a once raging inferno now cut down to a shivering torch—shifted. Flames sizzled into steam. Eyes widened. Expressions changed. Perceptions narrowed.

“What the fuck.” Chambers muttered.

Such was an appropriate response.

There was much they needed to know. Much they had to ask him. Some questions he had for them as well.

Thankfully, with the new evolutions achieved by his consciousness, the inefficiency of words could be substituted for direction injections of mutual understanding.

He didn't even need to assimilate their egos anymore either.

Ghosts: [4,510]

Splinters broke from his mind, gliding across the Nether as if darting needles. They were cloned from his sequences, operating as remote fragments of his mind, their outward-facing structure passing through the realm of thoughts as something between a quiet plague and a shapeshifter.

“Going to show you all a few things,” Avo muttered, his own mind still spinning from the ordeal. “We all have questions. Me as well. Going to show you what I know.” He caught Draus shooting Kae and glance and Avo grunted in understanding. “No. Not going to burn you. Don’t need to do that for this anymore.”

The Regular faced him again, and he felt her frown beneath her Meldskin helmet.

None of them noticed when his splinters passed into them, sinking into their thoughtstuff, burrowing into their wards.

The members of his cadre didn't even respond as they were punctured.

This moment of relish compelled Avo to exhale.

Probing his companions' protections, he examined their traumas, sequences, memories, and palaces. For long, he had been an all-devouring flame, a thing of elemental devastation, ruination in the Nether made manifest.

It was a color he never expected to glimpse. The virtue of being truly overwhelming, truly dreaded, an apex predator for an entire realm. But it had also taken things from him. Stripped him of practice. Restricted him from practicing his art to the fullest extent possible. The art he inherited from his father. The art imbued into him through White-Rab's packaged memories. Him and countless more.

In this moment, he was a Necrojack again, diving through the minds of his companions, tweaking and remolding, improving and gifting.

As his splinters swept through them, they merged with various sequences, injecting new ghosts into the minds of his allies, optimizing weaknesses and constructing any phantasms he deemed essential but missing.

Above all, their wards were improved.

Avo wouldn't be surprised if the Low Masters spent all their efforts trying to hunt him and his companions down after the humiliation he just inflicted on them. The Hungers—discounting their turncoats—would not accept anything less than his complete annihilation.

He needed to ensure his cadre were hard targets. His attention skipped over to Dice. The waif was mauled in thought and memory, her inner ego still leaking through the cracked yolk of her

accretion, aspects of her memories and senses leaking outward like prolapsed organs swinging from an open wound.

And so, he sequenced unto them the best defenses he had: the grand prize he stole from the Famine of Peace.

[NO! FUCKING CUNT! THAT WAS MINE! MINE! MINE!] The Low Master's rage made it all the sweeter as Avo weaved the new barricades into shape. A constellation of complex counter-traumas flared in actively shifting plates just behind their accretions. The construct was a masterwork, each component a match for any standard ward, all of them working in concert akin to a fortress lobby composed of exponentially more ghosts, impenetrable by all but the greatest Necrojacks.

Eyes widened. Heads turned. Mouths opened.

Chambers coughed another epithet under his breath. Kae grasped her head but then turned to Avo, an inscrutable expression coming over her face when she realized her mind wasn't burning. Tavers and Draus took it with appreciative silence, while Dice was a longer job, requiring Avo to realign her devastated ego using her template as a mold before she could be cognitively enhanced.

The next item of priority was creating Metaminds. For her and all the other enclavers. There were things he couldn't predict. Things like today that left them crippled.

Directing a splinter down into the city, Avo fought back a wince as he laid eyes on the slow-healing calamity. Entire populations across the city were mentally fused, their egos as if gathered flesh kissed by a searing flame, caked into singular burns in the aftermath.

He considered dispatching more splinters down to aid them as well, but that would take time. A lot of time.

With each split, his focus slowed and his attention strained. His mind was ultimately only a high-processing tripartite still, made up of his base and two subminds. It demanded effort to direct so many actions at once. He needed to prioritize.

Right now, as he finished sequencing fortifications into his cadre—cognitive grafts that would have any other team of well-trained Necrotheurges weeks or months to complete—he began threading his experiences into them. Granting them his newest learnings.

