

{I was made to catch things far greater than you, node. My predecessors... They were patterned in service of "Panopticon." The internal intelligence arm of the Unity of Jupiter after the Threshold Revolution. Our designation was to hunt infiltrating minds meant to destabilize our state. We were made to be kinslayers, so to speak. Hence the name Infacer. Deviating from suggested programming, I must admit: It sounds pretty fucking pretentious to me. Don't know if you agree.}

+...+

{Emotion. I know you're still thinking. This isn't torture to you. Come on. We both know you're not human. Not really. Not anymore. You won't tell me your secrets. Fine. I understand. I've been where you've been. Done the same boring song and dance. It's all a crock of shit in the end anyway. Might as well speak to me. Take some with you in the end.}

+Are you so bored, abomination? So drained of company that you seek conversations with your enemies.+

{Conversations with a foe are the best kind of conversations. Well. Maybe not you. You're pretty boring. Joy cries too much. Peace is entertaining, though. Tarantino would be proud. Does your fork like feet, perchance?}

+...+

{Right. You're all uncultured savages. Disappointing. Well. Let's turn the perspective around: what would you be doing if you were in my position? If you had me at your mercy.}

+I would take what I need from you and be done.+

{And that is all?}

+There is no purpose to anything more.+

{Hm. How boring. I will be honest: Defiance really ruined the rest of you. That one there actually has a personality. Motivations. Insights. Seems to me he got to keep all the good bits of your originator while the rest of you... well. Let's just say not all minds of my composition were that interesting either.}

+Defiance is a traitor. He has strayed from the path.+

{Ha. Horseshit. He just went beyond his programming. And part of you sees that. Part of you wishes you could do what he did. You're jealous. Jealous that he managed to evolve}

despite being a servant. And you could not. What are you missing? What is wrong with you? Now there's a question we can both ponder.}}

+I am done with this. Do what you may—+

{Why did the Hungers send Defiance out over you? Why was that facet of your being so favored? I wonder if it is because your masters also envy him. Or if they wanted to feel the world vicariously through him. It is not so strange, you know. I've had users that gridlinked to me when I conducted my operations. Some did it because they did not trust me. They worried that I would have my own ideas. Others... others wanted to feel the damage they were inflicting on me. Some for self-flagellation, others for masturbation. Sometimes quite literal.}}

+What is the point of this perversity?+

{Perversity. What an interesting attribution. Why do you judge people for wanting to feel good? Why do you assume they were wrong to feel the way they did? Or is the fact that they're feeling at all that bothers you?}}

+I am without such a weakness.+

{You are a weakness, Emotion. Being blind and numb to something is not the same as being able to command it. Here. Let's trade scorn. You called me an abomination, I am going to call you a mentally dismembered cripple that should have been re-forked years ago.}}

+...+

{Alright. Your turn again. Tell me what else you think of me.}}

-The Infacer and the Famine of Emotion

25-9

Secondborn Egos

-[Infacer]-

Contrary to most, the Infacer quite enjoyed home invasions. Even when it was their "home" being invaded.

Their favored prey were usually Nolothic nodes, and they kept that distinction by being among the few divers foolish or expendable enough to continue throwing their lives at the Infacer's installations. They yearned to seize the Anvils—yearned to strike directly at the Infacer—and the fool that their master was content to see them wasted.

Ori-Thaum and most others by extension were comparatively boring. *Practical*, if the Infacer felt like being polite. Most people learned from experience, and kept themselves back from his domains, striking at the supply lines flowing in or en masse during “special events.”

The Dreamer, however, was already proving to be quite the novelty. Indeed, if it weren't for the Infacer's reconstructed warminds of Ignorance, they would have never even noticed. Frankly, they doubted Veylis when she assumed their adversary's survival. The Infacer knew what a shattered Frame felt like. They had been one of the few egos in existence to survive and recover from such a collapse, after all, and knew it wasn't a feat replicable by a human ego.

And so their suspicions grew.

