

*Since Veylis Avandaer's ascendance to the position of High Seraph of Highflame and her complete capture of the Broken Kosgan traditions, there have been 682 formal assemblies called.*

*Of the [682] formal assemblies called, [455] occurred during times of war.*

*The great reluctance of Veylis and her Seraphs to compel such assemblies lies not in an issue of governance or authority, but quite simply, culture.*

*Infringement debases strength.*

*Will is to be grown; virtue to be displayed; autonomy to be maintained. The individual cannot be cultivated to true potential if they are neutered of self-correction. The War Hosts and Great Houses are magnifications of this ideal—an army of peoples marching together towards their own apotheosis, forming a tidal wave from a shared cause.*

*But there comes a time when even those of the same creed stand lost amidst the currents, when culture is assailed by rot from within and grievances must be addressed and adjusted by a higher, wiser hand to ensure the survival of the Guild.*

*In these moments, a grand assembly is called for all loyalists—Meritocrat and Chivalric alike—to understand where they stand against their true opposition, and where they failed to honor house, family, ancestor, and self.*

*The coming grand assembly will likely prove no different, but even Authorities offer rumors and whispers as to what major theme or critical flaw must be corrected in this session.*

*It is certain, however, that Osjon Thousand, Faithtaker, Speaker of the High Seraph, and Mediator of the Houses, will once again perform the address in Veylis stead.*

*For it be her paths that drown each and every FATED under the banner of Highflame, and it will be in these paths that all will be made equal regardless of seniority, deed, or even Spherage...*

*-GRAND ASSEMBLY: The Shapeless Government of Highflame (Highflame Propaganda Documentary Series)*

24-7

The Assembly (I)

The remainder of the meeting took on a more focused quality as the cadre decided on their new operating parameters.

First was insuring themselves against the danger posed by the Famines. They were to use Avo's splinters as an operational umbrella, and no condition was anyone to operate without

notifying the rest of the group. Should anyone go missing or get disconnected across the Nether for any length of time—even a second—they were to be treated by distortions and a deep scan provided by Avo.

They lived experiencing the firsthand benefits of Avo's splinters. There was little need to impress anyone of the dangers.

Tied to this mandate was also the choice to wind down operations for a time. At least until after the coming trial. With how many major incidents were happening across New Vultun, tensions between Guilds were spinning up to treacherous levels. Forces were being massed along the borders of districts, while militias and reserves were being activated to further provide much-needed defense.

The Nether was ablaze with gossip and conspiracy, claiming that "*Massacre at Flavors*" was an in-Guild assassination attempt gone wrong. How right they were, but how shallow they saw. To think the D'Rongos agents instead of assets was a mistake, but who else knew what Avo did of Noloth? Of the Nether's truth and the Low Masters' recent liberation.

Regardless, the chatter was spiking the temperature between Clans D'Rongo, Kazahara, and Kitzuhada. There were already vicarities of street side engagements between clan retainers, political brawls—with some very literal fists being thrown—and glaive-rattling between Seekers.

Emergency commands from the Inner Council demanded all clans keep to themselves and let any disputes be settled in a court of law judged by unbiased parties in the Overclan. Meanwhile, Guild Mirrors directed their cells and Glaives were placed on alert, telling them to stay ready for emergency activation.

All this was to Avo's benefit. Though the segmentation of the cells and the bottlenecks of the Mirrors prevented him from sweeping through Ori-Thaum, he could direct them against each other. Have the Silvers break themselves and leave them open to his machinations.

To this end, he could likely leverage the new privileges Aegis was granting him. To aid him in his attempts to "cut down on collateral damage," Kant and the ethics committee given him partial access to Voidwatch's total spectrum imagining so that he might be able to observe the material as well as he did the cognitive.

Complain though Kant and the other humanitarian minds did, Avo found himself surprised about how cooperative they were. He expected benefits and resources to be withheld. Instead, things proved to be the opposite. Perhaps rational decision-making was the greatest boon being a coldtech intelligence than a byproduct of evolution and impulse.

### **GRAFTING HEAVENS: [Maelstormer], [Fucktopia], [Arsenalist], [Runebreaker]**

The second order of business was incubation. With the cadre slowing their pace for now, Avo was also to play a softer, more subtle game, Avo seized the opportunity to awaken the dormant Heavens.

It would prove useful to have more allied gods or for his cadre to deliberately trigger their Daemons while the threat of Rend was high. More options would always be to their advantage, and the insight the Heavens presented at times was worth considering, if not immensely insightful.

Of course, the greater question of where the gods would eventually fit in this revolution still had to be considered, but such ruminations were already common for Avo. The enclavers, the FATELESS, the subverts were all increasingly party of him, increasingly subjects—if not citizens—of his unseen empire, and he increasingly wondered how he could better uplift and enhance their lives.

