

Battle of the Twin Flames (III)

A concentrated bombardment of agony consumed Chambers. These traumas that assailed him, they were tailor-made to break him specifically. Weapons made from the horrors of his past crashed against his wards like waves dashing themselves against a mountain.

The surrounding sequences twisted and changed into a jungle of horror. He was a hundred sequences away from the warmind. Close enough to feel full weight of Hysteria's traumatic amplifications. And though he could ward off the traumas besieging him from without, the scenes of his father striking his mother, striking him, squeezing the trigger of an empty gun against his grandfather's head, or just standing over them while wringing blood from a belt became the mindscapes.

Ninety sequences. A finger squeezed a trigger. An old man whimpered. A gun went click.

Something broke inside Chambers.

Even against the overwhelming assault, Peace's Conundrum was a ward unparalleled. Inside, however, Chambers was but human, but a vulnerable ego cracking beneath the onslaught.

As he released around thoughtwave detonation, Chambers found himself forty nine sequences away. In the far distance, the warmind resembled a hurricane made of chaos. Shards of broken memories formed a screaming face. *His*. His mother's. His father's. His grandparents'. And all the people he helped the Syndicates process.

+Aedon Chambers,+ the Famine began, voice drifting in like wind. +Gutter vermin. A former enforcer to a master that knew only shame. Ostensible acolyte to the legacy of Noloth. Out of all the Dreamers' followers, you confound me the most. Why, why did he ever choose you? What worth are you? What value is your life? Is it just your fortune? To saved and spared by happenstance and pity? Or is there something more? Something I do not perceive.+

Another thought-rending blow followed, Chambers parried the strike this time, splashing the ghosts apart with a distortive whip. *+Fuck! Off!+* He howled back. Killing all phantasms except for his wards and disruptor, Chambers began his mad dash to the end. He was close. He was so close. He needed to last. He needed to last, even if he felt his entire being coming apart from the inside.

COG-CAP: 71%

[Chambers. Focus. Keep goin'.] It was Draus' words that stood apart from the rest. Hells, it was probably because of her template that he hadn't shattered outright. **[Almost there. See it done, soldier.]**

Another sequence. Another repetition of nightmares. Emotion showed him everything. Everything that his mom could have suffered. Everything that he himself suffered.

He spent his entire life running from this. He couldn't face this now. He just couldn't.

COG-CAP: 78%

+Thoughtwave. Now.+ Chambers heeded Ignorance's command without even thinking. He wasn't fully capable of thinking. Every second he spent here was another he felt all his mother's pain, relived all his own pain. He didn't even know how Emotion found all these memories—how the fucking half-strand made them so well. +Chambers. Listen. This isn't real. Your mother abandoned you and your father. She wasn't a suicide. This isn't real. He's twisting your memories to make you more vulnerable.+

Was he? His father—his father did do those things. He was—

+It was your aunt that was burned in that lot. The food-tester. Your mother left by then. She never killed herself. You have splinters inside you. They're amplifying the harm. Thoughtwave. Now. Again.+

Chambers did as Avo asked, and as the thought-shredding explosion tore out from him. His mind went blank for a beat, but he resumed his sprint immediately after, and so did the Famine continue the assault.

+Oh,+ Emotion chuckled, +you've noticed the falsehood. How intuitive. Or perhaps that is still Avo's doing. As are all your greatest achieve. What are you without his facilitation, after all.+

The memories around him turned more brutal—making up for their deception with intrusive horror. His father's abuse was magnified—surpassed the thing of nightmares. He took blade and scalpel to Chambers and his mother, making them watch the other get flayed and dissected. The acts only grew more unspeakable thereafter, and the shape of his father began to twisted and change, cycling to resemble Avo, then Draus, then Kae, and Mirrorhead, and more.

Emotion used sense and history as a weapon, and with each passing moment, more and more of Chambers peeled away from the inside. He was passing through a river of erosion and there wasn't enough of him left. He being drowned by a sea of torment, and he didn't know how to swim.

+Stop!+ Chambers screamed, doing all he can to tune away the scenes around him, to banish the encroachment of the splinters. +Fucking stop! Stop! Fuck!+

Laughter mocked his efforts.

