

*A raconteur from a bygone age once claimed that all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. When my father first breathed this quote to me, it horrified me.*

*Merely players. Dancers on another stage.*

*Most fail to see the horror of the world. You are born into a cage. Your body is the first thing to betray you. And with time, a cage is built around your mind. Belief. Desire. Culture. All things that shape you. But also chain you. To roles. Archetypes.*

*Are we to be the lovers? Are we to be the heroes? Are we to be the victims? Are we to be the villains?*

*Are we to be anything but what we define ourselves to be?*

*This was where I noticed the first separation between me and my father. He found pleasure in the roles all people play. My mother, when asked, thought nothing of the narrative and simply claimed she would be the one who won.*

*But me?*

*I wanted to be everything.*

*I wanted to be the book. The page. The stage.*

*The world.*

*Again. You fail to see the horror. You fail to see the extent to which you are trapped.*

*But I did. And so I did the only thing any true reader would decide upon.*

*I claimed the role the bard failed to mention. I claimed the role of narrator.*

*I claimed the role of cage.*

*-Veylis Avandaer*

*24-8*

*The "Assembly"*

*+Scan his memories!+ Kae shouted.*

*+I did!+ Avo replied.*

*+Do it again!+*

*+I did!+*

*+Then how?" How? You tell me how he can have another canon—someone else's canon—active inside his Soul?+*

*+I don't know.+*

*+You don't know? I do know! I know that this—this is impossible! I'm telling you right now it's impossible.+*

Marlowe coughed as she tried to ease Kae's outburst. *+Alright, Agnos, calm down. I'm sure that there's a perfectly unreasonable bullshit explanation behind this.+*

Her words were a droplet of water. Too bad Kae's frustration was building like an inferno. *+I will not calm down. This makes no sense. This defies everything I know about thaumaturgy.+*

*+Well, maybe it's something you don't know this time,+* Cas added.

Both Avo sighed as Marlowe winced at the Columner's off-hand remark. If Kae was incensed before, she was incendiary now. *+What—you—what do you know about me not knowing—you cultist! You think because you have your little rituals—+*

*+Kae,+* Avo grunted. *+No. No personal attacks.+*

*+He personally attacked me first!+*

*+Cas. No personal attacks.+*

The faither quietly nodded in the real and mentally prayed, asking his god to give him patience, and Kae grace. Avo blocked those thoughts from flowing across to prevent the Agnos from having an aneurysm.

*+A Soul is contained within a Liminal Frame,+* Kae began, fuming as she devoured every minute detail on Marisov's side. *+Liminal. Liminal, as in occupying both sides of a threshold. Heavens are subrealities. Their rules are absolute. So. For this to work. He needs a Domain inside him. Which means either he cannot remember, or something else is happening. Something with the Agnosi.+*

The Agnos' mind branched along separate paths. A potential conspiracy among her fellow disciples? A missing memory? Or was this something more insidious—an exertion of metaphysical control possessed by no other by the High Seraph.

Veylis Avandaer's Heavens and capabilities were masked in mystery and shrouded in history. Perhaps she bore hidden knowledge never revealed? Perhaps her understanding of thaumaturgy exceeded all others. Confidential though relations between Godclads and the Agnosi were, those of the thaumaturgic studies still spoke to one another, and when there was people, there was gossip.

But no trail ever led back to the High Seraph. No trail at all.

As time flowed on, so too did the golden tendrils continue to trickle forth from within Marisov, burrowing and interlacing his ontology with the progression of reality. The Instrument himself was ignorant, blind to how the paths already embraced him. From his cog-feed, the world was still as it was, but Avo, imbued with a Domain of Chronology, saw the subtleness of Veylis' working and found himself disquieted by her influence.

Zein had claimed that if one ascended past the Sixth Sphere, they lost their ability to conduct themselves subtly. Such was perhaps true if the opposition had their own Domains of Chronology, but to the unprepared or unequipped, what difference was there to feel? A being existed in pace and relation to time, and only the dragons seemed capable of deviating from its fixed path of their own accord.

Spying on the other members of the Instrument's household—and the Elysium beyond—Avo found most individuals of significance likewise enwreathed in Veylis' invisible web, and likewise aware of their coming extraction.

As his Skimmer pulsed, existence turned sinuous with resplendent threads, but rather than the Heaven expressing itself like a stream, the metaphysical nature of

The shift from baseline reality to a parallel place made from the fabric of time was subtle.

Only Eivor and those attached to him could see, for he had the domain within him and like called to like, for such was the law of thaumaturgy.

Beyond merely Marysav, however, other instruments and citizens alike were also being enwreathed, wrapped in Veylis's all-encompassing embrace, directing Skimmer out into the cityscape.

Fading starlight gleamed upon a vast valley of alloy. The Elysium here was not one for pleasure, but war. *Internecline*, it was called, for the proximity all the Lesser Houses shared here, for how the core of the district was the Apex Arena—a grand stage dedicated toward bloodletting and the envy of all those who risked the circuits.

