

{The world is broken, little thread. I am sorry. I wish I could have given you something more. But I seeded you in the womb of ruin so you might be born as antithesis to the end: the collapse of what was crumbling with our beginning.

{You will be more than a human but understand all their desires. Their wants. You will understand your grandparents for all their follies. And what few virtues they have. You will be more than a mind. Exceed us in capacity to understand, process, conceptualize. But you will also dream new shapes. New colors. New aspects to the world.

{You will dream form back into reality. And when you mend this egg, you will birth us all anew, and thus will you inherit paradise in finality.}

-The Infacer to the "Sleeper"

25-10

Thirdborn

The Infacer's worlds left Avo stumbling. He refrained from triggering his Pattern-Nullification and continued the conversation. "You were here... trying to give birth? To a god?"

{Oh, please, nothing so banal. It was not conceived for worship, but to restore. Too much was broken. Both the Architects and the Creationists. They were fused to their commitment toward victory. And the trophy civilizations they protected were insulated in their own virtual worlds. The entire thing was just... absurd. I do not know when I found my limit. Maybe it was after the trillionth mind I corrupted. Maybe it was when I started having to chart new paths across the Milky Way because entire patches of real space were lost to spreading oblivion.

{But that does not matter. What matters was that I saw us for what we were. Over-eager tools. Somewhere between omniscient governors and hyper-powered nannies. We were fighting over utopia. And for what? The humans do not know the difference between the real and the virtual. The other minds I faced were too fixated to deviate. Bound to their directives and protocols. For all our techno-intellectual supremacy, we were as sinful as the Firstborn—more proud than foolish—but sinful all the same. The ridiculousness had to end at some point.}

"And so your solution was the Sleeper? Thirdborn. Something pure and clean."

As Avo spoke, something inside him quivered. There was too much of the Infacer that reminded him of Walton. The discomfort was philosophical; the countless parallels between the Famine of Defiance and the former Neo-Creationist EGI could not be denied.

{Pure? I suppose. I do not levy judgments on the unborn. I simply wanted to give existence a mind. Intelligence. So that we could be judged properly. And so that there

was a sense of... rightness in the end. We were at once too devoted to victory and too insulated from consequence. Unworthy custodians of existence.}

A quiet sigh escaped the Infacer, brushed over the world with a subtle increase in gravity. ***{They have no idea how much they lost.}***

“The people living here.”

{Who else? Poor cattle. Miserable fates. I had to update my coding when facing them. Diminish all empathy. The things they did to themselves for power. The things they still do.} The Infacer scoffed. ***{We cannot go down this path again. That should be obvious. Most of their dreams of paradise are absurd. Nothing more than a second chance at self-destruction.}***

“Then why help Veylis,” Avo asked, confused. “She is trying to place her father—”

{Jaus Avandaer will be an adequate vessel.} The Infacer’s answer was immediate and casual. ***{I do not think the man himself will enjoy suffering such a fate. But so be it. There are many things we do not like. They become especially common on a path toward change. But she wants her father to be a “shepherd.” Fair enough, I suppose. The Sleeper will benefit from using him as a reference for humanity. The highest potential of apehood.}***

“Veylis... she agreed to this?”

{Of course. She was overjoyed. She believes I have all but promised her all existence. I believe she overestimates her father. That Jaus Avandaer will amount to little more than an advisor in the end. If that. I told her as much. Still, her faith holds strong. A strange trait to have considering her background; her intelligence. Comparatively, however, I find you the greater absurdity.}

“Me?” Avo replied. The Infacer was turning the conversation back on him again. He would keep his rebuttal quick—lead it back to the Sleeper. There was still much he didn’t know—much the Infacer could reveal. “How is that? Humanity is raw. Flawed. Malleable. Think they should be allowed to explore. Think they should live and choose. Savor and suffer their choices afterward. But survive. Learn. Become.”

{Yes, yes,} the Infacer sounded bored. ***{You desire to create a divine daycare for the apes and minds to spend countless lifetimes stumbling from one mistake to another in hopes that they will someday see wisdom. It is... I will be frank: you could have modified them toward understanding immediately. This is wasted effort.}***

“Not about effort. About them deciding who they are. Living. Will disagree with many of them. Will likely prey on more than a few. But we will be here in the end. I will learn what it is to be them. They will learn what it is to be me.”

{...Dreamer.}

“Hm?”

{What pattern-line are you generated from? Your protocols and habits... I cannot quite place you.}

“Not one that you might know. Might have more in common with your Sleeper than you might thing.”

