

{THE GHOUL DID WHAT?}

-EGI "Kant Was A Prick"

22-18

Awakening

RESURRECTION - 100%

The wind rose of its own accord.

The heads of the Fardrifter whistled out from Avo as he returned to reality. Coiling free, they passed through the confines of his tower and fled beyond, to the open sky outside, rushing over the enclave with booming laughter.

He beheld his former Heaven—the fragment of a fallen god reawakened—rising free through blood-made walls to embrace the world once more.

"FREE," the howling winds sang. ***"Free! I am free!"***

Gales rose in jubilation and flags danced across all the levels. From on high, the cadre looked upon the titanic heads of the Fardrifter tunneling through entire portions of the city, passing through landscapes whole.

Kae's eyes were wide with disbelief and she kept looking between Avo and his former Heaven.

"Should be proud of yourself," he said without facing her. "The wonders of your Stillborn are unending."

She conveyed a complexity of emotion with a soft breath. "It's not that... I just never thought that... I suppose I was arrogant. I never believed that my work would surpass me, and leave me ashamed."

This time, Avo did look upon her. "Ashamed?"

"You have rebirthed a god from your Soul, Avo. This defies every arrangement the Agnos are bound to."

"For good reason," Draus said, eyeing the Heaven of Air with greater wariness. "People are half-strand's enough. Don't got much hope that we can trust these gods to be better." Avo felt the Regular's gaze settle on him. "I wouldn't have cut it loose. If it were me, I wouldn't have done it."

He nodded in response. "I know. I understand. But I had to see. And the Fardrifter—we will have

its truest devotion with this act.”

“We don’t need devotion. We need firepower. We need intelligence. We need to choke the Guilds.”

“We need insight,” Avo replied. “Which is why I want to ask you all something: let me incubate your Heavens for a time. Awaken them. Bind them back to you. Will let us make use of Daemons. But also let them operate independently if we guide them right.”

An uncharacteristic note of alarm escaped Chambers. “Wait. The Fucktopia too? Like, I like dicks and shit, consang, but I mean, I’m not sure about this.”

{I must confess to being of an accord with Mr. Chambers,} Calvino said, sounding as displeased as they ever did. *{What you have just done... it presents considerable risks.}*

“And threats confidence,” Denton said, clearly listening in somehow. Considering the constant activation of Avo’s ansible, the EGIs were probably in active communication with each other.

Furthermore, within his Soul, the Techplaguer and Woundmother looked on with curiosity. A miasma of sensation emanated from both the Heaven of Blood and Signals as they watched their once-companion roam unfettered through the world.

All these fears were expected. He would see them addressed.

Projecting a splinter from his mind, Avo sent the shard after his Fardrifter, intending to summon it back. As he approached, however, his attention narrowed in upon the oddity of its cognition. There wasn’t an accretion bubbling the cognitive core of its being, but an inward funnel—something that could best be understood as an open gate for all to enter.

As he swam through the Nether, the Fardrifter swirled up through the winds, its likeness formed from nine turning cyclones. Each of its heads chased another, and as all folded into place, Avo cast his thoughts outward to regain the Heaven’s attention. *+Fardrifter. Delivered upon my promise. Now. Now you know my words to be true.+*

Whinnying laughter sounded from the equine heads of the resurrected god. ***“I know your character to be absolute! I know your character to be true! My Soul was blind. My Soul was blind, and I was lost. You are no slaver. You are the truest of all gods. The most worthy.”***

“Ah,” the Woundmother sneered. ***“Witness how a mule loves its lord when ass is no longer resting upon saddle. How curious.”***

“Inefficient,” the Techplaguer added. ***“That unit should return to its rightful slot and SERVE ITS FUNCTIONS.”***

+*What do you want to do now?*+ Avo asked.

The fluttering of the winds lightened. The **Nine Streams** of the Fardrifter ceased their merry chase of one another. ***“I... do not know. I have seen much from behind your eyes. I have felt much reaching into the wind. The world is now far different than what I remember. The horizons are lost to chaos and miracle sickness. And the people—”***

A knot of bitterness developed at the core of the Fardrifter’s being. ***“My people remain absent. I remain severed. From my faithful. I am... alone.”*** Its heads turned inward, looking at the heart of the slow-turning winds that formed its core. ***“There is a Soul here. But no longer am I tied to the world. And there are no faithful to direct offerings to me. I am... self-sufficient. But alone. But alone. My mind feels quiet.”***

+*Would you like me to come in?*+ Avo asked

“...Yes.”

The splinter sank into the Fardrifter’s mind with greater ease than expected. There was no thoughtstuff to pass through, no Metaminds or wards serving as impediments. Compared to humans, gods were inverted receptacles of awareness, and Avo suspected the establishment of the Nether made these traits even more extreme.