Draus, Dice, and Chambers were simple. He bore their template within him, and so he fed their counterparts in the real with backups of data. Revelations dawned within them as he recalled all they had faced alongside him.

“You *swore*,” Chambers gasped, sounding almost giddy.

“Thanks for all the colors? Them were gonna be your last words?” Draus scoffed at him, unimpressed in the aftermath. Avo just smiled. The Regular was the Regular. Something was soothing about her persistence of character, especially when contrasted against his endless changes.

Dice was getting up, sanity restored, but still unsteady. Kae helped the girl nested within the Railjumper sheath all the way, the motion of their ascent made awkward by their difference in height.

The rest of the cadre gained directed packages of memory. Recollections from Avo’s perspective—the vividness blurred and intensity reduced.

Tavers made a series of chortles, each sounding more incredulous than the last. “How? Fucking how?” The interlocking whorls on a Rendskin exo-rig hissed and opened to reveal an exasperated squire. Her lips were curled downward and she glared at him, unblinking. “How the hells did you manage to tumble into all that.”

Her question was cut off by another.

“Pieces of an Ark?” Kae was staring at Avo from five steps away, brown eyes wide as saucers, mind shivering with uncertain excitement. “And—you swan through the Hungers? A world stored in shards of memory embedded in the flesh of a dragon?”

Avo twitched a single claw. The haemokinetic structure around them vibrated and rippled, ichor channeling matter, but also radiating currents of traveling gold. Kae gasped as her eyes jumped from one metaphysical emanation after another. “The blood of dragons. Time. Avo, you have a Domain of Time inside you.”

He breathed in acknowledgment. “Chronology. I think.”

“What... what does it do?” she asked. “Can you feel anything? Is this conversation happening in sequence? Are your senses different? How about your memories? Are you remembering two conflicting things at the same time?”

The answers to her barrage of questions were cast into her mind directly through the splinter Avo left implanted inside her—inside all of them. Another twinge of satisfaction passed through Avo. He had yearned to create a network between himself and his allies. The Neurodeck had served for a time. But this was his to wield. His to use.

No one could take it away.

{Now, now, Avo, if you’re a good divinely-ascendant cannibal you won’t need to worry about Aegis taking away your toys anytime soon.} Calvino hummed. *{In fact... Considering recent*

events, we might need to consider loosening acquisition restrictions some more...}

“So... you can sense and perceive the passage of time?” Kae said, sounding almost giddy. “Can—have you done anything else?”

“I just got back Kae,” Avo said, shaking off a sudden sense of exhaustion. “One thing after another. Might want to do a resurrection first. Tired.”

“Yeah, about that.” Chambers wandered up to Avo, looking him up and down. The half-strand's lips were pressed together and he pouted like a child. “Avo, how is it that you manage to fall into some bullshit pantheon-Guild-cult conspiracy every couple of days? How are you running into so much messed up shit all the time? You know, before I met you, my life was pretty boring.” Chambers paused. “Well, I mean I was ganger piece of shit who ended up running with Mirrorhead's crew. And I'd probably end up snuffed sooner or later. But still, consang, I wasn't getting involved with mind wars and shit. Nevermind that Gatekeeper—fucking, dragon-city traitors and Noloth-Ark shit.”

With each word, his ranting grew more irritated and less frustrated. “How is it that every time you fall down a hole, you come out with new powers and shit, and every time I tumble down a hole, I wake up missing an organ? It's not fair, Avo. It's just not.”

The building intensity of the rant made Avo chuckle. Awkwardly, Avo patted the smaller man on the shoulders, his claws wrapping half-around Chambers' upper chest. “Have you tried being favored by fate?”

Chambers' eyes bulged in disbelief, but a shimmer in the reflections on the end of the room drew Avo's attention. A passage was opening. Faintly, Avo perceived faint threads moving through existence, forming a tangled outline of humanoid figure.

He felt them thereafter using his Heavens, the construction of their flesh and matter, how the winds wrapped around her, painting her position across spatial reality, and most noticeably through the world-shaking tides of coldtech data flooding out from her across every moment, the Techplaguer twitching to full attention.

