

The Highflame Path-Hydra Heaven is a Second Sphere Heaven usually attached to a golem. With its extremely low thaumic cost and simple canon, its uses in combat are few but focused.

It will be deployed to disrupted demiplanes or spatial anomalies via paradox.

It will be deployed to shuttle objects and personnel from one of its heads to another.

With the specificity installed in its canons, this Heaven has also proven to be highly difficult to detect when not in full manifestation. With nine heads forming a junction of interconnected pathways, entities trapped within the Path-Hydra can only escape from the confines one of a few ways.

The first and simplest method is to simply trigger multiple Hells and outlast its Rendsinks. This is a risky option as the Path-Hydra comes with twenty-seven CC-II variant Rendsinks that are easy to eject and replace.

The more technical option is to influence the movements of the hydras. Should one head overlap with another, the Path-Hydra's ontology will usually collapse alongside the golem's systems. Doing so is easier than said, and either requires supreme anticipation or something akin to directional vector manipulation.

The last and most complex operation is to somehow outmaneuver the ever-shifting interior of the hydra and find the machine or metaphysical core of the entire structure. If something of matter is thrown into its changing structure, the backlash will be extreme and likely collapse the entire Heaven.

If you find yourself trapped within a Path-Hydra, it is best for you to vent whatever spatial Rend you have inside immediately, while constantly moving to keep the Heaven active and stress its Rendsinks. Additionally, your Metaminds will function without issue, so if you locate the operational nexuses, nulling the controlling element is a good option as well.

-Ori-Thaum Primer on Highflame Golems and Auxiliary Units

17-4
Extraction

A beat passed as Avo and Elegant-Moon just stared at the place where the Manta used to be. A sparking cable swayed—part of it also snapped clean through by the passing Path-Hydra.

[Shit, the ship?] Corner cursed.

["Shit, the ship?"] Chambers sputtered. **[Shit, actual-me! Did I just watch myself get snuffed?]**

+*You're fine, Chambers,*+ Avo replied, still sensing the half-strand across their session. The coldtech connection to his cadre was choked with interference though. The micro-singularity generated by his ansible quivered and struggled to stay open. The violations against spatial laws caused it to collapse and reform between the seconds.

{The nature of the plane likely doesn't support the possibility of the Schwarzschild radius,} Calvino said. *{Do you see now why we are so adamantly against basing a society on chaotic and ill-thought out "vibes and rituals."}*

+*Nice when they're our vibes and rituals,*+ Avo replied.

Abrel's memories fed him critical information about the Path-Hydra. He really wanted to avoid this. There were good odds that his team had just been tossed over into a Highflame kill box or containment plane somewhere. Being gone and away was the best way to handle an annoyance like the Path-Hydra, but considering present circumstances...

Yeah. His Galeslither could do with the upgrade and he couldn't risk anyone learning about him through his cadre.

That, and letting them die would... *bother* him.

[Oh, shit,] Chambers breathed. **[It's happening! He cares! He fucking cares!]** Avo burned away the sentimentality and focused on the practical aspects. **[...You corpse-licking half-strand.]**

+*Come on,*+ Avo said, speaking to Elegant-Moon. +*Let's go get eaten.*+

The Sang turned to him and shook her head. **[I'd call you absolutely mad, but I fear our unfortunate friend is unaware of their coming fate.]** A wince ran through her. **[Another mind fed to your flames.]**

+*Won't be the last. Time till resurrection for you cadre?*+

[One-hundred and eight-second standard for most of us. Starsinger has a Myrmidon-Pattern, so another thirty seconds for him at max resurrection. Not all of us are fortunate enough to be blessed with a self-tuning Liminal Frame that can return you within thirty seconds.]

He checked his Metamind and found himself reassured. He still had almost a minute before the other Godclads revived. Best he make this quick. Boltstride through the interior of the Path-Hydra and locate both the Manta and the golem or Godclad at the heart of things.

Existence shuddered as he felt a sudden weight slam against his Galeslither and Datacaster. Again, a head of the hydra made its attack. Its coming was so metaphysically subtle and sudden that actively avoiding it would have required his full attention.

Seeing how he wanted to take a trip down the belly of the whale, however...

Ribbed walls lined with mucus-coated alloy and metallicly sculpted replicas of what he assumed the insides of a leviathan's throat looked like filled his cog-feed. The environment of the Layer vanished around him immediately, and the ambient temperature plummeted below ten degrees Celsius. The path ahead continued to accelerate past him, the folds of the hydras inside blurring together. It was like he was on a train but it was the station that was speeding past him instead.

