

Ah, but hearts are blind, and our eyes are pregnant with lies.

We see what we will, and we will what we wish to see.

And for those who claimed to be undamned by faith, know that you are damned by thought.

For the shape of your desire forms your cage, and righteousness is sought second to paint the walls with the colors of the horizon.

There is no escape for the fettered mind.

No escape.

No release.

No becoming.

-The Mad Monk Alsyim, Fallwalker

24-13

Declarations (II)

Veylis guffawed, and the world laughed with her, drowning Jaus' screams by sheer volume. **"Cut my noose? I see you now. Why, how bold. How idealistic. You wish to see humanity unshackled? Is that it? To let them roam as free-range animals without constraints to their baseness nor ceilings against their ambitions? Is that it?"**

"No," Avo said. "More than just an ideal. Seen the alternative. Cynicism is a lie. Lie of the weak hands. Weak wills. Or addicts of control. I bring the disintegration of baseness through choice. Growth."

"Is that so?" Veylis let out a breath and a gale swept through the world. **"I've spoken enough. I've shown you enough. My generosity is at its limit. I demand recompense: I demand you speak to me now. I've shown you my dream, my great transgression; my final desire. I see your offense, but want to gather your true form, glimpse your true face. Your dream. What have you experienced that shaped you so?"**

And Avo did. Ghosts poured out from his mind, materializing as a ballet of memories. He veiled himself beneath a cloak of horror, playing perspectives from victim and perpetrator both. "Is this what you fear? These people? Their failings? Their weakness."

He felt Veylis' delight lessen. **"I do not fear them."**

"Then why do you face existence like a tyrant—like a scared child You made this cage because you fear the end. Fear the destruction of your system. Your desired order. You are enslaved by a

need to triumph. You and your mother both. And you are horrified by the potential of your father surrendering his will. And yours for that matter. Failure. Failure traumatizes you. Even the potential of it.”

“**And does it not you?**” Veylis replied, taking in the murder, the flow of slavery, the destitution afflicting the small. “**Does this scene not compel you to disgust? Make you wish you can bend the fate of humanity toward a brighter pathway?**”

“No.”

“**Why?**” Veylis asked, genuinely bemused. “**Tell me. Haven't you seen the face of our world? Haven't you seen the calamities brought on by this war? By the Guilds slaving for their own dominance? By the legacy of Noloth? Haven't you found yourself disgusted by the vermin? By the unworthy?**”

“I have imbibed them,” Avo answered. The phantoms around him changed. Showed death after death. Showed the horrors festering in the Warrens. Showed the collateral damage left in the aftermath of quiet wars. Left from Veng’s Stand and Nu-Scarrowbur. From of the street covered with water-logged bodies outside *Flavors of the Deep*. “I have felt them all. Lived them. Internalized them. And I found them *wanting*. They do not shake me. I do not fear the lack in men.”

A pause in the conversation followed the end of his sentence. Veylis savored his words to Jaus’ cycling cries. “**What is that like?**” She sounded genuinely curious. “**You wear another’s ego using Delusion. You dive into their lives—coat yourself in their weakness without disgust. What is that like?**”

He could almost hear a plea in her voice. Demented though she was, the High Seraph’s delusion only occupied a narrow facet of her mind. She wanted to understand him as much as he did her, and in this, both of them were betraying more to each other than they initially wished to reveal.

Avo knew this. Felt this. And could not turn away.

“There is no satisfaction higher,” he said. “I wish... It was like being blind before. Seeing only white. Then you see black. Then more. More. Colors flow into you. Emotions you never felt before. You learn to scorn some people. You learn to pity them thereafter. You learn to accept them finally. You learn to accept. Accept totally.”

A resonating thought brushed against his warmind of Hysteria, and a splash of memories painted the canvas of Avo’s awareness. He watched Veylis gaze down upon the city, watching the people, nudging the directionality of their lives, striking the vile. The moment was absurd; like watching someone use reality as their dollhouse, and such was how Veylis felt.

