

+Proxy-ID Sintaker to Mirror-Convex. L-213382 is compromised. We just got hit by an unknown hostile. Serpentine was nulled. She'll be resurrected in thirty seconds. Cog-cap overload—enemy cracked her Incog with a Skimmer.

...

Convex, do not bullshit me right now: do we have any assets operating in the area? Because Skimmers aren't standard issue-screaming phantasmics. Yeah. Because they're ours. Exclusively.

I think I caught a glimpse of fire in the Nether too. Not a lot of other shit that can be, is there.

I'm gonna drop the act now, Convex—did you get the order to burn us? Are we burned? All this for the Instrument?

Yeah. Instrument Mondelles is still alive. He's the one who made the kill while the rest of us were incapacitated, so he's got that to hold over us now.

Not that the fucking Gold wasn't smug enough of a shit already...

Ah, shit, I see an anchor forming... Fuck. Unknown was a Godclad. Repeat, confirmation that the unknown ambusher is a Godclad.

They're resurrecting—estimated time, a hundred and eight seconds standard.

We need answers, Convex. So Instrument doesn't snuff us all once he gets back in the drone.

And so I don't null you right now and pull the mem-data from your wreck of a mind if I get the feeling you're lying to me.+

-Sintaker," Ori-Thaum Godclad

17-3

Random Encounter

Death came at you fast in New Vultun.

Things have been going too well. Overstuffed by new opportunities and easy victories, something changed in the makeup of Avo's mind: he stopped thinking of himself as a member of the city and started believing himself to be above it.

Well, he was above it in many ways, considering his unfettered consciousness and Soul, but the poison was expecting perpetual dominance at every turn. Such anticipations were like a corrosive agent, wearing away at the mindset that ensured his survival for so long.

This was good for him. A good refresher on his place in this world.

Idheim was a wellspring of madness, and across its expanses were predator and prey alike. He was fortunate enough to be considered among the former now, but there were other beasts in the deep as well, swimming alongside him, always ready to take a bite.

“A temporary setback,” the Woundshaper cajoled. ***“Fortunate is but a fleeting advantage for our like, master. Their advantage has faded. Their counterattack left you slain, but now prepared. They do not know their deaths are soon coming. Soon, we feed anew.”***

As the Heaven of Blood shivered with rising laughter, the entropic miasma filling the reflection that was its Hell roiled and danced. There was but a trickle there. Only five percent Rend. Not even worth channeling yet. The Rend of his Datacaster was even lower, peaking at just over three.

Turning his focus to studying the misshapen entity comprised of imagined virtuality, Avo's perception danced along the metaphysical cables and fibers making up the Datacaste. Nonsensical codes flowed through the Heaven of Signals even in the fires of his Soul. From the willowing branches of the Heaven rose a field of glitching static, enshrouding the area around it in a protective veil.

Below the Heaven's fibril architecture, twitching cubes comprised of junk code metastasized within its Hell, the nature of the entropy expressing itself as an anomaly of spatial reality.

DATACASTER - 335 THAUMC/c DOMAIN (SIGNALS/SPACE)

CANONS: (SIGNALS)

->CROWN OF VIRTUALITY

Canon: Converts the environment (100 ft) around the user into simulated mirror-reality made out of raw data supported by Sprites; user can convert all inorganic parts into temporarily stored data (reloads back to their original position in reality after miracle ends)

Hubris: Organic material will result in a [system-collapse] for the user; thaumic backlash will follow

(SPACE) ->HARD-CAGE

Canon: Stores physical (up to 10 tons) matter within a coldtech data-storage device grafted onto the user (1TB per terrr__Fff1001<32>); data must be released back into the real when miracle is no longer in use

**Hubris: If the coldtech data storage is damaged, thaumic backlash
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EN**

HELL [3 CIRCLE] - 335 THAUMC/c

**CANON:
(SPACE)**

->WAVEJAMMER: All spatially-rooted wavelengths within (100 ft) will be disrupted and infused with corrupted codeSFdd@34Dae3moln:; if there is nothing to affect with the miracle within a period (10 seconds), a ___ will manifest.