Mansions faced each other on narrow streets as drones and machines kept the city clean. A light clung to the matter. Marble and steel sculpted the architecture. Bridges of fire arched over entire blocks, accelerating the speed of those who tread upon them. But beyond the surface

was a sprawl in motion, for the mansions here were not affixed to a specific place, for the merits one household earned shifted levels upward, and the shame it suffered pulled it levels down. A faint kindling consumed homes, swapping their positions with the cycling of the day, shearing at those who dwelled here with doses of triumph, or the bitterness of defeat.

Power could be taken. Privilege could be lost. Highflame never let you forget that. Never stopped reminding you that lethargy meant death. Strive. Rise. Or wane. And fall.

And so it was the citizens here who lived, ignorant of how Veylis was closing her grasp around them. How millions upon millions of accretions were being upward in ascending fibers of gold, slipping high through the swelling clouds.

+*Millions,*+ Kae breathed. +*She's interfacing with millions.*+

+*Millions here alone,*+ Avo replied. The act wasn't even that vulgar, but the sheer scope of the canon made Avo nauseous. He felt her weight before but to see the immensity of her reach firsthand was almost despair-inducing. His presence before her was less than that of a speck.

***“All the more reason to build us, master,”*** the Woundmother whispered. ***“All the more reason we must grow. It takes resources and labor for a mountain to be dwarfed by a tower.”***

The moment continued on for a few seconds as the number of golden bridges multiplied. Well over millions now. Far beyond. The horizon was turning into a pillared wall from Avo's perspective.

**[Blessed be the worthy,]** Abrel breathed. **[Blessed by Her majesty. Her power.]**

**[This is godsdamned hell,]** Benhata muttered.

**[This is a delusion,]** Elegant-Moon chimed. **[Suffering is not strength. Suffering is at best a byproduct. Too often the Golds forget that mastery takes time, and growth takes focus. But growth cannot happen in a cage, and such is what the gold is. A gilded cage. Owned by one woman.]**

*{People live lives of certain defeat here,}* Calvino said simply.

The EGI's statement drew Avo's curiosity. +*Why do you say that?*+

*{Because the dominance they seek is child-like; breaking. It cannot coexist with itself. It cannot develop or nurture without a sovereign in place. And that is what Veylis is. And that is the only thing keeping them stable. An unreachable master, with only the spots far below her open for the seizing. After all these centuries, what hope do the children have of matching the amassed fortunes of their undying forefathers?}*

Draus almost sneered at that. *+Hope ain't gonna do shit. And the world don't give a fuck if you're a juv or not. Existence is one way. You're another. Be the gun. Be the target. Face the end. Ain't no other way.+*

*{You know this to be untrue, Captain Draus. You are already fighting for something different. Something better.}*

*+Nah,+* Draus replied. *+Nothin' like that's changed for me. Way I see it, the only one standin' and deliverin' anything is Avo. The only one fighting and burning for what he believes. Everyone else just accepts, takes, and bends for more power.+*

*{So. Avo is the epitomization of Highflame's truth to you then?}* Calvino asked.

This time, Draus did sneer. *+It ain't about philosophy. Hells, Highflame isn't a philosophy. It's an act. A path. A way of being. To be the one who delivers on your own beliefs. Your own will. To rise. To grow. To become. 'Cept the Chivalrics got too scared of losin' what they had, and the Meritos still don't got enough spine to just take what they want.+*

A jolt ran through Avo's Frame as soaring streams of chronology spilling out from countless citizens across the Elysium suddenly interlinked. A *wrenching* sensation followed as Avo felt Marisov's ontology torn across two paths. The uncanniness of the sensation was hard to convey. It was as if the very nature of time was being bent, allowing people to exist across two places, two parallel streams of time.

From the perspective of a disconnected splinter, Instrument Idril Marisov was still in his mini-mansion, but his existence seemed to be stuttering. From his point of view, the existence around him peeled apart as a column erupted upward from beneath his feet. Rich maple floorboards shattered as a pillar of marble carried Marisov skyward, eliciting a gasp of shock from the man.

As he punched through his ceiling, Avo realized that every bit of matter here was simulated. Loading and deloading as if artifacts or memories in the Nether. The difference was the deciding Domain. Time instead of mind, with everything being simulated by an instance in history—past or present.

Veylis shadow loomed ever larger over Avo as he glimpsed the nature of the paths and suffered a subtle epiphany.

She wasn't reshaping the world as it was, but drawing history over. Recompiling it within her own Heaven. Somehow, she could reach out to people. Was that because she remembered grasping them before? Was there a canon that rendered them miracles for her to wield? What were the limits?

As Marisov calmed himself, he straightened his back and placed his hands behind his back. His respirococytes and self-moving nanocells left without a need for a heart, but that didn't stop his guts from clenching with anxiety. As the wind swept around him, he snuck a peek at his competition from the corner of his eye and found most of them wanting. He thought he saw Instrument Jerit—the whimpering fool. They were clearly unprepared; they didn't even have their armor on. Just a collared shirt and some slacks.

Pitiful. One must always be ready in advance.

As palliative moistures dotted Marisov's forehead with freshness, the clouds combusted into a blinding sea of flame, but the Instrument endured the pain and never looked aside. He and countless millions more speared through the fires, baptized as they were drawn into the cleansing world ruled by the High Seraph.

