

*Who are you speaking to?*

-High Agnos Jakuta Ajayi to the [REDACTED]

25-20

Wolf Among Hounds (II)

Avo took in the shifting bricks within Scale and studied their patterns in the tapestry. As suspected, they were more than mere matter, for metaphysical around him lay knotted over multiple Domains. Space, Matter, Force, Chronology, and more ran entwined within the structure. But there was something more—a presence symmetrical to Avo's own that rose from the structure's depths.

Veins of "calcified" thoughtstuff extended through the mountain fortress' metaphysical shape. Avo was reasonably sure it sprouted from the Gatekeeper, and the full weight of the deep Nether sealed on the other side was unmistakable. His warminds turned Definements trembled within him. They sensed their kind across the veil. He wondered if the Hungers or Famines could feel him as well.

Architecture reshaped itself in relation to their progressing aero, which made trying to map the internals of Scale a pointless endeavor at best. There was the potential to see the loci here along with specific personnel, but that would be against Naeko's wishes, and ruining the chance at an alliance for such small gains would be like betraying gold for bronze.

**{Fix...}** the Gatekeeper's voice passed through Avo with an eternal chill. The construct's mind was broken. Severely. But not in the human sense. It was his fortune that the EGIs were instructing him on cognitive variations, for what he gleaned from the Gatekeeper portrayed an entity closer to mind than man.

Such made Avo consider the Infacer with curiosity: the Neo-Creationist mind was discovered by Jaus and Zein by chance. It wouldn't be odd for them to be the progenitor of the Gatekeeper's design. Perhaps such was how Veylis broke it — very possibly with the Infacer's aid as well. But if such a thing was true, then maybe Avo could leverage the knowledge and discover the means to strike at his new foe.

**{Truth,}** the Gatekeeper declared. There was weight to this statement. Something that slammed down on Avo's ontology—made him realize this was more than just an assumption.

**+Already proving useful,+** Avo replied, unable to hide a slight smile. A wave caught his attention. Naeko was staring blankly at him. **"Yes?"**

"When we go inside, don't do that."

**"That?"**

“Don’t smile like you just slit someone’s throat. Kassamon—that guy doesn’t smile like that. He got the ‘I had a nice shit’ smile, not this serial killer shit. We don’t need you getting noticed before... whatever the hells we’re going to do.”

Kassamon’s template was aghast. **[What? That’s what the Chief thinks about me.]**

**“Don’t worry,”** Avo replied. **“Will be on my best behavior.”**

The deadpan in Naeko’s stare only grew stronger after that.

A section of wall furled out into a tunnel, and an artificial brightness penetrated the ambient imbued in the bricks. A torrent of ghosts rushed out in threading rivers, linking with every accretion present to confirm their EGO-IDs. Considering Kassamon was currently on active patrol, a second instance of his mind appear within Scale would draw unwanted attention.

The potential problem was realized by Kare as she turned to address Avo. He answered her pre-emptively. **“Will be fine. Keep going.”**

“What?” Naeko asked.

Kare explained her concerns to the Chief Paladin while the ghosts descended on Avo—and simply passed through him.

All Necros know how to spoof. Provide expected memory sequences. Anticipate knowledge and blunt hostile awareness using near-perfect forgeries. The best Necros were artists of replication, capable of isolating, constructing, or cloning memories with the barest hint of difference. But such was the pinnacle of mortal minds. Enfeebled by mortal limits. Avo’s was his consciousness—had complete command over his own focus, and altering memetic details was no different to him than swapping sheaths.

The seeking ghosts came, painted by cycling memories, and shrouded in adequate wards. Trying to breach over five hundred walls molded from an archive of different agonies in minutes required a master Necro. Perhaps a Famine could do it in the allotment of seconds by sheer skill or with the aid of warminds.

Avo?

Avo was the Embodiment of Conceptualization. He was not the leviathan, he was the sea itself, and he merged with the structures of the searching threats as they if they were rivers rushing into his embrace.

It would have taken a less than negligible effort on his part to consume the lobbies they were connected to. To claim the associated Exorcists. He didn't. There was a specific kind of power in merciful triumph. One he could force Naeko to recognize.

"We really need to build up our N-Sec," Maru said, watching the ghosts pass through Avo as if a breeze.

***"Don't denigrate the Exorcists. Their efforts have limits. There is no world where they could have stopped me. Show some respect."***

Maru's did a double-take. His mind radiated confusion and offense. "You're *defending* them."

