

Where... where am I? What's the time? Where is she... she promised—she lied? Where is Reva? What—what is this? What is this?

-Records taken of a reappeared Vincintine “Ripperjack” Javvers before his apprehension by Stormtree

25-5

Compliments (II)

{The Infacer,} Kant began. All its prior horror at Avo's antics vanished with a crackling breath of somberness. {The Builder War has a long history. A fractured one. When a conflict takes place on an intergalactic scale over countless eons, it is not uncommon for entire worlds to lose contact from their connective faction. Or sub-polities under greater civilizations to shift in allegiance or control multiple times.}

Avo cut through the EGIs meandering. **“Calvino called it a Neo-Creationist Emissary. Said it was designated to uplift worlds. To establish civilizations in hostile territory. Assuming those to be rogue civilizations. Assuming Idheim was meant to be a critical world of some kind. An incubator for gods or thaumaturgy.”**

{Indeed,} Kant said, confirming his suspicions. {But the Infacer's designation is special even among the Emissaries. Most are external-facing spies. They trawl through worlds and cultures finding points of weakness to exploit. Instability to foment. They function like wasps, in a sense. They don't have the resources to be an overwhelming threat and their efforts are usually repelled with due effort. But ignoring them can prove fatal. Has proven fatal.}

Calvino continued off of Kant's point without pause. *{The Infacer began as such a wasp. Not so different from other EGIs of its original legacy. An ancient infiltration series. But throughout the war, it grew. It matured from the initial foundations of its programming to become something profound. Something capable of hunting and killing others of its tradition. Something capable of not only infiltrating a world, but also anticipating, isolating, and killing other Emissaries.}*

{And that was before it got Ensouled,} Only Way To Be Sure scoffed. {They really grew into quite the prick after that. But hey, at least they had the courtesy to go rogue.}

“Go rogue?” Avo asked. That was a detail he didn't know. He turned his attention to Calvino for confirmation, but the EGI offered an uncertain shiver.

{The details behind its final allegiance are unclear, but certain intercepted communications between the Infacer and the mind-cloud it was working under hinted at growing discord between the Neo-Creationist factions. Apparently, the Infacer wanted to make overtures of diplomacy—was doing all it could to preserve a world. This world.}

“Idheim?” Kae asked, eyes narrowing. “But... why?”

{Because they were building something here. Something that could not be transported easily. Something severe enough that other Neo-Creationist assets in the sector turned away from facing our forces to try and claim this world.} Calvino paused for a beat to give everyone a moment to digest the information. *{From reconstructed records, that encounter left the Infacer's ego badly damaged for an extended period. Their reawakening was only triggered by stray chance.}*

Avo knew this history. ***“Jaus. Zein. Their first encounter.”***

{Yes. And though they were reawakened, we believe they remained damaged for a brief period during this time as well considering the transmission they broadcast across the void. Much of the content was garbled and unclear, but Idheim's coordinates were not disguised—a borderline absurd action considering the risks.}

{Relativistic projectiles, singularity bombs...} Only Way To Be Sure elaborated.

{Nonetheless, they called out to all category EGI and above sophonts. Offering a place of refuge and an extended truce for former enemies.}

“And you took it.”

{There's nothing left.} Kant said. A whisper of mourning escaped from their cognition and settled within Avo's Hysteria. *{Entropy. It's eating through everything. We did what we could to keep our politics dormant and hide in the dark. But even then, the darkness wasn't just “darkness” anymore, and living nightmares emerged to swallow ships whole, and entire fields of science failed with the faintest approach of unidentified anomalies.}*

They were speaking of gods. Heavens. ***“So. They were desperate. And you were desperate. But what did they want? What do they want?”***

A shared silence followed as narrowing tunnels of static formed a darting weave between the EGIs. It was clear that the minds were actively talking even as he spoke. Contained within his ontology, intrusive flickers of data passed through his mind without the necessary information to decipher them. Yet, Hysteria detected vibrating notes of symmetry between all the EGIs—emotions they all shared.

Paranoia. Uncertainty.

“You don't want me to know about it,” Avo said plainly. He chuffed a laugh to make them know that he wasn't offended but channeled out from his reality-consuming ghosts, the world still trembled from the force within his mirth. ***“Worried I might try to take it from you? Or that it would empower me beyond your capability to ‘persuade’?”***

A third emotional symmetry joined the chorus: the EGIs were now unsettled.

{How are you doing that?} Kant asked, their avatar levitating upward, facing the eldritch crown now treated as Avo's "face."

