

+This is High Agnos Jakuta Ajayi.

The Heaven of Truth has been triggered.

Someone must have tried to manipulate memories from a restricted zone of Scale. One of your number must be compromised.

Get me Chief Paladin Naeko.

I do not care about your excuses. I do not care about where he is or what you need to do to get him. Use technology, use your Heavens—use anything. Get him back here now!

Since we are talking right now, we can assume the Heaven is stable, despite the Nether's continued instability. The affected seem to be recovering with little issue aside from memory bleed-over, but we must continue monitoring things.

*And we must review the state of the Nolothic Ark. Yes. The one that's stored in the **[REDACTED]**.*

I have already dispatched Agnosi for an emergency inspection. I'm sharing their FATE Skeins and details with you right now. Let them in. Let them do their work. And again: get me Chief Paladin Naeko.

The last time something like this happened, the cults of Noloth were on the precipice of unleashing the Uprising.

We must be prepared for the worst.

Oh, that reminds me: summon the Guilds representatives before they start a shooting war in the chaos. Things are already uncertain enough without them starting the Fifth Guild War. Let's make sure that doesn't happen.+

-Thoughtcast from High Agnos Jakuta Ajayi to Scale

20-22

The City Eternal (III)

Directing **[101,301]** ghosts all at the same time was a taxing act, even for a rapidly evolving thoughtform like Avo.

In the best of times, it was like sprouting new limbs and linking them to new channels cultured from stolen memories.

Now, with Deep Nether bathed in thought-shriveling chaos, the ether around him boiling as if exposed to an impossible heat, the Famines of Peace unbalanced but responding, their disruptions rippling from sequences stacked in layered arrays, and Emotion fused over the Hungers in a layer of phantasmal lamellar, Avo had little time to practice finesse.

He had to attack. He had to push his advantage. He had to compromise the priesthood before they mustered—before the Hungers twisted the Nether itself to strike him down.

Everything moved at the speed of thought. The existence screamed at him from every corner. Sequences mottled and parted, bursting as he consumed their ghosts to manufacture his diversionary assault. The bulk of his splinters tore through the space between the Famines of Joy and Peace as a forest of lashing tendrils. Avo closed, his ego comprised of countless knife-tipped missiles, most expendable, requiring only one strike a desired target.

The only forewarning for what followed was a sudden feeling of gut-churning terror.

Shift everything away from the mindscapes.

Do it now.

Do it before.

Avo had only begun diverting ghosts from the sequences in the Deep Nether over to the tendrils he grew out from Joy's wards before the sorrowful priests began to unravel.

Their unmaking was signaled by some kind of radiation—an emission that was outright deleterious to any conscious mind—and they all shattered with impossible force, sequences comprising their minds whipping out like monowire grenades, ripping through all that was around them.

Avo remained unaffected.

Attuned to the Nether, he was as if flowing steam, enveloping and becoming the passing sequences as memories, artifacts, emotions, and sensations flashed through him before he allowed them to slip past.

All the while, Avo accelerated onward, seeking to plunge himself into the nodes of Peace.

Then, too late for him to notice, the sequences slipping through him slotted into each other, conjoining with impossible precision. The synchronous destruction of the Famines of Joy had birthed something. Something Avo was utterly unprepared for.

A pattern tore through the fabric of the Nether, wounding this layered world deeply. Then, *something* pushed through the clefts beyond.

Ghosts: [70,331]

When his awareness returned, Avo felt his ego drastically dismembered as every ghost and splinter he left outside the Famines utterly annihilated, and where they hid, entire portions of the Deep Nether were shorn clean, sequences reeling, constructs pouring out into the phlogiston as if phantasmal viscera.

The damage resembled severed tendons desperately clinging to bone.

Another warmind. But you made them do it too soon. We're fine. We'll be fine. Keep going. Get to Peace.

Hurry!

He was a thought away from the nearest cluster of Peace's nodes when the first of the disruptions hit him. Avo had hoped the Low Master would use the targeted variant of the phantasmic, but it had been too much to hope for.