Lightning became him. He leaped, and took the Sang with him, jumping the full twenty-four kilometers he was capable at baseline mass each time as his Rend grew. Unleashing a breath of matter-withering entropy into the structures around him, his gale rushed through but unmade nothing. Not that he was surprised.

His Sanguinity tasted no patterns present anyway. Attempting to punch through these walls would just see him invert back through the same path he came. This wasn't something he broke down physically. The Galeslither, however, remained an *appealing* option.

REND CAPACITY [WOUNDShAPER]: 9%

REND CAPACITY [DATACASTER]: 4%

REND CAPACITY [GALESLITHER]: 55%

Forcing the current head he was trapped in to hold still via his stasis, the demiplane didn't paradox or backlash. It still granted him a window of opportunity to push ahead with one section immobilized.

Suddenly, a sensation rushed through Elegant-Moon's Heaven—and into Avo's awareness as well. She felt four life signatures present. The singular organism was thirty-two kilometers away and hidden behind a narrow fold. The others were three times further, requiring multiple turns and a winding path to travel.

A burst of soulfire flashed through the Path-Hydra as its insides flickered out of existence momentarily, dipping them back in the confines of the Layer before turning. Someone was likely clashing Heavens with it, triggering paradox. Draus, he guessed. Likely trying to escape using her reflections.

“I can feel her,” the Sang said, facing twisting into a cruel sneer. “I can feel her perfected lungs and lab-grown muscles and immaculately carved bones and I can—” She made a fist, and through their link Avo felt her prolapse the pilot’s organs through her rectal cavity.

[That was not fucking necessary at all,] Benhata said, regarding the newest mind with absolute disgust.

Elegant-Moon, for her measure, simply smiled. **[The infliction of power is always necessary.]**

Through her, Avo felt the victim writhe and stain, body struggling as mutilated flowers blossomed—

+Keep her alive. Incapacitated. Need her mind.+ The orders left Avo in a daze, his templates helping him snap free from old habits. Bad habits. An echo of Draus sounded in his mind and he further adapted his mind toward pragmatism. A spike of annoyance turned inward as he realized he was wasting time—taking in sights when he should have been focused on extraction.

Chained to his will, Elegant-Moon did so with a sigh and forcibly shoved the swollen sack of hanging organs back up the way they came. Every muscle of the pilot was cramping. The Sang *read* the howling screams of her victim from their body language alone and offered a satisfied smirk. “Be you pleased now?”

He didn’t respond, instead choosing to stride twice more to arrive at the heart of the hydras.

The Sang’s Heaven was a powerful ontologic—and something that possessed symmetry with his Woundshaper. Part of him was already considering when to kill her. With her mind subsumed, he knew everything she did about herself and had the additional advantage of an outside perspective.

Outside perspective that could only be granted by over sixty thousand templates.

The things she has done and the deeds she performed were beyond appalling. He was beyond horror, but even as a ghoul, it was obvious that this one had a problem. Her lustaway drained the amorous excitement with every dose of pain they inflicted. His brothers hunted for the sake of thrill and gluttony. She did because it scratched an intimate, forbidden itch.

[What wonderful company you’ve been keeping, instructor,] Abrel muttered. A bitter sadness passed through her. **[At least I can say my cadre wasn’t made up of sadists and savages. We were green but... good. Better team than I deserved.]** Something inside her wilted. **[I wish you’d had burned them too. Godsdamn you Avo.]**

He granted her the room to feel her scorn but ignored the sting of her hate. *+Can’t be damned by the gods. Beyond them already. You already know that.+*

The heart of the Path-Hydra was a bundle of knotted tubes, circuits, and silicon-looking strips that stretched outward to connect with each of its heads. What staggered Avo more was the marvelous ember of the fire that burned within—the root housing the Heaven itself.

Fifty thaums. If that.

All these miracles manifested by fifty thaums.

How did Highflame even manage this? Creating something capable of so much for so little? Even the baseline Galeslither paled in comparison.

{A great deal of experimentation and focused development, I would say,} Calvin said. {It's also a modern Heaven, created by the focus minds of the brilliant Agnosi instead the maddened ramblings of god-fearing priests and people who died so much that losing technology between generations was more common than gaining it.}

Wasting no time, Avo peel the cluster of matter protecting the pilot with a flick of his hand and drew her tortured figure into the reach of his flames. As her mind burned and he learned of the functions of his soon-to-be Heaven, he also found himself aware that Aren Dallis—the pilot of this golem—was personally selected by Mondelles for her loyalty and tasked to shadow him wherever he went.

Her mind was also extremely traumatized and required the Conflagration to recompose her as Avo glared at Elegant-Moon before softening and turning away.

