

*The art of weaving flesh and blood and bone is like crafting a story—even if the architecture is nothing but a lie, birthed from your own artistry and creation, there must be a narrative behind it. Even with the aid of Heaven, miracles are nothing but structures of poignancy and meaning, and such things have to make sense.*

*The pattern must flow.*

*Here. Let me show you.*

*Do you see these? Veins. Blood courses them, carrying the fuel of our vitality across our organs. But with a subtle adjustment—you see? I have joined them to the bones. Made two into one. Now both can serve a similar function. Or both can both and neither at the same time.*

*Watch. See. Beauty.*

*The veins are now layered in bone. Ossified. And blood can now be poured and hardened into bone. But what's this? Bones now have veins of their own—a circulatory system within another system, with all the traits lifted from one to another. Or watch as bone is delivered across the blood. Flow. Gathering. Rebuilding. Watch as I change the shape of this eunuch—shhh, dear, shhh, you will be beautiful soon.*

*Watch.*

*Yes. From his back. Wings. Lovely, lovely wings.*

*And do you see? The structure is bone, but the lattices are blood. But that isn't enough to fly. No. We need a new tale to fuel this story.*

*Ah. Look what I have.*

*A wasp.*

*Listen to it buzz. Hear the ferocity as it tries to fly.*

*Yes. That will go nicely. We will fuse its capability to our changeling now. Here. You do it. Join your art to me. Let us see the shape your artistry takes.*

*Show me perfection, Vator. Perfection and nothing less. Expression and nothing but.*

*Creation, after all, is the truest thing a god can do.*

*-Old Auntie Gui (No-Dragon Godclad and Biomancer) to her disciple, Vator Greatling*

## The Body-Garden (IV)

*+This is your fault, you stupid fucker,+* Peace hissed, glaring at his brother Famine from within the vicariness. *+Look at them. Look at what the Strayer's bastard's done. He's trying to choke us. Choke the Unbirthed Divine. The fucking cunt is going for the gutters—he's trying to snatch our property off the top of our heads—ours! We need to find him! We need to cull him before he—+*

*+Calm yourself, Peace,+* Emotion said, shaping himself the ghosts. *+Such a thing is to be expected. He lashes at us. He strikes at our base. Ineffectually. We will isolate*

The mindscape around them splashed as memories clashed and shapes formed and broke. Sequenced from minds on the precipice of insanity and joined using a collection of loci hidden across the city's narrowest confines, the lobby was a sea in tumult, capable of dashing any intruder against jutting rocks of trauma should they prove foolish enough to attempt an ingress.

The barricades of the exterior were beyond the means of skill to traverse. With dedicated nodes permanently attached to its defense, the chaos that served as the lobby's defenses was a crushing symphony guided by a thousand master conductors. And even should its structures be shattered by an overwhelming assault, there were more of its like across the stretch of New Vultun, and beyond.

Behind these phantasmal walls, the priesthood of the Hungers was supposed to be unassailable. Within, however, anxiety filled the air with a lingering stink as the nodes communed, swallowed by worry and indecision at recent developments.

At the heart of the sanctum, a scene repeated itself, the memory sewn into shape by writhing phantoms, resurrecting moments from past long distant and forgotten.

An amber sky smiled down at the visage of a young man taking in the horizon from the edge of a cliff. The massive war dog he rode on chuffed at a passing insect, pawing at the sides of its round and well-muscled head to get at an itch. But just a few steps away, two specters watched the scene within a scene like voyeurs peering at someone else's most intimate recollections.

One was the Famine of Emotion: a priest gouged of his heart, regarding the moments of his past with a blank-faced repose. The other was a beast turned flame, the prodigal son of the one that strayed from their order, the current holder of the Helix and all its privileges, and the instrument of this city's ruin.

Avo, Defiance had named the ghoul.

Avo, after their fallen son, the son they killed.

Avo, as a poetic insult to himself and his master, instilling his creation with the breath of rebellion from the very start.

Avohakten earned his head for betraying the city eternal, for turning from utopia. The Burning Dreamer they gazed upon, however, was capable of far worse.

More than rejection, he symbolized destruction and consumption both. The Nether was kindling for his fire, and if left unchecked, there would be no place for any to flee, no place for the Hungers to roost.

And should his flames touch the city itself...

Should the Dreaming Divine be set ablaze...

*+Enough.+* The word emanated from all the nodes of Emotion at once, synchronized in thought without even being connected to one another. *+Call the city. We commune. We speak.+*

Peace recoiled. *+Call the Hungers? Did you lose your senses? Did the Burning Dreamer boil your mind? Does it fill you with some kind of thrill to parade your personal fuck-up?+*

*+It's too much,+* Joy said, their forms huddled together, bodies a mountain of sobs and despair. *+We have lost too much. What is left to give? What is left to take?+*

*+You shut the fuck up,+* Peace snarled. *+Tired of hearing you whimper.+* Redirecting its perception back over Emotion, a ragged noise escaped from Peace, the articulation insufficient to express his ire. *+What the hell are you planning? What fucking thoughts are being born in that cold skull of yours? Emotion? Answer me?+*

But Emotion didn't. It was not compelled to. And Peace was but a lesser facet of their shared being.