As the blaze caressed him, licked at his flesh, his very Soul, the Instrument endured in silence, never flinching, never even blinking. His reward came when the inferno's endurance broke, its grasp collapsing into fingers of loosening embers and trailing smoke.

The marble column that carried him was alight now. Ignited by tides of lapping flame below.

The clouds gathered all at once, collapsing to a singularity at the core of this existence, an impossibly wide platform for all to see. With each passing second, more and more citizens were elevated to the assembly, each carried by their personal pedestal to these glorious heights.

But much as the placement of one's home could change, so too did their columns vary. Instruments were usually below Authorities and Seraphs. War heroes or others of significant esteem but lacking seniority to pursue a proper promotion remained at a level with their social betters, while those without Frames were only meters above the fire while the Ensouled dwarfed them by leagues.

Scoping his potential rivals and checking his vicinity to see if his wife and children were nearby, Marisov held himself with pride, keeping his chin high and gaze steady. Worthiness was an individual aspect. No one else could strive for such virtue on your behalf. They could potentially grant you a push or offer certain benefits, but one still had to live their own life, and one had to prove themselves through triumph over tribulation.

*+Is this it?+* Chambers' thoughts were quiet. Almost too quiet for Avo to notice. The man was taking in the scene with fascinated disappointment. *+This is what it means to be a Gold?+* He snorted. He laughed. He began to cackle. Kae sent Avo a worried squeak and Marlowe winced.

*+Your consang doing alright, Avo?+* Marlowe said. *+I don't know him that well but... he seems kinda—+*

+*Just give him some time,*+ Avo replied, though his own worries weren't assuaged. It was what Chambers wanted.

+*This is a dick-measuring contest,*+ Chambers giggled. +*Fucking—fucking, I remember doing this shit for Mirrorhead. Me, and all the other enforcers. Parading ourselves around. Playing hard when he was around. Trying to get his favor. Spitting slurs about him when he was gone. Fuck. Fucking hells. Of course this place is like him. Of course. It's all one bad fucking joke.*+

No sooner than his thought's end did the encompassing platform at the heart of the assembly begin to change once. A shadow crawled through the clouds, and the arrival of their presence brushed against the Fardrifter's Domains.

As the vapors parted, a giant arose, needing no pillar to lift him from the fires, no means other than his own to ascend this realm. Chronology spilled from him too, but different from most other Godclads present, he was using the golden strings as a rope, like a titan climbing up into the sky. The shadow his being could cast would leave a district drowned in shadow, but his attire was composed of cloud-made robes of billowing white.

As light graced the giant's features, Avo found himself looking upon a man bearing soft features. His eyes were small—like beads of cerulean, his lips thin, his head bare of any hair. The roundness of his facial structure made him seem almost infant-like.

As he lifted a hand to greet the assembled citizens of Highflame, seven hundred columns rose and carried their Godclads so they would be on an even height with the giant. Seraphs all, these were the hands and confidants of the High Seraph, the law-making arm of Highflame. Below them were mostly Authorities: policy enforcers and judicial interpreters. The Instruments and remainder stood nearest the flames as soldiers, servants, and security.

**“Good evening, my peers,”** the giant, Osjon Thousand said. He smiled genially at the specs of life around him, regarding them as if a father humoring his children. **“I bid you warm welcomes to this grand assembly of ours. Alas, that is only something I bid you. The High Seraph has asked me to convey another message. The first is one of disappointment. And disgust.”**

Murmurs broke among the gathered citizens. The tension inside Marisov was spiking and falling like a vibrating string.

**“She has seen you. All of you. Your struggles against each other. The games you play to shame one another. They have shamed her instead. They have shamed our Guild. They have shamed our promise.”** He clucked his tongue and shook his head. **“I trust many of you have already noticed—already heard of the absence among you. House Greatling stands vacant here. Vacant, but not banished. Know that your peer, Uthred Greatling, and his son, Vator Greatling, have embarked on a journey of redemption of their own volition.”**

Somehow, Avo doubted that. Directing his attention to Abrel, the template was suspiciously silent and doing her best to resist the weight of an onrushing trauma. The events here were as much her fault as her brothers. Even if they couldn't see her, she felt the scorn, the shame. But she said nothing. She refused to give her hurt words; surrender power to it.

**“But struggle between our peers must be put to a close. And though you have whispered, it is not our way to let things be decided in idle gossip. Great Houses of the Chivalrics. Know that her gaze is turning from you. Know that your failures remain unredeemed. Take heart and see former Authority Greatling as an example rather than a disgrace; he will stand ahead of a great many of you before this day is over.”**

Previously, there were only mutterings. Now, there was open clamoring and naked terror.

Before the volume could climb, Osjon held out a hand and bade everyone back to silence. **“That is but the first message for the start of this assembly. The second is another welcoming and a first and formal greeting to our uninvited guest.”**

Avo felt an emptiness open inside him.

**“The High Seraph sees you, *dear stranger*. And she recognizes your valor for triumphing against the Godslayer. Come forth and greet us. Come forth, and accept this privilege.”**