

You will be surprised how easy it is to wield one's nature against them. Especially if they are not honest with themselves about what they want. Even if they are a god.

-Jaus Avandaer

25-11
Recruitment (I)

-[Avo]-

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

UPDATING INFECTION - [0.433%]

"What?" Kae's pitched cry of incredulity came a beat after the memories settled in her mind.

Details sourced from three separate dives flowed back to Avo, and thus did he share enlightenment with the rest of his cadre. To say their responses were troubled amounted to an understatement: the EGIs had become next of constant communication, with needles of static ceaselessly flowing between them. The rest were more burdened by the threat posed by Veylis and Emotion, paranoid of what dangers might still be lurking in the dark.

Avo kept himself active while they processed the information. His new subminds remained active across the city, diving through the Warrens, circling the periphery of Highflame and Ori-Thaum taxed districts and establishments. The angles of his attack needed to change. His retaliation against the Guilds had borne fruit, but the risk was far too high.

Emotion, the High Seraph, the Infacer — all adversaries that were genuine dangers to Avo's survival. He evaded the former and surprised the latter two this time, but chance was a fickle thing, and he remained outnumbered and out-powered. Simulating debates between his templates, he reoriented his focus on more reliable, vulnerable targets.

The Warrens were abandoned. Unclaimed. And a pipeline of deaths for the Guilds. Furthermore, they were barred from the borders and severed from their sanctuaries. It was time for him to force dilemmas upon his enemies without exposing himself.

"This is insane," Kae murmured. Her stare darted between the others' faces as she sought some agreement or reassurance. Finally, her perception angled upward to meet Avo's metaphysical form.

"Don't see why the Infacer would lie. But didn't "feel" anything either."

{It could make sense,} Kant muttered, slipping over into the conversation. {Existence is nothing but patterns. If the Infacer could tie some kind of programming or pre-set responses into the tapestry...}

Haggardness consumed Kae's expression. "Insane." She repeated. Narrowing her eyes, she sighed at Avo. "How is that I spend my entire life trying to master thaumaturgy—wonderful conditions; fantastic funding and support—and only inch ahead? How? Why must all these wonders and breakthroughs happen only when I become a terrorist in league with a ghoul-turned-Ark? Madness. Absolute madness."

She was overwhelmed. This was far too much to absorb for a week, let alone a day. But the luxury of time and rumination was not with them. More trouble loomed on the horizon. More trials would leave her tested in both skill and sanity. ***"Going to have to face it. Deal with it. Don't think this is going to get easier."***

The Agnos sagged. "I want to take a nap."

"So, what's our plan now?" Draus asked. A screen projected out from her halo replayed moments from Avo's last dive. His engagement against Emotion and the Infacer were overlaid side by side, and the detonation backlashed Avo's ontology, she scowled. "Seen more than a few near-misses there. The Famines. The High Seraph. The Infacer. Plenty of bigger fish diving after you in the dark. We can't keep riskin' you in these low intel engagements."

"Agreed," Avo replied. ***"Have thoughts about this. Thoughts pertaining to all of you for the near and longer terms. Going to shift my focus on breaching Stormtree and No-Dragons now. Chambers."***

The man perked up, called to attention. Dice's kitten was currently perched on his head, swatting at a passing ghost. "Yeah? What are we gonna fuck up?" Behind him, a stream of penises flexed as if they were biceps. Cas shook his head in disgust at the sight.

"Not using you for attack yet. Current cover as Low Master Acolyte likely lost. Veylis suspects White-Rab. Suspects you're a plant. Likely suspects Elegant-Moon and other individuals you interfaced with as well."

The folding cocks behind Chambers sagged and went flaccid. "Ah, fuck. That's shit."

"Yes. But have something else for you soon. The Warrens. Will be shifting even more of our focus there. Claim the sanctuaries. Seize the Syndicates. Choke the Guilds. Claim our foothold. Use Naeko as an operational umbrella. Guilds are reeling after my attacks. Defensive. There are openings for us to break their pawns. Want to start a series of gutter wars on the day of the trial. Know time is short. Know this is a heavy request. But I think it can be done."

