

*+All units scramble! Repeat! Deploy all assets! The Seeker has been engaged! The Seeker has been engaged!+*

-Wiser Nara, Ori-Thaum Intelligence Officer

17-9

### Knife-Fighting in the Dark

The sound of the nu-kitten's shrieking with terror was the first thing that captured Avo's attention as he pushed himself off the ground with his Echoheads. The second was that Dice—hiding behind a protective cover of her own making—was peering at him over a block of haemokinetic blood, staring at him from behind her holocoat.

"*Benefactor?*" She whispered, mind lit with the colors of disbelief. The distance between them was hard to gauge, and there was a looseness clinging to spatial reality. Scanning through his cog-feed, Avo studied his Rend and struggled to piece together what just happened.

Another Godclad had struck the fabric of space. Ambushed them. Whatever their canons, it clearly clashed with Draus' Twice-Walker, rendering the shared domain affected enough to suffer metaphysical disruption. He was still connected to Draus' feed through his ansible, but found her three floors and a full fifteen meters away.

Meanwhile, aside from the other few tenets still living in the upper nine floors, the people across the district fleeing from the paradox, and the matter comprising the surrounding architecture, the hundred or so individuals were missing. Gone. It was as if they were a glitch in his system—a thing that never was.

Incog.

Had to be.

*{Rend check,}* Draus said, surprised but unshaken. *{I'm at ninety-eight percent for the Twice-Walker. Winter's empty. Think we got Porte on our hands here. A big 'un.}* He hissed with displeasure. Slightly more Rend and her Frame would come apart as a rupture. Too close. Avo sent his own details over to her and she winced at his Rend. *{Hell of an alpha strike, I'll give 'em that.}*

*{Vent?}* Avo said.

*{No,}* she said. *{We go dark. I'll cast the others first for an update and use the Manta to get overwatch. You go Incog. I'm gonna be takin' a walk in the dark after. See who the hell just hit us and do a runner.}*

Directing his Sanguinity was a pain. The space around him responded like metaphysical lubricant, his blood skipping and bouncing from point to point, every motion sliding his grip away from what he wished to touch. If his Woundshaper were a palm, it felt like it had been shattered into pieces, and each fragment was drifting, filling his mind with a blur of stimuli.

**[Jaus,] Corner said. [What a godsdamned mess. Listen. I've been in something like this before. Sequence me in and I'll see if I can get us out.]**

As he reassembled the makeup of his mind, Avo regarded Dice again and formed a haemokinetic cube using the room as a mold, sealing them in and his blood with the Conflagration. The walls, ground, furniture, and bodies all unraveled at his command as rivers of red wove a structure of his design into shape. Fire traveled alongside pulsing bolts of energy, casting him and Dice in an ethereal fire as he shelled them away from noticability.

Suddenly, he found himself no longer able to remember Draus' position. She just went dark. Good.

They were all in the dark now. Now to see whose dagger found flesh first.

"Didn't want to meet you like this," Avo said, tilting his head to address Dice. The waif stood up from behind her barrier, but the blood she controlled was taut with tension, ready to uncoil and pierce his flesh at a moment's notice. Good. Always take what control you can. "How's your Rend?"

She tilted her head questioningly. "The numbers. The ones that grow when you use your Heaven."

"Six," she said.

"Good," he replied, spreading his haemokinesis to master his far surroundings. Spreading his base influence to its full twenty kilometers, scurrying people and ramshackle shanties painted their patterns into his Woundshaper. He considered liquefying everyone in the area but found himself uncertain as to if that would kill the Godclad hunting him.

**[Gotta be patient,] Corner chided. [This is a dance of noise and vibration. They feel where you are, you get snuffed. You feel where they are, they get snuffed. Problem is we can't play passive—we got until the Domain of Space stabilizes to find, snuff, and vanish or we're going to be pulled into the pocket of a six Framer, and that's a one-way trip to the Big Empty as far as I'm concerned.]**

Spurred by Corner's thoughts, Avo cycled memories back through his mind and he found himself staggered by how many aspects of reality the unknown Ensouled controlled.

