

*+The Dreamer knows. Such as we predicted. No matter. The other sacrifices are in place. Should we trigger the Forgotten now before the Guilds arrive? Strike with our opening?+*

*+No. Hold. We wait until an opening is engineered. Then we will sacrifice the Emotions to strike at the Gatekeeper.+*

*+This will not kill it. Its memory is cast across time itself by the hand of the High Seraph. Until her scar is removed, our ability to harm is limited.+*

*+Yes. But by her hand, we will see the Gatekeeper broken—wait, what is he doing?+*

-The Famine of **Mercy**

28-8

Opening Arguments (III)

-[Uthred]-

It took everything Uthred Greatling had to choke down his sickness.

The creature standing before him spoke, and with each word, the Former Authority felt his insides recoil and shudder. The way its halo burned, the way it could peer into his mind—it was a nightmare made flesh, come to haunt Uthred for all his past failings. And worst of all, he was powerless, as powerless as he was when he tried to stand against the High Seraph.

The Chief Paladin's might was beyond measure, for he was might itself. Uthred, though capable of burning blight and cleaving space to carve matter and metaphysics alike, was but a practitioner of war, a slave beneath the master of violence and force themselves.

Though Uthred struggled, Naeko decided, and that was all.

"What is this?" he managed to choke out, his anger and fear warring for control. He mastered himself. Years of combat had taught him discipline and focus, but it still took everything he had not to quaver, not to betray himself unto weakness.

In answer to Uthred's question, a sea of darkness spilled out from the ghoul's eyes, its presence cold and unnatural, empty in another word, like a void pouring into existence. Its outline was threaded by a filigree of phantasmal resonance, and even then, flickers of flame still danced as the alien substance entirely consumed the ghoul. A moment thereafter, with a sudden flourishing of midnight wings, Abrel Greatling hatched free from the parting petals of a midnight-colored egg.

She was as Uthred remembered her. Her combat-skin was still on, her heels were still those ridiculous stilettos, falcon-themed and gaudy. He hated those things, but Abrel wouldn't let them go, and for one of the few times in Uthred Greatling's life, he surrendered to another's will rather

than his own. She stood tall, her jaw squared, her eyes unblinking, but she swallowed, clearly as nervous as he was.

"Father," she managed. "I wish we could have had this conversation in better circumstances." She was fighting, fighting herself as hard as he was fighting himself, and shame lingered behind every word. "I wish I could have told you this before. I wish I could have revealed this to you. I wish..."

She took a deep breath and calmed herself. "There are many things I wish. I wish I didn't go after the Burning Dreamer. I wish I could have saved my brother. I wish I would have listened to you and brought him in. But these things don't matter anymore. What we wish now falls under what he will allow."

A beat passed as she looked upon Kae Kusanade and Jelene Draus. Letting out a soft sigh, she faced her brother and gave him a tired look. "At least you seem happy, Vator."

Uthred followed her gaze and regarded his youngest son. It was true. The boy was practically bouncing with glee. Of course, this moment of madness thrilled him. He must have been thinking about what macabre art piece he was going to plan, or maybe if he could flay the flesh from everyone present and unify them somehow in some twisted facsimile of a metaphor he just thought up.

"Well..." Vator chuckled. "I... Yes!" he finally admitted. He leaned back in his seat and threw up his hands. "This is just... *sublime*. I'm sorry father! Look at where we are! Look at what we are a part of! The Great Game! This is the Great Game of Guilds. And here we sit!"

That brought a slight smirk to Abrel's face. "I can't believe I'm saying this, Vator, but considering one of us is happy, that does make me feel better."

The youngest Greatling held his arms open as if embracing the present without fear. "Well, I aim to please."

Abrel gave another intake of breath and faced her father once more. "Alright, I suppose I should explain everything from the start. Let you know just what's at stake."

And so her recounting began. With each following word, Uthred felt the coldness of the void he'd just experienced seep deeper, deeper into his bones, deeper into his soul, deeper and deeper still. Her tale was one of unbelievable absurdity. A ghoul enhanced by a Famine, empowered by the High Seraph's custom-made Frame, driven by the idea of choice. This creature was the reason behind Jhred's death and the Greatling misfortune. This creature was now facing Veylis Avandaer herself, seeking to claim dominance over the city. And then the absurdity faded, and horror grew.

