

*It is impossible to regard reality as anything but a cage once you brush the power of the absolute. Or perhaps that is the wrong way of thinking of it. Perhaps it is the power of redefinition. The miracles delivered by the gods and their Heavens were not “divine originations” in the end, but a reinterpretation of existence’s patterns. Fire, **but more. Metal and flesh.** The sky **reimagined as a place.***

*Such is the basis of all this power. Marriage. Marriage between effects and concepts. Infusing material, actionable, or conceptual catalysts with laws rewoven. A new lore.*

*From this, we are capable of almost anything, limited by a lack of knowledge and deviations in our understanding of worship. Such was a good thing, as I have come to understand. The ruin we wrought upon ourselves was desecration. Held only in check by our parochialness.*

*If even a trickle of the elder knowings remained—if the Neo-Creationists had inherited an intact guardian if the pantheons managed to discover the slumbering voiders instead of I—I dread to imagine the state of totality’s tapestry.*

*Perhaps all would be torn now. The damaged connective tissues of natural law, spatial correspondence, and temporal relativity sundered deep and true, without any chance of restoration or mending.*

*Of all the terms Voidwatch has used to describe my former masters, one stands above all others. Demiurges. Controllers of the material. Antagonist of the spiritual. Such were the ones we usurped. Such was the role we inherited.*

*But do not take the wrong understanding from my words, Veylis. I wish for you to understand the truth of things, instead of having your gnosis colored by the dyes of emotionality. The wounds of reality run deep. This is true. But what is tearing but a pull applied in opposite directions? And precludes a suturing aside from two ends of an open gash being forced back together.*

*But ultimately, you must beware and be ready. Existence itself lies to us, for untold generations have grown beneath altered skies. Reinterpretations born of other reinterpretations. Fragments from shards already broken, embodying only singular aspects of the whole.*

*In a single word: recursion.*

-Jaus Avandaer to Veylis Avandaer

19-13  
Recursion

When Uthred was struck, it was with the weight of every blow he experienced across the centuries of his life.

A million pains blossomed through his body, same, different, forgotten, and remembered. The stones gave to open air beneath his feet, his pain editor triggered, but only some of the hurt was banished. That which he suffered at a time before the implant was grafted remained, and crawled deeper into him.

But still, what was pain to an Authority of Highflame? Not an obstacle. Not even a distraction.

Manifesting his Heaven of Fire, the Starscarred, a thousand and one pluming flames coruscated out from his dissolving body as the heat of a star detonated at its core. From an erupting blast, Uthred Greatling was born again, emerging from a light-made egg spewing molten yolk. The blazing feathers sprouting from his being grew sharper, turning a coat of blades. The shimmered with spiking temperature, the radiance around his body burning space itself, painting a scab-made plate of armor into existence.

Ravenous embers spilled out between the cracks and crevices of his ontology and where body and head were cuirass and frog-helm respectively, smoke-made wyrms acted as his arms and legs, spilling out from the cracks as if the shell of his person was piloted from within by serpents born of smog.

A wave of heat emanated out from him, cleaving far and wide over the reverberating brickwork relayering his surroundings. Sections of reality were actively rebuilding themselves, the gap he was swatted through vanishing as blocks slid into place and melted into each other.

For a moment, his senses screamed with confusion, a strange clash of details and feedback flowing into his mind. His cog-feed glitched as ghosts struggled to isolate the most essential details. Then, as if a weapon reassembled, a shuddering click ran through everything, and then Uthred found himself plunging through a wall of roaring storm clouds.

Hyper-accelerated munitions greeted the threshold of **Burnsight**, and he spread his perception through his expanding wave of heat. Missiles and drones clashed as interceptors crashed into warheads, stopping their final deployments. Nuclear blasts went off all around Uthred, but their traveling force and heat were drained clean by extending quills of fire.

Coiling his smoking wyrms into arms, he formed a blade of such heat it was blinding white. More projectiles came. But Uthred cut. And the atmosphere itself came afire; clouds vanishing, *geometry* burning. Where one thing was cut, the immolation spread, and within it lingered a constant slash, the cut existing so long as something burned.

