

*+Yeah. Yeah. I got eyes on the girl.*

*Really wasn't that hard to track, honestly. She's quick and efficient, but she doesn't know the city very well—and doesn't change up her methods nearly enough. Similar approaches. Similar exits. Similar holocoat setting.*

*She might have an old Sangeist model burning inside her. I'm not sure, but that's what the signs are pointing to.*

*Relax, I'm just trailing the juv. I'm going to use my Incog and get a closer look at how she operates. And see if your "benefactor" shows up again.*

*I won't lie, I'm interested to see if this gift-giving ghoul of yours is all he's cracked up to be. I might end up asking him for a wish of my own.+*

-[Redacted to White-Rab]

17-2

Prepared

The Layers dividing the Warrens were filled by a forest of ever-moving machinery. Fabricated by Voidwatch's orbital assemblies and installed planetside via the Guilds, even a partial component making up of one of the sky-shrouding plates deserved the term "tectonic." Considering the complexity of their interior, however, perhaps the word "art" was more suitable.

Requiring over five hundred billion drones to maintain, a machine ecosystem was in place to keep the Layers at optimal functionality, and to repair the inevitable collateral damage from Syndicate spats and other "unexplained" events.

The true brilliance of its make lay also in its simplicity. Absurd as it sounded, it would not be hard for Voidwatch to create an apparatus capable of expanding the space available to New Vultun's inhabitants while also making the Rash easier to quarantine if they were allowed to use all the tools they had at their disposal.

Making said apparatus from materials and mechanics low-tech enough to dissuade Omnitech—and all the other Guilds by that matter—from compromising its structure and lotting its components was another challenge entirely.

But the solution, here, ultimately was simple.

They didn't complete it.

They hanged parts of the Layers piecemeal to the Guilds and had the terrestrials assemble it, infusing its design with miracles to bolster what little technology existed within.

From this came an ecosystem ripe for determined smugglers, Syndicates, gangers, and squires to exploit. If one could avoid the attention of drones and Exorcists while surviving the steel-melting heat emitted from the constantly running holo-projector units or the radiation leaking from the nuclear reactors within, then they had the means to maneuver through the foundations of the Warrens.

For Avo and his cadre, accessing Layer Two was a far simpler operation. The Manta entered a maintenance pathway cloaked and unnoticed by the drones. Between the ship's hyper-advanced systems, their Incogs, and careful positioning, they traveled free and unseen, tracking the drone carrier that was their quarry.

The organs of the Layer were lit by glowering red and masked in hissing steam. Waste-heat transference stations studded the interior in stacked panels the size of hills. Heavy alloy dominated the black and chrome of heat-resistant cables running forming the circulatory system of the structure. A crevice recently made by a fusion burner sparked with electricity and severed wiring.

Down a molten tunnel, the Manta picked up sounds matching an industrial drill designed to break through the hulls of war machines.

Someone was making a quick getaway straight up through the Layer. Considering the noise and damage they were causing, they probably weren't going to get away.

Unidentified vessels traveled close to the surface of the inner Layer. The vessels sailing through the air here were less standard aero and more remodified deep-sea subs with retrofitted engines and hangers installed on their backs. Chambers scried at these peculiarities and found them to be transports for contraband. Weapons, drugs, goods, exotic aeros, and new augs stole from the Throat and Light's End.

This was part of what the Syndicates called "running the black." No one wanted to damage the layers, and high-speed chases inside such a cluttered environment were viable to break something delicate. Jumping between maintenance channels and out from hatches leading down into the air space of the Spine, was part of the lifeblood of the Syndicates.

And something that Avo would burn in the near future.

As they trailed the drone ship, watching to see if or when the unidentified contacts would return, they spent time rehearsing a variety of scenarios within a shared virtuality. The Manta scanned their surroundings and created a simulated space of Layer Two for the purposes of their practice.

Artificial constructs meant to simulate hostile squires were loaded in first, their kit, grafts, and skills based on aggregate data. The cadre handled them without trouble—even managing a non-lethal pacification.

Glaives proved to be more difficult entities. The challenge was less to do with their superior implants and training, and more to do with the near-certainty of Incubi support. Being in the vicinity of Yuulden-Yang meant the Nether was still unstable, and the Crown had to stay active.

Just like that, Avo's district swallowing flame was reduced to a dagger, though still devastating.

They prevailed the first time, but both Kae and Chambers were listed as nulled, with Draus being described Draus as being a “vegetable that just wouldn't forget how to shoot and kill the enemy even as the contents of her self-identity leaked out of her.”