Abrel told him about Jaus' final fate, about the scars they bore within them. Temporal scars for Veylis to exert her influence. Vator felt at his chest with curiosity, and Uthred's mind spun back to the moment he was drawn into the paths. He had always wondered how—no. This had to be

a lie. All of it. Shaken and unwilling to endure a stunned stupor, something inside Uthred broke and he cried out.

"Enough, enough," Uthred said, "you're lying. All this, this deception, this defilement—take her away from me. Do not use her form to assail me."

But Abrel stayed and looked as broken as he did. Beside her, the nightmare manifested once more, a pale smear upon the darkness of the room. **"It's not a deception,"** he said, his tone almost mocking. **"Isn't that right, Veylis? Are you watching me? Are you upset that I've ruined whatever plan you had? Whatever you were trying to achieve with these two? Should I sear understanding into them using the Gatekeeper? Grant the Authority his first glimpse of truth?"**

For a moment, there was but silence, silence, and then, subtly, ever so subtly, Uthred felt a shift in reality. The Pale Spider clearly felt it as well, for the monster tilted his head and looked beside Uthred, its mouth drawing wide in a vicious blade-lined grin as if anticipating the arrival of a new guest.

A moment later, someone suddenly was.

He stood a few inches short of Uthred, though perhaps a hundred pounds heavier. His cheeks were chubby and round, and his bald scalp shone bright beneath the ambient light of the court. His robes today were ruffled and thick, purest white without blemish.

Chief Paladin Naeko gave his own approximation of the newcomer, an utterance conveyed by a snort rather than any words.

**"Speaker Osjon Thousand,"** Avo said, trailing off with a hissing laugh. **"I was wondering when I would meet you again."**

Osjon tidied his attire and sighed. "I am a very busy man, Dreamer, and it saddens me to see that you have decided upon impertinence. The High Seraph offered your creator's remains back to you in a show of goodwill. The Infacer conducts willing diplomacy with truthful intentions, and here you are, infringing the dignity of our loyal citizens. These do not make for the foundations of a good adversarial relationship."

"Quite the oxymoron," the Agnos sneered, resembling a grimacing mouse.

The ghoul continued. **"Don't think the High Seraph particularly minds. Don't think she intended to preserve Abrel. Don't think she would even be particularly bothered if Uthred himself was lost. They are just 'instruments,' after all, instruments of a higher will."**

"Such is what the meaning conveys," Osjon replied. "But still, every Highflamer knows that their lives are dedicated to a greater cause. The cause of human elevation. The cause of true apotheosis. Still, we would be remiss to merely allow you to denigrate our virtues before poor Uthred—emotionally unbalanced as he is." Osjon offered a bow to the Authority. "We

understand you are under much stress, but needs must, I'm afraid." His chubby face conveyed a look of genuine apology. "We are sorry that you are forced into these circumstances, Uthred. I advised otherwise. I understand how much you have given for our cause and your wife. Her sins were not yours. I think that you should have never been charged for them. Just a shame that circumstance has damned you over and over."

"*Needs must*," Uthred managed, barely able to force out the words. "*Needs must*, Speaker. I beg forgiveness for my impertinence," he growled out the words. "But I came here to give this offering," he pointed at the locus on the desk, "to free my daughter! She was deceived. Twisted by the will of—of a *fucking* ghoul!"

"Father," Vator said. "Language."

Uthred ignored him and continued. "Are you telling me now that you knew as well? That the High Seraph knew? That I have been on this errand while you have been engaging in *godsdamned* peace talks with the murderer of my boy!"

Things inside Uthred broke and continued breaking. He tried to draw in a breath and master himself, but he couldn't. He didn't. "Jhred he—he was *unworthy*. But he was mine. Still mine. He deserved more than to be butchered by some bastard monster of Noloth."

A wet globule struck Uthred on the side of his cheek. He blinked, turned, and found himself facing a short rubber skin man with pitch-black skin and chrome limbs where the ghoul once stood. Hate burned in the man's eyes. Hate like no other. "You should have never bred, you... vermin. Your son was too blessed even in the end. He will never experience what he deserves. What about my son? Huh! Do you know what your child was doing to the city? Do you? Do you know he was making entertainment out of murdered children?"

