

There was a time once, an age upon an age, a day upon a day, a year upon a year, long lost before the now and the evermore, where we could have walked the fields free, or our grandfather's grandfather's grandfathers could walk the mountains, descend its paths, sail the oceans, traverse the deserts, carve their way through the forests and jungles.

These days are dead and dust, dead, dust, and never to return.

What remains now was cruelty made manifest madness, a miasma of torment and incomprehension.

You cannot gaze upon the horizon anymore.

You cannot even look the wrong way, where the bend of light meets the curve of the sky.

Doing so will bleed you, cut you, slice you down.

There are places where you cannot inhale the air.

You cannot know the scents lest you melt from the inside.

There are places where grains of sand are the size of worlds, where being lost is a certain law in reality, and not an eventuality of your own proven ineptitude.

All these things made possible by reality broken, made true by what happened by the deceiver named Jaus....

Made—made—made by a man,

Horizon lost, made by man.

-The Mad Monk Alsyim, Fallwalker

19-21

Horizon Lost (i)

{We're in,} Nandu said. His following giggle echoed across their coldtech comms. {I always wanted to say that.}

As Paladin Kassamon led them through the security checkpoints preceding the inner structure, he took care to point out the various systems they were using to monitor their facility and boast about the effectiveness of their personnel. The emphasis he placed on his words directed Nandu's next actions as he linked with the Paladin to review the local lobbies. Ostensibly, it was to review the public-facing information the Exorcists published in the Nether.

Unofficially, they were being granted the keys to the backdoor.

Menus and accessible phantasms lined her augmented perception. Iomae blinked in brief shock as she skimmed through the staggering amount of drones the Exorcists had at their disposal, along with the emergency response golems they had on standby. The local leadership hierarchy could also be summoned with a thought, the names and FATE-Skeins of all active Exorcist officers offered as downloadable mem-data. If she found the need, she could contact any of them through pre-sequenced sessions.

Making eye contact with Nandu as they stepped past another set of meter-thick blast doors into another security scan, Paladin Kassamon sighed and pointed to the flickering mechanics that swept their bodies. "Sorry about the hoops, but we can't exactly risk letting anyone just walk in. Lots of ways to stay hidden in this city. Can't take any chances."

He finished his sentence with a knowing wink, and Iomae fought the urge to shake her head.

There was something... *sorrowfully sweet* about interacting with a Paladin this way. As if she knew someone like him once. But something happened after. Regardless, the pain was something from her true life, and it remained secondary to the task at hand.

Continuing down the narrow hallway with reflective mirrors lining both sides, a horizontal grid of sweeping beams passed through all three individuals and their accompanying drones. Phantoms constructed phantasmal interfaces to give them progress indicators. A simulated biometric review of her bloodwork, body tissue, and skeleton was generated before her eyes. When all progress bars filled without incident, the review flashed green and dissipated.

Turning right, the same unfolded for Kassamon, still grinning at her, but her attention drifted over the sudden pulse of red over his shoulder.

Iomae's stomach opened into a pit.

Looking past the Paladin, she saw Nandu standing there, but the expression on his face could not be called worry. No. With his brows raised, jaw clenched, and eyes narrowed, he watched as the checkpoint scanned him again, focusing the grid on his nose. "You fucking serious, consang."

"Look, I'm sorry, I didn't sequence this." Kassamon sighed. "But you gotta be honest: that's a lot of nose it has to cover."

"Fuck you."

"I'm not trying to insult you. Listen, I might know a grafter you can cast. Specializes in cosmetics—she did my teeth."

“Double fuck you.”

As a second biometric report was generated, it blinked green this time after a brief delay and Nandu just shook his head. “Rough way to say hi to your guests.”

As the final passage unlocked itself, they found themselves entering a curving hallway blocked off by a solid metal wall. Squinting how light itself seemed to recoil for the surface, Iomae recognized what she was looking at in an instant. Memite. Another layer of protection and a reliable means to hold a techno-thaumic reactor without the material suffering any wear and tear.

The include of the thaumically altered matter also told her the SE-7777 pylon had been retrofitted in the last fifty years, with the canon for memite born from a relatively modern Heaven.

“There used to be a platform here, I’m told,” Kassamon said, gesturing to the empty hall around him, “built on a set of maglev rails. It could take you around the various stations and departments back in the day, but with the drones removing the need for on-site staff and advances in Necrotheurgy, we cut down on the operational costs here. The space used to be much bigger on the inside too. Now?” He cast a mental command and the entire structure began to shift.

