

+Paladin Baers, we're getting reports of a nuclear blast going off over the district of Veng's Stand. Do you have eyes on the situation?+

[Messy eating noises; slurping]

+Paladin Baers?+

+Yeah. A whole bunch of drones. Golems tearing shit up. Next to a megablock. Fucking Syndis, dispatch. You know how it is.+ [Food wrap wrinkling] +Looks to me like some kind of foggy missile or something is—the hell is that—+

[WARNING: OBJECT RAPIDLY APP-]

[SESSION LOST]

+Paladin Baers?+

-Paladin Dispatch

17-10

The Rash Abides (I)

Shotin Kazahara didn't enjoy being nuked. "Didn't enjoy" eventually evolved into full-blown hate during the Fourth Guild War when Highflame decided to keep the nights bright, the air radioactive, and the bombs constant. It was under such constant devastation that he got quite used to being deaf. And blind. And the feeling of his flesh cooking off his bones before he managed to switch to another stack or manifest one of his Heavens fully.

It was thanks to such practice that he only responded with muted astonishment at the sudden blast erupting in the air two meters next to him. His Raiment of the Unbreaking might've rendered him conventionally indestructible, but in less than a microsecond, the air was going to get very, very hot, and his flesh was going to get very, very fried.

It was times like these that he wished he opted to upgrade his Heaven of War some more.

Thankfully, after a lot of practice—and a few thousand deaths—he developed another technique that could potentially save his life: accelerating away from the danger as fast as he could.

His Heaven of Speed manifested fully as a screaming thousand-winged eagle exploded out from his Frame's subreality, switching places with his ephemeral self in existence. A row of eyes ran along the sides of the Heaven's body, as its feathers all bore the directional arrows. A tail of tassels danced out from its open ribs as an orb of watery force shivered, narrowing into a teardrop, pointing to his new vector of hyper-accelerated movement.

Withering wind and phantasmal fire lashed out at him from the corner of his awareness, but caught in the wake of his miracle, they snapped past him, their weight nothing compared to the ponderousness of his Soarer of Endless Pursuits.

The air split against the wings of his Heaven as he dove blindly, trying to avoid the blast, the sound barrier cracking around him as the nearby megablock closed with him in a blink.

Still wasn't enough though. The blast still licked the back of his feathers.

Soulfire erupted out from his eagle as he tumbled out of its form, hubris triggered, his skin and hair igniting even as the Raiment formed around him again.

REND CAPACITY [SOARER OF THE ENDLESS PURSUITS: 66%

The plascrete wall of the block crumbled before him as he tumbled through wall after wall. Something slick and soft splattered across his torso. *Jaus*, he hoped that wasn't a person. Through the tumbling havoc, he found his armor screeching against the tilted floors of a blurred hallway, each turn his body made taking a chunk out from the ground.

Then, the blastwave caught up to him. He knew it from the vibration running through the building, from the way the building shook.

He was lucky that was a low-yield warhead. Something greater and some of the damage would have gone through.

Burying a fist into the floor, he dug a furrow into the ground even as his burn-molted skin screamed for him to stop. His pain editor kicked in a second later, silencing all agony past a certain threshold. Activating his TraumaSight phantasmic, he winced as he reviewed the damage. No broken bones, but both his lungs were burned, eight percent of his skin was missing, and worst of all, his hair was on fire.

Slamming hard into a reinforced door, Shotin came to a final stop and released his armor. Staggering two steps forward, he vomited as he kept walking, already familiar with the after-effects from the last hundred or so times he experienced it. Patting out the flames of his biosilk suit burning on his body, he ran a hand through his hair and sighed. Clumps. Coarse. Falling out.

Rude. He wanted to say, but the only noise his lungs could make was a wheeze. He considered killing himself just for the resurrection but resisted the urge when he knew he would lose his lead.

The blood earlier... could that have been Dice? What else didn't he know about her? How the *hells* did some FATELESS refugee girl go from being owned by a Syndicate in a death game to

having a Heaven and an Incog in the span of a week? It didn't make any sense. There was something else here. A greater force at play.

Just how capable was this Aedon Chambers?

Shotin's session rang and he answered when he saw the name in his cog-feed.

+Oh, gods. Seeker! You need to—you should resurrect. I'll direct the knots—+

+Don't worry, Nara,+ he said, grinning. Part of his cheek detached from his bones. Spatial reality was settling again. They made a good attempt, but this game was going to be over soon. +I'll be fine. Send our boys and girls out to have some fun. Tell them to use their Phys-Sims. Follow the big red container. I'll bring the cage down real soon.+

His nanosurgeons screamed as they fought to restore his body, their efficiency strained to the max as he directed them to his lungs first so he could breathe again. Turning to his right, he saw a juv—maybe no older than ten—staring at him with a big, cold bottle of SurgeMax.

Hmm. Cherry flavor. His favorite.

"Flick you... fifty imps... for a sip."

The kid blinked. "F-uh—Seventy!"

Shotin laughed. His body didn't like that. He doubled over. Fucking kids and their bargains. He swore the vats were growing them too smart these days.