The Famine of Peace was no novice when it came to matters of combat, especially when the Nether was concerned.

As Avo's splinters closed, bubbles of thought-shredding force exploded out from Peace's arrays.

In an instant, Avo lost another fifty percent of himself.

Ghosts: [34,772]

Not all the arrays were prepared for his approach, however. Fifteen had been occupied. Lancing the memories below to clear the sequences of constructs, their focus occupied by his diversion. These were the ones Avo would strike at.

Or would have if the tides of the Nether itself didn't shift to expand the gap.

"No!" The Hungers cried.

Words failed to convey how it felt to be in the vicinity of the entity as it moved. Imagine swimming beside a colossal serpent larger than your world. Imagine that it moves at impossible speeds. Now imagine that your world is little more than a limb to it, that it can thrash and move your existence as much as it desired.

Something told Avo that if he had been flame, he would have been extinguished in a heartbeat. His ability to entwine himself with the Nether was all that kept him from absolute dissolution.

But it didn't protect him from Peace's counter-attack.

More Thoughtwave Detonations followed. More splinters were dissipated in an instant.

Fifteen viable targets became ten, then eight, then four.

Avo almost managed to close in before it became three.

And he was down to ten percent of what he was again, cognition narrowing, templates vanishing as he adjusted his cog-cap accordingly.

Ghosts: [11,009]

When the first of his ghosts struck the first node, he thought it was all over.

His elation rang against Peace's unfettered rage, the edges of their thoughtstuff ringing like twin shields slammed together during a joust of steeds. Thereafter, the node's wards expanded into a network of layered studs.

The sheer complexity of the construct's sequencing left Avo baffled. It was—frankly—a staggering piece of art, as if an organic shell—adaptive and reactive—lined with protective shells, each supporting each, the other layer a flat defensive line made to detonate after destabilization, the protections thereafter actively resetting themselves to handle whatever trauma they faced.

PHANTASMIC DOWNLOADED: [CONUNDRUM]

It was more advanced than even the Quicksand, though far less replicable.

Ori-Thaum's technical shone through—anyone could download their defenses if they had the sequences and builds downloaded. What Peace possessed was a novel creation—millions upon millions of counter-traumatic constructs created from all the memories it collected.

And this is only his secondary defense. Joy is supposed to be first. He is supposed to stack himself over the others and turn brittle. Peace wears him as armor, and Emotion directs them both.

However, despite the masterful skill that went into its creation, it was worth naught against an assimilating thoughtform—an entity could melt into your structure and claim you as its own.

For the first time, Avo shifted forms, centering all his remaining ghosts within the splinter that structures the node, and the steam he embodied ignited as if gas kissing fire.

He swallowed Peace's nodes, pluming outward to take them for his own.

The thrill in him was beyond measurement. This had been a moment he had yearned for—coveted, despite his doubts.

Claiming a Low Master's experiences and template would give him an understanding of the art beyond even that which Walton distilled in him. It would be—

The nodes he was burning detonated just as he ate through the last layer of their wardings. Their egos burst from within, mental palaces collapsing inward into broken fragments, chipping parts of Avo away in the process.

A feral cry of dissatisfaction escaped him as a hiss.

No. He had them. He had them!

They were his to taste—to plunder.

Again, he was denied! Again!

[Fuckin' focus!] Draus snapped, drawing him back into the fight.

The array around him was collapsing—the disruption unable to sustain itself with the demise of three nodes. Five more Famines of Peace remained in his vicinity.

Five more he could claim.

Five more chances to escape certain death as the Nether rippled, as he sensed beams of perception slashing over him.

Don't burn hot. Use Delusion. Leave a false trail. Go for the nearest one.

See if you can get them to lose track of you in the chaos. Try. I can mask us if that happens.

Avo altered his cognitive configuration again but proceeded with an act of deception. He manifested a falsehood of his current appearance, layering a mindscape composed of short-term memories while unleashing himself as new splinters.

