

+Gellend? What's up? Didn't you just cast me earlier? Gellend?+

+...Nothing. Just wanted to say... thanks. For being a good friend. Only really sane because of you. No idea how... never mind.+

+...Listen, do you want to get together after your work cycle? You don't so sound good. Is there anything—+

+Yeah. Sure. Have to go. Sorry.+

[SESSION DISCONNECTED]

+Gel? ...The fuck was that about?+

-Thoughtcast between Instructor Murta and Instrument Gellend

25-8

Nemeses (II)

Avo didn't so much soar as he crawled, using minds and loci as footholds to slingshot his splinters across the district while keeping Emotion one step behind. **Sync-Lag** rendered the reflexes of all tethered cognitions subsidiary to his and left the Famine with enfeebled vessels.

They would not notice Avo's raid until it was done, and so neither would Emotion, peering out from them as he was.

The Enigmata Knots numbered eight and masked the three-hundred and eight-five square kilometer district under veils of raining scripts. So dense were the circulating characters that all behind their searing forms remained obfuscated. But though they curtained the material world from perception, patterns they laid upon ontology were absolute.

Such was how Avo tracked the golems. Sorted them from one another.

Such was how he was going to claim them.

Four subminds dispersed into **[100,000]** splinters. The streams of Avo's consciousness rushed as a roaring concert, each ghost a needle tied to the threads of his ontology, spearing down to complete a nested envelopment. Where once conducting such a complex undertaking would have overtaxed his cognition, each Conflagration he subsumed accelerated the pace of his mind, the detail of his simulations, and increased his mental dexterity.

Buffeted by Hysteria, this was nowhere near his limit. He could go further. Complete shroud the district in the sequences of his Soulscape. But he refrained, lest Emotion glimpse the truth of his growing potential.

This dive remained a raid. Such was why he applied the Domain of Speed. And such he kept in mind as he dove through projected walls of altered information.

As the first of his splinters pierced through the scripts, the characters he passed transformed—came alight in hues of glaring red. The distinction soon ceased to matter as the rest of his splinters followed suit. Crimson reigned, and the fabric of the world began to blend before Avo.

**HEVAEN DTEEETCD
HEEVAN OF EGTMNAIA (AA/EFRPENTERCOANSMOITTM/)**

The miracles of the Enigmatas slipped from their patterns over into his, and the effect was immediate. His mem-data grew distorted, letters drifting, details slipping in and out of place. His mindscape was no different, with colors, structures, and concepts all bleeding into each other. Environments vacant of sense and randomized of detail assailed his perception. The sky was not the sky as it bore qualities of a *pond* or the *ground* while the buildings were as if drawings on a page—

**WARNING: THAUMIC BACKLASH SUSTAINED
->EMBODIMENT: (CONCEPTUALIZATION)**

REND CAPACITY - 15%

Enhanced by Draus' focus, Avo did not break from his task. Something was happening with his Highflame dive. Submind was engaged again.

No time for distraction.

He needed to finish with things here before any assistance could be diverted. Without hesitation, he traveled through their informational veils, tracking each golem using his Conception of Ontology.

Only through feeling his way across the tapestry did he comprehend their miracle, and even then, he needed Kae's aid to understand.

[The Heavens of Information are merging connotative and denotative details for everything spatial and physical,] Kae said, sounding curious. [The characters we see—look at the associated patterns. See how the Enigmatas are connecting different different expressions in existence with each other. Streets to skies or water and waves...]

[Everything is informational,] Avo mused. [Should be cognitive.]

[Ah, but information is more than memory or thought. Even thoughtless things have to absorb or convey information to each other. Like... biology. Your cells. This is simply blurring the meaning between different things. Sky can be compared to a reflection in a pond for certain languages or philosophies, and that is now true with the Enigmata. Apply this to all other concepts, and it is acting as a cipher for all of reality. It is shuffling meaning into meaning without destroying or collapsing any structures.]

A strange concept, but its effectiveness only incensed Avo's greed. He needed to have one of these Heavens.

So he directed his ghosts to seek out the minds connected to the golems, to tether himself to their accretions and grant him the initiative. The first of a few other patterns began to spike. Force. Wavelengths. Tides. They stuttered to a halt as phantasmal wires punched into them. Ignorance cried out to him again. All golems aligned with Clan D'Rongo slithered within an unseen presence—a presence moments away from noticing Avo thanks to the lag.