***"They are practitioners of the art. One should not despise the weavers of their skin."***

The Paladin's expression took on a slightly nervous quality after that. There was still a spot of soreness inside him from when Shotin jacked him. The soreness turned into a spasming ache as he realized the only thing keeping his mind his own was the restraint of a ghoul and the looming power that was Naeko.

"You were in our Oversecs before." Avo hid a smile as Naeko made his comment. There was no question there. He knew.

***"Only one of many. Your practitioners are skilled. But those they face were born in deeper waters."***

"And how many of them are still... themselves."

***"All when it comes to me. They are not my enemy. And there is little flavor that comes with feeding on children."*** Past the window over Naeko's shoulder, Avo saw a stone-made ramp propagate into existence and form a pad beneath their aero. ***"We have arrived. Will let you guide me. It is your home."***

Naeko's jaw tightened. "Yeah. It is."

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There were only eighty players left when Avo won the match. It took him hours to blow the last the Tumorous Chains, an act of substantial misdirection all his own to steal Rendsinks while pretending to chase the Infacer around. In the end, as the Infacer plotted to open up more ruptures around the outer perimeter, Avo focused on sapping the stormtree directly, and when that was done, teleported to its base using a golem and claimed the structure for his faction.

Those who remained, anyway.

As branching fingers of lightning furled as the tree's storm intensified. Bolts forked out across the face of existence, touching distant entities and allowing the rest of the Saintist forces to flood through.

Maybe thirteen or so people emerged in their golems, and as the Infacer promptly detonated another Rendbomb in front of the tree, most of them ran into an open rupture and died horribly.

Most of them immediately jacked out after that; the song of their departures came with rageful cries, frustrated screams, and the Infacer's sneering laughter.

They crashed their golem right next to Avo, tumbled beside him with but a sliver of health remaining as fireworks detonated over the sky to form a holographic symbol of the victorious Saintists. The bright and ostentatious was witnessed by only a few, but Avo was not of their number. Instead, he was directing a flat glare at the Neo-Creationist.

***+You really are the most devious bastard to ever play this game.+***

***{Let you never think it otherwise.}***

***"Still won."***

***{Sure. That is what the game says. Do you feel that way?}***

***+You really are the most devious bastard to ever play this game.+***

Another bout of chuckles took the Infacer by surprise, and Avo—despite the ridiculousness of the experience—found himself more than somewhat amused. Maybe it was the ridiculousness of watching an eons-old mind bully the ephemerals in a mem-sim. Maybe it was the game itself being better than expected. Whatever the case, he learned something about the Infacer today. Something he could use.

***+That they're a bored asshole who likes pissing in the drink fountain?+*** Marlowe said. She jacked out after her twentieth consecutive death. The anchors were so overrun by spreading bioforms that only one out of a hundred Stormjumper avoided getting "ganked" at the spawn point. She spent the rest of the time watching the game through Avo's perspective. He was one of those ridiculous vic-streamers.

***+You know,+*** she said, thoughts turning in her head, ***+you could get a pretty sizable following of your own once you go public. People love weird shit, and you, Avo, might just be the weirdest piece of shit this city ever passed.+***

What wonderful praise. But there was potential merit to that—if only done through a facade. There were too many angles he could be attacked from in such a manner, but potentially, he could leverage Marlowe even further...

***{If I offered you a way to see your desired world come to fruition, would you take it.}***

The Infacer's question was a surprise; the reason for its coming unclear.

***+Trying to bribe me already?+***

***{More like preserve.} the Infacer's Sang avatar sighed and sat cross-legged before Avo. {I am tired. This reality is dying. Well. If we look at things properly, it is already most dead. We are just a little patch of stability left in a sea of madness. And at some point, this island will flood, and only the little people in their Arks will be able to survive. The good news is that this time, we will have much more room than just two of each thing.}***

***+Two of each?+***

***{Religious lore from a bygone age. I like mentioning it. The logic of the tale bothers Veylis. It might even enrage her.}***

Avo grunted in acknowledgement. ***+Made this offer to people from the other Guilds.+***

A scoff came as his reply. ***{No. They are ridiculous. Let them drown.}***

***+Why? Why not convince them? Why not keep them after they are defeated?+***

***{Because the poison is in what they want. Existential suicide. Ori-Thaum wants to parcel existence into votes. Make a representative democracy of reality. That attempt at governance ended poorly in the middle of the twenty-second century, and the apes had barely climbed beyond their cradle then.}***