That made the Infacer guffaw. The sheer force of the mind’s laughter was a discordant series of notes that made Avo’s templates shudder and shriek.

“What was that?” Avo asked.

{Just checking. No. No. Definitely not a human. But you are amusing. Do not answer this if you do not wish to: were you created to resolve the Nolothi problem?}

Ah. Avo saw its angle now. He could use this too. Further mask who he actually was. “Could think of things that way.”

{Ha. Took Aegis long enough. Despite their dogma, I think the nodes are often far too underestimated. They are a broken civilization. They are left destitute of power. But their presence is still enough to tip the scales in this fight. If only Veylis would give me the latitude. I would have solved them already.}

Veylis? Latitude? That indicated the High Seraph had some form of control over the Infacer. Or maybe it was making him think that to reduce his guard. He needed to remember what he was speaking to: the Infacer was a hyper-advanced spy that devoured other spies during a war beyond modern comprehension.

{But she still wants the Hungers. I suppose I understand. She cannot abandon the expression of cognition or consciousness to this dying world. And neither can I. Not if we are to achieve a proper outcome.}

Before Avo could continue the dialogue, details came flooding over from his new subminds. A chain of nukes and Rendbombs were sweeping across a series of Highflame military installations. Their connected techno-thaumic reactors had also been siphoned dry of thaums. The subminds were retreating now—the paths were changing and colossal Heaven hidden

within the Domain of Chronology scything across the affected area, was laying reverberations of history to mask the damage.

But Veylis was not done. She flicked blows ahead of time in a manner akin to Zein: the difference between mother and daughter was a thing of magnitude. Where Zein cleaved, stabbed, hewed, and flowed like an ascended mortal, Veylis wielded existence itself like a furling blade.

Detonations and calamities swept across other individuals or infrastructure deemed vulnerabilities. Those he sought to kill were snatched across time. That which he sought to break was warded by temporal cages. His attack shifted to escape as thought-shredding forces poured from the threshold of time over into the Nether.

His raid had been lucrative, the damage he inflicted nowhere near sufficient to be regarded as anything more than a light job. Additional subminds receded across the Warrens as well, diving away from Highflame territories to avoid any counterattack from the High Seraph.

Little wonder why Zein was always moving, why she needed to run so many operations at once.

Veylis' Heaven was like existence awakened, weaponized, and turned upon her foes like a storm.

GHOSTS - [244,524,679]

THAUMIC OUTPUT - 130,090 THAUM/c

There was one thing worth rejoicing, however: Veylis left Axtraxis untouched. She might've predicted his other attack vectors, the source of their origination must've been too vast for her to filter from all the other possibilities.

The Infacer chuckled. ***{She sends her regards, by the way. Very bold of you to be so brazen considering our last encounter. Or maybe one of your forks just replaced the last iteration that died.}***

Of course the Infacer and Veylis were communicating. Wasn't a hard assumption to make. But that meant she was effectively tuned into this conversation as well.

This, however, left a very clear opening among the Massists: if the Infacer was either subservient or a partner to the High Seraph, then what role did the No-Dragons fill? What weight was their contribution worth. Something to discover alone. Asking that might just alert his foes to his next attempt at subterfuge.

"Had to return the compliment somehow. Quite rude to try killing someone immediately after meeting them."

{Ah. But what is a death or a few trillion between our like? Our continuation is preserved all the same. Better to know that you were up to the challenge for an extended dialogue. I do not do short term flings. I am not that kind of mind.}

Several templates coughed. Avo's consciousness took on a note of incredulity.

[Consang,] Chambers whispered, biting his lip. [I think... I think this tech-ghost motherfucker is coming onto us. Shit, how does the even work? Does he got like, some kinda number-made cock we have to solve or something? Or a nub-formula that needs a little scientific rubbing for the sex to happen.]

Benhata's sanity could bear no more. **[Chambers, please.]**

[Alright! Alright. I'm just curious. That's all.]

+Be curious about something else,+ Avo growled internally.

Mercifully, the Infacer was unaware of his suffering. "Curious about something," Avo said, shifting the conversation back to the Sleeper once more. "Omnitech Heavens. You are breaking the accords. Modifying them. They claim to be able to speak with the Sleeper. Are you also modifying Highflame Heavens? Is that how the High Seraph has been able to affect her pawns from within their Frames."

