

+Hey, hey, New Vultunites. Lots of exciting things on the horizon. Oh, for the “actual people” living upstairs, I mean. Not us FATELESS. But hey, at least we get front-row seats and can watch shit burn down. That’s something, right?

Anyway, I got a special program planned for us today. A consang of a consang told me a little something about which Stormjumper lobby Chief Paladin Naeko might be spending all his time in. Since he’s a man so dedicated to the public, I thought I might go say hi, and thank him for the day of work he did.

It’s not every day we get to watch an Ori Elder get hauled from an event in front of thousands of eyewitnesses after all. That, and a Highflame Instrument too. We might just have something extra spicy here. That’s why I bribed an entire match. Will he say anything? Will he just leave? Who knows. Let’s roll the dice.

[INITIALIZING STORMJUMPERS FUNCTION]

[CONNECTING TO LOBBY: Merrikaiver-4]

[LOGGING IN AS CALAFATELESS]

[Direct casting NAEKOTHEONLY]

CALAFATELESS: Good morning, Chief Naeko.

NAEKOTHEONLY: It’s not. I lost three matches in a row and now I’m about to get smacked talked. Listen, just get it over with already. And no rash-stuff this time. The match starts in a few seconds and I’ll get your asses soon.

CALAFATELESS: I’m not here to do that. I’m Cala Marlowe. FATELESS Thoughtcast. I wanted to ask you a few things about some recent happenings.

NAEKOTHEONLY: Oh, good, a Preparazzi. Who you with?

CALAFATELESS: Myself. Independent.

NAEKOTHEONLY: Wow. Your life must be terrible.

CALAFATELESS: Like you wouldn’t believe. Now, about my questions.

NAEKOTHEONLY: Elder D’Rongo and Instrument Greatling will not be commented on. They are still within Paladin custody. No, the Unwhere is not down. No, Oversec C-1 wasn’t an inside job to generate sympathy donations for the Exorcists.

CALAFATELESS: *And what about the other individuals seen during the incident a week ago. Do the Paladins have anything on the unidentified characters fleeing from Instrument Greatling's cadre? And what can you tell us about the "Rashrunner," Aedon Chambers—thought to be a Low Master acolyte?*

NAEKOTHEONLY: *Yeah, I didn't know dicks grew that small.*

CALAFATELESS: ...

NAEKOTHEONLY: *It's like a crippled baby carrot. If you cut it in half again. That's what I think about him. You like thinking about small dicks, Miss Fateless?*

CALAFATELESS: I...

NAEKOTHEONLY: *Listen. I'll do you a favor. You are officially invited to the trial. You can come in person and see the nu-dog carnival for yourself. I'm casting you the invite sequences. Got 'em?*

[OFFICIAL PASS TO THE SCALE OBTAINED]

CALAFATELESS: *Y-yes, I... thank you. I didn't expect—*

[LINK DISCONNECTED; YOU HAVE BEEN BLOCKED BY NAEKOTHEONLY]

CALAFATELESS: ...

Well. There you have it folks. Chief Naeko. What a guy. Here to thank him for his time, here's FUCK THE GODS' CORPSES "Peace Through Genocide."+

- "Interview" between Chief Samir Naeko and Cala Marlowe, The FATELESS Thoughtcast

19-11

The Paths We Pave (II)

Uthred Greatling waited for the paths to claim him, but the moment never came.

Three days. Three days had passed since the light carried the decree. Three days since the Voice of the Choir called for him to ready himself for a personal audience with the High Seraph herself.

Three days, and nothing. That was most torturous above all. The anxiety. The apprehension. The wait. Uthred was no stranger to conflict, be it war, duels, or politics. Before every engagement, there is always the *tightness*, the weight prying at one's organs; the freefall of

one's bladder, paired with an eternal need to urinate, though the body was already clean of waste.

For three days he waited, clad in his custom-made *Honorsworn* combat skin—an armor born from the marriage of alloy and flesh. It was joined to his body in more ways than one, connected to his senses like an external organ—skin over skin. Sleek paddings of gunmetal gray accentuated his augmented musculature, the plates of memite connected to graphene supports and a carbon nanofiber underweave.

