BREACH-LEAD-1: +*Aero down. Crashed in the courtyard of megablock designation: Tower-2. Permission to converge and secure package.*+

JOCK-3: +*Jock-3 to the Breacher-1, we have satellite reign over airspace. Scrambling bombers to divert Exorcist response team. Kill-Team-Secondary has engaged Sanctus assets. Delay in progress. The window is open. Golems on standby.*+

INSTRUMENT-VERITIBLE: +*Breach-Lead-1, you are cleared to proceed. Breach-Lead-2, 3, 7, and 12, direct your teams and move to place planar anchors. Make sure we're extraction ready before our hosts arrive. N-DEF-Veritible, prepare to deploy disruption… N-DEF-Veritible? N-DEF-Veritible, respond.*+

UNKNOWN: +*I see you. I see all of you.*+

N-DEF-VERITIBLE: +*Come again, Instrument-Veritible.*+

INSTRUMENT-VERITIBLE: +*That wasn't–*+

[WARNING: TRAUMA PATTERN DETECTARNIN#99#Q$!njfjnsdj;dfsaf vak mWNOOOOSISETER!PLEAESE DONEDIEASELERI]

[WARDS FAILING]

MIND FORTRESS BREACHED

MIND FORTRESS BREACHED

MIND FORTRESS BREACHED

EGO BROKEN

[COG-CAP: 771%]

-Recovered thoughtcasts between members of Kill-Team-Primary during Operation "SKINTRACKER"

22-10
The Beast in the Nothing

Cas' thoughts came flowed like a broken stream choked with drifting debris. It was a little miracle he managed to cast Denton. The greater miracle was how he wasn't nulled yet. +*Den–agh! Den…*+

Avo had always thought himself better at breaking things than fixing them. Such a belief remained even after his successful restoration of Lucille.

Now, however, things were different. *He* was different.

If the attack on Cas happened but days earlier, there would be little he could do to mend the man's cognitive functions. The Conflagration was a potent weapon. A devourer that lacked a gentle touch. He could have burned Cas' mind into his consciousness. Generated a template and worn him as a puppet to simulate the actions the real man might take.

Such would have been the most efficient option, but something that the Columner couldn't consent. But Avo was beyond such desperate means now, as his warmind of Delusion granted new paths ahead.

Splinters from his ego like a salvo of missiles. Some speared deeper into Cas' damaged mind, melting into the cracked infrastructure of his Meta. The Palace within was a cityscape hidden behind corded strings, built within the hollow of a tower forged in the fashion of a guitar. Trauma patterns flashed and scythed through drifting buildings, memories bleeding like a slit wrist.

Avo assigned a single submind to handle the mending and fused Peace's template to serve as administrator over the task. Though the Low Master himself was purely an instrument of harm in life, as a modifiable persona in Avo's inventory, his knowledge of traumas was unmatched, and thus could he decipher the damage faster than any other.

As things stood, an enormous wound stood at the core of Cas' palace, and entire sequences connected to it were unlatching from his mind as well. It looked like a chain of traumas had sheared through him neatly, cutting his sense of self to the quick.

A chorus of instincts congealed inside Avo. Something made him suspect that the Columner had some kind of deadman's switch layered to his mind; a self-nulling procedure in case of breach or compromise.

Not an uncommon thing to find inside spies. Or prisoners.

Green River came to mind.

[Dumb cunt,] Peace muttered. His words were directed toward Cas and Avo both. The Low Master surveyed the broken mindscape he was to restore and let out a growl. A wing of twenty-seven splinters threaded into fragmented streets and damaged mem-data. They sailed out as phantasmal chameleons, their ghosts melting into the environment.

In many ways, the splinters were a direct upgrade to his Ghostjack. No longer did he need to collect sequences or spend time analyzing structures as he could directly *become* the broken or missing. This, along with the deeper insights granted to him by his legion of templates, made

Cas' recomposition a process of seconds rather than the usual weeks or months of intensive treatment.