Such thoughts compelled Avo to speak with Chambers, but the man simply asked for more time alone. It was a request easily granted, but one that engendered additional worry. Chambers had a way about him—a presence and personality that remained dim after his most recent bout of suffering.

No traumas lingered in his mind, and the overall makeup of his phantasms and sequences were still the same, but the way he regarded himself was different, and the shape of his ego was actively transforming. Kare—worried about her friend—asked Avo how Chambers was doing thereafter and shared his concerns.

But they couldn't live someone else's life. Short of him asking to be changed, Avo would give him time. Time he more than earned through his act of valor against Emotion.

Perhaps Essus and he should share some time together. Something might come from that experience.

The third item of priority was Ambassador Valhu Kitzuhada. He was a vulnerable target, being father to Kare and emissary to Stormtree. As Avo was about to direct a few splinters to keep watch over him, Denton entered the fray and began actively dealing with several issues at once.

Already, she was scheduling meetings with the Paladins in hopes of recovering the currently held Seekers—not only those of “her clan,” but also Shotin. Moreover, she planned to establish contact with Ambassador Kitzuhada as well to make the affair a multi-partisan effort. Through her, he could monitor the situation without diverting one of his subminds. The spy remained cognitively incomprehensible to him, after all.

The Low Masters were likely to face the same impediments with her.

Finally, with the Highflame grand assembly soon to begin, Avo made final arrangements to secure him and the cadre front-row seats for Veylis' big event.

A slight feeling of foreboding bubbled inside him as he thought of the High Seraph watching him, but the urge to even out her voyeurism with an act of his own pushed him to continue.

And so it was that he found his way back across the Tiers, back into Highflame territory through the mind of one Idril Marisov—an Instrument he compromised not two days ago.

If nothing else, his newest subvert would grant him a glimpse behind the curtain and formally begin his immersive education about Guilder politics.

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*+You know, it never stops being surprising how godsdamned arrogant the Golds are,+ Marlowe said. +You'd think they'd find some sense of humility after all the self-criticism they do, but nope. The urge to suck and lick themselves just grows and grows.+*

*+Thank you for the very Chambers statement, Citizen Marlowe,+ Kae sighed.*

*+Happy to entertain, Agnos.+*

As the scenes played on from behind Marisov's eyes, Avo was somehow inclined to agree. With the Instrument's cog-feed projected live into the minds of the cadre, they spent the better part of four hours watching him wash, dress, do his hair, scream at his mechanical servants, scream at his son, scream at his daughter, scream at his wife, get into a fist fight with his wife, lose said fist fight with his wife, have mind-sex with his wife, schedule an emergency session with a Voidwatch grafter to put his face through a final skin-polishing procedure, put on his most ostentatious set of armor, and finally take his position before the open skylight on the top-floor of his mini-mansion.

The moments were a whirlwind of absurdity, with Marisov's moods swinging from flat to extreme anger to flat at the slightest provocation. The most fascinating thing though, was that he wasn't special when compared to his contemporaries.

*+Cock-waving and cunt-splaying is an art to the Golds.+* Such were Marlowe's words. The statement came as an offhanded remark tinged with bitter amusement, but it really quite fit.

Slipping out from Marisov's mind and infesting his surroundings, Avo found every FATED of Highflame scrambling to dress their finest, to look their best, and most importantly, to be better than their neighbor.

Almost no one lacked a rival they wished to overcome when the assembly commenced, and so consumed by the desire to triumph, a few even resorted to active sabotage.

Whatever the case, the surreality of the moment seemed more akin to an audition than an address by a higher power.

*+Did you have to do this?+ Avo asked Draus, picking out a few particularly gaudy memories. Images of an Instrument who intended to greet the rest of the assembly in a flesh-suit made out of tortured but still living Glaives. An Authority who a Heaven of Light—further amplified by high*

powered projectors she built into her back like wings—designed specifically to magnify her own form for leagues beyond.

The Regular in question snorted. As did her templated fellows within Avo's mind. *+Fuck no,+* she said. *+We're "Blade Caste." What the Chivs used to call us anyway. If you ain't an Instrument, admin, or something higher, you just get the broadcast instead of the live experience. Usually, us Orphans would slip into our combat-skins and just wait around in case our commander decided to show us off.+*

Using Hysteria to filter for Regulars, Avo found her words to be true. Certain notable Regulars flanked their assigned protectees as add-ons while a few "war heroes" were mandated to attend. Mostly, Highflame's finest continued their operations.

FATED though they were, even citizens had their differences of purpose and use. It helped that Regulars were usually only interested in war.

"Yes, *my Seraph,*" Marisov said. He was muttering to himself, practicing his salute—raising a fist up past his head as he imagined Veylis personally complimenting him. It was unlikely, but one could never be sure. *"Yes. It's an honor."*

*+I'm beginning to see why you left,+* Cas snorted, words directed at Draus.

