

*Thought is the root of divinity.*

*Worlds are built within our minds, the gods are birthed. With this knowing, it should not come as a surprise that this wellspring can also serve as the blessed unbirth.*

*Come, Jaus Avandaer. Come, Zein O'yaje. Enter my temple. I wish to lay my eyes on both of you. It is not often that I encounter those freed from the road of their fate. Come and greet my masters with me. There is much we have to discuss. Much we can learn from one another.*

*You have traveled far in search of answers. And I have waited long to possess the opportunity you present.*

*I think we seek mutual ends. I think we share mutual dreams.*

*I think that, together, we can actually do something about the false lights shed upon our world by the pantheons, and witness what truly lies beyond.*

-Wahakten, the Thief of Dreams, Priest of the Nolothi, and Servant of the Hungers

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The City Eternal

*+It's him, + Peace snarled, sweeping his perception through the hollowed sequences. +It's Defiance's bastard. He's here. He's been burning through these memories. How the fuck did he get here! Emotion. Emotion! Answer me, you cunt! How did he find this place. +*

Cacophonous ambiance continued its reign in the Deep Nether, but the nodes of Emotion stayed apart from the symphony in silence.

One after another, Famines entered the final threshold before their master, responding to the calls of the ascended polis. They arrived through shifting sessions, mangled thoughtscape reshaping themselves upon command. The priests loaded into the space in staggered groups, most of them still struggling to align their own minds after the sudden destabilization they experienced in the material.

The disruption was omen enough to inspire their paranoia. As such, few were surprised when the Hungers called.

Like missiles they rose into the air, loading constructs of memory around themselves as they climbed high, generating conceptual armies and vessels from the sequences patterned in their Ghostjacks. With thought forming the bedrock of this existence instead of "atoms" or whatever other lies the voiders sold, information was an omnipotent resource, and the wielders of which stood the true demiurges of this place.

Befitting their stations, the Famines mantled the phlogiston of resonating emotion just beyond the condensation of the Deep Nether like a host of stars. Each of their avatars shone as if points of a constellation, and from them spilled phantasmal tendrils, constructs and phantasms put to action at the behest of their masters.

Emotion hovered the closest to the Hungers, their nodes forming a final chain before anything would reach the city eternal. Beyond them, the Famines of Peace were installations of burning trauma, each grouping composed in arrays capable of nulling entire sections of a distraction. The preordained victims of their fission—the Famines of Joy—were the ones that dove into what few sequences remained, their altered cognitions rendering them perfectly expendable—useful as a forward element.

Even so, a numb disbelief emanated from every node of Peace. This was supposed to be impossible. Unfathomable. The idea that someone could somehow breach the thresholds established by their warminds and trespass upon the sanctity of this place was absurd.

Perhaps Ori-Thaum had the resources, but this demanded mastery far beyond the islanders and their paltry understanding of the lowest art.

*+Emotion, + Peace said. +I know you can hear me. Do not ignore me. How did he do this?+* Most of his other nodes were trying to provoke their way into similar conversations with their Famines of Emotion. They were getting little response either.

The Famines of Emotion remained as impassive as ever, their minds shimmering like placid ponds. Looking over the winnowed sequences, their thoughtstuff stirred slowly, and the dead avian in their chests released a rasping squeak.

Finally, a reply came. But not one Peace wished to hear.

*+I do not know, + Emotion answered. And he cast his memories of that day over into Peace again. And priest exiled from thoughts of peace knew that his fellow parted spoke only the truth.*

The fact that so many sequences were outright stripped clean betrayed the perpetrator's identity near instantaneously. There was only one entity in existence that could direct the potency of a Conflagration, that was fused to the slaving fires, a drifting mind capable of incinerating all that was thought.

Peace had been there the day they made their mistake and aided Defiance's bastard in its evolution. But how could they have known? How!

*+You gave him memories, + Peace growled, striking his fellow priest with spikes shaped from his growing tantrum. +You showed him our history. He couldn't have managed this without knowing! He fucking couldn't!+*

+*Master yourself, Peace*, + Emotion replied. Concentrated mists of perception hissed free from his nodes and passed through every last Famine of Peace and Joy below. Above, the Hungers stood unrighteously silent, tension and dread flooding through its cities, returning to the Nether as infusions of cognitive essence in streams of temporal blood.

As the misted blanket settled over shattered mindscapes, imagined people, vehicles, and creatures loaded into their expenses, conducting their own survey for every section. Famines of Joy watched over them and sang their laments, simulating the memories lost using their Cipher phantasms.