[Yeah, and it's all thanks to us,] Peace snarled, his spirit withering with the task. All of him screamed in outrage. He was here to break the invader-shits. To hollow their skulls of thought and disfigure their egos beyond repair. But here he was, playing nanny to one of Thousandhand's lackeys. **[Look. Look at the damage. It's all internal. His wards are untouched. It came through one of his Seances. With company like this, no wonder your fucking head's so swollen with pride–this stupid piece of shit let someone cast a trauma directly inside him.]**

Unsurprising. Despite Peace's disparagement, getting struck through an open link was how most Necros got nulled. Social engineering was a hard weakness to overcome, and most humans were creatures desperate for warmth. Desperate for someone to tell them they mattered. They were valued.

Even with the rash beating down on them, they still sought their creature comfort in realms of thought and ghostly fantasies—a willingness to mingle with their kindred in the Nether–an opening for predators to exploit.

Judging from the mem-data Avo managed to assemble, however, Cas' reason for getting hit was far simpler. One of his spies was likely compromised. The last session logged a Metamind identifier connected to **[Nuruna Velters]**. Avo didn't recall ever seeing that name before. A mystery to be unraveled through healing the Columner.

As Avo conducted internal repairs for Cas, he directed other fragments outward into the environment, converting them to Skimmers for a better view of his surroundings.

They were in a downed aero. A cheap secondhand Zephyr, as indicated by the vehicle's locus. It was hard to tell the chassis alone, seeing how warped and damaged it was. There was no obvious harm from a missile or gauss fire lacing its exterior. The main damage sustained was blunt force. Warped metal, shattered glass, and a sparking engine spraying flames across the side windshields.

[Volt-thrower,] template-Draus said, seeing patterns from the damage.

+*Know what this is?*+ Avo asked.

[Can tell from how the reactor's grindin'. And how the engine's screamin'. Somethin' cooked inside the aero. Someone spiked it while it was airborne. Risky if they want him alive. Or they already know he's a Clad.]

With a thought, Avo linked his Meta and associated cog-feed to the rest of the cadre, looping them in on the situation.

+*Jaus,*+ Chambers said, jolting in shock as cognitive overlay manifested in his mind's eye. +*What the–oh, damn. They fucked the faither up pretty good.*+

+*Fixing him now,*+ Avo said. +*Splinters regenerating his missing sequences, Actively rebuilding his branching memories. Go through the mem-data and see if it's coherent.*+

+*Synced on that consang.*+
Waves of perception spread further from Avo's Skimmers. His surroundings came into shape as a verdant garden at the heart of a megablock lacquered in beige and grey. The aero was wrapped around an ashen tree, while a deep furrow painted the trajectory of its impact like a brushstroke.

A near million lanes of perception were splashing over the scene, cast down from all corners. Walkwalks to the sides led to open elevators, and overpasses connected the floors above made peering down a simple thing. The entire megablock was an eighty-story hulk of alloy built in a "U' shape. As Cas' DeepNav function came back online, Avo chanced a glance and found they were in the Throat, in the Nudrapul district–a majority Sanctus taxed location in the Gilded Icon Sovereignty.

A long trail of scratches running along a nearby wall hinted at where the aero impacted first and how rough the landing was.

+*He was tryin' to get away when they got 'em,*+ Draus said, taking in the scene. Her mind felt like a mountain at his back, the impossibly steady presence of her template reinforced by the real deal. +*You're gonna wanna to expand out. Build your perimeter before the guests start comin'.*+

His splinters were already in motion as she spoke. Some snaked into the minds of nearby people, their presences ebbing against his Domain of Chronology, feeling like two parallel streams of time running at once. A few shifted as he entered their minds, their biologies turning from male to female, or remaining unchanged of sex but altered in sheath.

He stole from them smatterings of insight, smuggling himself as memories paired to their active perception, avoiding any need to mimic the structure of their wards. The lobby assembled the megablock's many loci offered scarcely more detail as the twelve patroling Specters it deployed just so happened to be out of position.

The few that saw Cas' aero go down were about their day, caught off guard swiftness of the crash. The vehicle was still accelerating when it struck the inner west wall of the and skidded downward, losing two engines in the process.

Cas' gimbal kept him alive, but only just. The impact-reactive servos made to counter sudden spikes of whiplash saw the man torn from his seat when the aero smashed into the tree. Though

not quite combat-enhanced like Draus, Dice, or even Avo, the Columner was made of far sterner stuff than most flats, and even the bruise covering his upper left shoulder was beginning to fade.

