

*I can't explain this. Hells, I've never even seen anything like this.*

*This is worse than a disruption. Your thoughts—they just disentangle when you get caught in a Thoughtwave Detonation. This though... it's like entire sequences have collapsed in on each other, artifacts and constructs blended like something between colliding rivers and combined debris.*

*...All the Sovereignties? All of them?*

*Jaus.*

*Fuck.*

*Our emergency loci grids have been activated. Defenses are in place. I think the sequences are untangling themselves slowly. I've gauged movement. Slow restoration. But only the gods know about how the FATELESS are doing?*

*The Golds and the rest of the Saintists are also disabled. I don't think it's them. We would have seen it coming.*

*Even the Homechain is reporting damages? The islands themselves? That's impossible. It's a fortress—Voidwatch? They confirmed it? Show me the satellite holos. I want to see.*

*Jaus.*

*Scramble emergency cells. Signal the Council. Call for the activation of the Mindfall Contingency. Something's happening. Something we're not seeing. Deploy all available Seekers. Stop quench the skirmishes before they begin. Activate all reserve forces. Yes, even the puppets. I know they're not ready; do it anyway.*

*We might not be ready to go into a shooting war, but the last thing we need is for Highflame to get any ideas before we...*

*-Final transmission of Mirror-Convave [REDACTED] (Cause of Death: Flayed by No-Dragon Heaven of Skin along with rest of compromised assets in the [REDACTED] Sovereignty)*

20-21

The City Eternal (II)

“You... don't give a fuck...” The words left the Hungers with an incredulous rasp. The sight of the countless eyes blinking in surprise between the scales of colossal dragons would have been comical if there wasn't a persistent ambiance of screams in the backdrop, and also if said eyes didn't resemble golden sores festering in a bed of wounds.

Still, undeniable satisfaction flowed through Avo—through many of his templates as well. There was something inherently cathartic about openly scorning your forbearer. Avo theorized it came with the breaking of the power dynamic between descendant and creator, the shattering of chains in the symbology that one was their own person, that one was beyond the power to be ruled.

He would have likely philosophized further, but a scoffed slur from Draus reminded him they still had an escape to plan.

Stunned disbelief gave way to outrage among the Famines, but while they were distracted, Avo positioned himself, his ego splitting occupy critical junctions in the Deep Nether. Places where he could observe each of the gathered nodes and serve as critical installations for a potential battle. He created as many sessions and hidden traumas as he could, extracting the ghosts and sequences directly from his ego before installing them within a hidden recess.

He had missed this. Missed being able to spoof and operate as a Necrojack. The Conflagration had made him destructive beyond measure in the Nether, but all he touched was certain to burn, and so nothing of the world beyond his mind and Heavens was his to sequence.

Not unless they were also Godclads.

A Famine of Joy whimpered, drawing Avo's attention.. *+How can you speak such things?+*

Draus directed choice words for this one too, despising him the most out of all the Low Masters for his fragility.

It occurred to Avo that this was effectively the first time the Regular ever got to interact with the Nolothic priesthood. All prior encounters were centered around the eradication of ghouls, purging the Famines' forces street by street, block by block, district by district. Now, she finally got to see the face of her enemy, and lo, was she unimpressed.

*+We made you,+* a Famine of Peace snarled, the scabs around him breaking. *+We created your like. Defiance just put things that didn't belong inside you. You think you matter because you're different? Do you really think you're fucking special? You're just a thing. And when we pull you apart, you're going to be a thing we know how to make.+*

The others of his like shifted in the Deep Nether, their nodes gathered and conjoined as layered sessions, building complex arrays bedecked by countless phantasmics. A corona of memories emanated from each of them, but Avo could sense their individual avatars without fail.

Distance worked strangely in this place of thought. One needed to move through connected paths to arrive at their desired destination.

A shame the Conflagration assimilated all that it touched. It would have been useful to have a more intact mindscape to move through.

