

*The terms of our mercy came with the surrender of our faith, but not our theology. The ruling blessed were slaughtered from parent to child. Most died with the tainting of divines; sour miracles festered mortal vessels as if entropy itself.*

*We, however, were the practitioners. Maintainers. Builders. Servants. We were preserved for what we understood and what we could do. And when offered a chance at eternity in exchange for never being graced by the divine, there could come only acceptance.*

*Once again, we were practitioners. Our pride, our joy was in creation. Such is the truest expression of the holy. Such it still remains, even in the absence of faith.*

*Do you know it was from us that they took the title "Guild"? An association of peoples and parties that practice a craft. Or seek a common utopia. Such was how we were originally partitioned. Segmented among each of our parent cultures but with overseers hailing of a rival desire.*

*The crafters of the Ori served the Overclan still, but housed under Kosgan roofs. Kept cared for by Sang mistresses. The same stands true otherwise.*

*The Godbreaker was wise to do this for a time. We were hostages and guests at once. But culture is diluted with the passing of generations, and so with the progression of time, we became a sect of our own. Architects of all faiths without being faithful. And with the great tragedy and the First Guild War that followed, our sole masters became our distant kindred from the void beyond — who offer diligence in their care, but fear toward our capabilities, and stand divided in their inclinations toward the Guilds themselves.*

*The world tumbles toward a new calamity, and we are already in the fire—its heat as savage and ruinous as the last. But still, we will remain. For we are the practitioners. Maintainers. Builders. Servants.*

*We are the Agnosi. And in the abandonment of our desire to become masters of our own fate, our salvation is eternally ensured.*

-Agnos Sallid Alsyim

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The Keepers of the Flame (I)

The Gatekeeper remained wary of Avo. The rattling of the surrounding bricks betrayed unconscious fear but also burgeoning hope. With how tethered the Gatekeeper was to the heart of this realm, its every reaction made the tapestry around Avo coil tighter.

Scale was quite possibly the single most protected location on Idheim. Maybe in what remained of existence. Countless Domains pressed and pulled against Avo's Frame. The waves outside

ground against him like whetstone, directional vectors peeling at his awareness even without striking at him directly. The cold in the air was imbued with anomalous geometries, and the animated stones hid secrets all their own: Avo sensed pockets of nothingness between patterns of puissant thaumaturgy. More secrets hidden. More ambushes laid in prevention of a second siege.

That was if the opposition could get past the voidtech weapon installations and intra-spatial weapons hidden beyond the walls. Death lurked beyond visual range here. Beyond mental range too.

Avo's insides *ached* with sheer want as he imagined himself the ruler of this plane. He dedicated as much of its structure to memory. With the requisite ontological mass, Heavens, knowledge, and sequencing, he could create a perfect replica of Scale in his mind. Make it as impenetrable as the original by conception alone. Such a fortress of mind, matter, and metaphysics would prove a ward beyond wards, and a hammer beyond hammers.

"It won't work." Naeko's words resummoned his attention. The Chief Paladin was speaking to him without turning. The walls before them opened to reveal well-furnished hallways and open glass beyond. A wing of light drones darted along the walls, cleansing and scanning the surrounding matter using scintillating beams.

***"What won't work?"***

"You're thinking about breaching this place. How you might be able to sack it." Naeko gave a grim laugh. "It won't work. I made sure of that. Hells, it might be the only thing I did well as chief."

Samir Naeko thought so little of himself as a man, and so much of himself as a weapon. Avo's latent hunger now shifted toward fascination — what would the Chief Paladin's psyche taste like if digested? ***"Truly. Zein has shaped you well."***

A sharp intake of breath came from the man as he paused mid-step. Avo found the man glaring up at him an instant later, eyes burning with unreleased frustration. Tension rose from Kare and Maru, but to Avo, the Chief Paladin was proving all too interesting. "Alright. Cut that shit out. Before I go any further with you—before I even decide what to do with you—I'm gonna tell you this: don't yank me around like she does. I don't give a godsdamn what you saw or heard in my head. I might be just a dog, but I'm not your dog." He let out a slight breath. "And, yeah, I guess I was plenty shaped by my master. Just like how you aren't so different from the man that made you. Might be a bit more Famine in you than ghouls."