Sequestered in his personal demiplane—a private garden paradise positioned just past two doors of sliding glass at the crest of Greatling Manor—he looked out into the pre-dawn sky and drew in a breath. The air was crisp. Ripe with flavor and fragrance, intoxicating to breath, refreshing to exhale. The garden around him was layered with moving vines sprawling across the walls and roofs, the colors a clash of black on purple, shy orchids peeking out from between ebontas.

At his feet ran an impossible river, flowing out from mystical mists, the waters limpid and bright, not different than a crystal-made mirror.

Looking down into the currents, he saw his own face, and he saw the faces of his children within his. Jhred's jaw and cheeks. Abrel's pointed chin and peregrine-like features. His eyes were emeralds dulled behind a haze, and though whatever imperfections his body once suffered had long since been carved from this sheath, he thought he could see the exhaustion of age creeping out from behind his gaze.

Uthred Greatling—once Uthred Songless—wondered, not for the first time, how he got here.

This garden was never meant to be his. It was his wife's. He knew her name once. Felt the vast emptiness pang inside him where love once burned, now permanently extracted via Necrotheurgy. This home was not his. He was but an up-jumped Instrument a generation removed from being FATELESS himself. It was by blood and merit alone he was able to prove himself and earn a Frame, and it was by that same toil that he faced down Yaedennaugh the Tonguetaker at the Halls of the Echoing Verdict during the Third Guild War and caught the eye of a particular Authority, who saw greatness in descended from a lower station than she.

He had come so far. Risen so high, fattened himself on triumph and power and joy, until winning grew hard, and satisfaction came only in drips before the tides of sour drowned his life.

The first great loss was his wife. The pillar of their family. The patron of his ascent. The root of his shame.

House Greatling was greatest among peers, once. Among the eldest bloodlines of the Chivalrics—warrior lineages that saw the light in Jaus' words and turned blade and steed against the bastard faithful that defiled civilization, supporting the despoilers that were the pantheons.

Once they were whispered as if titans themselves. Made equitable by the changing of the time, but by no means equal to those bred from common stock.

Now? Scorn. Scorn followed them. Scorn from all sides. The Meritocrats—yipping dogs they always were—and the other great families, unwilling to face their own follies, nursing their misfortunes through hurled castigations instead.

To say Uthred was tired was an understatement. He was spent. He had been spent for years and years now. He thought he was empty after the death of his wife. He thought he was empty after Jhred shamed them once more. He thought he was empty after Abrel—*damned, foolish* girl and blood of his heart...

But wasn't. Empty men did not feel dread. Empty men did not yearn to live.

The pressure that grinded against him was that of someone cursed with the portents of a storm at sea, without means to truly guard his little boat from the crashing waves to come, driven ragged by the sun smiling with rays of curving light from the world beyond.

His face shook now. His muscles were tight and exhausted. A quiver passed through his jaw, but he cuffed himself before even the hint of a tear could pass his mind.

"Blood before weakness," he muttered, reciting the oaths he made to himself all those years ago. "Death before dishonor. Death—"

Something moved in his periphery, shifting in the light. Uthred drew on his Heaven of Fire reflexively as if a squire performing a quick draw. The act was so refined in him that he didn't even realize his awareness had exploded outwards, allowing him to perceive the world as if heat itself was an extension of his senses.

The tension drained from his body before the second was over as he scoffed and turned to face his idiot brother, Alritch Songless.

"I... see you are still here," Alritch said, his voice cracking, debasing the smooth baritone they inherited from their father.

"You see. I remain." Uthred held up his arms and shrugged. "Be there a need for commentary?" Alritch laughed and Uthred fought the urge to scowl. "Remembering something humorous."

"Just a blasphemous thought."

A deliberate silence followed. A coquettish grin lit Alritch's face. His brother was a few inches shorter in height, and Uthred often said that the same few inches went toward his waist. Aside from this and the gleaming mane of blonde Alritch kept of their long-dead mother, the fact that they were twins could not be denied.