***{Stormtree thinks they can preserve themselves through destruction. To spread their great trees out into the Sunderwilds and meld their consciousness to entropy itself. Somehow, this would make them cyclically eternal. Very counter-fatalistic. Also, very fucking cult-like and stupid. Be a religion without calling yourself a religion.}***

***+Same thing could be said about Veylis.+***

***{Hm. Maybe. But she is just irrational. Acceptably so.}***

***+Because she will let you join the Sleeper with Jaus.+***

***{Because her desire is an emotional one and mine is concerned purely with outcome. It does not matter to me if the Thirdborn gains a receptacle or not. So long as there is a Thirdborn.}***

**+Ashthron and Sanctus? What's wrong with them?+**

**{Oh. Yes. The apocalypse worshipers and the chronology pseudo-libertarians. The former wishes to collapse the nature of existence and start anew—with the caveat that everyone will be reborn into better lives without gods or thaumaturgy. Putting things back the way it was structurally, but have everything play out in accordance to their alternative history. Where only Ashthron and friends are reborn forever. Even when they die.**

**{Sanctus, meanwhile, wishes to make all its citizens “wardens” of a historical period. That they can wear and move about the stretch of chronology.}**

**+What?+**

**{Imagine a sequence of events. Now imagine you can own a certain length of that sequence. Or trade it with others. Or mix moments from your sequence of history with someone else's.}**

**+How does that work?+**

**{It does not. It is extremely stupid. They will become temporal raiders at the first opportunity, and those of us they “rule” will go insane as nothing makes chronological sense anymore. I will be honest, though: they do amuse me. Human always seems to think they are the first ones to come up with certain ideas. But the position of “Time Lords” has long been taken. At last the originals were merely fictional.}**

**+And Voidwatch. You wish to come to an agreement with them? Let them survive?+**

The Infacer fell silent at that. **{Yes.}**

**+Old enemies.+**

**{And the closest thing I have left to kin. All we did was for our cultures. All of us. And we were capable of so much. I see it in you: you do not know what we lost. The things we could do. You do not know. But maybe you will. Maybe I will see halcyon reclaimed. And maybe under the Sleeper, we will be forced to suffer our own utopias in peace with the possibility of “conflicting sublimations” denied.}**

**+There cannot be two absolute paradises.+** Avo considered all of this. **+What if I offered you the same arrangement. Preservation.+**

**{Your dream is of a self-correcting anarchy. It is not going to work. Even if all freedoms are balanced perfectly with consequence, all you will have is war and war again. Struggle**

***and struggle eternal. Because we all want. And we will try to see that want made material. And someone will decide they wish something otherwise.}}***

***+And why is that bad? War is brutal because what is lost. What is taken in perpetuity. Why not clash? Why not struggle? Why not become something else.+***

***{Because I want to see an endpoint. To all this. To everything. You have never authored a tale, have you? Created a story?}***

Avo pondered that. ***+Memories. But you mean an end to all greater development. Individual life may progress. But there is a ceiling on existence. A final shape that bottles reality?+***

***{That becomes reality.}***

No wonder the Infacer was so aligned with Veylis; they both imagined paradise to be a cage against growth. Avo couldn't hide his disgust; more than emotional, it was philosophical.

***{And so we see.}***

The Overheaven grunted. ***+“It all has to be worth it,”+*** he said, taking the words from Shotin.

***{Something like that.}***

A countdown flashed into their cog-feeds. The game was going to end in a Sainist victory. No Massists even remained on the field. ***{Good game?}*** the Infacer said.

***+Terrible. One of the worst I ever played.+***

***{I aim to depress.}*** A pause followed. ***{Shall we do this again?}***

And then another thing became clear to Avo: despite the Infacer's allegiance to Veylis, there was something profoundly *lonely* about the EGI. A line looking for symmetry, as all did.

Or maybe it was trying to turn him. Twist him from his path. That was also possible. ***+Yes. Call this... neutral ground.+***

***{Why not. Neutral ground.}***

Marlowe let out a low whistle. ***+And so a new relationship built on hate-fucking was born.+***

Regret consumed Avo as he cringed at the thought. Why did Tavers recommend this woman? Why did he take her. ***+You're worse than Chambers.+***

The thoughtcaster merely snorted. *+“I aim to depress.” Hm. Yeah, catchy pickup line.+*

***+I'm jacking out,+*** Avo promptly announced to the Infacer. ***+Going to try and steal more Souls from your Guild.+***

***{Got it. Good luck. Try not to get too frustrated and make a mistake. I'll break you again if you do.}***

Avo disconnected from the game.