*+I was technically "asked to leave,"+* she replied flatly. *+Somedays, feels like they did me a favor.+*

*+What about the others?+* Avo asked.

Draus paused. Back in the real, she was sitting in the corner of the tower, showing Dice how to dismantle, clean, and maintain a gun. She froze there too. *+Others. You know about the others. You know who I am.+*

*+Yes,+* Avo answered. *+But do you want it back? Your old life. Your position. Your role. Original purpose. If I could undo the past. Remove the Greatlings. Would you want that life?+*

*+Over this one, you mean?+* Draus replied. Her lapsed into quiet consideration as melodic chimes sounded through Marisov's household. Night was soon to arrive. The Daystar was about to shift. *+Don't know. Don't think it matters either. I'd kept marchin' and fightin' and killin' till I was dead and done and that would've been that.+*

*+And that's enough for you?+* Marlowe asked, slightly incredulous. *+Just "go here, kill that, blessed by the worthy; die."+*

A cold grin spread across Draus' face. *+You forgot the most important thing about bein' a gun.+*

*+What's that?+* Marlowe.

*+All the waitin' in between.+*

+*The real hell,*+ Tavers absently mindedly muttered while doing something else on her end.

+*Honestly, Avo, I don't rightly know. I ain't who I was all those years ago. I ain't who I was when saved Kae. I ain't even who I was two months ago. Guard-Captain Draus would've died sooner or later. She was fine with that. Me? Now? I got my sight's aimed higher than just a messy death. I wanna stand and deliver. I wanna see if we can actually turn shit around.*+

She laughed. +*Shit. Another Reg would've tried to snuff me under suspicion of subversion. 'Course, they'd be right considerin' I'm with you.*+

Avo wondered what to say about that. The trust between them had come far. Unbelievably far. He had been little more than a monster. She was a weapon seeking desired martyrdom. Now, their fates and egos were entwined, and she thought nothing of offering more to their cause. More for him.

A pang of discontentment sounded within Avo, the discomfort growing in-sync to Marisov's chimes. He had her loyalty. He had her mind. He had her skills. Anyone else would've asked for something more by now. Even Tavers had.

Draus? All he offered was a war above all wars. A cause of supreme importance well worth killing and dying for. But even still, was that all he could give her for her efforts? Was that all she was worth?

Weapons were meant to be used. Flechettes, rockets, bullets, and bombs spent. Lives sacrificed.

But Draus was worth so much more. Could do so much more. Could live to be so much more.

+*Draus,*+ Avo asked, trying to best express his intent. +*What would you do if we won? What would you do if we claimed the Ladder. If all of us were still here in the end? What would you do if there were no more wars? If there were no more enemies? What do you want after triumph if the last chance at a good death escapes you?*+

Her ego recoiled. The thought he broadcast to her was less a trauma and more like an intrusive entity she didn't want to consider. Like all Regulars, her ego was externalized, her sense of self rooted in the world and material reality rather than interpreting external stimuli then fixing on her "selfhood."

+*I don't rightly know,*+ Draus said. +*Might just start a fight with you out of boredom if we get there.*+

He picked up the hook she was putting down. +*Can kill each other after assembly. Practice for the future.*+

She scoffed. +*Yeah. For the future. Don't worry 'bout me, Avo. Ain't plannin' to visit the Big Nothing anytime soon. I'm just not worried about it.*+

*+Blessed be the peacemakers,+ Cas whispered. +And blessed be those who bear the burning blade to cast the dragon; the deceiver unto the earth.+*

*+You cursin' me or something' faither?+ Draus asked.*

*+Oh, quite contrary, consang, quite contrary.+*

Draus lapsed in a suspicious silence as Marlowe simply laughed. *+Not used to being among cultist, freakers, rusters, joy-fiends, and ghouls, huh, Reg?+* Sadly, charisma couldn't work on everyone, and all Marlowe's words drew from Draus was a sneer. *+We ain't consangs, Marlowe. You won't be gettin' no interview from me.+*

The thoughtcaster shrugged and moved on. Not everyone was going to like you. Not unless you could change their minds for them.

As the cadre returned to silence, Avo felt it: an inexorable pressure grinding down upon his being. Strings of gold enveloped the interior of Marisov's home, but what surprised above the most was how the flowing paths of chronology were originating from within the Instrument's Liminal Frame.

All the other members of the cadre stopped what they were doing and took notice.

Draus squinted. Dice cocked her head, uncertain what this meant. The kitten meowed. Chambers stared blankly. The rest found their focus gradually stolen as rushing currents of brilliance swallowed Marisov from the inside.

It was then that Kae finally found her voice. Kae, whose mind had gone silent in the past few minutes. Kae, whose eyes were growing wider and wider. A Canon of Chronology was spilling out from the inside of the Instrument's Frame. Funny thing was that he didn't even have the necessary Domain. *+What the fu--+*