It was also something the Alritch was good at using to prickle his older brother.

“What,” Uthred said, glaring. “What blasphemy?”

“Perhaps the High Seraph... Forgot you.” Alritch offered his own shrug this time, his tailored suit of polished midnight not even wrinkling as he raised his arms.

“Forgot me?” Uthred droned.

“Yes. You aren’t among the Seraphs anymore, after all. Just an Authority now. Perhaps another more pressing matter came to her attention. Perhaps she forgot where you live.”

Uthred stared at his brother blankly. “Forgot where we live? Veylis Avandaer. The Fist of Recursion. The High Seraph herself... unable to find our manor, a bejeweled mountain of obsidian, glass, and fire, planted upon the peak of the highest Elysium in the Tiers?”

Alritch smirked. “The sun might’ve gotten in her eyes.”

The noise came from Uthred agonizingly. Unwillingly. Painful. He tried to hide it under his breath—mask it as a grunt more than a laugh. But Alritch knew. Alritch always knew. “You bastard.”

“I often suspect that myself,” Alritch said, looking down at his nails. “Father did have an... *appetite*, after all.”

Uthred shook his head. “You should be away from here. You should not have come. I alone have been summoned. I alone must face the High Seraph, and answer for our family’s sins.”

“Our ‘family,’” Alritch said. “The ‘Greatlings.’ Tell me, Uthred, how did we turn so different? I—I don’t mean to speak ill of a good one has done us, but shouldn’t your service prove recompense enough? How many times must you give and give and give some more because—”

“She was my wife. He was my son. She is my daughter. They were my responsibility. Mine to advise. Mine to raise. Mine to scold. And so too are their failures mine as well.”

The Songless among Greatlings sighed. “Come. Come with me to the balcony. Look at the armies we have. War hosts. Riches. The lands we possess. The wonders upon which we live. That was all built by you. I just don’t see—”

“No. You don’t. You never did. Be grateful we are joined of blood, and that you are mine as well, or I would have ended you for such thought.”

“Tsk, tsk. In such a mood.” Alritch’s playfulness softened. “You have been here for three days.

You put on your armor. You commanded me to listen to... *him*."

"Speak his name," Uthred sighed. "Vator. He too is my son. My greatest son."

"Yes. And a *monster*."

"Aren't we all these days?" Uthred asked rhetorically.

Alritch's frown deepened. "I just don't understand why we can't do what I suggested. Why you can't just think about it."

"I will not abandon the Greatling name. The thought is dead to me. Mention it no more."

"But it might spare you. Spare your life."

"I do not wish to be spared. I wish to face my demise. I wish to rise above it. I wish to show the High Seraph this. Of how I am still worthy."

An exasperated breath escaped from Alritch. "Oh, Uthred. Why must you—" His words ceased then as something moved through the light—then space itself. The skin of reality parted into slotted blocks, each shifting and stacking over each, the space around Uthred rebuilding itself and imprisoning him away from the higher reality.

Alritch reached out for him from the doorway, but cowardice gripped him, and he approached no more.

Just as well. For all the lesser brother's vices, Uthred cared for him still and hoped he could be spared a dark end should life do them a final unkindness. In the moment between the instant when the *paths* came and rebuilt the world around Uthred, leaving him alone in a steeped passage of fire and stone, Uthred Greatling stood to face his brother, knowing that if he were to never return, at least one among his family would remember him fondly.

He just hoped that Vator would continue being obedient in his absence. The boy was *gifted*. Made to be superior. Even to his own siblings. But since the breach of his artificial womb, there had always been something *wrong* in the boy, something that unnerved even Uthred. Thinking about what his youngest son inflicted on his tutors and playmates, Uthred forced the thoughts away and hoped his brother would not be the fool and agitated the child.

In some regards, true death would be a kinder fate than joining one of Vator's many "art exhibits."

As waves of metaphysical bricks reverberated around Uthred, assembling his new environment bit by bit, he realized that he knew this place—knew it well. He had been here a lifetime ago,

made his stand against the Stormtree onslaught in the ancient Nolothi catacombs, both sides desperate to flank each other after months of brutal attrition.