Avo's original self wouldn't have known how to react to that statement. Especially after all that was revealed about Walton. Things were different now. ***"I agree. Evolved from being just a beast. The shadow of my creator hangs over me. Just like Zein does over you like a pall. And what you feel right now isn't for me. You want to treat me as another of her vessels."***

***Find relief in venting at something she supposedly made. But I have rejected her. But I have already struck at her. And you can strike at her still through me. My words are not a taunt. Truth does not stop being truth even if we flee. Pain will remain even after pleasure fades. Stand and deliver.”***

He met Naeko’s glare with casual ease, and for a moment, the man’s thoughtstuff spiked. But then he was walking again. Traveling at twice the pace he did before, and Avo followed along with a content smile on his face.

+*You shouldn’t do that,*+ Kare cast to him, communicating without looking at him. +*Provoking the Chief Paladin—*+

+***He must vent,***+ Avo replied simply. +***I see flashes of Zein his mind. Her and Jaus. He is heartbroken. And all he wants is to lash. It will give him no comfort afterward. There is no more time to flee. No more room to run.***+

The Paladin fell silent, unsure of his words. Understandable. But she could not glimpse or heed Naeko’s pain as he did. The man was so *exquisitely* broken. There might not be another mind like his.

**[Hey, ghou, remember what the half-strand just said about being fucking creepy,]**  
template-Shotin coughed. **[You’re being fucking creepy again.]**

Hurrying his stride, Avo heard the pathway behind him seal as they departed the docking hollow to enter Scale proper. If there was such a concept. The area they were in looked no different from most offices, beyond everything being shaped from tessellating stone. Streams of ghosts spread like circuits within every wall, and it was only by reshaping his cognitive build that Avo kept himself from subverting the local network.

Armored Paladins stomped along the halls. Most moved in pairs, a senior and a junior identifiable in each. Master and disciple. The echo of old traditions. Most of them had their helmets collapsed, but few wandered even with their facial phase-fields active—one of the reasons behind their title of glasser.

The Syndicate and ganger templates within Avo took in everything with gaping awe. To see the ones they feared so close as people left them unsure how to feel. Separated from their causes in life, a good portion of criminals even found themselves empathetic toward Naeko. Strange how it was: just as vulnerability invited cruelty between humans, so too did mortal failings make them willing to pity.

The Paladins, for their part, snapped to attention or stepped in aside as they saw the Chief walking among them. Accretion spiked and tea was spilled. The contamination earned a squealing rebuke from a passing drone as it vaporized the fluids trailing along the ground.

“C-Chief,” a Sang with chitin fused over her eyes and a glowing neuter-mask layered over her face. She was reading a phantom-manifested report just moments prior. Or at least pretending to. Even without piercing the veil of her wards, Hysteria left him hyper-attuned to intense emotions, and her Lustaway was all but deafening.

Naeko waved her off as he kept going. “Yeah. Forgot something in my office. I’ll be gone soon. Keep looking at your Rash-shit, Spring-Glamor.”

The sigh almost made it out of her throat before it turned into a mortified choke. Pockets of laughter and muttering followed as Avo narrowed his eyes at Naeko. Hysteria revealed details for the Overheaven, but by what means did the Chief Paladin sense the actual contents within her mind?

**{Truth,}** the Gatekeeper murmured in the back of Avo’s awareness.

Ah. Of course.

As they reached the end of the hall, the walls before them flattened downward and the ground began to carry them forward. Just as quickly, the path behind them closed, and they were moving once more—carried by Scale itself at considerable speeds.

**+Is this your doing as well?+** Avo said, speaking to the Gatekeeper.

It wanted to say something. He could feel the weight of intent, but something was missing in its mind, and it couldn’t find the words.

**“ADMINISTRATOR. There is a [SHARD] of the Sleeper present.”** the Techplaguer’s declaration somehow didn’t surprise Avo. **“Hearing BROADCASTED information. SIGNAL JAMMED. SIGNAL JAMMED. Clear signal. SIGNAL JAMMED.”**

**+Expected,+** Avo replied. **+Infacer. Jaus must’ve learned much from them. Taken much too.+**

**“You should ACCEPT his request for [COLLABORATION], ADMINISTRATOR. Help waken the Sleeper. The Sleeper will make everything right. The Sleeper will protect the child.”**

A question long unanswered presented itself. **+Who are the children? Humanity? Sophonts?+**

**“Yes. And their patterns.”**

Ah. And their patterns. Another delicious mystery to resolve. He needed to try to tease something out from the Infacer when next they spoke.