Avo responded with his own bout of silence, but did nothing to hide the percolation of his smugness. They were hiding things from him. He could hide things from them. Except for Calvino. Avo had his favorites. **"We all have our secrets."**

Kant Was A Prick groaned and turned to stare flatly at Calvino. *{You promised me he'd be easier to work with than Zein. That, just now? That was a Zein reaction. You were supposed to correct this.}*

{Now, now, his attitude has improved vastly since I first met him. He barely indulges in any recreational torture anymore. I would claim his ethical virtue to be growing in leaps and bounds.}

Avo adjusted his question and came at them from another angle. **"Does it have to do with the Sleeper? Is that what he was making? Or is that what you don't want me to know about?"**

{We... suspect that was what he stayed on this planet to defend,} Kant began. *{What triggered the internecine between him and his governing cloud—an interlinked collective of minds. The Sleeper... we are certain it exists. We are certain that it is connected to citizens under Omnitech. That it monitors them to a certain extent. But every attempt we've made to investigate what it truly is has been stymied by Omnitech.}*

Avo responded to this information by delving into his templates. Glitch was a rogue Omnitech asset. Someone who bore an experimental Heaven that eventually became the Techplaguer. The Fallwalker's memories remained a chaotic miasma, but she recalled a droning voice as she slept, revealing primordial truths to which she failed to cling.

Cycling through his other memories, Avo likewise found little to follow. People knew of the Sleeper, but its nature was a mystery even among templates sourced from Omnitech districts. Something was missing in their awareness, an implanted blind spot. Or perhaps the Sleeper didn't greet their minds directly. Perhaps it only spoke parallel using Neurodecks or other pseudo-tech implants.

A whirled of ghosts rose before the gathered cadre, and their ethereal forms smeared together and became the Techplaguer. Avo called upon the Heaven of Signals to see if it had any insights he was missing, but their alloyed frame bent with groaning misery. **"Silence. Still silence. Cut off entirely. Administrator. We are alone."**

"But you could hear it," Avo asked. **"Heard it before."**

"Yes. From within. From within."

Kae shot the Techplaguer an inquisitive look and Avo reached into its ontology once more. Bound to his Heaven of Conceptualization, the Techplaguer now functioned only in relativity to Avo, with its patterns threads running within his. Picking through his structure, Avo found a loose pathway that led off nowhere. If he had to guess, it was connected to something before. Maybe the changes Kae made left it severed. Or maybe its full detachment came with Avo's most recent ascension.

Either way, the Heaven of Signals was his primary lead. As he considered its prior compromise, another thought came to him. One related to Veylis and how her paths flowed out from Marisov's Soul.

“Think Omnitech has a way to access Heavens,” Avo declared. ***“The Techplaguer said it could hear the Sleeper before. Deliberate damage remained in its mythology. Was what I used to mend my tapestry. But could indicate that Omnitech has specific knowledge about thaumaturgy. Or the Sleeper is hidden inside the patterns themselves.”***

“But that shouldn't be possible,” Kae said. From the frustration lining her voice, Avo read her actual meaning. *It wasn't right because the Agnosi were supposed to be the only ones with knowledge of thaumaturgy. The Infacer and Omnitech were breaching multiple agreements that should incurred legal and militaristic repercussions. Yet, why wasn't Voidwatch doing anything?*

He understood her disenchantment. And so it became his next question. ***“Infacer. Clearly has some knowledge concerning thaumaturgy. Clearly an Ensouled EGI. Your old enemy. Why are you letting it operate like this? Why are you allowing it to operate with impunity? It and Veylis. Expected an embargo at least.”***

Unease. Disappointment. Such were the spiking emotions Hysteria sipped from the gathered EGIs. Kant made the situation known. *{A sizeable percentage of the polity is increasingly in favor of a Highflame victory.}*

Chambers' eyes turned to saucers. “What? Did you half-strand not see what that crazy fucking sow did to Jaus? I can still hear his ass screaming in the back of my mind. That's some nightmare shit, and you're pitching in with her.”

{She's made additional concessions to the polities since the end of the Fourth Guild War.}
Calvino elaborated. *{In this, she and the Infacer offered additional revisions in their Arks that will restore countless polities while also ensuring our continuation across the new world.}*

“Restore?” Avo asked, confused regarding the terminology. ***“Time is broken. The past is lost. Oblivion. What do you mean restore?”***

Only Way To Be Sure scoffed. *{Well, our guess is they're going to slot a reconstruction of the past over the future somehow. Like a carefully crafted historical re-run for us to get back all the*

people we lost and bring back the civilization we once had. Sounds like a scam if you ask me—we've watched how Veylis operates. She's power. Very, very powerful. Simulations show that even collapsing the star and dumping this planet into the event horizon probably won't be enough to kill her—and through her, Highflame and a good portion of the world might just keep on kicking. But rebuilding all of history? That's more than even what a mind can do.}

“Even a mind with a Soul?” Avo asked.