“Own medicine,” he grunted, accepting that he wasn’t much better. Hovering in place using his Meldskin’s thrusters, he let his Soulfire wash forth and claim this much desired ontology as the maze-world entrapping him and his cadre collapsed as spatial reality reverted back to Layer Two.

Heaven claimed

->Path-Hydra (Space/Labyrinth) - 50 THAUM/c

When the world returned, he found himself in another section of Layer Two altogether. His HUD screamed with radiation warnings as he found himself looking down into the open mouths of nuclear reactors, each emanating a bluish glow from their insides.

The body of Mondelles’ operative remained intact solely because Elegant-Moon was rebuilding her faster than the heat and cancers could consume her. Through Avo’s eyes, Aren stared at her breaking and healing figure, skin dancing between perfection and disfigurement.

[Oh, shit,] she moaned, a pit forming in her nonexistent stomach as he unlatched her mind fully and left her sheathe a hollow vessel. **[Oh... oh, fuck. You... you killed me.]**

He felt her death dip into his Soul. *+Suppose I did. Let her go.+*

The Sang did as he said body came apart in an instant. In depths of his mind, the newcomer began to sob as Corner scoffed. *{Chin up, wuss. Take it like Vultunite.}*

She didn't respond. She was inconsolable.

With mechanics of his ansible stabilized, he cast a message over to Draus as he re-linked with the members of his cadre. *{Dealt with the golem. Ate the pilot. Understand the situation now.}* He check the Manta's position and frowned. Eighty three kilometers away. Looks the Path-Hydra's collapse displaced them as well.

{Nice work,} Draus said. *{Summbitch didn't play right with my Heaven. Think it was meant to counter it. Path-Hydra, looked like.}*

{Yes. Probably spotted your accretion or felt the Manta move through space. Was providing overwatch for Mondelles. Someone he trusted with his life.}

{Mondelles? Starsinger Mondelles?}

{Does everyone know this guy?}

{I think I met him once too,} Kae added. *{One of my mentors was commissioned to upgrade one of his canons.}*

{I might've seen porn-fakes of him,} Chambers said, not wanting to be left out.

Elegant-Moon grinned at Chambers and spoke from within Avo. **[Oh, he's going to hate this one. Never let Mondelles meet him. Death and bloodshed are certain to follow.]**

+Not going to be meeting anyone,+ Avo replied. This run was finished. Trying to engage seven—or more—enemy Godclads with four of them still operating as total unknowns and Mondelles possessing a Sphere Five Frame without the element of surprise was a fool's plan.

He doubted would surprise them again as he did when he broke out from the Starsinger's cage.

Despite this, however, he considered the run a rousing success. The setback of his death and coming upon a meeting between elements of Highflame and Ori-Thaum aside, he had a new asset to examine.

And a new way to interface with both Guilds.

{We're done for today,} Avo sent. *{Made a new consang. Bringing her back with me. Going to make new introductions for us. Be redeployed as an asset.}*

Through it all, Elegant-Moon just smiled genially at him.

+*What?*+

She shrugged her shoulders. **[There is no “me,” anymore. There is only you, and what you keep of me. I stopped be real the moment your flames torched my mind.]**

Her words left him struck with silence as Draus spoke across the line. *{...And I still didn't get to shoot nobody in the end.}*

{Take a detour through Syndicate territory,} Avo said, absentmindedly. *{Going to need to give Dice a gift anyway.}* He regarded the Sang again, and she rewrote her flesh to resemble his, bones elongating, skin paling, scleras turning black with curved, white irises. Then, with a snap, she turned back to looking like herself again.

This gave him options. Many options. He was going to have to convene with Ruveca, Jack, and Jane again.

{Need me to leave you a passage?} Draus asked.

{No. I'll catch up with you using new Heaven. Going to test it. Avoid notice. Kae. Going to like to see this one.}

The Agnos chirped with interest as a response.

[Shall we leave now, “myself,”] Elegan-Moon asked. **[Or do you wish to wander the confines of this lovely part of our city some more?]**

He dove deeper into her consciousness, wrapping his mind in the quintessence of her and recoiled. There was something wrong with her. Something broken. Something *missing*. The memory of her affliction returned in the form of a death—something that occurred with each of her Heavens at over fifty Rend.

Her nous went through ego-searing entropy both ways that day. What came back was missing fundamental facets of herself. Joy. Kindness. Humanity. All gone.

The Agnosi and her sisters called her continued functionality a miracle, but she knew. And now, so did it.

[It was perfect damage,] she whispered. **[Broke me perfectly so I only have the one joy left...]**

Pulling back from her ego, he released a breath. +*Come. We're leaving.*+

[And you will grant me my final end afterward?]

+We'll see.+