

+Kare. I, uh, I need to talk to you. I thought—I asked them to be the one to tell you that... oh, gods, oh fuck. I—it shouldn't have happened. She wasn't a soldier, they shouldn't—the fucking Paladins were useless and—and they should've—the fucking bitch just did it anyway and they let her! They let her! I was... I couldn't get there without abandoning my post but they kept going! I had to listen—they made me listen to what they did. I—I+

[Shotin sobbing]

+...Uncle Sho? W-what wrong? What happened? Are you alright?+

+No... no.+

+Tell me where you are. I'll get dad. We'll come to get you.+

+No! No, you stay home! You stay protected. Where it's safe. You have to. You—you can—it's not safe. I can't... she wouldn't forgive me if I let you get hurt too.+

+She? Who's she? Uncle? Uncle Sho? ...Listen, I'm going to try casting mom. Dad says her post got hit by a disruption during the offensive but things should be... be...+ **[SESSION NO LONGER EXISTS; UNABLE TO INITIATE META-SYNC]** +I... I what. I think that something might still be wrong with the Nether, I'll ask dad if he—+

+Jaus, Kare, I'm sorry... I'm so sorry. I couldn't. I had to stay—I couldn't go to her. I heard her screaming for me and I still couldn't... because I had to... I had to protect. Fuck...+

+...+

+Kare? Kare?+

+I'm—I'm here. I'm here. I'm still here.+

-Thoughtcast between Shotin Kazahara and Kare Kitzuhada, Fourth Guild War

17-15

A Moment Most Feared (I)

All it took to shatter a cadre was a single vector of force. An angle they couldn't see coming. An attack they couldn't resist.

Avo's consciousness was a symphony of minds, memories, and qualities manifesting and vanishing on the basis of task and need. Striking at the Paladins was a delicate operation. They were experienced and powerful, but unprepared, and that flaw made all the difference.

Draus acted as something for them to focus on—a problem they could fire upon, tangible and dangerous in the material. Unbeknownst to the city's peacekeepers, however, Avo subverted the very ground beneath them, his blood worming through countless tons of matter as a complex system of tunnels formed in an instant. He kept his Woundshaper on the precipice of manifestation until the last moment, hiding his Sanguinity in the darkness of the underground as their assault began.

He waited until he was directly below Kae and the others before he signaled the next phase to Draus. She leaped over through the reflections of his blood, drawing the Twice-Walker back into her Frame in lieu of her first-wrought miracles.

When they struck at the Paladins' Porter, the breakthrough was sudden and immediate, and the cadre itself came apart in the chaos, granting him the opening needed to separate their forces. He pulled Chambers, Dice, Kae, and the kitten through a thin film of blood into his Zephyr while unleashing his Path-Hydras simultaneously.

From there, the encounter folded into its third phase: the fighting retreat.

The first entities Avo targeted were golems Kassamon identified as having spatial-altering Heavens capable of affecting tangibility. They were unraveled before their Heavens could manifest, and from there the rest of the Knots were left naked against further harm.

Piloted by combat mechs beyond the Rash's means to affect, the remaining drones and golems fought and reacted in accordance with basic parameters, but lacked the skill and cohesion present in most human pilots. Knots were slow and stupid, unable to react cohesively without human direction. They might've had a chance if the mists were still up but with Porter of the Paladins dead and exposed to the unstable Nether once more,

As the Path-Hydras surfaced across the skin of existence, they fell upon the Rash-detail as the Woundshaper sealed the Paladin's spatial gateway using its fortress. A cap of blood and light corked the metaphysical opening and Avo found himself faint away of distant impacts prickling at him from the other side.

Almost immediately, more gates tore into existence across the district, only to be blockaded as well.

Rend climbed across Avo's Heavens as he set himself on eradicating the forces he could.

The golems and remaining drones were the first to be swallowed while each remaining Paladin was granted a path to themselves. The Straying Tempest was caged in a fist of light as Avo placed them on a collision course with Chambers—Lushburner fully manifested. The gun-layered snake that Avo's cog-feed identified as the *Bladegunner* was taken off the field next, vanishing into a sheet of glass while chasing Draus' Twice-Walker.

The last of the Paladins briefly unleashed their Unseen Basion Heaven around the district as a flesh-coated net-like entity with inward-facing eyes before a thread of black fire cut up into the air and their presence vanished. The bifurcated body of said Paladin soon materialized, and Avo melted the corpse to spare himself any surprises.

Sweeping the district frantically to discover the shooter, Avo found nothing as the surviving remnants of the Knots inside him demanded his attention.

Whoever else was operating here—assisting or hunting his enemies—was going to be a concern for a later.

He needed to resolve the final few golems right now. Unleashing his haemokinesis again, he unmade two-thirds of the surviving golems in an instant. Seven shapes mid-transition between mundane matter and divine ontology were drained away by his Sanguinity's crimson haze, their mass feeding his Woundshaper's speed, while their Heavens sank into the depths of his Soul.

