

“Oh, good. We’re all going to die.”

-Dowager Hua Far-Pearl upon hearing that the Stormsparrow will be in attendance at the trial

28-8

Opening Arguments (II)

Vator appreciated the insides of Scale more than its exterior. Here, there was a sense of life to the place: movement; animation. Drones flitted about, passing through forming and dissolving alcoves as if wasps in a hive. Around them, the bricks of this miracle-infused structure shifted, offering channels and paths for the machines to proceed to their tasks.

Emotion claimed that each of them had the ghoul's touch, that each emanated with the faint signature of their great enemy: the Burning Dreamer, the one they called Avo.

Vator, unlike his father, looked forward to meeting their great foe. He wanted to know the nature of Jhred's true killer, and he wanted to know just how a creature as crude and simple as a ghoul managed to inflict such humiliation on an Instrument of Highflame and Elder of Ori-Thaum at the same time.

They followed the Paladins wordlessly, walking down quick-formed hallways as the stones beneath their feet shifted, shuttling them onward at unnatural speeds. A cascade of different domains impacted Vator's frame as thresholds of mind and miracle passed through him, scanning his person and listing him within Scale's internal registry.

He half expected an alert to sound, considering the cargo they were carrying, but as he shot a glance at the locus in his hand, no response came, and no sirens were raised. Light spilled down over him from ahead, and he faced a valley basked in blinding radiance and even greater pressure. It was a pressure almost unlike anything Vator had ever felt — almost, because there was another that could be compared to it, another that was more sublime and *total*: the touch of the High Seraph herself, her glorious power surmounting time and space.

As they approached a vertical entryway, Vator felt as if he was standing upon a boat made of stones, entering the jaws of a forbidden beast.

"Be ready for anything," Uthred said, his voice low as gravel, and calm like drizzle falling at the eye of a storm. The younger Greatling simply nodded. His struggle was not one of anxiety, but more of excitement.

As an instrument, he had been a specialist, much like Abrel was. Though she was more focused on counterintelligence against Ori-Thaum, his interests and prey were a far broader subset of the Massist scourge. He liked hunting everyone and preferred enacting Highflame's will with a more personal touch. While Abrel was, in a word, part of a defensive apparatus that mainly faced Glaives and Incubi, Vator was a cancer spreading within his foes.

Here and now, though, he found himself burdened with even greater purpose and promise, for the foe he faced this time was unlike any other he had ever sampled. As the last protective threshold washed over him, he stepped into a looming chamber, so wide and vast that the winds here scythed more than they billowed, like skyward whips passing over an open plain. He judged the thousands of private pods lined both walls of the chamber and realized that light was emanating from the stones themselves.

What captured his attention immediately was the massive statue before him, a massive statue built upon a risen pedestal with many steps. After a moment's observation, he gave a disgusted snort and ignored the statue for its design offended him, and he looked over the other aesthetics across the room. The center was too wide, and too vast, and the Paladins were separated into four lines across the room. A few hundred of them were hovering in the air, facing where the Massists and the Saintists were to be seated. Some others were facing inward across the room, staring at each other, holding the middle. Ever metaphorical were these tireless guardians of New Vultun.

Vator sighed. Symbology. Droll symbology. What a performance.

But then he heard something. A rattling of chains. A shifting of metaphysical pressure. It was like a boot slowly grinding against his consciousness. Something loomed behind the statue -- moved. Uthred and Green River felt it too, for they responded, searching with their eyes, though they continued following the Paladins. Moving chains slid through the tessellated walls in the distance, straining to bear the weight of something truly ponderous.

Something that Vator couldn't quite see as they were led up a nearby narrow staircase, into the Saintist section of the court, bound for their designated seating.

One story up, he discovered a full suite of different facilities waiting for them. There was a common mingling area, something between an antechamber and a lobby that stretched across the entire length of the section. It went on for kilometers, and massive golden chandeliers lined with diamonds and crystals swung overhead. Service drones remained on standby, and every twelve meters or so there was a holoprojector built around an encirclement of sofas offering a whole suite of different thoughtcasts, vicarities, and propaganda for the viewer's entertainment.

The space was also entirely empty. It was like an empty throne room offered just for them. Vator and his group had been the first guests to arrive, flying through the night without rest or hesitation. Father claimed that he desired to meet the Chief Paladin to offer his evidence before anyone else could muddy the waters. A believable lie, but Vator knew his father better than that.

It was simply hard to face the other Saintists with his task half-complete, and through this, perhaps, they would find some level of redemption in the eyes of the High Seraph and the elites below her.

