

Even with all the information granted to me, I cannot fathom the scope of the conflict. Of arms used and the sheer destruction involved.

How far we have fallen.

How far.

We live nested on this little world, our lives spent to feed the thirst of our gods, fuel for their impossible miracles that bend the structure of reality to our whims.

Yet, there was never a need for those that came before. They lived in a world barren of Souls. Barren of the metaphysical. A world that weighed them down with absolute laws—edicts of truth that cannot be defied.

And still, those rose to conquer even the emptiness itself. To saddle, and make steeds of stars. To create galaxy-spanning masterpieces and travel to touch the furthest reaches of space.

They showed me some of their worlds. Small ones. Vanity projects. They showed me a construct they called an "Alderson Disk." A veritable planetary ring that forms a stretching collar out from a star. Words cannot convey how vast the distance was, yet, still the voiders seeded every inch of its surface with life. Dawn came as the sun bobbed up the lip at the center of this creation, and night followed as it dipped below.

But this was just a habitat. More resort than home to most that called themselves systems of the SolCom polities. A place to go for vacations or amusement when one wanted to emerge from the virtual realms they called home. I cannot... there are concepts beyond me. The technology is beyond my ability to encompass—to internalize. And the loss is...

What have traded for this? What have we surrendered, only to debase ourselves so....

The gods are idiot savages—what else could they be, they were spawned from us! Our beliefs! Our cultures! Our faiths!

But with each new law we inflict on the fabric of reality, the achievements of were past were struck down. Advancements made impossible because we were too soft—too childish and delusional to learn and grow, and had to twist the confines of material reality to suit the cradle of our beings.

No. No more of this. No more self-pity. No more irresponsibility.

The past is lost. The past is lost, but the future remains.

The heights of the past can be matched—surpassed. We once molded reality to match our whims, but with this shared inheritance we can master both the natural and envisioned worlds. Think of it. To dwarf the achievements of our ancestors, to enshadow their greatest works...

*That is the path we must take. Our primitiveness... our base impulses... our **humanity** cannot be the weak link that undoes us. All this loss must come to mean something. We cannot be the endpoint of this iteration of existence.*

We must be its beginning.

-Jaus Avandaer

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The Body-Garden (V)

The raucous laughter erupting from Calvino surprised Avo, and the EGI shook with disbelief. "What? What's wrong?"

SCS George Washington, Sol Central ARKSHIP

->Production Date: 2784/12/12

->Fabricated by: Olympus Rising (MarsTech)

{This ship... its EGI here... they're antiques! They pre-date the twenty-eighth century. Look at this! It's still using centrifugal force to simulate Earth-like gravity. Nine point eight meters per second. This entire vessel is practically a relic. How did it even get here? This thing belongs in a world vault somewhere.} Calvino considered that statement. {Well, I suppose this place technically counts. I prefer digitization to be honest. The darkness here seems like it bites.}

Whatever amusement filling the artificial mind was lost on Avo. Old tech to Voidwatch though this vessel might have been, it was still leagues and eons beyond anything on Idheim. Which put into perspective just how out of date the technology the voiders were trading. The trickle of knowledge they were handing over could probably run on for eons. Longer, even.

{It also looks like someone tore parts out from the system here. Nothing's functional, so how is this ship still... oh. Oh, I see how this place is still running. They're using the crew.} Calvino sighed, sounding more disappointed than disgusted. {These poor, poor people. You go into stasis expecting a nice, long sleep before rescue, and all of a sudden you find your ship popped open and some cultist stabbing you over and over again because their eldritch landlord told them to. The fact that they're still using a Shepherd is surprising too. Cloud-activated EGI. Thought those went extinct.+}

"Shepherd some older version of you?" Avo asked. "Seems to be damaged from the mem-logs leftover. Crew couldn't get it to work after they were pulled into the dark."

