

Building a Heaven is like trying to bottle an apocalypse. Designing canons, then, is giving said apocalypse a personality.

It is obvious to even the lowest creature that a Heaven is calamity manifested. A defiance of reality and all its laws in exchange for a new order. This, more than the looseness of the tapestry, is why Heavens are built within controlled ruptures, for what better to encompass a wound than another we already know how to suture?

Beyond the sacrifices needed to materialize the raw form of the entity and the scriptures required to narrow the Heaven's effects, there must be other things offered into the jaws of chaos. Everything must be examined. Objects. Environments. People. If there is one mistake—a singular misstep in the mythology and how it interfaces with the world, the structure of the Heaven will cascade into a collapse and fall.

Thereafter, what should have been an instrument to be wielded will then become a cancer of damnation that must be contained.

Hence, I wish for everyone to understand that your urgency has been heard—and discarded.

An Agnosi cannot deny a build certified by the accords, but if they say it will take ten years, then you will not grant them a day less.

I am aware of our arrangement. You do not need to remind me of the oaths to which we are bound and the services we are obliged to provide. But I will remind you that our duty is above your station. Our duty is to the maintenance, preservation, and restoration of existence itself.

Know this when you stress my brothers and sisters designated to your Guilds. Know this when you demand the creation of another impossible weapon, and they strive to make not only the single most ruinous construct they can conceive but must also do their best to keep us all alive in the process.

-High Agnos Jakuta Ajayi

19-2

Weapons of Ontology (I)

Total Heavens:

->[SANGEIST] x22; [LUSHBURNER] x15; [GALESLITHER] x18; [FULGERHUND] x12; [SNAKE-KING] x2; [SPRINGSTORMER] x4; [SHATTERHEAD] x10; [BULLET-BREEDER] x2

Sangeist (Blood/Matter); Lushburner (Biology/Fire); Galeslither (Air/Space); Fulgerhund (Lightning/Matter); Snake-King (Distance/Space); Springstormer (Biology/Lightning); Shatterhead (War/Strength); Bullet-Breeder (Guns/Matter)

Calculating total Domains...

Domain of (Blood) x22

Domain of (Matter) x36

Domain of (Lightning) x16

Domain of (Biology) x19

Domain of (Air) x18

Domain of (Space) x22

Domain of (War) x10

Domain of (Strength) x10

Domain of (Guns) x2

Domain of (Luminosity) x1 - Leftover from [Shineguard]

Eighty-five golems. Eighty-five Heavens. One hundred and seventy Domains. The combined bounty earned from fifty-two continuous hours of raids, runs, and thefts.

And now, the reason for former Agnos Kae Kusanade's lascivious smile. The symmetry of her face seemed designed around her smile, and so, despite the exaggerated expression she held, the thinness of her lips and the smoothness of her skin remained unblemished. The same could not be said about the shine of excitement in her eyes, her irises darker than they were before.

Assembled within the George Washington's Command Nexus, the present members of the cadre included Dice, Avo, Chambers, Draus, Essus, and Kae, with Tavers and Sunrise in attendance.

Swiping through the holo-haptic constructs representing each of the recently devoured Heavens, Kae's teeth gleamed like beaded pearls as her grin grew wider and wider, her uncharacteristic behavior infusing Chambers with growing discomfort.

The man, pushing off the throne that was essentially his by this point, Chambers sent a direct message to Avo via Neurodeck, eyes affixed to Kae as if she was a bomb on the precipice of detonating. *{So... I gotta say something. I'm not liking that look on her, Avo. Not one bit. Last time I saw a smile like that was on the face of Kid-Slicer Yoed. That fucker's Lustaway would be triggering all the while the juvs were screaming. I mean, damn, he sliced off a lot of ears in the*

Crucible. Shit. Rest in shit, Yoed.}

Avo shot Chambers a brief glance. *{Don't compare our Agnos to a degenerate.}*

{I'm not comparing her to him. Just... you know, that look. That's not the look a mentally sound person might...} Suddenly, he paused, tilting his head at Avo, then at Draus, Dice, Kae, and down at the kitten currently pissing on his feet. Avo just kept staring. *{Alright. I got the point. We're all maniacs. Except Essus. Poor bastard's in nasty company.}*

Chambers chuckled and Avo drove his past him, studying the near-flat sitting close beside Tavers. He still looked lost, but his thoughtstuff held to a steadier current now. More stability.

“So,” Draus said, seated on a chair constructed by smart matter as she finished loading another magazine, “you reckon we got enough toys to kick this party up a notch or what? Gettin’ tired of snuffin’ chaff.” She punctuated her words by slotting a flechette into the empty mag Dice handed to her, the girl helping in the preparations. “I want me some big game.”