Incoherent memories splashed into his Soulscape. The chaos of their encoded minds reminded him of gazing into Denton's awareness.

Perhaps Voidwatch seeded her among the Silvers specifically for this reason. Regardless, they were bound to his being, and lag choked their actions all the same.

Rippling Soulfire ignited along phantasmal currents. Hysteria-amplified traumas shattered wards and minds alike. Existence flickered, and for the briefest of moments, an imprint of Avo's Overheaven—the Knower of Totality—loomed over all that was. Using his ghost-made tentacles, he tore the golems apart: ontology from matter. Dead metal fell as Heavens quivered and struggled, reaching out for the tapestry as they were drowned by memory.

Their domains unraveled as their patterns were laced to **Conceptualization**. No longer did they exist as something unto themselves. Now and forever, they would be but a figment of another's dream, set free only if Avo willed it.

HEAVENS ASSIMILATED

->**[TIDERULER] (SPEED/FORCE/TIDES) x4**

->**[ENIGMATA] (SPACE/MATTER/INFORMATION) x4**

->**[WINDSINGER] (SPACE/MUSIC) x4**

->**[LUMINOUS SHROUDS] (PROTECTION/WAR/LIES) x4**

The veils put up by the Engimatas vanished, and the natural of reality resumed. With objectives claimed and with Ignorance whispering to him once more, Avo pulled even the husks left by the broken Knots into his memory and fled across the Nether.

He left as quietly as he came. Sirens settled over the district and Avo took to monitoring the aftermath through his Exorcist proxies. Alerts were sounding across Ori-Thaum as quarantines

were being called. Additional thoughtcasts asking inquiring about four vanished Knots gave Avo a reason for joy.

With six additional subminds integrated and sixteen new Heavens to study—with special focus on the Enigmatas—his priority objectives were more than complete. Part of him wanted to continue the dive. To trigger the sessions within the Incubi he devoured and strike at their Mirrors. Prudence and Peace's template bade him to stop.

[He knows you're here,] Peace said, his breath an annoyed hiss. [He's going to be waiting for you across the lines. He's going have traps within fucking traps set up for you. This ambush—you forced him out. He took a stab at you to get you to piss off. He doesn't know you've changed again. A-fucking-gain. Don't let him find out by backlashing you. Keep the cunt in the dark. Same way he's trying to keep you in the dark about what warminds he has left.]

His words passed into Avo, and attuned to Draus' template they settled without protest. **[He's wearing Defiance. Cannot abide by this. Will claim him. Will carve regret into the shape of his being. When I win. Only when I win.]**

[Good,] Peace breathed. [Fuck me. Defiance made a ghou that chooses to learn. Miracle in of itself. What now, then?]

Six subminds let out a unified hiss of amusement. **[Emotion waits for us in the Nether. So we will burn the world itself. Going to form the Knots from my memory. Attach false ego identifiers to them using minds I claimed from the clans. Fires still burning.]**

[Al-fucking-right,] Peace cackled, his excitement cracking the scabs coating his body, causing blood to seep through. [That'll be a real delight. Time to give those Ori art-stealing cunts a reason to bleed each other for us.]

[Deny Emotion easy penetration across the clans,] Avo concurred. He adjusted himself, passing out through another loci, another district. Called upon new memories and sent out two subminds to continue the blitz. The rest were given over to his Highflame submind as support—flashes of adjacent memories crossed over.

One of his selves was facing the Infacer again—talking more than they were fighting.

Paranoia spiked high, but the Ori-Thaum subminds kept to their task, deciding only to respond if summoned. They still had their own havoc to wreak, and Ori-Thaum could be pushed closer to the edge.

If he couldn't gain access to their inner structure in silence, then he would give them a reason to expose themselves through a manufactured crisis.

REND CAPACITY - 15%

ACTIVATING CONCEPTION OF ONTOLOGY...

APPLYING ONTOLOGICS

->[TIDERULER] (SPEED/FORCE/TIDES) x4

->[ENIGMATA] (SPACE/MATTER/INFORMATION) x4

->[WINDSINGER] (SPACE/MUSIC) x4

->[LUMINOUS SHROUDS] (PROTECTION/WAR/LIES) x4

TO [KNOWER OF TOTALITY] (CONCEPTUALIZATION)

UPDATING NEW VULTUN INFECTION METRICS...

