

*{ATTENTION CITIZENS:*

*THE INVESTIGATION INTO THE MASS SUICIDES AT [HEAVY ALLOY PLANT Z-1338] IN DISTRICT [2GATE] HAS BEEN CONCLUDED (focus here to relive death simulations).*

*TRAWLERS HAVE DETERMINED (0) SUSPECTS INVOLVED IN THE INCIDENT.*

*IN LIGHT OF THIS UNFORTUNATE EVENT, WE WILL BE OFFING INCREASED JOY SUPPLEMENTS FOR ALL WORKING PROFESSIONALS ALONGSIDE A NEWLY DEVELOPED INSTA-THERAPY NEUROMOD (purchasable at 88,000 imp; 50% discount for citizens rated above "CHASSIS")*

*PLEASE REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE AN ESSENTIAL ASPECT OF OUR MANIFEST DUTY. YOU HAVE CHOSEN TO RESTORE THE GREAT SLEEPER, AND THE SLEEPER HAS CHOSEN YOU IN RETURN. FOR EACH WHO FALL, THEY WILL RISE AGAIN NEW AND UNVARNISHED WHEN THE ALLWALL IS BROKEN AND THE SLEEPER AWAKENS.*

*VIRTUAL VIGILS FOR THE DEAD WILL BE HELD THIS NULRISE. FEEL FREE TO DOWNLOAD A VIRTUAL ALTAR OF THE DECEASED TO CARRY THEIR OPTIMALITY WITH YOU. DOWNLOADS LAST UNTIL DATA IS FULLY FRAGMENTED. FIRST COME, FIRST SERVE.}*

*-Omnitech NooSphere Report*

*18-1*

*Broader Horizons*

Kare resurrected just in time to see a giant in radiant armor striking the glass that surrounded her. Blinking as her cog-feed loaded and her phantasmics came online, she realized she knew that armor—knew the shimmering bronze plates and the person who wore it.

Shotin Kazahara. Her uncle. Not two meters away hovered her mentor, Paladin Maru Sandrupal, with a cluster of block-sized pylons sparking in the backdrop behind him.

How did they find her? Where was she? Her memories were coming back together, but the way her thoughts flowed was as if parted waves returning to a crashing union. There was a gulf inside her mind that was filling and clarity was slow to return, her focus broken by each ringing impact made by Shotin's gauntlets striking her transparent prison.

The structure that held her possessed a strange luster to it, something between polished alloy and a sparkling mirror. Fragments of clotted crimson clattered against her combat skin, and she noticed the deformation of her cage taking on abnormal aspects. It dented under Shotin's fists like metal while also fracturing like glass, breaking instead of tearing, but deforming before each

crack. The presence of the clashing properties made her skull spin as she tried to clear her head.

The lead-up to her death was a haze of conflict and chaos. She was swallowed by one of the enormous hydras and then found herself in a wind-wrought tunnel. Shadows swirled about her like they were currents to a tempest, the air whipping at her form like a hurricane. Then, she remembered the battle.

And her enemy.

*Chambers. The Lushburner.*

She was tearing him apart by the end of the fight. Shredding his Heaven away piece by piece.

But when she closed in to end things, the *fire* flowed, becoming a *conflagration* that boiled away her very thoughts.

A final memory lingered inside her mind. Vivid images of Chambers emerging from the ashes of his Heaven, sneering down at her as he resequenced his own Metamind. Ghosts folded and dove across both ends of his halo, rising and falling like cresting waves. Finally, she noticed a single trail of ghosts flowing back into the center of his mind as what appeared to be a spire rose from the phantasmal stratocumulus clouding the inner confines of his mind.

A Ghostjack? He had been holding it in reserve?

*“Oh, the D’Rongos are going to like these sequences,”* he said, snickering darkly to himself.

With each passing second, the fire ate away more of her perception—more of her consciousness. It wouldn’t be long until there was nothing left for her to burn. With a wave of his hand, Chambers called upon miracles of blood and shadow as he flicked her body aside, entombing her upon a structural support within Layer One.