Three remaining golems fought on, each bearing the same Heaven that manifested as bell-shaped reverberations of force that would have thundered endlessly through his paths if not they hadn't crashed apart against barricades both resplendent and unbreaking.

Avo drew then on a portion of the mass he claimed and fabricated constructs within his Zephyr. Lightning splashed and radiance danced across each of his missiles. Imbued with the Domains of Blood, Matter, Luminosity, and Lightning all, he flung block-splitting assault at the remaining golems. Dozens of spikes lashed through torrential gales as streaking projectiles, their friction igniting the air and their impacts beyond the point of devastation.

Be it the indestructibility of the constructs or the sheer velocity at which they traveled, the pulsating golems braced, then broke, the force within them blasting wide like radiation-clean warheads of a moderate yield. He caught the blastwaves in nets of light and wrung the devastation dry.

REND CAPACITY [WOUNDSHAPER]: 81%

REND CAPACITY [ZEPHYR OF THE NINE-PATHS]: 69%

Thoughts racing with more gateways spreading across Veng's Stand, Avo shunted Dice and Kae further away with his Yondergales while restructuring his inner labyrinth to begin Chambers' engagement against the Tempest.

The final Paladin was obviously suffering from the Rash, though Avo remained wary of their capabilities. With reinforcements to contend with, swelling Rend, and a scene to flee, Avo's Frame and cognitive processing powers were stretched to capacity. Dueling another Godclad was beyond him right now, but not Chambers. The latter still had more than enough space in his

Hell to accommodate a battle, and the man seemed fascinatingly resistant to the effects of the Rash.

Normally, Avo would doubt Chambers' odds against a Paladin, even if they were green. But these present circumstances were different. Between the Rash and the literal flood of bioforms trailing in his wake, all the half-strand needed to do was create a moment of opportunity for Avo to exploit, and another Godclad would soon be in their service.

Jealousy wasn't an emotion Draus often experienced, but considering she was fighting an armored snake formed from a near-endless source of guns, rockets, beams, and burners, she found herself wanting to switch Heavens more than anything else.

The Twice-Walker was damned useful, but sometimes a motherfucker just wanted to turn the city to ash.

She'd have to see if the ghoul and Kae could help whip something like the Bladegunner up if they managed to get out of this mess alive.

Regardless, the Paladin using it wasn't too bright. Seconds into being chased within her liminal passage, she ejected a sheet of glass faintly sharing the same outline as her and sent it onward while she slinked away by the wayside. Studying her foe from the comfort of her own plane, she saw that the Bladegunner was less snake and more a long *cloud* formed from an endless stream of munitions and guns jutting out from every inch of its skin.

The more it shot, the bigger it grew, the faster it shot, the faster it moved. Every miracle it had seemed to compound into another as its speed shot far beyond her own in an instant.

Again, Jelene Draus didn't often feel envy, but there were times you just wanted someone else's toys for the hell of it.

She dedicated the moment to memory and opened two new passages in her paracosmos. She let her distraction flee out the first, the Bladegunner right on its heels while she egressed from the second, finding herself back in the tunnels Avo made beneath the district.

Cutting back out into real space, Draus shattered the thin, reflective pole that served as one of her junctions and collapsed her Twice-Walker back into her own Frame. Heavy impacts hammered the surface and she took in the scene from high overhead using the Manta.

There looked to be fifteen gold-lidded rings spreading and duplicating across Veng's Stand. Through the blurred translucence of Avo's newest canon, she could see forces massing and ordinance striking his blockades.

She had no idea how long he could keep that up before he needed to vent, and didn't want to find out.

Another tear opened across her left ribs and Draus shattered the homunculi inside her with a thought before collapsing her Meldskin and layering her wound in a sheet of glass.

Yeah. The Bladegunner would've been a fun thing to have, but the Twice-Walker was more than useful at keeping her alive.

Just a shame it once belonged to a Greatling.

Activating her thrusters, she pulled the map Avo sent her before their ambush began and continued with a plane. They needed to make sure the Rend wouldn't spread and that they had no tails before breaking for the George Washington. That was where the heat of Layer One came in, and the gutters after that; false trails and misdirection.

She needed to make distance. The last thing she wanted to risk was getting pocketed after that Silver resurrected. Ain't no way of dealing with that one yet.

The length of the shadowy tunnel shifted and shortened as a trailing breeze guided Chambers toward his destination. A thousand or so wind-flayed homunculi still attached to their umbilical cords swung from his Lushburner as followed Avo's directions.

What was happening? Where was he going? What was he supposed to do?

Chambers didn't know. Which just made this another normal day in his life. Besides the Rash, the 'Clad on 'Clad combat, the use of dead infants grown from his body as a weapon, the metaphysical release of his repressed urges.

Yeah. Okay. Not really a normal day, but who was to judge him? Nobody, that's who! Especially since he just saved the cadre from a mega-high-uber spherag'd fucker that was about to snuff 'em all.