But instead of inhumanity and indifference, horror filled her every time an act of evil was committed. Horror when a child was sold. Horror when murder followed. Horror when the

starving turned to feast on filth—and then their own kin. Horror. There wasn't a lack of empathy here, but rather a surfeit.

And it hurt her. Every time it hurt her. Every time she responded with anger. Every time her hatred grew.

In that, Avo gleaned understanding. Veylis was offended the world hadn't fixed itself, that the people in the Warrens were rising above against life—despite life. She was offended that there was so little ingrained goodness in humanity. She was offended that the nature of man would see the supposed collapse of the dream down the paths.

“I was wrong,” he said. “Fear doesn't rule you. Disappointment. Disappointment rules you.” The paths around him stopped trickling. Golden sinews turned to frozen streams. **“No. You were right before. It was fear. Not of them. But of what is to come. Not of them, but what they represent to us. To the dream.”**

“Because it has to be worth it?” Avo said. “Is that why the world remains as it is for you? Why you are willing to sacrifice so many? To lubricate your Godclads with death.”

“The Ladder can undo all sins. The Ladder can even return that which has been lost. It is total. A grand restructuring. Before the promise of totality, what we inflict can only be seen as misdemeanors. Unless we are defeated. Then, our sins will be true.”

There was something uncannily *Zein*-like to the way she thought. But there was also far more introspection. The daughter was bereft her mother's hedonism, but the stench of martial supremacy as a foundational justification remained.

Defeat was its own sin. Its own crime.

“There is more than victory. More than defeat. I have glimpsed those that wound you. The ones that live in the Tiers. I have been cruel to them. I have nourished myself on them. I have faced them. Broken them. But also stood with them. Learned from them. They can change. Grow. Choose to be better. Even the degenerates.”

Template Chambers cocked an eyebrow and sighed. **[Come on, consang.]**

“Even they can become reliable friends.”

Chambers sniffled thereafter.

Even discarded weapons—discarded by your Guild—can find new purpose. A war you failed to give them.” Hysteria gave him into insight to what Veylis' was thinking, so he continued. “I don't want to let humanity be base. I want to give them a reason to rise. To make them face their own acts. Their own ruin. Their own sins. I know. I believe you. I believe the futures you've shown. I have tasted the *weakness*. But that is just a trait. A choice. And all being change with the passage of—”

“--Time,” Veylis finished. **“How do you intend to do this? Will you bind mankind mind to mind? Make people face each other? Or is this a perversion of the Hunger’s legacy? To take their realm and make it some kind of... educational playpen for a people that cannot mantle their own responsibilities? That *refuse* to.”**

A crash of thunder sounded from above. Droplets of rain began to fall.

“Is it too much for me to ask? For you to show me your mind?”

“Far too much. You are a babe when it comes to the paths, Dreamer. But the warminds you possess are a testament that cannot be denied. I know you are not aligned with Noloth—and so you have claimed your ascension by right of conquest. The truest of rights. The truest means of ownership. See my reluctance as respect and not scorn.”

“Wish you could see my thoughts instead of my words instead. But don’t think you’re a fool either. Just lost. And rigid.”

“How contrary. I find you fascinating, though a fool. I suppose you will supplant the honor I intend to give my father in your desired reality. To be the governor of their fates? Or... just a guide?”

“No. Will become them. Part of them. Won’t be any kind of master above or below. Just a bridge. Sinews. Streams. So all that is dealt is returned. So that all harm and help can be experienced. So people can face each other truly. And face themselves. I will not chain them from sin. I will not hold them back from folly. But won’t protect them from consequence either. Will make consequence certain above all.” **“And what of war?”**

“It remains. Only death is banished. The end is also an end to choice. An end to learning.”

“Ah. But what if the choice someone makes offends you? What if you cannot bear it?”

“There is nothing I cannot bear,” Avo answered. “I choose. And then I become. And then I decide once more.”

