

“Tell me, little priest, for what do you still fight? Your kingdom has been sacked. Your faith has been defiled. Your masters have been banished. Your pantheons have been taken. Your future has been seized.

Now is the time for surrender. For death. So why don't you succumb?”

+Spare me the exhalation of despair, monstress. I am beyond your reach, beyond your means to effect. You may destroy this node, you may twist this body. But the work continues. The war persists. We will reclaim—+

“No. You are finished. You are broken. Your futures are mine. There is no path—no reality—were Noloth is reborn. Tell me, Famine, how are you to succeed when your unfinished Daemons of Thought cannot even strike me? What fate awaits you?”

Tell me, little node, what world do you believe that happens?

+You are no true god. And though you may wield the world as your cage, we stride in the paths above. We have seen the hearts of humanity—the primal truths even within your servants and enemies. You are not unbreakable. You are not divine. You are human. Fear mortality though you do, you are human, and so you can be undone.+

“Primal truths. What delusion. What ignorance. What stupidity. The world within is not a vacuum. The brain is shaped before the mind ever takes for. For every truth you glimpse, you imbibe more deception. The world must resemble a collection of pinholes to your like. So much is missing from your awareness. So much more unrevealed. Keeper of secrets you may be, but I stand as the builder of truth. All you glimpse are secondhand epiphanies incurred by my falling waves.”

+... You are lost, Veylis Avadaer. You are lost to yourself. Your father was a traitor and a coward, but even he would see you for what you are now. Tyrant. Enslaver. All he gave was to unchain the world. And here you stride, seeking to drive it back under heel.+

“I bring glory to my father. Glory that he feared to claim Glory that humanity will someday all experience for themselves. But I must carve away the fester left by our pasts. I must destroy the brittleness within us. You speak of humanity. You hint at my arrogance. But I feel otherwise. I feel it is you who are arrogant, priest. I don't do this for the clades. For mankind. I respect the natures of all beings. I respect the injustice of existence. I respect that I can only know one heart—mine—and offer one path—mine.

Should one be virtuous enough to stand with or against me, then they too will be heard before the end. They too will be remembered when the final design arrives. Humanity cannot be worthy, for humanity does not exist. It is a concept of statistics. A Heaven left broken beneath the blade of my mother in an act of so-called mercy.

Individuals may stand. Individuals may rise. Individuals may remain. But what do you know of individuality, oh, breaker of your own mind? What a wretched and broken little heart you must have to willingly stay a slave to a city long lost. You would be better serve a truer ideal; an archon of victory.”

+You cannot turn us, monstress. We have glimpsed your final design. We will not be ruled by gods, and we will not be ruled by man. Only when all are brought to the city—when they gain the glory of higher community, will you be spared the destruction of isolation and entropy.+

“You are spared because I allow you.”

+We are spared because your lover holds you at bay. We heard your silence when he turned against you. We heard the please of your soldiers as you abandoned them to him, unable to greet him with force.+

“It is a fine thing, to accuse me of cowardice.”

+It is not cowardice we accuse you of, but love. Still, you do love. And still, you are human. And so, you will betray yourself in the end, at some point, at some time. You cannot evade him forever. And you cannot be strong eternally. Not alone. Not unless you see the way.”

[Veylis laughs]

“You have proven more interesting than I expected, priest. Twin offers of betrayal. Neither taken. Truly, you are too good for the Hungers.”

+Do not expect gratitude in return. We know what you are. We know what must be done.+

“And you will not stray?”

+No.+

“Good. Damned though you are, perhaps you are worthy of being blessed in one form. Or another. Infacer. You maybe have him. Take from him all you can. See if you can make something of his warmind as well.”

{ACKNOWLEDGED}

-Conversation between Veylis Avandaer and a Captured Famine of “Emotion.” (Suspected to have been deliberately leaked to Ori-Thaum intelligence circa 201 P.F.)

24-5

Battle of the Twin Flames (I)

--[Chambers]--

The Conflagrations weren't so much frozen as they were burning really, really slowly. This fact became known to Chambers as soon as he slipped past its exterior. His memories sparked like candle wick, but the languid pace of his subsumption left him feeling but a gnaw. As things stood, he could spend hours here without being affected overmuch.

Which was a good thing because he might just need hours and hours to navigate through this realm of crackling madness.

