

People like to think of Heavens as being made up of living stories. That is what mythologies are supposed to be after all, yes? Living stories?

Hm.

I never fully thought so. The best stories leave you with a feeling. A sense of expression that you cannot find anywhere else; a concept or understanding you will not glimpse upon other pages or meticulously edited memories. The best stories are a seamless mechanism. Characters, narrative, setting, plot, themes... all that blending into each other as if a resonant interplay.

Heavens are not so. Canons are not so. They are vulgar. They are forceful. They are like slogans or slurs hurled at designated targets—aspects of reality to bend and twist.

Mythology isn't a story, but it is related. It is the bastard cousin to higher literature and genuine artistry. But I am tired of waxing poetics, and so I will move to be blunt.

Mythology is cultural propaganda materialized.

Tell me, do you remember your childhoods? Those of you who had parents to remember, do you remember stating how invincible your mother is? How your father could hold up the sky? How your family, among all other families, was anointed by existence to be special? And then what happened? Your mother started filling her veins and forgot all about you. Your father, well, they took blades to him because his skin looked rather nice, and he went howling, screaming, pissing, and shitting himself before the final end. Both pillars of your family. Not unbreakable memite. Not sturdy titanium. Not even the thickness of stone. Wood. Easily shattered with a kick.

But still we wish believe these stories. Still we tell them to ourselves and our children. Because we cannot relinquish the urge. That we are special. That we are anointed. That we are more than those who exist beyond the borders of our inner minds.

Heavens are the manifestations of this anointedness, their absoluteness sparing us of any debate or rejection. "My father is the strongest." And so it shall be so. "My mother is the wisest." And so it shall be so. "My god is the greatest." And so it is still so. But in what regard? Vicious, desperate children that we are, in what regard? Can you conceptualize greatness? Convey it? Do you even know what victory looks like?

*I have read some old voider scripture before. Their myths are full of parables and wonders. Little tales of morality, whimsey, and hubris. We? We have stories of **[REDACTED]** shattering a mountain in a single blow, thus it was the God of Strength, and no mountains could stand before it. What story follows? What story? The canons are a series of boasts to manifested, forcing the totality of reality itself to express itself in the narrowest channels.*

-Ying Yang Wei, the Stormsparrow

19-10

The Paths We Pave (I)

It took seventy-two canon adjustments and eight deaths before the chaos within the Techplaguer was narrowed, but even then, despite Kae's best efforts, there remained torn seams inside the ontologic.

"What... what is happening," the Techplaguer said, its words slow and slurred, the electronic distortions flattened, giving way to a nasal voice that didn't quite fit the eldritch entity. ***"Where... where is my head-song? Where are the commands and orders? I remember... but now I've forgotten something..."***

HEAVEN: [TECHPLAUGER]

->DOMAIN: (SIGNAL)

->Canon: SKIN OF VIRTUALITY - Layers user in mirror-reality comprised of raw data and information, allowing them to move and exist as radio signals might and shift inorganic objects in their vicinity as blocks of temporarily stored data (reloads back to their original position in reality after miracle ends)

->Hubris: Signal jamming or heavy radiation will disrupt the user's virtual form and inflict severe thaumic backlash

The crown of virtuality was refined, removed, repaired, reviewed, and even recreated, but no matter how much Kae worked to align the patterns of its conception, the instability remained. Thus, minor adjustments were made to shift the composition of the Heaven and its corresponding hubris.

Where the crown converted Avo's nearby environment into a pseudo-virtual reality, the Skin of Virtuality adapted him instead, reducing both thaumic demand and Rend generation while retaining the protective features Avo's Conflagration needed. It was with the change of the hubris that the bulk of the missing panels were closed and functional control returned.

With this final edit, Avo watched as the Techplaguer slowly rose from its stupor, a shrill whine signaling the end of its words, sounding like a needle scraping down a chalkboard.

"Oh, what joy," the Woundmother groaned, ***"The insanity has been exchanged for new and exquisite auditory delights. Truly, this is the sound we all desire."***

The Techplaguer angled its antenna at the Heaven of Blood as if to convey a sense of mutual dissatisfaction. ***"The sound pleases me. Your undulating form does not. Cease your vibrations."***

“Cease my–” A tsunami of writhing tendrils passed through the Woundmother as it nipped at the Heaven of Data-Signals **“You literal ball of waste! Dare you to command me?”**

“Yes,” the Techplaguer said, sounding entirely indifferent about conversing with another Heaven. It turned its attention back toward Kae and the other Souls hovering before it. **“Remember you all. But only faintly...”** Its focus lingered on Chambers a moment longer. **“I do not like that one. Please leave.”**

Chambers sighed. **“Avo, it’s still busted.”**

“A bit,” Kae said. **“But the fact that it has self-awareness now means that its internal mythology is mostly stable. I will need to spend more time trying to understand what they did to it. I suspect the answers lie within the remaining leaks.”** Excitement tinged her voice as she circled the last of Avo’s Heavens.

