

It's important to know where you stand with people.

In this life, the people who might fight and die for you unconditionally are few and almost impossible to meet. Most allies will be people of a common cause. Keep that word in mind: common cause.

You can be friendly and all that shit, but don't ever forget the foundations of your relationship. When the conditions behind your objectives shift, make sure to double-check where you stand, and—word of advice, always anticipate a stab in the back.

What I find to be best practice is making what you want murky. Keep things unclear and hazy if relations are purely professional. Squires don't usually sell each other to the Guilds, but minds are breached all the time and fuckers get desperate. Don't let people know what you don't really trust them with. Do things in layers.

Oursource, if you need to.

If you want to be a major league squire, you can't risk yourself on minor league gains. If your target's a Syndicate head or something, you don't want to be hitting every one of the half-strand's lieutenants. The noise you'll be making will scatter the fish—and they'll know how your coming for. Might even start playing their own tricks: hiring pretend squires to help you out during a firefight so you'll end up trusting them.

Long enough to catch a flechette to the back of the head.

-Quail Tavers, School of the Warrens

25-13

Out of the Dark

-[Shotin]-

As a child, Shotin Kazahara had nightmares of the Maw.

His original fear was planted with a mem-sim detailing the history of the city's depths. It placed him and his fellow learners in various avatars. By misfortune, Shotin got to experience what it was like to be a Nolothi slave before anything else. Even now, he could still remember how the entropy ate at his skin and gnawed his body in layers even with the supposed divine protections. And then there was the darkness. How it felt alive, like a miserable predator yearning to see existence unmade.

The channels they dug ran down, down... so far down beneath the kiss of light that all they knew was darkness. Entire generators were bred and given unto such a purpose, deprived of starlight for so long that their skin went cloud-pale, yearning for a sky they would never see.

A shift of turbulence pulled him back to the present. Seated on the couch across from him, Denton's eyes continued staring a hole through his skull. Shit was creepy. It was like the woman didn't know how to blink.

Connecting his Meta to the aero's sensors, he took in the snaking channels and the festering entropy they exhaled upwards into existence. Holographic columns contained the spillage of streaming floods of garbage and rusted maintenance drones blinked just above the darkness, alloyed needles made to glisten by midnight rain.

"Scenic view," Shotin griped.

"It's a matter of perspective." Denton remained unburdened, unbothered. She seemed uncaring of all that was happening, implacable in all situations. Not even when Shotin applied charm did she offer more than three sentences before defaulting back to silence. The Glaive was impenetrable. More importantly, she was poor company and the coldness she radiated sequestered Shotin with his own thoughts and memories.

And if there was one flaw Shotin Kazahara had, it was that he hated being alone with himself.

Creating a Skimmer using one of his outer planar loci, he directed the phantasmic to descend into the dark and gaze further into the depths. Once again, he was a child living a false life. He thought of spending his entire existence as a slave, wasting away in the dark.

Horror. Such was the root of humanity. Such was the common lore of all history. Didn't matter the Guild. Didn't matter if you were a citizen or subject.

Being a Godclad elevated you beyond death's grip, but a mind could still think. Still imagine. Shotin's mind was particularly imaginative—he was capable of keeping his sense of self even while exercising deep empathy. It was what made him a fantastic defensive Necrojack. It was also why he hated sequencing traumas.

As his Skimmer pulsed, his awareness fell wide as if the downpour itself. He knew grime lining the Maw's walls. He touched the nothingness between the valley of waste. The ambiance here was all but haunting, with his mind providing screams across history. Screams of slaves. Screams of his sister. Screams of everyone he killed—deserved or otherwise.

Nowhere other than the base of New Vultun reminded him of what fulfilling Jaus' dream cost.

The Tiers were glamour and glory embodied. It was the polished tip of a porcelain tooth with a rotted base. Here was the opposite. Here was silence and oblivion: two poles pulling at the hearts of men.

This will all be worth it, he thought to himself. It had to be. If there was any utopia at all, it would all have to be worth it.

A pylon brushed against Shotin's attention, but he felt its presence metaphysically before his perception ever touched it. It released massive thaumaturgic emissions, drowning the world in an oppressive weight. Every last Domain Shotin had ached within the vicinity of the wall, but still he took in its structure, feeling how low it extended into the dark of the Maw, a spike buried into the entropy itself.

If he tried to shift planes here—attempted to breach the border in any way—the wall would halt his attempt, and the backlash would flow across all the channels.

And back into him as well.

“Interesting spot our friend picked.” Shotin directed a final pulse down into the Maw before drawing the phantasmic back into himself. “You think he’s running the Maw to avoid detection? That why we’re here?”

The Glaive didn't offer anything. “I think I'm not the one you ask this question.”

Shotin snorted. “Yeah. Figures. So. When are they going to show up? Or am I supposed to ask someone else that either—”

“Already here.”

A voice came from beside him, flat and nasally. Shotin's reflexes accelerated from the shock, and as he turned, he found a masked figure sitting next to him. The Seeker barely kept himself from shunting the intruder off into one of his more lethal planes before he caught himself.

Denton, as always, remained unsurprised. She offered the stranger a nod before gesturing at Shotin. “You can start with the questions now.”