FATAL INJURY DETECTED!

FATAL INJURY DETECTED!

FATAL INJURY DETECTED!

INJECTING WOUNDHOUND

FATAL INJURY DETECTED!

SHEATHE DECEASED

UNABLE TO TRANSFER WOUNDS

WOUNDHOUND UNABLE TO MANIFEST

EGO CONDITION: 85%

POTENTIAL FOR SHEATHE-SHIFT FAILURE: 12%

ACTIVATING PHYLACTERY...

The world exploded back into being for Quail Tavers as she felt her mind hammered into her new body like a cold spike. A head tore through her head and she kicked and swam in the Sang-treated amniotic fluid bathing her body. Through the glass, a layer of loci poured ghosts back into her mind, each of them connected to a larger crystal overhead, the lobby hosting the space needed for her ego to make the transition between bodies.

She calmed a moment later as she realized where she was. Reconstitution. Sheathe-shift. Her other body just died—she was lucky her mind was still intact and that she killed her Incog before the Skimmer could shatter her entirely. Not even a Phylactery could save you from being nulled. Nothing to pull back.

Relaxing, waited for the Rebirther to drain and its water to break. Phylacteries were just phantasms—there was a whole lot of No-Dragon bio-shit behind it too. Something about leaving a part of your flesh in the Rebirth while keeping it connected to your mind so it the mechanism actively modifies the body to resemble yours in real time.

Some Necros claimed it confused the Nether with one mind linked across two exact copies of the same bodies. Quail just thought it was a good investment and an easy way to bug out on a run gone bad. Or “survive” a nuke going off in your face.

Shame the fucking thing cost half a million imps to maintain per day. Good investment or not, that was a killer on the imps.

As the last pieces of her salvaged Metamind clicked together over her skull, she activated her session again, calling White-Rab. *+Rab. Run just got fucked. Godclad ambush hit our girl—and the cage might've snapped shut around our special wish-granting ghoul too.+*

+I know,+ White-Rab said, tone flat and focused. *+Looking at the scene from Mellow's golem. Ori-Thaum. Incubi are on scene, casting their Skimmers out for him. He's four kilometers behind the megablock—there's a knot approaching him and the girl. I'd say he has twenty seconds before they're on him. Maybe less.+*

+So? What? Pull the plug?+ Tavers asked.

White-Rab laughed. *+Hells no. He made me a 'Clad—he's all I got left of Walton. I'm not letting these Silver half-strands have him. Those Incubi jacking to their own deaths—I'll going to be*

hitting their logistical end. Maybe cripple a knot or two to keep them off his back. How soon can you get back in the action?+

The squire grinned and accessed her ship's systems. Circling Veng's Stand was easy when you used a disguised garbage hauler. She initialized the boot-up sequence for her *Impact-XIX* Highflame combat skin and began picking her arsenal. Truth be told, she always liked extractions more than infiltrations. *+Think you can dance in the deep for two minutes?+*

+My arrogance wants me to say yes,+ White-Rab replied. *+So I'm just going to say yes.+*

+And claim it's a fluke after they null you? Getting used to playing dangerous games now that you can't die, huh?+

He cut the link. She smirked and cast her jocks. *+Hey. Mellow. Dump some Rend bombs on those knots. Let's start some shit.+*

+Finally. I thought we were only gonna get to watch.+

Avo didn't know how Dice kept her grip on the construct when they were struck by the explosion, but she was making a habit of surprising him.

Shotin Kazahara vanished from before him in a blinding instant—the flash of a many-winged shadow and then nothing after. Avo's consciousness clawed for a mind to devour but tasted only absence as his entropic barrage lanced into the open sky and impacted something. Avo frowned as Calvino sighed at the potential collateral damage. His Rend was nearly full, and he was preparing to discharge everything into Shotin. Now, he only hoped it hadn't hit a block. That had good odds of killing a good few thousand uninvolved FATELESS if it hit a population-dense section.

The blast—Draus detonating her reactor from what his Neurodeck indicated—was measured compared to the devastation exchanged during a block war, but they were still close enough for Dice's construct to begin evaporating.

Tungsten could bear high heat, but a fusion reactor was still a fusion reactor.

Drawing away matter from the nearest sources, he cocooned himself and the girl again and triggered his Stormwreathed miracle. Their physical bodies crackled into flowing energy as the shockwave swept through them, spiking their sparking forms across the district. They hit the street like a thunderbolt as he jolted back into stable matter with a heavy discharge.

Everything electrically powered for twenty kilometers promptly shorted out with an explosion. Engines died. Water heaters exploded. Peacemakers stopped working. Thaumms filled Avo's Frame.

[Collateral damage is a motherfucker,] Corner muttered.

REND CAPACITY [WOUNDSHAPER]: 6%

REND CAPACITY [ZEYPHR OF THE NINE PATHS]: 86%

REND CAPACITY [DATACASTER]: 55%

Keeping the protective shell around him active even as their bodies returned to normal, Avo turned to check on Dice even as the first waves of perception washed over them.

