

+++

**[Incident Detected]: Higflame and Stomtree** skirmish on the edge between Mazza's Junction and Nu-Scarrowbur; multiple Knots engaging in active combat.

*Location - Warrens; the Spine; Mazza's Junction/Nu-Scarrowbur; Yuulden-Yang Sovereignty*

*Dispatching Paladin(s): Paladin Rores Aellimaei; Paladin Yasnag Jagganoth*

**[Incident Detected]: Biothaumic attack on Sanctus** chrono-refinery in the district of Uteru-Doth; alloy contagion spreading uncontained.

*Location: Tiers; Purgatory; Uteru-Doth; Nicsse-Vomo Sovereignty*

*Dispatching Paladin(s): Paladin Osjack Bowers*

**[Incident Detected]: Multiple Rendbombs** exchanged between Ashthrone and No-Dragon Syndicates in the Broken Serpent district; multiple ruptures detected; estimated deaths at 1.4 million and rising.

*Location: [ERRORRRORRRRRORRR-2(12\$\$!]*

*Dispatching Paladin(s): Paladin Lyric-Charmer; Paladin Nasvack*

**[Incident Detected]: Active firefight** over the Fire's Height at Light's End between Ori-Thaum forces; thoughtscans show members of Clan D'Rongo and Kitzuhada engaged in active combat.

*Dispatching Paladin(s): Paladin Kasman Reeders; Paladin Norag eld'Feyach*

**WARNING: SEEKER SHOTIN KITZUHADA DETECTED**

**ADDITIONAL ASSETS RECOMMEN-**

**WARNING:**

**[Incident Detected]**

**[Incident Detected]**

**[Incident Detected]**

**[Incident Detected]**

**[Incident Detected]**

***[Incident Detected]***

***[Rupture Detected]***

***[Incident Detected]***

+++

-Exorcist Dispatch

21-1

The Doublethinkers

*The city screams in horror and outrage as you sink into the crystal.*

*They shred your body, but the act is purely symbolic. Like burning the molted skin of a snake.*

*You are slithering deeper now. Deeper into the roots of this place. The conduits of the great dream. The columns of spine that hold this realm together.*

*You were right.*

*They were afraid to strike these temples for a reason. Fixtures of history. They were things of cultural significance the people couldn't let go. Mythology formed beyond direct worship.*

*The vivianite is real. Perhaps the only thing that is absolutely real besides you. It is implanted in the dragon, stabbing through streaming time as if it was flesh itself. The dragon is a creature of chronology. Loci can contain minds. Store history.*

*It is no surprise how it can cut the beast. They share a like in a way. A symmetry. Close enough to engender terms of tangibility.*

*You swim through the temporal bloodstream—but only one way. To turn back will cause the cyclers inside you to catch. A malignment of progressive chronology causes unspeakable disruption.*

*Dragons were not always a progressive loop. You do not know this. The Low Masters do. They learned from the pact they structured with the ancient Sang years ago. Two rebellions planned in one transaction cemented by the first lobotomization of a dragon.*

*From that sacrifice came the existence of the eternal city. A hidden refuge from the gods. Shards of memory and ego invested within a chronological leviathan.*

*The fabric of existence radiates out from the locus you now infest. Every ego, every shape, every recollection, every thought, every building, everything that stands, and will ever stand, and will ever be, are spawned from the crystallized corpses housed within their ziggurats.*

*Should've dove in sooner. Should've gone for the first temple you saw. But ignorance is everyone's undoing. Yours. Peace. The city itself. Everyone has lapses.*

*You would have needed to subsume Peace to know. Information is siloed among them. Preventatives for the minds they lost in wars prior.*

*Fighting Ori-Thaum wrought a savage toll. More than they let on.*

*As the dragon you hide in finishes its current revolution, you avoid the reset. If you had remained outside, they would have shifted you back to the point of your inception.*