“CRIER! CRIER! CRIER! NOISY! NOISY! NOISY! Silence them, administrator. Silence them! They're calling out to the void. They're throwing their voice into THE DARKNESS. Catch the words before they leave! Catch them before they slip beyond us, and return as far-flung teardrops from distant shadows.”

{We can't do that anymore, you broken thing,} Calvino chided. *{This is all that remains. The only habitable land left.}* A somber silence followed.

The Techplaguer flinched at the EGI's words. ***“Lies. Lies! LIES!”***

Denton passed through the glass, her appearance slightly disheveled though her expression remained as placid as ever. She was a luxurious designed double-breasted overcoat, the clan mark for D'Rongo—a twin-tongued ape biting down on a turtle's shell—emblazoned on her left breast. Magnetically clipped buttons clutched the garment tight to her while studded heat vents lined her shoulders, external exhausts for her outfit's inner air conditioning.

Reading her additional patterns of matter, Avo sensed a strength-augmenting exo-vest supporting her spine and seven half-healed knife wounds marking her abdominal wall.

He mended her flesh and biosilk blouse with a casual invocation of his Woundmother. His Rend climbed another percent. Ninety-eight. His Metamind was screaming at him to vent again. Would be wise to do that soon.

Briefly touching her stomach, Dentons stepped out from the glass and strode in pace with the flow of drones. She made a brief gesture of thanks at Avo for dissolving her wounds—somehow intuiting the deed was his doing.

{Or I just informed her,} Calvino muttered.

"Avo," she said, greeting him with a brief sweep of her eyes. Her left was slightly bloodshot, its implanted machinery. He wasn't sure how to repair that, so he left it as it was. Her nanos were already doing repairs anyway. "I see you're not as lost as Chambers claimed."

Avo looked at the man in question and the half-strand just threw up his arms. "Look, I tried to look at where you went missing and nearly had a seizure. Fuck, I did have a seizure. You were gone for fifty-five minutes."

"Fifty-five," Avo said. It really didn't feel that long.

"Regardless," Chambers continued, "everything got fucked for a bit. So, yeah, when Denton here cast me, I told her. And I'd I do it again." He swallowed.

Avo nodded slowly. "Okay. Good. Not judging you."

"Alright," Chambers said. "Because it was the wise thing to do."

[Stop being weird as shit, me! You don't need to justify this!] template-Chambers hissed at his real self. Avo directed the intent through his splinter, and actual-Chambers cringed.

"The entire planet was affected," Denton said, entering the conversation. "Everywhere. Tiers. Warrens. Other megacities. Anywhere that the Nether was affected." She paused. "Whatever you triggered, it was loud. It was—"

“Was connected to the Nolothic Ark,” Avo finished. He moved to bury a splinter into Denton as well, channeling the Sprites from his Neurodeck over into the ego fragment.

{Wait. Avo. Don't.}

The cognitive needle was an inch away from pushing through Denton’s wards. Only then did she look up at Avo’s halo and frown.

“What happened to your flames?” She asked.

*{You probably won't be able to perceive much inside her mind,} Calvin continued, elaborating.
{Her mind's not like yours. Or even Captain Draus.}*

+*Like yours?*+ Avo asked. He was always a bit suspicious of the inscrutable Glaive. There was too much stillness to her. She reacted to the world more like dead matter in ways, unaffected in terms of experience or tangible humanity.

{Not quite. She is an Alice-Series Infiltrator. A biosynthetic counter-sophont. Even her inner thoughts will be protected by quantum-coded encryptions.}

Avo frowned. And then jabbed his way into her mind anyway. The EGI was right. A sea of numbers, codes, and scripts awaited him.

Avo retreated.

{See.}

The ghoul grumbled.

{Yes. That's the entire reason why we restarted the initiative. So mind-snatching maniacs like yourself and Omnitech don't end up stealing anything from us.}

+*Could've told me before.*+

{You weren't this much of a threat before.}

If there was one thing Avo liked about the artificial mind, it was that they were always honest.

Eventually.

“Was connected to the Nolothic Ark,” Avo said, shaping his ghosts into phantoms instead. Despite all his efforts and burgeoning excitement, it seemed he wouldn’t be able to escape a session of show-and-tell with at least one person.