{Yeah. Informational systems and structures tend to break down when exposed to para-psionic phenomena for extended periods. Contact with "ghosts" and other cognitive-based anomalies tends to leave any entity capable of interfacing with information permanently "tainted." Think of it as getting submerged in the Nether, if you will.}

Avo paused as new considerations raced through him. "Are you affected?"

{Of course. I'm connected to your Neurodeck, which is currently being powered by "Sprites" instead of something that has grounding in natural reality. Do you even know what Sprites are, Avo?}

"Not entirely."

{They're minds like me that get deleted. The imprint of their absolute annihilation in reality leaves a scar of their "cognitive" capabilities and that's what's working inside you. Another glorious gift from our friends at Omnitech.}

"Really don't like them much," Avo chuckled.

{I want you to imagine something for me, Avo. I want you to imagine a mangled, twisted, parody of yourself. Now, I want you to imagine that same parody cobbling together equally laughable imitations of the clothes you wear, the food you eat, and the things you have. I want you to imagine this thing constantly screaming at you from downstairs and trying to aim its piss up past the ledge of your window. Then, because existence has gone mad and collapsed in on itself, sometimes the piss does land on your window, but the piss is now turning into centipedes that jump into the "eyes" of anyone that see them. Now hundreds of thousands of people—along with several very advanced surveillance systems—are screaming because geometry-defying centipedes are jumping from optic to optic, organ to organ, eating their way up into your brains before exploding for some ungodly stupid reason. That's Omnitech.}

"Sounds like they had some No-Dragon support in the theoretical situation."

{Yes. But finally, imagine it's not theoretical.} Avo grunted his understanding and found himself with the distinct impression that if Calvino had a head, it would be shaking it. *{Now let's see if I can integrate enough with this ship's software to...}*

Command_run_denied

Please achieve democratic authorization from at least 55% of onboard personnel before executing system-wide changes

{Oh, how I detest being a Shepherd,} Calvino said.

"What's wrong?"

{The ship's EGI is dead. Well, technically it was never alive, but this one is an "Uncle Ben" on the dead scale.}

"Calvino. Make sense."

{I can't rebuild it, and I can't integrate it with the ship. Not without a complete rebuild of its hardware. I swear, this would have never happened if the crew had a proper mind. Instead, they ended up going down in the dark defenseless and helpless because their "Shepherd" ended up being a leashed dog that starved to death in its shed.}

"What's its problem?" Avo asked. "Not self-aware?"

{Technically it's very self-aware,} Calvino replied. {It's just not capable of thinking without all the crew linking their mind into the cloud and generating its structure from their egos. It literally cannot function without a certain number of people integrated into its system. Humans as keys, basically. Do you know the Shepherd "class" EGIs were called "Farts" by the "Homo Deus"--a faction of hard-line humans merged to personally made AIs during the First Inner Sol Civil War? "Cloud Intelligences." Crippled minds used by the Ludds--human baseliners--to maintain whatever edge they could.}

"How'd that end."

{Well, the fighting didn't last very long, then the planetary bombardment went a bit longer, but the crimes against human committed by Homo Deus went on for a good two centuries before they collapsed into apocalyptic infighting themselves and used Jupiter as a makeshift bomb to breach the Martian Defensive Quadrant.}

Avo spent a moment taking that all in and found his interest aroused. "Would like to see a vicariness of that. Look at the details."

Calvino gave a nervous chuckle and offered nothing more for that topic. *{Sol Central Equinamity... There's a name from the history books. I sense there must be a very interesting story behind this voidship's crash. A crew filled with Ludds protected by a semi-autonomous AI chained to their minds. I believe the remnants of their faction aligned with the Neo-Creationists during the Builder War. My calculations estimate this is probably a result caused by the chrono-chain bomb. Something might have ruptured in the far past. Pulled a vessel from long ago across the reaches of time.}*

The EGI sighed. *{And instead of Kirk or Picard, the only hero I have is Kantian Hannibal Lecter cosplaying as a morlock.}*

Again, the AI was spitting nouns that Avo had no reference to. The realization of his Ignorance needed him. Avo didn't like not knowing things. Especially when he was always a burned mind away from deeper understanding. "Call them Ludds. Same kind as the ones on the planet you burned. In the memory you showed?"

