

**Veylis Avandaer:** Samir. Don't you ever want... more?

**Samir Naeko:** More? Well, what do you mean by "more"? More of what? More of "this"?

**Veylis Avandaer:** Hah. No, not right now. Later, perhaps. But... More, more than what existence possesses. More power, more capability to make things better. To be the decider rather than the decided.

**Samir Naeko:** Have you been talking to your dad again? Because this is the type of thing that you would talk to him about. I'm just—

**Veylis Avandaer:** You are not a fool. You are not an idiot, you are not a dullard. Stop speaking of yourself this way. Dead gods, it makes me want to throttle you on your behalf.

**[Samir Naeko sighs]**

**Samir Naeko:** You know one thing I don't get about you?

**Veylis Avandaer:** What is that?

**Samir Naeko:** You talk a lot about power, but it sounds like you really want control. I get it. Thousandhand's always going power this, power that, give them nothing, take everything. But this isn't how your mom trains us. She don't care about controlling everything—just being better; just cutting away all your enemy's options. You're not asking for power, Veylis. You're asking to be the sole uh—what's the word you used the other day?

**Veylis Avandaer:** Arbiter.

**Samir Naeko:** Yeah, arbiter of life or something.

**Veylis Avandaer:** Control is power.

**Samir Naeko:** Bullshit. If that was true, then I'd be a dead slave. If that was true, then all the slavers and masters and fathers would be running things forever. They didn't have a problem with control, because control was their problem. They could decide anything, and still they fucked everything up. Still they shit the bed. Because when the thought leaves your mind, turns into an action, and finally happens in reality, half the time it ends in a mess.

I've seen people change their mind a day after because you wanna know something, Vaelis? You imagine something and when it's coming out before you, it turns out ugly and you wanna take it back, but you can't. And so you do something else and it tumbles down even further from there. I'm fine with more power. Hells, I'd like to break more things. You like it when I break things. But control, dictating how everyone lives their life, being able to shape the future, that's your father's thing. He's the only man I would trust with it. Maybe him and you.

**Veylis Avandaer:** *And me?*

**Samir Naeko:** *Yeah, of course. And you, even if you're a little strange. You think about everything. You're a little bit of a busybody—*

*(Sound of Veylis' palm slapping Naeko's chest.)*

**Samir Naeko:** *Okay, okay. But yeah, you care. I'm just afraid you might care a little too much, is all. Anyway. Is it "later" already?*

**Veylis Avandaer:** *Did you humor me solely for... that?*

**Samir Naeko:** *My father wasn't Jaus, he was Shackler. He raised a simple man with simple wants, and... well, I think you'd hurt me if I called you a simple pleasure.*

**Veylis Avandaer:** *Induitably, my dearest brute.*

-Veylis Avandaer and Samir Naeko

24-9

The Veil of My Enemy

+*Shit*,+ Draus said. The other members of the cadre were no less unbalanced by the development. +*Time to jack out Avo. She's got her eyes on us.*+

+No. Wait.+ Something compelled Avo to stay. They had taken no action to cage or strike at him, opting instead for a performance, revealing his presence to the assembly. Though the act was subtly threatening, Veylis didn't strike him as the type to toy with her food, especially considering how she tried to kill him just two days ago.

There was something else here. Perhaps she didn't know where he was, or how he was infiltrating her Heaven. Perhaps she was trying to flush him out and was using paranoia and pressure to achieve such an end. Perhaps she was just—

**"We know you are among us,"** Osjon continued, eyes sweeping the gathered Godclads around him. Titanic though his form was, his irises were almost pinpricks of pale blue—the color of a vibrant sky wheeled by a cloud. But beyond the geniality of his appearance, there a wrongness that emanated from him and something about his looming shadow made the Fardrifter neigh with wariness. **"Do not be shy, dear intruder. It takes great skill to intrude in a place so high. Thy Seraph congratulates you on such an achievement."**

Osjon's words were calm, his voice soft and crisp, like the trickles of a serene lake.

But beneath him, the gathered assembly was building to a silent uproar. Accretions cycled like activating turbines. Auto-Seances activated. Ghosts threaded through the air. Whispered thoughts were exchanged between friends, enemies, rivals, and allies alike, with accusations and questions exchanged in mutual quantities.

The ever-present threat of Ori-Thaum was constant in the back of their minds, and from their fears did Avo harvest new echoing memories using his warmind of Hysteria. The world dissolved into lines of trauma, with recalled memories of pain and torment materializing within Avo's consciousness. Drawing from Peace's thoughts, he knew this wasn't something the warmind was capable of on its own, but unified with his nature as a thoughtform, he wielded it with a supremacy that exceeded all limitations.