"I... who are you?" Uthred said.

"I am no one to you," the stranger replied. "And that is the problem. One you will soon learn. For you are no one to your master. And you are less than no one to Avo."

And with that, the stranger vanished in a splash of ethereal darkness, and the Dreamer returned. "***Do you know the weight of your family's sin, Authority?***"

Uthred had no answer.

***"You will."***

+*Enough of this*,+ Emotion said, speaking his own piece for once. +*What are you doing, Dreamer? What games are you playing?*+

***"Politics,"*** the monster said, happy as can be. ***"The Great Game. As it's called. I'm setting the conditions for this trial. I am choosing my preferred enemy using their shared pawn."***

It looked upon Uthred again. ***“I thank you for coming so promptly. It has made things very convenient for me.”***

The Authority looked at everyone present in the room. Aside from he and Vator, everyone else seemed clear as to what was happening, the roles they played.

“You were used,” Osjon said, gesturing at Emotion. “This one is carrying a warmind. You are also infested with their shards. The Famine surrendered to you because Noloth wanted an easy way into the court. And through you, they had one. Highflame merely wished to turn their subterfuge back upon them. But alas, our *newest* adversary decided to complicate things.” Osjon paused. “There is a warmind of the Forgotten here. Do you know that?”

He was speaking to the Dreamer. The ghoul didn’t respond.

But Naeko did “Hey,” he said, speaking directly to Uthred, “listen, let me make this simple for you. I don’t think you’re so different from me, so I’m going to put it in words we understand. You are an asshole, and right now, you’re getting fucked by three people at once, and there’s only enough circumference for two.”

Uthred’s mind went blank. A look of disgust came over the Agnos’ face while the Regular shook her head. “I can’t believe you actually took up Chambers’ suggestion,” Draus said, speaking to the Chief Paladin.

The ambient laughter grew louder. Naeko shrugged. “I thought it was a pretty apt metaphor.”

“I don’t like that,” Vator responded, shaking his head in disapproval, interjecting himself in the conversation. “A bit too vulgar.”

“Why’s it matter what you like, Greatling,” Draus glared at Vator.

“Because you haven’t shot me yet?”

The disgraced soldier paused and looked at the ghoul.

***“No,”*** the Pale Spider replied. ***“Not yet. Regardless. Uthred Greatling. You have been chosen. Chosen by three powers. Your daughter exists as a fault line of history. Her situation can be engineered to preferable conditions for war. This is not a trial built towards the means of establishing peace but the beginning of the Fifth and Final Guild War. Alliances are shifting. Some are here to stay. Some will be removed. And some wish to enter the game. You are just one of the many fulcrums being pressured.”***

“It matters not if you tell him this,” Osjon said, speaking to Avo rather than Uthred. “He understands. He still believes in our cause. We have never doubted his loyalty.”

***“No. You merely used it. But that’s fine. Don’t expect to turn him against you. I just wanted to use him to get to you and the Famines. Have you both hear me at once.”***

That made Osjon's expression dissolve. "Why?"

***"Because I want you to protect our shared interest."*** The ghoul looked at Emotion as well.

"Who are you speaking to?" Osjon asked, studying Emotion as well.

***"Depends. Which one of you is going to hit the other one first."*** Emotion's expression grew taut. ***"I will aid the first of you that tries to remove the other from Scale. Join together to strike me and I'll send my memories to all the arriving delegates and reveal the first node of Noloth I find."***

The monster was staring directly at Osjon now. ***"It can be a direct war or a messy affair. Just giving your master a choice. Who does she want to risk reaching her Gatekeeper? Me? Or them?"***

Highflame's response came in the form of a sudden static explosion. Emotion was shredded by integer-laced shrapnel. Noise swept through Uthred's skull, passing through even through his planar defenses, and cleansing him of hostile presence. A low frequency rang in his skull as he heard a new voice enter the fray. They chuckled with mechanical reverberations. *{You really are the second-most devious bastard in this city.}*

The Pale Spider looked amused. ***"Infacer. See you've recovered."***

*{Yeah. I'm going to crash Ori-Thaum's market for what you did to me. I hate their Heavens of Information so very much.}*

"What just happened?" Vator said, eyes wide with wonder.