“Not yet,” Kae responded, though her excitement remained. “Not nearly enough to ‘kick this party up a notch’ as you might ask. Each Guild has hundreds of thousands of Heavens. The golems abandoned in these Warrens are centuries out of date in technology and thaumaturgy—elevated from obsolesce only by virtue of Stillborn’s capabilities.” Her dark eyes shifted over to Avo as she ran a hand through her shoulder-length braids. Her smile dipped into a sneer momentarily. “You have no idea the promise they stole from me—from my work. My *life*. What I could have—” She drew in a breath. But she was smirking still. Face joyless, but gleeful, bright with fiery purpose. Being allowed to work her craft once more filled her mind with iron and returned to her a pride once savaged by thought-incinerating flames. “For lesser Agnosi, a commission for a Heaven takes years. Years of study—years of testing and trials. Countless lives offered on the altar of progress.”

She shook her head. “I remember... before you took the fire from me, I once told you that your Frame would see me and my fellows made redundant. My words were too kind. Not only can it make us redundant, it will shame our efforts in the process. Even with simulated designs, the precision offered by your Imitators is beyond the capabilities of mortal ken, without a chance of rupture or failure. All it needs is the proper structural inputs...”

Sweeping a hand through the projections, the visual replicas of each Heaven swirled around her like planetary bodies bound to the gravity of a star. A hand came up, and she pulled a Lushburner from the ensemble.

“Lushburners. Slightly more recent Highflame ecological utility golems. Made one-ninety-three post fall, forty years out of date. But when distilled by the Stillborn’s Metafactory, there is no need to untangle canons and undo beliefs. No new sacrifices must be constantly fed to keep the secondary rupture active. From expendable Heavens, we harvested the seeds of our ascent. Seeds that, when planted by capable hands—mine! Can be cultured into canons worth keeping.”

By this point, Draus had stopped loading her gun and was looking at Kae oddly. “Yeah. That’s nice. Listen, Kae... you, uh, you alright?”

“See,” Chambers said, with a pitched whisper. “It’s not just me.”

The ghoul frowned.

“I’m am perfectly *not* fine,” Kae said, reaching out as if the strangle someone unseen. “I... am furious. I have been furious for days. I tried killing people. But it was horrible. Horrible! Horrible! Horrible! I hate the feeling of bodies breaking. I hate the screams. I hate feeling them die. Then, I got to enjoy a sampling of my greatest failure. The Heaven of Love. Wombrash. Taunting me.” She sighed. “It hurt. It hurt more than anything in my life. I—the human skull is not meant to be used as a birthing receptacle.” Chambers shuffled awkwardly as the Agnos glared at him. “But it reminded me... the pain focused me. This is what people are suffering. This humiliation. This degradation. This *indignity*. And the Guilds destroyed my life over this? They were stopping me from fixing this?”

She pointed at Avo. “You were never meant to have that Frame. Your *fuck* of a father should have never—” A sharp intake of breath followed as she clenched a fist. The moisture in the air coiled about her, the light scintillating from her form. “--But that is done. That life is lost. Lost. Lost. I can’t get it back. I can’t. But... you have given my mind back to me. My craft—my love above loves. For all that cannot be made right, my dreams are more alive than ever, and my chains and oaths are gone.” Her fist opened, and she extended a hand as if trying to grasp Avo’s form with her fingers. “I cannot say if meeting you was my greatest misfortune or blessing beyond my life’s worth. That Frame was never meant to be. It was never meant to be for you. I was never supposed to lose Dawton, my friends, my life. Exiled. Abandoned.”

She paused. “But now lost all I could have. I have lost all I could have. I have lost all I could. And so, nothing can stop me from healing this city.” She turned from the Heavens and regarded Avo fully now. “I wish you never were, Avo. I wish you weren’t real, and that I was back home. But here. Now. I am glad I met you. I am glad you are who you are. And I am glad for the things we will soon do together.” She smiled again, the gleam in her eyes faded. “Damn you for existing. And thank you for quenching the fire. And thank you for not just... burning me into you and tossing me away.”

Avo grunted. “Wanted to. Fought the urge. Burned away the desire after. Can’t regret it now. Literally.”

The Agnos closed her eyes and laughed. “You terrible monster. Alright. Let us focus on the matter at hand: our Heavens. Perfect for crushing the Soulless and mundane. Entirely too impotent if we are to raid the Tiers. I will not see us falling short when the time comes for my vengeance. For when we repay fire with fire.”