“So, what? It’s just naturally an asshole?” Chambers said.

Draus snorted. **“Everyone’s naturally an asshole to you, half-strand.”**

“Disagree,” the Techplaguer interjected. **“Most of you are THE CHILDREN–PROTECT! I hate him specifically. A bit more than I hate the blood-thing.”**

“Hey, fuck you again, consang,” Chambers snapped.

“Agreed,” the Woundmother added, a shiver of disgust passing through its ontology as it realized its ill deed. **“Bleh. And now you have me in alignment with the most fetid among the partlings! Seek my mercy, or inherit my ire eternal.”**

“No,” the Techplaguer droned again. **“No-no.”**

“So be it. You have won my scorn. I would spit spite upon your features, but you are already limp and deformed, and so I will feast my vengeance by knowing you were poorly built.”

“You are poorly built,” the Techplaguer replied.

“What? My symmetry and design are immaculate.” the Woundmother shifted through a dozen different cityscapes, each bearing different architectural styles, boroughs, grids, and protective walls. **“My form is unexpression unchained. You are a prisoner living in your own shell.”**

Silence followed for a moment. The Heaven of Signals pointed its solitary protrusion at Chambers. **“I believe he is more aesthetically pleasing than you.”**

“What?”

“I agree,” the Fardrifter said, entering the conversation with something loosely approximating conniving glee. Rare were these opportunities to bother the Woundmother for its near-constant barrage of verbal abuse. **“The man is... peculiar. But he has the charm of a wanderer. A man seeking his own path.”**

Chambers puffed his flame at that statement. *“Yeah. I am seeking my own path.”*

The Woundmother rounded on the Fardrifter, jabbing sharpened constructs in the nine-headed steed’s direction. **“You feculent cur!”**

“Charm of a wanderer,” Chambers repeated, sounding enthralled at the false compliment given only as a means to ignite the Woundmother’s irritation.

“I suppose we should watch for the next resurrection to come and test it in the real,” Kae said, regarding the rest of the cadre. *“But I believe it should be stable enough for operational use. It will be wise to keep a close eye on it, however. Avo, you should manifest it with your resurrection to make sure.”*

He grunted in agreement. Such was a thing already intended to do, but it was good to see Kae operating on the same wavelength. And with concurrent thoughts in mind, he considered their interrupted sparring. *“Think we should all go over how our session went. Things we observed. Can burn my thoughts into Dice. Draus. Chambers. But best if we touch base. See what worked. What didn’t.”*

“Like my changes,” Draus began. A brief moment of rumination followed. *“The glass is good and the Arsenalist pairs well with it. I think I might wanna make some alterations. Shield’s nice but it don’t seem to do nothing my glass can’t already. Ain’t worth a Domain of War. Dedicate my thaums to my replicas. Damn useful, those. Maybe add a Heaven on top of that. Somethin’ like a triggerable spatial-fracture explosive to take chunks out of hard targets.”*

“That can be done,” Kae said. *“You don’t have that many Domains yet, and you are building high...”* The Agnos’ voice trailed off. *“A thought occurs to me about this, but I think someone else should give their feedback first. I’d like another second to think.”*

“Rend,” Chambers said, still partially listening to the Heavens arguing in the background. *“Performed good, hard, and loud for a bit, but didn’t last all that long. Like, my miracles are countable, mostly. Friggin’ bioform bombs and shit. Cool and all, and if I can set something organic on fire, I can definitely explode it with my mind, but like, endurance is an issue, consangs. I was shit outta fucking luck by the time the kid and Kae started beating my ass. Tried to vent but the Agnos pulled me off—uh, sucked me with her spaces.”*

Kae's Soul inched closer and closer to Chambers. *"Work. On. Your. Powers. Of. Description. Or. I. Will. Break. Your. Canons."*

"I'm sorry, alright! I'm not doing it on purpose!"

"I don't believe you," Kae replied.

