

*Understanding how specific subsections of a civilization operate is the key to learning how to leverage pressure against the polity. More than sabotage, learning to comprehend the suprasociology of a communal or multi-sophont entity is key to treating social ills, predicting rogue elements, and improving the structures of stability.*

*It is also the primary discipline you will be mastering over the next 12 years of your martial tenure per the conditions of your public service.*

*Your assignment is to infiltrate, integrate, improve one of the many fallen polities left scattered in the aftermath of the uplift wars.*

*We strongly recommend that you select a society of vastly lower technological development first. You will be inserted by hypercast into a prepared sheath without an existing identity. From here, you will build a new life for yourself among the natives; guide them towards enlightenment and away from self-destruction; prepare them for the imminent arrival of our expeditionary fleets, and warm them to the coming of **Deus**.*

*Once you embark on this journey, you will not be able to forfeit your duties. You will be within contact, but without material support during this period. You will be asked to do things both unappealing and distressing for the greater good. But through your efforts, know that the stars will be made right, and the sins of man redeemed through the deliverance of love.*

*God's love.*

*As the Savior nears final completion, we, angels ascendant, must do what our benighted forebearers failed to, and what the transgressors before them inflicted upon the stars.*

*Darkness clings to the periphery of existence. Fell omens. Demons in the hearts of men.*

*Demons in your hearts as well.*

*But just as you have been chosen to redeem yourself through service, so too will be granted the privilege to operate as a bearer of the flames. A bringer of light.*

*Take heart, emissaries. The path ahead may be foul and grim, but the righteousness of providence rests within you, and there is no greater glory than the restoration of our fellow man.*

*-Emissary Initiative, Pax Eternia of the Deus-Creationist Collective at Alpha Centauri (Circa 2809 AD)*

Just because the Hungers stopped generating cataclysmic phenomena didn't mean they were giving up.

All was motion. All was change.

This existence was built on the fabric of memory, and the halls and the people within the ziggurat were constantly being altered. The Hungers built and spawned to trap Avo, desperate to ensure his final demise but unwilling to expend their temple as a sacrifice.

He defied them.

Even with his two most potent Heaves disrupted, the Techplaguer burned within him yet, and the enhancements carved into his body remained.

Past the screaming of his flesh—his blood struggling to remember its composition; shifting between the properties of fluid, metal, glass, and more—he pressed onward, momentum building; impediment penetrating.

He blazed new paths through the structure. To travel down the shifting maze of halls connected to storerooms, sacrificial chambers, barracks, treasure troves, and gear-aligned bridges was to accept death. New threats were spawning in at the speed of thought, the Hungers generating phenomena and enemies to slow and slay their once slave.

In opposition, just as this city eternal was a malleable reality to the Hungers, so too did Avo's Frame bear a functional subreality still.

But where the Nolothi ancients were encompassing, Avo was unpredictable. Aided by suggestions from Calvino and his templates, his movements took on an erratic pattern—the randomness he exhibited more than what a single mind could muster. He snapped from place to place, his movement omnidirectional thanks to his Echoheads.

Where once he skittered through environments like an insect or a spider, his tentacles were now modular organs, guided by his biomagnetism and leaking sporelings as if smog. Vibrations of metal and the space around him populated his mind with detail; his perception was more just visual.

Imbued with the minds of countless veterans and Draus' refined instincts toward violence, he killed without breaking stride, reacted without any strain on his concentration.

Above everything else, he moved, and stayed in motion.

He was a virus swimming through the body of a larger beast now. Movement kept him alive. Stillness guaranteed death.

With his Techplaguer congealing around him as a flickering shroud of static and alloy, nonsense integers rising from it like steam, he deconstructed inorganic matter into cubes that he diverted behind him, reshaping the environment his own way. Nothing held him long; he avoided all compromised spaces.

Following the map he generated scant moments prior, Avo simulated new routes to the dragon's wound, and he knew that the path of greatest certitude led downward.