Isolating a few more golems from the group, she gestured to the few with Domains of Space. “First, I suggest we reserve a few Heavens as specialized spatial Rendbombs. This is an immediate solution I have for in case we encounter a pocket—or someone with a build like Shotin Kazahara.”

“Paradox ‘em,” Draus said, nodding alone. “Or at least make them soak a constant rupture. Deny them the ability to hold ground. Pretty good, Agnos. When’d you start thinking like a soldier?”

The Agnos rolled her eyes. “Please. Your tactics are but drapes hung over my great works.”

[She’s right about that,] Abrel interjected within Avo’s mind. [But she’s going to need more than a theorist’s understanding of applied thaumaturgy. You need *practical experience*. And you really don’t have that many options.] She reached out for the Paladins but left the Fallwalkers undisturbed. **[Me, Kassamon, and Kare are the only ones with sufficiently advanced Heavens. Two of us have active combat experience. Kitzuhada probably has a sequence or two worth using.]**

[I thank you for the lovely compliment, Instrument Greatling,] Kare replied, speaking through gritted teeth.

[It wasn’t.]

[I know.]

[Then don’t use sarcasm, you dumb bitch. Did you really think I was going to fucking bi–]

Avo reshaped his consciousness and infused his base mind with parts from all three egos. His way of thinking transformed as his stomach coiled, horrified at the recent things he had done, disgusted with the shape of his body—dysmorphia coming hard. It took a few more adjustments before he angled his cognitive architecture away from potential psychosis.

“Have recommendations for us,” Avo said, using Abrel’s experience at Atraxis Academy as the foundation for his concepts. “Drawn from other egos. Abrel Greatling. Paladins Kassamon and Kitzuhada. Active combat experience.”

“Oh, yes,” Kae said, chirping with fascination. “I keep forgetting you could do that.” Her expression flattened. “Especially since *my Conflagration* just ate my memories instead of giving me post-cognitive abilities akin to your Frame.”

Avo grinned. “Have you tried being *special*?”

“I hate you again.”

He took in her pout with a few satisfied clicks of his fangs and regarded his cadre. Memories of team composition and thousands of combat-drill hours filled his being. With once passive memories brought to the forefront, it grew plain to him how inefficient they all were. How sloppy their approach. “We’re scattered. Each fight like a Fallwalker instead of a cadre. We assist each other. But we don’t support. And we are not designed to fit our behaviors. Habits. None of other than Dice.”

The waif blinked at him but otherwise said nothing.

“Yes. Cadre classification.” Kae hummed. “Breaker. Porter. Seer. Maker. With my own Aegis of Tides as the Highflame special designation ‘Fortress.’”

[It’s a stupid fucking specification,] Abrel said. [It just sounds better than “training wheels until we figure out what you’re good at” or “here, taking the ass-kicking for the rest of us because you’ll not worth shit in a fight yet.”]

“Draus is Porter. Has Jhred’s Heaven. Twice-Walker. But he’s a coward. A craven. She’s a hunter. A killer. Design doesn’t entirely fit the user.”

“Yes,” Kae agreed. “The old design was also quite *shit*.”

“Thanks, consangs,” Draus muttered. “Glad I got it.”

“It’s better than mine. Or Essus.” Chambers gestured to the man sitting awkwardly next to Tavers. “I mean, he turns into a big door or something. That sucks. Sorry, Es.”

But if the former refugee was offended, he didn’t show it.

“What about him,” Dice said, speaking suddenly. All eyes turned to the girl as she pet the nu-kitten on her lap, letting it chew on the chrome edge of a gauss rifle’s magazine. “Can he be blessed too? I think he should be like me. He’s fast. Strong. Good hunter. Will be a powerful master too.”

Chambers snorted. “Cat-clad.” A beat passed and he turned to look at Avo. “Okay. Not funny anymore, just cool. Can you do it?”

Avo blinked and looked to Sunrise for an instant, the swarm of sophont bees seizing his full attention. *+Calvino... Voidwatch has uplifts...+*

The EGI sang a chortle of amusement. *{Absolutely not. You live what might literally be considered hell to some people. I would hardly think it ethical to spawn a life in this place.}*

That made Avo chuff with annoyance. *+But you let the people grow children. Provide vats.+*

{Realpolitick can be vile,+ Calvino sighed. +The Terrestrials feed off death, and we need them to close more of the Sunderwilds. The ugliness of this arrangement is part of the reason for our dissemination of technologies. Reduced as we are, you are still far, far, far behind in way of things, grasshopper. But that said, no. Let the cat stay ignorant. Blissful.}

But as the EGI pleaded, another thought filled Avo's mind. Other considerations of his own.

