

The Parallelist looks like an easy Heaven to overload and rupture from a glance and used by someone less capable than Shotin Kazahara, it would be.

Unfortunately, one of us poor bastards will be facing the Planeshift in the field before this thing is done, so listen close. It might just keep you from getting real deathed.

The Heaven stands as the very definition of a “Sea,” focused on the breadth of influence across a vast number of different Domains instead of absolute control over just a few. With nineteen different aspects of reality connected to a Heaven of Space, Shotin’s flexibility is unmatched in all situations, capable of attuning any environment to suit another of his designs, rapidly slotting or switching stacked worlds from a surrounding instance or a pre-saved location he has stored within his ontologic.

I want all of you to understand that there is no “home ground advantage” fighting Shotin Kazahara. He will twist your environment and see instances of himself across his stacks. He’ll scatter you and your allies across said stacks and break you via defeat in detail. This goes to all you Porters out there—keep your canons protected and your Rend-bombs close. You want the Parallelist as hamstrung as you can make it.

That doesn’t mean he’s helpless, mind you. He still has a Heaven of Speed and a Heaven of War slotted in his custom-made Frame, but it’ll be easier grinding him down when he’s anchored to the material than chasing him across worlds of his own making.

It was with this Heaven that he managed to hold the Arsdan-Kossogi Sovereignty against two Highflame war hosts and four separate cadres, personally real-deathing Instruments Osjane Masser and Threes Inkton, and Authority Elvers Inkton over an extended engagement that lasted for thirteen hours. I personally knew Authority Elvers and will tell you his skill in direct combat exceeds even the best of you.

That was not what got him killed. What got him killed was breaking from his cadre and N-Def coverage to engage Shotin alone. View the vicarity we reconstructed from the remnants of his mind to fully immerse yourself in mistakes and decisions made during the battle.

I am ashamed to say that many of our Guild think we are intrinsically superior to our foes by our culture, breeding, and creed. This is self-delusion. Highflame is more than a creed or a culture.

True to the High Seraph’s words, we should not fall to the poison of dogma or philosophy.

“Blessed be the worthy.”

That’s a material expression. To triumph is Highflame. To push yourself every second and rise from every fall is Highflame. To recognize that one of your hated foes is a valorous rival worth learning from and emulating is Highflame. Shotin Kazahara would have been made Authority by his deeds if he had fought for us during the war.

Preventing the fall of a critical Sovereignty even as his cadre fell around him, even as [Redacted] debased our image by kidnapping and torturing his sister—a noncombatant and a prison of war—before trying to lure him out via her murder.

He did not break from his assigned position. He fought. He executed his orders. And the worthy won that day.

Thirteen hours of fighting. Twelve hundred knots destroyed. Two war hosts and eighteen Ori combat groups annihilated to the last soldier. Shotin Kazahara endured.

Today, we will be reconstructing the events of that day, as well as everything we know about the Planeshift. You will all be assigned roles in the war hosts as you attempt to engage the Parallelist and the surviving Silver forces.

I do not expect any of you to succeed and will be giving no merits for failure.

Prove me wrong. Redeem our glory.

-Instrument Santanado “Starsinger” Mondelles, Instructor at Axtraxis Academy (Highflame)

17-11

The Rash Abides (II)

Tension pulled at Shotin’s nerves as a lone figure circled toward his megablock in a rapid jog. She was moving pretty fast for someone not using their Heaven of Blood. A *bit* too fast, judging from the air currents peeling around her. Still, she wasn’t doing anything offensive or obvious. Just... circling. Trying to see if he would actually shift her over into his deep sea plane, perhaps.

Across all the stacks he had in him, the “city reclaimed by vegetation” design was among his favorites. Something about the green just made people want to talk.

His Skimmer bathed this layer of spatial reality with his perception, ensuring that none here hiding between the cracks or trying to pull a dirty getaway on him using an Incog. It was good practice to overlap multiple surveillance mechanisms. That was taught to him enough over the course of the war. More than a few Highflame Godclads managed to slip the supposed all-sensing nature of one of his Correspondence canons and the eyebiter infestation he caught from the Sang was pain enough for one lifetime.

Still, there were things that unnerved him about the girl keeping her distance from him, running down the clock via her slow approach. The first was her sudden death earlier. She just dropped. No rhyme or reason. Just died. She killed her bioform before that as well, turning into a red smear on the ground before he could get a good look at it.

Maybe she was charging up something nasty with a Heaven of Biology. That explained the nu-kitten she carried with her everywhere. Maybe the cat could piss lightning and shit nuclear fire. He knew a Sang once who could turn people's eyes into wasps. Got to experience that firsthand. Shifted the sow over into a plane of dawn as a response and set her on fire. That was a real-death most deserved.

He had to be ready for this girl pulling similar tricks.