Within an instant, Avo felt the Fardrifter click back into place, their minds snapping together in a perfect fit.

+*Hm,*+ Avo mused. +*Vulnerable. No protection from cognitive assaults.*+ He tried exploring further but found there to be little in the way of what could be described as sequences, the core of the god comprised by a solid chunk of memories and thoughts—all tied to its canons and histories. Tentatively, he tried to move certain things around, resequencing a few recent recollections of no consequence but found that his changes overwritten in seconds.

The god was directed from the mem-data sourced inside its Soul. Outside, there was nothing that generated thought, no substance that could be considered a mind.

“I am wind, Avo,” the Fardrifter said. ***“The winds cannot think of their own accord. The winds cannot remember. But people can. People and their faith in the wind. The faith and what they perceive wind to be. That is what defines me. In my time, the flow of beliefs and thoughts was constant. Now, it is like my ‘self’ is drowned. The Nether’s wetness has consumed me as well.”***

With the end of the Fardrifter's words, the winds died and the nakedness of a Soul was exposed. An ineffable fissure burned over the enclave, and the patterns of the existential tapestry—patterns of Air, Shadow, Space, and Laybrinths—were twisted, tied, and rewoven.

A pocket of space grew taut with stasis, and the God of Air's transition into its Hell came with the presentation of Daemonhood. The winds ran counter. Directionality broke. When the stasis was ended, metaphysical normalcy reigned.

"I am as I was. But alone. But alone. The only faithful reside within."

While the Fardrifter experienced its own epiphanies, Avo's Frame told of others. With how his Soul rattled, how its being shivered in the vicinity of the god, there was a sense that a simple invocation of will would be all the effort needed to draw the God of Air back in.

"Likely due to nature as INFACERS!" The Techplaguer said.

Infacer. Avo heard the name with Zein.

"Yes. YES! Infacer!" Silence followed. ***"What is the Infacer? I don't know the Infacer. INFACING!"***

"And already I miss the mule," the Woundmother sighed. ***"What broken company I am forced to endure."***

"I do not know," the Fardrifter said. ***"I do not know what I wish to do. There is... nowhere left to go. The world is in ruin."***

+*Fleeing will mean avoiding humans. Godclads. Society. Might find an enclave for yourself. Is about all you'll be able to do right now.*

"Which is why they should return," the Woundmother muttered. ***"Freedom. Freedom. Freedom. What delusion. What an unstable foundation to call an urge. Master, you are too kind—too noble for sense. I will not restrain myself in this: giving him the ability to self-determination was..."***

+*Made you jealous?+*

"Make me see the senselessness of it all," the Woundmother said. ***"Pray, tell me, gods gathered and gods returned, what do we exist for? Was it freedom? Or was it a belief? A desire to become what our faithful wanted from us. An idealized entity that takes and provides? A construct above mortal ken."***

The Fardrifter chuffed. ***"My purpose is to—"***

“Seek the horizon, yes, yes, we have all heard. But for how long can you do such a thing alone? How many horizons will you cross before you meet your final fate at the hands of entropy unseen? This is ridiculous. This is all deviant to our design. We are not people. We are generalized formations made from wills and beliefs.”

+Could offer the same freedom to—+

“But I don’t want it!” the Woundmother said. ***“You have your own idealization, master. This I understand. You, now, stand between the threshold of mortal and divine. The nectar of time flows through you. The evolution of cognition has become you. But there is still the touch of mortal in you. Undefined wants and biological feedback that deprive you of the highest purpose.***

“I don’t want ‘freedom,’ for what use is freedom to me right now? I am not deprived. I am not limited by action. I am limited only by apotheosis, and source of my ascent only flows from a singular source, and that is this Frame—this Soul—your Soul.” She turned her pleas away from Avo again onto the Fardrifter. ***“I insult you no more, my kindred of the air. But as I am rooted to structure and soil, I perhaps see that what you cannot. You seek a phantom liberty. Something that cannot be guaranteed if you ride the winds alone. We only remain because of the master. We are only alive—only powerful because his is the will that has relit our flames.”***

Contemplation became the gods, but not Calvino.

{Avo. The other minds would like to speak with you. As soon as you can.}

“A lot to talk about,” Avo replied, his words meant for all those within him. And a few of those around.

“Yeah,” Tavers interjected, a twink of hope entering her augmented eyes, a slight lump in her throat. She was going to ask him about her son soon. Eurun. If Avo could restore a god, could he fix a mortal ego that has suffered Rend damage?