Kae warned him to not vent the Rend from this Heaven if there was no coldtech present. Whatever “experiments” Omnitech performed on the ontologic without Agnosi supervision had caused the Heaven to be “deliberately deformed” in ways that didn’t register as damage to the Meta-Fac, rendering it incapable of direct repair. Even tunneling into the Heaven’s mythology and fully expanding its lore left him and Kae confused as to what they were facing.

Her claims that it was a miracle Glitch didn’t rupture while using were no understatement. Though she managed to stabilize it to an extent, its occupation within his Frame would ultimately be temporary. Once they tracked down the proper golems, he was going to rebuild the Heaven Domain by Domain.

Still, the hubris made him wary. “Follow the children?” “Protect the children?” It was as if the ontologic was infused with mem-data pulled from a mind undergoing psychosis. Except Kae said the mad and mentally incoherent couldn’t form a Heaven. He knew he was supposed to see this Heaven replaced, but there must’ve been something here...

“Do not use my winds when we arise,” the Galeslither said, breaking Avo out of his thoughts. Wisks of undulating darkness shivered free like rising steam from the steed’s manes. ***“My shadows may yet offer salvation, but the heat will see me consumed by taint.”***

Avo understood. He recalled how he gained the Galeslither, striking its paradox via an enforcer and their fusion burner. Considering the sheer heat boiling the air around them, he wouldn’t last more than a few seconds before he came undone with Rend.

Having three active Heavens also proved to be to his benefit. Operating with one empty to protect him from ego-damage or real-death was wise, but he needed to proceed with care. Direct engagements between Godclads were messy affairs in the best of times, and ignorant of whatever just killed him, he had to assume his adversary was as anomalous as he.

Recalling the moving threads of light burrowing into him a moment before the end, perhaps playing its opposite would be to his advantage. With brightness came a shadow. He could dive into the darkness cast by his foe; force them to carry him as a weakness before striking when they were off-balance.

Draus' drills and years of subsumed combat experience served as his executive compass. Everything must pivot into an attack. Hesitation was death. Staying static was death. A passive defense was death.

He needed to bypass dangers and force his foe into bad choices. If the asymmetry between them was too great, he needed to disengage. The rest of his cadre would be on approach to assist, but with Highflame and Stormtree forces amassed, he needed to be prepared to break contact and vanish.

Something he might not be able to do easily if his foe had a geometric or spatial Heaven to cage him with.

That, however, would be to their detriment. In the end, he was still the true peril, the beast that feeds on beasts, with Stillborn burning within and the Conflagration above.

When his resurrection concluded, his setback would be amended and the mind of his adversary would join the gestalt as fresh kindling while the stuff of their Soul would nourish his own.

He accelerated the cycle of his resurrection and prepared himself for the first proper feast he would indulge in months.

Time to reacquaint his fangs with *hard meat*.

RESURRECTION - 98%

"A word, if you would heed it, ghouf," the Galeslither said.

"Speak."

"You do not need to burn the Agnos. I... commend you for not forcing your will upon her and taking what little freedom she has left to enjoy. But you have many minds in you. Many minds can learn alongside you. Study from her in full, and assemble the best model for learning you can. I believe this is the path that offers us the greatest latitude of choice; to alter our own Heavens without ignorance or needing a guide."

"Oh," the Woundshaper laughed. "A rare moment of wisdom granted by the passing winds. How delightful."

“You may thank me by removing this one,” the Galeslither said, neighing at the Heaven of Blood. ***“Find a worthier god fill your confines–”***

“Cease your whinnying, mule–”

RESURRECTION - 100%

Death came at you fast in New Vultun. But Avo was always getting faster.