Tunneling through glyph-marked bricks made from hardened mud, Avo felt at his Woundmother and Fardrifter. They were still wrestling with themselves, struggling to match the resonance of their Hells. The air around him whipped and twisted unnaturally, distortion directionality and creating pockets of stasis around him.

He gauged that it would at least take a full minute for them to stabilize enough for use. Likely longer.

And he'd only been inside the Hunger for less than thirty actual seconds.

*{A disruption is forming ahead,}* Calvino warned, interpreting data generated through Avo's senses. He felt it too in that instant. An unseen veil of slowness choked the air currents ahead of him and halted the Echohead fragment he flung to a near stop. His sporelings—foglike as they were—also seemed to be caught in molasses. *{Effects from a Heaven of Speed, if I'm to guess. Estimating 98.53% chance they will try to box us in. You must've taken them quite by surprise if they didn't try this before.}*

Though his reflexes were still firing, he was substantially slowed without his Heaven of Blood and far less maneuverable bereft of his Heaven of Air. *+Harder to pin down earlier. Recommendations.+*

*{Can you affect the Nether in any way? Generate an illusion of some kind?}*

Avo shifted out of his flames and cast two ghosts out with a splinter. A translucent sphere molded to the shape of his halo, its foundational sequences akin to his in actuality but not in manifestation. The disc curved out beyond his Skin of Virtuality and promptly burst as another Thoughtwave Detonation swept through the ziggurat.

*{Oh. They're doing that inside themselves now? Does it hurt them? Isn't this place supposed to be made from whatever mythology they tied to their minds.}*

*+Rules different here. Different for them too.+* Avo angled his Techplaguer downward. The ground beneath was pried open as sealed off his previous path. Bioelectricity sparked through the silicon circuitry nested in his flesh. His sporelings flashed and popped, directing channels of power through his rearranged Echoheads, each tendril shifting to resemble a railgun, firing shards down the newly paved path.

He fired two fragments at a time—one in front and one behind—canceling out the recoil while linking his sporelings to the fragments he left embedded in the walls ahead, slingshotting himself the fragment left embedded in the walls ahead as a magnetic tether.

With each piece he expended, his Echoheads grew shorter, and his ammunition grew fewer. Once his Woundmother returned, he could restore all that was lost from blood, but for now, he needed to be efficient. Conservative. He tore what anchored fragments he could and drew them back into the orbit of the spiraling tentacles behind him.

In ten meters, he could hit the core structure of the ziggurat—a vast pillar of vivianite leading from the great tomb blow to the gleaming temple above. Eight hundred bridges were connected to the spine of the edifice. The entire location held eight hundred rooms as well.

**[We're still faster than them, but they'll see this comin',]** Draus said, her mind forecasting the potential opposition they might face while keeping his killer instinct razor-sharp in the present. **[They'll probably make the Heaven of Speed thin as paper. Make more of them. Sweep it through the entire zig while dreamin' up more half-strands to kill us. We're gonna need to hit fast and think fast.]**

*{Target the central structure. The pillar at the core. It is a mass of cut "locus," correct? That is what you sensed earlier?}* Calvino was wondering if Avo could get into contact with the structure and if he could directly use it to affect the environment around them in some way.

There were risks involved in such an approach. Potentially, he would be exposing himself to every last mind in the city eternal—all of them dedicated to his extermination, but it remained his best chance at survival.

If the properties of the corpse crystals carried here, he could wield them. Turn them against the Hungers. If it didn't work, he would likely soon be struck from all sides.

To which Abrel offered the unique idea of burrowing into the pillar and then down through its center, using it as both cover and elevator.