Looking down at the throne she sat upon, she wondered what the man meant by this gesture. To kill someone yet leave their body perched on a throne seemed too polite to be an insult. Yet, during their encounter, he fought like a vile animal, deliberately trying to birth his homunculi all over her, tearing the stillborn infants from his body and detonating them like bombs when she was—and *wasn’t*—in the vicinity.

Shaking the whiplash from her mind, she pushed herself up and activated her skin’s thrusters just as her uncle shattered the blood-made walls that sealed her. She tried to stand up, but he forced her back down on her seat as he planted a heavy hand on her left shoulder.

*+I’m fine,* + she said, trying to brush him off. She hoped her helmet’s phase shield obfuscated her face enough to hide her blush from Paladin Sandrupal. Nothing like family to embarrass you

in front of a superior. *+You don't need to—+*

He suddenly seized her by the other shoulder and shook her hard. *+Why... are... you... here...+*

She tried to push him off but found his Heaven an endless font of might and mass. Bouncing back and forth between his hands, Kare sighed and spat her lie, trying to save what face she could. *+I wanted to see what Rash-detail is like.+*

*+Why? Why? Why?+* With each question, his armored skull was pressed against her. She pressed her lips together and just frowned, meeting his silver-bright eyes without difficulty. Uncle Sho always had these episodes when he was worried. *+Listen, there are vicarities for these things. Hells, there are vicarities for childbirth—those are hell too, you shouldn't try them. But the point stands, why?+*

*+You know why!+* she snapped. Lightning flowed through her as she drew upon her Heaven and leaped behind him through his very fingers. She ignored him calling her name as she floated over to face her mentor, trying not to wilt beneath his flat gaze.

*+Funny who I ran into on the way down,+* Paladin Sandrupal said. *+Funnier how I had to stop him from beating Kassamon to death when the idiot got in his way. You got a real caring uncle, kid.+*

Kare didn't know what to say, so she stayed silent.

*+So,+* Paladin Sandrupal continued, regarding her with a raised eyebrow, *+how'd you like Rash-detail.+*

Kare shrugged. *+I think I'm more suited for desk work.+*

Her mentor grunted a rumbling laugh. *+That's what we all say.+* He looked past her and regarded Shotin. *+You know, I should start reading our op-briefs instead of letting you give me the condensed version. Seems like you neglected to mention a few things to me this time.+*

She straightened her back and drew in a breath. *+I have no defense for my perfidy, and will submit to a formal inquiry if you deem it necessary.+*

Paladin Sandrupal groaned. *+Absolutely fucking not. Don't think you get to juke my ass and then punish me more with paperwork, rook. You know how much I hate filing forms and shit. You know I'll be making you write the report in the end anyway. No. Let's just call this an... unhappy coincidence. How's that sound, Seeker?+*

*+Accurate,+* Shotin responded with a smile in his voice. *+I don't suppose I need to leave a statement?+*

*+I don't suppose you'll come quietly if I try to bring you in?+*

*+Well, let's not be reckless with your life, Paladin. What would your wife think?+*

*+I don't have a wife.+*

*+What? A man with your face leads a bachelor's life? A husband perhaps? Or are nu-dogs more your flavor? Sexually, to be specific.+*

*+Uncle!+* Kare hissed, voice cracking from sheer outrage.

*+Relax, turnip, it's just a conversation.+*

*+Till its not,* + Paladin Sandrupal replied.

The two men just stared at each other, neither afraid but both wary. *+How's a piece of shit like you have a niece like her?+* Maru asked.

*+She takes after her mother. Tell me, do you amount to anything in this partnership, or is she both the muscle and the mind?+*

*+Well, that depends on how many drinks I've had between shifts.+*

Shotin laughed. *+That's all you do? Drink?+*

A pause followed. *+I might indulge a little harder.+*

The Seeker cocked his head. *+Suncloud?+*

*+Maybe a little nova if things are about to be shit. End the day with suncloud to take the edge off.+* + Paladin Sandrupal coughed.