Thirty two sequences left. It felt longer. It felt so much longer. Being so close to the warmind *hurt*. He slammed through a storm-wall of screaming agony and nearly broke right then and there. All his self-loathing, all the pain he felt—real or splinter-planted—became unbearable.

He wanted to tear himself apart from the inside. He wanted to be hurt. He wanted to come apart and just die.

But Avo needed him.

His father's voice filled the Nether now, became the mindscape around him. Sneering down, with drool and beer dribbling from his chin, he spat down at Chambers, dividing and multiplying until all of existence was him and only him. *+Congratulations, son. You saw through it. She didn't call herself. Because she was a coward. Just like you. You and her are both runners. Except she saw that you're more than a little like me too. So she ran. She ran and left you with me.+*

+You fucking—she left because of you!+ Chambers screamed

+Yeah, she left because of me. But also because her worthless shit of a son couldn't figure out how to use a gun to finish off a worthless drunk. Imagine that. Perfect opportunity to make your life better, and you just fucked it up. How much does a power cell cost anyway? How hard is it to steal one?+

Nine sequences. Chambers was coming apart from the inside.

And then presence of his father faded, and his place was Chambers' mother. His mother, with all those trailing welts running down the face. His mother, with his eyes, his nose, and the same miserable expression on her face after taking a beating. *+How hard was it to kill him? How hard? How could you just watch him hurt me for so long. I loved you. I loved you, and you just watched. You piece of shit. You're just like him. Just like him.+*

WARNING

EGO FRAGMENTATION IMMINENT

ALL NON-ESSENTIAL PHANTASMICS DEACTIVATED

COG-CAP - 94%

+No,+ Chambers whimpered. *+No.+*

+Chambers,+ Ignorance began, but his mind vanished as something fundamental inside Chambers crumbled. The ghosts inside him began to shatter. His Metamind was snapping aparting. Vicarities and thousands upon thousands of mem-cons spilled out of him like viscera from a gutted animal.

Three sequences away away from heart of the storm, from a construct made from metastasizing memories forming a tumor-like pattern in the Nether, Chambers drifted as his sense of self began to unravel.

+S-sorry,+ he whispered. +So sorry.+ He failed his mother. He failed his conscience. He failed himself. Time and time again. Only consistent that he failed Avo in the end.

A long sigh came from Emotion as the Low Master materialized within his mind. The priest's countless nodes materialized like a murder of ink-black rotting crows. Chains dangled from their wings, and the severed head of a strix swung from a pendant cling to their necks. Disappointment was Chambers' companion in the end.

The templates were silent. Ignorance was missing.

He was going to die. Alone.

This was what he deserved.

+Know that you are despised, Aedon Chambers,+ Emotion said. +Know that your ruination here cleanses the name of Noloth—of which the Dreamer used you to sully.+

A squeak of noise called to Chambers. He couldn't tell if it was a hallucination or reality.

[Get up, you stupid shit; you fucking cunt,] Peace begged. [Get up. Don't let that fuck Emotion have this! You are the half-strand. Be the half-strand.]

+There is nothing left of him, Peace,+ Emotion said, tone filled with faux pity. +Not that there was much to begin with. After all, it took our monsters to save him from his. You mother was the only smart one in your father. She left you. She knew you weren't worth fighting for. Deep down, you wished she was a suicide for leaving you. You wished your father would have cried to lose her—if only to see him human and hurt. But you are not so special, Aedon Chambers. Not so tragic. You but fuel. Unworthy of eternity. Unworthy of anything but the Maw. But worry not. I will remove all trace of you from the mind of the Dreamer. From the minds of all who know you. You will pass in misery. But your shame will be unremembered.+

The splinters burrowed deeper into Chambers. He stared at his prize—so close. But there was nothing left.

His cog-feed glitched then. A vicarity began to play of its own accord. In a pity of misery and torture, bodies writhed on racks made for pain, and unmoving figures lay in the corners of dungeons.