They burned when they engaged Avo. That was the fate of most unprepared Necros that faced him these days—hawks trying to hunt a storm.

For the following attempts they adjusted. Avo was to be deployed as a field asset to directly engage the enemy. This allowed him to retain maximum effect and negate his weaknesses.

Draus operated as their coordinator in combat. Her voice barked quick orders through their ansibles, highlighting things of note. Operating together was easy when they had shared feeds, but Avo thought they could be more symphonic.

Kae could wait.

Perhaps now, though, the Regular trusted him enough to join the fire.

He wouldn't lie and say he didn't covet her mind, that he wasn't fascinated with how it functioned. Even with all the experience provided to him by the countless templates within, they paled compared to Draus. Made woeful decisions contrasted to hers in active combat and broke all too quickly.

There was something about her nature that didn't come via experience and was more than base nature could ever design.

Highflame called it “perfectly broken.” People damaged in ineffable ways that left them hyper-functional even beyond the need for an ego, their layouts of their cognition outward facing, as if preparing to invade the world.

Regulars were creatures of consummate violence. Fighting was like breathing. Killing was like breathing. Dying was like breathing.

Even in the impossible scenarios she simulated for fun—where their Heavens, Metas, and Meldskins suddenly stopped working and all they could do was fight and die, she performed as she always did.

Kae was cut down in seconds—not suited for the battlefield.

Chambers proved himself a scream—though he did attempt to slam his genitals in the face of his murder as his body came apart.

Avo didn't see the shot that killed him in that exercise, only learning of his defeat as Threshold loaded him out of the area as Draus finished her session.

The Regular moved and fought. She found an easily defensive position and held. She didn't leave a body when she died. A missile snuffed her in that run. When she got out, she treated the situation with a shrug and commented about how her Heavens were making her soft.

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*{Alright, let's go over the run again,}* Draus said as they closed on the drone carrier. She shared the vessel's schematics across their Neurodecks, dismantling it into parts and showing its critical components.

*The Low-Olympus Drone Hive was a machine made a ludicrous number of years ago on a planet called Mars. {We got the exact drone carrier tracked. Our target should be using one of its drones to get around. We don't know which one yet 'cause the slippery shits got Incogs, but Avo here has a solution for that.}*

From the details of Drone-Hive's specifications, it was supposed to be part of some massive city-building operation, carrying over two hundred *Worker-B-Ills*. The little drones were twice as large as a standard civilian aerovec and doubled as a transport for organic workers while mainly serving as automated construction units. Built to resemble its namesake, it was industrial yellow in paint and shaped like a bulb, capable of carrying twelve tons of mass, putting together delicate pieces of machinery thanks to its fibril-like limbs, and seating twenty people at maximum occupancy.

Twenty flats, anyway. That was about ten snuffers depending on their rig, or six unarmored Scaarthians on an extreme diet.

Calvino filtered additional details into the virtuality about a larger and more armored variant of the hive coated with serrated drones loaded armed with twin *Gelspie-224 Heavy Chemrails* and four tactical nuclear warheads.

*{This might just be one of the most distinguished war machines humanity ever made, believe it or not. For nine hundred years after its creation, the Drone Hive and its modified offshoots*

*proved to be some of the most lethal instruments of war you can deploy—especially against an enemy voidship. Exhibits of the drone hive are usually placed next to the Kalashnikov rifle as a running joke.}*

The design made Avo think of Sunrise, and he suddenly found himself wondering where the strange entity went.

*{There was an incident in Silk-Cliff Sovereignty. We needed to redeploy additional operatives—ones that blended in especially. If all goes well, that’s all you’ll need to know. If it doesn’t, we’re probably going to take a detour through No-Dragon territory in a desperate suicide mission to stop the instantaneous ossification of everything composed of biomass as the Fifth Guild War kicks off around us.}*

A beat passed.

*{Well,}* Draus said. *{That’s the No-Dragons for you.}*

*{Has it always been this bad,}* Kae whispered, more to herself than anyone else.

Calvino laughed. *{You should have been here during the days after the Second Guild War. New Vultun would have outright collapsed if it wasn’t for Operative Zein. Anyway. Drone hives we gave to the city use vivianite to house para-psionic phenomena, so they can be jacked and burned via your more “conventional” means. If your targets are Ori-Thaum, however, I expect them to have traps awaiting you.}*

*{Yes,}* Avo agreed. *{Not dangerous to me. But I need to get close. I’m in first. Chambers. Scout ahead with Specter. See if your perception hits anything.}*

*{Synced on that,}* the half-strand said, casting his ghosts out like someone would hurl a fishing line.

