

Of course words can be weapons—how else do you think your father stayed my hand? Well, yes—the way he flails with his sword is amusing, and dare I even say endearing. But if you can seize comprehension of your foe, if you can master what they want, what they desire, who they think themselves to be, then you can provoke them. Drive them to unwise action.

Capture the animal and herd the man.

A warrior with a brittle heart makes for easy prey. A simple statement of provocation paired with a challenge often seals their fate.

But it is the ones that can see within that you must fear. The ones that have gazed the shadows of their heart and emerged thereafter changed, but uncrippled.

Treat them not as base creatures, my dear. Treat them as the rivals they are, for they know some semblance of what it means to be a Glaive, and thus they will seek to claim your leash before you might claim theirs.

-Zein Thousandhand to Veylis Avandaer

24-10

The Cage and the Plague

"Firstly, I must commend you," Veylis said, still speaking through her chorus of puppets. "There are few people in existence that can outmaneuver my mother. Tell me, was your success an improvisation brought on by desperation or was it long plotted? I must admit that I cannot tell: your reach runs deep in the Paladins, of that I am certain, but the way you exposed yourself at the end—and the nature of your mistake betrays a dissonant inexperience. I surmise you must be used to memories and shadows, but only a mere babe when it comes to drawing taut the strands of time."

"With each word the High Seraph spoke, Instrument Marisov's confusion climbed. Within his mind, Avo kept to his silence and considered his response.

Though he didn't want to reveal anything to Veylis, he couldn't deny there was a string of curiosity pulling at him – a chance to greet his greatest threat puppet-to-puppet in a session of open, *dishonest* dialogue.

While he observed, Veylis continued on. "But part of your behavior confuses me. Skill you are at scurrying and slinking about the shadows of this city, you appear to have a problem with *numbers*. Frequency, for a concept. Let us speak of Paladin Kare Kituhada. She's yours. Of this, I'm certain. Initially, I suspected her uncle was your pawn, but as I counted her involvement in all three recent major incidents while he has only appeared in two, I think you are at best his benefactor. Or he is someone you are trying to claim."

Her chronology-forged effigy of Kare grinned while the Paladin's template cringed. "Veng's Stand. Then, today, at the Fathoms. The progression of the two events brought my attention to her encounter with one of my Instruments. And then to you. Three points in a chain sharing a central protagonist. Why, I have half a mind to accuse you of being the girl herself. But you are not Kare Kitzuhada, are you Dreamer?"

Pressure built on Avo, but he took this opportunity to learn, to study Veylis as she was trying to study him. If there was anything you could say in favor of the Seraph, it was that she was remarkably good at obfuscating just how much she knew. Seeing how she referred to him as "Dreamer" indicated a substantial insight into the Famines, for they were the only ones that referred to him as such. Pairing this with how little he truly knew of her capabilities, paranoia rose as he considered how knowledgeable his foe truly was compared to how much of this was a play to probe truths from his reaction.

"I must admit that I would have missed your infiltration if not for your... mistake earlier today. I am usually occupied with a great many things—but the resonance of time cannot be mistaken," the Bloodthanes looked down at Marisov, sneering at him.

The man's dread continued to rise, but Avo found his suspicion piqued. What was she trying to do?

"This brings me to how you claimed my attention today," Veylis said. "It is a most uncharacteristic folly. An active and vulgar distortion of chronological progression. Far louder than your first manifestation days ago. This makes me actively curious: is what I assume to be a mistake truly so? Or is it a deliberate provocation? A taunt. Something you flaunt using the Chief Paladin as your shield?" "Highest Avandaer," Marisov whimpered, composure breaking.

The winds around the rustled forth in a susurrant shush. "Calmness, Instrument. You are just the vessel right now. Understand your role and perform. There is nothing else you can do otherwise."

A flicker of emotion resonated with Hysteria. A flash of a face entered Avo's awareness. Zein was standing over him, her wooden blade held high and a foot gently planted atop a child's arm—fist still clenching a practice sword too large for them. Veylis struggled as the memory collapsed, but the fleeting substance of the echo granted insight.