The wall before her spun and then turned inward, vanishing from her sight as they passed an unseen event horizon. A pathway opened before them as more walls folded out of sight, the inner geometry of the pylon adjusting to accommodate their arrival.

“You know Highflame and Stormtree both tried to breach the All-Wall back in the Second Big One?” Kassamon said, continuing on. “Wasted billions of lives trying to breach our structure. Almost did it too, the half-strands. The big idea was to undo the borders so they could link up with all the reinforcements they had just beyond the city. Provide a means of resupply. If you ask some of the ancients, they would tell you things got close that day, but the Maw provided as it always did, and the wall stood. We stood.”

Iomae waited a moment longer to hear if he would say anything else—anything of the conditional ceasefire the Paladins signed with Veylis Avandaer while she stood on the cusp of victory—but silence ensued.

“Is the ontological structure stable?” she asked, probing to see if he would offer any other insights.

He turned and shot her a glance while they continued onward. “Well. We have the rip bottled up for now and there haven’t been any paradoxes since then, but I think you’re going to need to be the ones to tell us what’s up.”

“Sure thing,” Nandu said. “All it’ll take is a peak, some grit, a bit of spit, and a lot of dying.”

The Paladin threw back his head and laughed. “Yeah. Seems like that last bit solves almost anything, doesn’t it?”

As the last walls impeded their path folded away, Iomae entered a funnel devoid of lights as the smooth metallic walls were interrupted by a cluster of Rendsinks. Holo-projected thaumic hazard icons—a stack of skulls overlaid by a dragon eating its own tail. Years of experience rose from the shadows of her past and she found herself familiar with the design. Most stationary thaumic structures had layers of Rendsinks, and the ones around the Heaven were usually inactive constructs, set only to trigger in an emergency.

Their curved edges lined the walls in cresting waves as they walked passed, and she guessed they descended down around the spine of the pylon itself into the very roots of the Maw.

The last doorway to the reactor's main control room was transparent sliders that lifted open at their approach. Beyond, a well-lit room with few chairs placed before several dormant holo-haptic interfaces pulled her attention while head-sized utility drones maintained the premises using their modular articulations.

A soft aroma of coffee filled the air as Kassamon pointed right without looking after they entered. “If you have an addiction, the drink mixer there will you handled. No need for imps either. We got these from Voidwatch directly. None of the Guild ‘easy service, insta-pay’ scam-shit.”

Iomae frowned at the back of the Paladin’s head. He was laying on a pretty thick “Anti-Guilder” bit, but something about it felt fraudulent. Like he was trying too hard and putting on a show.

“Thank you, Paladin Kassamon,” she said. “I think we will do just fine here. We will begin by conducting a full preliminary overview of the Heaven’s ontology. Tell me, if one should need to get a closer look at the reactor.”

“Just connect to **[SE-7777-PRIMEOP]** and cast your commands. The system will respond and create and shift a direct access hatch for you. Protective suits are stocked and maintained, though if you want to check them yourselves—”

“It should be fine,” Iomae said, interrupting him so she could get on with her word. Her heart was throbbing at a steady pulse now. Her bones were vibrating with refrained excitement. She had been looking forward to this. She had wanted to do this again for so long. She just needed him gone so she could proceed with her task. “I appreciate your hospitality. If we have need of you, we will call. There is no need for you to exhaust your time directly monitoring our progress. We will keep you updated.”

“Yeah,” Nandu said, sneering at the Paladin. “Don’t you got a grafter to talk to? So you can get more of those white ass teeth.”

Kassamon shrugged. "I think I have enough teeth. But maybe my ears could use some more work."

"Yeah, yeah, go tell that to the wall or something," Nandu shot back.

The Paladin smiled broadly and gave them both curt nods. "I'll be keeping a close eye on things... but I get your meaning. I don't like having outsiders look over my shoulder while I'm working too, so I'll get out of your nostrils."

Iomae sighed. Nandu growled. She wasn't sure before, but Paladin Kassamon was definitely doing this on purpose.

Before Nandu could retaliate with any of his own invectives, the entire body of the Paladin shivered and he tunneled backward through space, past the closing doors and the reforming walls.

"What a half-strand," Nandu muttered, glaring at the spot Kassamon used to occupy.

"I don't know. He seemed fine to me." Iomae did her best not to crack a smile as Nandu turned his glare on her. "What?"

"Somehow, I think he would have 'seemed fine to me' too if I had your face."

