

+Hey, Sevens, there's something popping up on the DeepNav. Pairing aerial imaging now.
Scrambling interceptors from anchor [SE-SECT7].

Looks like some kind of subtle spatial distortion. Ninety kilometers ou–

Shit, twenty now...

Eight.

It's getting close. Too close. Fire up the Knots. Send–

WARNING: PARADOX DETECTED

DOMAIN: (SPACE)

WARNING: RUPTURE DETECTED

DOMAIN: (SPACE)

WARNING: ENTROPIC OVERLAP DETECTED

BORDER WALL STABILITY COMPROMISED

REND CAPACITY [SE-7777]: 3%

Godsdammit. There goes my fucking lunch break.

ATTUNING NETHER BROADCAST SEQUENCES TO [OVERSEC-OPEN-PUBLIC]

Attention: we have spatial rupture right pressing right up against SE-7777! Repeat. Spatial rupture. Geometric fragments spiraling–deploying Rendsinks to contain leaking. Activating Knots. Sevens. Cast the Paladins. Get them down here. I have a feeling we need to be sending an emergency commission to the Agnosi soon for a wall patch. My guess is either a smuggler barge or a golem just fucked itself passing into SE-7777's area of influence.

Poor stupid shit. Guess they thought they could run the border.+

-Exorcist Kelenn "Tens" Nieyvyr

19-19

Walltaker (II)

"Alright," Draus said, restarting the simulation with a thought. "Let's run through one more time."

A detailed reconstruction of the SE-7777 border wall hovered at the center of the Command Nexus. Created from a mix of Nether scans and orbital imaging provided by Aegis, the towering pylon their targeted Heaven protruded from the depths of the Maw, its height rivaling that of even the highest Elysiums crowning the Tiers.

Near translucent threads passed through the hollow portals dotting the stretch of the structure, each voluminous length composed of countless strands representing all affected Domains. From pylon to pylon did these threads run, each section of the wall connected to countless others, with multiple redundancies in place to make a cascading collapse impossible. SE-7777 was but one of the few walls in its section, with several others that could assume its role should something fail in its design.

However, it stood as the sole dam choking a narrow passing of the Maw—a geographic weakness inherited from the builders of old Noloth.

With everything within five hundred kilometers of SE-7777 mapped, the simulation reset itself as the avatar for their compromised barge moved down its designated route once more.

“Things will begin with the payload,” Avo said. “Will alter the Heaven of a barge before setting it off. Ensure an easily triggerable spatial paradox. Detonation takes effect within 5 kilometers. Apply leakage directly. Fill it with dead smugglers just in case. Makes things more believable anyway.”

Three markers appeared in incremental spots approaching the pylon. “I scoped this area already,” Draus said. “Mostly dead zones in the gutters above. I’ll be able to make and manifest the reflections in time while directly observing from above.”

“Emergency Knot response time?” Avo asked.

“Thirty seconds,” Draus said. “But we’ll be movin’ fast. Jumpin’ from place to place and gettin’ close before they scramble.”

“Good,” Avo said. “Will have Chambers and White-Rab on standby if something goes wrong. Cripple their communications. Distort censors. Low risk of failure.”

“So, I got a question right,” Chambers said, pointing at the barge’s avatar. “We know it’ll pop once it gets close to the wall, but why are the Paladins gonna give a shit again? Like, Syndis shit their pants all the time. This might just be a closer pants-shit than most.”

“Because we’re going to deliberately paradox a barge that has passed through SE-7777 before,” Kae explained. “Its current canons allow it to imprint itself on *almost* flat surfaces within a certain range of angularity. When it paradoxes and ruptures, the issue will make itself known quite obviously.”

“Will also be feeding related mem-data to Kare after this,” Avo said. “So we can push the Paladins to act if necessary.”

Chambers smirked and nodded. “Nova. So. After this, you light up Kassamond and Kare, make the former volunteer to oversee the border patching while the rookie ends up miraculously ‘discovering’ a treasure trove of mem-data in the wreckage and winning her that sweet, sweet promotion.”

“Or just more influence,” Tavers said. She shot Avo a look. “Don’t have her climb too fast. Or get lucky too much. Jealousy can make the other motherfuckers around you downright perspicacious.”

An uncharacteristic sigh left Chambers. “Ain’t that the nasty truth.”