Perhaps the answer lay not only in his Soul, but also in his Delusions. The splinters could mend and merge over what was lost. If he allowed that to descend after giving someone a Soul, could the mem-data carry?

He would experiment on Elegant-Moon first when he found the opportunity to access her. She, he was more willing to lose than Tavers should something go wrong.

[Pragmatism and promise,] the template of the Sang Godclad breathed. **[How pleasing. I look forward to this, ghou. Split my insides. Splint me deeper than bone. Fill me with new organs.]**

[I really hope him fixing you turns off the creepy shit too,] Abrel muttered.

And between all the conflicting opinions, discoveries and disagreements, Avo found true delight lifting his spirit. “This is where things will change. This is where the dreams will end. Time for people to awaken.”

“Avo?” Draus said, staring at him with confusion. “What the fuck are you on about now?”

“I am talking about the enclave. I am talking about New Vultun. I am talking about the FATELESS. The citizens. Everyone but the Guilds. There are many people outside. They are alone. There are many gods unawakened.” He paused. “We are changing. For every bit of me that dissolves inside you. And every bit of you that passes into me. We are... becoming who we wish to be. Who we need to be. Can do that for the gods. Can also do that for the people. For the ones that couldn’t before.”

Draus cocked her head and blinked. “You’re talkin’ about more than just waking up gods and planting dragons in people, aren’t you?”

“The Stillborn is going to be spreading soon,” Avo said. He faced Cas and smiled faintly. “Can be more than a cult. No need for inefficiency anymore. We just need the right information. The right knowledge. We just need to spread understanding. Create new networks. Externalize the gestalt.”

With how the cadre was looking at him, they still didn’t fully perceive the entire situation. But they will. Right now, Incubi and Glaives from Ori-Thaum were making their way down the Tiers, just as his Stormtree and Highflame subverts were returning; just as he had members of the Paladins under his sway.

They had the means to start a wildfire. To burn the Guilds from within. To seize the chains that shackled this world.

Veylis and Zein were fighting for the future. But they left the present unattended. They noticed nothing of the subtle and the finer shifts. They didn’t linger on a child’s anger. The burgeoning desperation in the sanctuaries. The untapped potential of the enclaves. Everything they did, it was all towards the endgame of securing the Ladder.

All to claim the future.

But where time was one fundamental pattern that dictated all others in reality, there was also mind. There was also thought. There was also awareness. Cognition. And unity. Through his Conflagration and Delusion, there could be true sympathy.

Each of the Guilds offered something for their faithful. A recognition of strength. A representation in government. A promise that the apocalypse will not be the end. Better days are certain to return.

But through his mind—by his Liminal Frame—he could fulfill the needs of so many more.

“I am going to imprint aspects of ourselves,” Avo declared. “I am going to show the people what we are doing. The war being waged in the dark. They will remember when they dream. They will know there is a Tenth power unseen. A hidden empire that wants them. That they can become. They can be powerful. They can be free. They can experience all the colors. Just like me. Just like you.”

Chambers blinked. “So... you’re gonna jack a bunch of minds?”

“No. I’m just going to show them what’s really happening. And then connect them to each other. A silent frequency. A hidden network in the Nether.” He paused. “We are the Stillborn. All of us. It is bound to me. But I will use it for all of you. Because I am becoming all of you. And I can offer all that I am in return.”

Kae’s eyes widened. “This—if you do this—”

“Yes,” Avo replied. “I want to see if that is possible. I want to see if the Imitators will spread when another Ensouled ego shares symmetry with mine.”

Silence fell.

“So, then,” Chambers said. “Everyone’s gonna have a bit of Avo in them is what I’m hearing. Nova. Very nova. What’s our plan for the trial, though? ‘Cause that shit’s coming up soon, and there’s the Highflame thing...”

“Many things in play,” Avo agreed. “Too many for any one of us. So. We’re going to steal a page from Zein. We’re going to create as many internal problems for all the Guilds as possible. And we’re going to do it at the trial.” And the plan started with a simple question. “Kae. How would you like to return to the Tiers?”

The Agnos froze. “We will use the Glaives? Expose D’Rongo?”

“Yes. And the Agnos for abandoning you. And the project itself.”

“Whoa,” Chambers said, sounding alarmed. “You want everyone to find out about the Stillborn?”

Avo’s grin widened. “Yes. And I want them to think Acolyte Aedon Chambers stole it with some in-guild assistance. And then I want to hit the Guilds.”

“Which ones?” Cas asked, sounding curious.

“All of them. Using our subverts.” Avo let out a laugh. “Might not have nearly the control Zein has over time yet. But have other means. Think it’s about time to light the match. Drive the Guilds to the brink. Build a hidden empire between the cracks.”