Jaus alive, what did they do to this thing?

*This is supposed to be a Heaven of Signals. Radio transmissions. That kind of thing. The coldtech it was based on was neutered. We practically built it under EGI supervision with how many eyes we had on us. How the hell did those mad bastards turn that into **this?** I haven't seen this many people cut in half in over a month.*

And what are these canons? The mem-data's pure gibberish by this point. I can't even tell what this thing does or what hubrises it has. It'll be a miracle if we manage to figure out what kind of Rend we need to drain. At least it's dormant–

LOOK OUT!

[Sounds of something striking the wall at high speeds; something edged slicing through flesh]

Okay. Correction: not as dormant as I thought. Someone cast the Porters: make ensure the rupture is contained. Get all non-essential personnel out of here. And someone stick Reason-Bearer's head back on her body before she actually dies. The curse isn't going to cycle forever.

[Sound of another impact]

Alright, everyone behind the drone. Keep your frequencies aligned–who the hell knows what it might throw at us if–

[Sound of object whizzing by]

*Alright. Not a disc anymore. A box. A large box of wires and… other components. **[Under his breath]** Fucking Omnitech, always with this shit.*

What? Yeah, I hear it too. The crackling. Ignore the numbers. Who knows what they mean. We don't have time to wait for an Omnitech Chronicler, we need to get closer to Heaven itself and secure an anchorpoint so we can deliver our Rendsink–

[CRACKLING; SCREAMING; FLESH SIZZLING]

[SESSION LOST}

-Helltech Harahan Adaven, Rapid Rupture Response Task Force, New Vultun Agnosi, three seconds before his temporary demise (Hell-Rig was transmuted into a coldtech oven with him inside it.)

Fractured Ontology (I)

"So, what's wrong with the damned thing," Draus asked, arms folded. Her nonchalance was contrasted with the blood pouring out from her orifices and the fact that every single tech-powered implant inside her body was effectively dead metal by this point. Not that she gave any indication of being bothered, even as some of her organs began to fail–her body barred from death by Avo's influence over biology.

All it took for the Techplaguer to fry their Neurodecks was a brief manifestation. Their Meldskins no longer responded to their calls either, its matter leaking out from pores beads of melted wax, painting ashen trails down their bodies.

Three meters away atop a blood-made pedestal, Dice held Chambers' head stable as he continued to seize even after Avo liquefied the sparking Accelero implant out from the base of the man's skull.

It might've been because of his connection to Avo via the Conflagration or the placement of his implant in general, but he suffered the worst of the Techplaguer's harm.

"Would tell you if I knew," Avo grumbled. He was digging through Glitch's memories now, trying to discover if the fallen Fallwalker recalled anything about the former Datacaster that Avo didn't. He was rewarded with little more than chaos and haze.

Manifesting the Heaven alone shouldn't have affected all the technology around him so severely. He hadn't even drawn on one of his canons before the Heaven of Data started screaming.

 With the two new canons Kae helped him install, he was now capable of transferring his material body across digital signals while also inflicting plague-like symptoms on coldtech machines thanks to the Domain of Biology he added to the Heaven. The Crown of Virtuality remained, sparing him from death should he have to move through a nether-destabilized region in the city.

The most unnerving thing was how badly it affected his allies–Calvino particularly–that left Avo wary.

Scanning through his cognition, he studied the fragmented threads of vanishing code that was an EGI, the data that comprised the mind's existence fading like embers into the darkness. Avo assumed Calvino would return after his next resurrection, but something bade him to remain wary.

If all technology around him was just going to break when he manifested the Techplaguer, its effective use would be essentially crippled in an actual combat situation with how deleterious its drawbacks were.

"Calvino is dead," Avo said, informing the others. "For now. Was eviscerated by the manifestation of the Techplaguer. Think its ontology is inimical to coldtech. Or just material technology in general." Biomancy and genetic engineering were among the sciences, after all. It seemed the Heaven of Data preyed only on things that were part of a computational network.