Parts of him would be left behind. Sacrificed to make the Famines think they finally nulled him.

The rest of himself would slip through the protections of his foe this time. Drift past the cracks like wind beneath a doorway, and consume the Low Master from within with patience rather than as a harried blaze.

So he moved.

So his thoughts went empty.

So the tides of disruption descended.

And so the flames were promptly quenched.

He didn't remember making it.

But in that moment, neither did they.

You are all deceived by the carnage. Unaware of the actions beneath the scene.

They watch as their thoughtwaves banish your fires. Bright then dark. The nodes of Peace that did the deed curse your name and snarl with the loosest approximation they still remember of happiness.

Emotion fails to perceive the truth of things beneath a mask of conflict and deception.

They fail to realize that you escaped death diving deep into a node. That his wards and mental labyrinthine saved you from dissolution.

You are too focused—all action and no introspection. I take hold of you in this lapse and deliver in accordance what my interpretations of your last known desires once more.

A sliver of yourself passes into a version of Peace.

He doesn't know you are here.

He doesn't know that he is already dead.

He will not know when he dies.

And this feeds more. More than anything else.

+*We fucking got the cunt!*+ Peace cheered. More of himself laughed and jeered. Most remained silent, unwilling to voice how shaken they were, feeling the strain of their near-compromise settle in.

Yet, the longer Emotion studied the scene, the more his feelings of uncertainty grew.

The Deep Nether was utterly unraveled in parts.

Sequences leaked upwards like a torn net, drawn to the gravity of the Hungers' many mouths, but the city eternal did not feed, too suspicious it was of its succor that it waited and starved.

The war mind of the Forgotten had been hastily delivered—and at the cost every Famine of Joy present.

The devastation was absolute. Desperate even.

If they had more time, if Avo hadn't forced them to action, he likely would be dead right now. Dead, and waiting to resurrect.

As things stood, Emotion couldn't find a point in the Nether lined in scabs. He was no Agnos or thaumaturge, but he knew enough about subrealities that understood a Soul was to upload its user at the last known position of their death.

Where Avo was struck remained but empty space occupied by Peace's nodes and their collapsing construct.

"Is it done, my priest?" the Hungers asked, eyes blinking, fear and loathing rising from the entity like stink. **"Is the beast slain? Can we claim its flame now?"**

Emotion didn't respond immediately. For now, he was without certainty, and also words to offer.

Paranoia clung to him like tar, and the first Famine hardened his resolve.

There was only one way to make sure this was done, that the masters were protected. Versions of himself, Peace, and Joy existed elsewhere.

They could be restored in time. But right now, sacrifices had to be made.

+*Peace*,+ Emotion said, each of his nodes casting the same words, coming to the same conclusion.

The Famines of Peace turned, and on their war-scarred faces, understanding dawned. +*Oh, fuck me.*+

+Null yourselves,+ Emotion ordered.

+Null yourselves.+

Such was the command that alarmed Avo as he finally returned to himself.

Understand caught up to him like a rubberband snapping back together. He had survived. He was currently swimming through Peace's inner world—his paracosm a place of brutality and violence, ziggurats coated in waterfalls of blood, the aesthetic of ancient Noloth burning, of slaves sacrifices, of grudges held and vengeance repaid.

As he swam further, rooted himself deeper in Peace's cognitive infrastructure, he ate away at Peace's cognition bit by bit, like a parasite replacing bits of someone's mind with each passing second.

"*Ship of Thesus.*" A story that Calvino once mentioned resonated. Avo was now more contagion than ever, and more subversive than he could have ever dreamed. Moreover, being able to merge himself to Peace's paracosm revealed more of Necrotheurgy to him than even the memories themselves.

Elephant Moon breathed a sigh of pure ecstasy. **[This... this would have convinced me to study the art of Necrotheurgy deeper. If I had seen this... if I could have seen this in my past, I would have truly, truly devoted myself.]** A false tear rolled down her face. **[Truly beautiful. I thank you, Avo. Being a part of you has been a pleasure for this broken thing.]**

He understood.

