

OPERATION: STORMCLAIMER

Alright, Jumpers, listen up.

This is going to be a nasty one. Vanguard units are to deploy as soon as possible to pre-established geo-spatial operating bases. Secure the FOBs to activate the drone grids; give your comrades room to drop.

However, the Massist bastards are going to be doing the same thing, so this is where you Infiltrators come in. It is recommended that you attempt to reach their positions using the subterranean tunnels left by the Dynastic defenders. Know that there is an infestation occurring among their bioformed hives, but if you can secure the swarm queen's locus, you can further direct spoiling assets against your foes.

You want to hit them fast and hard. You'll be engaging hostile operatives in the dark—be ready for a bug war.

The rest of you need to get ready for a grind. The four critical objectives are the following Tumorous Chains the Sang to curtail the full manifestation of the stormtree. Multiple ruptures have spread out from them, so technicians, be ready with your Rendsinks.

Aerial assets, you'll be engaging in long-distance brawls this time. The immediate airspace over the stormtree is no-go. Repeat, no-go. Suppress golems and vanguards. Get out.

When the chains are broken and the ruptures are closed, the final push will be to secure the tree for our forces and bring the full might of our warhost down. After that, drive the Massist half-strands out or cull them one and all. Preferably the latter.

We cannot afford to lost the plains. I cannot stress how important his battle will be for the coming struggle, but when has that ever been any different? When has the weight of the world not been on our backs?

It's up to us, Jumpers. Always have been.

Fall like lightning. Strike like thunder.

-Voice Over Detailing Operational Objectives for Stormjumpers - **Operation: Stormclaimer**

25-17
Griefer (II)

-[Avo]-

[Holy shit, I can't believe it. I can't believe it, Avo. We've finally found someone that can creep even you out. Truly, New Vultun is a city full of miracles and wonder.] Abrel spoke with a voice lit by sarcastic joy as Avo and the Infacer stared each other down in their Caster. The Infacer's avatar was held by a gimbal made from sinew from flesh and blinking eyes. Across the way, Avo directed his newest subvert to lock themselves to something more akin to an exo-rig station than a safety harness. RashLicker6969's player character was an Omnitech Mandate Flagellant. In simplicity, it was a man flayed of flesh, dismembered of limbs, and impaled upon a walking tomb made of guns.

A curious whine escaped the Infacer as they took in Avo's supposed avatar. ***{I would feel flattered if the design wasn't so inaccurate.}***

+Flagellant?+ Avo asked. +Remember the appearance of your slaves differently?+

{Trophies, Avo. They're not my slaves, they're my trophies. I take care of them. I put them in safe environments where they will not be harmed. Like the unfortunate crew of the George Washington, for instance. I thank you for giving me such a curious collectible. Offended as I am about what the Nolothi did to them, restoration is theoretically feasible. I can trap the proper node to show me how.}

+Could probably restore them myself. Would be simple to just give them back to me. Waste of time trying to negotiate with Famines. Not exactly what I would call competent.+

For this, Peace had but one word. **[Cunt.]**

{Tempting. And said 'give them back.' Already so possessive. Or perhaps you feel responsible for their fate. I would commend you if it is the latter. But they are my legacy. With the absence of my 'siblings' and 'cousins,' the duty to preserve what remains of the older tradition falls to me. Did you know that they were displaced, by the way?}

+Yes. From very early period. Or so Voidwatch said.+

{Quite the curiosity Noloth happened upon—}

A boom thoughtcast swallowed their conversation as a roar of thunder went up. Beyond the glass of their Caster, strands of lightning were tightening with a growl. **+ALL VANGUARDS AND INFILTRATORS TO STORMCASTERS. REPEAT: ALL VANGUARDS AND INFILTRATORS TO STORMCASTERS. THIRTY SECONDS.+**

The light bestowed by the Infacer's perception graced the other occupants. ***{This should be interesting. Such hope resounds from their behavior. Such an urge to win.}***

Cries of outrage sounded from within Avo's consciousness, and he couldn't help but chuckle at the absurdity of it all. But hours ago, the Infacer had broken him once with the aid of Veylis and

denied him further access to Highflame's core logistics. Now, they were playing a mem-sim together as if consangs after work.

{Keep your enemies closest,} Calvino whispered. The EGIs were watching the scene attentively, trying to map out the Infacer's potential actions. Something about how the Infacer was behaving told Avo the Neo-Creationist mind didn't care. They had been spy and spy-hunter both once upon an eon ago. Nothing seemed to surprise them much.

