

24-4  
Defilement (III)

–[Shotin]–

“Okay,” Shotin said, taking in the Incubus’ burning halo holding another Conflagration at bay. He didn’t expect that. Hells, he didn’t even know Conflagrations could end up deadlocked. Things were happening too fast for him to keep pace with—Seeker Shotin Kazahara was used to being on the other side of the equation. Not good. “Another day of fucking bullshit. Kare? You alright?”

A groan sounded from his niece, indicating her recovery. Just her. No other Metaminds remained in his cog-feed. Shotin scowled. Godsdammit. Fuck. Another *massacre*. Another godsdamned massacre. Everything was starting to feel like the war again.

“What—what’s happening?” Kare said, clutching her skull. He shot her a glance to check her Metamind for any damage. Some uneven reverberations in her thoughtstuff, but her accretion looked fine. No cracks. No leaks. “I’m fine—where...”

Her perception finally drifted upwards, taking in the nether and the damage inflicted. No other cognitive signatures remained in sight. Thousands of other guests lost in a blink like candles given unto a hurricane.

“Oh, godsdammit,” Kare said, sounding sick—sounding like how Shotin felt.

He shook his head. “Yeah, I know, kid. Come on. Let’s see if we can find—”

A shadow fell. A sudden pressure brushed his Domains of Speed and Space. Kare’s cry went high in accompaniment with his senses. “Kraken!”

“Kra—” He didn’t manage to finish speaking. Without even bothering to turn, he projected a stream of perception upward through his Metamind and beheld the descending tentacle. The limb was the size of a falling tower, large enough to coil around half the restaurant, more than sufficient for smashing down and obliterating their private room.

More worrying than the limb was the fact that the kraken seemed to have a Metamind as well. Only so many possibilities there.

With a twitch of annoyance, Shotin shifted his planes—but not for himself or Kare.

Instead, a dimension of slashing wind surged up and severed the tentacle clean. Dark blood oozed out as a fog of black and red contaminated the pristine blue. An alarm went off in Shotin’s Metamind as he withdrew his Parallelist once more. A detonation followed. A blast both shapeless and bereft of force, but potent in its entropy.

**RENDBOMB DETECTED**  
**->DOMAIN OF [SPACE]**

**REND CAPACITY [PARALLELIST] - 5%**

Shotin scoffed. Fucking amateurs thought they were going to catch him with that. As the kraken's dismemberment wept blood, its form faded and the waters began to bubble, violent and loud.

+*Spook?*+ Shotin said, trying to cast the Incubus inside his planes. +*You still there?*+

No response. The locus was burning too. Shotin felt a pang of respect and sadness rise inside him. He didn't know the half-strand long, but it took a special kind of Necro to set their own ego ablaze. Especially to protect another. If Shotin was still alive by the end of this, he'd find their Mirror=Concave and petition for their permanent remembrance among the Ori's heroes.

For now, he had an ambush to punch through.

Another blow landed, sounding like an artillery shell striking home. Cracks began to form in the transparent ceiling, spreading like webs across the entirety of the restaurant.

"Sorry I told you to dress formally," Shotin laughed, eroding the tension Kare prepared to manifest her Heavens. Lightning surged around her person, the shadow of a spider-like entity growing from her shadows with each flash. "And about your consang. Brave bastard, even if he is an Incubus."

Kare blinked. "Who?"

Another blow landed. With it came another Rendbomb detonation. Water and spatial entropy began to trickle in. Shotin sighed. "The guy you were trying to introduce to me. The Incubus."

**REND CAPACITY [PARALLELIST] - 7%**

The Paladin's eyes rolled before she realized. "Oh. *Oh*. Yeah." She just nodded. Not exactly the reaction Shotin was expecting. "He'll be back. I—I will explain later. Right now—" her gaze fell on the open doorway and the countless nulled bodies beyond. A twitch of anger passed behind her eyes. A curl formed in the corner of her lip.