"Calmness, my girl. Calmness. You are but the victim in defeat. You are but the disciple when you strive. And you are but the ruler in victory. Understand your role and perform. Perform. Master. And then overcome. To struggle against my enforced truth is in vain, for there is nothing else you can do otherwise."

[Fucking Zein,] Peace snarled, spitting imagined phlegm into the mindscape. [Her madness is the ruin of us all. The cunt traitor should have leashed his sow better—and kept his pup's mind clean.]

"More," Veylis spoke again suddenly, "I know that you are peering at me using a modified warmind of Delusion. This you cannot hide from me—and you cannot hold to the thin masquerade of false allegiance. I have culled, herded, slaughtered, and experimented on the Famines of Noloth. Your relation to them is as thief and foe, rather than acolyte or ally. The way you operate is too unfettered; too flexible. And the Hungers, greedy masters that they are, would have never allowed someone they deem as their lesser to bear a Frame. Unless something has changed."

But then the expressions of her puppets turned almost inscrutable as their heads tilted in sequentially inverse angles. "Unless you are the *traitor*. A surviving figment of Defiance, come back to taunt me. Strix? Is that you? Have you finally returned to insult me after stealing my Frame? Ruining my opportunity of delivering a kinder salvation upon this world?"

Her knowledge of Walton wasn't a surprise, but it was unnerving nonetheless. More than a few people knew his father had made arrangements and bargains with powers across all of Walton to turn the winds of fortune in Avo's favor.

Still, to hear Veylis speak the Strix's name made Avo's insides shiver.

The fabric of time ebbed around Marisov, and Avo's Frame groaned under the slightest pressure Veylis exerted.

WARNING: SPHERE (IX) LIMINAL FRAME DETECTED

The High Seraph seemed to content to jab. To provoke and talk and spur from him a response. This he understood, this he could master, but there was also something else. She wasn't afraid to speak. In fact, it seems she quite liked to. Something about the way she acted made him wonder if she was starved of proper company.

Fine. He would alleviate her boredom. He would feed her curiosity. Just as she would feed his.

But he wasn't going to be the victim in this farce, nor would he be content in playing her game. Avo had enough of that with Zein. Best to establish proper *adversarial boundaries* with the daughter before she misunderstood the nature of their relationship. And the only way to do that was by inflicting some pain; taking some respect.

Overriding Marisov's ego, Avo slotted his base mind in the Instrument's sheathe. His senses loaded in and the world around him slithered into sensation. As his cog-feed rebooted, Avo called upon some recently harvested memories and broadcast them at Veylis' puppets.

"Why? Why, godsdamn you! I loved you. I still love you! I would have done anything—we could have just—"

The shifting of Chronology halted as a torrent of cognition swept through the puppets. A feeling of disquiet resonated from Veylis and found itself within Hysteria's caress; a line of symmetry was formed between ghoulish and Seraph as clashing revelations left both disarmed. She knew

about his father; about his methods. He knew about her past; about the pain she inflicted on her former lover.

The thing about analogies was that they were aesthetic. She was no more cage than he was actually plague, and by the nature of asymmetry, two could play at this game of prevarication.

No longer were her puppets smiling. No longer did they hold any expression. Instead, the Bloodthanes were unraveling into strings of gold, and the surroundings were peeling away, leaving only Kare's effigy and Marisov encompassed by a featureless void.

"There you are," Veylis whispered through Kare's voice.

"Here I am," Avo replied. His templates conspired inside him; simulations formed and collapsed in his mind as he channeled twenty percent of his cognitive capacity to running potential branches of discourse. Zein had the capability to finish multiple conversations ahead of time, and for a time she seemed omnipotent. But ignorance was her undoing, and her daughter shared the same weakness.

Time to see if she could be misled further. "I must confess some disappointment," Avo began. "Was expecting you to notice sooner. Was wondering when I'd get your attention." Kare closed her eyes and huffed a laugh. "Do you know something funny, Dreamer? I've heard this taunt from one of my mother's echoes before. The same words. The same intent. You must know her well, then." "Well enough to try and kill her." "Ah. Almost a common response when it comes to her." Veylis gauged Marisov through her own puppet and frowned. "Warminds are unable to function together; they are fragile things, and break with their effects clash. But somehow you are wielding *three*."

