

*+ATTENTION ALL SUBJECTS! THE DISTRICT: [VENG'S STAND] IS NOW UNDER  
QUARANTINE! WOMBRASH OUTBREAK IN PROGRESS!*

*PLEASE RETURN TO YOUR HOMES AND STAY AND SHELTER.*

*PLEASE DO NOT ACCESS ANY NETHER LOBBIES HOSTED IN THE HIGHLIGHTED  
DISTRICTS DURING THIS TIME!*

*THE AFFECTED ARE RECOMMENDED TO FIND A SOURCE OF FIRE AS SOON AS  
POSSIBLE! IF YOU ARE UNABLE TO FIND A SOURCE OF FIRE, PLEASE COMMIT TO  
YOUR CIVIC DUTIES AND COMMIT SUICIDE VIA THE FATEST METHOD AT HAND—A FREE  
TIER LOTTERY TICKET WILL BE PROVIDED TO YOUR SURVIVING FAMILY MEMBERS.*

*FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH STANDARD PROTOCOLS WILL RESULT IN THE  
DEPLOYMENT OF LETHAL FORCE VIA CONVENTIONAL, COGNITIVE, AND  
METAPHYSICAL MEANS.*

*WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION. PLEASE ENJOY YOUR DAY!+*

*-Exorcist Public Nether Announcement*

17-14  
Outbreak (II)

By the time Shotin's corpse splattered in half on a steel-wire fence, Avo was doing little better.

Victory was hard to celebrate when a conjoined cluster of babies ruptured from your distended bowels. Each passing second filled Avo with pain beyond description, like a part of his very being was trying to shed itself, releasing itself out into the world as a flood of homunculi.

They spilled from his Woundshaper in rivers of writhing red, their haemokinetic bodies shimmering with a mix of properties beneath the light of Layer Two.

Channeling lightning through himself, he deliberated on Boltstriding over where Shotin's Soul burned across the face of reality, his resurrection anchor already scabbing over a mangled mass of flesh. Between the caked remains of the man himself were oozing spills of pulped infants, their little bodies leaving his exposed inside as a slurry.

Sphere Six. Dead like all the others. Dead in an instant. Dead like Avo was soon going to be if he wasn't constantly using his haemokinesis to pluck and plug the metaphysical sores forming along his Woundshaper. All that did was delay, however. He needed to die. But before that...

**[Avo,] Abrel said one of the few templates capable of enduring the suffering, [You need to get out of here. Grab your cadre and go. Get the Reg. Scoop up the juv and the Agnos. Leave**

**fucking Chambers to eat shit and die. If you stay here, there's no way you're getting the Seeker's mind. Not a chance. He'll come back with his Parallelist and pocket us in the heart of the sun—pinch us all out like a candle. You need to go. Go. Now!]**

**[Or stay.]** Elegant-Moon's phantasmal presence offered a pleasant smile. **[Stay. I enjoy these sensations—]**

Avo ignored the Sang and temporarily released some of his mass and demanifested his full Heaven so he could speak with Draus with reduced time lag. His ansible pulsed within his skull and found the Regular casually shattering her right leg before reconstructing a transplant from the shards she just made. A glass cage stood across from her and five people twisted and moaned between the bars.

Their bodies were disfigured by extreme bears and fried umbilicals dangled from their open wounds. Judging from the ports along their back and spine, they were probably golem jocks—a rare moment of mercy on the part of Jelene Draus.

Considering how much pain they were in, however, perhaps it would have been more humane to snuff them instead.

*{Fuckin' Chambers,}* she chuckled, more annoyed than angered. A few little bodies lay at her feet, but she was enduring just fine, showing no hint of pain at all. Regulars. It was like their minds existed entirely separate from their wills. *{Did you get 'em?}*

She was talking about Shotin. *{No. Head blew open. Homunculi spilled out. Technically Chambers got him.}*

The Regular snorted. *{Better not tell him that. The stupid sow-born bastard just made his own ass public enemy number one. I'm gonna fuck him up somethin' bad for this. Yeah. I'm gonna take my time and do it slow.}*

Avo breathed. *{Cadre building activity later. Leave now. Open passage to unoccupied spot in gutters. Kill ourselves and burn the bodies before going back.}*

*{Loud and clear on that. I got the Manta holding overwatch over Kae and the others. She and Dice are lookin' mighty fried, but alive. Our half-strand... gonna take some time to—}*

**WARNING: FOREIGN SOUL DETECTED**

**UNIDENTIFIED GODCLADS DETECTED**

**CLASSIFICATION: SPHERE V [EST. 10200 THAUM/c]  
->THE UNSEEN BASTION**

**CLASSIFICATION: SPHERE V [EST. 10001 THAUM/c]**  
**->MISTCLAIMER**

**CLASSIFICATION: SPHERE V [EST. 35555 THAUM/c]**  
**->BLADEGUNNER, KILL-FUCK-MOVE**

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

Draus sighed. Time they didn't have.