+*Is there nowhere safe anymore*, + Joy whimpered. Another gave a piercing cry of despair. More followed. +*Are they not satisfied enough with all they have taken from us? Our history! Our future! Our lives! Our Heavens! Our triumph! Must they come to defile the last sanctuary we possess as well?*+

None among the cohort answered him, for they had nothing to offer in response to his question.

Not until another Joy announced his discovery. +*One of the Delusions is missing. And a warmind of Lies as well. There are gaps in our protections. There is a gaps!*+

+*Fuck*, + Peace gasped, anger giving way to rationality-breaking terror for the first time in centuries. +*No. No, godscuntfuckshit! Wait... Lies? That one doesn't even work. Not unless someone tampered with the counterbalance held by Jaus' dogs.*+ Peace scoffed. That was a problem for later. There were other concerns for right now. +*Joy! Joy, plug the gap. Make sure nothing else got through. Do it now.*+

A series of wails escaped from the avatars of Joy as they descended as a rain of scalding tears. +*More of us spent. Always more...*+ Thousands of their nodes gathered at the point where Delusion stood missing.

All things were relative in the Nether, and positioning here was less object-spatial relational and more memory-to-memory reality, structures defined by interconnected sequences. But still, how deep the Famines of Joy had to travel revealed the true penetration they suffered. The warminds were unfinished weapons once meant to be cognitive armor and guardians alike. No should have gotten past them. But the Burning Dreamer had. And what's more, it seemed like it managed to steal another of their irreplaceable treasures.

+*Fucking Defiance*, + Peace said.

+*He has created a masterwork*, + Emotion agreed.

**"He has betrayed us like no other,"** the Hungers whispered, the majority of its inhabitants fear-stricken, reshaping their usual fervor to meekness. **"Dreamer. Dreamer?"** It called out,

voices nullifying the existence of more than a few nodes that resided in the vicinity of the dragons. **“We would like to speak. We would like to speak in earnest. We need not treat each other like foes. You are kin to us. Descended from us. We... apologize if you thought you couldn’t trust us. We do not reject you. We even wish to imitate you. Tell us. Tell us of the fire. Tell us of your triumphs over the betrayers’ people. We have heard whispers of your great deeds. Tell us.”**

Silence. Imagined constructs moved through flame-scabbed sprawls—places so scoured clean of memory that new ghosts had to be spent as pontoon mindscapes to allow actual passage through the ash. Famines of Joy fractured into multitudes of interlacing protections, sacrificing their egos to create ruptures of counter-cognition, their damages patching the gap left where the warmind of Delusion was supposed to be.

*+It’s so cold here,+* one of the Joy said. *+Like we are swimming down into our grave.+*

Peace replied with words of encouragement. *+Fuse faster, you whimpering fucks.+*

Still. Something didn’t sit right about their progress. Something felt especially wrong. Like there was an additional presence in the Nether that they couldn’t protect. That something had changed beyond their current understanding.

**“He does not answer me, my priests,”** the Hungers said, words a mix of nervousness and annoyance. **“Find him. Find him. The strain is growing. Find him. Before I must continue to feed.”**

Already, the ichor dripping from the dragons’ wounds was slowing with the halt of the eternal feast.

They needed to find the Dreamer. And fast.

*+The path is sealed,+* Joy said. *+If he has not fled, then there will be no place he can retreat. He is here. Trapped. Trapped with us.+*

And for the first time, Peace’s mood turned to sneering cruelty. *+Good.+* He primed his Thoughtwave disruptor.

It was time to do what the Guilds couldn’t.

It was time to put out those flames for good.

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**GHOSTS: [6,351]**

**GHOSTS: [6,093]**

**GHOSTS: [5,888]**

A breeze.

Such was the sensation that refocused Avo's mind.

The Deep Nether greeted him from a maze of perspectives across countless sequences. His awareness felt spread out—parts of him adrift amidst separated memories, his ego comprised of phantom limbs but also not; itself and something else at the same time.

Strangest yet, he felt himself more rooted to the Nether than ever. As if he could mantle this sea of thought upon his being at any time.

*Good. We're still here. Delusion's installed. Connected to me. You. The Conflagration. It would have confused your fires. Good thing I was the first warmind you encountered. Fortune on your part. Or maybe planning on Walton's.*

*Who's to say? We'll probably never know.*

**GHOSTS: [5,585]**

Another part of himself vanished from his control, and Avo felt the dismemberment leave him like steam dispersed. Fused into various memories, his perception of the Nether was limited. Narrow. On a whim, he resequenced certain memories, transferring between the sections of his ego at will.