Memories from the man’s template sang out to Avo. Moments from his past where he tried a little too hard or performed a little too well back in his ganger days. The other low lives didn’t like Chambers outperforming them much, and they cut that lesson into him that one midnight, timing their attack with the downpour so they could indulge without ending Chambers for good. Screaming agony echoed from inside Avo as the falling rain washed away wounds made by plunging blades and gnashing teeth.

Just one of the many instances when Chambers howled for death, but the city wouldn’t let him go.

[Yep,] Chambers said, chuckling and somehow keeping his mind away from the torture, [shit’s something all juvs learn quick in the Warrens.]

“After that,” Kae said, pulling Avo away from his thoughts, “a commission will be sent, and the Agnosi will respond. Except not! Except it will be us!” She giggled, a strange expression overcoming her face. “My identity will be changed, my body altered, and my thoughts masked. But me and Chambers will be off to the pylon so we can review the damage.” She sighed as a distant expression came over her. “I can’t believe I have to become a spy to practice craft ‘legally’ again. What is my life?”

Two new shapes were formed by the simulation: floating vivianite lattices enmeshed in biomodded tissue made to be attached to a skull. “Proxies,” Avo said. “Recovered a few from some Incubi caches... and a few prototypical versions from one of Walton’s dead drops.”

Draus shot Avo a look. “Anything else that’s good?”

“Mostly mem-data so far. Information. Knowledge about Necrotheurgy. Know how to build some of the proxies now though. Requires being able to construct a Metamind first. Might be able to do that with Kae and Calvino working together. Shouldn’t be too complicated.”

Kae nodded. "The exo-ego stack-grafting process is not my specialty, but all Agnosi understand the steps. With the Stillborn, it shouldn't be too hard. I'm more worried about the proxies, though. Do they even work? Is there a danger of compromise? It was used by the Incubi, no? Is it even usable for these purposes?"

"Yes," Avo said. "Proxies are meant to be untraceable. Burner minds with a half-life that connects to and shuffles your base mind. Ensures no traceable data even if nulled. White-Rab is already done with them. Has the FATE-Skeins and counterfeit memories sequenced in. Made several gangers put them on as a test. Works."

Kae blinked. "And... then what happened to them." Avo opened and closed his mouth several times, chomping his teeth together. "I should have expected."

Two profiles extended from below each proxy, showing two figures dressed in well-tailored suits of ashen gray. The first was of a woman around Kae's height but with skin a few tones softer, cheekbones a few inches higher, and eyes spaced a bit further apart. Her name was displayed as Agnos Iomae Hatherene. Across from her spun her counterpart, Agnos Nandu Yuewei, whose physical appearance could be described as "beyond grotesque with nose like a doorknob, dolloping ears, and drooping eyelids."

Chambers winced as he walked over and patted Kae on the back. "Fuck, Kae. I'm sorry."

She shifted in her seat as her mouth fell open. "For—for what?"

"Look at what Avo's going to do to you," he whispered, shaking his head. "I mean, the guy has to be you, you know. That's how the Paladins don't see it coming. We gotta go to the extremes to disguise ourselves. Me. I'm sacrificing here too. I gotta lose my dick. The dick I just recently got enhanced. Life sure is a half-strand sometimes."

A whirl of machinery in the corner of the room signaled Dice's confusion as to what Chambers was trying to do. As the nu-kitten in her lap yawned, Dice looked toward Draus for understanding, but the Regular just shook her head and shrugged.

Only Avo truly knew the game Chambers was playing, and it was a leftover habit from his time in the Syndicate. It was a little trick where one would volunteer another for a truly miserable assignment while pretending their own sacrifice was greater. Surprisingly, it worked more often than it failed.

There was a natural gullibility that one could exploit in people with enough confidence portrayed.

Not that it would help Chambers in this case.

[Avo,] template-Chambers whimpered. [Please don't turn me into that ugly bastard. That fucking face is a work of modern art. Really creative work White-Rab's done, but holy

fuck I'm gonna sheath-reject so bad if it's my face. Looking in a mirror will be a trauma pattern.]

[But Chambers, won't you be able to keep your impressive cock this way?] Abrel asked, hiding her taunt with a question.

[Yeah,] template-Draus joined in, attracted more by Chambers' vulnerability than any true sense of amusement. **[Ain't you gonna be sad to lose that twelve-incher the ghoul gave. 'Sides, having a face like that will keep just about anyone from rashing if they catch sight of you.]**

[Oh, fuck you guys!] Chambers snapped.