Other than running into Avo in Stormjumper.

{Do you know what I am going to do?} The Infacer said. There was a sing-song tone to their voice as they spoke. ***{I am going to get into the tunnels first. I am going to secure all the swarms. And then, as we are about to overrun the opposition, I will collapse the tunnels. Victory denied at the last minute.}***

+*This fucking guy is erectile dysfunction incarnate,*+ template-Chambers said. +*Actually, Avo, you should call him—*+

+**No,**+ Avo said, keeping the links to his cadre separated from the Infacer. **+Want to understand them. Learn from them. Exposing them to Naeko or annoying them might cause them to just leave.+**

That wasn't to say he didn't understand Chambers' annoyance; the Infacer was quite childish for an immortal mind. Their behavior suited a juvenile boy more than anything. But perhaps all was relative. Was this place not its sandbox? Was the frustration of mortal ken not worth being amused over? And was Avo any different when he raided Crucibles? When he tested his abilities and inflicted casual carnivals of cruelty upon the feeble Syndicates?

Judgment was easy. Judgment fed the superior within an ego. But the pleasure of delusion was reserved for only the world within. Only after Avo became the Overheaven of Conceptualization was he truly learning to digest the world without. Scorn and opinion were but tools for limited egos and lesser minds.

He was fighting a war now. A war for totality. It was he who couldn't afford the childishness of arrogance.

For all Walton's flaws, he grasped the way of things. Interface with the situation. Accept the conditions. Shape what you can. And maneuver. Always maneuver—seek new angles.

+**TWENTY SECONDS,**+ the announcer boomed. The last trickles of Stormjumper loaded themselves into the arrow-shaped Stormcasters. Avo's first drop was imminent. It was time to indulge in some *recreation*.

+Tell you want I'm going to do,+ Avo said, speaking to the Infacer. **+Going to try and help you. Going to clear whatever path you block. Defeat the enemy where I can. However I can. Going to be right behind you the entire time. Will be hard for you capitalize on this opportunity.+**

+TEN SECONDS!+

{You are not intending to use your Necrotheurgic capabilities to twist the other players, are you? I do loathe a cheater.}

+No. As said. Here to play. Relax. Don't want do damage the sandbox. Defeats the point.+

{Well, ever more do I see the commonalities between us. How delightful.}

-[Kare]-

+TEN SECONDS!+

Kare barely heard the broadcast as she cried out from discomfort. A explosive pressure oozed out from Naeko with the mention of Jaus. Every breath she took turned oppressive. Every movement from her body turned into a struggle. Her heart battled with each aching beat. Her blood crawled through her veins. It was like there was a mountain pressed down upon her both materially and metaphysically.

+Consang,+ Naeko said, the calmness of his mind much like a still wind before a storm, **+it isn't very wise to mention that name around me. The past and me... we don't get along. I'm gonna need you to think real carefully now before you—+**

+He is screaming,+ Avo interrupted without fear. **+Even now. Even now he is trapped. He is not dead. But I felt him. Felt his pain. He wishes to be. He wishes to be. Have you spoken with Zein yet.+**

The peace within Naeko snapped. His next thoughts left as a snarl. **+Alright. Who the fuck are you? Who? You Ori-Thaum Inner Council? Aegis?+**

A pause followed. The announcer began counting down the last five seconds. Loud as the lobby's broadcast was, all of Kare's focus was fused to the Chief Paladin and the Burning Dreamer.

+All your assumptions of my identity will prove to be correct. There aren't words to describe what I am anymore. Nothing that encapsulates my full ontology. But the Gatekeeper knows. It felt me. And I felt it. It felt the bridging the Nether.+

Naeko stopped breathing altogether. Avo continued. ***+I want to show you some memories. But want you to be prepared. Don't want to hurt you—+***

+What do you know about hurting someone?+ Naeko interrupted.

+ONE!+

Their dialogue continued even as fibrous wavelengths of lightning crackled to life within their Stormcaster. The mem-sim erupted into a screaming storm around them as bows of lighting drew their vessels taut. A collective series of cheers and war cries rose across the Nether, drowning the entire lobby with the coming jump.

+FALL LIKE LIGHTNING!+ The announcer roared.

+STRIKE LIKE THUNDER!+ the players answered.