There architecture here could be described as colliding memories. Shattered ghosts drifted into each other, their fragments carrying portions of recollection as sequences of events slammed and melded with moments unrelated to themselves. A collapsing megablock crumbled as dust rose, but the smoke turned into the petals of a flower as Chambers suddenly found himself looking through someone else's eyes, digging through the soil of a private garden.

As a hand that wasn't his scooped clumps of soil in rapid repetition, the scene changed again and he found himself staring at a reflection as chrome-faced organ harvested took scalp and beam to his flesh, carving away human weakness in the name of the alloy. Suddenly, it was back to the flowers again, but between the petals he saw a district hiding—noticing its immensity as if peering through a popped mechanical lock.

Entering that stretch of recollection, the mem-data around him glitched and changed as Chambers slipped over into a perpendicular sequence of events. Passing screams and incoherent emotions warred around him. Flashes of color and then blindness then pain and pleasure all splattered together in a cauldron of what-the-fuck cognitive stew.

+*Fuck me,*+ Chambers groaned. Never mind hours, his ass was going to be here for days. He had half a mind to detonate a thoughtwave or fire trauma pattern at the Conflagration from the inside until something happened, but a gut feeling told him that wasn't going to be a wise move.

The constant ambient screaming didn't help. Neither did the persistent swell of loathing and anger. He remembered the first few times when he got burned by the Conflagration. Back in the demiplane while they were trying to fix Kae. This was like that, but in slow motion. And this time, he played the role of mender.

Problem was, he was a middling Necro even with all the experiences Avo dosed him with. There instinct missing in him. Reactions and intuition that his current ego just lacked. Lost in this big miasma of hallucinations, noises, visuals, and sensations, he was rendered blind by sensory overload—unable to tell where something began, and something else ended.

He asked himself what Avo would do right now. Probably pull some new Nether bullshit out of his ass. Eat the other flame or suddenly create the Heaven of Cognition or some shit.

But that gave him an idea.

Triggering his Specter, Chambers cast out the scrying phantasmic and sent it patrolling ahead while loading explicit instructions into his Metamind.

FILTER FOR MEMORIES DEEMED [FAMILIAR]

There were moments he shared with Avo. Things they both knew. Some of those instances had to be ground up in this big fucking mess. He just needed to hop across those, right? Use as beacons to find his way and... do whatever it is he needed to get Avo free from this mess.

As he traversed the devastated stalemate, his Metamind began to map out the vagueness of a structure using his Specter. With how the different strings of conjoined memories, it looked like two helixes running through each other. The shape wasn't surprising—nor was the detail on how one Conflagration was slowly absorbing the other.

Chambers knew they did that, but the more worrying question was if the winner by attrition would be Avo or the half-strands that tried to burn him.

ATTENTION!

[FAMILIAR] SEQUENCES DETECTED

->FAMILIARITY RATING: 89%

A new route formed for his Specter, and Chambers traveled through the sequences with increased velocity. Passing through a curtain of clawing hands and falling artillery, he surfaced from the randomness to find a clearing of relative order.

The memories before him were all coherent. Aligned. A stable pond between dueling rivers. More importantly, it was a scene Chambers knew, and knew well.

Aerovecs enshadowed by the neon gaze of Layer Two circulated through the cities skylanes while distant sirens wailed. The background of the cityscape was splotch of blurs—lacking detail compared to the singular megablock standing in the foreground.

The Conflux megablock. Mirrorhead's fortress. Chambers' old office.

A trickle of discomfort crawled up his spine. *+Shit. Of course I'm back here again.* Pushing himself closer, he loaded himself into the memory as an avatar. Ghosts stitched him into shape in the rink of the Mall-Brawl as he looked around. A projection of a *Night Mantis* exo-rig was staring down at him, as were countless faces he knew a month ago in another lifetime.

How fast things changed. How lucky he was. If Mirrorhead didn't have him pick up the ghoul, if that fuckwit Shred hadn't flaked on him, if someone else decided to pull Avo away, where would he be right now.

Spotlights kissed the crude chrome of his former comrades as their optics shuttered and zoomed. The slamming of metallic limbs shattering linoleum pulled his attention away briefly, and he saw Avo backing away from Rantula as Essus—the poor bastard—lay there with empty eyes.

Alert!

Inconsistency Detected

A marker formed in his cog-feed as an inconsistency was registered. Ghostly markers swirled about a fragment of glass three meters away. As Chambers approached, he saw that it wasn't a fragment at all, but Mirrorhead's mask.