Data from both his Metamind and Neurodeck accelerated through his cog-feed as threads of light enveloped the space around him. His nerves pulsed with energy as his Celerostylus fired. A metaphysical weight rang against the Domains of Space and Luminosity belonging to his Galeslither and Woundshaper.

With all darkness banished around him, Avo pushed out with his Sanguinity and felt existence barren of matter.

Alright.

Demiplane. He’s been pocketed; captured by a Heaven of Light or something of that nature. Yet, he found himself familiar with this space. He had been here before, several times in his past. He was only able to escape by...

No. Not him. These were Abrel’s memories from her time at Axtraxis. Of when she faced her instructor.

[Instrument Mondelles?] Abrel breathed. Her confusion spilled over. [That’s... what would he be doing down here? That’s impossible, he’s–] She scoffed. [Avo. Use your Galeslither’s wind. Take the backlash and vent your Rend into the threads. Choke their momentum with your Hell.]

He acted without question; one couldn’t be betrayed by a mind they controlled absolutely after all. With his Crown of Virtuality active, he had the option of activating a session and stepping over into Chambers but the thrill of hunting a Godclad compelled him to play a while instead.

The reality around him shook as he redirected a current of wind. Soulfire burst out from his Galeslither as the Heaven screamed. The temperature within the demiplane was different than that of the Layer’s interior by a few degrees. His grip over the Domain of Air broke as his Rend spiked.

Threads of light dove down to pierce him once more.

He invoked his **Halt of the Passing**, and a field of stasis fixed the attacking in place.

For the second time within the length of a second, reality rattled. Existence shook.

The light around him broke.

Being almost omniscient was a wonderful thing.

REND CAPACITY [GALESLITHER] - 42%

He tore back into baseline existence finding himself within the cramped confines of a vehicle. Time moved at a crawl as sensations filled his mind. Patterns of matter traced the skin of his Woundshaper. Shadows lingered all around him as blinking lights greeted his sight. He was inside the drone—eight other people bursting into motion, reflexes firing but reactions dulled by surprise.

Shock and surprise echoed from their minds and evaporated against his. One was a half-formed entity—half-stitched by strings of gold, their appearance hidden by a holographic disguise set to the theme of white noise.

A shockwave tore out across Avo's Sanguinity. The eight unknowns burst like sacks of gore. Blood splattered the passenger compartment within the drone—the purple tones and soft velvet decor came as a surprise. The viscera of the one in stasis—Abrel's former instructor, Instrument Santanado "Starsinger" Mondelles—hovered in place.

Of nine present within the drone, only three were still alive.

Two more than Avo expected.

The counterattack came at the same time Draus' reconnected with his deck and Calvino started talking. Multiple indicators flashed in Avo's HUD just as two enemy Godclads recomposed themselves, bodies knitting back together as if bands of rubber snapping back across the surface of time.

Manta: 821 Meters [ETA 6.4 seconds]

Six seconds was an eternity in a fight between Godclads.

A sudden force seized Avo's flesh as he felt his bones shatter in an instant. His Domain of Biology shuddered. A screech of pain escaped him as he casually wrestled his blood back from the intruder's control.

[Specificity trumps generality, motherfucker,] Abrel hissed, enduring the pain better than Avo. **[Lesson twelve.]**

He fused haemokinetic replacements for his bodies and hooks to struggle against his shredding skin. The Godclad revealed herself to be a face-painted Sang nested with a rig sprouting wings molded from bone. Avo's Conflagration roared out to consume the survivors just as the second of his foes—a figure hidden masked by orbiting arrows of softly glowing silver—made their own move.

The arrows rushed through Avo and accelerated through the body of the drone as if there was nothing there. An inch away from devouring their minds, the world sped up around Avo as agony tore through his shredding sheath. Something hit him. Something faster than he could perceive. The sheer impact should have punched him clean through the vehicle, but the Sang held its flesh tight.