*+We make lots of things,+ Avo replied. +Many of them are useless. Some of them are regrettable. Others pointless. Like this conversation. Came here to face you. All of you. To see my “gods” for what they were.+ His derision pierced past the Famines and settled on the Hungers themselves. +Died for you. Killed for you. Existed for you. But now you’re disgusted by me. Fear me. How things change.+*

*+Fear you? Fucking fear?+ The Nether around the Peace-formed nodes quavered as if they were collapsing inward. Ghosts fled while pockets of vacuum expanded. Thoughtwave disruption. The weapon of choice when dealing with him. +You’ll see fear, you mongrel slave! You’ll see. The traitor’s touch has addled your mind. It will be a genuine pleasure to still your flame and carve your construct open to see what went wrong on the inside. Maybe we’ll keep you after that. Link you to your companions and run traumas through them. See which of you shatters first.+*

**[Oh, good,] Chambers sighed. [He’s that kind of asshole. The kind that tortures because he’s always angry and doesn’t have a hobby. My dad would have—well, my dad was a drunk piece of shit who didn’t love anything but a bottle of Fulgermax, so they probably wouldn’t have gotten along either.]**

A shimmering field of pulsating rage rippled from each array supported by the Famines of Peace. Avo prepared himself for imminent danger, leaving only the barest amounts of his ego around his subself. The rest were spread out like an actual plague, unseen but growing, his ghosts shifting from one part of the Deep Nether to another.

Presently, his ego was separated into **[66,313]** splinters across various sequences. Portioning twenty-five splinters out of the collective, he designated those parts of himself as expendable in case of an attack. He would use them to simulate his Conflagration. Give the Low Masters something to focus their fire while he directed the rest of himself toward more conducive responses.

They would only be used if his current approach failed, which was centered around getting one of the Low Masters—or the Hungers itself—to interface with him.

**[Bide your time,] Draus said, watching their foes. [Go too soon and we lose all advantage. They null you from ways beyond. We can’t even touch ‘em right now. Don’t give ‘em any reason to end you. Not yet.]**

The Famines of Peace held to their posture, but the Hungers’ attention were firmly settled on Avo. **“Peace. Hold.”**

Ghosts stopped circulating through Peaces' constructs. The vicinity around the Low Master grew thick with indignation and rage. But he obeyed. More than anything, he obeyed without question.

More than a few templates within Avo turned their gazes away. This act was something they knew well. Draus, especially, considering the nature of her departure.

Loyalty was the highest virtue a hound could aspire to have. But loyalty also meant that one would never truly be their own master, that one would never truly govern their own fate.

Avo shook his head and turned his attention away from the ones content with their lot in hell. To Famines of Emotion he looked, and he found himself facing a wall of coldness that met his gaze without difficulty. That was the one he needed to watch the most. That was the one he had to be careful of. Among all the Famines and Hungers, only one was uncompromised by impulse, and so they had the best chance of anticipating his actions.

**“We have not taken your insult to heart, Dreamer,”** the Hungers said, their voice a discordant clash, some masculine, some feminine, some young, some old. A few sounded genuinely truthful, most were just resigned, and a few were openly enraged. Still, the eternal city spoke as a consensus, disunity defied despite warring sentiments. **“We understand that your existence has been a tumultuous one. You share our pain in seeing a better world unrealized.”**

**[Holy shit,] Chambers groaned. [These motherfuckers are allergic to the word “sorry.”+ He regarded Avo. +I mean. I guess you had to get it from somewhere.]**

Avo restrained himself from making Chambers relieve the aratnid incident. Facing a tyrant was a good way to remind oneself not to enact tyranny.

Quietly, more of his steam settled in additional faraway sequences. Even still, more nodes lingered over him, their strength of numbers enough to encircle the Deep Nether. Or at least make it seem that way.