{Avo...} Calvino sighed.

"Will see what I can do," Avo finally said.

That earned a toothy grin from the waif, and reinforced with Kassamon's traits, it suddenly dawned on him how young she was. How soft. He quickly resequenced himself away, deleting the guilt before it could overcome him.

Humanity was an insidious thing.

{Careful not to let that morality bite you,} Calvino chuckled.

"Okay," Chambers said, grinning. "That cat's a Breaker. I can feel it. Destruction. Mayhem. Piss." He pointed down at his boot. "Hey, Kae, is there are Heaven of Piss."

"You will *never* have it."

"There is!"

"Anyway," Avo re-railed the conversation before things could develop into a place more scatological, "Woundshaper served me well. Zephyr too. Datacaster essential for survival. Think the first is a good tower. Physically affecting. Want it to be more. Create things. Fabricate matter and flesh both. Expand control."

"And spread your influence like a fire?" Kae asked with a smirk.

"Yes."

"I think it can be done. But your Zephyr though..." She seemed more uncertain. "That will require adjustments. Much like the Twice-Walker. We must borrow deeper into the mythologies. Make them harder to paradox and tighten the parameters of their canons." Her eyes narrowed. "Or overhaul them altogether."

"Shootin' out from reflections and turnin' people to glass's been useful," Draus added. "But I need somethin' with a bit more kick. Fuck the ice bear. Give me somethin' that can slag a block. That'll pair well with the Twice-Walker's my say."

[Can't say I disagree,] Abrel stated. [Which is probably why you got the Bullet-Breeds from that patrol, didn't you? I was wondering why you went for one so out of the way.]

Avo refused to acknowledge her implications, but Kae caught on without any prompting.

"I think we can make something of the Domain of Guns," she said. "Or fire. Or war. Or even Strength, really."

[Keep your Heavens a bit mixed too,] Kassamon said. [The Twice-Walker and Galeslither are pretty good at getting away but... they lack any offensive capabilities. Specialize but don't neuter is what I learned. Give yourself a few options at least.]

That was an easy suggestion to agree with. He told Kae as well.

"Chambers?" Avo asked. "Have a selection to choose from this time. No need to compete with Draus."

The man smacked his lips together. "I want... some lightning. Lightning and fire. Something elemental. And won't let people get away from me. I want to be *everywhere* and in their face all the time. And then, I want an easy pocket. So I can... you know..."

"Contained Rash-pockets," Kae muttered to herself, seeming a bit disgusted. "Wonderful. What has my life become."

"Wait," Chambers added, looking to Avo once more. "You got one of them Paladins in your brain-fire now, right? I think I saw the girl between the flickers. Karde."

"Kare?"

"Yeah. What I just said. Why don't you... you know. Spread the memories. Share the experience. With all of us. Make it easier."

A lull followed as Chambers realized the nature of his suggestion. "Oh, shit. Sorry, Kae. I, uh... I mean, it's really not that—"

"Fuck it," Draus said, interrupting his stammering. A boulder inside Avo plummeted. He turned to regard the Regular. She was standing now. Looking directly at him, her features inscrutable as she ran her tongue along her inner cheek. She shot a look over to Dice, and then another at Chambers. Finally, she rested her stare back on Avo. "Let's see it."

"See it?" Avo asked.

"Let's see what's your fire's like," Draus continued. "Ain't you've been waitin' for this. For me to ask?"

Avo breathed. "Would have been fine if you never did."

She scoffed. "You would have spent the rest of your life pussyfooting around. 'Sides. I'm tired of you hoarding all the spoils in your mind. I wanna know what my kills feel like. How it'll be to sink among them."

Across the chamber, Avo heard Tavers mutter. "Fucking Regulars. Godsdamned maniacs. All of them."

"What changed?" Avo asked.

"Shotin," Draus admitted. "Got a new thrill to slake. Need a bigger gun. Better skills. And a lack of time. But good for me that I know a certain memory dealer that can rebuild minds."

"Draus," Kae said, bravado faded, suddenly sounding very unsure.

"S fine, Kae," Draus replied. "Ain't never been 'fraid of fire. Not gonna start now."

"Won't be able to take this back," Avo said. "An instance of you—"

"Will finally be able to keep you in line from the inside," Draus said, sneering. "And maybe you'll fight worth a godsdamn bare-clawed now. Who knows. It'll be a small miracle, next to a big one. So. The hells are you waiting for, cosang? Light me."