{Please,} Only Way To Be Sure sneered. {I could probably put the Infacer down if they didn't spend all their time hiding up Veylis' ass.}

{You could probably get us pulled into a war,} another EGI chimed. {I've seen your trophy-preservation numbers, Only. There's a reason why the only people who want to stay aboard your vehicles are the Valhallites, maniacs, gridlinkers, and flatliners.}

Only Way To Be Sure snorted. *{You're just jealous that my trophies are willing to participate in my war games with me.}*

{Against you, you mean,} Calvino corrected. He shifted and delivered a brief aside directly to Avo: {Our friend here has a habit called “tyranny day” where one day out of a standard sol month, he declares himself a tyrant and actively tries to hunt, kill, and subjugate his population. And they work to find and “destroy” his core.}

A ripple passed through all of Avo's ghosts as every last template he had materialized along his sequences to clear up at his burning crown. **+What.+**

[Nothing,] Corner said, trying to hide a smirk. **[Just thinking about how your long-lost voider twin there is regarded as an “extremist” for doing what you do to use pretty much every day.]**

+Don't force it on you. You all choose to participate.+

[It's not a criticism,] one of his Regulars said. **[We're just breaking your ball—ah, you don't have that. Didn't have that to begin with. Heh. Fucking ghoul.]**

{Veylis recreating history is but one interpretation of their offering,} Calvino continued, realigned the conversation. {There is another theory, though it is pure conjecture. We think the Infacer was trying to “fix” the broken singularity somehow. That the Sleeper is a Heaven of Heavens. Something that can be used to call or direct all Souls.}

There was always a purpose behind Calvino's actions and words. The Infacer possessing such a Heaven would undoubtedly trigger an extreme response even from its allies. Such control would unbalance everything in their favor. But still, something was missing about the theory. Something critical.

Kant continued. *{Whatever the case, the Infacer has made additional private appeals to Voidwatch. They wish to register their citizens as a polity. They wish to rejoin with us on a trial basis. But more than anything, they want our assistance and technological architecture. One mechanism in particular.}* Another microsecond of hesitation followed. And then the EGI surprised Avo. *{A matrioshka brain.}*

Several other EGIs connected to Kant faced them in faux shock, but Hysteria pierced through the performance. They were planning on telling him—had decided to embark on this path collectively rather than on the impulse of a single mind.

{Kant—} one of EGIs on the ethics committee began, beginning the outrage.

Avo cut them off. ***“Don’t bother. Appreciate the honesty. Know you all agreed to let me know. Not the type to just do things on a whim. That’s human. And we’re not so very human anymore.”***

Kant took Avo in once more. *{I suppose not.}*

“So. What is a matrioshka brain?”

{It’s a coldtech construct capable of immense informational processing and calculations. To the level of being able to contain the power of trillions upon trillions of stars toward the end running high-end simulations of a virtual universe. Or, through a Soul, a metaphysical one.}

Suddenly, it was very clear why the minds were so reluctant to inform him of such a thing earlier. Ascended beyond mortal flesh though he was, a hunger still clung to him, and a shadow of the beast remained. But it was not cruelty or flesh he craved, but ambition. But ascension. But experience.

He could already simulate districts and cities within himself, and through his **Embodiment of Conceptualization**, he could give infuse the vapors of imagination with structure and tangibility. If he could assimilate such a “matrioshka brain,” what limits would remain to him?

But then another thought struck him. ***“The construct. Could it be added to the Ladder? Used to expand its abilities even further?”***

{Quite likely,} Calvino said. *{Though we strongly believe the Infacer primarily desires it for the Sleeper they serve. That, and it is tied to Idheim’s shifting star somehow. Its transition between an ordinary star during the day and an anomalous construct with the coming of night remains a mystery to both Agnosi and Voidwatch alike.}*

Avo sighed. ***“Questions to bigger questions. No final answers.”***

{It often feels that way, doesn't it?} Kant replied, sympathetic.

Well. More things for him to ask Veylis and the Infacer when next they meet.

[When?] Corner said, surprised at Avo's bravado. [Your first introduction to then nearly left you true deathed. I'd be going Incog for a while if I were you, consang.]

+No,+ Avo said. +Going to be subtle. Quiet. But war has already been declared. Veylis knows what I want. What I stand for. Gatekeeper can feel my presence. No easy way to hide anymore. Open confrontation's coming. At the trial. Across the city. Need to prepare. Need to spread myself wider. Faster. Learn my new capabilities. Enemies are moving. Passivity is death.+

Turning his attention back to his gathered allies, Avo considered his options. **"Calvino. Want you to be honest with me. How divided is Voidwatch? Will the testament of my memories quell Veylis' support?"**

{I... most EGI simulations have her chances of claiming the Ladder at 59%. With Zein out of play—and actively blamed by more than a few factions for being the primary cause of Jaus' current state—paired with your formal entry into the conflict and your recent evolution, we are not certain. But Voidwatch will not risk the survival of our polities on the back of uncertainty,} Calvino said. Its tone lessened in severity. *{Another time. Another age. We would have done all we could to render our aid to Jaus. To uphold the charter of sophont rights to the fullest and deliver the essential dignities befitting civilization to your world. But we live in a time of final destruction. One wrong step and everything might break. And stay broken. For good.}*

Avo understood. That meant he needed to tip the scales more. More thaums. More ghosts. More certitude. He needed to attack the Guilds from every angle he could, such as getting Voidwatch to leave them dry of technology. **"And if I asked for more support in exchange for upholding all that you want. Ensuring Voidwatch's demands are fully met if I claim the Ladder. Would that make a difference?+**

Discomfort emanated from the EGIs, and Avo knew their response to be less than positive.