Minutes passed, and Avo felt their acceleration spike. They were heading straight down now. Straight down, and moving faster. But not nearly as fast as the turning of Naeko's thoughtstuff. The man was at war with himself. With all he faced today, he was close to some kind of precipice.

Avo needed him to fall in the right direction.

"Don't touch the Gatekeeper," Naeko said, breaking the silence. "Not until I say so. Not until I tell you to."

Avo nodded. ***"It's been talking to me."***

The curse the Chief Paladin spat was instantaneous. "Godsdammit. Since when?"

***"As we drew close. It sensed me. Felt the symmetry in my ontology."***

Naeko threw up his hands. "What the hells does that even mean?"

***"Means we share similarities in capability. Do you use it often?"*** The tension-breaker was initiated. Naeko frowned. ***"To find out if your coworkers are looking at pornographic material at work."***

A long-suffering wheeze escaped from Naeko. "No. No, I don't usually use the Heaven of Truth to see which of my Paladins is a pervert."

**[Almost all of us,]** Kassamon casually admitted. **[Gods, I miss actual sex.]**

**[We should start a group,]** Shotin muttered.

The Chief Paladin rubbed his face. The man seemed increasingly at a loss. He didn't know how to respond; didn't know how to treat Avo. Good. There were too many notions festering in his mind. Better to remove them one after another. Make him start from acceptance of what is rather than the anticipation of what might be.

**{Broken,}** the Gatekeeper said.

**+I know,+** Avo replied.

**{No... no... broken.}**

The phantasmal tendrils turned toward Naeko and Avo grasped the supposed LGI's intent. Ah. So, Jaus created "son" felt some kind of kinship with his to-be-son-in-law. How very thematic. White-Rab flashed into Avo's mind as he bit back a chuff of discomfort.

Maybe everyone was a bit more predictable than they thought.

Their stop announced itself with a near-silent click, and as Avo followed the Nether fissures far, far up, he guessed where he was. ***“So. Straight to the Gatekeeper. No fanfare. No office tour.”***

Naeko just cocked his head as if the ghoul was stupid. “No. I’ve decided I want it to take a look at you too. See if you can keep this ‘truth streak’ up.”

The wall beside them opened, and baleful crimson splashed over them, rushing out with a breath of crawling entropy and waste-heat. The tunnel beyond was ribbed with countless vents. Steam fogged the path ahead, but the caustic flavor entropy could not be ignored. Naeko continued leading their party, but Avo found its attention lured by the Gatekeeper’s phantasmal vines.

Unlike Avo’s Overheaven, however, it was less a mind wed to a Soul and more a Soul that cauterized passages leading to the realm of cognition. The Nether above called to Avo. This close, he could feel his Soulscape quaking from the untapped ghosts. Perhaps he could have wretched the pathway between worlds open if he tried. More likely not.

The Gatekeeper was a fulcrum between worlds. It would be well nourished with death. Its weight rivaled that Naeko’s when dormant. Considering what it was tasked to do, Avo suspected it was closer in mass to Veylis in truth.

Multi-limbed drones worked on the local machinery, their chrome bodies basked in the glowering neon. Interference leaking over from the Deep Nether splashed against Avo’s cog-feed, strained against his ascended ontology. It felt a greater, rival ocean pressing against him, distorting his sight, blurring his senses. He thought he gleaned accretions fifty or so meters beyond, but he wasn’t sure. Faintly, he could feel a pressure squeezing against him as well. A pressure originating from a rival flame not so far away.

***+Stop that. Here to help.+***

The Gatekeepers reaction came with a delay, but the weight faded and the perception-warping haze cleared.

Five minds awaited ahead. Four were human and shape. The last, however, was something Avo had never seen. It looked like multiple streams of thoughtstuff swirling together, spinning like layers of spiraling arms around a hollow core. Looking upon it made his wards shake. Was that the Gatekeeper? Was the absence something caused by Veylis? Or was it simply by design.