He could shatter thousands of Godclads around them. Render them barren of thought and self. Strip them of memories and leave this place winnowed by cognitive fire. He could devour what he could and retreat until better opportunities availed themselves.

But that amounted to little more than an insult. Spite. He wanted to see the face of his enemy. Or the veil they wore, at least. Learning how Veylis operated was the entire reason he was here, after all.

While Avo made his calculations, Osjon simply watched the crowds while Marisovv battled the building tension within. The Instrument suspected nothing, for what could he have possibly suspected/ When even his awareness betrayed him, how was he supposed to be cognizant of his compromise?

As the pressure built to a breaking point, Osjon simply a palm and lowered it. The effect was immediate. More oppressive than calming. As his hand fell, and so too did mental chattering.

The dialogue died.

Osjon smiled.

**“We see your apprehension. We see your attempts to evade us. To lurk. Lurk within the minds of our Instruments, Dreamer.”**

Avo struggled not to wince. They were slowly revealing more. More of what they knew. Tightening the noose. He shifted his attention of to his cadre and made a decision. *+Breaking you from the splinters. Minimizing risk. Draus. Going to stay on. Kill me if I don't check in after 5 minutes. Or if I trigger your session once.+*

*+Synced,+* the Regular replied. *+Don't be a fool.+*

*+Won't,+* Avo replied. *+Need to see if I can find out how much they know. Maybe they might not be—+*

**"Instrument Marisov,"** Osjon said, the pitch of his voice climbing higher, almost alight with glee. **"Instruments Hawaka, Oswill, Makaram. Please step off the pedestal."**

**[Shit,]** Corner snarled.

Abrel just shook her head. **[Avo. She knows. She already knows. You're not hiding anything from her.]**

A block of ice formed within Marisov and Avo both. The Instrument's eyes went wide, but he mastered himself immediately. This was a test. All things were tests. He simply needed to mantle himself to prove that he wasn't—

**"Oh, do not take this personally, Marisov. We are sure that you did not know. In fact, so subtle were their movements that even we of the Seraphs did not see. At least, not until the High Seraph shared with us her insight just moments prior."** He laughed. **"Ah, but Dreamer. What a delightful misstep you've made. But just as well. Just as well. She wishes to speak with you. With you, and your *stolen vessels*."**

Avo disconnected the rest of his cadre without a second thought. Draus would deliver if all went south. Once again, he was descending into dark waters alone—risking nothing but a death, and a learning experience.

He paused then as he thought of Osjon's words. Misstep. Suddenly, he realized what the Seraph was inferring. The use of his Chronology Canon. It had to be. The miracles he imposed of time earlier had drawn Veylis' attention when Kare and Shotin were battling the assassin cells at the *Flavors*. She had been watching him after. Staring at him from afar.

A second epiphany then followed the first. Kare. She was the chain. She was the reason he was compromised now—or why Veylis and the Seraphs suspected him. Highflame faced Noloth and Ori-Thaum before. Subvertd assets weren't rare. Common, even. But for Kare to be at the scene of two major incidents in the past three days, and for the Instruments and Bloodthanes to be exposed to her...

Marisov placed his foot on the edge and looked down. Flames crackled and whipped from the pillar that bore his weight. Swallowed by the blaze, it was closer to an incandescent stick of wax than a marble column. Below, the sea of fire danced and lapped in lashing curls of calamity. It was only upon perceiving did the Instrument felt the heat, tasted the fear.

Throwing himself into the fiery abyss meant trusting the High Seraph's will, trusting Seraph Osjon Thousand's commands.

Dread pumped through his veins. And Marisov let it pass through him. Drift out of him. His focus cleared. His will was resolute. His mind was made. He directed his gaze high and met Osjon's

unblinking eyes—eyes the size of twin moons. Marisov lifted a clenched fist in salute. “Blessed be the worthy.”

A few other Godclads recited the creed in accord. Most were content to watch, to pierce him with their judging stares. Fools. What would they know? How would they endure if asked to demonstrate their resolve before the High Seraph?

Marisov knew how he would. He would show them. Reveal his character to everyone right now.

Giving himself over to trust, to determination, he opened his arms and fell down into the splashing fires. The inferno rose to meet him, but Marisov refused to call upon his Heaven, refused to enclose his face behind his combat-skin’s collapsable helmet. Death or pain may come his way, but he would not succumb. He would not stray.

He had chosen his path. Better a fool of confidence than fate’s coward.

The column he stood on melted with his descent. As fat dollops of white plunged into the roaring waves, and shortly thereafter, Marisov followed. The flames embraced him only briefly, for as soon as he was engulfed, reality came asunder in coiling stands of gold, and the Instrument found himself stumbling to a halt within a cube of white, entirely alone.

