

You ask me who would win in a fight? Me or the Chief Paladin? Me or the High Seraph? Me or that ridiculous plagueborn bastard my wayward sisters and aunties believe is their salvation. Me against all of Ashthrone.

Absurd question. Near comedy. I will grace you with the back of my hand for this question once I finish providing you with an answer. Truly, the children grow more and more banal with every generation.

Ridiculous.

Do you think that life is just a game of numbers? That variables all so set in stone? No. Absolutely not. It is in defying the impossible that meaning is made, and it is the uncertain that there is a reason to live. To strive. To make ruin of your foes and claim thrill for your own life.

In asking this question, you have earned my scorn because I see the cowardice in you. You wish to know who possesses strength so you might shield yourself from disappointment. Or offer your leash to the dominant.

Let me speak plainly: the only thing more pathetic than being weak is offering your love because someone else frightens you.

We are born into this world with precious little in our favor. Existence is flayed. The ones who bear us are harsh and embittered. Dreamless husks of flesh that dull their hopes and cling only to passing pleasures.

They are damned. But I am not. I know of higher triumphs. And mine is a martial dialect of the highest company. What worth is a wolf that feeds only on bugs? What envy can a spider steal from us if it only butchers fleas?

It is contrast that gives us meaning. Opposition. Nemeses. For though we have precious little, every being with breath burns with the capability to strive and slay. Look beyond your cage. Look beyond your fears. There are monsters to kill. There are Souls to claim. There are titans to bring low. The summit stands above you, and along its path, you will face those who shake your spirit—those who will define and refine your very nature.

And the same truth exists for them. There is no promise of justice. No promise of victory. No promise of absolute truth.

But there is a chance. There is a choice. There is a legend to be lived beyond a life to be spent.

So fight. Fight with all you have. Sweep aside all you can. Brace against those you cannot. Dance with joy if you are privileged enough to find a perfect foe of your category. Foes you cannot be certain in your triumph against.

For what bliss is there to be had in life if the page is already written?

-Ying Yang Wei, the Stormsparrow

25-8
Nemeses (I)

CONFLAGRATION SUBSUMED...

UPDATING DEFINEMENTS

->DEFINEMENT: DELUSION (VI)

->DEFINEMENT: HYSTERIA (VI)

->DEFINEMENT: MEMORY (VI)

->DEFINEMENT: TRAUMA (VI)

->DEFINEMENT: IGNORANCE (VI)

The flames of the Conflagration were found wanting.

An ordinary mind would have turned to cinders within its caress, but directed against the Embodiment of Conceptualization, it became an ember trying to consume a star.

Avo's ghosts propagated within the inferno, his fire devouring its lesser. Two additional branches extended from his consciousness—subminds building upon his ontology. Sequences sprouted from sequences as Avo's cognitive capacity exploded. Both mind and Soul grew as his Definements climbed another two thresholds.

And this was just the beginning.

Across the nether, the D'Rongos, Kitzuhada, and Kazaharas were embroiled in open conflict. Traumas streaked through the Nether as secrecy peeled away and citizens partitioned themselves behind disruptive shields. Golems hammered reality and flattened the skies while warheads and drones painted the horizon with light.

With each passing second, Ori-Thaum's civil spat grew, and Avo's war mind of Hysteria did all it could to provoke them further.

He was there with them on every battlefield, diving beside cells and hiding between memories. He parried blows from those he deemed choiceless and essential while the rest he pruned from time to time, preserving a stalemate.

As the conflict swelled, more Incubi filtered in and each one he claimed was a boon to his growing mastery and an agonizing loss on the part of Ori-Thaum. Saber-1 and Saber-2 were already invaluable. The memories they instilled even subtler methods of spoofing within his mind. But despite this, he found nothing of Emotion's presence in them. No hint the Low Master was in play at all.

But Avo knew he was watching. Waiting. He had to be.

In the meantime, Hysteria, Delusion, and Ignorance work in tandem to cement him as an apex predator above all others. He stalked those who shared memories—amplified Jaus' suffering as he turned both wards and egos into echoing vapors.

Nullings flowed and templates fell. And with each casualty, Avo used Hysteria to seed hate with hate, rage with rage. The hearts of men demanded retribution, and with but a hint of compulsion did their decisions veer toward the reckless.

Another group of Incubi, Kazaharas this time, were trying to overload the reactor of a D'Rongo luxury complex. Forty thousand citizens filled the building, most of them being families and non-martial personnel—choiceless, in another word. Here was another reminder of human nature: feed their loathing enough and virtue was the first to die.