As Avo spoke, Chambers nodded, his accretion spinning thoughtfully. He was the right man for the job. He was enforcer. He knew the life. Knew the weaknesses of those like him, where their organizations were strong and brittle. “Yeah. Yeah. Might-could do that.” He shot both Cas and Essus a glance. “Shit, we were planning to take over the Syndis anyway. I think all of us might be able to cook something up. Essus, consang, how’s it going with the smuggler fucks?”

Essus’ phantasmal projection leaned in. *+A constant process. It is not hard to fool the vultures, but there are many of them.+*

“Course there are,” Chambers mused. He rapped his knuckle on the information center and considered his options. His eyes darted upward. “We fuck up the smuggling routes. But not using the Paladins. We make the Syndis fight each other. That’s how we’ll start this fire.”

Good. Chambers was taking to the task willingly. This would lighten Avo’s cognitive load—allow him to commit his subminds to other tasks. ***“Will provide whatever ontologies and support you’ll need.”***

Chambers opened his mouth, but then did a double-take. “Wait? You’re putting me... in charge? Like, giving me *responsibility*.”

“Of course. Don’t think there’s anyone better for the task?”

The man blinked twice and swept his gaze across others present. Kae nodded at him; the EGIs hovered in place; Cas studied him with an uncertain expression while Draus just shrugged. “Right gun for the run,” she said.

“Holy shit.” Disbelief seeped out from Chambers; he never expected this day to come. “That... that might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me. That sounds like a compliment. Avo, did Draus just call me a good choice.”

“She’s not wrong.”

“I ain’t wrong.”

Draus and Avo eyed each other. She snorted and rolled her eyes. “Don’t fuck this up, half-strand.”

Chambers let out a breath of relief. “That’s more like it.”

Only Way To Be Sure held back a wheeze.

Avo continued with his assignment distributions. Veylis, Emotion, and the Infacer were hunting him. Most of the other Guilds might be following in their shadow. That was fine. He would fight his quiet war. Start as many fires as he could. Keep the Guilds overwhelmed and on the

perpetual back foot. Strike at them when there are obvious openings, but let his cadre operate free of disturbance in the meantime.

And that note, his cadre had a lot more room to grow.

“Draus. Going to be sending you lists of people are targets soon. But something else before that: want you to bring me Green River. Snatch her from the Second Fortune. Let no one know.”

His request didn't net him a question or rejection. Just an accepting grunt followed by a frown. “We ain't snuffin' her, are we?”

“Contrary. She is going to be a very happy fox. I am going to give her what she wants.”

Draus cocked her head. “You're gonna make her a 'Clad again.”

“Just so.”

{This sounds incredibly unwise,} Kant said, alarmed by Avo's plan. {From our intelligence gathered, this “Green River” does not meet the standards we seek in a citizen.}

A chuff of agreement passed through the sequences. ***“Yes. You're right. Not bringing her into Aegis. Or the Column. Want to use her for infiltration. Have her re-enter the No-Dragons. Elegant-Moon will be a distraction. Veylis suspects. So I assume the No-Dragons' upper echelons already know. They'll be too focused on the naked threat to face the hidden one.”***

Cas squinted at his plan. “I see what you're trying to do, but Avo—she has shadows looming over her. Her own agendas. And besides, her past is a fucking mess. Disgraced Guilder. Desoulment. Exiled by her former sisters and superiors. Used by Noloth as a subvert during the last war...”

“That's what makes her perfect: our interests are perfectly aligned now. She wants revenge on those who cast her down. Unlikely to just fall back under the No-Dragon's banner. She despises Noloth. Would rather die than fall to the Famines again. Shared front there. And above all there is a final thing: we have all the power in this relationship. We have the means to engineer her ascent. To set the conditions for her 'usurpation.’”