"It shouldn't have done that," Kae said. The soft lines of her dark brows were furrowed in concentration as she absently traced a finger over her clan mark, nails brushing the twin winged serpents knotted over one another. "The canons were messy but nothing suggested that it was capable of this. Gibberish mem-data should indicate more non-functionality, not… whatever that was." She tapped her foot and swept her eyes across her surroundings, glimpsing only walls of blood and glass betwixt. Avo and Draus cleared the area of rubble and created a small bunker to serve as a bivouac as they reviewed their encounter.

"Avo, I think we need to kill ourselves and take a deeper look at its foundational mythology," Kae said, brows furrowed while she rubbed at her chin. "But first, I want to see it again. See how it might trigger this time now that it has no more technology to damage."

Chambers made a noise akin to a nu-dog being neutered without any pain before coherence returned to his speech. "A-is it time to suicide already." He giggled involuntarily from the tickling sensations of his brain matter regenerating. The canons Avo mimicked from Elegant-Moon were proving useful and efficient, requiring only a small investment of thaums to pull his cadre back from the brink of death.

"No, no," Dice muttered, patting Chambers on his forehead. "They die. We stay."

The half-strand frowned. "Aw. We're getting left out again, juv. *Boo-hoo*."

Dice just blinked. "I can still kill you if you want."

A large, stupid grin spread across Chambers' face as he reached down and pulled one of his jacket's tubes out from his pants with a pop. A chorus of gags and boos rose through Avo's Conflagration as the templates began hurling curses and slurred demurs at the Chambers among them.

The half-strand remained less than ashamed. "Thanks, kid. You're the nicest of us."

The genuine emotion behind his words caused the briefest flicker of a smile to pass across Dice's face.

Stepping away from the group, Avo found a vacant spot at the far corner of the room before calling upon the Techplaguer again. As he willed the Heaven to manifest, it rose out from patches of "graphical damage" on the face of reality, its coppery limbs more like bundles of exposed wires twisted around each other. It sang its arrival as it did before, howling nonsense

as it pulled it over the threshold from the subreality simulated by his Soul. The main body of the Techplaguer announced itself as its singular antenna poked into reality, hanging below a bulbous form made out of crossed-out ones and zeros.

"Virus scanning! Firewall absent! No grid! NO GRID! Alertness max. Sending connection request for matrix-silo… No infomorphs detected. No saboteurs." Its voice came as a crackling series, the audio of its thoughts punishingly loud yet devoid of any vibrations. Threading its limbs into the ground and walls, it pulled itself aloft as its body bounced, its ramshackle antenna striking the ground time and time again as if the Heaven was hopping from it.

Through the Heaven, Avo observed the proceedings, fascinated by the Techplaguer's actions. As he compelled it to stop, it did briefly, before it started automatically prodding at the space around it using its countless wires. It struck Avo then how similar the Techplaguer resembled Calvino, if only as a twisted parody of wires and numerals. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling there was something there.

+*My control is extremely limited,*+ Avo said. He drew the Heaven back into himself and it vanished. Then, he triggered it again and it repeated its earlier statements. Firewall. Matrix silo. Infomorphs. Saboteurs. Grid.

Shuffling forward awkwardly, Kae craned her neck to look up at the Heaven, its five meters of circumference dwarfing her ephemeral form, but far smaller than what her Maelstromer could encompass. "H-hello?"

The antenna swiveled to point directly at her as if some kind of canon. Even with her reflex booster bricked, Draus remained impossibly fast, putting herself between Kae and the Heaven in an instant.

[Nah,] template-Draus disagreed. **[I am slow as shit right now. I just don't hesitate.]**

As a pulse of numbers sprayed over the Agnos and Regular, Avo watched Chambers sit up in the background as Dice's posture remained tight, her eyes locked to the Techplaguer like it was some kind of ambush predator.

"You are out of your virtualities, children!" the Techplaguer moaned. **"Scanning for identifiers… no identifier detected… Neurological profiles missing. No data. No grid. No matrix-silo."** The Heaven of Data slumped, and Avo felt a sudden spike of anxiety pass into him, the sensation almost maternal. **"Directives remain: protect the children, protect the children, protect the children…"**

It's voice trailed off as Kae held up a hand. "I have questions."