*This space is theirs. It has been for years.*

*They know how to manipulate its thresholds better than anyone.*

*That also means you will too if you manage to subsume one of them. But it won't be easy. They're probably adjusting their defensive perimeters as we speak. Joys will be preparing themselves as sacrifices to channel new warminds. But that costs egos and time. Priority targets are still Peace.*

*Consume them. Spread through their nodes. Turn the detonations against the other Low Masters. Use the chaos to burn them into you. We can cripple them for good today. We just need one opening. One chance. We can leave here with more than we ever expected...*

Avo had to drain a sudden thrill passing through him. The minds of the priesthood appealed to him like flesh once dead, a bountiful feast just beyond his reach, but not his sight. He adopted more of Draus' aspects and mantled his self-control.

Only if there was opportunity. And only if it wouldn't get him killed.

Abrel whispered prompts to him, feeding him memories connected to her experience in social engineering. He needed to convince the Low Masters to approach him, but that couldn't be done by any conventional means. They already knew of his flames and would take every precaution to avoid contact.

But rational understanding could be overcome by impulse.

**[They're unbalanced,] Abrel stated darkly, thinking of her cadre again. [There's a lot of emotion coming from them, and it's all centered around you. Invoked by you. Pull on some threads. Have them tell you things and strike at what they believe it. See if you can make any cracks spread. But don't be outright antagonistic. Just be... insufferable. But still a potential asset.]**

*+Tell me about Noloth,+ Avo began, speaking to the Hungers. +Tell me of the world that you lost. The world that you dreamed of. Tell me in your words. I want to hear it from you.+*

His words provoked unexpected shifts on the faces of Emotions. Their heads tilted and the dead bird enchained within their cavernous chests twitched. Avo could feel their stitched eyesockets study him.

The ghoul simply shrugged. *+Could lie to you. Could say I was busy. Or distracted. Too occupied to read the histories and lore you gave. But the truth is I didn't want to know. Wasn't sure if I wanted to remember you.+*

Joy moaned. Peace seethed. Emotion just nodded.

The Hungers, contrarily, understood. **"Trust is a hard thing. Of this we know. You wish to know of Noloth? Very well. We will remember. We will recall. Joy. Attend us."**

At the eternal city's command, the Famines of Joy committed their ghosts to new tasks. The tears that formed their chariots spilled outward in silvery fibers, biting into memories and pooling mindscapes together. More than a few of Avo's splinters were caught in the wake, and gut-feeling halted him from pulling them out.

*Wait! This is good. Perfect even. Stay. Cling to the memories. But don't subsume anything. Joy is made to be poison. A miracle of trauma pretending to be a man.*

A vast mindscape emerged from tumbling tides of chaos, and a portal to another place appeared to open. Unlike the holographic projections delivered by phantoms, the realm before Avo was tangible. Visible. Full of life and sensation. It was better than the most detailed of vicarities, appearing as if an actual place instead of a complex recollection formed from possible memories.

Stack ziggurats came into view, but Avo realized he was looking upon the city that would become New Vultun when he saw the sigils of the Maw. The trenches were only partially dug by this point and he could still see the slaves working, entire slums built along makeshift platforms, crude ramps to facilitate logistics.

**“This was the first deception,”** the Hungers said. A moment later, a pillar made from swirling leaves manifested over the city, descending on a pyramid-like structure lined with sacrifices. **“The gods ruled the upper city. The parts where those of lesser capability and slave stock dwelled. They fed from the waste of our society while we stole away the best below, preserving them in our eternity. For ages, such was how things were. We manipulated the topside. We fed the gods deceit. We ruled from the shadows, moving pieces and directing the faithful of the tyrants against each other.”**

Avo grunted. For the first time since he received the mem-data, Avo accessed the history of Old Noloth and pulled information about its lore. Instantly, he realized where this was going, but he let the Hungers continue.

**“Then came the betrayer, Jaus. He and his sword-whore. They arrived as vagabonds, slipping into the city as captured slaves, but moving with purpose. It took little time for them to descend the secret paths within our ziggurats and enter the Penumbra. They knew what they were looking for. Another vessel—the one that Defiance... left in your care.”**

+*The George Washington,* + Avo replied.