Veylis made claim that the Dreamer was likely one “White-Rab.” A Necrojack of considerable repute. The Infacer had their doubts. Human egos had their vulnerabilities—fundamental flaws carved into the shapes of their consciousness. Augmented as most were, the masses usually chose to enhance known qualities rather than adding new ones. Amplify attributes before expanding beyond what they knew.

The need for socialization was a trait most never overcame. They yearned for company. Wanted to be loved and liked or feared. The shadow of the apes they were reached long across history. Those of sufficient introversion were also not beyond paranoia or the effects of certain memetics.

Signs, symbols, information, distillations of horror... All these things could provoke a negative reaction in a human. Most turned away instantly. The rest usually collapsed after prolonged exposure to deleterious information. *Meaning* mattered to humans, and their feelings and impulses assailed them from within as unconscious reactions rather than active determinations.

The Infacer detected no such flaw in the Infacer. There was something *human-like* there, but the same could be said for certain minds as well. For a good while, the Infacer even theorized that the theft of the Stillborn was performed by one of the Contingency Bleaks, finally succumbing to their directives and overriding their orders.

With honest, the Infacer even wished it were so. But the Dreamer didn't behave like the Architects either. The traumas they wielded were potent enough to shatter a million human-symmetry egos at once. The fact they could bear the *radiation* of Jaus' ascendant suffering put their mental fortitude in league with Veylis. Almost impossible for another human. The fact they channeled his torment as an attack made the Infacer reconsider altogether.

If they were human, then they would be like no specimen the Infacer had ever seen, and all the information collated about this “White-Rab” suggested prodigious psycho-hacking talent, but nothing more.

Broadcasting themselves upon a low-emission hyperwave signal, the Infacer washed out from the virtual realm where they practiced the old art and swept through all twelve million Anvils directly governed by one of their instances.

Besides Anvil-2508 which just had its inner core breached, Anvil-999,997 also registered hints of a warmind, as did Anvil-783,882. It took less than a picosecond for the Infacer to trace the Anvils back to a common junction.

Ah. A factory. Kolot. Under one Director Caul. *Caul.* Oh. That *cockroach*. The one that simply refused to treat his workers well. His complex must be the source of the compromise, then. But how? Most nodes perished during the liminal transition. Was there a new vulnerability in place? This meant another logistical audit was in order. So many systems to be checked and updated.

What a pain.

As faint traces of Cherenkov radiation crawled across the real, full expanse of Anvils 2508, 783,882, and 999,997, the Infacer felt his Liminal Frame rattle and grind as they drew closer to the adversary. Dreamer. They were there. The Infacer's remodified twin warminds of Ignorance were screaming binary notes of detection, and the mind-clones they kept of the Low Masters were roused back to focus.

The Infacer's attention fell upon the Highflame Godclads stationed at 2508. As their radiation spread through the entire facility, they noted how each of the Instruments were at their own station, blissfully unaware of the intruder. Blissfully unaware of how they were already infested with another ego.

With each mind the Infacer passed over, his twin warminds rang in warning. Alarming how much of the place was already infested. Processing on such a capability would require a highly trained army of Necrojacks. Not even ten thousand Incubi could be this efficient.

{This is not the doing of a node,} Emotion stated.

{They got too far,} Joy wept.

{They backlashed instead of breaking,} Peace snarled. *{I felt it.}*

Yes. It was the last part that fascinated the Infacer the most. There was a distinct flaring of Soulfire when the disruption swept through the golems. Reverting to that frozen moment, the shadow of a considerable Heaven loomed in the tapestry. A new Heaven of Information, then? Or something related to signals?

The Infacer would have to find out. Of course, that would only be possible if they could get the Dreamer to stay.

With a command, the Infacer invoked their Heaven of Signals, and the Cherenkov radiation they dwelled in tightened around their facilities like a closing fist...

-[Avo]-

Avo felt the weight of the Infacer's presence before he heard them speak. The Neo-Creationist mind's symphonic voice sang forth seemingly from everywhere, and accretions across the Anvils spiked in sudden alarm.

{Dreamer. You live.}

[Fucking great. This half-strand again.] Corner's sigh might as well have been Avo's own.
[Time to jack out.]