Something else gnawed at him. She was just too full of tricks to be some random wilder girl beyond the walls. Wiser was casting casualties into his mind—a full knot wiped out and an entire Incubi strike cell along with their monitoring mirror nulled. That was beyond the capabilities of most Godclads. There must've been someone helping her. An extremely capable Necrojack like the Low Masters.

Or one of their acolytes.

He glared at her strangely formed accretion and frowned. She didn't even truly have a Metamind protecting her, but the makeup of her consciousness looked *warped*. Hardened against traumas. That indicated expert-level sequencing. The type even he would need to spawn a dozen instances of himself to achieve.

Aedon Chambers. Shotin could feel the man's hand in this—feel the acolyte's artistry emanating from the girl. He must have also arranged this Frame for her. Helped her usurp a vulnerable Godclad, perhaps.

Shotin sighed as he prepared himself. He had a feeling this was—

WARNING: MISSILES INCOMING IN STACK-PRIME [1.4 KILOMETERS]

Shifting his consciousness out from his instance back into his prime sheathe, he found himself blasting off the top of the megablock with four unidentified missiles marked in his cog-feed. The district below was awash in fire and carnage, and sirens blared down from the layers above him, the Paladins finally deeming the situation worth their attention, miserably late as usual.

It wasn't like they would be able to get in before he was done. A translucent dome caged a fifty square kilometer area around the block and it was already partially detached from real space. If any of the Paladins got in before this was all over, he would just shift them into a realm he used for temporary holdings, and snuff them a few times if they were a Porter.

The incoming missiles, though, needed to be dealt with. With his drones down and knots occupied, he needed to prevent someone from nuking the district again. The last thing he wanted today was more dead FATELESS.

Pulling a hundred or so of his own instances across from various unused planes, he felt his mind stack as his perception and thoughts accelerated. The world slowed to a near halt, and even his body moved like molasses, maintaining velocity only due to his Heaven of Speed.

Zooming his sight in, he studied the missiles fired by the golems and frowned. Large, slow, and brushing on the borders of his Parallelist. Rend bombs. Oh, how he despised those things. He didn't need to be a genius to know what they intended to inflict on him. Dumping Spatial entropy to rupture or disable a Heaven is standard. The expertise was knowing how to smuggle the bomb across for an ensured—

WARNING: PARADOX DETECTED

DOMAIN: [SPACE]

WARNING: REND DETONATIONS DETECTED

DOMAIN: [SPACE]

REND CAPACITY [PARALLELIST]: 24%

REND CAPACITY [DAWNFORGE]: 41%

REND CAPACITY [SOARER OF ENDLESS PURSUITS]: 6%

And all at once, his stacks collapsed along his instances as spatial reality succumbed to turbulence.

Time accelerated and the Rend bombs blinked and reappeared, crossing countless kilometers before detonating just above the block.

Late-triggered spatio-kinetic delivery mechanisms. Of course, Aedon Chambers had those. He must've raided some of Sanctus' supplies as well. The fabric of reality crinkled in some places and stretched in others. Shotin suddenly found himself grinding down a wall, his face now christened with wonderful new skidmarks.

WARNING: REND DETONATIONS DETECTED

DOMAIN: [SPACE]

REND CAPACITY [PARALLELIST]: 35%

A new intel update slipped into his mind from Wiser Nara. Apparently, *someone* had nulled all their golem jocks and stolen their mem-data. After that, they attached the spoofed memories to their own assets and smuggled their own golems onto the battlefield. Images displaying the wrecks of a Galeslither, a Snake-King, and an Anchorhold golem entered his mind. The first lay in two parts, torn in half by a growing rupture in the space it occupied. The other two were

spraying entropy from their ruined husks, their overloads dumping Rend into him, but not clashing against his canon.

A strike this precise filled Shotin's stomach with coldness.

Someone was in their systems...

Dice... could she have been bait? Could Aedon Chambers have infiltrated Ori-Thaum's inner lobbies so completely that he was watching them this entire time? Were their preventative measures insufficient? How deep had the half-strand penetrated?

Dammit. He should have suspected this. Everything was falling into his lap—one lucky lead after another, and finally a hit in a district in the middle of nowhere.

Life had been too kind to him lately. He needed to focus. Take this seriously. Stop playing with his food.

+Nara! Closed protocol! Keep our forces separated! Eject everyone from the lobby and jack out yourself!+ He pushed the thought across his session and activated his Heaven of Speed again, trying to remember where Dice was.

This would all be worth it if he could just extract her. She was the lead—the trail to Chambers that he needed. Everything else was secondary.

+Well, that worked better than I expected,+ White-Rab said, sounding pleased with himself. *+I didn't expect to hit a paradox. Gotta thank Reva for that tip. I'll refund you those golems. I didn't think I'd be able to keep the ruse up in time. Guess their command was too busy trying to figure out where their Incubi went to notice spoofed knot-data popping up in the wrong place. Alright, Tavers. Here's your opening. Go get my ghoul out of here alive.+*

+Yeah, don't worry,+ she said, just as her drop-pod caught a wave of spatial turbulence and bounced off a wall. *+I got this.+*

And sighted. She hated spatial anomalies. Hated feeling herself bounce all over the place, hated as deviance in the metaphysical distance pulled an accurate shot off course. Her deployment was supposed to be two kilometers past the megablock in the back of Veng's Stand. Where she ended up arriving was an abandoned aero lot repurposed into a hangout for vagrants and juvs alike.