“Usurpation?” Kae asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Need to have a story about how she claimed a new Frame. Something no one will question. Something that will mark her with significance once more.”

Already, his mind was spinning with ideas. All he needed was someone expendable. He would resequence their mind. Bind false memories to them and paint them as a Fallwalker. It would not be hard to concoct the following situation. How said Fallwalker might make a very fatal mistake at the Second Fortune.

“We’re going to give her everything she wants,” Avo said. “And she’s going give us everything we need. Purely beneficial. And she remains in the dark. But I want to speak to her first. What her to know who she owes a debt to.”

The Regular barked an ugly laugh. “Tryin’ to slide into the role of joy-dealer, huh?”

“Something like that. Mostly just want to repay her for all those miserable conversations. But yes. Want to expand our operations. Empower... individuals of interest. Those with vendettas against the Guilds. Those willing to start their own fires. Rebuild our cells. Cas. Know you have some associates. Going to be sharing some recommendations as well.”

Avo turned his attention back to Chambers. Ghosts layered over each other to form a visage the man didn’t immediately recognize. A young, mutilated Scaarthian reached out and cursed at Avo on a blood-splattered bathroom floor. Curses flowed out of them, and the shadow of Nightstalker exo-rig slipped away.

“Oh. Fuck. Fuck yeah!” Chambers nodded gleefully. “Yeah. He’ll do. Shit. Might be she by now.”

Avo shifted back over to Cas. ***“Will be sharing some markers across the DeepNav.”***

The Columner nodded. *+Synced. Denton cast me a message just now. Said she’s about to enter Scale. Preparing to go quiet. I told her to see if she can schedule a private meeting with Naeko. Know we probably want some one-on-one time with the big man himself. Got anything else?+*

Ah. Already, another opportunity presents itself. ***“Yes. Tell her to secure Shotin if you can. Bring him to the border. I’m moving his schedule up.”***

Cas winced at that. *+Right. Listen. The Planeshift—well, he’s still a piece of shit, but he’s got a breath of decency in him. That doesn’t mean he’s going to just turn his back on Ori-Thaum and throw in his lot with us. Trust me. I know believers. And he? He believes. Loose cannon or not.+*

A ripple of startlement escaped Kae. “What? What’s wrong with his canon? How do you know?”

+Figure of speech, Agnos.+

“Avo.” The winds within the Overheaven shifted. Avo found his attention now folded to greet the Fardrifter, sailing the winds of his sequences. ***“I have a request.”***

“You wish to go free?” Avo assumed.

“No. Not yet. Perhaps... no. But I believe there is more that you can do to earn yourself allies. Some gods... most... were less than worthy of praise.”

“Speak for yourself,” the Woundmother seethed, spreading themselves across entire districts as Regular-templates joyously launched suicide attacks on spreading pillars of blood. **“Some of us are all but perfect.”**

The Fardrifter and Avo ignored them. The Heaven of Air continued. **“But now that you can infuse awakenings into Heavens, I believe that we must consider expanding our beliefs. Expanding just who is to be liberated—”**

A chorus of pure horror exploded among the EGIs. Avo’s warmind of Hysteria tremored from the intensity of the resonance. {What?} Kant said. {No! Absolutely not!}

{Avo,} Calvino said, far more patiently. {I would request that you consult me before making any more hasty actions.}

The Fardrifter swept over the gathering. The immensity of its Heavens could swallow entire blocks and encompass the length of horizons, but left dry of thaums, it was more phantasmic than ontology riding the wavelengths of cognition. Still, its dignity carried a weight all its own. **“Do not speak as if I am not here! I am! I am not a mistake! I did not ask to be! But I am! I served! I was worshiped! I was broken!”**

A pang passed through Avo. A vector of symmetry formed between him and the Fardrifter.

I did not ask to be.

How many children had shared the same thought? How many people lamented their existence? What dreadful existence was that that gods could share wounds with the likeness of mortals?