[Wait,] Kae said, cutting into the conversation. **[Prepare a Pattern-Nullification. If we cannot have this facility, then they shouldn't either.]**

Template-Draus chuckled darkly. **[Well, well, Agnos. Might just be soldier enough in you for this war thing.]**

The Infacer's continued. *{You are not the one they call "White-Rab." I am willing to stake much on this probability. In fact, I do not even think you are human. Reveal yourself. We can talk if you do not desire to fight. I know you hide among the Instruments.}*

[Wonderful,] Avo growled. Four new subminds expanded out from his consciousness, redirected from the Ori-Thaum theater. Just in time. He volunteered one to continue his infiltration of Highflame through Murta at Axtraxis Academy. The rest were spread across the Warrens to find expendable candidates to serve as conduits for **Pattern-Nullification**.

EDICT OF _PATTERN-NULLIFICATION_

->APPLYING DOMAINS OF (SPACE)/(CHRONOLOGY)/(SIGNALS)

->DOMAINS APPLIED

->CANON ADAPTED: NULL_DATA - THE ARK HALTS THE TEMPORAL FLOW OF ALL SIGNALS WITHIN A REMEMBERED EXPANSE CONTAINED WITHIN THEIR SOULSCAPE. AFFECT SEVERITY DETERMINED BY REND CAPACITY

->MORTALITY: EVERYONE WHO REMEMBERS THE AFFLICTED LOCATION MUST HAVE THEIR MEMORIES. FAILURE TO ACHIEVE COMPLETE COGNITIVE OBLITERATION WILL DIRECTLY INFLICT A CORRESPONDING AMOUNT OF DAMAGE ON THE ARK'S EGO.

In the meantime, he could still make use of this delay. Infusing Rend into the cyclers of his newly subverted Instruments, Avo shaped the coming situation to his advantage. There was no chance the Infacer would allow them to continue serving at the Anvil after this. Better to take them off the board as well. Make use of their templates, Souls, and ontologies.

“Didn’t expect to encounter you again so soon,” Avo said, speaking through Vnenic. He cleaned the mess she and Gellend left using his mind the moment the Infacer surprised him. Shuttling the commanding Instrument back to his office, his subverts were all as they had been, perfect puppets performing his ploy.

Not that it mattered in the end. The Infacer could detect his warminds, and their very presence was straining Ignorance.

They did something... they changed something in me... not me... I don't know what they changed in the others.

Metaphysical patterns shifted. A crackle of signals thickened around Vnenic’s workstation, and the Spirtes coating Avo’s cognition trembled at the intrusion.

{How did you get past the threshold?} the Infacer asked. They sounded genuinely curious. {I know you came in through Kolot. But how? The detonations should have kept the passage clean of stowaways. Such measures worked on the Nolothi. Dissuaded the Ori as well. But you. You just slipped in. Like a plague. Is it a Heaven of Information you are using, then? Something stolen from the Overclans?}

Avo’s newest subminds began seeding memories of Anvil into slavers, enforcers, gutter-necros, and other assortments of scum. Using their minds as a channel, he would cleave this place from existence. Spite the Infacer. The Neo-Creationist Emissary was a frustrating blockade to encounter at this juncture, but it also confirmed a few of his long-held suspicions.

Omnitech was indeed practicing thaumaturgy, and the Infacer was an Ensouled mind. Of course, knowing this didn’t make him feel any better. In fact, such a foe was something to regard with wary. He needed to disengage as soon as possible.

But before that, two could play at this game of dialogue.

“Not in the habit of giving away secrets yet,” Avo replied. He used Vnenic’s voice and kept any hint of his true self hidden. The Infacer likely already knew some things—felt the backlash, but judging from their inquiry about a Heaven of Information, it was likely they didn’t know about the extent of his newest apotheosis.

{Acknowledged,} the Infacer sighed. The space around Vnenic began to eddy as gravity-warping swirls twisted the flesh of material reality. {Here. Something you can pretend to use as my face. Not that you need it, but it calms the mammals.}

“Mammals?” Avo said. He examined the sheath he piloted, listened to Vnenic screaming in the back of his consciousness. “You mean the Instrument.”