Its surface was cracked. Jagged. Half dissolved by blood.

Chambers froze mid-step, staring at the misplaced memory artifact with suspicion. Two weeks too early for Jhred Greatling's death. Maybe a related fragment of memory was displaced here. An inconsistency of—

+*Thoughtwave Distruption. Now!*+ The rumble of Avo's voice startled Chambers into doing just that. He blasted the mask, and as his distortion traveled, a section of the mindscape was carved hollow as glitching mem-data bled over. Paranoia wasn't always right, but it kept you alive if you listened every now and again, and all the mind-time-space bullshit he found himself facing alongside the cadre only left him jumpier.

His reward came in the form of shattering ghosts and parting steam. All of a sudden, the Mall-Brawl came alive. A few hundred of the spectators suddenly stood up, revelrous expressions vanishing from their faces as they rose into the air, shedding their material forms as they began to scream. Traumas resonated from the hidden ghosts. Chambers' Metamind squealed an alert as unidentified egos intruded the sequence.

Cutting all non-essential phantasms, he left the bulk of his capacity for his wards as he prepared to engage. Yet, before the traumas could strike him, the ghosts simulating Avo, Essus, and Rantula shifted around him, shifting into a wailing wall as the incoming attack burst apart against them.

+Avo?+ Chambers said, casting his thoughts out.

The entire memory came alive as traumas clashed with traumas. Whistling missiles slammed and chased each other through the air. Aeros broke from flight paths as they detonated into thoughtwaves, opening pockets in the invading egos.

A passing drone shined a spotlight right down next to Chambers as the tiled flooring of the Mall-Brawl plummeted into steps leading down into a dungeon—into another familiar memory; the demiplane where they fixed Kae.

+*Down*,+ Avo said. The world thundered when he spoke, but there was a vacancy in his voice. A distance.

Chambers didn't waste time arguing. Discarding his body, he accelerated down in a stream of ghosts, plunging along stone bricks. The door behind him slammed shut and a thoughtwave

detonation severed the sequence entirely. Ahead, another door opened and Chambers dove through.

Jerking to a halt as he arrived in a small, cramped room, Chambers looked around and felt his stomach drop. This wasn't a place from Avo's memories. This was the coffin apartment he lived in as a kid. Before the ghouls and the Uprising.

+*Fuck me,*+ Chambers whispered, taking in the bed lining the walls; the cheap entertainment locus spinning at the center of the room; the cleaning stall barely wide enough for one person to stand in.

[Hell of a sight, isn't it?]

Chambers went still, and spun to face the speaker. As he turned, he found himself staring at his own twin.

[Template, actually.] A ethereal conorna emanated from Chambers' template, but by all other means, he was a spitting image. A mop of dirty blonde hair. Scoundrel-like features. Average height. Encased in the fluid plates of his Meldskin aside from the face. **[You took a minute to get here.]**

It took Chambers a beat to respond. It wasn't easy conversing with a perfect replica of yourself. Especially a replica housed in someone else's mind. +*You were... waiting for me.*+

[Well, you or Rab. But I figured it'd be you. Me. Fuck, it's weird, huh, consang.]

That statement earned a slow nod from Chambers. +*Is Avo here?*+

[Avo? He's... uh, Ignorance is running the show for now. He talks to us every now and again. Only when you forget about him though. Or stop noticing him. However he works. I think he's like, Avo's subconsciousness or something. Whatever the case, he only gets active when the Low Fuckers come sailing through. Don't think he's capable doing anything active.]

+*Great,*+ Chambers sighed. +*So what do we do now? How many of the half-strands out there? And how do we get Avo back up? Do I just jolt him with a trauma?*+

[Nah,] template-Chambers said. **[Ignorance talked to all of us earlier. Said that the Conflagratoin's are meshed into each other. You'll light both sides up and the stalemate will continue. Specially since the Famine-bastards' got some kind of amplifying warmind on their end. Ignorance said that might be the entire reason why we're still being held at bay instead of sweeping through the place. Either-fuckin-way, we need to get rid of it.]**

+*We?*+ Chambers said, looking around the room. +*Just me and... me.*+

Draus sparked into existence next to him. Chambers shrieked. **[Technically, just you and Avo. Rest of us ain't actually alive.]**

+Jaus. Fuck. Draus. Don't do that.+

The Regular smirked at him. **[Wasn't my choice. Guess Ignorance thought it'd be funny to dump me in this way. Usually, just my memories get used.]**

Chambers sighed. +So. *Who else do we got.*+

Sunlight splashed down on them. Turning, Chambers found himself facing a drawing—*his* drawing—that was slowly turning into a window. Stepping up on the bed, he looked outside the glass and saw thousands upon thousands of forms and faces staring up at him along a debris-strew street. A hovering district circled the horizon in the backdrop, while the border atmosphere beyond the near stretch of memory resembled Kare's bed.