Gathering his focus, he tried to clean what he could from what was around him, tried to understand why the High Seraph had cast him here. Strangely, he noticed translucent threads burning around him. Spatial reality quivered as the air pulsed with expulsions of Soulfire. Such was a scene Uthred knew well. Thaumic backlash. Or in more severe cases, a paradox.

More importantly, he remembered now. This wasn't a sky. He was briefly trapped inside an enemy Porter during the last war. They died, not knowing the Starscarred was designed to cut and burn Heavens like theirs. They died, and he tore his way free with his battle-thrill climbing, ignorant to the great folly his wife was soon to commit.

+*Seraph Avandaer*,+ he began—

But the thought never got the chance to leave him. The Soulfire unzipped the plane he was in, just in time for him to be flung into a wall of frost.

His heat was quenched in an instant. And when the cold bit down on his fire, it burst ablaze while he ceased to burn. The same fate he just inflicted came back around thereafter. Soulfire erupted out from his Heaven as he found himself back into existence in his mortal form, his fires dying all around him

**WARNING: PARADOX DETECTED**

**DOMAIN: [FIRE]**

**REND CAPACITY [STARSCARRED]: 88%**

A ripple rushed through the world again and the bricks layering existence around him spun clockwise, their faces cascading to form a new horizon for him to face. Gone was the chaos of demplanes and unidentified coldness. Now, a soft mat made of durasynt foam filled his vision as he struck the ground hard. Years of training taught him how to roll and his utility fog expanded out from him, acting as a final cushion.

Even so, at such speeds, a baseliner would have ended as a smear. Uthred, sustained by augmentations sourced from technology and thaumaturgy, escaped with only severe joint damage, multiple contusions, and heavy internal bleeding. Still, he rolled to his feet even as he spat a mouthful of dried blood upon the mat, the nanosurgeons in his body already working to repair his damages.

Cold lights shone down on him and he staggered but refused to fall. Holographic boundaries marked the limits of the ring and the space beyond was obfuscated by their phosphoresce. That proved to be inconsequential, however, as Uthred laid eyes on his opponent.

Again, he thought he was looking at his own reflection, but as he looked away from his foe's jaw and cheeks, he realized he was looking at the face of his eldest son. Jhred Greatling glared at him from across the ring, cybernetic eyes set to a deep red color, his hair a shade of deepest red.

Uthred remembered his son looking like that against his wishes. He remembered the mockery Jhred suffered, the other children Abrel brutalized in his honor. Now, the eldest son of House

Greatling was standing across from Uthred, a last chance offered for dialogue between father and son.

Yet, it was falsehood. Or a distortion. Whatever it was, it wasn't *true*. Jhred was dead. And the High Seraph was—

*"This isn't torture,"* Jhred said, keeping the sneer of anger even as he said the words. Dressed in attire fit for sparring, the boy had his fists held up, but his stance was a hair's inch away from perfect balance, and the spacing of his guard was also questionable. All these details, Uthred remembered. And so did Veylis Avandaer it seemed. *"The failings of your children remain their own. Blessed be the worthy. You offer yourself in exchange for them. You speak these words and you insult your Guild, your oaths, and yourself."*

"That was not my intention," Uthred gasped, battling tortures both physical and mental. "I wished only to make what is wrong, right."

*"And this your choice?"* Jhred asked, stepping forward. *"And your successes make up for your children's follies? Is that how you see this?"*

"I—" Uthred failed to reply.

A testing jab snapped out. The experience took hold. Uthred shifted back; and circled away from his son's rear hand. Jhred shifted stances—a moment too slow. The Greatling patriarch feinted with his fists but swept with a kick. Shin greeted ankle just as Jhred replanted his front leg in a hurry. A pop sounded—the melody of dislocation sounding.

The blow was precise. Perfectly delivered. Something honed by endless combat hours and battle-hardened instincts.

But as Jhred fell, Uthred betrayed his purpose once more and caught his son before he could fall—something he failed to do in life.

Immediately, Jhred attempted to force a thumb in his eye. But Uthred's nanofog poured over the boy in an instant and soon the first of the Greatling children was held in place.

*"Is it your fault that I lost?"* Jhred asked, voice unnaturally calm despite the feral rage behind his eyes, the snarling of his face.