They were led on without stopping, the ground shifting beneath their feet once more as they were carried forward to their final destination. The stones rose in stacks of stairs, extending forward first, then suddenly cutting at a sharp left angle. A section of the tessellated wall above

them swung open, and suddenly they found themselves looking across the stretch of the Core of Truth, a private pod offered to them for however long this entire affair would take. As they entered the embedded podium, however, Vator had to update his assumptions. This wasn't a private pod. Someone was already here.

Three people, in fact.

The first among them was that bull-like specimen of a man, Samir Naeko. Vator's face lit up in a grin as he beheld the Chief Paladin. There were Scaarthians built with less width and muscle mass than he bore. His sinews were so thick that even a frequency blade might take some time to cut through his flesh. Not even his combat-skin could hide his physicality. He was robust to the point of absurdity, the kind of man you would find within a promotional biomod advertisement, marketing new muscle boosters while staring you down, questioning your worth as a warrior.

And it was telling that he was the least interesting among all those present, for beside him sat two individuals that Vator hadn't expected to encounter.

On the left was a square-jawed woman clad in pale white armor. The matter was featureless — almost fluid. Her optical implants glowed bright red and her deeper flesh hid augmentations of Sang origin. Her bronze skin was scarred, and that thick knot of braids running down the back of her head—that was something Vator never truly forgot. Former Guard Captain Jelene Draus of Nicoma's Orphans. Regular. One of the many reasons why Vator's mother was marked with highest disgrace and found herself stripped from Highflame's collective consciousness.

In retaliation, the Chivalrics also ensured that there was no place for a honorless Regular to stay in the High Seraph's court.

Vator couldn't help it. Surprised laughter burst out from, and beside, his father stood frozen stiff, eyes locked on the Regular who barely regarded him with more than a glance. The accretion around Uhtred Greatling's mind spun as if the outer walls of a hurricane.

To the right of the Chief Paladin, then, was another anomaly, Agnos Kae Kusanade. Vator only recognized her because he had perused her dossier once. She was supposed a missing person wanted by all Guilds across the city. Her scandal was related to the murder of a Paladin, and the compromise of a commissioned Highflame research project. Skirmishes had broken out between the Golds and Silvers in the aftermath of those days.

+Be wary,+ Emotion said, sounding as close to on edge as Vator ever heard the Famine. *+I don't know what he's doing. Dreamer is placing his pawns out in the open.+*

+Is he daring us to attack?+ Vator thought back. *+Perhaps, or perhaps, he is no longer afraid of losing them.+*

But Emotion offered him no answer. Well. It seemed that even Nolothe's finest was caught off guard.

"Well," the Chief Paladin said, "are you going to keep standing there and staring, or are you going to sit down, Author?"

Vator observed his father. The man's eyes were wild and distant. He swallowed "Former."

Naeko shrugged. "Right. Former. Present. All the same to me, really."

Uhtred mastered himself. Slowly, he turned away and found a seat at the opposite end of the pod. There was a good twelve feet between him and Draus, but he never stopped staring at her. He never took his eyes from her face. The Regular scorned him still, looking over the side and observing the Court of Truth as if there was nothing of interest within this pod.

An awkward silence quickly followed. Green River shuffled her fur-lined dress and sat with some space between her and Uthred. She offered the Chief Paladin, the Agnos, and the former regular a genial smile. "I bid you all a wondrous morning. I, Green River, am at your service as witness, and am am pleased and humbled to be invited to this momentous occasion."

"Alright, alright," Naeko said, holding up a hand. "We don't need to do this. Already know why you're here."

"Of course, Chief Paladin," Green River said. The fox along her neck blinked slowly at Naeko. "I merely wish for everyone to feel at ease. For though I know that there are some unpleasantries in our past, I think it would be best if they were dealt with so that we may proceed with more important matters..."

Vator looked past the edge to see what Draus was observing, and he finally caught sight of what the chains were bearing when he entered the court. The Gatekeeper loomed, ripples of star-like radiance ebbed from atop its head and chain-like wings shifted around its back, down its sides, festooning it to the room itself. Before it was a pedestal holding two platforms. Both were lined with translucent phase fields and layered in planar cages, and faint trails of light infused them with a building intensity. This would be where his sister and that Ori elder were judged. There was nothing obfuscating them from view, and they were to be seen by all. A moment of revelation and humiliation both, Vator assumed.

Looking once more at the Gatekeeper, Vator felt his sense of awe grow. What a presence. What a creation. So this was the reason for the Siege of Scale. This thing lurking within the bowels of the fortress, ensuring the balance between the Guilds for centuries after centuries. Vator wondered if he would be party to a second siege soon if the High Seraph would put for a call to bloodshed.

More heretically, Vator wondered what it would be like to possess the Gatekeeper's Heaven.

As he finally took his seat, he placed the locus containing Emotion upon his lap and crossed his legs.