Back in the real, Avo just smiled. "Chambers. Kae. Won't need to worry about memorizing information or practicing disguises. Everything will be known with the proxies. Will be feel running a skill-sequencer in your Metas. Know what to do naturally."

Kae still swallowed. "So, just to be sure..."

Avo turned to Chambers. "Don't worry. Will let you keep your dick."

"No!" Chambers hissed.

[Fuck!] template-Chambers groaned.

Kae nodded slowly and gave Chambers' a pitying look. "I'm sorry, Aedon. It seems that my 'sacrifice' will remain cockless." And then she patted him the same way he did her earlier.

"Alright, enough of that," Draus scoffed, glaring at the two for their indiscipline during the review. "Once your identities are dispatched, you'll arrive in separate luxury aeros provided by Tavers. From there, you'll proceed under the care of Kassamon and 'ascertain the severity of the breach.' He should leave you both in the core to do your business, which'll be when Chambers starts jacking into the pylon's inner networks and establishes Nether control while Avo reaches out either through the glass or using Chambers as a vessel after initial shaping is done.

After that, Avo makes a hole that we can use and heads on out beyond the wall, where he'll touch down in the nearest enclave and establish our first outer city safehouse. Me, Essus, and Tavers will be physically overwatched via reflections and the Manta. Dice will be held in rapid reserve in case we need someone to put out an unexpected fire. This all goes well, it'll take less than a few hours, and we'll be walking the Sunderwilds in two to three days. If shit goes south, Chambers, Kae, break your proxies, kill yourselves, and then exfil under Kassamon's supervision or reflective passway depending on expedience."

Chambers snorted. "We got plans inside plans. Counters for counters. The way I see, this'll be—"

“No!” Tavers cried, an uncharacteristic terror conveyed behind her eyes.

Draus, equally alarmed, expressed her displeasure another way. A shrill whistle sang out from the Regular as Dice exploded into action. Placing the cat on the ground in a swift moment, the once-waif shot across the room like a flechette in motion, her sheath performing as advertised. She plunged into Chambers like a streak of blurring whiteness.

Even as Avo fired his enhanced Celerostylus—now dubbed Condyllostylus after the fly capable of five milliseconds reactions—the sudden thrust in speed Dice got from her Volant Reflex-Acceleration System took some effort to track. For an instant, all movement across the Command Nexus halted. All besides Dice, Draus, and Avo. Then, as exhaust erupted from the vents built along the waif’s spine, she exploded across the last meter separating her from Chambers, the feat of speed staggering, even to another reflex-boosted individual.

The sound barrier broke. Her metallic shin fell in a whipping crescent, but Dice pulled back at the last moment, striking Chambers just across the ribs. The blow tore him from his feet. His body arc. The words never made it out of his mouth. Beside him, Kae was covering her ears, dazed by the sudden shockwave washing over her.

Avo released his reflexes.

Time resumed.

Chambers shot through the air with a choked gasp as he struck the wall with the speed and violence of a missile. Still, the smart matter reacted according, folding and shaping itself into a protective cushion around his back and neck. It was a testament to voidtech that these protections were now considered private, though an equal statement was made by Chambers’ own augmentations. His body remained whole, even with Dice pulling her kick. A day ago, and sheer force of such a roundhouse would have sheared his fragile flesh in two across the midriff.

The nanofibers lining his muscles held up well, and his bones seemed sufficiently durable. Considering how his eyes were rolling up into his head, the next thing that should be considered was some extra protective lining inside his skull.

Draus nodded at the girl. The Regular’s own Volant Reflex-Accelerator was a line of hissing heat along her spine. Such was part of the reason why Avo opted to avoid grafting such an implant to his body. Though it hypercharged one’s synapses via nanomechanical fibrils running through one’s neurons, using it repeatedly ensured lasting damage to one’s nervous system and drove the body beyond what it could endure.

Useful for when Heavens were manifested, but Avo preferred a reliable constant over limited spikes of performance. His Condyllostylus offered close enough performance anyway, and he might be able to improve it further still by imbuing it with other biological traits he discovered.

“Didn’t want to kill him,” Dice said, looking down at Chambers who was twitching slightly.