Oh, they were going to appreciate him after this. He could feel it. The ghoul would be giving him Heavens, and the Agnos would actually smile more at him instead of giving those sad eyes from when he told her about growing up ini the Spine. Hells, the Reg might even give him a nod.

He could picture the scene in his head now: he'd be walking down the tunnel into the George Washington with dead homunculi hanging from him like a cape. There, Denton would gasp and the Faither would be like "holy shit, I didn't think anyone would be that powerful. That strong of spirit." Then, Draus would put a hand on his shoulder, and her lip would curl because she always has a solid brick up her ass, but finally she nod, and everything would be great and—

Chambers' reverie came to a halt as the biggest godsdamned spider he ever saw came into view.

Well, kind of a spider. Its legs were like crackling with lightning or some shit, and its body burned as he did. He could actually feel its Domain pressing on his as he approached. The part where it stopped being so bug-like was how all its little pitch-black beady eyes lined its entire body and the giant ball of clasped hands that made up its head.

Little dead babies were dangling from its midsection; no running from the Rash, fuckers

He couldn't lie: Heavens looked weird as fuck a lot of times. Made his mind do backflips when he stared too long. Still remembered when they used to crash against his wards though—those were the days. Soft and weak Chambers. Not-Godclad Chambers. Victim Chambers, owned by Mirrorhead, just doing this and letting life pass him by.

A twinge of discomfort flared up inside him, but he felt better as he shit out another gaggle of screaming infants. He charged these ones with his fire too, priming them like meat explosives, leaving them burning like embers—dangling candle tips about to go off.

He died before he ever gave up his Frame. This was the best of him. This was the most he would ever amount to. He wouldn't survive going back. He couldn't.

**WARNING: FOREIGN SOUL DETECTED
UNIDENTIFIED GODCLAD DETECTED**

**CLASSIFICATION: SPHERE IV [EST. 6712 THAUM/c]
->STRAYING TEMPEST**

Pushing the clouded thoughts from his mind, Chambers studied his foe and came to a hovering halt as he coated himself using all his little friends. Swarms of insects, warped creatures of bone and wing and flesh, Sang bio-drones he burned that day when Nu-Scarrowbur got fucked all clustered around him, forming a barricade of bioforms.

The Straying Tempest, on the other hand, was skittering across cracks of lightning, dashing from place to place.

Oh, so this was gonna be a fast one. That was cut. Chambers hated people who were faster than him. Or stronger. Or smarter. Or better looking. Or had longer dicks. Or nicer legs.

The point was that Chambers had a lot of hate to offer, and this half-strand was going to catch a thick spray of his loathing in the form of dead babies. Exploding dead babies. He was going to do to them what he should have done to that burned Silver cunt earlier—boom!

A pregnant pause hung in the air between him and the Tempest. He tried shouting a slur at

them, but the Nether wasn't working well down here and his Lushburner didn't have a mouth, so the bitch-bird he was just started squawking.

The ribbed folds of darkness lining the path wheezed with the passing wind as the Tempest's many eyes blinked. "I-S-stop!"

Chambers frowned somewhere in his Soul where his actual face should be. How the fuck were they talking? That was bullshit. They didn't have a mouth! Did they have a talking Heaven? Was that a thing he wasn't getting? And they sounded kinda nice too. Soft and shaky, but very crisp and measured. Deep for a non-Scaarthian girl too. At least he thought it was a girl or something.

Actually, he wasn't sure. People had all kinds of voice box modulators in New Vultun. She could be like the *cock-thief* of floor twelve back in his childhood mega. Nasty case, that one. Before the Rash. Big, ugly Kosgan fucker hiding in alleyways with a medical saw, a voice changer, and a holocoat pretending to be a young woman. That motherfucker stole and sold so godsdamned many testicles that Chambers found over a hundred thousand imps on the psycho after snuffing him—

Paladin was still talking. He completely missed what she just said.

"--by the powers vested in me under the Accords and recognized by the city and its Great Guilds. Will you comply?"

Shit. What did she say? He accessed his Metamind and pulled the moment back but found himself losing focus the moment she started talking about legal bullshit. "*You know, I always hated you glasser-fucks.*" He summoned a stream of nu-pigs from his fire and let them fall into Avo's shadows, squealing. Hopefully, the Paladin caught the insult. "*It's always 'Accords' this 'laws' that, but at the end of the day, you're just like all the others! A fuck! A shit! A half-strand. A murder of us little guys because some of us just wanna feel good or something. It's bullshit!*"

It was only after his rant concluded that he realized he still had no mouth. At least the Straying Tempest was staring at all the falling pigs. "Are... are you calling me a pig?"

Holy shit she got it! Chambers made his Lushburner nod in excitement, the bird bouncing and wood breaking as it did.

"I..." The Straying Tempest sagged, seeming exasperated. "Alright, I guess. Then, if you won't comply—"

Chambers promptly flung his collection of homunculi, the cluster of burning infants sailing through the air.

They promptly exploded before getting anywhere near her.

The Lushburner sagged. The Tempest just stared. “I—did you just...”

Chambers charged.