Uthred flinched back, at a loss for words. "I should have—"

*"Am I a subhuman or not, father? Do I have will? Agency? Self-determination? Am I not worthy?+*

“Of course—”

A blow struck Uthred from behind. A spike of pain pulsed through his body as his nerves came afire. The tip of something sharp and thin chiseled down the length of his spine, pushing through his combat-skin’s protections without any impediment. Another blow followed—this one of the phantasmal variety. Without warning, unidentified ghosts spilled out from a session planted inside him. Warning klaxons sounded from his Meta, his mind fortress’ countermeasures firing all at once.

Yet, it was in vain. In an instant, a sea of invading traumas plunged through his multi-layered defenses. Nails of agony were hammered into his skull. Memories shattered and thoughts turned to haze. All his active implants were deactivated against his will. Torment consumed him. He felt over Jhred and control was lost to him.

For the first time in years, Uthred Greatling screamed.

“*Sorry, Authority.*” The voice behind him chuckled. He knew her. *Abrel.*

“No,” Uthred gasped, forcing the words out. “Don’t—” Whatever else he could say left as a ragged cry when she withdrew the frequency blade she embedded in his back at a deliberately awkward angle.

Legs spasming, arms twitching, Uthred tried to direct his fog to protect him, wondering why it didn’t detect “Abrel’s” ambush, but found it compromised as well.

“Don’t bother,” Abrel said, pushing him over with a kick. He found himself facing the ceiling, staring up into the strobing tiles of light. Holographic statistics decorated the corners of a live feed over the ring and shadowed by the brightness, he saw both of his children standing over him. Jhred and Abrel. The wretched and the vicious.

“I understand,” Uthred groaned. “I understand the lesson.”

Abrel snorted, her eyes narrowed into crescents and she shook her head. “*No, you don’t, dad. You don’t get it. Me and Jhred here? We fucked up. We did. So. Our echoes are going to spell it out for you: he’s dead. I’m going to be on trial. And Highflame and House Greatling are probably going to be covered in shit before this is all over.*”

“I can fix this,” Uthred coughed. “I’ll get you back from the Paladins. I will contact all the media I know. Vator will find the one you were hunting—Aedon Chambers. The fault is not your own. I will see justice delivered. And your punishment will be mete in kind. But I will not lose you to a circus. You will accept your penalty as a member of this Guild. And you will redeem yourself and atone for your failure.”

Both echoes of his children stared at him, their faces impassive yet anticipatory.

"... I cannot claim to understand your thoughts, Seraph Avandaer." Uthred tried to move his neck, but his body continued to be a prison. "But I know that you have never been a purveyor of idle philosophies. That you seek outcomes and accomplishments over intention and hopes. I cannot give you satisfaction. Our transgressions were committed. They cannot be undone. But if you make me abandon my daughter, if we allow her to be sacrificed, then... you are a fool. And you don't know the caliber of Instrument you waste."

His final words tumbled out as a reckless gambit. Hesitation had earned him nothing but punishment. Passiveness preceded pain, and the hurt the paths delivered were laced with no shortage of disappointment.

"I understand her better than you in some ways," Abrel said, speaking as a puppet for Veylis. "But in some other ways, I suppose you are right." She offered her father a sad smile before glancing at her brother. "Would you like to hear a truth, Uthred Greatling?"

"Y-yes," Uthred said.

"You remind me of my father and mother both. Not nearly equal. You are far too flawed—too *human*. But I recognize the weakness that possesses you. The love that enchains you. The war that rages inside you. I have seen them countless times. Collected them. Even felt them. So do not think I do this to torture you. Your pain does not please me. I just need the lesson to settle in, and I will teach it the way my mother taught me."

"I don't—"

Abrel's hand flicked out as a blur. A flash of light slipped through the air and flitted along Jhred's throat. A beat passed. Then came a line of red. Then the first trickles. Then gushing blood. It took all Uthred had not to look away as his eldest son reached up to grab at his wound, only for his head to fall from his shoulders.

*"Do not mind him anymore,"* Abrel said, never rewarding her brother's corpse with a second glance. *"Our parents shape us. Prepare us. Give us what tools they can or break us. But eventually, our choices must be our own, and so too must the fates we reap."*

Just then, another shadow stood over Uthred, the blurred face of his father appearing briefly, expression mired in pain before fading like a mirage.