She looked just like her mother.

Shotin swallowed.

"Right now, I have order to enforce and Godclads to deliver unto justice. Citizens have been murdered. I will see the accords enforced."

And the shadow of his sister vanished before Shotin's eyes. Only Kare remained. Kare the Paladin. Kare the Godclad.

The trickling water was becoming pressurized jets. Shotin sighed as he picked up the bottle and offered it to his niece. "Sorry about lunch, Paladin Kitzuhada."

She accepted it from him and took a gulp as electricity crept over her body. "I'll choose the place next time."

Shotin chuckled. "Sounds good to me. So. What's say we get ourselves a dish of calamari to go?"

Kare tossed the empty bottle aside. Electricity and roiling wind whistled out from the corner of her eyes. "Why not? Do you wish to begin? Show your niece how things are done?"

He responded by calling upon his Heaven of War and encasing his already armor-clad body in a metaphysical shell of indestructibility. "Pft. Flattery will get you anywhere with me. Alright, then, kid. Try and keep up."

Then, just as the glass above them shattered, just as a wet, slimy wall of biomass fell through, Kare and Shotin manifested both their Heavens in full and plunged upward into the falling waters.

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-[Draus]--

+*Rab, you got Avo back on yet?*+ Draus asked as she brought her glass dagger through the last Seeker's skull. The rest of his cadre lay dead or dying around her, their anchors scarring the flesh of reality as their resurrections progressed. Their bodies were ruins of mangled flesh and broken fragments, their entrails spilling out as if glistening rubies.

Locating and hitting the first cadre took some time, but with a little help from White-Rab, she managed to pinpoint them using Nether traffic. As Nuurhein was Stormtree territory and the D'Rongos were effectively operating without official clearance, they kept themselves mobile while sustaining their pocket.

The entire operation was a *subtle* action. A quiet war.

From the outside of *Flavors the Deep*, no one could even tell anything was amiss. If someone tried to pass into its interior now, however, they'd find themselves stepping out a random alleyway or another open doorway in a five-kilometer radius.

The source of spatial anomaly splashed and sloshed a mere arm's length away from Draus. A four-meter-tall compass swung its water-filled pointers in random directions as an intricate diorama of the local Elysium hovered at the construct's very core. The thing was a golem by technicality—the entirety of its rear was one large Rendsink—but it was more of a stationary installation imbued with a low-mass Heaven than a machine capable of dynamic combat.

## **HEAVEN DETECTED**

### **->TIDEPOINTER [SPACE/DIRECTION/SEA]**

Faintly, Draus felt an unseen thread tugging at her Domain of Space, pulling her senses in countless directions. From what White-Rab managed to extract for her from the last Seeker, eight other Tidepointers were working in concert with this one to keep everyone inside the restaurant entrapped. Eight others and neither she nor Rab knew where they were.

Nothing like her favorite ghoul being dead or trapped when she needed an additional scoop of intelligence.

She managed to isolate, infiltrate, and take control of the aerobus containing the first of the Tidepointers in the time between when Avo called her up till after he went AWOL trying to null one of the Famines. Casts from Kare said he was whipping up the winds something fierce back at the enclave, and the resulting lag on his end probably meant he was doing something with time.

All that seemed fine and good. The ghoul was only moderately out of control. Nothing too bad. Then, he pulled his splinters out without even so much as a heads-up, and now he wasn't accepting her sessions either. The only times that happened with him were after a nulling or when he was dead.

Part of her considered the possibility that he might be gone. Gone off to the Big Nothing gone. Discomfort made her reject that possibility outright. He'd be back. She'd chew him out. He'd threaten her. She'd shoot him. They'd do it all again.

That was the way of things.

As she allowed her final victim to go down with a splurt and a gurgle, Draus turned her complete focus on the Tidepointer and considered her next steps.