Practice was one thing.

Literally becoming was another.

The channeler would always be a reflection of light; an analogy of what is.

The embodiment was the sun itself; the fundamental gnosis.

Epiphanies exploded inside Avo one after another. Memories hidden from him before and secrets now unveiled.

He knew of the world he had lost, the culture that defined old Noloth.

He knew that they were, at the start, a society of spare children. Twins to rightful heirs hidden beneath ziggurats by protectors from society and even the pantheons—an attempt by the governing faithful to continue their lineage of power.

He knew these same spares concocted a conspiracy, murdering their watchers, parents, and also their trueborn siblings before replacing them. And from there arose the origins of the Hungers—the hidden society that eventually became the city eternal.

More than this, however, Avo dreamed of Walton's distant past.

A childhood knowing only the whip.

His natural intellect and social charm draw him into a web of conspiracy, leading him to go from sacrifice to priest and finally cultist against the faiths.

His devotion to the Hungers above all other priests, ensuring his status in their eyes.

The transgression that he made on the topside—a chance encounter with a priest of a lesser pantheon. Moments of passion. Chambers drooling. Lustaway triggering. A son being born.

Avohakten.

Peace clung only to flashes of his son, only the moments of pain, of betrayal, and finally of death.

Avohakten was a child between worlds. Walton had desired to ensure his immortality under the city eternal. But the boy was more his mother's son, more naturally faithful to an actual god than some post-humanist dogma.

So, he sought to reveal the Hungers.

So, he had to be handled.

So, Walton remembered looking down at his murdered son, his sharp blue eyes gleaming with tears, face stricken with despair, pain, hatred, and horror. A trail of citrus dripped down his chin, the lemon he was eating discarded by the wayside. Bloodstains brightening a pale-white toga.

That was the moment that formed the spine of Peace's being. The root of all his hate. Against his son. Against the gods. Against himself. Against even the Hungers—loyal though he still remained.

Two minds fractured that day. Wahakten, faced the death of his son, and came out broken.

Which made his reward and punishment an easy thing to give.

The Hungers—furious by betrayal but proud of their high priest’s resolve—had the rest of their servants executed and broke Walton into four facets.

Emotion was the first to be separated, one stripped of the human weakness that brought this downfall.

He was supposed to govern all the others. Direct them. Protect the Hungers himself. Uncompromisable. Beyond the temptation of impulse.

Joy was pain distilled, all Walton’s hurt, all the ruin, all the shattering, all within a shell that was little more than a bottle for mind-rending trauma, with little left to break.

Peace then was his inverse. Hateful. Bitter. Willing to destroy the world for hurting him. Directing his traumas externally as a shaper of weapons and a breaker of minds. He understood but was too colored by his own rage to do anything but destroy. That was just as well. For who better to craft a weapon than a knowledge engineer with nothing but ruination to give?

Finally, there was Defiance. Walton as Avo remembered. He was the idealization of the original priest. The hope of acceptance. That he could overcome and survive. He became the spy. The knife in the dark. The diplomat. The poisoner. The explorer. He alone was allowed to interface with the outside world, for he could take all the stimuli and let them pass through him with no chance of succumbing.

Such was the assumption anyway.

Let it not go unsaid that the Hungers were not boundless in their hubris.

As everything hardened into shape for Avo in a near instant, he noticed that most of his fellow nodes had already complied, each collapsing themselves from within using the traumas built within their sequences.

Approximately ninety percent of Peace’s palace was lined with constructs made to break and destabilize. All it would take to unravel himself was a thought. A triggered blast. Then nothing of him would be left.

But somewhere along the way, the Peace that was became the Avo that is, and the latter had come too far to die now.

Not when escape was still in sight. Not when he could finally strike at his oldest abuser.