**“Yes. Supposedly the name of a place. Or some bygone hero. It is hard to decipher. The crew offered little detail.”**

+*Maybe just ask them next time,* + Avo said. +*Torture for fun. Don't do it for information.* + The Hungers glared. Avo's subself didn't wilt. Instead, he generated flickers of the woman Walton had slowly killed over the course of days. +*Yeah. I know what you did. All that because you couldn't stomach being a civilization of lesser seniority. But go on.* +

Avo directed multiple splinters through the mindscape simulating Old Noloth. He took care not to consume any memories, lest he betray his presence, and simply left himself attached to multiple objects in the city.

**“Jaus. He came to us. He sought a solution to our mutual god problem, and was seeking the aid of the other crew at the behest of his ‘artificial advisors.’”** The Hungers said the words with such scorn that Avo felt Calvino spasm. He wasn’t sure if something was happening at the EGI or if it was trying to respond. **“Regardless, our efforts became comingled, and through our mastery of the art, the thought-crystal supplied partially provided by the Ori—the pretenders of our craft—and the beginnings of practical thaumaturgy established by the Chainbreaker, we turned pantheons against each other and conducted our efforts in secret. For years, we formed a clandestine basis of communication, and we twisted worshippers across all cultures.”**

The Hungers fell silent for a beat. **“Tell me, Dreamer, do you know what belief is? Belief is will fed with a story. Belief is a direction for your choice to move it. This is the engine that compels gods. And this engine was the thing we broke in mass.”** Notes of euphoria entered the entity’s voice. A sense of wrongness flooded Avo’s nerves. **“In the end, the destruction was so sublime. All it took was thaumaturgy itself. A change of the lore. A sudden rebuild of ontology through great influxes of death. The fall came. And it was beautiful. Beautiful.”**

The visage of Old Noloth began to wither and change. Explores gouged sections away from the city. The God of Leaves spewed Soulfire from multiple tears as it plunged through a ziggurat. Thousands of slaves were convulsing at once.

Mass death. Mass sequencing. Mass collapse.

**[And so he poisoned the gods using their own faith,] Kare muttered. [He made the pantheons their own bombs.]**

Avo barely heard Kare’s response as another spike of dread pierced through him.

*I feel it too.*

*There’s another of us. One at least. A warmind. It’s being triggered. It’s coming closer. The Low Masters were stalling for time too. They’re trying to capture us. Contain us. Probably going do something to the sequences around us.*

*You need to accelerate. End this presentation. Let the Famines of Joy reel you in. Don’t be in the Deep Nether for whatever comes.*

Instinct and scorn made Avo chuckle. He shook his head at the Hungers and hissed out a sigh. *+So then what? Godsfall. Everything was ruined. But the gods were broken. The world was yours. Did you come up with designs to betray Jaus first? Or was that for down the line?+*

**“Betray Jaus?”** The Hungers’ voices rose to a shriek. **“He betrayed us! He banished us! Look around you. Look at this ruined place! Do you see this? All that is memory and conception could have been made truly real. We could have rendered all the gods useless. Created a new paradise where all people could live a life as masters and nobles if they only envisioned it. That all miracles can be made manifest with but a thought. That was the world that was stopped. All for this. The Nether. A crippled shadow of what could have been rooted to my essence.”**

The dragons seemed to sag, laid low by the admission. **“There are more and more minds now. Increasingly many egos upon the shallows, the cognitive load we must filter greater and greater. Your kind was meant to be a solution. Additional support as auxiliary minds and containers for traumas. You were not... it was a thing of necessity.”**

Still no apology. But there was an opportunity, something Avo had to ask before anything else. *+The bodies in the George Washington. They’re empty husks. Can’t create thinking minds. You made them?+*

**“A thing of our blood did,”** the Hungers said. **“A warmind. It birthed your nodes. It is birthing your nodes still. But you have taken the temple from us, and so many of your brothers are trapped in this limbo. Unable to be birthed...”**

*+Where?+* Avo asked.

This time, the Hungers didn’t answer.