“You did the right thing, kid,” Tavers said, shaking her head at the fool. “Never say the words. Never even hear them.”

Dice shifted in posture and tilted her triangular scanning module. “What are the words.”

“Don’t even ask,” Tavers muttered.

Draus snorted. “Variations of ‘dairy’ and ‘sprint.’”

If the girl still had eyes, she would have blinked. “Nu-cow... run?”

“Yeah, sure,” Tavers said. “Nu-cow run...”

A low moan sang out from Chambers as a series of pops rattled from his body.

“Nanosurgeons are kickin’ in,” Draus said. “Duramite did him some good too. Wall catching him did more to save his life than anything though.”

“Yeah,” Avo said. “Good performance. Will need to send our compliments to Jack and Jane. Ruveca too. Might consider adding a modified layer of fat around our organs. For the blunt force trauma.”

“We already got the Meldskins,” Draus said. “That usually performs better.”

That was true.

Letting out a breath, Avo turned back to the simulation and watched as rings rushed out from the barge’s icon as it impacted its delivery point just within the wall’s threshold. Everything seemed to be accounted for. Every major aspect remained controlled. Drawing upon his templates to see if there were any potential faults within his plan again, the only concerns that greeted him were unpredictable freak encounters and other threats of randomness.

But even then, he would control the Paladins on site through Kassamon. Even should the most unanticipated of circumstances follow, he could ensure the near-certain extraction of his cadre at the very least.

[Stay paranoid, consang,] Corner said. [It might not help, but it’s better than dying surprised. I would know. The block job you snuffed me and the others in was supposed

to be sure-fire thing too. Easy raid. Easy pay. No risk. But there's always something out there in the dark. Something you can't see in the deeper waters. You won't always be the beast.]

+*Yeah*, + Avo replied, thinking back to how the Incubi managed to null him all those weeks ago, and his near-fatal encounter against Shotin. Control. Control was paramount. He needed to cement his ability to shape the variables. Not just environmentally, but across the board. "Going to burn the memories into Kassamon and Kare now. Both are away from the Scale. At home. Mem-data indicates they're alone. Kae. We'll adjust the barge's canons in a few minutes. Also want to try to rebuild a golem. Get the oracle glass ready."

The Agnos blinked, turning to show him the blood pouring from her ears. "Huh? My-my ears, they're still fixing themselves! Cast it into my Neurodeck!"

Avo sighed. "Tell you when I get back."

"Shit!" Kassamon screamed, howling at his own reflection in the mirror. Sweat was pouring down from his brow. Tendons were twitching across his forehead. Every muscle across his body was sore and exhausted from the struggle. Pressing the P-80 particle pistol under his jaw as mustered what strength he had left for another push, he bit back the urge to sob as the burning torture intensified.

"Fuck," he whimpered. "Godsdammit."

He could kill himself. Fry his brains in his restroom. No one would know of his shame. Know would know that he gave up.

But he would know, dammit. He would know that the five footlongs he ate for lunch won. He would know that he gave up because of a little discomfort, choosing resurrection over facing his consequences. Overcoming them.

Giving up wasn't what Jaus Avandaer was about. A quitter wasn't who First Sergeant Kassmon wanted to be. Clenching his teeth, he moved his finger away from the trigger and pistol-whipped himself for motivation. "Come the fuck on, Kassmon. You got this. *Came-awuugh!*"

The cry that tore out from his throat this time wasn't because of the pain in his stomach but the fact that his mind erupted into a chasm of soaring fire. "Shit.]"

Great. Perfect. Not this again. Ever since he got burned at Veng's Stand he felt weird. Felt like part of him was warped somehow. Now, as the Conflagration flowed out from an Auto-Seance hidden deep inside his innermost memories, he recalled everything—and more than a few new details from his template counterpart simulated within a certain ghoul's memories.

+Kassamon,+ Avo said. +I need—+ The ghoul choked back a note of discomfort. +What... What is this.+

[Come back later,] Kassamon groaned. **[I'm taking a shit.]**

An uncomfortable silence followed.

[Dude, you are in so much pain right now,] Two-Mag muttered.

[No shit,] Kassamon grunted.

[That's kind of the problem, isn't it,] Abrel snickered.

[Fuck... you.]

Avo sighed. +Kassamon. Have a new assignment for you to volunteer for. Giving you details now.+

[Sure. Whatever,] Kassamon sighed. **[You're not having me... I don't know, help you eat puppies or something right?]**

+No. Just doing something with the border wall.+

[...I prefer helping you eat puppies now.]