For some strange—and oddly *familiar* reason—his frustration tickled her, and she couldn't help but giggle. It was almost as if they struggled over this topic before. "Come on, Agnos Yuewei." Iomae reached into her inner suit pocket and pulled an unnaturally radiant mirror while her partner deactivated security specters monitoring the room and looped the drone's sensory feeds. "Let's go see 'the damage.'"

"Sure thing, Agnos Hatherene. Just give me a moment to change some things.

[UPDATING SE-7777 TECHNO-THAMUIC REACTOR SETTINGS]

ACCESSING HEAVEN OF SPACE

DOMAIN OF (SPACE)

->CANON: BOUNDARY- TRANSPOSITION RESTRICTION THRESHOLDS

->ALLOWANCE ZONE UPDATED: [CONTROL ROOM]

[SETTINGS UPDATED]

Avo felt the touch of SE-7777's Domains the moment he emerged from the reflective passage. It was as if space flowed around him like sublime waters, greeting him in a fluid embrace instead of a grinding weight.

Ultimately, it was good that Chambers managed to adjust the settings of the Heaven to grant clemency for Draus' passages. Using the man as a channel for the Conflagration was an option, but required Avo to kill him afterward to reset things—a troublesome act they could now avoid.

{On site,} Avo said, broadcasting the update as expanded his awareness, taking in the control room and everything around him. Translucent fissures of blood crept across matter as he sensed drones and learned pylon's material composition. To his left and right, Kae and Chambers gawked at him momentarily, their expressions ones of muted surprise, somehow knowing to expect him but not fully recalling the nature of his appearance either.

Proxies were a fascinating thing. They recomposed a secondary mind atop the first, generating the fabricated identities from the existing mem-data, allowing the user a kind of unconscious awareness of the information they needed to know while existing under a near-perfect false paradigm of new memories.

{Synced,} Draus replied, the DeepNav unable to track her position back in the George Washington.

Tavers chimed in a moment later, her mind connected to the Manta's sensors, looking down upon the pylon. *{Clear skies. No half-strands in sight. Let's wrap this up before I have to amend that statement.}*

"Lobbies secure?" Avo said, asking Chambers—currently posing as Nandu.

"Yep," he replied, flashing a toothy smile. "Drones a blind. Specters are banished. Exorcists just got pinged for mandatory group meetings on public safety. They're not going to enjoy that."

"Good," Avo said. "Keep watch. Shouldn't take long." Turning his attention to Kae, he regarded her presence with his Woundmother briefly.

"Oh, does the expansion of my design please, master," the Heaven of Blood purred.
"Before, I only dreamed of hard shapes and dead stones to born of my ichor. But now, we have made architecture using the little builders within our veins. The body is a construct as well. Bone, imagined from bone. Skin, woven from skin. Flesh, inspired by flesh."

Low laughter the sound of distant thunder rumbled inside his Frame. Biology and physical matter were just patterns that answered to his touch; blocks he could place to his whims. There was an ever-present urge, tantalizing and taunting, begging that he reshape those around him to the whims of his curiosity. He resisted and kept to the path.

“Had a chance to look at the Heaven yet?” he asked.

She shook her head, her longer hair and lighter skin portraying her as visibly different while biological architecture remained a familiar constant to his Heaven.

“We just arrived. Paladin Kassamon should also be present and monitoring the situation. We have time.”

He shook his head. That was an assumption. One that he paid for with Shotin. With Mirrorhead. Not here, if possible. Not if he could avoid risking it. “Let’s go. Chambers. Open the way.”

“Who the fuck is—oh.” Nandu shook his head. “*That’s* my actual name? Chambers?” He frowned as he repeated it to himself before casting a command into the local Nether using his Meta. Part of a solid wall shifted away to reveal a winding walkway leading down and left into the reactor core itself.

Casting out his Skimmer, Avo let his perception radiate across the entire area as centered his focus around the techno-thaumic reactor itself.

Housed within a fifty-meter-long containment sphere constructed of stainless steel, hardened polycrystalline compounds, insulated specs of silicon, plastic, wiring, and other miscellaneous structures. Calvino explained that hydrogen was providing most of the facility’s energy, the cold mechanisms built at the very core of the machine. The Heaven was anchored to the structures layered around it in shifting needle-shaped emitters that directed and orchestrated spatial reality not unlike how Avo used his Echoheads to focus his magnetism.