The four signatures manifested in Avo's Sanguinity in an instant. A ring-shaped gateway opened in the fabric of space overlooking the district as a new cadre pushed through with golem and drone support. It would've been one thing if they arrived near one of the megablocks or the center of the districts, but they were zeroed in on Chambers' position from the start.

Shapes moved behind a curtain of mist as the Paladins began forming a perimeter around the intersection where Kae, Dice, and Chambers remained.

*{Shit,}* Draus muttered.

*{Paladins... can track... Wombrash,}* Calvino said between glitches and groans. The EGI was in pain as strings of data unspooled from its avatar, the nanomolecular sun spewing out smaller variants of itself, its shape distorting from second to second. *{Every... person the outbreak afflicts... helps expand the rupture. Ruptures inside them as well.}*

+*Affecting you too?*+ Avo asked.

*{Well... what can I say? I can... simulate "love" and also self-replicate. That makes me... as applicable as... any of you meatbags and... thoughtforms.}* A part of the EGI vanished as it deleted a section of itself. *{How is it corrupting me? I—I hate metaphysics. It's ridiculous. It's just ridiculous.}*

As the artificial mind lapsed back into a pain-inflicted stupor again, Avo tried to examine the composition of forces arrayed against him using his Sanguinity to no avail. The members of the rival cadre already had their Heavens manifested and some of their canons counteracted his Sanguinity's sensory perception. He could still feel movements and patterns of matter from moment to moment, but mostly it felt like gazing into a fathomless ocean: nothing but darkness and vagaries beyond a certain point.

Still, he could feel their Domains resonating with his, brushing his Biology, Luminosity, Lightning, and Space divinities. Compound that with Shotin's resurrection cycle, and neither time nor firepower was on their side.

*{Draus. Need to go into the mist. Pick up the others. Get out. Need to go it fast. Can't see anything using the Manta. Plan?}*

A pause followed as she peeked out from the ruined building she was hiding in and considered the situation. *{Yeah... Yeah, I might got one. We run this fast and guerilla. You got that new Heaven in you, right? The hydra?}*

He grunted.

*{Well. Way I see it, what they got is firepower, numbers, and teamwork. What we got is surprise and absolute lethality if we can close. They ain't got nothin' for your Conflagration. I say we run this guerilla. I'll link a passage through your blood. I'll go loud first. Get their attention. You close with the hydra. Get inside. I'll step in using you. And then we start using each other as doorways: isolate and burn the shits. That's my figurin'.}*

**[Good idea,] Corner said. [You might want to consider a contingency if they have something that runs counter to your Domains of Space, though. Give yourselves a physical way out in case your best option fails.]**

At the same time, Avo called on his newly claimed Paladin template for details, reshaping their personality to be more pliable in a shameful moment of desperation. **[Listen: I'll help get you out of this if I can, but you promise that you won't real-death any of my consangs.]** Avo's agreement came quick and Paladin Kassamon continued. **[That veil controls where things are relative to each other. It shouldn't clash with the Twice-Walker, but Path-Hydra will go edge to edge with whoever's the Porter. You need to get in close first and cool the air somehow. That'll backlash the Heaven pretty badly and open the cadre up on the spatial end. I have no idea who the rapid response cadre might consist of so you pull your godsdamned punches. Burn their minds if you have to but don't...]**

Words failed the Kassamon as he lapsed back into silence and torment.

Cool the air, huh? Get close? Well, going into the mist directly might just get him locked into a fixed position. What he needed was to avoid it altogether while still encroaching on the Paladins.

Avo looked down at the ground beneath him and redirected his Sanguinity downwards into the district's foundations. Immediately, *{Draus. Going to make a few updates to the plan. Might like them...}*

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Kare Kituhada had never been in so much pain.

She relived deep immersion snuff vicarities for cases before, had her arms torn off by a rogue Fallwalker, had her bones turn into a feral entity inside her flesh before trying to claw its way out, set herself on fire for nothing during a false outbreak.

None of these tortures compared to the Rash. None of them.

But still, she was here, compelled and worried at the fate of her uncle, Shotin Kazahara.

Family makes a person do stupid things. Like lying and begging her mentor about wanting to experience *Rash-Detail* for herself to harden up and not mentioning she was related to at least one of the Godclads present on the battlefield.

As another whip of electricity broke from her body, she winced and fought to keep her Heaven manifested.

**+Keep it together, rook,+** Paladin Kaga grumbled. Kare hadn't interacted much with the stone-faced Scaarthian lieutenant back at headquarters, but she seemed unshaken by the hurt.

Serving the cadre as Porter and its most senior member, Kaga manifested herself as a veil of fog that kept their unit tight and the area locked down. Nothing could come in without her knowing and if someone was in her Mistclaimer's grasp, they weren't leaving without her say so. The Heaven also made it easy for them to communicate even if their coldtech and Metaminds were disrupted seeing how Kaga could carry their words through the misted ether of her being.

Despite the pain, Kare found herself feeling confident she was going to be fine. Her senior supervisor and mentor, Maru Sandrupal, was here with her as well, unwilling to let her volunteer alone.