**CLASSIFICATION: SPHERE VI [EST. 403331 THAUM/c]**

->PARALLELIST, ALIGNER OF WORLDS

(SPACE/GEOMETRY/CORRESPONDENCE/CREATION/GARDENS/DESERTS/JUNGLES/CITIES/DAWN/NIGHT/DARKNESS/LIGHT/STRENGTH/WIND/WATER/STORMS/LIES/WAR/SEAS)

**[What?] Benhata gasped. [Parallelist? That's... I know that one...]** Recognition filled the template. Followed by cold dread. **[Oh... oh, we're dead. That's Shotin. Shotin "Planeshift" Kazahara.]**

Several of the Incubi were of accord, each bearing a resigned acceptance to their fate. High-end Ori-Thaum Godclads. More than that, a legend of the Nether and the last Guild War. Operating for years as a singleton operative for the Council of Elders, Shotin Kazahara developed a reputation for not dying. Even when he was burned. Even when he was supposed to.

Rumors and half-confirmed truths painted a picture of Shotin as someone with an individualist streak. Different from the norm, but still able to comprehend and adapt to community. The innate keenness of insight he possessed helped him stay ahead of political rivals more than few times.

Elder D'Rongo—not an unknown to Avo himself—had personally ordered him censured twelve times for disobeying the council and embarking on unsanctioned operations. Each time, however, she found herself unable to muster the political capital to see him divested of his Frame and imprisoned.

Breaking the rules was one thing. Breaking the rules and bringing results—in one case holding a key district without backup against two separate Highflame war hosts for nine days—was beyond reproach. Pair this with the fact that he was a masterful Necrojack as well, and Avo found himself facing a foe he could have considered a rival in skill but his superior in power.

Could have. The Nether was his realm to burn and all minds were his to kindle.

His path to victory remained clear. Find an angle to access their mind, and scour them from reality.

Pinpricks of excitement began to build up inside Avo then. Shotin Kazahara would be another wonderful template for his collection. The gestalt was to grow stronger.

**[Dissolve me,]** Benhata whispered. The other Ori-Thaum templates were of the same mind. **[You talk about choice all the time, time to live up to it. I don't want to be here when you start hurting more of my people. I won't help you unless you reshape me. Same with the rest. Dissolve me. Forcing me into this is torture. I can't stop you, But if what you believe means—]**

Avo kept Benhata's memories but collapsed his template into non-awareness. The same with the Incubi. The Mirror thought too highly of himself. They were all going to supplemental aspects

to him and Corner anyway. This wasn't about cruelty, but practicality. No sense in generating self-inflicted trauma fractures in the gestalt.

Shapes suddenly filled his mind. Sensations of titanium and other alloys armoring moving vessels. A subtle weight pressed on his Domain of Luminosity, and he found himself wary.

**[Good guess would be golems,] Abrel said. [Weak ones, but lots of them and backed by assault drones, BVR precision drones, and Incubi strike cells sessioned to their loci. Shots will be coming at us from over the horizon if we're spotted, or in low orbit.]**

They came as four units—with three thaumically potent golems forming the core of each knot. The missing Porters were like only being held back until space stabilized. Three hundred and sixty fast-moving assault drones made out of lightweight metal and altered fullerene entered the Woundshaper's awareness. It was as if they were made of vivianite, each acting as a conduit for phantasmal essence.

Useful. Exploitable. Vulnerable.

Dice was saying something, but Corner's voice overrode hers. **[Don't melt them. You turn them straight to blood, you show your hand to the other 'Clad. They're the real danger here. These are just the little fish. We still don't know what other Heavens they got and we sure as shit don't want them to know what Domains we got so they can Rend-dump our asses.]**

*+Could wipe all the drones,+ Avo said. +Drink them into my mind. Cast me into the golems. Use them against the 'Clad. Collapse the whole network.+*

**[Opens you up to a disruption hit,] Corner replied. [Remember. You need to be in contact with whatever Domain you're trying to manipulate using your Heavens. The Silver's got Nether-based systems, but I'm not sure if that's compatible with your Crown, seeing as it's a perversion of coldtech. I say you fling some shots at them using the top of this building and lead them with more shots across the district. Pull their attention away and see if you can get this "Planeshift" to stick his head out. Make it seem like someone with an Incog is fleeing out the block. Sell the story.]**

Abrel concurred. **["Make problems for your enemies. Don't wait. Waiting is dying." Mondelles loved saying that.]**

"Dice," Avo said as a mist of blood began to condense around the building. "Stay close. Stay low. Stay way from the walls." He planted his Echoheads into the ground and stabilized himself.