Dice just bobbed up and down among the group. Quiet. Content to be.

"Yeah, there's somethin' 'bout that," Draus said, concurring with Chambers. *"My current Hells ain't bad. The upgrade to my Diffusion Singularity works pretty well. Good to be able to fold a bunch of reflected spaces over a single one and detonate it like a displacement bomb. The Harmless Fire hell for my Arsenalist too. Reversing all projectiles back the way they came ain't bad. Empties the Rend quickly. I think Chambers needs something like that. I don't even know what he has right now."*

"It's slow," Chambers complained. *"I literally make people's body heat stop existing and cause their genitals to mutate into rapidly bubbling tumors."*

Everyone spent a moment taking the information in.

"Kae, why the fuck did you make that for him?" Draus asked.

"Psychological warfare," the Agnos said. *"There are people I want him to hurt, and hurt deeply."*

The Regular's Soul chuckled with a flaming sputter. *"Shit. Look at you, joinin' the party. They grow up so fast. Ain't that right Dice."*

"Uh-huh," the waif responded without a moment's hesitation or thought. If Avo had the face to frown, he would have. The girl was similar to Chambers in a way. The problem was he sought validation like an addict, while she considered herself as something scarcely more than a nu-dog. This could be improved.

"Okay," Kae said. *"Quicker venting for Chambers. Maybe some tweaks to his Heaven as well. Make it less Rend intensive."*

"More reach." Perceptions turned to Dice, and as she realized the attention she garnered, her Soul quivered. *"B-because I move fast, but things are far away. So. I want more reach."*

"Good call," Draus said. *"Avo? Ain't heard nothin' from you yet."*

"Want to optimize critical canons first. Keep my hubrises few. Narrow. Hard to exploit. Think we should hit more random Syndicates across the city. Make us all Sphere Five for greater options. Considering the removal of certain canons as well. And Domains. Can self-tune. Purpose of

being a sea is having a broad array of options. But my canons can be shifted at any point. Don't see the need."

"Exactly," Kae followed. "So long as we have access to the Stillborn, none of us need to spread ourselves thin. There are still benefits to being a sea, but right now, I think we can afford to go high and tune ourselves toward flexibility should the need call."

The conversation continued as resurrection encroached. They moved away from matters of thaumaturgy toward matters of tactics and strategy. By this point, the entire cadre exhibited cross-role capabilities. Destructiveness was a non-issue for the group as Avo, Draus, Chambers, and Dice all had their own methods of breaking things.

Of the group, Draus was most accustomed to being on the offensive, and the Domain of War ensured she could cleave through objects beyond matter, or launch entire structures in her grasp as if a bullet chambered in a gun. Dice proved to be a fantastic hunter and skirmisher per her background, but she lacked foresight. Something Avo could remedy by burning sequences from Draus over into her.

The main boon offered by Avo himself was still his Necrojacking capabilities—now augmented to the extreme thanks to his Conflagration, stained though it was with a single weakness. On the side of his Heavens, he existed as a fire brigade, capable of occupying most roles without difficulty, capable of rapid assaults, heavy damage, or pure attrition. Draus claimed he fought like an ocean trying to swallow her. In truth, he was trying to overwhelm her focus and work at her potential weaknesses from various angles. There were strategies he could further refine to shape situations in the group's favor.

Of everyone present, he was the one with the most surefire way of abandoning a dangerous situation.

Chambers—despite his lewd fixations—was a good Maker and harasser, willing to do just about anything to draw enemy attention. His current use would be straightforward and simple, but Avo thought there was undeveloped potential in how he piloted flesh. The Agnos, the least martially inclined of their immediate group, functioned well as overwatch. She worked much better changing the parameters of the environment than actively trying to fight someone. Her Heaven was due more edits toward enhancing her perception, awareness, and planar control.

Someone capable of reading and understanding what potential canons might be active among their foes was worth more than just another trigger-puller.

"You know, there's one thing I've been wondering about," Chambers said, resurrection progress at ninety-eight percent, their beings mere moments away from being reinjected back up into reality, "Kae said that the movey-flamey-things inside Avo's Soul—"

"The Imitators," Kae said, offering the term.

“--Thank you. The Imitators. Why don't we have them? She said they might spread, right? Or was she just wrong?”