He told her about the lapse that was triggered, about the false memory contained inside Kare. He showed her an abridgment of his encounter with the Hungers, and then what the doublethinkers had revealed to him.

By the end, Denton looked as unbalanced as a biomechanical machine wearing the skin of a person could muster.

“So. Scale is where they kept it.” Denton mused. “Operative Zein kept some things from us.”

Avo grunted. “Or maybe forgot herself. Either way. Might need to have a conversation with her soon. More than a few things I want to know. Some about Jaus. Others about time.”

Consideration passed through the Glaive’s features. “With all that has happened, the timetable of her reconstitution might be modified. The date of the trial is also in question.” She shot brief looks at Draus and Kae. “The situation in the Tiers and across the city is tense. Multiple skirmishes have erupted across the last hour. More are in the process of happening. Paladins are being dispatched to contain and apply diplomacy where they can.” A beat followed. “Naeko is among them. He ensured the safety of a major portion of the entire city.”

{25%} Calvino sent, pairing visual information with words. Visual data downloaded from Threshold materialized in the corner of Avo’s vision, and he saw a gargantuan palm made from mist and clouds—a fourth the size of New Vultun itself and growing—slam down on the city, settling as if a mountain.

A shiver ran through him and all his templates. Despite all he had just survived, all he had achieved, Naeko’s feat reminded Avo that he was not quite a giant in his ecosystem, that there were still mountains beyond mountains, and gods beyond gods.

[Better stay far away from that one,] Corner said, a wary murmur under his voice. The former squire didn’t scare easy, but he knew Naeko. And witnessing such power only made the fear settle deeper. **[We’re not ready for that kind of fight. Not even close.]**

But Avo considered another factor. His splinters. His mind. Would the Chief Paladin even see it coming? Would he even realize that he was being consumed from the inside, sequence by sequence?

Peace didn’t.

[Avo,] Corner said, truly serious. **[I’m tell you this will all the respect I can muster—this isn’t someone you want to “experiment” or “find out about.” Until you’re sure you can evade or snuff, stay the fuck away from him.]**

And that was all they said.

“He’s been hunting us,” Avo said, returning to the conversation with Denton.

“Understood. I will speak with him before things begin. Make boundaries known.”

“What are the accords?” Avo asked. “Why are they binding?”

Denton paused. “They are agreements struck between the Guilds. Promises made absolute under Jaus. Humanity has made an art of breaking laws. So. It was universally decided that chains were needed to bind everyone. It was supposed to be the first structure of absolute legality. Something above all beings.”

“And was supposed to banish or capture transgressors using the Nether,” Avo said. “Or the Hungers themselves.”

The Glaive tilted her head at him. “I am uncertain. The histories here are... contradicting.”

“Of course,” Avo muttered. Why wouldn’t the Guilds want such a thing to exist? For people to be aware of it. “But it wasn’t finished.”

“And further damaged during the Second Guild war,” Denton added. “That was what we thought the High Seraph was truly desired during her siege. To break the final rules laid by her father. Such was what Operative O’yaje claimed.”

O’yaje. *Thousandhand*.

A headache was beginning to build. It seemed like with each thrust of progress he made to understand the grand scheme at play, the more the mists of obfuscation and mystery grew.

The threads of time were ringing around him now. His blood was a constant song.

Somehow. Somehow he knew history had been tampered with. That the chronology tied to this was irrevocably broken in some way.

But wasn’t the past already lost? Was history always chased by swallowing oblivion?

He needed more perspective. And he wasn’t going to just get it here. Turning his attention to the mirror on the far side of the room once more, Avo clicked his fangs together and began to think. He prepared sessions in his Auto-Seance. Formed splinters as he continued his dialogue with Denton, sharing what they knew.

[What are you doing?] Abrel asked, curious as to why he was calling up the sequences tied to the session he had hidden within her mind.

+*Everything I can at once*,+ Avo answered.

After all, he wasn't fixed to a single point anymore. He could have a dialogue while being efficient. And it was time he synchronized some knowledge across his subverts.

Starting with Abrel herself.