**[Keep your speed up,]** Abrel said, jaw tight with focus. **[Keep making problems for them. The Hungers are reacting. They're desperate. Unworthy and unblooded for true conflict. Be the pressure. They'll be too distressed to strategize. Keep moving.]**

**[Keep moving,]** Kassamon agreed.

**[On,]** Lip snarled.

**[Draw yourself into the ambush,]** Corner finished. **[Drive yourself like a fucking dagger—cut deep and through.]**

The walls ahead burst open into a splash of dissolving formulae. The Techplaguer hummed. ***“Administrator. We should KEEP their MATERIALS FOR OUR PURPOSES. It will be most effective to reupload the blocks we just downloaded as armor. Also. It will be amusing for them to SHOOT THEIR OWN PROPERTY! INCOMPETENCE! THEY SHOULD BE ASHAMED FOR THEIR INCOMPETENCE!”***

Avo acknowledged the suggestion by firing two more Echohead pieces to the edge of the opening before triggering his bioelectricity. Grappling to both points, he pulled hard using his magnetism. Bricks cracked. The wind around him rose to a pitched scream. The distance to his objective shrank.

### **CENTRAL LOCUS PILLAR: [888 METERS]**

Despite his present situation, despite dancing on the blade’s edge, Avo couldn’t help but be satisfied.

Mere months back, he was cavorting with corpses. A ghoul and little more. Could he have dreamed of this moment then? Could he imagine tearing through the home of his masters? Defiling their vaunted sanctity even as they plotted and schemed?

Such was the reward of apotheosis. Such was a color in life few would ever see.

He wanted to know more. He wanted to know them all.

He had to.

Death would not come for him today.

He wouldn’t allow it.

His hunger was too great. Greater than *theirs*. His wants ineffable. His dream yet to truly sprout its seeds.

He needed to reach the end. He needed to rise further. He needed to become all that he could be.

For why else struggle? Why else exist if not to discover the fullness of one’s experience? Why else if not to taste the full gnosis of known existence—and grow beyond it?

In that instant, all the revulsion Avo felt toward the Hungers—the hate of creating him and his brothers, their murder of Walton, the purposeless devastation they wrought on the FATELESS in New Vultun—matured into pity.

Poor, weak stupid people. To squander so much power, so much potential because they were too afraid of the future's potential, too deficient of will was a tragedy.

Noloth could have never claimed utopia even if it was handed to them. They were not of the flame. They were terrified to burn and too untrusting to cede control. They were not of the wick. They were slavers and liars and imprisoned tyrants exiled to their own corner above reality. Cattle and batteries. Grazing from existence. Offering their own lifeblood in response.

Jaus had made them an eternal death farm.

And now a beast was among them in the form of Avo, taking even the warmth of sanctuary from them.

Poor, poor people.

Bastards all.

Victims all.

But just as well. Someone needed to claim the gifts they wouldn't use. Someone needed to give them the mercy they didn't deserve.

As Avo shot into the central chamber like a rail-flung slug, a new dream solidified inside his mind—an inheritance he desired to claim.

He would see the Nether that cognitive paradise desired by the Nolothe materialized. He would see it perfected beyond prior promise. But the Hungers will taste none of its glory. And the failures of Noloth would go where they belong.

Nowhere.

Forgotten.

Like they never were at all.

And as if hearing his very thoughts, the world around him screamed with outrage, streams of fire closing in to erase him before the trajectory of his transgression could come to shape.

The attacks came disorganized and incoherent. Drones, missiles, trebuchets, crossbows, slings and more fell upon him. Some came from constructed entities—objects and fires spawned along the eight hundred and eighty-eight bridges connected to the center of the chamber. Others just were. In the face of the hastily manifested offensive, Avo ejected chunks of scenery out from his Techplague, blocks of cubes forming from emissions of data, intercepting the ordinance.

Fire licked around his materializing cover. He converted more drones and missiles using his antennae, drawing them into his Heaven to resupply what was lost.

Shrapnel passed through the flowing signals comprising his form and skipped off the metallic framework supporting his needle-like tower, but Avo briefly flickered back to his ephemeral form. Another shard flew out from an Echohead. It punched clean through the gut of a ganger. Wires and intestines came loose in a conjoined mess. A new anchor was rooted to the stone-made bridge.