To his senses, the transition was instant. Fire, then cell. To Avo, reality was actively loading, swells and currents of temporal thaumaturgy changing in composition and structure as Veylis worked to remake her inner world.

A hand fell on Mariov’s shoulder. A gasp escaped his throat as he turned around, wrist-mounted spatio-kinetic cannon expanding. He spun. The cell blurred. His barrel came to rest under Osjon’s chin.

The bald Seraph didn’t even move. Once again, he stood a figure clothed in purest white, though far diminished in size. The air of menace remained about him. As did most of his features, but this close, Avo could see there was movement coming from the shadows he cast; an unwelcome presence locked in a cage.

“Worry not, Instrument Marisov,” Osjon said, patting Marisov on the shoulder, indifferent to the gun threatening him. “Worry not. It isn’t you we wish to punish, but the one that resides inside you. That is if our assumption is correct, of course.”

Around them, existence was actively changing. The fabric of reality was being rewoven by time, and as the strings were fused back together in coiling whorls, the white cell was torn down like wallpaper hiding a grander world beyond.

A scene loaded before them. Burner’s Way entered Avo’s awareness as he found his Instrument standing amidst the wreckage, exactly where he had been days prior. Toppled buildings became

the aesthetic. Battle lines of golems and drones littered the sky as Highflame and Stormtree stood on the verge of a skirmish. Beside him, the other Instruments were missing, but Paladins Kitzuhada and Sandrupal were present, as were the Bloodthanes.

The world was almost exactly as it had been a few days ago in Avo's memories. Down to the last detail. The sheer accuracy of Veylis recreation was unnerving. Her Heaven reminded him of his sprint within the Hungers, but more pervasive somehow. More absolute. More controlled.

If Necrojack had remade this scene using memories, Avo would have considered them a master. He supposed the same compliment could be paid to Veylis judging by her mastery over time.

"Apologies, Seraph," Marisov said, braving a breach of decorum as he took in his surroundings before turning to face Osjon. "But I don't understand. What is happening? Why am I—"

"Thank you, Osjon. Please leave now. I wish to speak with my newest enemy. Alone." The Paladins and the Bloodthanes spoke in unison. As a legion. Their voices remained their own, but there was someone else there. A director or puppeteer.

*Veylis.*

The bald Seraph simply bowed and fell backward into his own shadow, before vanishing utterly from reality. The darkness of his contours faded with his passing and Marisov blinked, his mind a whirlwind of terror and impulses.

The High Seraph was before him. The High Seraph was greeting him. The High Seraph was going to—suspected him of...

The urges to proclaim his undying loyalty while also declaring his innocence or ignorance warred. An amusing response considering how often he imagined himself in this position: granted an audience with Highflame's greatest power.

*"I see you now, Instrument Marisov,"* Veylis said, continuing to speak through her puppets.

"Spare me your words. It is not you who I wish to speak. But you do have my sympathy. I trust this is all very confusing for you."

It took him more than a few heartbeats to find the words, his lips were dry, his throat was burning, and his mind was on the verge of a complete meltdown. "Yes, of course, High Seraph," he said bowing his head, "it is an honor—"

"No, it is not," Veylis interrupted, the voice of her legion synchronized in sternness and disparagement. "Please Instrument, do not lie to me. This is an unfortunate situation for you. An unpleasant situation. Let *Delusion* be something you are infested with, instead of an act that you

actively perform. Lies are for enemies and we, if we are allies at all, should always hold steadfast to our truths or what we believe to be as such, would you not agree?"

Marisov took a moment to compose himself, not ready to be rebuffed so immediately. "Yes, of course."

Such simply occurred a collective sigh from Veylis' puppets. "Another synchopant. I really should have Osjon do something about that. But alas, I didn't bring you here to discover if you have a spine but to speak through you. You, and the rest of you cadre. It's an unfair thing you have suffered. Brought low by a force you cannot prevent. A shame. A pity. But brought low nonetheless."

Behind her, the horizon expanded, and there, Avo watched as the sky folded upward, curving over them like a tunnel as existence tore once more. A street strewn with rubble, glass, and debris came into view. Water glistened upon plascrete as the corpses of people shared a mutual place of rest with unmoving aquatic lifeforms. Broken halos fizzled away to nothingness, and the only two still standing were Shotin and Kare, trying to regain their bearings next to an overturned arrow.

A temporal thread ran between both of Kare's chronological puppets.

**[I'm *fucking* cursed,]** Kare's template muttered, exasperated at how many great powers were interested in her.

"I must commend you," Veylis said, still speaking through the chorus. "Your triumph over my mother is... something unexpected. It has unraveled the paths. Indeed, your very existence is actively pruning them. Reducing the future's possibilities by entire sections.