Ghouls—or some sexualized facsimile of them—scampered through the bone-made dungeon built beneath the streets of New Vultun, bringing in new flesh to torture. New flesh—but the perspective stopped following them.

There, crucified in above a burning brazier, a well-muscled man glared back at Chambers. Stripped, whipped, blinded in one eye, with all the fingers taken from one hand, with his right kneecap inverted, and his right testicle hanging from his neck, the defiant prisoner simply spat bloodied phelgm into the fire—victimized, but not a victim.

+*Is that you got?*+ Dannis Steelhard asked, speaking to the darkness. +*Is all the pain the Soft Masters can deliver?*+ He spat again. +*You didn't even take my other nut.*+

And then, despite all that he suffered, despite all the flesh that was taken from him, Dannis Steelhard began to flex.

--[Draus]--

PHYS-SIM CALCULATING IMPACT VELOCITY...

->PALM IMPACTS IN: 1.5 SECONDS

The *weapon* made her play.

Her cog-feed sighted five hostile Godclads; all engulfed by frozen *Nether-fire*; no eyes on Shotin; Paladin's condition was critical.

Of her targets, one stood apart from the rest—a rapidly mutating kraken the size of a block that was compressing all the water of the restaurant's aquarium into a pressurized sphere.

The other four had space-related Domains. Draus could feel them recoiling from her Frame, took in some of the Rend they were using the contaminate reality. The cadre moved as a uniform square. No more than ten meters separated each from each, and they struck at all angles as they tried to pin Shotin down with jabbing miracles.

The first looked like an eye blinking at the heart of a star. Another was a metallic pillar made out from metal hands that pried at the fabric of geometry as if it was paper. The third was a titanic humanoid that had a shining compass where its head was supposed to be; the rest of its body was fused to a burning chariot. Looked to be a coiling tree of some kind, the air around it growing tighter as it twisted.

What they had in common was *ignorance*. Ignorance of their deaths soon-to-come. Ignorance that the material conditions of the battlefield had changed.

Light struck each of Draus' **Replicas** and bounced off the glass as diffracted chains. She created passages between her constructs, between windows, between puddles of water, the metallic sheen of overturned aeros, and droplets of liquid falling from the sky.

In an instant, she covered every conceivable angle of fire conceivable and created her own encirclement. Then, she created a mirror ahead of Dice as the girl shot ahead toward the fight, the wind and air combusting from her speed.

PALM IMPACTS IN: 1.25 SECONDS

Her opening barrage shredded both matter and Nether. Thoughtwave disruptions carved gulfs through the frozen Conflagrations from the countless reflections. With them came particle beams, missiles, flechettes, slugs, and liters of ferro-mag munitions.

Flames were extinguished in an instant. Gunfire disemboweled the kraken from the inside while rockets dove into open wounds. The suppressive cadre came apart under fire—but turned into the attack. They responded fast—with instincts ingrained by practice. New miracles came alive in defense of their metaphysical forms.

But as they struggled to fend off the Arsenalist, Dice accelerated through her designated mirror—and speared up into the Seekers from the puddle they were passing over.

Two Heavens splattered apart against her radiant shell as she shot high into the air before being redirected by a sheet of glass—and burrowing into the guts of the kraken. The other Seekers' splashed down into the waters—and were promptly pulled into Draus' **Paracosmos** as a veritable tide of gunfire devoured them whole.

Just as the Seekers' offensive shattered, the Conflagration reignited, and familiar pressure slipped back into Draus' mind.

Broken as the weapon was, she couldn't help but grin internally.

PALM IMPACTS IN: 0.89 SECONDS

--[White-Rab]--

White-Rab held only twenty percent of his Metamind when the disruption hit.

It offered him only the briefest reprieves from the Famine's unceasing assault. Thankfully, Dice impacting the kraken with the force of a high yield nuclear shattered the closest ego the Low Master had to jump from.

The hostile Godclad came apart first as gore, then mist, then steam. The cage of water it held detonated outward like a bomb, traveling fast enough to become hyper sonic jets of shrapnel. All structures not imbued with memite were shredded. White-Rab didn't even want to think about the collateral damage as nearby aeros were crushed by the concussive force of the impact, while distant shadows fell in pieces from the far-flung waters.