Slowly, a veil of mist lifted over the visage of Jaus, layering his suffering—and the Ladder that imprisoned him in a haze. **“How strange you are, Dreamer. How strange. I expected you to be some kind of spider. A master of secrets. A hidden tyrant of the heart. Instead you are... You wish for the utter unfetterment of humanity.”**

“I expected worse and better of you,” Avo replied. “I thought you would be cruel. Brutal. Thought you would be more the warrior. But you are human. All too human. More sensible than your mother, yet monstrous enough to inflict the unspeakable on your own father. I hunger to *know* you.”

“And I long to claim you as vaunted artifact for my paths.”

Another beat of quiet came with a building drizzle. The world was a haze of light rain, and Avo gazed up into the gold using his puppet. "Veylis. Are you lonely? Do you feel that this truly worth it? All that you've done? All that you've given away for this?" She didn't answer at first. But her answer came as a single word, and the volume of her voice rang with a solemn quietude.

"Yes."

How quickly could disgust and horror dissolve into pity. Veylis was cage and caged both. Her beliefs were their own prison. "I can help you restore your father. I can save him from torment—will save him from his torment. But what you are doing—you are failing to meet divinity. To reach apotheosis. Idealization cannot be built by fear. What you imagine to be worthy... it only be true because you restructured reality. Because you changed the ontology of humanity. This isn't victory. This surrender. You must see that. You must."

"And you must see that your supposed desire to unleash humanity comes with an all-encompassing chain: you. You will be that which holds us back. You will decide what thoughts flow for you will reign by rule of mind. It is easy to speak of freedom absolute when the concept and power is sourced solely from you."

She distrusted his intentions—the fortitude of his philosophy. Some of his templates shifted at her words. They called upon his moments of hypocrisy, subverting the minds of the unwilling, doing so even now.

"Perhaps there is a blindness we all suffer with ourselves," Avo replied.

The flicker of Veylis' annoyance died down to embers. **"Perhaps so, Dreamer. Perhaps so. Would... what would you do if the world was perfect? If there was no Ladder. No war. Who would you be if you were unburdened by this conflict?"**

It took him a moment to realize what she was doing. She to admit something to him. To admit a more mundane desire beneath the grand designs of the Flayed Ladder and the final war it would bring. But despite her obfuscation, Avo found himself at a brief loss.

Who would he be without this war?

Would he even exist?

He was born a weapon. A monster. What use would a clean world have for ghouls?

Nonexistence. That would have been his fate, but if remained nonetheless, if he had all the time in the world, was all that he was now...

"I would like to be with people," Avo said, unsure how to put his desire into words. "I would like to watch them live their lives. Catalogue memories. Gather stories. Give them to those who need them. Watch more people change. Watch people grow?" Veylis choked, then chortled with incredulity. **"You wish to be some manner of... voyeuristic education. Some hidden mentor that swims the waters of thought?"**

Hearing that made Avo think of Walton. Full circle, he supposed. But maybe he was becoming more the idealized figure that he once imagined his father to be rather than the traitorous enigma he was. "You are compelled to seek control. I am delighted by garnering influence." And a final admission forced its way out of him. "And gathering power. Apotheosis. There is no flavor quite like it. No pleasure greater. No analogy of comparison."

"Yes," Veylis breathed. **"Of that privilege, we are wed in belief."**

"You?" Avo said.

"Anthropology. History. I wished to... archive old cultures. Old civilizations. I wish to learn how our forebearers died and who they were. Not only on Idheim, but across the cosmos long lost to us. When I was a girl, I dreamed... there is an old holo-show I got to watch after the Godsfall. It dealt with explorers of a finer age. People who traveled the stars. Faced danger and conundrums while battling foes material and philosophical. I felt jealous of them, fictional though they were. I wished to have what they had. To live as they did.

"And after. I wished to... to come home to my family. To spend time unending sparring my mother, debating my father. And..."

She didn't mention Naeko, but Avo possessed none of her wounds. "You broke him, you know? Broke his heart utterly. You and your mother both." Before she could react, he played a memory for him—a memory of Naeko kneeling, weeping before Zein. *+Where were you...+*

Lightning shattered the skies above. Veylis did not cry for him to stop. Instead, her paths shifted, and a thoughtwave cleaved barren Avo's ghosts. He allowed the blow to stand.