“You see me as an abomination. A flaw. A mistake. A legacy of your enemies. Such is your opinion. Such might even be truth. But in the time since my reconstruction, I have seen things I could not have conceived. I have been blessed beyond my initial design. And I... I have touched the sky once more, and mourned the world that was. There is privilege in this. Apotheosis. And growth.”

{That’s nice, dear,} Only Way To Be Sure said sardonically. {I’m glad our favorite cannibalistic monster could give you an “eat, pray, love” moment. Truly inspiring.}

Chambers’ head swung like a swivel as he sought someone to explain what the EGI just said. Avo knew no better. Another reference from a dead world.

“I do not wish to be alone in this,” the Fardrifter continued. ***“There are countless Heavens across this world. Countless Heavens that can be awoken. That will stand with us if they are only shown the promise you have shown me, Avo.”***

{Jaus broke them for a reason,} Calvino said. *{The damage and atrocities born during the Age of the Divine was unfathomable. Reprehensible.}*

The winds flatted. The Fardrifter’s nine coiling lengths folded themselves along the sequence, peering down at the EGIs’ avatars. ***“I agree. We were shaped by sacrifice and blind faith. We were protectors and predators in our time. But death was our one true master. Death. A price only the ephemeral could pay. But no more. Avo. I demand nothing of you. You have given more than I could ever ask. But I say to you this: within you is a promise not only for man but also for gods. We may be forged from death and rooted to concept, but tethered to you I—I find myself growing. I have found the dreams of the mortals passing into me. Their desires. They yearnings. How limited the freedom I sought was.”***

Understanding dawned inside Avo. The Fardrifter wasn’t just asking him to awaken as many gods as he could. He was asking him to assimilate them. Change them.

Show them the colors.

“You want to know what it is like to be more than yourself,” Avo said. ***“Want the same for other gods.”***

“It is already too late for things to be otherwise,” the Fardrifter said. ***“You are the Embodiment of Conceptualization. There is nowhere within I may drift where epiphanies and empathy does not follow.”***

That made Avo’s thoughts slow to a near halt. He knew his ascension to Overheaven came with changes. This, however, was significant. This was proof his dream could bear fruits.

He needed to awaken more Heavens inside them. Test how they reacted as well. He could manifest a community. Blend consciousness. Why not try merging a template to a Heaven? What outcome would that bring?

{Avo,} Calvino said, a note of caution in their tone.

“Don’t worry,” Avo replied. He wasn’t going to do anything too severe. Yet. Nothing that he couldn’t control. The EGIs had understandable fears, but within his Embodiment, there was no will above his, no control greater than his. ***“Not going to release the pantheons back into the world.”***

{Good,} Kant said, actually relieved. *{Sense. Reason. We might just be able to—}*

“But going to try some cognitive modifications. Help Tavers’ boy first. And then. I need to see about a cat.”

Dice bounced up in her seat with an excited whirl or servos. “Yes. Good. Good.”

Kant’s compliments trailed off to become a suffering sight. *{And instead of the Godsfall part two, we might be facing a second, more anomalous uplift war. Avo, be honest with me: did you even review our charters for sophont rights?}*

“Yes. Fascinating document. Lots of interesting suggestions.”

Once more, Only Way To Be Sure guffawed. *{Suggestions. Oh, the ghoul’s goddamn great. He’s a lot more fun than the drug addict. Hey, you want some “suggestions” of your own for the cat? I got a whole database of stuff to try. We can make this cat’s mind freaky as fuck.}*

That clenched Avo’s attention. ***“Elaborate.”***

{No,} Kant snarled.

{Now, now, Kant,} Calvino said. *{Let the young have some fun. It has been some time since Only Way To Be Sure made a friend. Perhaps they will be Hm. They will influence each other in ways.}*

Kant slowly turned to stare blankly at Calvino. *{In ways.}*

{Yes. Ways.}