People and objects were clipping through each other, stuttering as they swayed from place to place. Screams filled the air and distant sirens told her that she had about thirty seconds before the Paladins and Exorcists reared their ugly faces too.

Thankfully, she came prepared. Booting the lid of her deployment pod off, she activated her *Shapebreaker Rendcannon*—a special gift from an Ashthrone middler for her exemplary service. All she needed to do with this thing was point and pull and anything that was material would alchemize into superheated gas.

Four scout drones detached from the sides of her pod and connected to her mind. Full spectrum awareness filled her mind's eye as she began scouting for the package. Neither the ghoul nor the girl would be hard to miss. And with spatial reality being disrupted again, she was just about as deadly as any Godc—

The lid rubberbanded back through space and she shot it. A wide beam swallowed over the metallic plate. A beat later, only dust graced Taver's combat skin.

REND: 98%

Yeah. This'll do.

Draus resurrected to the sight of a building folding in on itself and scowled as she realized her gun was missing. She made a note to fuse it with her Meldskin next time so it would count as part of her for a resurrection. However that worked. Might need Kae to explain it again.

Her Neurodeck crackled as metrics related to radiation filled the corner of her eye. She ignored it. A conventional explosion was the least of this district's concerns. Spatial fabric looked more fucked now than when she went under. A few columns of smoke shivered up into the sky as if she staring at them from behind an oily window.

A humorless chuckle escaped her as she fired her thrusters and soared low along the ground. This had the rotlick's fingerprint all over it: really, really quiet, then unholy chaos and carnage for everyone when shit goes sideways.

To her surprise, the Manta was still in one piece and she connected to it again via Neurodeck. Her suicide had reduced its mass by a bit, but it was still more than operational. Sending it high into the air, it became overwatch again as she tried to call Avo.

But his Ego-ID was blank in her Neurodeck.

Her lip curled. Dead, then. The question is if he's dead for good or on the way back.

Sweeping its sensors through the chaos, a ping manifested in her HUD marking where Dice was. Four hundred meters away. She'd clear than in an instant—find out about their current situation and exfil with her in tow. No sense in leaving her to waste out here.

That'd be a real Highflame thing to do.

She cast Chambers' again. +Chambers—+

{I know! Don't worry, I'm on the way. I brought Kae with me. And we're driving—} A sound of Chambers screaming for his life started and then abruptly ended. *{We didn't crash. Thank Jaus. Anyway, that half-strand isn't ready for all our feet rising up the folds of his asshole at once.}*

Draus suspected Chambers' foot wouldn't ever get the privilege. *{Just get over here. And come up with some extraction routes too.}*

{Got it. There's a gateway we can take ten kilos away! Denton's back in the Washington! We'll have her open it before we get there!}

The Regular boosted over a half-collapsed shanty and found Dice smashing through everything in her path as if they weren't there. Fallen drones and abandoned aeros went up into the air. Solid walls burst into dust as the waif just charged through them. And strangely, with each thing she broke, she seemed to be going faster, hitting harder.

So, Avo was just taking a break, then. She doubted the girl pulled these new tricks from thin air.

"Kae," Chambers said, cutting from one lane to another without casting any directional indicators. Aeros behind them blared their horns and swerved. "Are you ready? Are you ready for anything?"

Their aero swerved as Chambers yowled curses at the Exorcist drones darting up from under them in front of them. "That's right! That's right! Fuck me! Fuck me hard in front of the lady. Run me out the lane and kill us! You bastards are half the problem with this city. Piss back out your asses! Fucks!"

Kae frowned at the constant stream of vulgarity and tried to focus on her tasks. "I... I think. I'm trying to review the Heaven—our adversary has a great deal of coverage. Spatial reality across fifty kilometers has been considerably—"

"I don't care about them, Kae," Chambers said, rolling his neck but getting no cracks like Draus. He tried again. Still nothing. He mimed a cracking noise using the corner of his mouth and pretended to succeed. "I'm talking about me."

"You?"

Chambers nodded.

“...What–what are you planning to do, Chambers?”

He looked out the window and narrowed his eyes as he judged the cityscape below. “There is one power above all others. There is one Heaven standing on all the others. A Heaven that can only be cured by the flame. Someone’s trying to hurt our consangs. We can’t let that happen. Nothing’s off the table. Everything’s permitted.”

“... What are you talking about?”

He looked up at the ceiling and nodded, steeling himself. “Just be ready...”

The Agnos’ mind went blank as she tried to decipher his words. She gave up a moment later, turning her attention toward which potential Heavens were at play and what routes they could use to escape.