His father let out a long-held breath. "Why are they here?" he said, gesturing roughly at the Regular and the Agnos.

"They're witnesses," Naeko replied. "Important witnesses promised to me during your daughter's rampage across Light's End. Or, well, supposed rampage. That's what you've come to claim, right? She was affected by someone else? Had her mind twisted." He leaned back and pointed at the locus that Vator held. "Is he in that? The Famine of Emotion?"

"He is," Uhtred said, keeping his tone even. The narrowing of his eyes belied suspicion.

Naeko snorted. "Well, he don't look like much, does he? Just an inert piece of vivianite."

The corner of his father's lip twitched. Oh, how the man hated glib remarks.

"I understand that there is proper procedure for handing in evidence," Uthred stated carefully. "Things are to be pooled among all registered visitors within this court. As both the Saintists and Massists are involved today, would I be incorrect in assuming that my submission would be included with the others?"

"Your submission is happening right now," Naeko replied. "In fact, you can let him out. He should get a seat at this table too, metaphorically. That way, all the Great Powers get a representative. Would you like that, Emotion? You in there? Can you hear me?"

A low noise of disapproval came from Uthred. He directed a cast at the locus. *+Come out then. Be part of this circus. +*

Emotion materialized a moment later, forming that ever-brutal visage. His eyes were stitched shut. A cloak of shadows clung to his body, and in his heart, an open crevice where a dead avian was held in place by tangled knots.

"Chief Paladin Naeko," Emotion began, "you live a long life for a dog. Most don't outlive their masters."

At this, Naeko smacked his lips together and sneered from behind his glowing visor. "Yeah, well, if I had been with him, he just might still be here. Can't say the same about you. You were always there for your masters, and it still wasn't enough. Even when they made four of you? Where's the rest, Emotion? And how are the Hungers? Hope I didn't pat them too hard last time. Can you hear them behind the jingling of chains?"

At this, the Gatekeeper's rattling intensified, and Vator fought back a snort. "They're mocking you," he said, his glee almost childlike. This was more juvenile than he expected. So much posturing, even from the Chief Paladin. He didn't know what to expect from such a legend.

But humans have to be humans, after all.

The tessellated doorway to their pod suddenly sealed and so did the viewing port that gave them a full overview of the court. Uthred stiffed, but no one else reacted to his nervousness. "What is this?"

His answer came with the sudden materialization of a new form, a new figure. There was no splashing of ghosts, only a new metaphysical weight. The creature wasn't, and then the creature was. Between blinks, Vator found himself beholding a pale, nightmarish being.

The first thing that caught his attention was the halo — that burning halo, flames licking high, materializing as faces of the fallen and peepholes of memory into different locations. Eight blackened limbs drifted upon clouds of smog. Vator's mastery of flesh told him that he was likely detecting an echo head, though modified with...

He paused. He didn't even know. That was entirely novel and unique.

Each tendril was connected to a vessel made from threaded ceramite. Long claws extended from slender digits, and black eyes and sharp teeth gleamed in the darkened ambiance. They'd come here expecting the Burning Dreamer to perform his misdeeds from shadows, mislead the Guilds with subterfuge. Such was what Emotion told them to expect, and promised to repel. But here the monster was, in the open, in league with the Chief Paladin himself. All expectations were cast to the wind now, and all plans were now in free fall.

Vator got the feeling that everything had been misjudged, that he and his father were still blind, that Emotion himself might be blind. Uthred tried to stand, the flames around him igniting. But then a translucent hand wrapped around him as he gasped. The fires were extinguished in an instant, and Uthred Greatling, Authority and one of the most powerful men in New Vultun, was pressed back into his seat without any particular strain on the part of the Chief Paladin.

The faintness of a hand, a vaporous palm materialized over Uthred, and slowly, the Burning Dreamer spoke for the first time. ***"It's good to finally meet you, Authority. I've been looking forward to this. Your daughter sends her regards. She's screaming at me even now, begging me not to eat you. Begging me. She cares for you deeply. You should be proud."***

"What?" Uthred said.

"Beautiful," Vator whispered, taking in ghoul's visage. Never mind the Gatekeeper, this was what he came here to see. Wondrous prey. Glorious specimen.

+Dreamer,+ Emotion said, keeping his tone even. +*How bold of you. How arrogant. You think yourself ready to face the Guilds in the open, then?*+

The once-ghoul opened its mouth, but then paused. ***"The Guilds? All of them? No. But that doesn't mean I can make this war unfold just the way I want."*** Once more, he turned to look at Uthred and Vator. ***"And ensure the protection of those I deem worthy. Abrel. Come greet your family."***

And from his halo coursed flame cast in a familiar form.