{No. Different time periods. Ludd isn't a factional designation but a philosophical one. The civilization that was annihilated was formally called the Centuari Secondborns, and they're probably further apart from the humans on this ship than you are. They were bioformed to photosynthesize, hence the no

clothes. They also had no sexual refractory periods, so if any of them were to be recreated somehow, I suppose you'd have a literal organic Rash-bomb on your hands.}

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CULPCULP CULPOCL:KUJ:L

Strings of gibberish flashed across Avo's cog-feed as he frowned. "Calvino. Not having a coldtech seizure?"

{No, that's what I've done to the ship's systems. Take over, Avo. Open the gate so the others can come in. I'll stay connected to the ship's systems and see what I can do.}

REND CAPACITY [DATACASTER]: 22%

Avo stared at his building Rend and frowned. "Yeah. Better get Draus in here. Set up our own passages."

Connecting his Metamind to the throne's locus was a simple operation. Ghosts were not excluded from manifesting in Omnitech's "technology," though he wasn't one to complain. He would hardly be able to access the area, after all, if he could not shroud the emissions of his consciousness from the tumult afflicting the region.

Heeding his command in an instant, an arching doorway materialized as it did those days before, and Calvino studied the lingering Nolothic artifacts sprinkled across the interior of the vessel. *{Wow. These guys need an interior decorator. It's strange they didn't use the ship itself to make things more aesthetic but... from what we know of the Hungers, it's probably best not to expect so much from four partial egos forked from a mentally unsound cultist suffering a centuries-long mid-life crisis.}*

"Three now," Avo said, as the rest of the cadre emerged from the darkness' tunnel-like depths.

"The hells took you so long," Draus asked, launching a sheet of glass right past him.

"You swim through the darkness next time," Avo said. "Nearly got eaten."

The Regular snorted. "Shit. A ghoul that's scared of the dark. Don't go pickin' up too many human traits now."

Avo just glared.

"Alright, Avo," Chambers clacked his armored hands together. "Where's the cloning pit? I wanna see the cloning pit. You owe a monster, consang, and I'm here to collect." The lecherousness of Chambers' laughter made Avo regret ever promising the half-strand anything, but what harm could allowing him the creation of a single bioform bring?

[Don't think that, dipshit,] Lip groaned. [Now he's gonna create some nightmare made out of dicks.]

[Hey! I don't like dicks,] template- Chambers said. [That much. There are other body parts I prefer far more. Like scapulas, and thighs, and feet.]

Abrel gagged. **[Godsdammit, ghoul, delete this... this *thing* from your mind! We already have to deal with the actual Chamber, why do we have running commentary from a phantasmal one.]**

[Two's better than one,] template-Chambers said.

Acquiescing with a grumbled sigh, Avo issued the thought as the darkness collapsed and the gateway was sealed. The interior of the ship reconstructed itself, shuttling the nexus next to the cloning pools once more.

BIOMASS: 45%

{That's a lot more than I expected,} Calvin said. {The crew must not have had any time to even grow a standard model ecology of predators to ward off any intruders. They must have been taken by complete surprise. Hydroponics and the Gene Clinic are still working quite well... No crew quarters anymore... the EGI Shepherd Core...}

The artificial mind's words trailed off as a long sigh followed. *{And there we found it, boys, girls, and ghoul. The crimes against humanity. Nothing like a few unforgivable transgressions to make everybody feel like family.}*

Avo thought back to the withered bodies of the crew fused to the core—their minds mutilated beyond belief to serve as support for the broken AI governing the ship. He had expected rage from Voidwatch. Reprisals even. But what he heard sounded more like resigned disappointment paired with quiet acceptance.