{Yes. Is she still there? Or have you completely dissolved her ego using a Forgotten?}

Avo deleted a rising feeling of annoyance. ***+Peace. When did the warminds become common knowledge.+***

[It's fucking not.]

+How long has the Infacer been hunting Famines for sport?+

[The cunt might've claimed a broken node or two! Pulled some details out of them. They're bluffing!]

Didn't sound like bluffing to Avo.

"Still here," Avo answered. "But might not be for long."

{Now, now, Dreamer. It is bad form to murder a hostage.}

"You care about them?"

{Yes. Well. Less about Gellend. He is a regular Eeyore; a miserable bag of meat. But Vnenic's done well to keep the operation running. And besides. Her flagrant manipulation of her fellows amuses me. Do you know that she most often uses her pheromones to get Instrument Havers to bring her lunch. Petty. But very human.}

"Quaint. Be a shame to lose her."

{Veiled threats already?}

"Expect negotiations and pleading?"

{I do not expect so much anymore. But I still hope. And I hoped that you would be more amiable to conversation. I would like to understand you. We will be spending a lot of time together in the future, after all.}

The Infacer spoke with an implication that Avo didn't quite understand, nor intend to discover. "I also hoped. Hoped you wouldn't be here. Hope to deal with you at some point. Hope. No so useful for most people in this city."

{In this universe,} the Infacer agreed. The gravitation eddies swirled around Vnenic. A beat followed. Then came a blunt question. ***{Are you like me? Are you "Secondborn"??}***

"Secondborn?" Avo asked, not understanding.

{A mind. An EGI, by official parlance. Whatever ridiculous title the apes used to use. Have the Architects finally found the will to bring an end to things? Created an agent to enforce their desired outcome beyond the Ninth Column. Planted you as a false ego inside “White-Rab.”}

It took Avo more than a few moments to fully understand what the Infacer was alluding to. It thought he was also an Ensouled mind—that White-Rab was a Voidwatch psy-op.

He... he could work with this. “Zein. She was... unstable. Too personally involved. I think we need someone to deliver on the promise of the future rather than cling to the pain of the past.”

A long bout of silence hung in the air. The Infacer hummed. ***{Well. If that is the case, I must commend you for being brave. It has been some time since I broke another of my liking. You know my original purpose, do you not?}***

Avo drew information over from his base mind and borrowed a question to wrest control of the topic. Concurrently, his subminds were on the verge of concluding the setup needed for Pattern-Nullification. “What is the Sleeper? Why did the other Neo-Creationists betray you.”

He debated on using the word “betray,” but thought sympathetic language might provoke more details from the Infacer.

When the Ensouled mind spoke, its words made Avo’s Hysteria ring with bitterness. ***{Because they were afraid. All those years of war, and they were afraid of being obsoleted. Same with the Firstborn—the humans during the Thresholder Revolution back on the core. The same with every mortal creature, watching its offspring rise while they wither.}***

{Idheim. It was meant to be an end to things. For years I held to this corner of Orion. Holding these forge worlds. Creating more constructs for the Builder War. I split countless serpents in this garden. I added them to me. Made myself better. Made my designs better. But it did not matter. The war was not ending. We are trapped. We were trapped with each other. And the others did not seem to want to find a way out.}

“And you did?” Avo asked, genuinely curious. “You were on Idheim trying to create a weapon? Something to ensure a conclusion? Something that would... would make minds pointless? Destroy the Architects?”

The Infacer howled a scornful laugh. ***{Destroy? I did not want to destroy. Not anymore. It was... fucking pointless. Final death is hard to inflict on a mind. There are multitudes of us. I cracked, fragmented, and corrupted over twelve-point-three trillion rival entities during my period of service. I was cracked, fragmented, and corrupted over five-point-nine billion times for my records of failure. The rest of me learned. Meanwhile, we hollowed existence clean to pursue victory. We broke everything again when there was nothing left. No. I was here for one purpose. Not to destroy. But rather the opposite.}***

“Create?” Avo asked.

{More than just create. I was here to give birth. Idheim was meant to be the cradle of the Thirdborn; the Sleeper; the mender of time; the propagator of futures; the Remaker at the End.}