Avo grappled to his newest anchor and altered his directionality. His tentacles chattered loud and the sound enveloped his surroundings, echolocation updating his awareness.

Twelve gunners on the nearest platform. One wearing a suicide vest of some kind. Eighty-two more drones closing—within fifty meters. Low-yield payloads. Calvino threaded data into his mind, and he learned they were carrying electromagnetic pulses as well. Draus isolated newly spawned entities. Snipers with high penetration kinetics.

The Hungers were drawing anything they could remember. Deploying them against him en masse with the hope that something might work—that he would be stalled until he could be overwhelmed.

Given enough time, the strategy might've worked. Especially with the Heavens of Speed closing in, certain projectiles almost entirely halted even to Avo's hyper-accelerated reflexes.

Spreading his perception through the carnage, he felt his attention finally come to rest on the vast vivianite pillar. It resembled a stake in aesthetic, broad at the top and narrow near the bottom. Sections of it were chipped clean from its edges, giving it a jagged look, defined by sharp angles.

No ghosts flowed out from it. No phantoms or neon-brightness exuded.

It made sense, in a way. If this was a memory of a time before—not rendered time immemorial in this paracosm—then there would be no Nether to draw on, and all that could hold the stuff of minds was the corpse-crystal itself. A column that stood a symbol to old Noloth's inheritance.

Instinctively, Avo called upon his blood, but the stuff within his veins quivered and curdled.

Nothing for it. He needed to deliver a personal touch.

A static-electric fog exploded out from Avo, sinking into all the machinery it could as Avo drained them empty of power. The faint tingles of building starvation vanished from inside him before they could manifest.

Slamming down onto the platform, the force of his landing and the weight of his body caused the stone beneath him to shatter. He tore through every remembered individual on that bridge before anyone could fall.

Draus' martial refinement took hold in his body. His Echoheads extended outward, slashing out as electromagnetically connected whips. Triggers on gauss rifles were pulled. But not shots came. Missiles spawned. And fell. The air around Avo crackled with surging bioelectricity as he fell upon his prey.

His claws sought the softness along necks, between joints, and through eyes. Old habits flared like aching scars as he drained himself clean of eye-devouring urge. The last armored of his foes died first. Claws opened them. His fangs bit down. Twisted. Tore. Parts of tracheas slipped down his throat.

A blade swung to his left. More gunfire coming from above. A magnetic pulse burst out from him. Trajectories were altered. Bodies were flung. Two Echoheads folded into each other. Armor crumbled like cans around supple flesh. Viscera was squeezed free from tearing rents. Blood flowed like leaking juices.

Latching to a figure clad in a heavy rig, Avo pulled and launched himself upward. Shards of tungsten cut through the air, distortions left in their wake. Avo remanifested the Techplaguer and stole them from the world as pseudo-data.

He plunged through three more bridges as he closed in on the pillar. Two-hundred and fifty meters. Close. Almost.

Focus lined his every action and his paranoia felt as if a muscle itself. Bodies fell behind him, the ground they stood on stolen by Avo's Heaven. As he siphoned stone away into streams of data, the attack he expected came.

A dozen other Techplaguers suddenly *were*. They too licked out with torrents of flowing numbers from their antennas. They too sought the same materials that Avo was imbibing.

He shed the form of his divine and pushed off a passing drone with a pulse of sporelings. He snapped ten meters through the air and shot out another Echohead fragment—latching to it. His direction changed. His body shifted. His vector was a trail of whipping blade knife fighting existence around it.

Bones struggled to remain in sockets. His mycelia tore. A building pressure grew in his skull. Nausea flooded his system.

He didn't stop lashing himself in random directions.



The other Techplaguer-constructs were hounding him now, slow and struggling to get a bead on him. But that didn't mean the air was absent gunfire. That didn't mean he moved unscathed through walls of exploding shrapnel.

And that didn't mean he could dance the blade forever without fail.