That earned her a glare from the Seeker, but it bothered her, it didn't show.

“So,” Shotin said, battling the urge to shift everyone present into a plane of his choosing. The only reason he held back was because of the border wall. SE-7777... was that why they wanted to have the meeting here? To ensure that, if he did anything, the border would trigger a paradox? Something they planned beforehand. His question trailed off into a nodding laugh before it began. “You sneaky fuck. Scenic view my ass. I'll need to remember this one.”

“Not sure what you mean,” the stranger said. They didn't sound like the Incubus nested in his mind, but thoughtcasts were easy to disguise. The more troubling thing was the holocoat lining the figure's body with light-based distortions and how the sequences in their Metamind was constantly changing.

The bastard couldn't be nailed down.

"The border," Shotin replied. "It's got a canon that interferes with my Parallelist, doesn't it?"

The stranger simply leaned back. "It might. But that's not the important part. The Maw is. Saw you looking at it earlier. Taking it in. Good instincts."

Compliment or flattery, Shotin couldn't tell. Frankly, he liked both. "Yeah, well. I was promised a sight. I guess a cluster of valleys choked with matter-dissolve entropy count." He sneered at Denton. "If it fits one's perspective. When the hell did you get in, anyway? Didn't even notice the door open. What? Did you jack the aero's locus too? Load up an Incog without me noticing."

"Nothing so sophisticated." And then the half-strand said no more.

Something about their posture reeked of smugness. Shotin shook his head and snorted. "Fine, asshole. Keep your secret. But I want to know... just what the fuck is going on. What do you know about Clan D'Rongo and—and the High Seraph... the Low Masters... my niece. Just what in the hells is going on here?"

"War," the stranger said. And then they deactivated their Incog and offered Shotin a face to look upon—some Shotin recognized.

A bald man with dull green eyes dressed in a heavily buttoned silver long coat studied him. Scars and circuitry ran in crisscrossing lines along his face, and thick synth-muscle fibers left striations down the man's neck. Shotin cross-referenced the man beside him with his memories for confirmation.

"Mirror Benhata," Shotin said. "We meet again at last. Gotta say, you gave the Inner Council some scare with how you went missing at the Trident. Report says you left a smear of shit in your office, but not even a mem-log besides."

Benhata winced at that. "The body... it does things when someone nearly nulls you. Snatches you out from your office while you're having a seizure."

"Someone?" Shotin asked.

"Yeah," Benhata said. "Someone. I take it you're familiar with the Low Master's newest Acolyte? Aedon Chambers?"

Rage went off like a bomb inside Shotin. He had to force the next breath out of himself. Memories returned to him—flashes of a mangled infant spilling down his body in caked rivulets of gore. "*Motherfucker.*"

Benhata chuckled grimly. “Yeah. The feeling’s mutual.”

–[Avo]–

[Avo, what the fuck, consang, why do I still gotta be the bad guy?] template-Chambers whined. **[I thought we were trying to recruit his ass?]**

The submind ignored him as it continued to puppet the avatar. Leading him deeper into a new forest of conspiracy.

Shotin was astute. That much was clear with how closely he watched the Maw, with how he fast he realized the true reason why Avo wanted the meeting here beside SE-7777. It was only the finer details he was missing. Finer details, and a critical lack of knowledge concerning the Stillborn.

But that didn’t mean he couldn’t be misdirected. That didn’t mean openings couldn’t be created. Especially using his Overheaven.

“There is a war happening in the deepness of the Nether, Seeker Kazahara,” Avo continued, letting Shotin have a moment to stew in his anger. The man turned his eye on him with confusion. “In a place deeper than where any our Incubi dare delve. The Low Masters... I believe they are experiencing something of a *civil war*. It is the only way I can explain my own survival. I was held for some days by Chambers. I was even kept alongside a No-Dragon Godclad... *Elegant-Moon*, I believe her name was.”

“No-Dragon?” Shotin asked, sounding entirely confused.

Avo didn’t bother explaining the next part verbally. Instead, he channeled a concentration of mem-data within a splinter and cast it over to Shotin. It took the man of beat of deliberation, but he accepted the link—started reviewing the data within one of his outer-layered loci. It detailed all the information about Instrument Santanado’s dealings with the “rogue” Ori assets. That, and the plot behind Ambassador Kitzuhada’s assassination.

Shotin’s eyes widened as he shifted the splintered locus across his many planes. He reviewed the information with multiple other mindscapes—and inadvertently exposed all of them to infection. Yet, the intrusion of Avo Overheaven proved to be the true prize.

The metaphysical patterns making up Shotin’s Parallelist revealed themselves to Avo, and he fought the urge to chuckle. No longer was **SE-7777** the fail-safe; Avo could backlash or paradox Shotin with a thought via a conflicting canon or **Pattern-Nullification**.

Good. This worked even better. Time to plot a paradox. Destabilize the Parallelist and capture the man’s actual Metamind.

+Get ready,+ Avo said, casting a pre-warning to Denton. **+Paradox incoming.+**

The spy betrayed nothing as she just watched them.