Casting the memories across his subminds, he conferred with Aegis for information. A low whine of startlement came from Calvino. *{It is built in the shape of the Milky Way... How fascinating.}*

## +Milky Way?+

*{The general makeup of our galaxy. Before... things were broken. I suspect that Jaus Avandaer might have gained such knowledge from the Infacer—or at least their database. The design seems more artistic than practical; rebuilding such a mind will require a simulated mapping first.}*

Good. The process would be useful for him as well.

The way ahead adapted to their approach. With each step forward, matter receded like a retreating fog, and the metallic sheen of Rendsinks revealed themselves. A few steps more and a surrounding wall of techno-thaumic generators manifested against Avo's consciousness like a rain of falling hammers.

He choked back a hiss and nearly stumbled. Maru winced and Kare cried out. Naeko continued on like they were encountering just a stiff breeze.

**"How?"** Avo said, catching up the Chief Paladin. Now this was *vexing*. He could perceive the tapestry itself, was more attuned to the Nether than possibly any being aside from the Hungers. How did these reactors escape his notice. And why didn't he feel them until they were but meters away. **"I felt nothing."**

Then it was Naeko's turn to be smug. "You know what? Something made me think you were going to keep playing the ghoul prophet. But I guess since the stones hid these secrets well enough from Veylis, they work well enough on you too."

Scale expanded the patterns of space and geometry at its base, and the room yawned wide, growing from a chamber, to a cavern, to a chasm, to an open expanse with clouds and starlight drifting above. As the walls beside him unfurled, he saw rows upon rows of techno-thaumic reactors. The force they exuded rivaled any of the border wall sections, but their design was beyond complex.

*{Hm,} Calvin*o said. *{They are still running. Good. I worried that the Agnosi might have done something to destabilize their structures.}*

Ethereal vines crept around Avo, forged imagery from phantoms as he walked. A scene materialized around him: the supposed LGI core Kare remembered seeing. For a heartbeat, the facade painted itself over the world, the sheer weight of the falsehood pressing itself upon Avo's mind. The ghosts channeling the memories, however, were *thin*. Thin and connected to something of thaumaturgic potency.

Such was how the Infacer banished him the first time. A false memory that became a one-way funnel.

Clever trap. Something that could only threaten those that delved too deep, like Incubi or Famines.

***“But still not enough to stop Veylis from wounding you,”*** Avo muttered. Scale’s capabilities were more than awesome. Even as feeble hints. But Veylis had breached this place once. Would have taken it without Naeko.

The phantoms faded, and the stones ahead Avo parted like a mountain opening into a valley. Bricks unbuilt themselves. A brilliance bestowed its light upon the gathered party.

An entity greeted Avo, its initial impression announced with a melodic series of chimes. Every bit of its body was constructed of resplendent chains. Their links formed twelve arms that bound a fracture in place. Sliding chains slithered through the cracks, bolting the passage from both sides.

Nothing would reach the Deep Nether until the Gatekeeper was removed; unless the Gatekeeper itself willed it.

As it lifted its head, Avo found himself taking in the “head” of the LGI. A stack of uncountable human skulls constituted its face, and each component part possessed their own accretion. From them streamed burning dots that composed the cognitive galaxy, and from them poured beams of perception that carved clean through Avo’s wards.

He didn’t manage to hide his hiss that time.

He was the Embodiment of Conceptualization.

The god that faced him was the Embodiment of Truth.

And right now, he greeted his fellow *Ark* wearing a fake skin stitched from ghosts and metaphysics.

“Chief Paladin,” a familiar voice called out. A figure approached, shrouded in the Gatekeeper’s coronal resplendence, more chains sprouting free from the Heaven of Truth to become as if metallic wings. “I expected you to be away for the rest of the day. I do recall you promising to leave us to our work.”

And just as Kae’s memories surfaced in Avo’s mind, let him realize he was speaking to the High Agnos himself.

Her former mentor.

A man she once considered to be like her father.

A man that seemingly did nothing, offered no aid after the atrocity committed against her.  
**[Jakuta,]** she gasped.