*{This is going to get loud,} Calvino said. {Remember to liquefy your shots before they leave your area of effect, by the way. Minimize shrapnel for these poor people.} A sigh left the EGI. {So many are going to die.}*

Corner laughed. **[Just another day, then.]**

Studying the gathered knots, veins building with crackling energy drank mass away from the upper sections of the tenement while he hardened its foundational supports. He didn't need a Phys-Sim to line these shots for him—the engagements were going to happen within the radius of his Sanguinity. Fabricating a few thousand tungsten balls each weighing about ten kilograms and twenty more two-ton flechettes from the surrounding matter, he channeled his Boltstride into them, and the upper two floors of the apartment exploded into a storm of blood.

The balls tore through the air first, washing over the knots like a wave. The scout models were vaporized outright while the heavier assault drones sparked and spiraled from the sudden onslaught. Precision followed chaos. Lightning flooded the flechettes as Avo loosed them one by one.

The first golem he hit shuddered from the impact as a shockwave of force cut through the cacophony. Strong as its armor was, the next three needles ended up punching clean through.

**REND CAPACITY [WOUNDSHAPER]: 46%**

+Dice!+ Avo said. “Need you to do something. Going to release my hold on the blood around us in a moment. Will need to vent. You take it. Keep it hard. Keep us alive.”

The waif proved herself worth the investment again as she nodded without hesitation, eyes still fixed on the flames rising out from his halo.

He unleashed another salvo of flechettes, but they shattered impotent as two of the remaining golems shivered and expelled a translucent field.

Suddenly, gaps formed within his Sanguinity's influence. He could still sense the matter within, but manipulation was lost to him. It was as if an impenetrable threshold had been erected around the knots.

Blood-made alloy shattered into ships and fragments against the shield without leaving a hint of harm. Then, from behind the barriers, the counterattack began with a rainstorm of missiles and gauss fire, and the ganger hideout came apart.

**[Good,]** Corner said, chuckling. **[Now start moving your shots.]**

Avo began reshaping plascrete from a nearby alleyway.

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Quail shadowed the coldtech tripwire drones she deployed by a distance of five meters. Seeing as all the thoughtstuff she could see early up and vanished, she figured that everyone just sparked their Incogs, and they were all fighting in the dark at this point.

Ahead of her, the tripwire drones communicated with each other via a beam grid, set to trigger if something passed through them that her optics couldn't see.

She couldn't really consider herself a Necro, but she knew enough about their tricks and limitations that she built up a big bag of tricks specifically to fuck them over.

The main thing about Incogs was that it affected anything informational or cognitive. Coldtech cameras wouldn't work. Eyes don't work. A godsdamned panopticon made up of ghosts, motion sensors, and a whole lotta of other tech-shit might've worked, but that still required you to get through their cog-cap first, and that usually took a while unless you had a couple thousand eyes pouring their perception on the same Metamind.

What the Incog didn't affect, however, were things that were purely mechanical Things like a tripwire or a landmine. Even thaumic equivalents. The material world and the Nether were parallel not truly intersecting. This allowed for its own exploits.

Six other drones trailed behind her, extending her defensive coverage on both sides. The blast wouldn't be big enough to devastate the building—or really even kill anyone in a cheap rig—but it would give away their presence, give her something to shoot at. Which was where her Omnitech-made “Threader-9” linear acceleration cannon came into play. Five orbiting rings danced along the arm of her combat skin as a single grain of tungsten hovered in the air.

All it took for her to crank up the weight and send a shot lancing out at 500 meters per second was the clench of a fist. She would need to fire her boost-pack to counter the recoil, but nothing short of armor would survive that, and she doubted was stalking—

A crack of thunder boomed. The upper corner of the building shook. Dust fell from the room.

Quail blinked and threw herself horizontally on impulse.

An explosive barrage shredded the midsection of the building and sent her tumbling down through rooms and walls. Her combat skin, maintained by experimental Rendsinks “borrowed” from Ashthrone, drank away the kinetic energy and re-routed it to her defense.

