

A singularity is building within the paths.

Actions are collapsing into actions.

Decisions are narrowing into fewer decisions.

All of possibility is approaching a bottleneck.

Soon, we will tread the shallows caused by history rendered inexorable.

Then, at Scale, a new shatter-point awaits.

A place where the future will fragment once more.

Now. A singularity. A collapse.

Then. A supernova. An explosion.

I can feel the chains of probability ringing against me.

Be wary, wielder.

More than a thousand hands will reach through the ways you walk.

And she will be there as well. Not in person. Nor in divinity. But in will and influence.

Cut with care, for the future teeters on the precipice of a new paradigm.

-[REDACTED]

20-14

Everything in Motion (I)

Zein sheathed her blade, and all that could be ceased to flow.

As her Frame quieted, she gazed upon reality with the eyes of a mortal and took in the sprawling Elysium before her.

Existence here was a coiling serpent wrapped around a tree of ever-growing ice, and between the crenulations lining its snow-capped scales did the district hide. Twin titanic towers shaped from ice and frosted steam stood back to back at the center of the great leviathan, and from them spread vibrating threads, a shivering net enshadowed by the kiss of a dimming sun.

The cords were each connected to a sprawl of lesser edifices—these structures resembling crystal organs and delicate chimes, structures pristine and resplendent, their surfaces lined with pulsing ghosts, plucking pleasure into perceiving minds.

The threads thrummed, and the sound here carried more than noise. Traffic flowed through those strands. The only kind in this miracle-forged utopia. As knots of bouncing string ceased from structure to structure, street to street, bodies and objects emerged. Masses of FATED spending their days in leisure, blissfully banished from the horrors below and the war beside them.

And it was all so *boring*.

Along the ice-carved rails of a terrace, Zein sat, the bodies behind her offering spilling red into patches of purest green. The wounds gifted them were born of frequency blades and crude kinetics. No sense in making the dispute any more severe; a simple inter-familial dispute gone wrong would do.

The Kazaharas and D'Rongos were sinking their teeth into each others' throats as it were. More force did not always result in a perfect cut.

Activating her session, Zein cast a single thought to her Necros and signaled the culmination of her bloodletting. *+My deed are done. You may reroute traffic to this structure.+*

She cut the connection before ever hearing their reply. For what was the point? The conversations she could have were already known. What will be made what already was.

Future.

Past tense.

Letting out a sigh, Zein cocked her head sideways as a splash of ethereal blue caught her attention. Mem-data fell as a curtained waterfall from a passing ring-shaped dirigible, focus nodes connected to multiple headlights whispering to her mind. With but a thought, one could expand any of the articles and pair their Metaminds to a new mindscape detailing whatever calamity was happening, along with all the assorted vicarities and memories it offered for entertainment.

TRIAL OF THE DECADE TO BEGIN IN FIVE DAYS >>>

CHIEF PALADIN SPOTTED IN THE WARRENS >>>

GOLDS AND GREENS MASSING FORCES >>>

RUPTURE IN ONE OF ORI-THAUM'S ELYSIUMS >>>

WAR TENSIONS REIGN; SUICIDES SPIKE; DEATHS GREASING THE WHEELS OF THE ECONOMY, CAUSE BECOMING EFFECT IN OF ITSELF >>>

There were good odds that other repetitions of herself had been involved in each of the incidents, each acting to prune the paths of possibility in their ultimate favor.

A tightness was falling on her Heaven now. The existence was clenching tighter, growing bare in terms of future trajectories. An ontological weight was pulling at her, willing her to approach the twin towers in the distance and slip free from this planar paradise born of hubris and delusion.

She didn't answer. She couldn't.

She was neither hilt nor wielder, her existence more akin to blows pre-struck into the waters of time, actions committed and reclaimed as debt. The choice was not in her arsenal. To leave here was beyond her ability to decide, for elsewhere, the first of herself and truest of the Godslayers was walking down another road, carving another repetition into existence to serve in their stead.

Until that blade too was broken.

Until her demise became the stuff of entropy.

Until the paths were trimmed and only the final road remained.

Then, and only then would all repetitions align, would all the blades coalesce, would Zein Thousandhand step free from the paths to face her daughter, the betrayer a final time and restore the dream that should have been.

Another Zein would stride forth unto the battleground of Scale. Another Zein to ensure the victory—or defeat—of their preferred players.

For now, this instance of herself still had more conflict to engender.

The D'Rongos needed to be unmade, the Kazaharas and Kitzuhadas united, and Ori-Thaum reforged in leadership before the bells of the next war rang.

If only her coming act could have been a cleaner one. Such was her own lament. Delay as she might, manipulate the variable as she could, the paths ahead would not change, and the destination was already bursting, shedding possibilities like petals, a blossoming on the verge of bloom.

She drew and cut in a single motion, slicing through the parchment of existence, and drowning

herself in the torrents of what could be. With her blade held tight, new actions and memories passed into her, searing her deep with coming tasks and targets.

