

24-4  
Defilement (II)

The last strings of restraint within Avo broke as he manifested the full might of his Heavens. Damn his need for stealth. Damn the quiet game. He needed Emotion broken—nulled.

He needed to do it now.

Thousands of kilometers away, within a tower overlooking an enclave, whirling winds twisted around Avo's recently constructed sheath as chronology and air were wed as a rising tempest. Flowing gold painted the paths of rushing gales. A pulse of blood spread out and connected Avo to every ton of blood he could sustain. The cackles of the Woundmother and the shrieks of the Fardrifter proclaimed the coming of miracles as Avo's reflexes accelerated to the point of absurdity.

Yet, unwilling to leave anything to chance, Avo invoked a canon to lift his relative advantage in reactivity to something total. Something absolute. Something that surmounted the will of passing time.

**->DOMAIN (SPACE-CHRONOLOGY)**

**->CANON: NINE FUTURES FLOW - THE USER CAN DIVIDE THE PASSAGE OF TIME FOR [250 KILOMETERS] OF REALITY INTO NINE DIFFERENT STREAMS. EACH STREAM THAT MOVE SLOWER WILL NEED TO HAVE THE DILATION OFFSET TO ANOTHER STREAM TO MAINTAIN TEMPORAL BALANCE; A PHYSICAL ENTITY OR OBJECT MUST BE PRESENT IN EACH OF THE NINE STREAMS**

A hurricane exploded out from the heart of the enclave but its winds swept the city as nine passing channels. Startled thoughtcasts spilled in from Kae and countless others. He ignored them. He ignored everything but the battle at hand. He ignored even his templates as he heard Draus calling for him.

There was only the dive. Only the fight. Only him, and the one he was going to break.

He was going to reach into Emotion's mind this time. Shred his ego to the quick. Take from his memories all he could and obliterate every last node he seeded in the Nether.

Ejecting haemokinetic constructs across each stream of his **Nine Futures**, Avo twisted time to his favor at the eye of the storm.

The Nether-lag between his cadre spike, but so it went. He couldn't allow this moment to slip—to risk Emotion vanishing as Shotin shifted the planes once more or another unknown warmind to be unleashed against him.

Every one of Emotion's oncoming splinters went from a rain of arrows to being frozen raindrops, Avo pressed his own counterattack as he withdrew his subminds from their separate tasks, concentrating the fullness of himself in this present battle.

Drawing from Peace's mastery of trauma, Avo resequenced his splinters as he sent them rushing forward in sweeping waves. Emotion's Delusion-cast fragments were sallying out from four ruptured minds. They all bore their own defenses—Conundrum wards, also taken from Peace. It would take an absurd concentration of trauma to smash through them even with Avo's mastery over time.

No. He would open his path in a different way. And he would follow the trail which they left to find Emotion himself.

The first wave of Avo's splinters crashed and broke in a detonation of thoughtwave distortions. Splinters were smeared out of the Nether as ghosts dissolved. Pockets of nothingness opened and Avo sent his second line surging through. The third clashed against the remainder of Emotion's splinters as a diversionary action while also pinning their opposition in place.

As Avo splashed into the Seekers' inner worlds, he found their palaces utterly resequenced. Shaped into a single pathway leading to a distant Auto-Seance. It resembled a lonesome road made from the stuff of memories and at the very end rose a rot-claimed tower that pierced the passing stormclouds above, projecting sessions to places unseen.

Avo made no attempt to hide himself as he traveled down the pathways, threading his splinters through the mem-data and devouring every ghost he could. But as he did, memories spilled into him. Moments taken from Walton's past—moments that included Avo. Places, faces, and scenes that he knew.

Flashes portrayed a ghoul kept in a cage as Walton showed him acts of Necrotheurgy, as he tried to teach the beast ethics, as time passed and he carried the monster's mind from body to body, attempt after attempt. But the creature's progress to becoming Avo grew twisted. Perverted.

Instead of Walton refining the ghoul's mind, he began to take on more qualities of the monster he sought to uplift. Intrusive moments merged. Moments of fangs tearing into supple flesh. The exhilarating bitter and sweet of blood and adrenaline-soaked muscles. A scream of a child as claws peeled bits of them away to get at the softness within.

The haze of gore receded. Avo's perception shifted, and he found himself staring at Walton feasting on a corpse. The corpse of the *boy*. The corpse of Aurrie, as Essus wept and wept. He saw Walton slitting Draus throat and slipping his tongue into the welling gorge. He saw Walton offer himself—leash, collar, and all—as nu-dog to Mirrorhead, crawling on all fours, barking when called upon.

More memories came: Walton capturing Kae; Walton triggering the rash in her over and over. Walton forcing Chambers to feast on the malformed homunculi, the former enforcer eyeless, earless, limbless—a screaming torso fattened for the harvest.

Avo saw Walton finally forced into a cage alongside him, filthy, naked, and malformed. A ghost-made chain ran around his neck, sinking down past the bars below them, sliding deeper and deeper into the abyss. A scent of citrus remained, but it was tainted by blood and offal. Tainted by defiled memories.