*+Still not getting through,+ White-Rab's cast finally arrived. +His ego is there but unresponsive. It's like he's frozen. Chambers said he might've glimpsed a fire in Avo's cog-feed near the end. A fire from the outside. Another Conflagration.+*

Draus paused as she considered the implications. The fact the D'Rongo had some Conflagrations of their own on standby wasn't surprising. It was an Ori weapon after all. But whether they deployed it in desperation, or if the Famine had planned this out, or if someone

knew about Avo's potential vulnerabilities were all thoughts that crossed her mind. But ultimately, these thoughts were just conjecture, and theorizin' wasn't gonna save the ghouls none.

+Synced,+ Draus replied. *+I'm going for the other cells—gonna collapse the pocket. Try gettin' at him usin' the Paladin or somethin'. Hit him with the fire again to start him up. Think that was how he worked Kae before.+*

+Got it,+ White-Rab replied and ended their session.

She went back to thinking about how to breach the pocket. Snapping her glare at each of the four resurrecting Seekers, her window of opportunity was rapidly shrinking. Surprise was with you only once. When it was spent, your target best be snuffed, else you better have enough rounds for the fight to come.

Something her time in the *Orphans* taught her well. Just a damn shame there was nothing else from that time she could use right now to her advantage. She was a trigger-puller. A grunt dancing the edge. Intel issues were for spooks, Necros, jocks, or command, and she counted herself among any of those.

Her fingers twitched. The reflexive urge to just shoot the Tidepointer until it was nothing but slag intruded. But the act would be an impotent one. All that might do is draw the attention of Stormtree and the Paladins—and with Naeko due to bring his palm of death down on the district at any time, there was another timer she had running against her.

"Godsdammit," Draus said, muttering to herself, as her mind offered her various methods to destroy or turn the golem into a makeshift weapon like a bomb instead of—

A bomb...

The Rendsink could be detonated like a bomb. She just needed to set it off. A plan formed in her mind. The idea was bold. Loud. And there was no way she could stay in the district after she was done. It had to be done in one shot, or she just might be getting flattened by Naeko as well.

As she turned the aerobus' inner walls to glass, she opened a session with Dice. *+Juv. Need you on standby. Opening a passage for you right now. Gonna run a blitz.+*

An immediate affirmation came from the girl. *+Alright.+*

Invoking her *Simulacrae*, the reflection before her came alight while she formed **Hyalokinetic** arms to carry the Tidepointer through. As she passed into the liminal world created by her Heaven, she materialized a cannon via her *Arsenalist* and aimed the aerobus behind her. Stepping out atop next to a rooftop access point, she fired without looking and watched as a vehicle passing through a distant skylane burst into flames.

The response she generated was instantaneous. The Elysium's all-consuming stormtree thundered as forking bolts snatched the burning wreckage out of the air before it could fall.

Planting the golem down next to her, Draus looked down from her vantage point and prepared herself. Presently, she was positioned just above the restaurant, standing on the edge of a luxury hotel that offered an expansive view of the entire district. The cityscape was a merging of wild nature and heavy metal. Even in this place of luxury, shield-shaped structures were the norm, with their interiors mazelike and complex.

Savage bastards though the Scaarthians were, at least the sows took their warring seriously.

Titanic runes rose from skyscrapers, lighting the world up like miniature sunrises. Coiling branches bearing the properties of lightning and wood passed through every stretch, every structure, and hovering totems patrolled the skies.

Studying the enormous aquarium encasing the restaurant, Draus summoned two **Shattershunt** shards and loaded them in her projectile launcher. *+Dice. Best you start running. Built up some speed. We're gonna do this fast and leave only dust. You synced, consang?+*

*+Yeah. I'm synced.+*

Draus nodded. And then flung another shard of glass high up into the sky. That was going to be her looking glass in a minute. Also where she was going to be shooting from to hit all her targets. *+Good. Pass through on my go.+*

The shard reached its summit. She tossed the Tidepointer over the edge with a thought. The space-altering golem plummeted, arms still spinning, tumbling as it approached the aquarium.