*+My man,* + Shotin said. *+Old Thousandhand would be proud. Not bad, glasser. Seems like you only got a baton instead of the full stick living up your ass.+*

Kare found her eyes drifting between the two men as her head spun. *+What the hell just happened? Weren't you two about to... uh...+*

*+Nah, we got over that,* + Shotins said.

*+Keep up, rook,* + Maru added.

What was this insane macho bullshit?

+I—I remember who attacked me,+ she said, redirecting the conversation toward a more worthwhile direction. She shared her memories with her superior and ignored her uncle waving at her. *+This is a Paladin investigation. You can leave now, Seeker.+*

She had the feeling he was glaring at her. *+Is the person who snuffed you Aedon Chambers?+*

Both Kare and Maru froze and faced him.

+What exactly was it that you might've been doing here, Seeker,+ Paladin Sandrupal said, keeping his tone conversational.

+Oh. Just taking in the sights. I wasn't hunting a potential acolyte of the Low Masters or anything like that.+

Sandrupal nodded. *+Good. Glad to hear that. So, about this hypothetical acolyte...+*

*+A disgusting, vile, subhuman half-strand piece of shit that whips his cock out in your face and sprays aratnids at you.+* Shotin illustrated.

Horror bloomed inside Kare as she realized how the Rash was triggered.

+You know the thing I can't figure out? Why he left your corpse so intact.+ Shotin looked Kare up and down. *+From our very unpleasant few minutes together, he didn't strike me as someone who had all his sequences together. But he left you mostly unharmed.+*

She shot a quick look at her mentor and he gave her a nod. Another wisp spilled out from her Metamind and connected with Shotin's accretion. Her near-term memories played, and in seconds disbelief spiked into quiet, thundering rage.

+Those motherfucks,+ Shotin said, tone entirely calm. *+I was wondering how... I thought it was too easy for him... Godsdamned D'Rongos. Of course, those snakes are behind this. That just makes too much sense...+* He giggled mirthlessly to himself as he clenched and unclenched his hands.

+Uncle Sho?+ Kare asked.

+I'm good,+ he replied. *+I got another angle to dig through is all. Another angle, and a piece of shit I need to slowly kill.+* The hate he felt for Aedon Chambers ran like a molten stream – searing, slow, unceasing. Looking over the two Paladins, he shook his head. *+There was a breach at the Trident. A nexus was stolen. A Glaive is still missing. We are engaging in pre-war protocols.+*

Sandrupal exhaled. *+Shit. You're saying clan politics followed my rook down the Tiers?+*

+Maybe,+ Shotin said. *+But it feels bigger than that. Chambers was trying to meet an informant here. A Godclad named "Dice"?*

+The FATELESS girl's a Fallwalker?+ Sandrupal said after a moment's recollection. *+You're sure of that?+*

+No. She's too well-equipped to be a Fallwalker. Two Heavens at the least with a full cadre backing her up. Chambers might be psychotic, but he's got expert help behind him. And some of the most advanced coldtech I've seen in a while. There's Guild support behind them, and consider all the Heavens and resources they had, a pretty wide range at that. You know what that means, glasser.+ Shotin held a finger up to his armor, miming a shush.

+Yeah,+ Sandrupal said, though his mind was thick in frustration. *+I know the score.+*

+Good,+ Shotin said. *+No one's excited to repeat the events of the Second Guild War, anyway. Keep yourselves safe. Kare. I'm gonna need you to request some leave.+*

+What? Why?+

+Because I'm not waiting for the D'Rongos to take another swing at you,+ he said. *+I can't keep you safe if you keep bouncing around the city playing peacekeeper.+*

Anger tightened in her gut but she kept it contained. He knew better than this. He was trying to rile her. Rattle her enough that she seemed unbalanced before her superior so he could press his will. He always did shit like that. *+I don't need your protection, uncle. I can manage myself. And I'm playing at anything. I have a job. I'm going to do it.+*