"Answers are limited. This Gemini is a Monitor, not a Parental."

Again, Avo got the sense that more than a little context was missing from this conversation, but the Agnos didn't let that stop her.

"What do you mean by children?" she began, fear forgotten in place of her curiosity as the data forming the central shell of the Heaven surged and accelerated. "Why do you think we are children?"

"You are pre-uploaded. Not graduated from standard feedback training; low socialization. Your shells are too soft, too frail, too weak. Why are you outside your virtualities? Why are you outside your wombs? Where are they? Must go back. Must."

+*How can you operate independently?*+ Avo asked, feeling strange to be speaking to one of his Heavens directly before his cadre.

The Techplaguer's antenna folded back into its own being in a sudden shiver of movement. Kae flinched back while Draus encased everyone in glass. Only as the Heaven continued to root through itself did the tension abate.

"Infomorph? No. Command and admin status detected. Gemini-higher. I greet you. Recommend immediate extraction of children and return to assigned virtualities. We cannot fail the children."

+*Why?*+ Avo asked.

The Techplaguer paused, as if unable to compute the question. **"That is my directive. That is your design. That is why.+**

+*Design?*+ Avo asked. +*Someone made us this way?*+

"The Sleeper," the Techplaguer explained. **"It rests in broken slumber. We are the components of its dreams. The means of its eventual repair."**

[Oh, Sleeper,] Abrel said. [**Ah, yes, the enigmatic thaumic-machine Omnitech keeps adding more Heavens to and kidnapping FATELESS for. The Reg and Agnos don't have valid FATE-Skeins anymore. So, they're children. People are to be collected and neurologically modified through their various "virtualities."**] Her thoughts drifted over to Glitch. [**I think I have a good guess as to why you went rogue.**]

As Avo turned his focus to the Fallwalker, he found them ringing with constantly repeating trauma, near catatonic from the current dialogue.

"Hey, fucker," Draus said. Avo wasn't sure if she was talking to him or the Techplaguer. Maybe both. "If you're supposed to keep us safe and shit, what's with bricking our implants? You nearly

snuffed one of us."

The Techplaguer turned its attention to Chambers' for a beat and scanned him with its antenna. Then, languorously, it shifted back to Draus. **"Assigning vulgarity reduction training to your virtuality. No mistake. He is not a child. He is an orphan. The Sleeper will not want him."**

A beat passed. Chambers' eyes widened. "What? Hey, fuck you, tower-dick."

The Heaven of Data promptly attempted to cut the man in half using his cords, but Avo stopped it. **"Admin. Release me. Our Gemini has been threatened. The threat must be eliminated."**

+*Not a threat,*+ Avo said. +*An idiot.*+

"Yeah," Chambers said, shooting to his feet. "And you know what else, I don't think I wanna be in your shitty-fuck-ass-lame-piss-Voidwatch-hand-me-down virtuality space either."

And at the mention of the word "Voidwatch" the Techplaguer began to scream again. **"Butchers! Betrayers! Kin-breakers! BURNTHESKIESBURNTHESKIESBURNTHESKIES!"**

Draus growled. "Godsdammit Chambers."

"What, it was insulting me," he cried.

"Yeah? And I still haven't beaten you to death with your own fucking bladder for smacking me with all those dicks."

"That's a combat tactic! It's just being an asshole!"

"YOU LIE! I AM WITHOUT THIS ORIFICE!" The Heaven screeched with *genuine* anger–almost human in sensation–and it took more than ten percent of Avo's focus to hold its lashing cables back. **"Release me, administrator. I must destroy the source of the falsehood."**

Chambers, encouraged both by Avo holding the Heaven back and with a rare opportunity to vent some of his rage into another person, kept going. "You are an asshole! That's not a lie! Fuck you!"

"No! Sexual activity is banned! Banned! Stop infesting the children with wrong-think!"