**[Alright,]** Draus said, muttering as she manifested within him, a shadow hidden within a breeze, **[This feels weird as shit. Like we're all ourselves but not. Jaus, Avo, how much godsdamned stranger is your mind gonna get?]**

He didn't rightly know.

**GHOSTS: [5,112]**

Another series of disruptions tore chunks away from him. He reacted with each assault, shifting parts of his cognitive mass through each other, vanishing from a set of mindscapes only to fill another more broadly. He was rooted to himself. Always. But beyond that, he could occupy any component of thought. Any substance of mind. So long as he infused himself into them, that was.

Ghosts were still trickling in despite his current state. He could still subsume structures, but his efficiency was all but crippled when compared to the naked flames of the Conflagration unleashed.

Presently, he was dismantling constructs from within, merging them with his evaporation, absorbing and manifesting as them in the same instant. The process took time. He needed to wrap himself around the desired memories before condensing. It felt jarring to be so slow after the unfettered consumption of minds allowed by his Conflagration, but things were strange in general, and he was learning the rules of his new capabilities.

It was a trifling thing to accelerate through memories—easier even, seeing as he was just overwriting existing mindscapes right now—but digestion was most reduced. It wasn't so different from acting through specific haemokinetic constructs via the Woundmother in a sense.

He considered shifting from wind back to flame before a screaming impulse made him reconsider.

*They'll find you instantly. They'll concentrate their disruptions and put you out. You'll need to release Delusion to use your flames. And it's the only thing that's allowing you*

Avo didn't. Discomfort could be endured. Nullification, however, wasn't so easily overcome.

Another wave rushed through parts of him, and entire sections of his ego vanished in an instant. He remained a thoughtform. To be distracted from his own existence was to die. He needed cognition like lungs needed oxygen.

**[Spread out more,]** Draus said, trying to anticipate the next attacks. Abrel, Elegant-Moon, Corner, and Dice were summoned from his rising fog, nested in various objects or sensations he encountered. Subsumption was slow, but internalized construction remained as instant as ever. **[It's like we're an entire army right now. But we're in the open. And they're hammerin' the hells out of us with artillery. Thin our "forces" Go wider. Reduce your losses.]**

He adapted with Draus' advice and ballooned outward, flattening himself across vast distances.

## **GHOSTS: [5,310]**

The diminishment continued, but so did his restoration. And as he thinned the sequences he embraced, the percentage of his losses was redacted further and further in comparison to his gains.

The Deep Nether greeted a million perspectives. In some places, he was just a fissure running along the wall. In others, he was a discolored button on a child's vest or the eye of a bioform; the eye only, misplaced and misremembered, a false creation of a broken mind, a delusion all its own. At times, he became noises, and in others, he was but a mood, feeling, or sensation.

He was all of these things. But he was also none of these things. For as the mem-data faded into him, his ego rose like condensation, his outward-facing structure unlike the substance within. All that united these memories was his ego, his invisible presence layering a world beneath a world.

Incongruence was no longer a factor.

Gradually, he mastered his new configuration. He copied and rebuilt entire sequences subtly, his steam hissing over the remembered contents and changing them. It was as if winds blowing away dust to reveal the surface below had changed.

Carefully, he generated new constructs even as he spread further. Drones, aeros, birds, and towers became his spies. Gradually, he turned his awareness beyond the mindscapes comprising the Deep Nether and sought the Hungers once more. Now, however, the phlogiston of thoughts was walled in by new presences.

They greeted him as versions of Walton riding tear-made chariots, funneling down into a withered section of memories. They greeted him as rageful minds armored with scabs and dripping with blood. They greeted him as blank-faced and eyeless priests who had dead birds festooned in open wounds where their hearts should have been.

Collectively, they were as if voidships shrouding the atmosphere, Peaces' disruptions orbital weapons made to part the continents themselves.

*The Famines. So many of them. I think Joy is forming a blockage where Delusion used to be. Would have been good if part of us made it past the perimeter. Fine. Can handle this. We just need to start parted like Draus said. There are other warminds here. The Forgotten. The Impulsive. The Demented. Many more. Perhaps we can go for them...*

*No. It will take too much to deal with them and the Hungers. We need to handle the Famines first. Then we need to get into one of the Hungers wounds. Or onto its cities somehow. New idea. New plan. We find an opening. Something to help us climb up into the Hungers.*

Sudden inspiration struck Avo as he considered how interconnected the minds of the priests were. They were connected. Close. If he could burn one, he could likely get them all. The question was how he could do that without being nulled immediately in retaliation.