*Then, prepared, they would have killed you.*

*Now, they do not see you slithering your way out among them, the mists of your transparent being wrapping over them, becoming them, imitating them.*

*Lost to focus and drowned by the volume of outsider thoughts, I guide you through this city.*

*The atmosphere is sour-sweet. The spice of internecine is brewing.*

*The very fact of your survival opens old wounds.*

*The ascended chosen of Noloth past are outraged. Terrified.*

*The dragons cycle, rolling and revolving through each other, the wounds closing and opening, as fangs and circulating maws twist and clash, gouging wounds along ringworlds made from the substance of revisionist history.*

*In the moments after your absence, the citizens spawn back in. They appear along walls. In their homes. In gardens. With families. Next to friends. They reappear in their old bodies as they emerge back into the reality they abandoned, suspicion and paranoia gripping their hearts.*

*You pass into a woman, merging up the straps of her sandal into her silken robes lacquered with mercury. She is screaming at her lover. They were given unto the Hungers as scholars of completing ideologies. Clashing bygone philosophies that have long dissolved in terms of poignance.*

*"How did this happen!" she hisses. She balls her fists and lashes out, as she was prone to do so.*

*You pass from her limb as a leaping gust of wind into his tunic. He stares back at her with exhaustion.*

*“We will find him,” he says, unaware that you have layered yourself over the memories compromising his face, drifting over into the jagged, ebony tips of an ebonta, crawling up its branches to seek an aqueduct.*

*The flowing of blood calls to you. The Woundmother stirs slightly within your being, almost reconstituted. The wind simulated in this world is stilling after phases of anomalous tumult.*

*They continue to hunt you.*

*As you splash into the running waters toward the place where threads of gold rise into a cleft in existence, more people are fighting. Some are screaming at each other. Some seek comfort. Others seek corners to sulk. More than a few exhort their rage on objects.*

*The sourness grows with each second they cannot find you. Desperation feels like a rising note.*

*A woman screams at her child, but in the act screams back at the rest of the city, at herself. They are angry at their own failures. But their hearts are frail. Human. All too human.*

*So they do the next best thing instead of change.*

*So they do the only other thing aside from denial.*

*They blame each other.*

*It is not an unnatural thing. They are only interconnected minds after all. A consensus. Not a gestalt. The fractures of a broken democracy are laid bare for you. The analogy inverts.*

*You and your templates are now a fusion. Unified in ignorance. Unified in action.*

*They are fissioning. Coming apart as you remain fused together.*

*The history they bear across eons remain chronically scarred. Past decisions disagreed upon resurface. Old wounds flare.*

*You are experience distilled. All the aspects chained to a single ego's control.*

*They point to each other and curse each other's names, fractures between their bonds made through their exile, growing.*

*“We should have never spoke to him—”*

*“We? You pushed for that. You and your vaunted scholars and diplomats. We should have done this by means of blood and bone.”*

*“Blood and bone has failed us! It failed us against the Ori! It failed us against the High Seraph. It failed against the Force-Breaker.”*

*“Because you would not commit. Because you hold us back.”*

*“I keep us from the precipice!”*

*Legions of voices echo from singular mouths. Entire communities turn in on each other, roaring their displeasure through all their avatars at once. Warriors weighed by bronze plates cover before crones of silk and satin. Children strike their parents with whips. Buildings crack and decompose.*

*“Enough!”*

*This voice tears through all of them at once. All of them. A single unifying desire remains.*

*To find you. To isolate you. To purge you.*

*Whatever the cost.*

*“Spawn the thought-breakers. Do it now.”*

*“But the pain—”*

*“Every time we use it shreds fragments of our beings. It chips and grinds us away—”*

*“What is the cost if we left him stay? If we let the infection fester.”*

*What is the cost indeed? Perhaps you should act on such a desire.*

*“No.”*

*“No.”*

*“No.”*

*“The slave must be scoured. The beast must be purged.”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Yes.”*