ARMOR INTEGRITY CRITICAL! {2%}

Glass, leather, plastic, and silicon filled the air around him, the drone shattering as his Meldskin somehow kept him alive, parrying the kinetic energy of the impact away from him.

More vicarious understanding filled his mind. The knowledge came from Corner this time—he was enchained by a Heaven of Speed; damned to always be slower than his attackers by a magnitude. Only by killing the user could he be freed. The only problem was that Corner had no idea how this Heaven worked or what its limitations were.

The potential problem was promptly solved by an unexpected victory: the Sang struck at him again using her trauma patterns.

And unlike him with his flesh, she didn't have any means of holding her mind together as her cognition succumbed to his flames.

New understandings materialized in his mind. He knew what they were doing here—what the objective behind this entire affair was.

More important to the present, however, he had means of freeing himself from his current entrapment.

Controlling the Sang Godclad—named Elegant-Moon, descended from the line of Chen—Avo restored his own flesh and eviscerated the Godclad of Speed in the same second.

The Heaven of Speed ceased its miracles and his mind screamed once more. His skin seared and he found himself tumbling from the rapidly decompressing drone alongside Elegant-Moon, falling between pylons carrying traveling electricity.

WARNING: MELDSKIN INTEGRITY COMPROMISED

Recomposition in progress {4%}

Fusing a shell of blood around himself, he noted the Sang healed faster than she burned, steam rising from her eye as her flesh defied the surrounding temperature.

{Avo. We're here,} Draus said, voice calm and unworried. *{Bringing the Manta in. I'll open a passage for you.}*

The stealth ship was forty meters away on the Neurodeck and one hundred and thirty-one on the DeepNav. Grunting, Avo aligned the metrics to the former. He was going to be using voidtech anyway—he resequenced his mind and was—

Something brushed his Domains of Space.

Multiple templates screamed from inside his gestalt. He didn't think. He reacted. Wrapping himself and Elegant-Moon in blood, he speared toward the Manta as a bolt of haemokinetic lightning, peeling internal supports and auxiliary pistons working within the Layer.

Behind, a colossal serpent the size of a megablock skimmed the surface of real space before diving back out of existence. Avo considered diving into the darkness before Abrel responded.

[No! That's a Path-Hydra,] Abrel cried. From her shared knowledge, he understood what it was—a specialized golem made to paradox geometry, spatial, and correspondence affecting Godclads.

With Elegant-Moon's mind fully siphoned into his gestalt, he reviewed the situation.

She was in a cadre under Mondelles, and they were here to discuss the travesty behind the "Conflux arrangement" that saw Jhred Greatling dead, a cell of Incubi and their handler nulled, multiple districts devastated, and Stormtree and Highflame on the verge of open conflict. They arrived prepared for a fight, but things proceeded diplomatically despite the active tensions.

What she didn't know, however, was trouble. With most of her team dead after Avo managed to break himself free of Mondelles' planar prison and surprise the party, she found herself fighting alongside an unknown Godclad, and the Path-Hydra proved to be an unexpected guest as well.

+So,+ Avo said, *+No idea about who are unknown consang is?+*

As their bodies recomposed, she offered but a shrug with her vessel and template both.

[Ghoul,] she sighed. **[If you're asking me, who am I going to ask?]** She paused and noticed Abrel. **[Wait? What? How is she here?]**

+Same way you're going to be staying,+ Avo said. Switching over to his ansible, he sent a message to his cadre. Through the glowing haze within the Layer, the accretions of his team

shone, coming into view. Twenty meters away now. He looked around and felt nothing. They couldn't stay. They needed to go. *{Draus. Got a new guest out here. And a new friend. Think we should call it before the other 'Clads resurrect. Ambush them later if we have to.}*

{Synced,} Draus said. A low noise of frustration rose from her throat.

{What?} he asked.

{You got to have all the fun again,} she grumbled. *{And who the hells that earlier? Think I remember seeing those light threads some—}* Was as far as she got before the Manta was swallowed by a surging mass of scaled obsidian.