Miraculously—literally so—Kare's Heaven remained unharmed. Golden rune parried all material damage, and as her spider-like continued to conjure lightning and writhe, White-Rab delivered a final, parting stroke to whatever remained of the Low Master's nodes.

+I'm coming for his memories,+ White-Rab said, shifting every ghost, every sequence he had to a thoughtwave detonation. *+I'm coming for him. Then I'm coming for you.+*

He didn't wait for Emotion to reply. He didn't care what the half-strand had to say. Thought-sundering force swept through the Nether and blasted an open pocket the Conflagrations. Whatever nodes were present now *weren't*.

Kare's screaming subsided into an incoherent groan to silence as White-Rab promptly nulled her.

There wasn't a question whether the Low Master fused some Auto-Seances into her mind. But that was a problem for Avo to solve.

Speaking of which...

Nether-flames around him roared and began to fuse.

Took Chambers long enough.

--[Chambers]--

+You got this Dannis, + the over-muscled, over-oiled man said. His face was red from the staining. His blood was squiring. But impossibly, the metal post he was nailed to bent with a metallic groan.

Pale, white, busty, forms with meter long genitals gathered outside his cage in shock. One pointed a long and slender hand at Dannis. *+Masters! He's breaking free! Max Erectus is breaking free!+*

Another loudly exposition: *+We have to stop him. There is no chance he can defeat us. Time to attack.+*

Broken as he was, Chambers winced. The dialogue sounded a lot better to him in his memories—but maybe everything sounded that way when you were an idiot juv.

With a triumphant cry, Dannis tore himself from the torture post and leaped over the brazier in slow motion. He landed with a triumphant cry—and the brazier in the wrong place.

Fucking mem-set errors.

+Come on, + the sex-ghouls cried, charging Dannis one at a time. *+He's only got one testicle. His powers are diminished.+*

+One is TOO much testicles for the likes of you, + Dannis said, before throwing his head back and laughing.

The first ghoul clawed at him.

And missed.

Dannis struck out with his signature castration claw—but he used it on the ghoul's left breast. Tearing the lump of flesh clean off, he brought his hand back with a flick and promptly decapitated the ghoul.

The ones behind jolted to a sudden stop. The expositioner from earlier gawked in shock. *+Oh, no! He has a tit!+*

+That's right, Dannis agreed, flourishing the mound as if it was a frequency blade. *+First Sphere Godclad I may be, but the Heaven of [SHARPENED SEX] is no joke.+*

+There's still enough of us, the ghoul cried. *+Get him.+*

They charged. In a line.

Dannis butchered them using the severed breast and his swaying genitals as a blades.

+So... fucking cool, Chambers muttered.

As the ghouls lay in pieces at his feet, Dannis Steelhard turned at face the viewer's perspective. Before he spoke, he retrieved the testicle hanging from his neck and slotted it back into the internal cybernetics of his penis with a satisfying click. *+I know. Life gets hard sometimes. But we got to get HARDER. We got to be HARDER. Even when our balls are taken.+*

+But how, Dannis, Chambers asked. He was drifting in the haze. Only his peripheral awareness told him something was happening in the Nether. *+How do you stay hard when you're all fucking broken inside.+*

Dannis' eyes grew misted with sympathy. *+Because, Aedon. I'm horny. I'm always godsdamned horny. I'm horny to be alive. I'm horny to be fighting. I'm horny that there's another chance to be the fucker and not the fuckee. Be horny.+*

+But I can— *+Yes, you can!* Dannis said. He was holding Chambers by his collar now. The mechanics of the moment weren't very clear to Chambers, but he went with him—almost completely nulled and all. *+Your mother ran. There's a lot of things we can say about that. But more that we shouldn't life's hard. And you got left alone.+*

+Yeah, Chambers said, a sob trailing his words. *+I'm a piece of shit.+*

+Yes, Dannis nodded vigorously. *+But you're a piece of shit that's changing. Think about it. Would your dad be here if he had your opportunities? Would Avo ever choose him? Would he even survive half as long as you did?+*