Twitching, gibbering, and broken, Walton turned Avo and simply shrugged. *“As it goes. We all belong to someone else. But I found my master. I remember my master. I remember my master...”*

Other cages rose through the dark, and within them lay other members of the cadre. Wombrash consumed their wretched bodies, but they repeated as a chorus alongside Walton. *“As it goes. As it goes. As it goes—”*

Avo launched a trauma into the mem-data. The sequences around him fragmented as he laid his own path—relaid the tracks of proper history in defiance of Emotion’s insult.

His hatred for the Low Master was beyond a thing of feeling now. The affront was philosophical. Metaphysical. *Blasphemous.*

For all of Walton’s faults, he passed as an emancipated man. One who gave everything to see his greatest work freed from all chains.

Even ones of blind adoration.

The memory that replaced the falsehoods was that of Walton’s ultimate demise. Of when he forced Avo to null him, and in that paradoxical action, set Avo free. The gesture was purely symbolic, but to a Godclad, what was a symbol but the substance of the metaphysical? The ideal?

In the back of his mind, Peace broke through. Peace. Louder than all the other templates. **[He’s goading you. He’s fucking luring you in. You need to stop. You know this, you stupid cunt! He picked this battle—he’s prepared for this. Break these minds and turn back. Turn back and extract the stupid shit you came here to claim!]**

+No,+ Avo said, the calm he now felt an enforced one. *+Time is mine. I have him. I can—+*

**[You don’t fucking have anything! The trail could lead off anywhere! Think, Avo, think! This is literally a godsdamned cocksucking carpet leading you off into a slaughterhouse. You think he’s not ready for your splinters? You think he’s unprepared for your Heavens? Put away the beast! Put away the beast, and be the Necrojack Defiance fucking made**

**you. The memories don't honor him! You do! You were his dream. Don't be fucking stupid with it.]**

Avo's splinters slowed but didn't stop. He was minutes away from the Auto-Seance. Minutes away from passing his splinters into the tower, into the session left active by Emotion. *+I'm not-the beast isn't...+*

But the thrill was there. The need to hurt. To destroy. To torture. Just as his hatred for Emotion was more than a feeling now, so too was the beast. The need to break the Famine was all-consuming.

*A hunger.*

Avo stopped. The decisions left him sapped of will and every splinter that constituted his complete ego shuddered as their wards were struck. Choosing not to pursue was agony. Accepting that he was walking into a trap—or a cage that might just be enough to contain him—was agony.

But Peace was right. He was Walton's dream. His legacy. This was playing the ghoul. He had to be more.

And so he realized the deeper mockery conveyed by the pathway. It wasn't a reimagining made to depict Walton's literal fall back to inhumanity, but to mirror Avo's own collapse back to his bestial nature.

The cage was right in front of him. The Auto-Seance was deliverance. It was the leash. He was handing himself to Emotion on a leash.

*Godsdamn him. Godsdammit all.*

Peace snorted a tired laugh. **[Good fuck, I didn't think you'd listen. I really fucking didn't. Yeah. Defiance really did some good work with you, huh?]**

Avo didn't reply. Instead, he adapted his mind. What was needed right now was focus. Was to execute the mission. He needed to be more like Draus—like Corner. Internalizing their templates, the bitter weight pressing down upon his core crumbled as he checked his cog-feed and examined his next steps.

**REND CAPACITY [WOUNDMOTHER] - 13%**

**REND CAPACITY [FARDRIFTER] - 91%**

The Fardrifter's Rend made him wince. Canons of Chronology were hell for his entropy. Hell, and he couldn't use his actual Hells to offset the cost because the entire Domain was born of his cyclers rather than the Heavens themselves.

Turning his attention to each of the four Auto-Seances within the nulled Seekers, Avo unleashed a tide of traumas through his amassed splinters and laid ruin to the beacons that were to ensure his entrapment. Ghosts shattered as sequences split apart into nothingness. As they collapsed, Avo destroyed what little was left of the Seekers' minds.

They were Emotion's subverts. Carriers of unknown warminds. Better that he claim their Frames and see them dead than risk any alternatives.

Avo released the Fardrifter and the passage of time immediately smoothed. Detonating a few dozen more of his splinters, he unmade every last fragment of Delusion leftover by Emotion. Before the disruptive waves could claim the last of the rival splinters, Avo thought he heard a rising applause.

**[Heh,] Peace scoffed. [Looks like whatever Emotion sequenced into himself turned him from a cold cunt to a funny one. Thought the piece of shit was insufferable enough already.]**

Avo grunted. The plane around him shifted.

Suddenly, the Seekers were gone. Carried with a lurch of spatial reality. Within this plane of storms and seas, only Avo's locus remained, bobbing up and down turbulent waters for a heartbeat longer as he was moved back to the uttermost demiplane guarding Shotin's mind.