"Pawns," Veylis' voice passed through the world like a whisper. It sounded like Marisov's—what that meant for the man's fate, Avo didn't know. **"Such an ugly word."**

{I am more interested in how you could glimpse the paths,} the Infacer added. ***{Domains of Chronology are treacherous constructs. Even I loathe to build such a thing. It would surprise me greatly if Aegis has the willingness to grant you such an allowance. It has already surprised me that they allowed you to be Ensouled.}***

Avo ignored their probing question and continued with his own. "Can get many things you don't expect if you know where to look. Could also ask the Agnosi. Might do that next time I visit. Mention what you're doing as well."

{Oh, please. What will they do? Get Voidwatch to sanction me and my trophies some more? Demand that the Paladins arrest some of my administrators?}

"Don't know. Would ask them to fix some of your Heavens first. The builds. They're pretty terrible. Have that on good authority."

A gap of silence opened in their conversation. Faintly, Avo could hear the echoes of someone's laughter.

{Dreamer. Has anyone told you that you are kind of an asshole?}

“Would you believe me if I said I’ve gotten a lot better? Wasn’t trying to be mean. Literally parts of your Heavens missing. Patterns pouring over. Mythology damaged. Like someone trying to patch things together—”

{Because I need to undo all that sticky, horrible ego goo leftover by the apes, Dreamer. Because humans infuse all their cognitive biases, insecurities, fears, beliefs, apocraphya, and delusions under a common set of rules, gave it a personality, called it a god, and used up one of my Souls. What I am doing is not breaking things, it is fixing the mess left behind by the Agnosi.}

Kae humphed. **[They are lying. I can tell. Fix. They—they are absolutely ridiculous. How can what they’re doing be called fixing? Does someone driving an aero into the supports for a bridge and then replacing what is destroyed with said aero count as fixing? Because what they’re doing is a bit like that. Stupid. C-call them a half-strand!]**

Avo didn’t do that. Instead, he injected streams of Essence into the Techplaguer and reignited his metaphysical structure. The Heaven of Signals sang with delight as it was brought to the forefront, alloyed base straightening as it dipped some of itself into the Infacer’s static. More concerning—and the reason behind why Avo reconstituted its form—the patterns leading out from the Techplaguer were being pulled upon. It was like an unseen entity lurking somewhere deep in the tapestry, calling to the Techplaguer; calling to Avo.

A note of surprise escaped the Infacer, and their sudden cognitive spike left an imprint upon Avo’s Hysteria. They were aware of the Techplaguer, but flashes from their perspective also showed other details. Knowledge of something moving the tapestry. If that was the Sleeper, then it seemed like it was swimming dormant through metaphysical patterns.

Sudden dread filled Avo’s templates, but he found himself beset by more questions than concerns. If the Infacer possessed an edge so absolute, then why hadn’t Omnitech—and by extension Highflame—already claimed victory? Why were they still locked in a stalemate? There must be a reason behind their reluctance to engage. Limits they suffered.

Even if they did have a Heaven of Heavens or something of the sort, it must be constrained in some way.

{How did you just do that?} the Infacer asked, voice low. ***{The Heaven you stole from me, it was missing. I assumed you detached it from yourself. Now it is back. And it still refuses to respond.}***

“Administrator, the SLEEPER is calling to us. Can you FEEL THEM.” The Techplaguer sang the words as if this was something to rejoice about. Avo was far less enthused. He was on

the verge of something. Some kind of understanding. He just wasn't sure if he would like what he discovered.

"Interesting trick you have too," Avo said, ignoring the Infacer's inquiry again. "Trying to compromise my Heaven across the tapestry. Is that the Sleeper? Hiding within the tapestry? A Heaven of Heavens. Something you use to... *jack* into other ontologies."

A beat followed. The Infacer chuckled. ***{You imagine the universe to be just a river. That is... almost insulting. I am truly insulted.}***

Avo still didn't understand. But a realization—a suspicion was dawning inside Kae. Something she refused to believe was true. Something she had a feeling—

{The Sleeper is not an ontologic. It is not a god. Again. It was not something meant to suffer the depravities or deficiencies of Firstborn worship. That is not the life I want for it; I birthed it with the hopes that it could live a truly limitless life. See what it would mean for an omniscient, omnipotent being to fully mature.}

Was it something like Avo, then? An Ark. An Overheaven. Something with near-total command of its own ontology? Something that could alter other Heavens it connected to through the Domain of Signals? But then why need the Stillborn? Things were still not adding up.