Chambers paused to consider that question. *+...Maybe?+*

+No! He was useless. That fat bastard wasn't even a good squire! Your mother made all the imps! He's limp. Impotent. He can't get it up. That was part of the reason why she left! No one likes a soft cock. You are not a soft cock, Aedon. You're hard.+

+I am?+

Something hard pressed up against Chambers. Dannis nodded, his golden mane and rugged, manly features creasing with wrinkles. *+Yes. I can feel you, Chambers. You are harder. Harder than you know. And you get harder yet.+*

+I can?+ +Who rashed Shotin.+

+Me?+ +Who managed to get one over on Mirrorhead.+

+Me.+ +Who's going to save your consang right now?+

Chambers opened his mouth but the word didn't follow. *+He... he broke me. He fucked me up inside I—it hurts.+*

Instead of yelling, Dannis' expression softened. *+Chambers. I broke too. I broke every time they shoved something larger than a durian up my ass—+ +--what's a durian—+ +--I broke when they implanted that frequency pogo-stick in my urethrae and made me bounce up the Tiers to stop the bombing of Scale.+*

+Oh, yeah, Cockjumper: Origins.+

+--I broke when my wife left me.+ Dannis' lip twitched. A single tear escaped from him. *+I loved her. She didn't love me. She didn't even come to my memorial. So I know. I know. But you're still here, Chambers. I can only be hard in your memories. You gotta get hard for me, right here, right now.+ +I'll... I'll try,+* Chambers said. *+But... there's not much left.+*

+Can you still feel horny.+ Chambers reached deep into himself. Faintly, he heard it: the last function parts of his Meta.

LUSTAWAY ACTIVATED

Dannis nodded with pride. *+Good. Good job, Aedon.+*

+I can still be horny,+ Chambers gasped. There was relief with the lust. A happiness. *+I'm still horny. There's enough of me left to be horny.+*

+Yes, there is.+ Dannis grinned. *+And if there's enough of you left to do that, there's enough left of you to save Avo.+*

+Yes. I'm... I'm gonna get hard!+

+Yes! Get hard!+

+Harder!+

+Harder!+

LUSTAWAY ACTIVATED

A trickle of clarity returned to Chambers. His pain was still there. His pain was still immense. But there was something else inside him that was *immenser* than the pain.

Lust.

LUSTAWAY ACTIVATED

Directing his perception to find the bundled mess of memories that was Hysteria, Chambers drew on all his degeneracy and called upon his disruptor.

ERR_GGG

THOUG-GH_THOUGHTWAVE DISRUPTOR IS ONLEFILINE

+I love you, Dannis,+ Chambers said. *+I-I wish you were my dad.+*

Dannis was standing at the edge of the cage down. Distant screeches and moans told of more ghouls coming. The man clenched his ass tight as he left. *+No, you don't, Aedon. You're harder than me now. Hard enough to be your own dad. Hard enough to be your own mom. You spent your entire life being horny for other people, Chambers. Now, it's time for you to get horny. For yourself.+*

Against all odds, Chambers found it in him to trigger his thoughtwave disruptor. Against all odds, the fucking thing actually fired.

A distortive wave furrowed through the Conflagration—through the cluster of nodes and splinters that thought Chambers defeated.

Surprise flooded the Nether.

+How?+ Emotion whispered, startled. *+How are you still—+*

The disruption consumed Hysteria. The amplification it provided collapsed. The Conflagration began to ripple as a building pressure came crashing down like an avalanche; one flame devouring the other.

All of Emotion's nodes promptly winked out.

An infernal storm consumed everything, subsuming memories, Hysteria, and even Chambers' ego.

As Chambers felt his sense of self merge with that of his template, Avo's reawakened flames reformed his broken being with an even greater level of control.

+Chambers,+ Avo breathed, actually sounding uncertain what to say. *+Are you alright.+*

+No,+ Chambers admitted. That was going to be true even once Avo restored his ego. *+Not even a little. But I am horny. I am horny for life. And I'm horny for you, consang.+*

An awkward pause followed. *+I... Sorry. Going to fix you as best as I can.+*