->[0.07%]

+—*Sure. Have to go. Sorry.*+

Avo swallowed Vnenic's right eyeball before ending his session with Gellend's old friend. His splinters were now seeded within Instructor Murta's mind and they set to work on eating away his suspicions. Soon, his newest subvert would forget all about the spontaneous session of dialogue they had with their old friend and continue with their day.

And give him a vector to spread across Axtraxis Academy.

Within his Soulscape, a very displeased template of Abrel Greatling stood over a brutalized Gellend. The former had set upon torturing the latter as soon as he was consumed and simply kept going when the older Instrument revealed himself to be incompetent in combat as well.

[E-enough,] Gellend whimpered, holding up a fingerless palm. He was trapped under rubble—put there by a falling blow from Abrel's Heaven: Strider Upon the Highest. **[Please. I know I was—]**

The Greatling descended. Her alloyed falcon-beaked heel sank through Gellend's collarbone and the man began howling in agony. Simulated templates though they were, the actions they performed were true to the originals and further focused by Hysteria's boon. Abrel was beyond fury at the man's incompetence—his corruption allowing Avo such depth of penetration. The man proved his dishonor in combat in competence.

[You worthless scum,] Abrel seethed, standing over Gellend, driving her foot deeper. Her eyes were cold and she look him in like a hawk gazing down on a worm; he was too pathetic to kill, but too wretched to spare. **[Look at what you have allowed? Look at what you caused? He's among the aspirants now. You just fed our future to a *fucking* monster.]**

[You serve him!] Gellend screamed, spitting his words through a haze of pain.

[I fought him!] Abrel snarled. Her foot sank through his shoulder. Gellend's eyes rolled into the back of his head, but she didn't allow him to black out. She pulled him close and spat her hate next to his ear. [I faced him first! Across the Warrens I chased him. Across the districts! I gave everything! Cadre! Honor! All because of my rage! I—I—]

Her hands began to tremble. Abrel bit her lip. Her grip on Gellend slackened, and she let his head crack against the rubble that supported them. **[I failed. I failed my duty to. But I tried. I did.]**

Looking up into the skies of the mindscape, she found the open air above her that of Light's End, and the structure around her shard-sharp and mirror-bright. This was the point of her final failure. This was where she chased him into the lightrail and lost her surviving friends. **[Is this what you wanted to show me? Are you taunting me? Avo? Fucking answer? Answer me!]**

Other templates gathered within the sequence to take in Abrel's outburst, but Avo said nothing. He was too busy running his tongue along the insides of Vnic's eye sockets.

In his defense, he hadn't intended to relapse to cannibalism. It was just something that happened. When he made his way to Vnic's workstation, she was busy communing with her cadre a lack of high-speed interceptor drones made to suppress Ori-Thaum's aerial defenses—preparing to file a report over to Gellend so he could request an increase in the unit's production across all assembly lines.

When he entered the room, she seemed both annoyed at his presence but pleased with the convenience of his arrival. Even with the spatial vacuum layering her mind from penetration, Avo read from her expression that she regarded Gellend more as a nuisance than a direct superior.

She spoke to him directly about her worries at first, and he nodded along, stared at the parts of her body that enticed Gellend to keep up the guise.

[Fucking half-strand likes shoulders, thighs, and feet,] Chambers sniggered as he watched Abrel snap Gellend's arms again. [Fuckin' Guilders man. Even tits and ass are too good for them. Gotta get into that weirder sauce or some shit.]

Then, Vnic made a fatal mistake.

As Avo observed her, he found himself wondering just why Gellend thought she was so attractive. True, her face possessed the symmetry befitting a Guilder. Yes, she was tall. Musculature robust. Her shining green eyes were bright, but not that unique. Her ponytail had a healthy sheen, but there were more stylized aesthetics.

It was only when the pheromones started pulling at Gellend's senses that Avo understood—and sensed another Heaven at play.

The pattern connected to taste changed within her ontology, and Gellend's bodily impulses grew incongruous with Avo's mind. The man's Lustaway almost triggered as she smiled—a strong earthy scent layered with sweetness. His body called for Avo to surrender, to give Vnenic anything as she blinked three times in quick succession.