"You're gonna regret this one, kid," he had said, chuckling humorously between sips of coffee. "You're gonna hate me for not stopping you. And I'm gonna be there with you when you do, just to tell you I told you so."

He was right. He didn't know how right he was—especially didn't know why she wanted to be here.

But a lie spoken couldn't be taken back, so she had to live it out as a truth now.

Their drones located three bodies among the debris below. Near the corner of the intersection were two females—unidentifiable due to the severity of their burns. Their mottled flesh twisted and tried to fuse into new womb-sores, but lacked the structure to do so. It didn't stop them from being inflicted with other symptoms though. The feverishness. The delirium. The extreme hormonal shifts and emotional agony.

Kaga's Heaven acted as a stabilizer for the Nether, her mists a pillar while the world outside was a sea lost to tumult. Mem-data and other details passed through her mind as mech-driven golems and drones set out to secure the district as well, with two Knots dispatched to locate and retrieve Paladins Kassamon, Baer, and Luddinis.

A flash of soulfire caught her attention as she felt a new presence click against her Domain of Fire. One of the bodies at the intersection was getting back up. The only male. Cycling through the mem-data, she frowned.

Wait, *had he been castrated?*

A sudden shift in the mists broke her from her thoughts. Kaga's voice boomed in the back of her mind. *+Contact!+*

The drones outside exploded into a hurricane of shrapnel as entire portions of Veng's Stand shattered into shards. Gleaming daggers plunged into the mists but never made it more than an inch. Kaga scoffed and began to move, spreading her reach outward and fast.

Paladin Sandrupal claimed Kaga could encompass an entire Sovereignty with her Heaven—that getting away from her required more than speed. As a new swarm of drones peeked out from Kaga's protective veil, they detected the enemy Godclad at the same time her Metamind did.

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**UNIDENTIFIED GODCLADS DETECTED**

**CLASSIFICATION: SPHERE III [EST. 982 THAUM/c]**

**->TWICE-WALKER**

None of the domains loaded. Maybe they needed to.

The Heaven's presence—and its thaumic signature—suddenly vanished. It was like it dove straight down into the ground as—

Light bloomed inside the mist and steam parted the protective veil. Kaga snarled as soulfire burst from every bit of moisture that constituted her current existence, the backlash striking her. *+Somebody deal with him.+*

The Godclad that was resurrected was burning now, a pillar of fire rising from their body to spew bioforms and insects into the real. More worryingly, he had his pants down again and was swinging his genitals in their direction while hurling slur after slur.

*+Is this... normal?+* Kare said, asking Paladin Sandrupal.

Her mentor sighed. *+There are no normal Fallwalkers, Kare. Only the psychos and degenerates. This fucker's clearly a bit of bo—+*

He didn't get to finish his words as the ground beneath the intersection melted into blood. Kare's Metamind screamed again, warning about foreign Souls and unidentified Godclads filling her cog-feed, but her attention was entirely taken up by the icicles forming in the air next to her.

Then, in the very next instant, all the cold congealed into a large fang as the head of a rime bear manifested and all the moisture in the air froze.

Kaga's Heaven rattled and detonated into Soulfire. *+Backlash! Backlash! Need to ven—+*

Her voice cut off at the same point in time her Mistclaimer dematerialized, vaporous veil draining back into the shape of a flailing Scaarthian who burst apart in a spray of gore. The confidence inside Kare disintegrated with the lieutenant as her mind went blank and her training took hold.

Cracking through the air, she lashed at the blood below and felt a resonating Heaven fling a bolt right back at her. She absorbed the crimson-hued lightning without effort.

Her Straying Tempest resembled a twelve-legged spider with legs and palps hewn from electricity, a body bristling with burning hairs, and eyes that could gaze into any darkness. Beside her, Maru's Heaven, the Bladegunner, was a train of moving appendages and weapons, its appearance a segmented machine composed of bladed scales and a thousand guns and cannons where its limbs should have been. Gunfire poured out from its body as more and more matter converted itself into exploding ordinance, pounding away at the spreading blood below.

The Unseen Bastion lived up to its name and made no appearance even as four block-sized heads of a spatially defying hydra burst through the surface tension of existence and opened their jaws. A hurricane tore through the drones and flung golems aside.

Energy surged through Kare's Straying Tempest as he tried to make space, but the air around her grew thick and red, the particulates coming alight around her in a cage of luminosity. She struck against her prison, lashing it with her lightning and burning it with her flames to no effect. The bright was unbreaking. And through the translucent dome, she saw a triple-eyed, winged construct made of jagged glass crash into her mentor.

Kare cried out, a thunderstorm detonating from the core of her Heaven. She skipped, bounced, and rattled, struggling even as the jaws of the hydra closed around the orb that trapped her. A second thereafter, fangs taller and longer than certain builds parted her from spatial reality in a long and winding tunnel whistling with running wind.

Kare Kitzuhada came to Veng's Stand to help her uncle.

Kare Kitzuhada found herself in the belly of the beast alone.