Draus fired her shards—and used her Arsenalist to magnify their velocities. Two shimmering blurs zipped down across the curved exterior of the hotel. They struck the Tidepointer just as it was a meter away from impact. With perfect control over her munitions, Draus guided the shards into the Rendsink and triggered their payloads.

Space shattered—and so did the glass of the aquarium. Water splashed down in a tide, but some currents ran upward, while others disappeared altogether. Sweeping the cityscape around her using her aerial shard, she felt the fabric of space quiver and saw unnatural blastwaves that displaced matter and left geometry *wrong*.

She marked those points on her DeepNav and cast them over to Dice. Then, tuning her reflexes to max, Draus drew upon the full power of her Arsenalist and fired while opening Dice's passage. *+You go close. I got the far.+*

The girl shot out from the airborne shard faster than even Draus' missiles. The air came ablaze around her as her Heaven's runes burned with surging power. Draus guided her shots in the meantime, merging her awareness with each of her projectiles as she guided them through the traffic-choked skies.

**TARGET ONE - [2.6 KM]**

**TARGET TWO - [2.2 KM]**

**TARGET THREE - [1.55 KM]**

**TARGET FOUR - [0.92 KM]**

The first four shots impacted, and she tasted death immediately. Her hyper-charged missiles twirled under speeding aerovecs, evaded the beam weapons of the passing totems, took shortcuts through reflective pathways, and traveled even within the interior of buildings to arrive on target.

The first to be struck was another passing aerovec. A Stormtree military vehicle this time, it seemed. Fires blossomed out from an apartment window as the cadre protecting target three died along with their golems. Target two and target one were midway through responding—spatial reality actively changing around them when they were hit. One was located atop a penthouse while another was apparently hidden in its very own demiplane—inside a “citizen's” coat pocket.

Each detonation cascaded into another spatial collapse, and Draus did what she could to keep her shrapnel concentrated—keep citizen deaths to a minimum.

She didn't much care for the Massists even now, but that wasn't an excuse for a sloppy job. Turning her attention to Dice, she realized the girl was already through the rest of her targets as well. The destruction she left her in her wake was far more visible. Plumes of fire spewing up into the air. Sirens and screams as the stormtree's lightning chased after her.

The three Seekers were in the process of liquefying as Dice slammed into their aero—crushing them and their golem against a memite wall.

*+All targets down,+* Draus said. She redirected a beam of light using reflections across the city and opened another passage to serve as Dice's exfiltration. *+Good run. Now pull a runner.+*

Dice needed no further prompting. Acceleration growing every minute, and an eruption of dust and debris exploded up into the air from the city streets as the girl shot through the portal before the stormtree's grasping branches could find her.

Draus herself stepped into the glass door of the rooftop access point and vanished into her **Paracosmos**.

A moment later, a lashing bolt whipped down at the place where she was, striking her exact position a half-second too late. Sirens and screams rose across the city. A droning thoughtcast swept through the Nether, bellowing for everyone to shelter in place while the clear skies above turned viciously stormcast.

At the heart of the city, a tempest built to a frightening intensity, spreading its influence wide to clutch the entire district in a protective embrace. A cage of electricity passed over all, guarded all, imprisoned all.

All except a dozen Godclads actively engaging in the ruins of the triple-minted Skuldvast cuisine restaurant, *Flavors of the Deep*.

Slipping across space, Draus peered at the city again from across the street and frowned. Her Metamind registered the Parallelist and the Straying Tempeset–Shotin and Kare’s primary Heavens—but there were also six others she didn’t know. Six others with ethereal flames spewing from their skull, lashing at the Paladin and Seeker’s wards.

#### **SESSION ACTIVATED**

**->EGO-ID: [White-Rab]**

**GHOST-LINK ACCEPTED**

+Rab?+ Draus said, reaching out with her Simulacrae to find her next firing trajectory. +Got him back up y—+

And then a trauma pattern went off inside her mind.