“No one is ever 'just wrong,’” Kae said, more than a little annoyance trickling over into her statement. “It is likely something missing from my theory. Perhaps it is too ingrained in the Stillborn, and will not leave the threshold of its liminality. Or maybe it only works if Avo actively compels it to multiple.” Her last theory adjustment came after a brief pause. ‘Or maybe the Imitators think they are Avo himself and are too tied to his ego to manage any kind of departure. Whatever the case, I will continue my vigil. It will be important to delve deeper into these mysteries in preparation for what we must do to remedy the Rash.”

“Nova,” Chambers said. An awkward beat passed. The Woundmother was still mocking the Techplaguer about the ugliness of its antenna to no avail. Every assertion the Heaven of Blood cast was met with a flat denial or single-word answers of “no.” “So. What comes next? We check if Avo's Heaven of Assholery is only slightly busted then get out of here and kill more people?”

“Do several things at once,” Avo said. “No need for sleep. Draus can keep us linked by mirrors. Always more targets in the city to hit. Have more lobbies we can use subverted. Most important in the near term is Kae and I will need to go down to the Maw again. Need to test the last Canon of Luminosity I have. See if it works. See if I can cross the border.”

“Synced on that,” Draus said. “The sooner we get beyond New Vultun, the quicker we can really carve out a spot for ourselves. Stretch our wings and all that.”

Avo grunted in agreement. *“Maybe find a stabler Fallen Heaven to mask more drops from Voidwatch.”*

Whatever next he had to say died on his mind as their resurrections reached culmination and fingers of light clasped over their noses.

“Shit,” Chambers muttered. “Here we go. See you guys topside.”

RESURRECTION - 100%

As Avo made his ascent again, the world greeted him in swirls of light and shapes and sensations, but instead of inhabiting the unmoving sheath that was his corpse, he tore back into reality with his Heaven of Signals manifested. Mantled within the Techplaguer, Avo flicked and buried his cords into the nearest surface he could find and dragged himself. From the metaphysical to the physical did he tread, while the virtual simulation tinging his being instilled within his person a slight drag while he moved.

Bathing his surroundings via a Skimmer, he observed the Techplaguer as it moved and spun, a loose bundle of wires pulling a data-infused ball around, his antenna striking rubble-carpeted streets over and over.

No struggles followed this time. No battle against a hostile will trying to deny his control. It was as Kae said. It was mostly fixed. Mostly.

“Children!” the Techplaguer screeched, spherical body spinning to point its antenna at the rest of the cadre. **“Remember that you have CORRUPTED MAINFRAMES and...”** it trailed off, unnatural impulses replaced by vacuousness. **“I cannot remember what follows.”** Pausing again, Avo allowed the Heaven to lift a cord toward Chambers. **“You remain filth. That I remember.”**

“Kiss my ass, you fucking testicle.”

+Hey, you shits done down here?+ Ghost-carried thoughts pulsed through the entire space, filling the air with Taver’s voice. *“Looks like you flattened the set pretty good. Wanna reset?”*

After a few more tentative seconds, Avo released his Techplaguer and stood across from his companions. His mind burned as countless templates chattered.

{Another unpleasant death the span of three days,} Calvin chirped. {What a risky life I lead, being your attaché. Of course, what should I have expected from an Omnitech Heaven.}

“SCORN!” the Techplaguer screamed, the intensity of its hate now reverberating through Avo’s Soul. **“Hate! Hate! Sky-stealer! Sun-taker! Bastard of shared legacy! Die! Break! Die!”**

{Ah. What a charming conversationalist.}

“I AM NOT! I HATE YOU!”

Groaning as the Techplaguer erupted into a new fit, Avo found himself looking at the others. “One more time before we leave?”

“Why not?” Draus said. “Wasn’t done kicking your ass the first time.”

Template-Draus scoffed. **[Fuck this uppity sow. Is that how I sound? We’re scalping her ass this time?]**

An awkwardness lingered in the other minds. **[Uh, Regular Draus, isn’t she... you?]** Benhata asked.

[She ain’t. I’m here. She’s there. Are you supposed to be snuffed somewhere?]

[... yes? Technically?]

[Then why ain't you dead? Why you jawin' at me? Why use are you to this fightin' body of ours? Fuckin' find some use for yourself, soldier.]

The former Glaive gave a series of defeated noises and just sighed.

+*Rest the set*,+ Chambers cast, his ghosts threading out to reach Tavers. He snickered.
+*And...*+ The space around them flickered. The toppled rubble flashed and then vanished. They were standing beneath a ringed highway now, surrounded on all sides by traffic infrastructure and half-built infrastructural complexes. +*Action.*+