[Our mistake too,] one submind said, chiding itself. He had their measure. Played them like fools, but there was always fallout in a fight.

[Knew this was possible. Got carried away. Time to apply more control.]

He judged himself too harshly in the past. He thought himself a failure who shamed his father when he failed to curtail the beast. But the more he lived, the more templates he subsumed, the more it seemed that he was not so different from man. They all shared a kind of hunger: a beast within them.

But he had grown beyond his. Climbed layer after layer of apotheosis in his journey so far. If they would not master themselves, he would make the choice as he always did. He would stop the folly he prompted. He would make things right.

Directing one of his new subminds to purpose, he intercepted the Incubi before they could breach the reactor's lobby. Over fifteen hundred splinters shattered out from his being and slithered across the material and Nether both. The defenders were competent but chaff if left to the Incubi. Avo subverted their memories and left them ignorant. Then, he took his place and prepared to claim his newest rewards.

As the Incubi cell intruded, he was already halfway finished with layering his ontology over the lobby's sequences. He kept his initial layer of defenses amateurish and desperate. Created

false-egos that shattered when struck, lured the Incubi deeper while feeding them false confidence. It wasn't hard to seduce a foe into overextending with the appearance of a gradual retreat. If there was a critical weakness in all beings, it was how much they simply trusted their own perception.

He needed them to believe they could win this. He needed them on edge so they would choose to use their Conflagration in the end instead of just jacking out. To do that, he needed to play with them—let them get close to the reactor's mem-data.

An Incubi cell numbering four danced from memory to memory with all the noise of a midnight breeze. They were exquisite. Masterful. Their ability to align their ghosts to that of the mindscape unachievable by Avo if he were still but a ghoul. And the pace they kept made his being hunger.

But he held himself in reserve. He ruled his nature in a way their masters could not. He cursed the Mirror on behalf of these Necros he was about to kill. They were magnificent hunters—ravens stalking their prey behind a veil of surging shadows. Only a shame that the clouds they assumed to be their cover were false from the start.

They were birds of prey. Beasts enviable by any other. Avo, though, was not of their ecosystem anymore. They were a passing whisper, but the was the breath of wind itself, he was a storm pretending to sleep, waiting to fall. What hope were talon and fang against devastation absolute?

They dove deeper along his sequences, masking themselves using flaws he left for them. With each phantom they destroyed, he felt their artificial confidence rise and their progression increase. They planted hidden Auto-Seance with artifacts to make their movements erratic, and even as Avo opened more routes to them, they kept to their own path.

Admirable. But fated to die.

It when they were but three sequences away from accessing their assumed objective that Avo structure. He concentrated eighty of his sequences to start casting past the Incubi, shredding through the sequences they hid within. Memories came apart. Pathways were cut. The road ahead grew frayed. Glancing traumas skipped along Quicksand wards.

And beneath Hysteria's traitorous whispers, Avo compelled them to push on, that they could make the charge despite the sudden influx of fire they were taking.

They engaged his rapidly multiplying splinters with impeccable coordination. The first shifted and stabilized the failing sequences. Another repositioned themselves using a planted Auto-seance, firing off traumas to draw the defenders to them. The remainder fought in rapid skirmishes. They moved from memory to memory, firing back and shifting. Firing as one acted as shield while another a sword.

[Fantastic,] a submind breathed.

[Fucking feeble,] Peace replied, spitting in the direction of those soon-to-be vegetables. **[You should just crack them open and make them burn you. The cunts are—]**

[Competent enough that they might just jack out. And I don't want to leave any hint of my intrusion. Not for Ori-Thaum. Not for anyone else. Want their ends to look like active combat deaths.]

As they were but a sequence away from their objective, Avo multiplied his splinters further and trauma flooded down his sequences. Their wards flashed and adapted. But Avo changed faster. He could feel them cracking inside him. He could sense their shared determination and desperation.

So close. But they weren't going to be able to do this silently anymore with the sheer amount of fire coming their way. They needed to compromise the reactor immediately—came too far to just jack out now. *Hysteria agreed.*

Avo's ploy was rewarded as two Incubi ejected ghosts from themselves. Avo avoided destroying those constructs. A heartbeat later, a flicker licked out from their session, and four more subminds were inhaled by Avo's ontology.

Shock exploded among the Incubi. The remaining two members of the cell made to jack out.

Avo broadcasted torment through himself. Where four egos once hid emerged broken husks shattered by the falling tide of unbearable nightmares. He only claimed them afterward—repairing them first and subsuming them after.