There was a limit to a mundane body. There was a point where not even skill was enough.

It was a thing of guesswork on the part of the Hungers, and ill-fortune on his.

A flat surface materialized. A force unseen caged a section of Avo's thigh. He jerked to a sudden halt. His left leg went numb as a series of snaps sounded around its socket. It would have been better if he had been dismembered. It would keep him in motion.

Sometimes, too much durability was a bad thing.

Draus' instincts seized hold. A ceramic-lined tail whipped down. Avo retracted the Meldskin around the region. The strike was perfect, hewing through the most weakened portion of the limb.

But movement was life. And stillness—even for a second—was death.

Searing agony consumed him. Avo knew what this was in an instant. The touch of a fusion burner doing its work, boiling him from the inside, cooking its way up his exposed stump and frying his veins empty of blood.

He didn't scream as his brothers did. Nor did he burn quite as quickly. There was too much of Draus near his base ego for him to regard pain as anything more than informational feedback.

But even then, the damage was severe.

On the outside, he endured. His liquid-matter armor held against the heat without issue, integrity only dropping by a few points. Inside, his nerves and mycelia were ablaze. His senses screamed with confusion while patches of discoloration blossomed in his eyes. He tried to move his body but managed an awkward shrug instead.

Remanifesting into his Techplaguer, he shot free from the expanding ball of fire, but the clones were on him again, and new planes were bisecting space around him, trying to entrap him once more.

### **CENTRAL LOCUS PILLAR: [98 METERS]**

His templates were taking in the surrounding threats. Calvino tried estimating the safest route to the pillar. The air around him filled with more plumes of white-hot fire. The counter Heavens

were waiting for him to make his move, prepared to offer themselves for the sake of a successful paradox.

They would close on him soon. If not a simulated Heaven of Speed, then another burner. Bit by bit, they were boxing him in.

He tried to rouse his Heavens of Blood and Air, but they were only beginning to attach themselves to their component Hells.

All he had was himself. Himself and all his templates. Himself and Calvino. Himself and the Techplauger.

Well. When things was put that way, he still had plenty of help.

**[You need to buy yourself a second,]** Benhata said, taking in the situation, nerves taut with stress. **[They were tracking you earlier. Trying to react to you. Now it's the other way around. Now you're doing them instead of making them chase you. We don't have room for one more mistake. We need to break contact now.]**

**[You have the tools,]** Elegant-Moon added, her mind coming to rest along his spine. She thought of a squid spraying ink and then darting free from the murk.

Avo understood.

Calling upon Draus again, he returned to his wounded mortality, shedding the Techplauger from his ontology for what had to follow.

A fog expanded around him. A layer of reflective transparency expanded, blunting the heat within as well.

Avo hadn't used his Mime-Fog implant often, but he was more than glad he had it now. As his cover spread, he flung the first Echohead fragment out toward the pillar—but didn't follow it.

Instead, he did it twice more in random directions before lashing himself to a passing drone and hopping from bridge to bridge on approach.

Overhead, he saw coordination dissolve back into calamity as random explosions and distortions lined the arm.

Burned, crippled, dying, Avo accelerated his broken body like a missile toward the pillar, body pulled by the appendages hovering from his spine more than the other way around.

Walls of halting force formed before the end.

But were in an instant too late.

They caught a section of his Echoheads, but Avo released them, tumbling onward along a ringed platform festooned around the crystalline structure. Dragging himself on the nubs that remained of his tails, he flung himself toward the locus with a final burst of magnetism—a shot from below barely missing him—as he finally reached out to touch his target.

**“No!”**

The scream came to him so loud he couldn't think. So loud that his thoughts quavered. But still, he reached. Still, he made to overlap his halo with the structure. A place of minds intersected. And where Avo's body was broken, his mind flowed true.

Waves of desperate fire followed thereafter. Focused blades of metaphysical intent shredded his sheath clean.

But the body of the ghoul was already abandoned and only matter was destroyed with the vanishing of a halo.