*"Your own father was a miserable man. Never made it far in the Guild. But his pain was your triumph. And he would have been proud of you, had he not taken his own life before the arrival of your greatest victories."*

Uthred looked away, refusing to face his past. "Thank you, High Seraph."

*"No. That is not what you wish to say. I have compromised your mind, I can hear your thoughts. Speak as if you are the strong and not the meek."*

Biting his back a growled as he will with all his might to stand, Uthred closed his eyes for a moment to center himself before returning to the conversation. "You're a sow, Veylis Avandaer. Years of service. Loyalty. All my efforts. And you tell me you're not torturing me now. And ask me to betray my daughter."

*"I didn't," Abrel said. "I just said that I would not accept your life, resignation, or exile as recompense for her failings. It is as you said. Years of service. Loyalty. All that effort. You are not the one that has displeased me and humiliated us. That is your blood. An issue of your house, indeed, but our path is to pursuit of strength and virtue. And I see little of either in the collective destruction of an entire house. Especially one so esteemed as the Greatlings."*

"Then why am I here? Why have I been summoned."

*"Because I have a use for you, Uthred. I favor you. I respect you. Your wife, your first son... They failed us. They failed the dream. Your daughter stands on the precipice. In one path, she is exiled. Her Frame is taken. She cast down from the Tiers and given to my father's dogs to rip and rend and ruin as a show for the city. House Greatling will be shamed but remain intact, and when the assembly comes, you will lose your position as Authority for all the demerits accumulated. You, and all the other Chivalrics."*

Abrel leaned down closer then, her lips next to his ear. *"The others scheme against you. Many still call you Songless. They refuse to accept you. The Meritocrats despise you. They view your kind as a cancer. And as of now, I am inclined to agree. However. There is something you can do to change my opinion of your house, at the least. Not a sacrifice. Losses do not make up for losses. Should you ever gain any notions of falling on a blade or ritual suicide, then know I will only take it as an insult. I require an act of valor on your part. Addition to make up for subtraction."*

"Make it known," Uthred said, steeling his resolve.

Abrel leaned back and smiled. *"Do you know that your son's Frame was never recovered? His Heaven remains missing."*

Uthred swallowed. "Yes. I have also heard rumors. That many of the dead—"

*"And missing their offerings," Abrel finished. She sighed. "As I... am stressed to shape our futures and guard us against subtler threats, a number of other individuals have also shamed us. Some of them, I suspect, are compromised. Others are simply disappointments, not unlike poor Jhred. A secret was hidden from me recently. Of a theft. The theft of something I could not afford to lose. A failure that has already seen all responsible parties punished. I choose you,*

*Uthred Greatling, as my champion. Because I've always respected your resolve. And because you have far too much to lose if I am to withdraw my support from you."*

"And because you're sure I cannot betray your confidence," Uthred muttered.

*A loud piercing laugh emerged from Abrel, a noise she would never make. "No. I'm not sure of anything. Even with my control over reality. Blind faith is for worshippers. We must be the captains of our own souls, hm? First, I will require you to draft a temporary writ of resignation from service. That way, you can be spared what is to come. After that, there is something I need you to seek, and a trial I need you to attend. Are we of an understanding, Uthred Songless?"*

The patriarch of House Greatling hardened his resolve. "Yes."

*"Good. This is what you need to know..."*

So she told him of the Stillborn, of the coming of the Ladder, of what is at stake, and what glories he had to gain. And at the end of her words, Uthred was a man broken and resmelted by purpose and fear.

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Casting Uthred back into his little garden through a crack in the paths, Veylis Avandaer set her pawn in place as she moved through the light, simulating the world around her in all its permutations.

It was likely more than good fortune that kept her spared of her mother's presence for this little conversation.

Regardless, Uthred was another soldier deployed in the battle. Veylis thought not of him as a pawn, but as a blade she just unsheathed. She had others, of course, but the temporary dissolution of House Greatling was safe play to take.

After all, who knew the condition of the Greatling girl's mind after the compromise of the lobby holding her?

No. Abrel Greatling had to die. A pity, but a precaution nonetheless.

This way, however, she could engineer things so that Uthred and the most useful among his children might still reach the end of this journey alongside her.