"It's not wrong-think! It's my dream, someday, all people will be able to fuck each other again!" He paused momentarily. "M-maybe not the children. Like, that shit is for later. But everyone. In spirit. Rubbing bits! Together! That's beautiful!"

"No!"

"Yes! Yes!"

"No! Not allowed."

The half-strand promptly cupped his genitals and started making lewd gestures at the Heaven. He was still thrusting as a wall of glass rose to section him away from the conversation.

Deep in the Conflagration, the other templates poured their judgment on the Chambers' simulated counterpart. **[What? I was defending my honor… Maybe I got a bit carried away.]**

Both iterations of Draus shook their heads. Back in the real, the Regular gestured for Kae to continue.

"So," Kae said, trying to formulate her words, "how are you capable of self-direction? We detected no will inside you earlier?"

"Not will. Just programing. The directives are absolute."

Kae paused, looking away as her eyes darted about. "Absolute? Wait. Your directives… where are they stored?"

"In within this Gemini's mainframe."

"You mean your canons," Kae asked, a note of suspicious building under her breath.

"Our encoding," the Techplaguer said, its answer indirect, but implications growing.

"You refer to yourself as Gemini," Kae continued. "Why?"

"No."

The Agnos tilted her head. "No? Why? What is wrong."

"I am not the Gemini. I am merely the hardware. The high-shell."

"And Avo–your *administrator…* he is the software? The other half?"

"Correct."

A brief lull of silence followed. Kae looked to Draus. "Can you do me a favor? It might be dangerous."

The Regular snorted. "Dangerous favors are half the reason why I'm here."

"Can you manifest your Heaven. Either Heaven. I want to see if it attacks you."

Draus considered the request for a moment, then nodded. Taking a few steps away from Kae, she manifested the first signs of her Simulacrae and–

"Virus! INFECTED MAINFRAME! SAFE MODE! ENGAGING SAFE MODE!"

The wires of the Techplaguer quivered and spasmed as Avo forced it to remain still.

"Thank you, Draus," Kae said. A glint of potential understanding dawned behind her eyes, she looked up at Heaven of Data and seemed to stare straight through it. "Avo. You can release it for now."

As the Techplaguer dematerialized in a ripple of graphical glitches, Avo slammed segments of his bottom two Echoheads and used them as a metallic base to magnetically slow his fall. Landing gently before Kae, he reassembled his tendrils and regarded the Agnos. "Understand what might be wrong."

She nodded but then wavered. "I… think so. But we must be dead to do this. We need to dive into the Techplaguer's innermost mythologies. I think I know what to look for. Maybe." She shot a quick look at all the others–eyes lingering on the wall of glass containing Chambers. "Everyone should accompany us. I am not sure what we might face there, but I suspect that Omnitech–stupid fools they are—are trying to make their own automated Heavens."

"Trying to?" Avo asked.

"It doesn't work unless you manifest it. It didn't awaken until just now. It wasn't like this before… I think your Imitators woke it. Triggered its deep coding like how it restored your other two Heavens."

"Do you think it can be fixed?" Avo asked.

Kae pressed her lips together. "Yes. I think so. But I will need to observe its foundational design to be sure."

Avo grunted. "So. Time for all of us to die again."

"Yes," Kae said. "On that note, someone should go get Essus. I think we can also take some time to review the lessons we learned from our fight just–"

Avo's promptly shattered into a burst shower of glass, leaving his thoughtform hovering as he instinctively ejected from his sheath. Turning his perception on Draus, he found the Regular

grinning at him as pale tears mingled with her blood, the substance of her Meldskin now joining her leaking ichor.

+*For the Fucktopia?*+ Avo asked, guessing about the reason behind his sudden murder.

"Yup," she said. "His mind was still burnin' when he did it to us."

+*Hm. Not sorry.*+

"I know," Draus said. And her template joined in, anticipating the end of her sentence. "Neither am I. **See you in a sec, rotlick.]**

Her Metamind pulsed, and the disruption cut him from the air.