+You alright?+

She didn't respond, instead looking down to check on the nu-kitten in her coat.

A weak meow sounded a moment after, and Avo felt the blood rushing through its veins while its heart screamed. The creature was confused. Terrified. And probably the only other living thing that made it out of that building.

He was going to mock Draus about dying here later. Hopefully, the Necros would be too busy chasing him to notice her resurrection.

Just as he extended his Sanguinity to locate and liquefy Shotin, the first trauma pattern chipped a dozen ghosts from his mind. Followed by three hundred. That assault lashed out at him through the drones closing in on him, firing conventional munitions at his haemokinetic protections.

Avo scoffed.

His Conflagration and Sanguinity swept out together. He absorbed their flechettes and devoured their traumas. A hundred tons of matter vanished from his surroundings as his Woundshaper's thaumic mass climbed with its tonnage. Across the Nether, the strike cells barely had a moment to react before they belonged to him.

Knowledge entered his awareness. Sessions and information he was formerly denied surfaced in his mind. Twenty two new minds entered his template as each of the Incubi found themselves unbalanced by their sudden deaths while the jocks wept and shrieked inside him, unable to face their own ends.

One moment they were flinging mind-breaking horrors at what looked to be strange fire.

Then they were burning. They were the fire and the fire was them.

Corrupting the loci of the drones just before a knot of golems approached, their protections pushing the touch of his haemokinesis away, he accessed the machines he turned via their session and kept them under his control.

The golem—despite all the armor built into their bodies—were not ready for the drones to fire into the open exhausts of their engines. Flames gushed out the more materially rooted golems while the shield-emitter—something that looked like a hovering watchtower more than a weapon of war—turned to shield only itself from harm as Avo drank the Heavens out from the other two and melted away their structures.

HEAVENS OBTAINED: RNEBREAKER (WAR/STRENGTH) x2

As he triggered the sessions for the Incubi cell's Mirror-Convex and subsumed his mind as well, he contemplated this final defensive Heaven with lecherous hunger and yearned to possess its power. The impenetrable protections it offered would go well with his Woundshaper, seeing as he could feel its presence pressing against his Domain of Luminosity.

The only question was how to get through to it. The jock piloting it reacted fast—cutting themselves from both lobby and comrades. It seemed as if they deactivated their Auto-Seance as well.

[Avo. Get the fuck out of here. You can snatch this Heaven some other time. We need to go before.]

Then, two things happen at once.

The first arrived as spatial reality stabilized, and the sky above changed. Metaphysical stacks of translucent shot through the ground as the environment distorted around him, the surrounding district still present, but overlapping with another space entirely. The presence of people and drones vanished from his awareness in an instant. It was like he was alone.

The second was the sudden deactivation of the golem, its protective shielding winking out for no obvious reason.

Avo wasted no time, seizing both matter and mind as he claimed it for himself.

HEAVEN OBTAINED: SHINEGUARD (LUMINOSITY/PROTECTION) x1

Yet, as he flooded the locus of the machine, he found the jock already nulled. In fragments. Only a single string of mem-data provided any clues.

+Avo. Going to make you an opening. Get away from the block. Brace for Rend dump.+

Uncertain who the memory was from or how they knew his name, he reacted as he considered, Boltstriding just as a tide of perception splashed through the district while a jungle sprouted into existence around him, Avo found himself dashing forth into a place that resembled the Veng's Stand but was empty of people. Ignoring the change, he spread his Sanguinity wide, but found only greenery and woods for leagues and leagues beyond.

He wasn't in real space anymore. A weight was treading on his Domain of Space. An immense weight he felt earlier.

A thoughtcast flooded the air. *+Hello. Good morning. This is to the bastard that ruined my hair. I see you. Little lightning bolt. You have five minutes to come to the megablock so that we can talk like civilized people. I won't lie—I'm probably going to punch you at least once, but that's better than getting shifted into an undersea plane where you'll be promptly crushed by all the pressure. Dice. If you're the one who managed all this, I'm impressed; but still, fuck you, I'm bald now. Come out. Don't make me snuff you. Shotin.+*

[Fuck,] Corner said. **[We're in his pocket. We're in his stacks.]**

[He... seems nice,] Chambers said. **[Maybe we should talk to him? Y'know. See if we can get close and burn his ass.]**

That gave Avo an idea. He stopped striding and activated his Incog again. Waves of perception were radiating out from the tower, but they wouldn't reach him yet. Turning to study Dice, he let out a breath as he began to plot.

"So," he asked. "Do you have a preference of powers?"

The girl blinked, her holocoat glitching from being Stormwreathed. "The gift? Now?"

"Might not be a better time," he said. "Might also ask you a favor. Give you another gift after."

"What's that?"

"Might need you talk to someone. Use your mind for an ambush. It'll burn a bit."

She just stared at him in silence. "I want the cat to be safe."

Avo studied the small creature peeking out from the lip of her jacket, hissing at him. "Okay. I'll make sure the cat's safe."