*I drive you to flee faster. To travel along the crimson canals separating each grid of the city. It's just a kilometer away. Just a kilometer and we spill back over into the Nether itself.*

*We are so close when they begin their bombardment again. So close as the entirety of the Nether comes alive with disruptions.*

*The analog inverts once more. They are matter and mind both. You are thought arisen—mind mantling matter.*

*What grinds their vessels winnows your existence.*

*Blastwaves approach all around us. I prepare to lift you out your last. To fling you back into awareness. Your Woundmother is reconstituted. There is blood aplenty for you to construct a new vessel for your shape.*

*But your Techplaguer dances on the edge of precarity. And it is all that prevents you from a final death.*

*You must act with care. But without hesitation. You must—*

*Hold.*

*A patch of stability opens before us. Clearings between looming spheres of devastation.*

*Parts of the city shift. Builds and streets snap and relocate themselves. A single alleyway descends into a low ramp leading to a Maw-berge. The one on which you first resurrected. Aseleri's ship.*

*You never did go looking for that.*

*You drift through the scenery, waiting at the lip of the alley. We study the barge. It looks just as it did: scaffolded walkways over twelve square beds, corpses and detritus rising in layered mounds.*

*A version of “you” is there as well. But the newest iteration. The one they remember. The enhanced Bone Demon sheath sits upon a throne of bodies, pallid ceramite plates veined with fungal fibrils clutched by an exoskeleton of midnight silicon. The pieces making up an Echohead lay scattered around among the surrounding waste. Sporelings rise from “your” body like smoke from a wreckage.*

*This is a lure. An invitation. A body they made for you.*

*But why? And for what purpose?*

*The scene before us seems like a trap, but forcing us out into the open is simple enough. Inflict another series of detonations. Force me to end this lapse. Drive us into another desperate sprint across materialized mindscape in a final bid to bring us down.*

*Or perhaps they have designs beyond your death. Perhaps they seek your capture. Containment. Consumption.*

*There is no trust between you regardless. No mutual position to truly negotiate from.*

*Neither of you desire coexistence now. One must fall. One must be unmade. One cannot be suffered while the other lives.*

*But curiosity still calls to us. And there is something to learn.*

*I release you.*

*I release you to awareness.*

*But stay hidden. And be prepared to shift.*

*Accept nothing from them that you cannot take from yourself. And trust nothing manifested.*

*The barge is moving. Accelerating down a river of blood into a nearby aqueduct, its dimensions shrinking along with the acceleration.*

*Beyond the channel, the disruptions continue, and the wound draws close.*

*Be ready, Avo.*

*We are near the end.*

\*\*\*

***“Blood...”***

The Woundmother stirred, and Avo followed soon after.

The world around him filled his senses, becoming known to him as he flowed down hills of decomposition and rust. Rot became his existence. His splinters merged with wounds, slid into broken ribs, and glided beneath skin.

He perceived the world as he became it. But also through the catalysts of his Domain. Blood told him that he was rushing down a rapid river, speeding down a roaring canal toward his final destination. The air whispered details to him. The shifting of the surrounding ecology as Rendbombs and disruptions grew in intensity, leaving only a thin line untouched in this reality. Matter outlined the world around him, surging currents mapping flesh and biology, alloy and glass, waste and debris.

He knew this place. Knew it first by instinct. Then knew it by recognition.

The bodies were just as he remembered. The decapitated head of the gang-marked woman that he first ate sitting just before his dormant sheath. Along the walls swayed the toppled aero—the one he used to climb up and ambush the scavengers.

There was a dreamlike quality to the scene around him. His past spawned in a realm of minds. An obvious cage made for him and no one else.

He wondered how the Hungers gained this knowledge. How they reconstructed his memories so completely.

But then again, he wasn't that surprised.

Walton had been with them for a time, and he was not fully uncompromised until he entered the Deep Bazaar and was made to do the unthinkable.

His ego existed in five parts, and he kept himself spread out in case of a sudden detonation. He checked the condition once more and felt the jaws of peril close down around him.