Shotin cast a quick look at her former enclosure and scoffed. *+Listen, Kare, you wanna be an adult? I'll treat you like an adult. You got hit by a Conflagration. Incubi mind-burner. That's the type of stuff we use to salt the Nether and burn entire lobbies.+* She opened her mouth, shocked at how openly he was talking about Ori-Thaum's forbidden devices before she noticed a Sandrupal's perception splashing off to stare at a nearby way, as if unaware of his surroundings. Realization dawned inside her a moment later. *+When did you—+*

+Spoofed in deep twelve seconds after running into him,+ Shotin said. *+Come on, turnip. It's me. And you tell him that he needs to stop using Sanctus wards. They're shit. And double to my point, if I alone can do this, what's going to happen to you if Clan D'Rongo decides to stop with the warning shots and just go for you? You're not an Ori anymore. Not after you took those oaths. And the damnest thing is they can't do a single thing to keep you safe.+*

+I don't want to be kept safe,+ Kare replied. *+And get out of his mind. H-have you been inside his mind this entire time?+*

*+Well, yeah, I saved us another three pointless arguments, didn't it?+*

*+I can't fucking believe you... You absolute piece of shit...+*

*+And there you go sounding like her again.+ Shotin shook his head. +Look. Whatever is happening, it's more than the Paladins can handle. Naeko took you all over the deep end as is. Detaining an Instrument of Highflame; arresting an Ori-Thaum Elder. You might just be an opportune victim. A target on the intersection to multiple parties they want to threaten.+*

*+Then let the threats come,+ Kare said. +I'm not afraid.+*

*+Well, I am!+ Shotin snarled. +I am! I am! I just... I just spent a day shitting dead babies out from my flesh, and I resurrect to find a literal flood of Paladins about to fuck everything up. I resurrect to find your name among the active personnel for Rash-detail. I resurrect trying not to throw up because I see you listed as missing in action.+*

*+And your response was to, what? Jack into the minds of my colleagues? Twist them to your own ends.+*

*+I'll do whatever it takes to keep my clan and Guild safe. To keep what's left of my family safe. You understand what that means.+*

*+I-+*

*+It means that I'll be watching over you even if I have to frag every other Paladin there ever was. You understand? I failed once. It won't happen again.+*

And there it was. The old wound that never healed in him. The shadow of her mother's death cast a pall over both of them. Kare folded her arms as her insides turned into a screaming cocktail of anguish, resentment, and concern. *+We can't keep living this way. We can't keep living in the past. I know what I want. You'll do anything for me? I die to see this city made safer. So. Where do we go from here?+*

A silence settled between them. Sandrupal, still befuddled by Shotin, cleared his throat and began to hum to himself.

*+Sorry,+ Shotin said, turning away from her. +I just... uh.+*

Kare wanted to reach out. To comfort her uncle. But anger won over compassion, and she kept her arms folded instead. *+Yeah. You're always sorry in the end. We always end up doing this again.+*

He let out a breath. *+I'll be going back up the Tiers. I'm not going to be telling the Council of Elders about this. Not until I can put whatever evidence I have before a Heaven of Truth. I*

*suggest you do the same. For both our sakes. In the meantime, I'm gonna give you an Agnos to contact. Get your Frame boosted. No arguments about this. If our family ends up at war, I want your Sphere high and Soul bright. Do this for me, right? Keep yourself safe for me.+*

She didn't respond immediately, waiting till he began to move away. *+Who's going to keep you safe?+*

Shotin paused. He turned back to look at her. *+What?+*

*+Do you think it's easy for me, knowing you or dad can die at any time as well?+* she asked. He gave no answer. *+You're a piece of shit, Seeker Kazahara. Selfish. And selfless.+*

*+Yeah,+* he said, strength bleeding from his voice.

*+Go, then. I'll see if I can find anything on our "shared problem." And let my mentor go.+*

That earned a chuckle from Shotin again as speed built around his body. *+In a couple of seconds, turnip. Just suffer me for a few seconds more.+*