*+We can show you,+* a Peace sneered. *+In fact, you’ll see soon enough.+*

**[Yeah, alright, they’re doing something fucky,]** Abrel said. **[Avo. Get us out of here before we discover whatever horrible shit they have cooking.]**

He obliged.

With a thought, he directed his subself to stand, lashing his false Conflagration at the recalled realm of ancient Noloth. Famines of Joy scattered and the supported mindscape collapsed. Folds of disturbed Nether built around the Famines of Peace, but they didn’t fire. Not yet.

Melded to Joy’s ghosts, Avo felt his splinters recede into several thousand Joys as he planned his next steps. However, as his steam slithered into the Low Master’s thoughtscape, merging with wards and sequences, he realized the structure within was constantly changing from form to form, memories and infrastructure mutating.



It demanded all of Avo's focus to keep up with the rapid shifts, and he couldn't help but feel that he was in the wrong place.

*Oh. Oh, it's already inside them. They're going to let it out.*

*Avo. You need to get to Peace now. Get away from Joy. Turn yourself into Ghostlinks and go. No time for stealth anymore.*

*They're trying to cage us.*

**"You spit at us blindly,"** the Hungers raged, **"like a child trying to offend its parent."**

*+Let me null the fuck,+* A Famine of Peace followed.

*+Masters,+* Emotion interjected, a slight frown occupying his face as he turned to Peace.

*+There's something in his behavior--+*

Avo crawled along the labyrinths comprising the Famines of Joy's inner world and positioned himself for a link. There was more than a little distance between the Famines of Joy and Peace, so he needed to give himself as much time as possible.

That was where his previous preparations came in handy. Distractions within distractions. Things to draw away attention.

*+Would you like to hear something in earnest,+* Avo said, speaking to the Hungers. He didn't wait for the dragons to respond, and mentally readied his various sessions and installations to launch their constructs at the Low Masters. They would never hit. Not even close. But that wasn't the point. *+Your paradise... is pathetic. You fled material reality. Fled and abandoned so many. Talked about the chosen people. City eternal. But you hide. Even when you won. Kept choosing to hide. Why? Why?+*

**"The others, they were not to be trusted--"**

*+Why did you kill him?+* Avo asked. He was looking at Emotion now. Directing this question specifically at him. *+Why did Avohakten rebel?+*

The Famines of Emotion said nothing, but their perception slipped ever-so-slightly off Avo's subself.

**"The traitor thought he found faith,"** the Hungers snarled. **"Faith. He was going to join the upper and lower cities. He was going to show us to the gods! Betray all that we worked for."**

+*Still no mention of why.*+ Avo just chuckled. Chambers was right. More than he could ever know. +*It can't ever be your fault. Can it? Never your mistake. Always the world against you. Always someone else betraying you. Let's not talk about my namesake. Let's not talk about Walton. Let's not even talk about the people you fused into voidship's core. Your priests. Look at them. Haven't they given enough? They're just facets now. Barely any person left in them. Look at where you are. Look.*+

And Hungers did. And Peace cursed. And Joy wept. And Emotion frowned.

+*All this? This is what you deserve,*+ Avo said. +*It's what you earned. Paradise belongs to those with the will to claim it. That ones that will not be ruled inside and out. And that can't be you. Because you are afraid. You are afraid of dying. You are afraid that you cannot control everything. You are jealous. Because you're not a true god.*+

**“...Enough of this. Peace. Be done with him. I will speak with his restoration once we have extracted his flame.”** The eyes turned to him once more. **“A pity. I wanted them to help you with your ascent against the Guilds. But hopes become ash ever so often.”**

+Yes,+ Avo agreed, not even bothering to hide the feral grin spreading across his face. +*Ash. Always.*+

And then and multiple memories across the Nether shifted in shape as Avo's Delusion-infused constructs rose, Thoughtwave disruptions fell, and tendrils of ghosts held within whistling steam whipped out toward the Famines of Peace.

**Ghosts: [101,301]**