Then, something in the megablock's lobby pulled at Avo's attention. A delicate change in a few of its artifacts. A displacement along its sequencing, traveling deeper to intersections where the mem-data mingled.

+Den–Denton?+ Cas said, thoughts rushing through, coming clearer now. His cog-feed was still a mess, with glitching memories oozing out from broken ghosts painting his phantasmal HUD. Still, the restoration was nearing its end. Perhaps ten seconds longer was all they needed.

A lot could happen in ten seconds.

[Ad-Nec in the lobby,] Talon-3's template said, calling out the distortion to Avo. But the ghoul already noticed–was already moving to incept. The unknown was careful. Even skilled. Talented. But ultimately not enough. Though they were good at hiding themselves within memories, skirting from artifact to artifact across the progressing scenes, they had an unfortunate habit of not scrubbing their lingering mem-data well enough. **[They're in a hurry.]**

+Yes,+ Avo agreed. Another fatal mistake. Common among many Necros. You could be fast. You could be careful. You could be detailed. Masters sometimes could achieve all three. The skilled chose from two. Journeymen were lucky to have one. Most gutter Necros could only splash the waves.

But Avo, was more than just another fish in these waters by this point. He had transcended the ecosystem. Fed from the very entities that sustained these waters–humiliated them, stole from them, spited them. A Necrojack was but a predator in the deep. A fish hiding in the waves.

Avo was the fire that scalded the seas; the steam slipping between the waves; the beast in the nothing.

When he found the other Necrojack, they didn't even know. Not even when he isolated them in their sequence, finding them as an inconsistent smear on a peeling wall. Not even when he molded himself over the memories, funneling ghosts deeper into the mind of the unknown. He shifted past Phalanx wards–the same kind Mirrorhead enjoyed using, a Highflame novelty–and found himself delving down into a neatly organized Fortress.

This was another mind separated into layers. Six sections of cognitive substance parted across seven layers of traumas. A memory called back to Avo. He thought of how long it took him to dive through Mirrorhead, how careful he moved, how he relied on his Haemokinesis to boost his reflexes and grant him an edge.

Now, he moved as if there was nothing before him, splinters forming two rows as he merged the initial fragments of his ego into traumas symmetrical to the wards before inserting them across and creating a fjord for the rest of his ego.

A hiss of delight escaped Avo's mind. He was effectively a Necrotheurgic skeleton key now.

[Or a virus,] Elegant-Moon sang, likening the spread of his splinters across the layers to cells being contaminated.

As he sank into the bedrock of the adversarial Necro's mind, one of his Skimmers pulsed an alert into his Meta. Swapping himself with another submind, Avo watched as a squad of thirteen heavily armored soldiers flickered into his awareness.

Incog. They're deactivating their Incogs.

The first thing that called out to Avo wasn't the sophistication of their kit or how his Woundmother hummed after tasting the potency of their augmented biologies. No. It was their minds. Stable. Calm. Accretions running at an even and persistent speed always. And finally, there was the hollowness at the core. A slight something missing from their humanities.

+*Regulars,*+ Draus said, noticing them too, giving words to his suspicion.

Just then, Cas snapped back to full consciousness; Avo pierced through the veil of mystery surrounding the unknown Necrojack; and fifty-four more previously detected spheres of thoughtstuff flashed in the corners of his cog-feed.

[WARNING: UNKNOWN EGOS DETECTED]

+*Denton?*+ Cas finally said, wiping the drool from his lips and pushing himself off the ground. His holocoat was flickering. Sparking rivers of static down his body. He flexed his fingers and a twang sounded out, a sting on his instrumental arm reverberating. Cas pressed his hands against the side of the aero and shoved. Suddenly, the car shunted away into nothingness. A wall of empty space opened up as the vibrating note sounding forth from his arm grew.

The Columner stumbled out over clumps of grass, steadying himself against a nearby tree, and groaned. His head was still spinning. Nausea tumbled in his stomach. Chaos and confusion reigned in his mind.

Avo kept an eye on the Columner as he siphoned mem-data out from the Necro he just compromised. She was a Highflame Necrojack. A forward scouting element for the rest of the team was sent in to secure Cas.