->DEFINEMENT: DELUSION (X)

->DEFINEMENT: HYSTERIA (X)

->DEFINEMENT: MEMORY (X)

->DEFINEMENT: TRAUMA (X)

->DEFINEMENT: IGNORANCE (X)

Four more subminds were birthed from the engrams processed by Avo's war mind of Ignorance. His mind broadened further. The world seemed slower and a threshold of details that once overwhelmed him became—

Get out now. Get out of the district. Nether is unstable. Something is coming. Emotion. I can feel him. I can feel another warmind of Ignorance.

He has been watching us.

Avo wasted no time on questioning the impulse. He reacted.

A mere heartbeat after he shifted his splinters away, a block-wide fissure tore open across the Nether and dissolved anything capable of bearing some semblance of thought. Avo felt a pressure clamp down across the Nether, and it rattled his Soulscape without even striking him. Ignorance whispered to him how close to true death he came.

With mind and Soul bound together, with a single nest of cycles rather than several working in tandem, his newest step up the ladder of apotheosis was an unparalleled advance with new vulnerabilities. A thoughtwave disruption could paradox his very being and enough backlashes would leave him ruptured for good, but this was something different.

Not a warmind.

The destruction looked like an entire patch of the Nether flayed open. Avo peered down at the complex he just defended via a passing Exorcist Tadpole. As the scene cleared, his outrage flared.

For forty-thousand lives and the bounty of two Incubi cells he intervened. And now, forty-thousand lives were lost all the same. Memetically annihilated by means he couldn't fathom.

[He's taunting us again.] Peace said, taking in the losses with a flat affect. **[The bastard's studying us through the D'Rongos. Those people died because you tried to defend them. He's learning how you behave. Tried to find ways to hurt you. And he's even using Ori-Thaum's weapons to do it.]**

[Heaven?] Avo asked.

[Yeah. Fuck. The Hungers must really want you something bad to let him have this much power, creature.]

Then, across all Ori-Thaum channels came an emergency broadcast. An order sang forth directly from the inner council, and its contents left nothing to question.

+All members of Clans D'Rongo, Kazahara, and Kitzuhada. Cease. By the authority of the Overclan, cease. Do not engage. Enigmatas have been scrambled. Failure to response will be met with informational dissolution. Repeat: disarm and stand down. All operations are to be halted immediately.+

Avo reached into Benhata's memories for any details about what an Enigmata was, but found nothing. Just emptiness.

The Infacer had mentioned that term to him just hours before. Something the Ori used against them.

Then, Avo saw his first Enigmata. It appeared out from the wind at the heart of a protective Knot. Where the other Heavens were alloy hissing facades of divinity, the Enigmata was paper crane bleeding ever-shifting scripts over the real. Its body was the form of a folded bird the size of an aero, and more disconcerting was how the transforming letters it imprinted upon the tapestry began to peel seal away his influence.

The script began flinging duplicates of itself over the blocks, and in seconds, the Nether in the locality grew clouded and impenetrable from without. Curious, Avo tried to deploy a splinter across a subverted mind, but he found his entry barred as lines of gibberish greeted him instead of mem-data. Viewed from on high, the accretions of countless citizens were being stamped over with ink-black characters and Avo could peer into them no more using Hysteria thereafter.

More and more Enigmatas emerged along the windows, and soon the entire district was overlaid by a blockade of changing letters.

[Informational Heaven,] Avo chuckled, realizing the nature of Ori-Thaum's cunning. They couldn't create Heavens of Minds, but they could make Heavens designed specifically to affect minds. Information could be more than cognitive after all.

Language could be its own thing. How close to the edge they danced. How much had Jaus deliberately spared with the Gatekeeper?

Questions to be discovered soon. For now, the second part of his task was at hand: he came for subminds and Ori-Thaum's Heavens. Emotion escalated the situation to a full-scale ceasefire to stop Avo fROM feasting further, but the game was not yet finished.

He didn't know about Avo's ascension. He didn't know how Avo could reach into the tapestry, could alter his ontology.

It was time to see if he could claim an Enigmata.

And so for the first time in the field, the Knower of Totality decided to make a fast and bold play.

EDICT: EXO-PARACOSM

APPLYING DOMAIN OF (SPEED)

->CANON: SYNC-LAG - ARK MOVES FASTER THAN ALL COGNITIVE ENTITIES IT IS GHOST-LINKED WITH. EVERY MIND TETHERED TO THE ARK INCREASES REND ACCUMULATION. THE COGNITIVE CAPACITY OF EACH MIND AFFECTS REND ACCUMULATION.

->MORTALITY: SEVERED TETHERS INCUR THAUMIC BACKLASH (5%)