She could take maybe nine more hits like that before she had to eject her first core. Not great. She needed to be gone before—

The thoughts vanished from her mind as she slammed into what felt like a solid post.

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**Armor Integrity: 89%**

**REND CAPACITY [TWICE-WALKER]: 98%**

**VENT! VENT! VENT!**

Between the screaming of her ghosts and the structure-shaking blasts, Draus found herself drowning in chaos.

The wall she had been taking cover behind disintegrated as over a hundred high-yield explosives punched into the building, blowing an open gouge into its center.

Her Meldskin had spared her from the shockwaves and shrapnel, but she still needed to fire her thrusters to stop herself from falling. Tumbling down to the floor below, she landed and shattered a dinner table, and found the former occupants leaking gore. Their bones shone with cheap chrome and their blood ran thicker than nectar.

Warheads too joyed out to fight earlier. She spared these ones. They weren't worth the flechettes.

Guess luck didn't last.

Collateral damage. War was a motherfucker.

Draus moved on. Shouldering her way through a destabilized wall, she had both her gravmag rifle and second Heaven readied. She held back on the latter in case something unexpected killed her. It was her only ticket back into the fight right now, and she'd be damned if she was going to go out as a rupture.

The Manta flew high overhead, displaying the scene with a bird's eye view. Over one hundred and four assault drones were cutting the block appear with mag-flung kinetics from behind a protective veil while missiles speared down from on high and beyond visual range. Threshold fed her additional intel about the launch sites—with half of them being in neighboring districts while one was in low orbit.

The eight of the golems they came with were still operational, with one crashed into a stack of shanties, a column of fire rising from its ruined husk. Another flash of crimson lightning slashed from an abandoned alleyway a street over, striking the shielded knots without effect, but pulled their attention away, giving the impression that the target was traveling.

Immediately, the bombardment hammering the structure trickled away as the knots broke to retaliate over a broader territory.

Avo was at work. Pulling their attention away. Giving them something to shoot at. This was her opening to get out. Rushing down the hall, she called in the Manta in for a quick extraction and cursed as she snapped back to where she was three seconds ago, spatial reality slipping again.

She needed to exfil. Staying here was asking to get snuffed, and the last thing she needed was to run into—

Something collided with her chest, the impact flinging her through a room just in time for a missile to strike its outer walls, plunging her three more floors down.

### **Armor Integrity: 49%**

Draus had no idea what or who just hit her. She didn't think. She reacted, firing her gun even as she was driven through wall after wall. Her gravmag rifle sang with a series of crackles and she directed it to zig-zag blindly through the floors above, Accelero hypercharging her reflexes and slowing her fall to a crawl.

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Shotin Kazahara casually dropped down through the collapsing block and studied the situation as shrapnel shattered against him. His ears were completely burst, but he was used to that by now, tumbling and rolling on his side with a blank expression as he waited for his nanosurgeons to fix his damaged equilibrium.

He had triggered his Incog the moment he found himself buried in the building, vanishing from any potential counterattack. Thereafter, he manifested his auxiliary Heaven of War and shrouded himself in an impenetrable suit of animated armor. Beside the single chink on the back of his neck.

Damnably hubris.

Making his way through the block carefully, he held back from answering Wiser and continued his investigation. Whoever he paradoxed with must've still been in the area. His Heaven of Speed felt no movement, and spatial reality was acting like one of his exes.

Taking advantage of assumed asymmetry, he formed Vector Mines along the lower sides of the block, anticipating a quick end to his foe. Channeled through his Heaven of Speed, the traps hyper-accelerated anyone caught in their wake toward his direction, ensuring a quick encounter.

When no one splattered against his armor in the first few seconds, he found himself frowning.

Patience and intelligence were not what he liked in an enemy.



He liked idiots. Fools. The type to charge at you screaming, howling slurs about the woman who birthed you or your father's cock size. Those made his job easier. Why couldn't there be more people like that?

Instead, he found himself forced into more actual work, moving up the structure to get a top-down view via an optical scan without exposing himself and casting into one of his drones. The Incubi were also going to soon arrive, and he knew how much his former coworkers liked blasting their perception over everything.

It would be annoying if they nulled his own only lead on Aedon Chambers before he could have a chat with her. Reconstructing mem-data was always a pain.