Just as alignment settled, she felt the paths around her quiver and break, shredding apart around her as if waves caught in the wake of a force capable of shifting the very tides upon the sea.

Zein delayed no longer, and cut once more, stepping out into the gutters—and deflecting a stray flechette—before slashing thrice more, skipping an hour ahead in time, twelve Sovereignities in space, and into the expanse of another Elysium.

It would take a few more attempts before Veylis would give up on chasing her, but she would be effectively free by the tenth crossing.

While she fled, however, she familiarized herself with the reservoir of new actions and information the prime granted her and remembered what she needed to do.

Zein Thousandhand was to devise the death of a noble soul.

The trial was to see the D'Rongos laid low.

The trial was to see the Chivalrics undone.

The trial was to see Shotin Kazahara lit by the flames of vengeance.

And all it would take for all these things to come to fruition was the death of a single, noble girl.

Paladin Kare Kitzuhada didn't deserve what was going to come but deserve mattered so rarely in this world.

Flashes of dancing neon painted Uthred Greatling's face in light and shadow.

The moment was unbelievably aesthetic. Sublime, even. And so, of course, Vator took the opportunity to sketch his father's features in vivid detail, to dedicate this moment to portrait when the present became history.

He lacked canvas and pen, but both things could be provided through the catalyst of flesh.

As their aero passed through the cold mists over the district that was Mazza's Junction, the youngest Greatling found himself struck with inspiration. From his finger did he grow an oozing brush filled with blood, and structured from meat and bone, and from his cheek did he peel a layer of skin to use as living parchment.

Uthred's weary frown deepened ever so slightly, a faint stretch of wrinkles coming into form under his eyes—a sign of aesthetic imperfection; something that Vator had always been jealous of.

His father was often stoic, sometimes rageful, rarely sorrowful, but never anxious. Not until now.

Abrel's tale had rattled him. With each word she spoke, each second of her recounting continued, the former patriarch to House Greatling sank inward, mind drifting from the active dialogue, offering only grunts and one-note responses for her to continue.

She elaborated on what spurred the chase through the Warrens, how the acolyte and his cadre were torturing Jhred before he died, how they escaped into Nu-Scarrowbur seemingly with pre-knowledge that the Bloodthanes were there, how they had planned to use the Stormtree to aid their final escape. The Fallwalkers only manifested their Heavens when they failed to flee using the lightrail and were forced to face the Paladin's rapid response Knots, and by then, Abrel's cadre numbered but two.

A horrific day, no doubt.

But that shouldn't have been enough to unnerve father. No. Some cultist acolyte and his fellow ensouled were troubling, perhaps, but they were of Highflame—culling a hostile cadre should be a trifle, if a bit frustrating.

There was something else here. Vator could feel it in the tightening of his father's frontalis muscles. Too much tension there. He didn't even furrow his brow this much when Jhred tried to strike that Thousand girl even after they declared the battle over.

That was a humiliation and a half for their family. And hell for Jhred afterward.

Poor Jhred. Poor, poor Jhred.

"Vator. Stop prodding me with your Heaven." Uthred Greatling spoke the words without even looking at Vator.

His youngest son only smiled. "But you rarely frown, father. I had to make sure you were well."

"Had to," Uthred murmured. He closed his eyes and rubbed at his face. Exhaustion rose from his body like steam and Vator soaked it away, "Vator. Enough."

"It pains me to see you this way."

Finally, the man's eyes turned to him—those misted emeralds growing sharp amidst spheres of white. "No. No, it doesn't. I can see the smile on your face. It's the same expression you made

when I brought you to the zoo the first time.”

That transformed Vator’s mirthful grin into a genuine smirk. “I liked the monkeys the most. They remind me of the flats.”

A snort that was almost a laugh escaped from Uthred. “That was a horrible day. The things you did to those poor creatures.”

“I *healed* them,” Vator said, pointing his flesh-made brush at his father in mock offense. “The caretakers were clearly being negligent. I gave the creatures what they wanted.”

“Yes. And so a woman lost her head, a man lost his arms, and an infant was nearly eaten. As I said. Horrible day.” He sighed and looked out the window. A phantasmal string shot out from his Meta and connected to the aero’s loci. A second later, their cube-shaped service drone came hovering by with a beverage forming inside its chassis. “Vator... Fatherhood is... being a parent means choosing sacrifices. And sometimes you only know you made the wrong ones in retrospect.”

Ah. This was far more interesting than painting. With a flick of his wrist, Vator absorbed his brush back into himself but kept the canvas for later. “Are you sure you’re well? These almost-admissions of human limitation are unlike you.” He performed a calculated pause and turned his expression flat. “It’s Jhred, isn’t it?”

“Jhred. Abrel. You.” Uthred chewed on his words. “He was his mother’s son. That was always true. The... *shaming* harmed him the most.”

“But his actions and failures are his own.”

“Yes,” Uthred said. “I do not believe I could have guided him away from his path.”