**REND CAPACITY [WOUNDMOTHER]: 81%**

**REND CAPACITY [FARDRIFTER]: 97%**

**REND CAPACITY [TECHPLAGUER]: 51%**

His Heavens were stabilized, but still on the precipice. He needed to vent his Rend. And soon.

**[Optimal strategy is using the Fardrifter first,] Abrel advised. She shared her knowledge. [You want to mess up their directionality and spread yourself out as soon as possible. Not sure what they're playing at right now, but it doesn't feel like a trap to me. Not exactly. It's too obvious, and the behavior is too contradictory compared to how they were acting.]**

Some of the other templates agreed. Corner just wanted him to construct a new body and leave. Draus was distant; more machine than human in these instances, prepared to fight on Avo's behalf at any moment.



“Hello?” A voice drew his attention upward. The face of a girl—her skin like tarnish bronze—peeked over the edge. Her biology sang out to Avo and in seconds he narrowed in on the oddities of her nature.

Her eyes were twin-sided. Irises pointed out from her face and another into the back of her head. The same was true of her tongue—of most of her body. Normal as the dimensions of her body seemed, it was like there was another version of her growing inside, pointed toward another place.

He directed a splinter upward—the mist of his presence an unknowable memetic distortion. He sank into her body, through her orifices and pores, and found himself plunging through to another place entirely. There was a world in the emptiness lining her organs. A false scene playing before her eyes.

There, she actively dreamed of Thoughtwave Detonations ripping through the canal, seeing nothing but square plots of blood-nourished agriculture from the side of an embankment.

**[What the fuck?]** Chambers muttered, completely at a loss about what was happening.

Calvino had more of a clue. *{I think this one is double-thinking.}* Avo turned his attention inward, focusing on the EGI. The nanomolecular sunrise swirled like a blot of ink, portraying two scenes in Avo’s mind’s eye. *{Observe. Two series of thoughts are occupying her mind at the same time. Genuine parallel processing. Fascinating. More so in the usage than the manifestation.}*

Another figure spawned next to the girl. This was a warrior by build and armor. A robe decorated with the insignia of a strix flapped over pieces of bronze. The same symbol was carved over his eyes, two birds made by scarification merged into one, wings sprouting wide where his eyebrow was supposed to be.

More figures began to materialize over the other containers. Each of them spoke their greetings as the girl did, and as Avo passed his splinters through them as well, he found their inner worlds committed to perceiving the same delusion as the girl.

**[Again: what the fuck,]** Chambers muttered.

But an understanding was dawning inside Avo. A suspicion, at least.

This was, in a sense, not unlike spoofing a sequence. Or deliberate obfuscation. One of the few reasons why someone might want to think two things at once would be to distract a peeking mind with one set of memories. Something to mask another layer.

“We don’t know if you’re here, Dreamer,” the growing crowd said. “Since you have not been forced out of hiding, and no Soul-anchor mars the city eternal, we will assume you are here. We

understand you do not trust us. We know the escape you seek. And in knowing this, we have done what we could to aid your mistake, distracting our fellow citizens with recalled deceptions. Generating disharmonious constructs to aid in your escape. For now. We wish to speak. Hear us. You do not need to reply. Hear us and know our wants. Our regrets. Our hopes. Hear the whispers uttered by those who live on the periphery of Noloth, for you are not the only one alone that the dream has failed. And that there was more than one dream that failed.”

Uncertain silence filled Avo’s consciousness. His templates stood in rapt attention, paranoia still gripping most, tension filling them all.

The chorus continued. “Before you leave, we beg you to hear us. Only this once. Perhaps it will be enough to move you to deliver us mercy. Perhaps Defiance birthed you with virtuosity enough. All we can do is speak. Speak and hope. Speak and hope for the others will not listen, for the masses cannot tolerate true disunion, and where dogma is rooted in some, regret flourishes in others. Hear us. And then judge. It is all we can ask.”