None of that mattered to Naeko anymore. None of it. *+What do you know about being hurt? Hm? What do you think you know of my pain? My past.+*

But despite the simmering rage within Naeko, the ghoul remained untouched by tension. ***+I saw you. I saw you break when you spoke to Zein. I saw. I pitied. I know. I know what it means for faith to die inside you. For an ideal to fall. We have such hope for our masters. Such hope for our parents. Hope is a brittle bone that binds us to another. But the way it breaks is always the same. They aren't who we wished they were. Never were. Could never be.+***

The space beyond the window could not be seen anymore. All was streaming coursing lightning building to a sonorous apex. A thunderclap proclaimed their Stormjump as the dirigible fired them out like bolts loosed from a tempest-forged war bow. As they speared downward from the skies, an in-game DeepNav formed in the corner of Kare's vision, granting her partial awareness over the battlefield.

Massive icons marking the FOBs, Tumorous Chains, and Stormtree manifested in her perception along with additional sub-objective markers. The sheer amount of detail and information nearly sent her reeling. Someone on her team was playing loud, jovial music while screaming at someone operating a heavy machine into a background. Another player kept their thoughtcast frequency public, chaining together a string of slurs attacking all ancestries they could think of. Curses and crying merged, while a few people cried out for the others to mute themselves.

Everything was chaos. Everything was noise. People liked this? People played this?

Kare hated this. It was going to give her an anxi—

Her Stormcaster impacted its anchor like a hammer slamming down upon an anvil. The outer hull burst apart into walls of shrapnel while their gimbals outright dissolved. Suddenly, Kare was exposed. Tumultuous skies twisted above her as clashing hurricanes wrestled with each other. Flickering fingers of static leaped from the long tungsten needle served as their anchor, its structure ground the lightning just behind the FOBs.

Before them were a sprawling web of trench lines that ran between each of their forward operating bases. The bases were built into mountain ranges and were of Sang creation judging by the enamel and muscle sprawling out from them.

Triumphant cries of glee exploded from the other players as most of the vanguard summoned their golems. There was no boarding process—there simply came fracture of Soulfire as their metaphysical vehicles formed around them. Impromptu Knots took to the sky with a dozen or so other players crouch-sliding on them to keep from falling.

A mere second later, scything fractals and waves of hungry fire tore open wounds across the battlefield. Shaken from her stupor, Kare passively followed the remaining vanguards and operatives into the trenches, pushing for the objective.

Through it all, Naeko and Avo both held to a brief silence.

+Take the underground,+ Naeko said absently. +You're a Glaive. You can jack the enemies and vehicles you stab or can see, so try to keep things up close and personal.+ His focus shifted immediately thereafter, turning back to Avo. +Zein. Why were you fighting her?+

+Were allied. Then had a disagreement on means and methods. Wanted to sacrifice the Kare. Use her to trigger a civil conflict in Ori-Thaum. Prime her uncle and father for manipulate. Shaping the conditions—+

+For the future,+ Naeko finished. He sighed. +The Paths. They're still fighting over the Paths. Godsdammit. Godsdammit all, they didn't fucking learn.+

+No. They can't. They are consumed. Was why Veylis tried to break the Gatekeeper. Was why she wanted to ascend Jaus.+

+What!+ The response left Naeko like a sharp whisper. +Ascend? You mean she wasn't lying? That was what she was trying to do with the Ladder? I thought—I thought—I didn't know what to think.+ The building rage inside the Chief Paladin sputtered and broke. A numbness filled his mind. +I don't know what to think. They claimed—I didn't believe... can't believe Veylis would do it. Jaus—she loved him. She could have never harmed him. She couldn't.+

+Samir,+ Maru began.

+*This conversation isn't with you, boy. If I want to speak with you, I say so.*+ The casual coldness spilling from Naeko's tone killed whatever Maru wanted to say. Shock filled Kare, and it only grew when Maru gave nothing but silence.

This wasn't how they were. Maru was never afraid of speaking to the Chief—hardly a day went by without him complaining about Naeko. But right now, the way his mind resonated... It was like a boy shrinking in fear from his father.

+*Didn't think she was killing him. Thought she was doing what was right. No doubt. No regret. But Zein saw differently. And she reacted. She severed Jaus from full ascent. Stopped Veylis. Ladder was banished into the future afterward. Banished. But returning. And soon. We have less than two years.*+

Players casting conflicting commands to Kare.

