

Preparation is not enough!

I don't care if you were prepared, trainees! You need to succeed! You need to perform! You need to execute!

As we just saw in gray team's performance, they had full situational awareness, Deep-Nether control, time to shape their surroundings toward their own advantage, and two hundred more heavy assault drones to deploy.

And what was the result?

They still lost. Right. Can anyone tell me why?

No.

No.

None of you are paying any attention!

No. Wrong.

They lost because because they couldn't perform. Cadet Abernie was left to fend for herself against two separate threats while the rest of her team found themselves lured out of position by two unknown targets—one of them only a golem. And with gray team's Breaker pocketed and killed, the rival cadre gained numerical—and firepower—superiority, allowing them to further conduct defeats in detail.

Where! Were! You!

Where?

Answer me! Are you going to leave your comrades to die in the field? Are you going to be distracted by the first set of shiny keys Ori-Thaum might jingle in your face? Are you cats or people?

You had a plan. You had preparation. You had time. And you still lost. You need more training. You need more discipline. But most of all, you need to execute! Execute on your strategy! That means being adaptable enough to face changing situations—like one of your foes having an anticipated Heaven. Or golem support. You need to determine the variables. Keep them fixed to your own favor instead of changing everything to suit your opponents!

This rule stands whether you're fighting as part of a team or operating as a singleton.

Do not shame your own efforts. Live up to them. We're running this exercise again. Exit the plane, gray team! Black team! Good work. Switch out!

Blue team! Red team! You're both in. Do not make me repeat this lesson again. Red team! You have defender's initiative. Pick your terrain and environmental hazards. Set up your grounds. Combat begins in five.

-Instrument Santanado "Starsinger" Mondelles, Instructor at Axtraxis Academy

19-6

Practical Education

Quail blew a lungful of smoke into the air as she watched the embers rise from her burning hiflass. The pipe she used was marred by war, whittled and misshapen from shrapnel and gunfire both. But it still worked. Not so different from her. Not so different from any squire that made it past the tenth year. Last long enough and you eventually get better at making choices that keep you alive.

Someday, there won't be anything to chip away, but till then, she do her best to avoid an early grave.

This was part of the reason she was smoking just outside the set. She left the production booth and turned off her Incog after the mad bastards started their little death game. Her wards were top of the line; specially made courtesy of White-Rab. Still, she had no intention of trauma-testing them against Fourth and Fifth Sphere Godclads when things didn't call for it.

As a vault door sixty meters down began to hiss and open, Quail spotted the other reason for her temporary departure. Stepping out from her poorly lit set, Cala Marlowe stumbled into view. She moved like she was on Numb—which meant she probably was—each step half-hearted, with barely enough energy to keep her going. A blank expression clung to her face and she was blinking fast, rubbing at her bloodshot eyes.

"Hey, kid," Quail said, saluting her fellow substance addict with her hiflass. "Look like shit today. Rough day at work?"

It took Cala a moment to notice her, but when she did, a faint smirk crept up her face. "Oh. Quail. Are you having a 'social night' or using one of our sets to film a snuff-vic. Again?"

"That was one time, and for his boy's mind only. Nah. I'm here to see you."

Despite the condition she was in, Cala's features were impeccable in their symmetry. Her face was devoid of wrinkles and even the darkness ringing her eyes were genetically adapted to be of a lighter shade. The fact she looked about to fall over suggested she probably hadn't slept for the better part of two weeks, and the thinness of her frame screamed of a fast that lasted just as

long. The booze reeking from her was a clash of qualities. Some of her poison was sold only to Silvers, but the taste was blunted by the presence of cheaply distilled beer enjoyed by most FATELESS.

Her hair was fashioned in the shape of an inverted “v.” Fringes of auburn were tinged with platinum highlights stylized in the form of a rising wave. Armored plates sectioned her red leather aero-cyclers’ jumpsuit while holographic veins crawled down her arms and legs from behind, forming a replica of New Vultun along her back. Her skin glowed like incandescent ivory beneath the dim ambient lighting of the hallway, and as she drew close, the shadow of her nearly two-meter-tall form speared up Quail’s body.

“So,” Cala said, her eyes locked on the squire’s hiflass. “Got another one for me, or are you going to be lame tonight too.”