It was on the top floor that he got the first clue about his enemy. The air around him was thick with red particulates. Earlier, he had thought that just a drug. Now, as it reshaped all the matter around him, he found his mouth opening as an epiphany sank alongside the tang of blood.

Blood. With a Domain of Matter. Someone from Stormtree? A Heaven connected to a Sangeist? Whatever it was, it was capable of far more than the golem itself. Lightning surged through its vein-like structures as he stepped carefully, wary that his unseen foe might feel him. He cursed the fact that the blood was misting the air itself—the vector of its effect was without limit. If his Parallelist was still usable, he would have narrowed in on them already. But until space stabilized itself in a brief few moments or so, he guessed that he still had to do things the hard way.

Clearly, his enemy agreed as the top section of the block exploded in a wave of force and electricity. Two more probable Domains then.

Falling down, he studied the dematerializing block and triggered his *Sanctus Ase/gad* reflex accelerator. The world around him slowed. The entire place was collapsing. Floors were coming apart and all the people in them were dead or dying. Yet, there was still no sign of his foes. Bits of wall and debris cracked into him, redirected by his Heaven of Speed while he frowned.

They couldn't have gotten away. There were still here—he felt it in his *bones*. He just needed to force what was left out to the sides to get them by surprise, but he had to be patient. He didn't know how powerful they were—their Spherage. At least three, and that was enough to kill you if you weren't prepared.

Good thing was that space was settling around the area again. Stabilizing. Soon, he would—

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**REND CAPACITY [WOUNDShAPER]: 93%**

The knots were in full pursuit of “*him*” five kilometers away, leaving only a few drones to guard their current area. No sign of the other Godclad either. No suddenly manifested bodies. Maybe they were following the golems. Maybe.

The building was going to be rubble as soon as he released his hold on the Woundshaper. He was going to have Dice take over soon. But that was only after he managed to get himself away from this place.

With all the chaos he provided, he hoped Draus was gone. He needed to make his own exit now.

Channeling a final surge of Boltstride into the room around him, he aimed to fling his room out from the structure itself across the full distance his current tonnage could support. It would also put him in position to use his Zephyr again, in a place where space was still stable, though he could feel reality returning to stable foundations.

It wouldn't be long until the Parallelist returned. He needed to go. No more time.

A lance of surging lightning pulsed through the inside of the hideout.

Then promptly ricocheted off something unseen and launched Avo and Dice upward through the block at an angle.

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“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” Tavers grunted. She didn't know what the hell kind of rounds was hitting her over and over again, only that they were shaped like a raindrop and kept turning on a dime. The ground kept collapsing beneath her feet, so she was just flying now. Still, the shots were ringing the sides of her combat skin, swatting her through rooms—and in one particularly nasty case, *someone*.

Burning hard toward the outside as entrails spilled off from her, saw the light of the outside world and found herself relieved to see only a dozen or so drones hovering overhead.

She was significantly less relieved when she suddenly found herself launched the other way by *something* unseen. “Oh, what the fu—”

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Draus watched the knots leave before she pushed the debris off her and sprinted toward an open window. The opening was clear. The Manta was cloaked—just a few hundred meters away above a three-storey shack.

She burst through the wall, but the wall decided it didn't like that, and something swatted her right back into the air.

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Shotin barked a surprised laugh as several impacts slammed into him, one in particular feelign like an aerobarge. Ending his Incog, he activated his Skimmer, and his perception washed out, peeling the unseen back into shape.

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**REND CAPACITY [WOUNDSHAPER]: 95%**  
**VENT! VENT! VENT!**

Avo felt an entire chunk of his consciousness vanish as ten thousand of his ghosts shattered at once. "Dice. Now!"

He gathered all his Rend and readied himself. Gravity lurched in all directions. The kittens yoweling was growing increasingly demonic. A mind manifested in front of him. Then two more.

His Hells came alive with the lashing of his Conflagration.

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**COG-CAP: 91%**

Quail Tavers killed her Incog and activated her emergency session. *+RAB!+*

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Draus knew when a situation was fucked up beyond her control. But she still had a clean cyclor. And there was a surefire way for her to give herself some more breathing room without using her Heaven at all.

**Triggering Reactor Overload**