*{What happens if they’re not on the carrier?}* Draus asked, testing the team.

*{We establish a perimeter,}* Kae said. *{I shunt the drone carrier away, Chambers jacks it, Avo takes point, and we bring it into your reflection.}*

*{Use Cipher phantasmic to investigate after.}* Avo added.

*{Right. If they’re present, we will secure the drone and pacify the occupants,}* Draus said. *{Remember our drills. We don’t need to snuff no squires if we don’t gotta. We go hard and fast and never let up the tempo. Twenty seconds. That’s the time we got in case one of them is a ‘Clad that can port in help. Rapid response teams’ll make this a mess and we don’t wanna be havin’ a gunfight with both Highflame and Stormtree nearby. In out. Done. Shit goes south and we vanish. I’ll make you an exit. Avo can slip over into Chambers.}*

*{In summation: keep it quick, keep it neat, secure the ship, grab the half-strands, deal within inside the glass, and be done before they figure out where they're even at.}*

The plan was sound. The amount of force and chaos they were about to bring to bear seemed overkill, but Avo wasn't complaining.

Overkill was good when you wanted things done right.

Feeling miles ahead using his Sanguinity, Avo brushed the titanium composing the carrier with his Woundshaper and deleted the rising urge to liquefy from his mind. It was a bit over ten kilometers away. For a moment, he felt as if—

Avo blinked, unable to remember his thoughts.

**[Think we just got Incog'd]** Corner snorted.

**[Or the ghouls turning loopy,]** Lip said. She paused. **[Fuck. Trapped in a mentally disintegrating ghouls for all eternity is not my ideal way to be.]**

For a second, he worried if it was the lapse again, but found no one harem and nothing amiss.

Also, nothing but an Incog could make his mind slip from active thought.

*{I think our consangs are there,}* Avo replied. *{Tried interfacing with it using Sanguinity. Felt at something then forgot what I was doing.}*

*{Well, that's a sign if I've ever heard one,}* Draus said. *{Or you're goin' senile.}*

**[Hah!]** Lip barked with laughter. **[I like her. When are you going to burn her.]**

**[Lip, you're not supposed to ask the ghouls when he burns his "consang,"]** Abrel taunted.

Avo sighed. It was like he was made of up a traveling freakshow sometimes.

*{Avo,}* Calvino said, attempting tact. *{You quite literally are a traveling freak show.}*

+Thanks, Orb.+

*{You're very welcome.}*

Another message came through from Draus. *{Alright, rotlick. You're up. Bring us in.}*

He grunted in response and swam free of the Manta's protective cocoon.

**Warning: Temperature spike: 1893°C**

The sheer heat in the air would be useful for Chambers' Lushburner.

Enwreathing himself in a shroud of blood, a crimson carapace fused over Avo as he felt Draus connect her Heaven with his reflectivity. He was now the vanguard of the team and tactical insertion point. The rest of the cadre can engage and fight using his blood as a doorway.

*{You're gold,}* Draus said. *{Sic 'em.}*

Lightning surged through his flowing blood and the world blurred around him. Firing his reflexes, he darted into a jungle of alloyed cluttered, the speed and nature of his ontology certain to render him a bullet through the vulnerable interior of the Layer, destroying everything in his path.

A second later, though he did indeed slip through the matter in front of him, nothing was damaged.

Composing himself from a whip of lightning, his Datacaster allowed him to part all inorganic constructs impeding his path while his Sanguinity helped him chart his jump without hitting any living entities lurking about.

Within the span of a second, he crashed back into sable reality right next to the drone hive. Parting panels of blood from his back, he activated his Meldskin's thrusters and kept himself aloft as he triggered as the shadow of the Mars-made machine drifted overhead. Most of the porous slots on its sides were empty, the drones occupied by other tasks.

Triggering his Skimmer phantasmic, waves of perception rushed over the reach of his Virtuality, its structure insulating him from the instability of the Nether. As the colossal weight of his cognition brushed across the length of the carrier.

Then, he felt it.

A crack of a ghost shattering; the flash of translucent thoughtstuff spilling into the Nether. A feral grin came over his face as a single drone manifested in his vision. *{I see them,}* he sent. *{We have—}*

Suddenly, a thread of light dove out from the carrier itself, existence vanished around him.

Just like in the last simulation, Avo tumbled into the embrace of his Soul without knowledge of what killed him.