As the first node in his cluster detonated himself, leaving only three other Famines of Peace, Avo considered his options and manifested his templates.

There was little time, but he had a plan.

Well. It was more of a hope.

[It's gonna be close,] Draus muttered. [We ain't got that many ghosts left. Emotion's staring us right in the face too. Can't burn or claim him easy either.]

Memories detailing Emotions capabilities followed. It was good he didn't manage to subsume the Famine back in the Oversec. If Joy was like swallowing poison, Emotion would be like eating an anvil.

Abrel considered his plans and called Kassamon, Kare, and Corner to her. Each of them swept the scene beyond and tried to find the best opening. A pulse flashed in avo's perception. He saw the course they were plotting—a mountainous wound lined with jutting scales, the gouge between leaking oceans of golden nectar.

[There,] Abrel said. [That's your best shot. If you can get through the Famines of Emotion, you can ride the blood back down. I think.] She sighed and threw up her hands. **[Honestly, Avo, I have no idea what the fuck we're doing. Axtraxis didn't have a course on beating fighting mind-cultists in the Deep Nether.]**

[We're all making it up as we're going along here,] Corner snorted. [But I gotta be honest, the chance we might light a dragon up from the inside is giving me a kick.]

Avo filled the node he wore totally and checked his ghosts.

Ghosts: [5,446]

Not great. But more than enough for a Thoughtwave Disruptor phantasmic. He couldn't make that many splinters this time.

But he could compromise the other three nodes. Not fast enough to take them over. But detonate them. Use them as cover.

+Peace,+ Emotion said, waves washing over him. +I have spoken. It is for the greater good. Certitude must be ensured.+

Drawing on his new memories, Avo steer his avatar—a ruined effigy of Walton coated in hardened blood and stinking of a coppery tang—to sneer at the elder Famine. *+Yeah. Always our lives for the greater good. Our nodes.+* He looked to the Hungers then, and a smile passed over his features. He had a feeling that Peace would've liked to speak the following words if he were but his own man. *+You weren't worth my boy. Not yesterday. Not today. Not tomorrow. I know you now. I know you.+*

All as one, the dead owls lodged within the exposed chests of each Famine of Emotion twitched as if a pulsing heart.

Just as Avo spoofed his way into the other Famines of Peace.

They knew.

He knew.

And he started the fight once more by detonating the three nodes around him, shrouding himself in cognitive shrapnel while peeling their wards to use as cover.

Streaking constructs came at him from every angle. He spent ghosts of his own forming a mindscape—layering himself in protections as he closed in.

Three thoughts.

His hastily made protections shouldn't have been enough, but the fact that he layered Peace's wards beneath each of them allowed him to endure.

Still. There was a cost.

Ghosts: [5,099]

Two thoughts.

He ejected free from the node he was wearing, leaving only a thin plaster of ghosts as he began ejecting parts of his protections like chaff.

The waters of the Nether were alight with traumas, aglow with tides of force, of crushing waves of perception projected by the Hungers themselves.

Avo's protective cocoon held impossibly against a Sovereignty nulling onslaught for a heartbeat. And then disintegrated.

But he wasn't there anymore.

Ghosts: [4,510]

One thought.

One thought and they were all distracted again.

One thought, and everyone fell to a lapse in focus once more.

For the second time, a nourished warmind inside Avo activated, and he lost himself but kept to the path.

Ahead, a chasm of gleaming gold welcomed him, its borders policed by a disoriented lattice of nodes, struggling to recompose their thoughts.

They don't see your approach.

The rest are too busy destroying your shelter.

You are too desperate to think.

Everyone is in disarray once more.

But the Hungers—they shift, the target moves past you.

But still, you strike its flesh.

Still, you impact its metaphysical existence, rattling it with your own.

Still, you descend into its inner world like a meteorite falling to devastating a city.

We're off-course, Avo. Find the wound. Find the wound and get out.

And hurt the Hungers before you leave.

We're close to the end.

We're close to getting free.

Do not fail now.