The mind did not obey the hands, after all.

*+Call them,+* Emotion said again. *+And banish this sight. The city does not wish to look upon the sordid past. Only the future concerns it now.+*

The Famine of Peace fell into an embittered silence but acquiesced. Pugnacity was all that remained of their nature. A will to hate and a want to fight carved clean of little else. Still, he obeyed, as he always did, compelled by what little wisdom he possessed.

Each node clasped their minds together, thoughts and selves clasping like hands as the communion began. The tumult inflicted on the Nether would be great, and the ripple of the action would travel far, but with the Guilds drowning in their own failures, only insects might notice the shift in the tides.

As the Nether itself began to rupture and peel, Emotion glimpsed the coiling leviathan circling through the eternal city and heard the agonized whispers spilling out from all the lives infused under the scales. True Noloth was suffering, the pain of being the fulcrum to this elevated dimension of thought capable of bending even a city toward the event horizon of insanity.

The immensity of the Hungers' thoughts washed over all the Famines in an instant, capturing them like a riptide building at the depths of the depths of the ocean. But great though the pressure was, Emotion could sense the slack in the pull and knew the focus of the city eternal was slipping.

**+I... we... Why... Why have we been called?+ Soberness pulsed out from the Hungers. It noticed the gathered assembly of its servants. **+What is this? What is wrong?+****

*+There have been developments,*" Emotion said. Memories threaded out from the nodes and nourished the Hungers with understanding. What followed thereafter was predictable. Rage. Disbelief. Horror.

Dread.

**+How did this happen? How could you have allowed this? The creature... it burns now. We can feel the heat. We can feel... It moves like a torch licking at our flesh from afar. We can feel it. It's boiling us.+** Suddenly, the fear stopped flowing, and an eruption of amusement followed.

*+That is what I wish to discuss,+* Emotion said. *+It is also why I have granted the Burning Dreamer our lore. To prime him for understanding. And to create an opening for realignment.+*

Peace sputtered in disbelief. *+Still? You're actually still trying to fucking take that creature back? Trying to give him the Strayer's throne? He's not us! Even a part of failed! Have you taken leave of your senses, Emotion?+*

*+“Je” can be shaped,+* Emotion replied. *+To become whoever he wants. Or whoever he thinks he wants to be. This is the revelation we face. Noloth is forgotten. Noloth is broken. But Noloth can be reborn. By influence over the Burning Dreamer, and by inheriting the flame itself.+*

Silence cut through the gathered nodes as the Hungers parsed the deeper meaning behind Emotion's words. **+Servant of mine, you wish to see me burn? To be fed to this creature?+**

*+No. Avo. The Burning One. He has given me... inspiration. An idea of how you might be freed.+*

**“Speak. Tell us.”**

*+The instance of his change—his ascension from a creature of the material emanating thoughts*

*to a creature of thoughts nested in the material—was made possible by only a few specific favors. The first was the deployment of the war mind of Ignorance. The second essential factor was his deployment of the Conflagration—a tool used by the pretenders. Thieves of our art and culture.+*

**“Ah. The Ori. The air was too foul to absent their hand in this travesty.”**

*+Fuckers,+ Emotion agreed, speaking without adding substance.*

*+Through the Burning Dreamer, I see an instrument we can direct against the Guilds. To burn down the Tiers and weak all corners. The first foe we must strike is the Ori. They stand as the greatest threat against our actions, but they are ill-prepared for the actualization of their own flame to be turned against them.+*

*Emotion paused. +I believe the wisest course of action is to help the Dreamer. To work parallel with him, in pace but unseen, in dismantling the Ori.+*

*+Help the creature,+ Joy moaned. +After what he did? After all that he has rejected.+*

*+Yes,+ Emotion replied. +He will be our greatest weapon, set loose against our truest foes. But he will also grant us openings to secure what we need, and when he waxes in power, we will shift. We will aid the Guilds against him, and force him into a stalemate while reaping his spoils.+*

The Hungers chuckled, momentarily wordless with amusement. **+Determined to see one of your bastard children make it to the Tiers after all, aren't you Wahakten?+**

*Emotion ignored the jibe. +It is efficient. And I am not beholden to the pressures of base impulse.+*

**+Ah. But Defiance would have claimed the same thing.+** The Hungers lapsed into silence, their countless minds shimmering as they all thought as one. **+We should still be grateful for his service, I suppose. He has given us this opportunity. This gift. This “Avo.” Hm. Sentimentality is... sweet.+** Another lull. A lapse in focus, this time. **+Do you wish to betray me, Emotion.+**

*Alarm built in the back of Emotion's mind as the question slammed down upon him. +No.+*

**+I think Defiance would have said the same. Trust is pathetic... You have my permission to play this game for now. To indulge in your... schemes. But I have a mission for you. Something that must be done.”**