Wide pillars lined with stacked skulls oozed rising threads of phantasmal essence, the ghosts present and whispering, bathing him in perception. The defensive positions and devastation were not yet present in the space. There was no rubble here yet, the ceiling not yet collapsed from the fighting, the embalmed bodies slotted in the walls not yet torn from their rest and altered into animated armor by Tonguetaker as she waded into the fight, butchering three other Instruments before meeting her final end against Uthred.

Here he stood, a lone figure between columns several times his size, the ghostly lighting the air in increments as a broad path came into view, stretching for kilometers and kilometers before finally arriving at the foot of a long staircase leading up toward the gutters.

When Uthred inhaled this time, he fought back a gagged as the fetid musk of the hall assailed him. Even the smell was the same.

But how were the paths able to do this? The High Seraph? Had she plucked and reconstructed this place from his memories? Or could she reach backward into history like no one else was capable, reconstructing moments long past with near-perfect precision?

“High Seraph?” Uthred said, pushing the words out from his stomach for maximum projection, seizing his worry by the throat and strangling it into submission. For all the power Veylis Avandaer may have, she would not have him mewling in fear. She would not have him cowed. He would face her covered in shame and glory alike.

The Greatlings were guilty of immense failure. This was true. But the fact she chose to embark him on this section of the paths gave hints that she still remembered his greatest deeds.

“I am here, High Seraph. Here to be judged. Summoned to attend.”

Still no response came. The wind whistled as they passed Uthred, rushing between the columns. He triggered his combat skin’s helmet, and a wreath of flesh cupped his face before an opaque shield of white fused over his face, protecting his features from further exposure or unseen dangers. As he drew in a breath this time, filtered air entered his lungs and new information was fed to his visual display.

He was trying to glean any additional details he could from his surroundings when the order was given.

+Follow.+ The ghosts spoke without any hint of tone or gender. Threads trailed forward toward the horizon, toward the staircase leading up. But so too came a shadow descending, an enshadowed figure that Uthred glimpsed sometimes on the rare days he slept, in the mists of his dreams.

“Uthred?” her voice, high and lyrical sounded. “Uthred? I have been here so long? Is that you? Did she finally claim you as well?”

Blinking fast, he didn’t understand the meaning of this. In seconds, the far and distant figure moved as reality reshuffled. Now, she was just across from him, her long flowing auburn hair snapping back into his memories as he remembered, as he recalled.

Yet, as she drew nearer, he turned away, more certain than ever this was a test of his spirit, that the High Seraph was measuring his mettle.

“Uthred? Uthred? Please. Face me. Show me your face. It has been so long.”

His wife was dead. She was killed during the war. She was killed for failing her duty. She was killed for her cruelty and disregarding orders. Her name was struck from their annals after, banishing her person forevermore from their Ark, and exiling her from her chance of return after the great victory.

She could not be here. This was a shadow. An apparition.

An assault.

Torture.

Rage kindled inside Uthred Greatling. Rage at the indignity of what was being inflicted on him. Rage at his helplessness. Rage at what he had to do before his strength had any chance to give.

“Do you call for resolve?” Uthred said, ignoring the desperate pleas of the shadow—the false thing that wasn’t *her*. “Fine. I accept. I will show you my resolve.”

The blade formed in his hand in a flash, the nanos in his blood pushing through skin to form a monofilament blade. With a practiced sweep, he cut, the briest shudder of weight told him he sliced deep. The voice of the haunting was silenced in an instant. Her body toppled backward, her tassels of hair almost the same hue as her spraying blood.

Tightness gripped Uthred’s chest as he looked away from her, forcing himself not to commit any of this to memory, to defy the law.

His wife was struck from their histories. Just a shadow. Forever a shadow.

“It is done,” Uthred said. “The decree of the Choir stands. My loyalty stands. I have not wavered. Not for a second.”

And so this was the truth.

But still, Veylis Avandaer, High Seraph and master of Highflame, remained absent and empty of any reply.