"Rules of engagement were just negotiated," Osjon nodded. "We now have varying levels of priority hostiles. An excellent, if horrible act of diplomacy."

*{A dick move as our ancestors might call it,}* the Infacer chimed.

Finally, Uthred caught a look in his youngest son's eyes. It was a look of enchantment. His gaze was gleaming. He was staring upon the Burning Dreamer, enraptured, consumed.

This moment, this had been a masterstroke. He realized that the ghoul had used the pressure of turning him and his son to draw out Highflame, to use them against Noloth in turn—made them conduct a tangible act of harm on his behalf against a shared foe.

And now his fear of the Burning Dreamer was complete. The nightmare was more than he could ever imagine, and looking at how Vator was staring on at this Avo, his brother's murderer, with an enchanted expression, Uthred swallowed as he dreaded the seduction of his son.

—[Maru]—

*+Alright, the first of the Saintists are coming in,+* said Paladin Hatchet. The Sang sighed across the session. *+I think I see my cousin among them. How annoying. I was hoping to avoid her for another century at least.+*

Maru snorted. *+Yeah, well, I don't think there's any avoiding this one.+* Looking through the DeepNav, depicting the internal corridors of Scale, Paladin Maru Sandrapal watched 4,000 delegates representing the No-Dragons surge towards the Court of Truth. Attuning his mind to local specters and camera systems, he watched as they all had those swirling painted facades plastered over their faces.

Good. Neuter-Masks were active. That would avoid the Moro-Kwan incident from 50 years ago. The last thing he needed was the Sang to provoke another battle in the halls of Scale. That had nearly sparked the Third Guild War prematurely.

Casting a brief look at the pod holding Naeko and their esteemed guests, Maru shuffled as he gathered his nerves. There was a feeling in the air. There was nothing to it yet, just a feeling. But he had the same vibes before the Fourth Guild War kicked off.

And just as well, the Dreamer told him about the coming war. He hadn't wanted to believe the ghoul or whatever that creature was. But with the way things were going, Scale wasn't going to be the mediator but the powder keg when everything went off.

A shadow formed behind the shivering boundary protecting the insides of the Court of Truth. Maru adjusted himself and prepared to serve as the welcoming committee, ushering in both Saintist and Massist alike for this wonderful bilateral trial of mutual humiliation. However, the guest that arrived was not who he expected.

She was a Sang, indeed. But she was no Guilder, no ally to the No-Dragons, or anyone else for that matter. Maru had known her, had seen and been her in vicarities, and walked streets while bathed in holographic portrayals of her triumphs and glory. She entered the court, stretching her arms high as she yawned.

"It seems I'm a little early," she said, rolling her shoulders. Her head was composed of three faces, each taking up a side. They all held different expressions, were decorated with contrasting makeup and various shades. The mien she directed at Maru was a featureless doll-white visage, with red lipstick and gleaming silver eyes. It was a smiling face, a joyous face. And the world around her bubbled with effervescence as electricity and sparrows danced through the air.

A song of spring trailed with her every step, and from her back sprouted six additional arms, a stunning accompaniment to her two natural limbs. The first two were cybernetic. One held a banner decorated with lightning-infused sparrows tearing into a falling hawk. The other was a long spear with crimson hair painted along the flat of its blades. The following two arms were long and bestial, rippling with muscle, claws to rip and rend. And the last two arms were thin, impossibly so. They were like wisps of whiskers dancing and trailing in the wind behind her.

Her attire was as colorful as he remembered, a complex interplay of patterns and symbols from ages long past. More banners sprouted free from her back like flapping wings, and tassels and paintings of dragons ran down the poncho that she wore.

A breath escaped from Maru as he looked on at New Vultun favorite and most-feared Fallwalker. "Sparrow," he managed, "what the *hells* are you doing here?"

She simply smiled. "I was invited, puppy. Now? Where's the Chief Paladin and his *delightful* new friend. I wish to offer them my greetings. I heard a war might be starting here and wanted to join in on the opening festivities."