*+Jaus,+ Shotin muttered, surprise escaping him in both mood and tone. +You got them. You nulled all of them clean. And here I was expecting to be disappointed.+*

*+You're not the only competent person in this city,+ Avo replied.*

*+Sure as shit feels that way some days. Not today, though. Not today.+*

*+Where'd you put the cadre?+ Avo asked.*

*+In my "storage." I was planning to dump them into my plane of dawn, but I think letting them stay nulled for a bit might be wiser. No resurrections.+*

Another voice crackled in the back of Avo's mind as his cadre continued to call for his attention.

*+Did you get him?+ White-Rab asked, tone flat and cold.*

+No. It was... was a trap. Was trying to lure me away.+

+Synced.+ No recriminations came from White-Rab. No complaining or whining about letting Walton go unavenged. He knew the score, and he just accepted.

Part of Avo felt ashamed. Was it so much easier for his progenitor to master himself even without being a thoughtform? Or was it something—

Another pulse blossomed through the Nether. Instead of feeling like a twitch this time, the disturbance came as a rushing tide that passed over everything. An instinctive alarm spiked within Avo. His instincts screamed from him to project his splinters, to wrap himself around Shotin and disconnect from the members of his cadre.

*I—I know this. Another warmind is coming. The pressure is—Hysteria! The magnifier. Draw all your ghosts in and brace. Brace.*

Thoughtcasts from every of his cadre went unanswered as Avo acted without thought. Reassembling the totality of his ego, the concentration of his ghosts swelled past fifty million. The accretion he formed around Shotin erupted into a mountain of rising steam.

A shocked sputter slipped from the Seeker as his voice turned incredulous. *+What in the fuck—+*

The next phase of the attack came as a tidal wave slamming down on the Nether. No longer was Avo forced to hide within Shotin's demiplanes for protection, and no longer were Kare and the rest of the customers lost to their stupor. But they were more than just freed. Now, thoughtstuff exploded outward from their Metaminds, splashing everyone within the establishment.

Short-term recollections and chaotic mental murmuring broke against Avo's protections, but the sudden amplification of every movement in the Nether was an unbalancing one.

Kare cried as she clutched her skull, and Shotin reached to steady his niece.

But before he could, the assault came in the form of broadcast traumas. Hyper-charged by whatever warmind was empowering them, the initial bombardment landed cognitive warheads. Eighty percent of the guests were nulled immediately.

The remaining ninety held a heartbeat longer.

Only Shotin and Kare were spared as Avo broadened his defenses, encompassing both of them. He tried to reach out to the customers he subverted earlier. The drones. Nothing. The Auto-Seances he installed didn't respond to his session. Another pointless act of mass murder to get at a Seeker.

Emotion clearly didn't care about retaining Clan D'Rongos' "services" long-term. A butchery of this scale in the Tiers—the Elysiums no less—was going to bear far greater consequences and scrutiny than just another genocide of the FATELESS.

As blastwaves of augmented traumas greeted Avo's wards, he found himself once again awed by the *Conundrum* phantasmic he took from Peace.

**IMPACT SUSTAINED**

**ADAPTING COUNTER-TRAUMATICS**

**COG-CAP - 3%**

**IMPACT SUSTAINED**

**ADAPTING COUNTER-TRAUMATICS**

**COG-CAP - 4%**

The mass of traumas arrayed against him would have been enough to depopulate half a district, and right now, it was being concentrated in a space comparable to a musical theater. But as the Nether beyond him writhed and coiled as it struggled to carry the blows, Avo held like a bunker under a mountain.

His mind thundered, but nothing broke. Nothing even *fractured*.

If Emotion's strategy was to perform a siege, then he was sorely overestimating the power of his warmind.

**[Fuck no,] Peace said. [That's... Hysteria, I think. The fucking thing's half-finished. It's only got so many uses before it comes apart itself. Emotion's not just going to waste it. He's planning something. He has to be—]**

The answer came with a roar of crackling fire.

Traumas went silent, but two-voices—both screaming at each other, hating each other utterly; completely—drowned all other thoughts out of existence as the Nether came ablaze.

*Conflagration. Now!*

Avo shed his Delusions. Steam combusted as flame met flame in a jarring clash. As he attempted to devour the other Conflagration before it could consume him, he felt his grasp on his own ego slipping as parts of himself began to pass into the encroaching fire, and vice versa.

**[Shit!]** template-Chambers cried.

Within Avo's mind, his inner-city held firm, but the horizon was a rising inferno rushing to consume them all.

**ERRRE\_oORR**

**FNS-r0uo**

**FReeeuUSSS**

**KEFUKCKKFUCKYOUUU**

**DleeeDKPLEASEFREEDIEFUCKYOU DIEFREE**

Colors and memories burst like clouds of paprika. Strain though he did, he could hold onto himself, couldn't stop himself from melting. Couldn't stop his flames from going still.

The Nether went silent as two flames stalemated each other, both working to consume the other, neither giving an inch in their war of attrition.

The last thing Avo perceived before he fully drowned in the chaos were unnatural eddies forming in the waters of the aquarium past the glass of the ceiling, and how the bioforms were drifting lifeless amidst the currents, collateral damage just as the customers were.

All of them, except the kraken. The kraken which somehow was now sporting a halo of its own. The kraken that was lifting a tentacle, and preparing to bring it down upon Shotin and Kare.