{There are some techno-thaumic reactors that are fully Ensouled,} Calvino said, proving Avo with reactor schematics. *{Eight, if nothing has occurred since my last calculations. Eight cybernetic minds made cooperatively by Ori-Thaum and the No-Dragons, capable of materializing the metaphysical outlines of an ego. They were given as gifts by the Guilds to the Paladins and certified by us before going into use. This installation does not seem to have one such LGI—limited governing intelligence—active. Unfortunate. I’m sure you would have liked to claim another cycler and Soul for your personal use.}*

Avo grunted and thought back to his experience at Burner’s Way. Cycler production was possible, albeit hard to achieve and impossible to standardize according to what Kae knew. The Souls themselves were the greatest bottlenecks—aspects of broken existence that were theoretically impossible to replicate.

He would need more cyclers and Souls soon, but it would be more reliable to seize them from Fallwalkers or Fallen Heavens than to raid functional techno-thaum reactors across the city. The functional few that existed in the Warrens were doubtlessly occupied by the strongest of Syndicates or the Guilds themselves while destabilizing the power base of a megablock would

likely compromise his presence and give those hunting the Stillborn a trail to follow once news entered the public.

Walking down the hall with Kae in tow, they arrived at what amounted to a “reality dock” as a Rendsink clipped through the surrounding matter and blocked the path behind them while a solid wall grew transparent before vanishing entirely.

Neither ghoul nor Agnos opted to don any of the safety rigs provided to them. Both were Godclads and their Hells would blunt whatever unexpected feedback they faced as well as any Rendsink.

{I missed this,} Kae said, releasing a heartened sigh as excitement leaked from her mind. Spatial anomalies folded points and places within the reactor. With every step they took, they found rocking between a range of positions as if they existed as a pendulum in constant motion instead of a single position in space. *{I can see this reactor has not been maintained or updated recently. Look at the nodules. See the missing LIG module at the top. Agh. Outdated design. I think the Paladins either never bothered to upgrade because they lacked the funds, or sold the cyclers and Souls back to the Guilds for favors.}*

[None of the above,] template-Kassamon murmured from inside Avo. [We had a self-sustaining reactor for a bit from 166 to 201 Post-Fall, but the Fourth War ground us down some more. A bunch of walls were downgraded from full self-sustaining constructs and had their Souls and cyclers extracted for us to fill our ranks again and make up for those we lost. So. Here you have it. Why you’re not going to be gobbling any scrumptious goodies up.]

{Hard times for everyone,} Avo replied, speaking to both Kae and the template inside his mind.

Standing before the reactor, looked up at the grayed-out tube of translucent connecting to the top of the containment sphere, the vents running as horizontal slats along its sides, the neon projections feeding numbers and adjustments into the air, with ghosts threading mem-data between each of the sharp-tipped needles puncturing deep into space as if an acupuncture session for reality was being conducted in this very room.

“Are you ready?” Avo asked, looking at Kae.

But her reply came before his words were finished, and she collapsed to the ground, body snapping between three places before she finally struck the ground.

“Ah, I felt it,” the Woundmother said. **“She tore all the moisture inside her skull out from her body. An instant demise. The little oracle is growing used to using her fangs. At least on herself.”**

Studying Kae's body for a beat as a scab formed upon the surface of reality, Avo engineered his own demise with a thought, triggering a Thoughtwave Disruptor at the core of his mind and putting out the fire that was his existence.

RESURRECTION - 1%

Plunging into death, a sea of voluminous patterns called to him even before his ego loaded within his Soul. He could feel the chains of various Domains stretching out, reaching far beyond where his awareness could touch.

In death, he could interweave his being with the metaphysical on a level deeper than what he could alive. There was a want inside him to explore, to see if he could pull himself along the bindings connecting one border wall to another, but he resisted it. He was here to create an opening—to establish a personal tunnel for him and his cadre in New Vultun's borders.

All other matters could wait till after this run was done.

As he drew Kae into his Soul's orbit, he injected his Soulfire into the reactor and bade the mem-data to load. A flood of thousands upon thousands of canons and Domains washed through their awareness, the torrent of rules and hubrises overwhelming.

"Don't worry about most of them," Kae said. "Most are standard restrictions meant to keep parts of spatial reality inaccessible. We just need to look at the ones corresponding to our Domains. Like Draus' reflection. Your blood. My water. Chambers' biology. Or fire."

"Not space?"

"No. That will affect far too much. And the changes will be registered across the chains before being noticed instead of buried among all the secondary bridging Domains."

"Understood. So. Any preference on which Domain to start with?"

Somehow, despite her being comprised of Soulfire, it felt like she was smiling. *"Let's start with reflections."*