She knows. She can see. She knows. She can see. I can't hide us. I can't hide us. I can't hide us...

Veylis placed a card down. Avo winced. Time to retaliate. "Curious. How did you let Ori-Thaum take the Stillborn from you? Expected you to have the project under constant watch. Constant protection. Was your failure something of ignorance? Or arrogance?"

A full guffaw of laughter rang forth from Veylis this time, and as a faint ripple of thoughtstuff passed through the entirety of the Heaven, Avo tasted genuine joy. "Arrogance. And defeat, if I am forced to admit. The Strix. The Famine of Defiance. I confess that I was... taken in by his nature. Such a curious specimen. A shame what happened to him. I would have kept him alive if only to possess an agent so valuable. Things must be harder for you without him guarding you." Avo reshaped his own ego before rising rage drove him toward an unwise response. Again, he wasn't sure how much she knew; if she was just playing with him, or if she merely suspected something.

Perhaps it was time for him to leave his own lure. To give her a red herring to follow, see what her response was—

"I know you're not my Guard-Captain," Veylis began. Their surroundings shifted into a collage of environments and moments bleeding together. Multiple instances of Draus were stitched into form by slithering vines of Chronology. Her engagements during the Fourth Guild War; her firing a missile at a passing aero during her tenure as a squire in the Warrens; red and black splashing over her exo-rigged form as she ignited a fusion burner in a Crucible. The moments continued to expand, much to template-Draus' chagrin.

[Now she notices me,] Draus scoffed. [Fuckin' wonderful.]

The world around peeled away to show Aedon Chambers. Of him, Veylis had manifested one instance in him. His pants were missing. Rantula's longcoat flapped from his back like a cape and while the winds made his genitals twist about like a compass gone haywire.

Now it was Chambers' turn to sigh. **[I got better moments than that, lady, what the fuck! At least use me rashing Shotin.]**

"Nor are you that poor pitiful creature, Aedon Chambers," Veylis said, sounding on the verge of laughter. "I read the Paladin report and... saw the little stageplay you made for Instrument Mondelles. Very amusing. You may want to consider deepening your use of propaganda if you haven't already." Was that a hint that she knew about Marlowe or an actual recommendation? Avo couldn't tell anymore. More annoyingly, Veylis was proving every bit as aggravating as her mother, if in a more loquacious.

[Finally, you see,] Peace groaned in sympathy. [All of Thousandhand's disgusted fucking self-assuredness, and all of Jaus' need to never shut his cunt mouth distilled into one perfectly arrogant girl who thinks she knows better and is better than everyone.]

Abrel—awed to be in the presence of the Seraph, simply offered a quiet retort. **[That's because she uh, kinda fucking is, consang.]**

[Speak to me once you remember the texture of your dead whore-mother's fucking nipple, you misshapen cunt!]

An argument spontaneously began between the two and Avo loaded them into his mindscape, where the highly augmented Godclad began brutally beating the Famine. Regulars and enforcers gathered round to cheer, and Peace turned his slurs on Avo as well.

"That just leaves Agnos Kae Kusanade. Or one of the Columns you don't know."

Veylis channeled a smile through Kare. "Or maybe you're the *Pale Spider*. The user of the Bone Demon sheath that keeps appearing over and over again.

An unnerving conclusion, though expected. Avo responded with a casual chuff. "Got me." Veylis smirked. "Do I? Hm. I suppose it is possible. Defiance did have a penchant for twisted little creatures, but a sheath is a sheath. Like a mask. Discardable. Mutable. Why, look us now."

“Veritable skinwalkers,” Avo replied, playing along.

“Exactly,” she sighed. “Maybe I’ve seen your face. But... what does that mean to me, anyway? I still don’t know you. Ever the mystery you remain.” Kare ran a hand through her hair and looked up into the ambient light. “Would you like to trade stories? Things I know about Defiance for the experiences you shared with my mother?” A beat passed. “Why do you think I care about what you did with Defiance. He’s dead. Gone.” “But still here. In memory. And maybe—” she gestured. “Famines leave many nodes. And as I said, it would be an awful waste to discard an asset of his caliber. Partially broken though he might be in the end.”