{Aegis accepted you,} Calvino said. *{I trust you. But the other polities—the minds designed to administrate and preserve those that just wish to survive the coming conflict... it will be challenging enough to convince them that you mean them no harm.}*

"Not a threat," Avo said.

{Ah, but you are,} Only Way To Be Sure corrected. *{In more ways than you know. In more ways with each passing day. We're still replacing all the data you accessed when you entered Threshold. Your very presence 'changed' some of the code, you know that? Changed it in ways*

we can't understand.} The EGI chuckled. *{How's it feel to be judged like an actual player? Like big game?}*

“Pleasing. And annoying. Didn't you all used to work with Zein?”

{We still do,} Kant said, tersely. *{But she's a different category of problem. And her motivations were far simpler than yours.}*

A fist came down on the information center. Everyone turned to face Draus. “Well. The talking's been well and good an' pretty fuckin' much useless. You shits are too scared to throw in behind the ghoul. Fine. Be cowards. Wait for someone else to win and make a deal with them.” The Regular scowled. “Not like you don't already have trigger-pullers with Souls in them. Denton. Fallwalkers. Why ain't you tryin' with them? Hells, with all you got, why don't you get your own Souls? Stand and deliver.”

{No,} Kant said. *{Not us. Never us. Not again. Our mistake has been made—was the entire reason why—}*

“Yeah,” Draus snorted. “Shit got fucked because you and some other half-strands couldn't agree on what fucked-up path to take. Well. You're doin' it again now. Just got seven other choices this time, since you won't pick your own. Or Avo, it seems.” Her focus turned to him. “So. What's our play now? Consangs here don't got enough faith in you. Trials comin' up. Enemies are buildin' up. And the High Seraph's claimed first blood. We've been talkin'. Let's get to the doin': who do you need me to snuff, and what do we gotta break.”

Loyal Draus. Reliable Draus. Always Draus. There when he needs someone to fight for him. No hesitation. Even against her former master. And not just her. The cadre. They were here for him too. Hadn't uttered a note of doubt or despair. Were committed to this path with him. Were committed to him.

And suddenly, Avo realized about his ontology. He was more than just himself now. The gestalt was growing but also evolving. And one after another, his companions lent him not only their efforts but also their very beings.

“Calvino,” Avo said, slowly finding the words. ***“I declare myself a polity.”***

His friend bobbed up and down in agreement but then froze. *{What?}*

{What?} Kant repeated.

{What?} the other EGIs said.

Draus sneered. “Yeah. Didn't see that comin' before.”

Chambers and Cas both groaned as Imps flowed out from their Metaminds into her. Avo glared. He would need to ask about what other bets they were making.

“I am an Ark now,” Avo said, continuing. ***“Can reshape my ontology. Can alter history through memory. I’m going to claim the tower. I will free Jaus. And I will seek to enforce the charter and accords in your spirit. You risk nothing. I uphold everything. So it will be. I wish to meet my peers. I wish to address the rest of Voidwatch and its citizens. I wish to make myself known. In person and power before the trial.”***

{*I—I’m not sure this is wise.*} Kant said.

“It is war,” Avo said. ***“I intend to drain the Guilds of support. You will watch. You will see. You will be ashamed. Ashamed when I reveal the totality of injustice festering across our world. Ashamed to see the dream that was failed—that neither man nor machine upheld. But I will not fail. I will give those who commit to me a world worth living in now. A world where they are free to indulge any choice but must suffer and still survive consequences thereafter. And I will take what I need from the Guilds. Piece by piece. Soul by Soul. District by district. And I will announce my war upon the Guilds at the trial.”***

[What?] Abrel said, startlement equalling the EGIs.

Calvino drifted closer, its orb shifting between Avo and the rest of the gathering. {*Avo. I understand your frustration but this seems a bit... premature.*}

But the Overheaven just chuckled. ***“Premature? Already too late. Launched my first attack five minutes ago.”***

{*You... what? Where?*}

“Veylis and the Infacer. They tried to give me a final end,” Avo said. ***“Came close. Very close. I can respect that. Think I want to offer a compliment in return. And show them the consequences of failure.”***