With her exoskeleton’s torso partially lifted, Quail reached into a hidden interior compartment producing another smoke for the younger woman. “Gotta make do without the pipe.”

Cala took the thin line of white and put it between her lips. Lifting her right hand, she flicked her thumb back as a streak of fire lit the narcotic. “Thanks.”

“Sure, still owe you for helping me put the squeeze on Kasmel.”

The thoughtcast host threw her head back and guffawed. “Gods, he’s such a half-strand. All it took were a couple of winks and there they were: nudes across the Nether without proper sensors attached. How he managed to avoid the Paladins for so long, I don’t know.”

“He’s probably got people,” Quail said.

“But that’s not the only reason why you’re waiting for me. Alone. Outside a set. Past midnight.”

“No.”

The tip of Cala’s hiflass grew bright as she took a drag. “So. Business or pleasure.”

“Maybe pleasurable business,” Quail said. “You, uh... you still with that faither? The one your mom and sister keep sending squires to snuff?”

“Magdin?” Cala scoffed. “No. Stupid bastard got himself nulled trying to hit an Ori-Thaum convoy.”

“Ah. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s how the idiot would have wanted to go. It wasn’t like anything he did mattered or anything. He was a selfish, arrogant, pig-headed piece of shit just like all the others.” Cala

reached up to rub her arm. "I'll find another before the month's out."

"Yeah," Quail said. All that Guilder gene-engineering to make two-hundred pounds of reinforced self-loathing. Poor girl. "Listen... I don't even know if I should tell you this—" The squire waved her off. Cala narrowed her eyes. It was a show, of course. Something to get her attention and make her engage instead. A dirty little trick you learn in the biz.

"What?"

Quail sighed. "Not sure if it's good to involve you. Could be dangerous. Gets into really anti-Syndicate sentiment. Might put a target on your back."

Cala yanked the hiflass from between her lips, the weariness vanishing from behind her eyes of brilliant aquamarine. "You old bitch. Don't bait and bail, spit! Tell!"

Quail grinned and regarded the girl. She might not have a lick of actual fight in her but godsdamned did she have reach and know people. If the ghoul could clear her somehow, let them bridge high and low society for future runs, whatever these runs might be.

She would start this thing off by giving the girl a special scoop about the Syndicates they recently hit. Get her good and interested. Cala hated the Syndicates almost as she hated the Guilds, and starting her on gutter news might just be the way to audition her for Avo and the rest. It beat just watching the girl wither away before her eyes, waiting to hear about how she eventually overdosed. Or got snuffed when she finally went too far against their masters in the Tiers.

In weird way, she was a bloodhound like the rest of them; a person in desperate need of a fight to feel alive.

"Alright," Quail said, trying her best to sound conspiratorial. "It goes like this..."

Combat between Godclads was an exercise in mastering chaos. The side that was aware of—and could control—more variables in battle was usually the one to triumph. Such was the nature of Total Domain Warfare, for no aspect of reality could not be weaponized, and no instrument of war could be spared mastery.

Armed with Abrel, Kare, Kassmon, and Draus' collective experiences, Avo fought wielding Chambers as a conduit mind and sheath. Only a flicker of fire remained with his real left just beside the doorway—something he would exploit when an advantage was forced.

For now, it was time to spar and observe.

Kae's Maelstromer Heaven suited her well. Her canons were all focused on containing and controlling the movements of hostile entities, keeping them locked in place. Spatial reality turned like a whirlpool for Chambers and Chambers alone, and though his Bio-Igniter burned hard to escape, the metaphysical nature of his acceleration broke loose from his being to vanish into the interconnected wall of plated eyes that was the Malestromer.

The same spatial locks did not apply to Draus' Arsenalist or Dice's Runemade. Hollowed blocks flattened into rubble as a headless galloping chimera wielding countless weapons and armored in burning scripts bound from roof to roof, light itself coiling around its many blades. Snapping past it came a shot of a hyper-accelerated slug carrying the weight of Draus' existence.