[Trap,] Benhata hissed. [She doesn’t have anything connected to Walton. Avo—]

But the ghoul was ahead of him. “No.” Veylis froze. “No?” In that moment, she sounded exactly like a softer version of Zein—her true voice slipping through.

“Not interested in playing house with you anymore,” Avo said. “Come to face you. Come to take you in. To meet my enemy.” Nonchalance vanished from the Paladin’s face and a look of satisfaction came into place. “Ah. And what do you make of me?”

“That you like to talk. That you’ve been lonely. That you’re afraid of facing Naeko. That there are more things keeping you in check—at bay from sweeping over the other Guilds. And that you want me to betray myself to you. Betray my knowledge. Because it would be an expression of power.” “*Control*,” Veylis corrected. “Expression of control.”

Avo grunted. “How long has it been since you stepped beyond your Heaven? How long has it been since you faced someone you couldn’t dominate? That you couldn’t break or command.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Veylis replied, shrugging Kare’s shoulders. “I have not yet met such a person.”

“Naeko. Your mother. Defiance.”

“In good time; within my measure; an entertaining distraction and nothing more.” Veylis leaned in closer. The metaphysical around him thickened, the strands of time swelling with tension and building force. “Do you know what I make of you, Dreamer?”

“Suppose you’re going to tell me,” Avo replied.

“I think that your arrogance exceeds mine; I think that Defiance was more than just a mere benefactor to you; I think that your mastery over Necrotheurgy and association with Noloth betrays the rest of you and that there is only one person I can imagine the traitor priest bestowing the Stillborn upon—certainly none of my mother’s expendable candidates. But she never trained you to be a true contender in this war, so she left you untrained in the use of time as a weapon.”

“Because she’s trying to claim the Ladder herself,” Avo shot back, seeing if his knowledge would inspire any unexpected reactions.

Kare closed her eyes. “Ah. So, she showed you that as well. I suppose she must’ve liked you more than all the other ones before.”

“Only so far as a useful amusement,” Avo replied. “And finally a proper foe.”

“Then, I suppose you do know her quite well. Again, I am impressed that you managed to best her—even in unofficial capacity. Returning the Chief Paladin—” “Naeko,” Avo said, giving the position a name.

Veylis ignored him, but the faintest vibration of pain and bitterness called to him. *Ah*, but they were both reaping something from each other. Getting a measure for the nature of their opposition. “--to the fold.”

“Did it hurt?” Avo asked, taking a risk as stepped forward, meeting Kare’s effigy eye to eye. “Did it hurt when you betrayed him? Or did it hurt more when he didn’t bend to you? When he chose your father’s dream over you? And did that hurt more than murdering your own father? Over the Gatekeeper. Over his final decree. Because you didn’t want to give up *control*.”

[Avo, what the fuck!] Abrel hissed, taking a moment out of her beating. [Are you trying to get us snuffed.]

But as old wounds sang with dulled pain, Avo had to hide a smirk. Enough of Veylis Avandaer was still human in emotion. Human in ego.

Veylis sized him up again and nodded. The Heaven didn’t change and time remained as it was. But when next she spoke, Veylis gave forth her own vector of attack. “Do you think I can engender more sympathy in you if I killed your Bloodthane?”

Avo’s thoughts stopped dead.

Then, suddenly, everything came together.

Veylis had been putting things together, had followed Kare’s thread and traced his runs and dives across the city, connected him to Walton. But the parts missing from the picture misdirected her, made her regard his actual self as a decoy sheath, and planted her attention upon another.

Another disciple of Walton’s—someone he must’ve entrusted his legacy too.

White-Rab.

Raldi. Who was tied to Reva Javvers—also present at Nu-Scarrowbur when Draus and Chambers were escaping. His realization made Hysteria resonate once more.

Veylis had followed the wrong strings across time. Everything connected to him also brushed against White-Rab. White-Rab, the Necrojack. White-Rab, the hidden disciple of the Strix. White-Rab, the inheritor of the Stillborn.

White-Rab.

Avo's decoy.

Avo's shadow.

For the first time, Avo felt genuinely disgusted at his father.

Godsdammit Walton.