"Wasn't intended to hurt you. But believed you should know. Believed you should face—" The world rumbled. Existence came apart in fissures of fire and devastation and calamity. Space broke. A singularity formed before Avo, and his Domains of Space rattled as the horizon began to fold his perception, peeling at his awareness. He prepared to jack out. Prepared to end the meeting. **"I am well aware my transgressions, you godsdamned—"**

Then, everything stopped, and he found himself standing under a downpour.

"I apologize for my outburst," Veylis said, tone tight but controlled. **"That was... unbecoming of me."**

Again. She surprised him. He expected to be struck down. To be destroyed utterly. Had accepted it, if only to convey the lasting damage she inflicted on someone she still clearly loved. But now what she expressed was shame. Shame at herself for losing control. Shame at being provoked.

Truly, she was Zein's daughter through and through.

“You know things can still be made right. You know that you can bring an end to this.”

“No. No, I cannot. I am but Highflame, and though my claim to the Ladder is highest and truest, I am not unequaled. Not unrivaled in ambition or power. The other Guilds have their own dreams. Own designs. But in the end, the Ladder will only belong to one. One ego. One Soul. One will. And so it must be war. Even with my father, so too without. The prize is too great to resist and ever frail are the hearts of man. Though I see our dreams are of conflicting tides, though we are certain to be enemies, I will offer you this promise: I will come for you above all others, for I hold you in esteem, I name you Nemesis of the Flame. I will give you no quarter when I find you. I will offer you no surrender should you ask for you. Such is the threat you pose. Such is the highest respect I can offer. And afterward, when all is mine, I will see that you are properly rewarded for your valor.”

“Will bring me back in your new world?” Avo asked, hissing with wry amusement.

“Would you not do the same?”

Of course. He was going to claim her template no matter what. Wretched though her deeds might be, he could make this right, and her presence in the gestalt would be invaluable. What would it be like to become her? What would it be like to glimpse the world truly through her eyes?

“In a fashion,” he finally answered. But there was a final note of honesty. “But you might not like how I keep you. You might not enjoy the taste of your own deeds. Will give my own promise to you. My own threat: all that is yours will be mine. You will strike at shadows. You will cull your own. You will break your own empire. But I will only take. I will take from you. Take from all Guilds. I will devour you from within and without. I will hollow you of ghosts. Of memories. Of deaths. I will burn your banners in trauma and fire. I will *become* you—and exceed all that you can be. I will show you what it means to be a god.”

Veylis exhaled, and behind him, he felt a presence.

He caught a glimpse of her then, for a fraction of a second. He saw the faintest visage of her face—light brown with golden eyes—and saw the chassis of her body swimming out from her in a tide of incomprehensible limbs. She loomed over him, her size towering, her body a thing of biology and alloy betwixt. His Domains screamed with her approach, but what jolted his mind the most was the static crown she bore in place of a halo.

A static crown with a single glaring eye. “So it is said,” Veylis spoke, her voice softer and deeper than Zein’s, lacking any Ori accent. “I witness, you Dreamer. Stand and deliver. Stand, and don’t let me down.” And then her form dissolved. Came apart like golden snakes diving below the surface of reality. **“I am finished with him. Infacer. You may begin.”**

[Infacer?] Benhata asked, mind spiking with alarm.

Before the template could finish, the Techplaguer screamed. **“ADMINISTRATOR!
DISCONNECT! DISCONNECT!”**

There’s something... They have something... It’s not a warmind... It’s not–

And before Avo could leave, the paths broke and he found himself drowned before a thick veil of mist that burrowed into Marisov’s flesh, that percolated within his brain and began to reassemble him from within. Static distortions exploded within Avo’s awareness, and he heard Calvino cry out from the effect.

{COGNITIVE-SYCHRONIZATION IN PROGRESS}