## **GHOSTS: [5,818]**

He directed the idea over to his templates—a minor civilization reforming inside his consciousness—and the elites of his mind interfaced with the problem with the others struggled with the newest changes.

**[Holy shit, do I feel floaty,]** Chambers muttered.

**[I don't think we have the speed for a direct approach...]** Kare said.

**[We'll have the best odds if we can just envelop them with our steam. It'll take longer, but I don't think they'll notice.]** Abrel frowned as he requested a simulated info-space from Avo, details about relative distances and which of the Low Masters he could hit. **[They're still pretty far from us. With a lot of nothing in between. I think we spotted some of their constructs too... maybe—]**

**[No,]** Benhata interrupted. **[We might be able to shift into any memory, but we're still overwriting the ghosts that were there before. The cultists will lose control over their own puppets and know something's wrong. We need to get to them directly.]**

**[How about the crying ones,]** Dice muttered, words coming from her unexpectedly.

*No. They're not egos anymore. And Joys are made to be lost. Don't burn them. Ever. They are trauma-incarnate. They'll just make things worse for our mind.*

+No,+ Avo replied. The places he occupied quivered slightly as he spoke but revealed nothing more. *+Can't go for them. Need to go for Peace. Emotion. Emotion especially. Seems to be the highest among the priests.+*

More discussion. More deliberation. More simulations. Plans formed and collapsed. Variable were estimated and approaches were abandoned.

**[Draw them close to us, then,]** Draus had finally said. Her recommendation cut through the clamor, and all the templates went quiet. **[We need them close. We need them unprepared. We gotta do something unpredictable. So. Reel 'em in. Give 'em bait.]**

**[Bait,]** Abrel muttered. **[Ourselves?]**

**[Parts of ourselves,]** Draus added. **[We don't exist as a single structure anymore. Whatever the hell Avo ate this time, it's got us able to occupy multiple points at the same time. We can afford gettin' bits of us nulled. It'll also stop them from bombin' us for a bit.]**

Avo understood.

If he shifted a portion of himself—something entirely expendable. Something to capture the attention of the Hungers and Famines, he could potentially lull them into a false sense of security. Deceive them.

Wise. Actionable. Possible.



No harm in trying.

A sliver of Avo's ego was transformed, its nature a conduit in a network, a drone comprising a swarm. In a heartbeat, he emerged from the memories he hid within and molded the ghosts like clay. He created a facsimile of himself—the ghoul that he was sprouting a halo of rising fire.

Conflagration supported Delusion pretended to be Conflagration again.

Never say Avo didn't choose the most convoluted of options.

His expendable subself materialized upon plains of ash, a single ember flickering into sight. The rest of him moved strategically, quietly creating new mindscapes in preparation for a coming ambush.

As the Hungers and Low Masters noticed his distraction, the Thoughtwave disruptions stopped, and streams of perception drowned the subself.

**[Time for a show,]** Chambers chuckled. Avo channeled parts of the man into himself. A thrill snapped into place. A sense of momentum from being seen.

*+No need to tear your garden apart,+* Avo said, speaking through his subself. He sat upon the ashes and just glared at his former masters, his former god. *+I'm right here. Tired of watching you miss.+*

*+You fuckin—+* Peace's words trailed off, but his rage continued to flow as a torrent. The most warlike priests' nodes adjusted their sequences and deactivated phantasmics. Thoughtwave Bombs and disruptors were rendered dormant.

Famines of Joy sailed overhead, painting the world around his subself in a translucent ooze.

**"Welcome, Dreamer,"** the Hungers said. **"Welcome home."**

Avo couldn't help but laugh. *+Is that what this is now?+*

*+That is where you were conceived,+* Emotion said. A pause followed. *+A critical aspect of yourself. No ego should be able to join with a warmind. Let alone graft it into themselves. But you have always been more than just another ghoul. Defiance made you well.+*

On that, Avo couldn't disagree. *+Was very prepared. Shouldn't have nulled him. He was the best of you.+*

**"Yes."** To Avo's muted surprise, the Hungers agreed. **"We should have been more... restrained in our punishment. But these are desperate times. Look upon my kingdom,**

**Avo. Look upon what sustains me. Look upon the eternal city filling with waste, my egos straining to bear the load.”**

Avo grunted. *+Look upon me. And realize I don't give a fuck.+*

Chambers laughed.