+*Hiding memories within memories,*+ Chambers said. +*Are those—*+

[All the templates? Yeah.] His twin nodded. **[But we can't do anything ourselves. Ain't got no will. But you do. And you can.]**

+*The fuck does that mean?*+ Chambers asked.

[Means link me. Link me, and the rest'll follow. Link me, and we'll show you what you need to null, where you need to go, and who you'll need to fuck up. Link me so we can stop waiting in the dark and gore some of these Nolothis sow-sons for good.]

The mindscape around them rumbled. The sound of distant screaming grew. Avo's voice thundered through the air.

+*They are approaching. Detonations detected. Labyrinth integrity seventy-two percent. Chambers. Find the war mind of Hysteria. Find it. Stop it. Then spark the Conflagration once more.*+

+*Alright,*+ Chambers breathed, unused to so much pressure riding on his shoulders. He didn't expect to be doing a liberation run in Avo's mind, but he sure as shit didn't expect to be doing a lot of things. That being said, he didn't need to do this alone. And he didn't need to do it blind. +*Let's go make sure we're the flame and they're the wick.*+

He cast out a chain of ghosts, and rather than connecting to his template, it vanished inside the mental construct—passed into a place untraceable.

GHOST-LINK DEPLOYED

->ACCEPTED [NULL.ERRR]

Mem-data flooded his mind. He felt his awareness synchronize with Avo's, and an immense headache spiked through his skull.

WARNING!

SEVERE COG-CAP OVERLOAD!

REDUCE-

+Here,+ Avo said, speaking now from inside Chambers' mind. +Tuning away excess details. Just think. I'll do the rest.+

+Avo?+ Chambers responded. +That you? Or are you... Ignorance?+

+No difference. One above. One below. A reflection of unknowing. And want.+

+Okaayyyy,+ Chambers said, unsure how to take that. He didn't dwell on it. +Well. Show me where I gotta go to get you untangled.+

Ignorance projected the details into Chambers' cog-feed. A vast map of an entwined mindscape came into view. They were currently located along a loop connecting Kare's loose memories with some of Chambers'. They needed to make it fifty-thousand branches away, in a rapidly spreading expanse of memory.

+Good news is that we know where they are,+ Ignorance said grimly. +Better news is that the effects of the Nether are amplified within the designated space. Can't hide Hysteria. Just need to you pass through Delusion mind fortresses to get there.+

+Yeah,+ Chambers deadpanned. +Just. How the hell am I supposed to get in without them sinking their ghosts into me? I mean—that's like what you can do now, right? Shape your ghosts into anything you want?+

Avo grunted. +They're warminds are limited. Unstable. I am conjoined to Avo; Delusion is conjoined to me. We will break them. We just need a will. A direction.+

[Gonna make it simple for you, consang,] Draus said, a vicious grin pulling at the corners of her lips. **[You're playin' the squire. Ignorance is the spotter. Delusion is the artillery. Now are we gonna get going and null our way through, or are you gonna sit here tryin' to learn somethin' you're too stupid to get.]**

Chambers glared at Draus.

The Regular shrugged. **[What? Am I wrong.]**

+No, you're not wrong, Draus, you're just kinda a sow.+

Chambers paused as the words left her. The Regular cocked an eyebrow. He patted himself down. *+Huh. The actual you would've killed me by now.+*

Draus narrowed her eyes. **[Yeah. Damn shame about that.]**

Another explosion made the mindscape around them shudder. Somehow, Chambers found it in himself to smirk. *+I... I'm gonna get to tell you what to do.+*

[No.] Draus stared. **[Ain't how-]**

+I'm in charge now... I can call Draus a sow and she can't kill me.+

Her stare turned to a glare.

+You know, this might not be all bad. Not all bad at all.+