The ghoul grunted. Then, Kassamon suddenly felt an odd static pulse inside him. The tortuous weight that wouldn't come vanished, and in its place splashed a heated deluge from inside Kassamon.

The Paladin blinked as horror blossomed inside him. Shaking for another reason altogether now, he looked down between his legs and saw that the waters were stained dark red.

Loud hyena-like laughter sang out from Chambers. **[Holy fuck, Avo, you popped the Paladin's ass-cherry with your Heaven.]**

Avo grunted. +Just helping. Tired of feeling him groan and writhe. Information coming in. Know you're about to shoot yourself. Do it in a second.+

[A-Avo,] Kassamon managed lamely. **[Can... can you make me not remember this? And clean up the mess.]**

+Sure. Done with the adjustments. Shoot yourself now.+

Suddenly, the world jolted and Kassamon found himself tucking the barrel of his pistol under his chin, power settings low enough to fry his tissue, but not punch a hole in his ceiling. He resisted the strange compulsion to thank Avo just as he squeezed the trigger.

In the same instant the beam burrowed and boiled his brain matter, the embers of a roaring flame tunneled down through his Meta across the city, up the Tiers, into the mind of another Paladin...

Kare was asleep when her mind ignited. Consciousness slammed down on her like a hammer, jolting her from the sheets as she recalled all that her template experienced over the past few days.

“**Jaus,**” Kare choked, rolling from her bed. She was about to bounce her head off her nightstand when *someone* took hold of her body by the blood coursing inside her and planted her back upon the softness of her mattress. [I... **you... oh, you... It’s you.**] She groaned. [**What I wouldn’t give for you to just be a nightmare.**]

+*Cheer up. Here to make your dreams come true today instead.*+

Mem-data and snippets of information took shape within her mind. She frowned as impossible predictions and understandings began to dawn. [**You want me to... be promoted?**]

+*Achieve some acclaim at least. Get more clout among the Paladins. Good for all of us.*+

She frowned. [**“All of us.”**]

The ghoul had the audacity to chuckle. +*City needs heroes. Reliable figures of virtue. I’m just giving you a hand. Another thing. Will be coming up to the Tiers soon. Have another gift planned for you. How would you like to be the one who helps Naeko bring in some of the people behind Paladin Dawton’s murder? Who framed Agnos Kae Kusanade?*+

Suddenly, the disorientation inside her cleared. [**You’re going to use me against Clan D’Rongo.**]

+*No. Going to use Paladins against them. So justice can follow after vengeance.*+

He offered her a flash of insight into what he was planning, trickling in the mem-data that he obtained from a classified Ori-Thaum information node. Her breath hitched. Her stomach clenched. [**This... this is...**]

+*Yes. Information about the responsible parties. Survivors of that night. You’re a good Paladin. You can find them. With my help. And your father. Uncle too. Together we can see things made*

right for once.+

Kare fought to control her breathing. **[You're not doing this for justice. You have your own aims.]**

+No. This is for someone else. And I don't think she has the fortitude for murder. But just as well. Death might be too gentle. Too neat of an end. Have been thinking of ensuring another ending. Turning politics to my advantage.+

The Paladin bit her lip. **[I will not help you hurt innocent people. I will not-]**

+I know. Everything you think. I know. That's why I'm giving this to you. This is an arrangement that is optimal for both of us. You practice your justice. I practice mine. And the city is served no matter what. You know I'm not lying. Can feel it.+

She shivered despite herself. **[I... I... okay. But-]**

But she never got to finish her words before fires governing her mind shifted, altering her memories, and the blood vessels inside her head burst.

When Kare woke again, she found herself with new knowledge—new hunches about Syndicate smuggling routes and a premonition that something was going to go wrong soon. Searching through her Meta, she encountered new installments mem-data that she didn't remember downloading, and accessed them after a moment of caution.

As the information loaded, and Kare found herself looking at some of Ori-Thaum's most confidential operations, a yawning dread opened in the depths of her stomach as she struggled to remember how she obtained these details.

Only a haze lingered in her recollection. A haze, and an affirmation on her part.

Yet, despite her agreement, she couldn't shake the sense that she might have just made another bargain with something beyond her ability to fathom.