*+Speak your wish, oh, Noloeth eternal.+*

**+The fire of our enemies. I wish for you to steal it from Ori-Thaum. I wish for it to be brought before me. The rot within me is growing and I... have a new blessing for you. For Defiance and his child, the Burning Dreamer. I am to ascend further, thanks to this... inspiration you have shown. Let the Dreaming Unsea change. Let the waters turn to oil. Let fire usurp the place of the flow. Let all be joined in a grand immolation, all burning with a shared though a shared pain. My pain!+** The Hungers snarled, the loss of self-control without warning. **+And then will all who dream be of one thought. I wish to burn. I wish to burn. I wish to burn.+**

A maddened gasp of laughter escaped from the Hungers. Emotion felt Joy shiver beside him. Peace just glowered and looked away. *+Your will, my deeds.+*

**+Good. Good, loyal Emotion. Good, empty, soulless husk. If only reality was as obedient as you.+** The Hungers flickered, its presence moving to slip back beyond the tear in the Nether. **+Have your fun. Bring me my flame. Deliver me this relief.+**

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Diving down through the darkness of the surrounding the George Washington made Avo feel as if an invasive entity. With the additional canons grafted onto his Galeslither, he swim across shadows as if it was but water. Yet, the blackness here had momentum to it. A vector of movement pulling him deeper and deeper inward.

It strained his Frame to move, and for the first time in a while, watched the Rend gauge for his Galeslither slowly fill in his cog-feed.

**REND CAPACITY [GALESLITHER]: 11%**

Struggling with each bust of motion, thought his Galeslither a steed caught in a storm despite being a tempest itself. Strained by such opposition, he wondered what manner of Heaven he was facing in these depths, and how he could claim it for his own.

***“The place is primordial. Primal.”*** The Galeslither neighed, its unease drifting over into Avo. ***“We are an insect swimming through a bloodstream. The darkness sleeps. We must not be here if it ever awakens.”***

Heeding the words, Avo swam on, the Galeslither now manifested around him while his Crown continued to flicker, protecting him still. No data lined this place of shadows, however. Whatever the make of this plane, his Heaven of Signals found no purchase on its skin.

In the distance, a small doorway of shining light appeared. The entrance to the command nexus drew was close.

Then, he felt a ripple rush over him.

The darkness around him lurched and spun, and he found himself battling to stay steady. An immense mass—its presence so ponderous he could feel the blackness displaced from its very movements—was moving somewhere far beyond the point of his perception. Fighting the currents, the Galeslither screamed as its ontology flared with soulfire.

The metaphor of his metaphysical existence turned into wind and shadow both as the waves parted around it. As roaring gusts erupted from the shape of his Galeslither, his Rend spiked alongside his speed as another cresting wave whipped at his being.

**REND CAPACITY [GALESLITHER]: 77%**

The light of the entrance drew close, but so too did he feel something dart through the opacity behind him. He didn't linger. He didn't think. With a final gust of launching him free from the black, he felt unseen fingers slice through the manes of his Galeslither as his Hell flooded with Rend and a line of searing pain opened along his neck.

**REND CAPACITY [GALESLITHER]: 98%**

Shooting past the threshold into the confines of the voidship itself, the Galeslither collapsed back inside his Frame as Avo tumbled across the floor, his Meldskin hardening to protect him from harm—even expanding its shape a second before he struck the edge of a throne.

Blunt force was parried from his body via the flowing waves of his smart-armor. A deafening crash rang through the empty chamber, but Avo was spared any damage to his hearing as the Meldskin tuned the noise away.

*{You know you could have split the throne apart with your new canon, right? You really didn't have to barrel right into that chair.}*

Growling slightly at the EGI's jabs, Avo shook his head. "Didn't expect to be coming in that fast."

**Armor Integrity: 12%**

*{Well, that was dangerous,}* Calvino said, sounding more thrilled than fearful. *{I suppose this is what it feels like to ride a roller coaster.}*

Avo turned on his back as the cracked pieces of his Meldskin began flowing back together. "A what?"

**Armor Integrity: 15%**

*{A roller coaster,}* it said, forwarding images of some kind of miniature open-top train that zoomed along looping rails while people trapped in primitive gimbals screamed.

Avo frowned as he struggled to understand the purpose of such a mechanism. "For torture?"

*{No. Fun. Thrills.}*

He grunted. People would get their stimulation from somewhere, he supposed.

Pushing himself off the floor, he looked around the nexus and found it mostly unchanged. No one else had been here since they left after the thoughtwave detonation. Not that he expected anyone to, but paranoia was a virtue in the life that he led.

*{Connect me to the ship's systems. I want to see just what condition this ship is in and find out what's wrong with its mind.}*

Casting his ghosts out with the protection of his Crown of Virtuality, he connected his mind to the ship's locus and allowed Calvino to cross over.

**SCS George Washington, Sol Central ARKSHIP**

**CONNECTING TO THE SHEPHERD...**

**Recovering ship-log...**

**->Accessing Grey-Box**

**Warning: Corrupted Data Detected**

**Warning: Corrupted Data Detected**

**Warning: Corrupted Data Detected**

**There are 1,444,124,551,888,569,763,921 instances of corrupted data [92%]**

**ATTENTION: External EGI detected**

**Beginning integration...**

**Initializing data recovery and repair...**