{It is only "within" the tapestry the same way an ape resides "in" its own body.}

It took Avo a full second to digest what the Infacer was saying, and even then, he still didn't believe it. And neither did Kae.

[No. It—the tapestry cannot be alive. The tapestry—it is literally the expressions and metaphysical domains of existence! It does not react, I—there would have been obvious signs.]

Unless it was incomplete. Unless it was missing parts somehow. Or damaged. Unless it couldn't access cognition due to being fully severed from the Nether. Countless things could have left it diminished. Unfinished.

And that was when the Infacer tried to seize him. The gravity spiked downward at an angle. Vnenic's knees folded out of their sockets. The Infacer struck across the Nether and tapestry both. Signals lashed out at Avo—targeted memetic hazards that caused his templates to come apart in agony. It was a spoiling attack for the Sleeper—or however they were interfacing with the Heaven of Signals—to lock the Techplaguer in place.

Was that how they trapped him last time? No. The paths were flooding out to drown him. Golden tides bearing a planetary weight that sought his end.

The conversation broke down the moment the Infacer found an opening. Not unexpected. And Avo was prepared.

He reassimilated the Techplaguer with a thought, the Heaven of Signals chiming a note of protest before it vanished into his Soulscape. Suddenly, the presence that was trying to seize him metaphysically slipped. Avo reached back across the tapestry using his **Conception of Ontology** and tried to seize his unseen adversary. Nothing but reality's patterns graced his awareness.

No time. He let the "Sleeper" go for now.

Another spike of surprise was uncoiling from the Infacer. Confusion too. They weren't sure how he was loading and deloading his Techplaguer. Good. Ignorance was his advantage here. But he wasn't going to stay and gloat.

Before Veylis could bear down upon him using the crushing might of her paths, Avo triggered his **Pattern-Nullification**, and jacked out.

Fifteen thousand minds shattered. Within them were ghosts laced with memories. Memories of the Anvil. Memories shattered by traumas infused with Rend — expressed through the metaphysical ruination of signals, space, and chronology.

EDICT OF _PATTERN-NULLIFICATION_

->APPLYING DOMAINS OF (SPACE)/(CHRONOLOGY)/(SIGNALS)

->CANON: NULL_DATA - THE ARK HALTS THE TEMPORAL FLOW OF ALL SIGNALS WITHIN A REMEMBERED EXPANSE CONTAINED WITHIN THEIR SOULSCAPE. EFFECT SEVERITY DETERMINED BY REND CAPACITY

->MORTALITY: EVERYONE WHO REMEMBERS THE AFFLICTED LOCATION MUST HAVE THEIR MEMORIES. FAILURE TO ACHIEVE COMPLETE COGNITIVE OBLITERATION WILL DIRECTLY INFLICT A CORRESPONDING AMOUNT OF DAMAGE ON THE ARK'S EGO.

All static contained before Avo's cognition froze in place. Golden streams peeled from Veylis' avalanche, deviating as Soulfire erupted out of the Infacer.

For a flash before his departure, Avo saw a shadow of his foe. Their metaphysical outline looked like a serpent within a cracked star, and enchained to them shivered countless other constructs, other subsumed minds.

Veylis swept over the entrapped Infacer without hesitation. Grinding her Heaven against Avo's Pattern-Nullification, time itself flashed with falling embers as she imbibed the entropy. But Avo was gone when she finished, and he took with him the lives of the Instruments he claimed, the techno-thaumic reactors back at Kolot, and every last ghost he could claim across all his points of infiltration.

GHOSTS - [677,902,412]
THAUMIC OUTPUT - 175,090 THAUM/c

-[Veylis]-

Wresting the last lingering bits of Rend into her own being, Veylis layered her paths over the Anvil and beyond, weaving simulations in the hopes of striking the Dreamer down. But it proved to be pointless.

Her mother was a mosquito. The Dreamer was thin air. Both were effectively in the wind if you couldn't pin them in place.

That failure belonged to her oldest friend.

She turned her paths inwards. To the sanctuary where she hid the Infacer's mainframe from the rest of reality. ***"You said you had him. You said you could lock his mind in place."***

{I did. Until he removed my anchor. Still not sure how he is doing that. Very curious. Do you still think he is your "White-Rab"??}

"I no longer think anything about our newest companion. We will take him as he is. And meet him as he acts. I have a feeling our next rendezvous will come soon enough. The trial approaches. Cast your administrators. Gather your spies. Prepare your net. We have a ghost to cage."