As the round approached, the structures it passed over spilled apart into glass-made ammunition as the Arsenalist struck with well over a thousand times the kinetic force a single slug possessed. The concussive force rippled outward—but only for an instant. The wind and rains coiled. The Maelstromer folded the impact back in. A funnel of pure devastation was centered around the Bio-Igniter as its flesh and fires dissolved in an instant. Yet, the damage was moderate at best, for from the heat left in Draus' wake, Avo commanded Chambers to regrown himself five kilometers away.

Flame and flesh intermingled. Reality wailed as the tapestry tightened. An unseen hand took hold of dancing flames as tendrils were reborn in an instant. Tearing back into existence as if the flames were a doorway it could use at anytime, the Bio-Igniter crawled back over into existence as its tumorous core swelled with burgeoning biomass as it drained the heat from matter burning and slagged.

Bio-Igniter, Flesh-for-Fuel, Fire-for-Flesh. Fetish-for-All (Biology/Fire/Matter/Strength)

From its body burst newly blended bioforms. Creatures with their properties entwined, monstrosities so impossible they would crumble and pour apart into smoking viscera without the Bio-Igniter's miracles. Each organism was birthed in an eruption of fire, and a chain of heat connected them to Chambers—and Avo—as if extensions to their ontology.

With every hundred degrees of heat came a new bioform converted, and soon there was a swarm numbering ten thousand filling every inch of space around Chambers. As the space around them quivered, Avo bade Chambers to move and again he dissolved himself, regenerating not fifty kilometers away, crawling out from a burning chunk of debris.

[Holy shit,] Chambers roared with laughter in Avo's mind. [This is what I'm talking about. Hit and run! Hit and motherfucking run!]

Grappling up to the top of a nearby block, the sights and scenes at their original position were still known to them, their senses interlaced with all their bioforms.

The Runemaker was sixty-three kilometers away but rapidly closing. Dice's acceleration began quickly and multiplied with each second she accelerated. The air behind her unspooling into whips of light she used to cleave at Chambers' swarms. Hundreds of bioforms came apart. Their heat-links broke, reeling back into the Bio-Igniter as it continued to breed more. Others spilled around the surrounding blocks, folding and moving and flaking Dice utterly.

Yet, as Chambers commanded them all to detonate, a wave of fire blossomed outward but was overtaken by a curtain of shadow that rippled across the city and displaced the explosion out from every single point of darkness for twenty kilometers. Columns of fire rose from alleys and streets.

For the briefest moment, Avo spotted Dice sailing through the air, her mortal form post-vent, exposed and vulnerable to Chambers' ability to combust organics. He made a note of this misjudgment on her part and compiled the necessary memories for when he was to burn her next. It would ensure immediate improvement instead of grinding corrections.

Runemake, Shadow-Devouring-Bright (Strength/War/Luminosity/Fire/Shadow)

[I kinda wanna pop her,] Chambers said, brushing all points of matter, biology, and fire using his Heaven.

+Tempting to test power; I know,+ Avo replied. +No point in risking death or real death. This is practice. See our own flaws. Understand each other.+

[Yeah, yeah,] Chambers said before his attention was pulled by a lance of immense power.

Buildings displaced by its wake shattered into glass as Draus' accretion closed. A heartbeat ago, she was also sixty kilometers on the DeepNav. Now, she was eight hundred meters away and closing.

Chambers yearned to move again, but Avo requested that he stay. Template and ego overlaid, the half-strand agreed and spread his tentacles wide. A cape of fire was layered again in a mass of deformed flesh larger than most blocks. Skin tags and oozing pustules spewed steam into the air.

This time, the twosome greeted Draus with tentacles open and a swarm of bio-missiles as the true face of the Arsenalist flicked intermittently with Simulacra Resplendent.

Draus' first Heaven resembled that of a twenty-meter-long flechette with nine rings made up of countless firearms trailing behind it. At fifty meters, Avo could see that it was propelling itself by gunfire, each ring down a bit narrower than the last, with the heaviest guns at the very end. The ordinance unleashed was a constant stream, the rate of fire growing faster by the second.

Drawing on one of his newest canons, Chambers tore the heat from the Arsenalist's barrels, but it accelerated onward unimpeded.