“Of course. Jhred did as he always wanted. Such was who he chose to be.”

“Selfish,” Uthred said. “No thought for the rest of us.” The words sparked something in the older Greatling. A flash of rage, the ignition of anger. The temperature between them spiked violently and the aero’s fans roared in response, battling to keep the temperature at baseline. The former Authority clenched and unclenched his fists as he rolled his jaw in agitation.

A sudden beep broke the storm building inside Uthred as the service bot spat out the drink it was preparing on a tray. A crystal decanter filled with a glowing red liquid came into view, and Vator inhaled the sizzling sweet-sour that was Ambrosia.

Distracted from his fury, Uthred hesitated before reaching inside the drone to procure both beverage and drinking glasses for himself and his son. Vator realized he had been waiting for a personal servant to attend them for a beat.

Luxury engendered specific habits in one's life.

"It was how he always acted," Uthred said, pouring for himself first, then his son. "Himself and no one else. I had hoped he would spare more thought for Abrel. They were always close. I knew she kept in contact with him even after he ran from us. It was a mistake letting her hold ties to a coward. A mistake—"

"Of course, father," Vator said, interrupting the building tantrum. "But you have to understand that the world touches all in different ways. Hearts are undone by what they cannot have. Or cannot be. And even a father's love cannot protect a child from everything."

Uthred Greatling almost nodded. "I thought I could train you all well enough to make your discipline ironclad. All of you. I thought I succeeded with you and your sister, but now I see that I've..." He looked at Vator again his expression softened. A cord of worry drew taut inside Vator. Even more uncharacteristic behavior. What was bothering him so much? "I wish I could have connected with you better, Vator. You are the worthiest of my children, but you..."

He opened his mouth, searching for something to say. Perhaps something inoffensive or fatherly, but the words eluded them.

Vator understood.

Likelihood called to like, and despite his father's best attempts, they were not the same.

His father, after all, was descended directly from baseline stock. Human limitation plagued him even past the years of his apotheosis. It was like a hidden wound that couldn't be healed or restored. A scar that wouldn't go away.

Vator, however, was always designed to be a step beyond. A being engendered under a special project to create the next generation of worthy offspring liberated entirely from nature's unjust hand. Even when his vat was shattered in his infancy, even the process to his perfection was interrupted, he was still born far beyond human and saw the world in ways others couldn't, the others like the apes trapped in the zoo.

A brief silence followed, but the elder Greatling was never one to stew in misery.

"Vator," Uthred said, tone hardening to become a calm baritone. Ah. The authority had returned. The malaise was banished. He was speaking superior to his Instrument, resigned from his position though he was. "We are but three days from the commencement of the trial. Your sister's fate hangs in the balance. We must find the ones that caused this. The acolyte. His cadre. We must retrieve them as commanded to face judgment and return what was stolen"

"Face judgment?" Vator breathed, excitement kindled. "So. Is this the demand of the *High*

Seraph? Is this why you are so unnerved? What is she like? Did you see her in person? Did you feel her power—”

“Son,” Uthred said, firmly, but calmly, “that does not matter right now. What matters is the mission. As I am no longer an Authority, I have no right to compel you in any way. However, before you are called upon by a new superior, I think it will do well for you to show initiative. And walk your own path.”

Vator licked his lips. “My own path?”

“Whatever it takes,” Uthred said, sounding slightly uncomfortable to be saying those words. “Whatever efforts you were applying before, continue to do so. But without restraints. Operate to your maximum potential.”

“Of course,” Vator said, placing a hand over his mouth to hide the savage rictus curving into place. He leaned into the softness of his seat and looked out the window, his Heaven pulsing as all the world below sang out. Bodies danced along the surface of his awareness. Bodies and canvases. Canvases and worlds. “You needn’t worry, father. I will make you proud.”

Uthred stared on with discomfort. “Alive. Vator. Alive. And not mentally shattered. Anything else. Anything. Is up to you.”

“I will see our subjects in better health upon capture, even. I am your worthiest child, after all. I aim to please.”

“Aim to succeed,” Uthred said. “Aim to prevail. Do not... do not make your brother’s mistake. Your sister’s mistake. Or mine. Stand and deliver.”

“Blessed be the worthy,” Vator replied, looking out at the district below, his eyes narrowed and he considered his immediate steps. “I wish to disembark. There is a place I wish to see again.”

“Jhred’s base of operations?” Uthred asked.

“Yes,” Vator confirmed. “I was here a week ago, but there were too many Paladins. I will also be visiting Nu-Scarrowbur. I always wanted to visit a district of a non-Saintist culture.”

His father tensed but didn’t rebuke him. “And what do you expect to find that the Paladins couldn’t?”

“Bodies,” Vator answered honestly. “Any bodily remains, really. The dead can tell us much. And there were a lot of dead left in the wake of my sister’s little incident. I think I’m going to piece together my own little picture of what happened. We can always use a little more perspective.”