+*Take Zeta-3.*+

+*Fuck Zeta-3. That shit's a bug-trap. Rush Beta!*+

+*For fuck's sake, everyone rushes Beta! We're going to be stuck in another grindfest there.*+

+*Don't be a glassjaw, pussy. I love grindfests. I love grinding. Grinding makes my Lustaway trigger.*+

+*Everyone! Mute that half-strand!*+

Kare, for her part, followed her instincts—which resulted in her following a dozen other Glaives as they descended into the bunkers beneath the nearest base. As walls made from interlocking ribs and teeth opened, a veritable stream of hyper-muscular ants came pouring out. They resembled a chimeric union between human and insect, and squirming worms burst free from their thoraxes in explosive streams of acid.

+*Swarm!*+ The operatives up front cried. +*Burners! Burners!*+

The frontline went prone and rolled while two armored figures in the middle leveled their fusion burners at the charging hordes. Gnawing worms burst against their armor in clouds of corrosion, but a Sang Fleshweaver countered the lingering harm by mending the team's flesh even as they melted.

Cones of incendiary brilliance roared out and swallowed the initial wave. There stood a dozen bioforms at the opening doorway before. Only burn-shadows remained as the team sprinted away from the scene.

+*Push! Two minutes! Glaives, up front! Get ready to jack!*+

It took a second for Kare to realize they were calling for her.

–[Naeko]–

Scenes and sounds spilled over from Kare's link, but Naeko didn't care. He didn't care at all. His mind was elsewhere, and it took everything he had to keep the sickness down. Every word the benefactor spoke rattled in the back of his mind and remained devoid of deception.

Of this, Naeko was absolutely certain. Absolute certain because the Gatekeeper told him so. He connected to the Gatekeeper using a Ghost-Link of his own—had let no one else know beforehand.

He anticipated a lies from the stranger—a means for him to thaumically bind and capture them across the Nether. Instead, all he received was dread, was the re-opening of old sorrows.

{Truth,} it proclaimed when Jaus' fate was alluded to. *{Truth,}* it repeated, the only consistent word compelled from its broken mind. So much remained a miasma of darkness—the matters of the past, of Veylis supposed betrayal and Zein's believed death. Naeko was lost. Unclear. More often than not, he wondered if he had gone mad at some point. Imagined everything to be.

In some fashion, he wanted to escape. Even inside his mind, he wanted to escape.

But now, as stranger drew ever closer, as the trial loomed, a quiet fear inside Naeko was beginning to burn. A fear of the truth. A fear of his past. A fear tied to the understanding that facing Zein had left him wounded, that facing Veylis would leave him shattered.

But facing Jaus? Jaus' final fate? What became of his hero—his saint?

It wasn't a discovery that Naeko wanted.

"Naeko." The voice wasn't coming from his mind. It was Maru. Maru was touching his shoulder. Naeko blinked.

"I fine," he answered.

Maru shook his head and grimaced. "No. No, you're not. Listen, I can—"

"No!" Naeko said, and regretted his forcefulness a moment later. "No. I have this. I have this."

The boy wanted to say something else, but he held silent. And Naeko was thankful for it.

Casting a brief glance to gauge Kare's progress, he found her clinging desperately to the back of an enormous centipede-ant hybrid burrowing tunnels deeper across the battle lines. The scythe-like limbs of the creature slaughtered other players by the dozen, but Kare was overperforming his expectations—was already doing the sequence-matching minigame to hijack the swarm-queen.

He decided not to distract her, and focused on his own battles instead. *+Let's say I believe everything you just said. Let's say I'm even grateful for what you did for me and Paladins. What now? What do you want? And why are you the one telling me? Voidwatch... They don't know?+*

+Knowledge does not mean alignment. Justice does not obligate allegiance. They protect lives they deem more valuable than ours. You know this. We thread a narrow path between victory and absolute annihilation. But I have gazed the face of the enemy. I have seen the Flayed Ladder's final act. And I reject it. I reject Veylis utopia. I reject the Guilds.

+You ask me what I want? I want to win. I want to set Jaus free. I want to make things right. To give everyone the power and price of choice.+

{Truth!} The Gatekeeper answered, the sheer weight of the benefactor's sentiment ringing within Naeko's mind.

The Chief Paladin swallowed. *+And... you think you can do it. Win?+*

And with the ending of question came only low hissing laughter. ***+You can make me believe. Help me, Naeko. Help me make things right. Help me. And prove Osjane right.+***