His second thoughtcast went out to Draus, asking her to be on standby.

Time to see if he could claim a new *template*.

“Great,” Shotin growled. He rubbed at his temples with frustrated exhaustion. “Perfect. I always knew the D’Rongos were sow-born bastards but this... our own Ambassador. Working with an Instrument of Highflame. And an acolyte? Who also attacked said Instrument.”

“Yeah. Real mess.” Avo read the confusion on Shotin’s face and knew his plan was working. “There are a lot of elements in play, Seeker. These elements are the reason why I haven’t returned to the fold yet. The D’Rongos are subverted. No telling how deep the Nolothe rot runs. But there’s something else. Something worse.”

“Worse?” Shotin asked. “The fuck can be worse than—”

“Highflame was making a Liminal Frame. The only of its kind. Something that was going to win the war for good. They called it the Stillborn. Capable of cutting out the Agnosi and modifying itself. Capable of *upgrading* any and all Heavens through the thaums it absorbs.”

Shotin blinked twice and reflexively ran a hand through his silken mane. Avo took this opportunity to start infusing memories sourced from Shotin’s inner demiplanes into expendable minds.

EDICT OF _PATTERN-NULLIFICATION_

->APPLYING DOMAINS OF (SPACE)

->CANON: PLANESFALL - THE ARK COLLAPSES TWO POCKETS OF SPACE OVER EACH OTHER, OVERLAPPING EVERYTHING MATERIAL CONTAINED WITHIN BOTH POCKETS; THE AMOUNT OF REND CONTAINED WITHIN THE ARK DETERMINES SCALE AND SCOPE

->MORTALITY: EVERYONE WHO REMEMBERS THE AFFLICTED LOCATION MUST HAVE THEIR MEMORIES. FAILURE TO ACHIEVE COMPLETE COGNITIVE OBLITERATION WILL DIRECTLY INFLICT A CORRESPONDING AMOUNT OF DAMAGE ON THE ARK’S EGO.

+Hells clean?+ Avo checked with Denton. She gave him a casual nod. Shotin didn’t notice—was too engrossed with the mem-data offered. **+Good. I’m going to hit us from the outside. Heavy kinetic strike. Knock the aero out of the air. Make it seem like an external attack in case this attempt goes wrong. Expect spatial paradox otherwise. Dive down the Maw if situation deteriorates further. Draus will pull you out.+**

He read a flicker of confirmation from the static encryptions veiling her actual thoughts and hid his pleasure. Voidwatch was showing his base mind much—benefits he inherited in real-time.

EXO-PARACOSM

->APPLYING [WOUNDMOTHER] HEAVEN TEMPLATE

->CANON: SANGUINITY'S REIGN

“Things change fast, don't they, Seeker Kazahara?” Denton's question pulled Shotin from one distraction to another. She offered him an apologetic smile. “Brace yourself: it goes even deeper. Deeper than you think.”

Avo thought of the place where he began this journey. As a corpse in a barge pending resurrection.

How far he'd come. How far he still had left to go. “Deep as the Maw.”

-[Shotin]-

Every sinew in Shotin was screaming at him to run, but he couldn't tell why.

The revelations were shocking. Terrifying, even. The situation was worse than a subverted clan—there was a whole other war being fought over this... *Stillborn* and that was supposedly why Veylis was involved. Not to mention the plot to kill his brother-in-bond... and Kare.

His mind was a whirlwind of chaos, and he needed a moment to think.

Wait. Benhata said something just now. “What? What was that?”

And then the Mirror smiled, and the dread churning inside Shotin rose to almost unbearable heights.

“Ah,” Benhata said. “Words aren't enough. I'll have to show—”

Shotin' sensed the blow. A sudden spike of force pressing down against the aero. Groaning of the external hull. He shifted on reflex—and pulled all three of them into his inner plane before their attack could destroy the aero. He wanted to bring his stacks down on the outside world but hesitated—border wall—

Before any of the three could settle within Shotin's Parallelist, he felt a claw of Rend pierce clean through two of his planes. Space collapsed upon space. Paradox followed before Shotin even realized what was going on.

WARNING: PARADOX DETECTED

->DOMAIN OF (SPACE)

His stacks collapsed. They were back in reality again. Sensations flashed around him. He lurched hard as spatial reality unfurled out from him—but there was something else. As he found himself pried free from Denton's crumpled aero tumbling past the edge of the Maw, he saw a single burning wisp chasing after him.

An incandescent chain of ghosts speared into his mind.

Shotin fell, but instead of plunging into the embrace of darkness—into the oblivion he once feared—he found himself grasped in the embrace of something vastly more incomprehensible.

Something unfathomably more terrible.

Ghosts shivered up and around him like dancing candles from undulating sequences, and as his Metamind loaded back into function, he faced the truth of his adversary for the first time.

WARNING: UNIDENTIFIED SOULS DETECTED

WARNING: _ARK_ DETECTED

**[OVERHEAVEN] - AVO, THE KNOWER OF TOTALITY (CONCEPTUALIZATION) - 181,055
THAUM/c**

“Welcome, Shotin Kazahara. It is good to finally meet you. Glad to be doing this far ahead of schedule.”