*{Ah, thermodynamics,} Calvin*o sighed. *{How I mourn for thee.}*

Fire exploded out from the heart of the tumorous heart of the Bio-Igniter to swallow the Arsenalist. The Heaven of Guns vanished, but Draus was far from done. Reality fractured before Chambers. The world around them shattered into glass.

Where the Twice-Walker was a furtive creature with three massive eyes and wings made up of shifting shards, the Simulacra was an overwhelming juggernaut unafraid of open combat. The three eyes now occupied the place of a crystalline skull hovering above plates of reflective plating. Twelve blades jagged wings imbued with scintillating brilliance spread out from the Simulacra's backside, while a mirror-polished shield and spear filled both its hands. But the manifestation wasn't done. The fractures expanded further, spatial reality collapsing as a bridge. Across twelve separate points in space, "twins" to the block-sized Heaven of Reflection suddenly slipped out from the ontological fissures.

With knowledge of how her canons worked, however, Avo knew better.

Simulacrae Resplendent wasn't multiplying. Instead, it was just a single entity occupying several points in spatial reality, with each "fracture-duplication" multiplying its speed and power.

Simulacra Resplendent, Legion of Self (Reflection/Space/Radiance/Glass/Strength)

The Arsenalist of Unceasing Ordinance (Guns/Matter/War/Geomtry)

The twelve Simulacrae slammed together, forming a shield wall even while a river of firepower spewed out from the Arsenalist. The rolling flames flowed through one Heaven of Reflection and spilled out the other, completely misdirected.

Chambers made to move, but wind, water, and space churned around him like a vortex, rooted him in place again.

[Wow, that's annoying,] Chambers muttered, launching a swarm of shrieking exploding bat-bird-spider-whatevers at the dome of Kae. **[Wait... she's shrinking?]**

+Pressing us in, + Avo responded.

A flick of a glass-made lance cut up. The Bio-Igniter came apart, the slice dividing space around it as well. Just ten, a klaxon sounded from Chambers' Meta as he reconstituted himself, Rend spiking with the effort.

REND CAPACITY [BIO-IGNITER] - 97%

Avo frowned. They had barely been in combat for twenty seconds and already Chambers was at the limit for one Heaven.

[Hey, man, I perform good fast. Lasting's for the guys that have to rely on endurance.]

{Source: a sample size of one,} Calvino quipped.

Avo grunted a faint note of amusement as he recorded this as well. Improvements needed to be made. If Chambers was going to pursue attritional canons, he needed more options for his Hell. Maybe tweaks to his canon for Rend efficiency as well. Regardless, he needed to be elevated to Fifth Sphere as soon as possible.

He saw enough so far. It was time for him to enter the fight himself. And see what he could glean of his own weaknesses from another's eyes in the aftermath.

+Chambers,+ Avo said, +Use your... other Heaven.+

[What? Fucktopia? Are you sure?]

+Yes. It will make Draus very upset. And that is funny.+

[I mean... what if she kills me?]

+I will miss you?+

[...Shit's touching, consang, but like I don't wanna die.]

+Good luck Chambers,+ Avo said, as he injected himself back across the session.

[Avooooo-]

He left just enough of his Conflagration over to keep Chambers' template active. It was still a bit like puppeteering, but the subminds were doing an admirable job operating the body as if they were Chambers. And rooted to his biology, who was to say the fires weren't?

Awareness returning, Avo found himself hovering in place in a bio-magnetic cocoon. His Echoheads were floating in pieces around him, sporelings running in mercury-like streams through their discs. Dropping back to the ground, his tendrils snapped together with metallic clacks as he expanded his Heaven and reached beyond the bunker doors.

Forked veins streaked out across the face of reality like lightning bolts imbued with the characteristics of blood. It looked as if reality was granted its own circulatory system, an infection spreading far and wide across the set itself.

Mustering his primarily—and most destructive Heaven—Avo liquefied part of a block to spike himself past three thousand tons.

But this time, when the Woundmother came into shape, blood did not flow together to form a lone spire. No. Instead, a storm of sanguinity carved matter free from dissolving sections of district, and hidden in the smoke, a second city began to bubble and rise.

Woundmother, Architectress of Sanguinity
(Blood/Matter/Lightning/Biology/Luminosity/Protection/Fire)