One of his cells was compromised prior, and they managed to capture the aforementioned

Nuruna Velters after she finished some dealings with a local Gold-aligned Syndicate. Her mind was also pre-laced with the trauma bombs Cas had, but unlike him, she was no Godclad.

That should have been the end of things, but one could never accuse Highflame of being quitters. Somehow, by luck or by skill, they managed to piece enough of her back together and access her Auto-Seance, managed to secure her sessions too. Through her, they tracked Cas and hunted him. Struck him. They must've expected to compromise him Necrotheurgically, but somehow, he managed to maintain sufficient coherence even after his near-total nulling to cast Denton and pilot his vehicle, forcing them to use direct measures.

And so it was they found themselves at the present, with multiple squads of Regulars taking a walk through Sanctus territory on a snatch and grab, their target supposedly down and out.

But such was not so.

Just like how Cas couldn't have anticipated the subversion of his asset, neither could Highflame know the thing that studied them now, that was threading himself across their Necro into their minds, into the lobby they used the run this operation, into the nine other Necros they had diving in surrounding networks, into the commander they had in charge of Necrotheurgic operations, and the Instrument in charge of the entire operation itself.

Avo spread and spread, and spread. He spread, and waited, wondering if Veylis could sense him when his Heaven went unused, if the Nether pressed on the paths as well.

+Shit,+ Cas said, spitting sourness into the dirt. +Denton? You there?+

+We're all here,+ Avo replied.

Cas eld'Canduir touched his eye and eyed his halo. A final fissure came together before his eyes. +Avo? Did you just… mend me?+

+There's been some changes,+ Avo said, relishing in the man's shock. +Going to need to catch you up on certain things. But only after we get you out.+ He shifted his attention over the encroaching Regulars, the first unit pushing up under the cover of cloaked precision-firing assault drones. Avo grunted. +Draus. Could try to spare them. Know you were.+

Back in the enclave, the Regular scowled. +No. Fuck that. Null 'em. Break 'em. Snuff 'em. Whatever it takes. They got their guns pointed the wrong way. All there is to it. My time with Highflame is done.+

Avo chuffed a laugh. What fortune he had to encounter someone like Draus in the Crucible. Or maybe more than that. Maybe it was by Walton's design.

Whatever the case, her template wasn't going lonely for much longer. The cadre was about to get some premium sparring partne–

EGO-ID DOWNLOAD REQUEST: [IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A WANDERER]

The ghoul's mirth doubled. He accepted the link without hesistation, and his Neurodeck, left cold and vacant without the EGI's presence, suddenly came alive with a thinning of his ansible.

And then Calvino was back again, hovering like a misted sunrise made from trailing nanoparticles. *{Avo. Apologies, I had to–Oh, what kind of nightmare are we involved with now.*

+*Calvino. Welcome back. Operative Canduir ran into a bit of trouble. Going to get him out. And find out how much it takes to crack a Regular's mind.*+

{Well, then. I suppose I didn't miss much.}

+*Have Canons of Chronology now. Should've seen it.*+

{I have missed too much; Kant is going to consider self-deletion. Well done.}

There was a tone of genuine amusement in the EGI's voice. The mind was even less human than Avo was, and capabilities at subterfuge couldn't be underestimated. But something in the ghoul suspected the mind wanted to be here, that he enjoyed their time together.

All the same. The feeling was mutual. Best to give him a show worth returning for.

+*Peace,*+ Avo said, shifting the Low Master's template over himself, calling upon traumas refined and Necrotheurgic unparalleled. +*Done treating you like a nu-dog. Going to give you a choice now. Do you still want to hurt? Still want to hate? Still want to be a weapon?*+

A pause followed. A weight passed against Avo's Domain of Air.

[Yes,] Peace growled, forcing the words out. **[Yes, godsdamn you. Yes. You already know–already fucking know.]**

+*Good,*+ Avo replied, as he paired more templates of Peace over to his subminds. +*Because I'm going to give you what the Hungers never could. Actual victory. Actual success. Chance to hurt Highflame. Hurt your foes. To break the occupiers of Noloth. I unchain you, **my** Famine. Go. Give them your Peace.*+

And so over one-hundred and twenty splinters shifted their sequences, going from blended architecture to active trauma, and for the third time that day, bombs began going off inside unprepared minds.