Slowly—almost unconsciously—Avo took two steps closer to her and a twitch passed through her expression.

There was hunger in a human as well. Hunger suppressed by Lustaway. Hunger for touch and belonging and emotional warmth. Hunger starved by Wombrash. Hunger that Avo's base mind only had one true reference for.

He coiled a cocoon of ghosts around the station as he let himself loose for old times' sake. Calvino was distracted by the base mind. And the templates didn't judge that much...

Whatever reaction Instrument Vnenic expected, it certainly wasn't Gellend crushing her throat before wrapping his lips around her left eye.

What followed from there felt all too natural. So natural that Avo felt dirty after doing it.

The taste was *horrid*. The human tongue gave him none of the pleasure or thrill ingrained in a ghoul. His teeth were worthless and short, and the same could be said for his tongue. By the end, he was chewing for curiosity more than the flavor.

With her death anchor rising from her body, he sent his splinters to seek out the remaining members of her cadre before one of them came looking for her. Vnenic's death progressed. Avo blinked at the anchor before pushing a ghost through.

Pressing through the veil that separated the material from the thaumaturgical, an Overheaven pried its way into a lesser Frame. Vnenic's Soul was a solid shell caging a fire, and as Avo's shivering sequences burrowed into her final refugee, he could read her quiet horror from her Soul's mem-data. *"What—how—"*

From her perspective, he was a sigil of fire encased behind a nest of dragons, wards, and entropy. From the fractured heart of his Overheaven branched illimitable sequences lit by two different flames.

"Apologies," Avo murmured awkwardly. ***"Had been getting better. But. Had to see. Wanted to see if the taste was as I remembered. Blame nostalgia."***

"What?" She said again, uncomprehending of her coming fate.

"Doesn't matter. Your template will understand soon. Goodbye."

He left his tendrils within her anchor and waited for her to resurrect. By now, the rest of her cadre were plunging into his Soulscape, leaving this sector of the demiplane clear for further penetration. The core of the Anvil now stood open. It was time to conclude his feast here and its sister facilities. Reap his Heavens.

As he sifted through these new memories, he shifted the bulk of his submind out of Gellend and into one of Vnenic's comrades—one Gerreta Havers with a **Matterjumper** canon. She was in charge of any potential overloads in the Anvil and often found herself jumping from place to place while transporting Rendsinks. Such was the reason she had direct access to the inner core of the facility—the place where Heavens were grafted onto golems, and where golems were dispatched in secrecy across Highflame.

As things stood, not even Gellend knew the details of the process. The inner threshold of the Anvil was its own jurisdiction, and no one short of a Seraph could forcibly intrude without facing severe penalties.

Materializing in a seal control center overlooking over a dozen transparent transport tubes shuttling a constant stream of golems deeper into the facility, Avo projected a splinter from Gerreta and jacked into one of the unfinished golems. From there, he waited as he traveled. Kept himself ready for whatever was about to come.

A scan passed through the tubes and **Delusion** let Avo slip through without difficulty. A building weight began to grind against Avo's being: that inexorable pressure that came with a sufficiently powerful Soul. Whatever awaited him was potent. Comparable to Zein even.

Once again, his hunger returned—just in time for Vnenic to resurrect as his newest subvert.

A bubble formed ahead of him: a miracle of space. The composition of its pattern led far across existence, and Avo prepared himself for another transition. As the golems ahead slipped over the bubble's outline, they simply continued onward without any obvious effect of matter, mind, or metaphysics. Moments later, Avo followed through without difficulty but suddenly found a new pattern accompanying him.

A pattern of static and signals. A pattern he had recently been familiar with.

A thought-rending detonation consumed the golems without hint or pre-warning. Even Ignorance was blind to the attack. Avo dispelled the splinter a second too late. His ontology *recoiled*, Soulfire combusting across all his ghosts as a shadow of his true self was momentarily imprinted over the world.

WARNING: THAUMIC BACKLASH SUSTAINED
->EMBODIMENT: (CONCEPTUALIZATION)

REND CAPACITY: 15%

Gliding back into his sheaths, Avo prepared himself to escape—reached across the Nether to prime additional subverts for his **Edict of Pattern-Nullification** as to destroy the Anvil if he couldn't claim it—when a familiar voice crackled into existence.

{Dreamer,} the Infacer said, sounding pleased. *{You live.}*