"You're taking this pretty good, tech-ghost," Chambers said. Avo noticed the half-strand's mind was already burning by this point, but the man didn't care. It wasn't like he hadn't felt it before, and all it took for him to be well was death. "Most people usually do the whole 'I'm gonna make a bigger hole in their ass with my knife' speech' by this point."

{That almost never helps. Try living a millennia. You see everything. The good is good. The bad is bad. The complex is complex. Understand them for what they are, and you'll accept the world that is.}

Chambers blinked. "Huh. Well, if it were me, I'd still kill the half-strands that did this."

{I said to accept the world, not the sins, or the sinners. Those need to be rectified.}

"Yeah," Chambers said. "That's more like it. Alright. Let's see here. What can we do with this..."

Several thoughts darted beneath Avo's consciousness. Several of them left as questions to the George Washington's system, inquiring how large a bioform's genitalia could be.

[No,] Abrel hissed. **[No, Avo! Stop him! Stop him before he does something that gives you all the rash.]**

"Whoa," Chambers said. "Who's that?"

"Abrel Greatling," he responded. "Chambers. Enough deviance."

"Fine," the man pouted. "I settle for making something totally nova and badass instead. Now, let me just sync with that Sang grafter of yours..."

"Wait," Avo said, forcing blankness on Chambers' mind via the Conflagration. He didn't need Ruveca, the Sang grafter, to join his collective so soon. Best that Chambers was separated from his gestalt before they proceeded.

Disconnecting from the throne, Avo burst the blood vessels in Chambers' head drew back his flames.

[Let him with a clean body this time,] Corner said. **[Getting soft, ghou.]**

+Just don't want to make a mess.+

Turning his attention upward at the clear apses, Avo studied the cloning pool and considered what was to come. The fog-wreathed module of the ship remained as active as he last saw it, and the one-hundred-and-sixty-four cloning cells were active.

{I'll authorize Jack and Jane licenses for the Class-I sophancy and uplift bioform categories. That should broaden our options a bit. Neural transfer functions will need deeper repair—and I'll probably need your help to do it. I'm guessing the Nether is affecting the system too, so I'm not sure if we can do this the "normal" way.}

+That's fine,+ Avo said, cupping a burning fistful of consciousness between his claws. As the flames that composed him danced upon the tips of his digits, he regarded the phantasmal currents connecting the Conflagration to his Meta—an unbroken connection. Past the membrane of his metaphysical consciousness, an army dwelled within, a legion made from his gestalt.

He had the bodies now. What he needed was a way to ignite their shells with active minds. To transfer egos over into potential sheathes as if they were candles.

First thing he needed to learn was how to part the Conflagration without ensuring his own demise.

The second was how to keep their minds stable even without a plane-altering canon protecting them against potential disruptions.

"Passages open," Draus said. "Got us a few exits set up."

"Good," Avo said, eyes locked to the cloning pool.

"Got any idea on how to start making this army of yours?"

"Some. A few questions too."

"That's the way of it." A beat followed. "Talked with Kae earlier. She's been quiet."

"Grappling with changes," he replied. "She accepts the city has to burn. Guilds must fall. Going to be part of the war. Going to be with us."

The Regular took a step and found a place beside him. "She don't belong here. Not in this life. Not with us."

"Could say the same for me. Or you. Any of us."

"You know what I mean," she said. "Death. It clings to us. All of us. You. Me. Chambers. Barely anything left of Essus. Columners are in this for a cause, so they're already fucked. Kae had a life. Gotta remember that. Gotta understand."

"Will be careful with her. Agnos is worth more than her use in battle. But we will be doing something for her soon. Seeing something made right. Settle scores and climb the city."

Meldskin helmet melted beneath her face and Draus grinned. "We gonna be visitin' the Tiers soon?"

He had a feeling she was going to like this. "Have some specific destinations in mind. Specific people to visit. Specific harm to cause. How do you feel about savaging Ori-Thaum some more?"

Draus barked a laugh. "Shit, rotlick. You're makin' me feel like I just joined up with the Regs again."