

*The creation of the eunuch was the result of emotional self-deception. The Agnosi were born of the same affliction, but a different want.*

*During the Dynastic Eras, when our line could still produce living boys, a game was being played. A game of dragons, then gods, then humanity, and beasts at the lowest rung. Our lines were crafted. Our breeding and continuation was engineered based on cultural predictions—arrangements made by the parasites that festered in our beings.*

*What the dragons truly desire, I cannot profess. But they were guiding us toward a specific path; favored some families more than others, and schemed and plotting against themselves all the same. From this was born disharmony, and from disharmony came ruination. The breaking of lines. The frowning of fate.*

*And so, they needed preservers. Individuals both capable and expendable. Individuals that understood the system, but were not permitted to engender offspring for whatever inscrutable reason. So came the eunuchs—the blessed cursed. Lineless nobility.*

*Families would give their children unto these eunuchs, for they were uncompromised with the severance of their futures, yes? For they thought of the state. Solely of the state.*

*Foolishness. Like closing one's eyes and wishing another reality would manifest.*

*There are more legacies than that of blood. And there are legacies that surmount blood by far. Even dead, we live in the Godbreaker's shadow. Even with our fathers, brothers, and sons hewed from our wombs as corpses, we still feel the weight of the curse, and carry the loathing of cycles.*

*We rose and culled the dragons when we found the opportunity. They thought removing the governing males of our past would be a beheading. That a culture so dismembered would be easier to direct. Not so. Not so.*

*Just like how the eunuchs whispered their own words into the little princelings and princesses, so too did the mothers, sisters, and daughters plot to defile the ones that disfigured us so.*

*And such is why I put forward this measure for everyone today. Gathered Guilds. Our esteemed ancestors from the vast and dark. We are pretending the Agnosi are servants. Dogs. We pull at them from several directions. Use them to make our gods. But they are the ones that build our futures. They are the ones we rely on more than all.*

*I advise a reduction in restrictions on the Agnosi. I put forth a demand that they be given back more individual rights. Especially to choose who they wish to serve.*

*-Dowager Valor-Seeker, Born Jiang, Consul of the Outer Court, No-Dragons*

## The Keepers of the Flame (II)

Jakuta Ajayi greeted the Paladins flanked by two of his Agnosi. The last of their group was still communing with the Gatekeeper, projecting herself using thaumically-attuned streams from the oracle glass bound to her right eye.

“Something came up,” Naeko said. “Paladin business. Is the Gatekeeper stable?”

“Are you asking if it can be used without potentially collapsing?” Jakuta said, quirking an eyebrow.

“Sure. Why not?”

The High Agnos’ expression flattened with Naeko’s nonchalance. Something told Avo that the man really didn’t think much of Naeko. What proved more interesting was the aesthetic of Jakuta’s sheath.

The gauntness of his figure could not be understated. His face was all caverns, all edge, little meet. Extensive modifications had sculpted perfect symmetry into his features, but it was his choice of apparel that caught Avo’s attention. He wore something between a frock and a coat, and the item only had one collar folded over his left side. On it was pinned eight different insignias—each an escutcheon representing their respective Guild.

The man had his taste in fashion, if nothing else could be said.

Turning on his heel—silver and gold rimmed to signal neutrality—the High Agnos took in the Gatekeeper as if it was an unsteady art piece and sighed. “I delved into its patterns personally. The state of its ontology remains... *stabilized*.” He said the words with pity, but his mind emanated only frustration. “I would not consider its collapse imminent, but I will tell you as I have before: the decay of its ontology is progressing. Unless a means is found to restore the stability of its ego, I fear its true death is inevitable.”

Naeko shot Avo a brief glance following this statement.

Ah. More reasons why the Chief Paladin wanted him here. It seemed the blow Veylis dealt to her “brother” was proving to be a fatal one, if only prolonged.

“But it can be used?” Naeko asked again.

Jakuta rolled his eyes. “Yes. Yes, it can be used. We have not been able to discover why it was screaming or what might have breached the Nether. There’s been no entropic imbalance detected in its Hells. In the Rendsinks of Scale itself, if I were to go further. Whatever passed

through the cracks of the Nether must be paltry in thaumic mass. The Hungers remain trapped. Of this, I am certain.”

“What about someone breaching it from here?” Naeko asked. “You think that’s possible.”

Jakuta’s face went slack. “Excuse me?”

“What if someone managed to get through into the Nether from the real? Maybe the breach was the other way around.”

The High Agnos’ expression grew increasingly incredulous with each passing second. “No. No. That’s... that’s highly improbable.”

“But not impossible.”

A twitch at the corner of Jakuta’s lips signalled the end of his patience. “Chief Naeko, I assure you, we Agnosi have considered all theories, possibilities, and likelihoods in extreme detail. In extreme depth. I *appreciate* your attempts at trying to comprehend the art but... I believe that we should each stick to things are more suited to. It would be remiss for me to tell you how to do your job.”

And his pride was prickly. Brittle. Well, Kae had to get her defensiveness from somewhere.

**[Hey!]**

Naeko, meanwhile, brushed off Jakuta’s dismissal with a shrug. “Well. I thank you for your service.”

The falseness of Jakuta’s smile betrayed just how much he wanted this conversation to settle. “No need. Now. Please give Agnos Uren a few minutes more to conclude her final adjustments. After that, you can proceed with your ‘business.’”

**{Lie,}** the weight of the Gatekeeper’s broadcast rang against Avo’s Frame like a bullet deflecting from armor. Lie? Why did it say that? What was the lie? If it was, why hadn’t the Gatekeeper banished the High Agnos already.

All his questions were delayed by one asked by Naeko. *+Did you hear that too?+*

**+Yes. Gatekeeper said “lie.”+**

Naeko expanded his projected thoughts, included bother Kare and Maru as well to ensure things didn’t look so suspicious. But Jakuta was no longer looking at them. Instead, his attention was fixed on the Gatekeeper, how it jingled with each straining movement, how its chain-formed wings twitched from time to time.

**+Naeko,** Avo said, preparing the first of his splinters. **+Think I can get you the information we're missing. But. This is your house. And I promised. Need your permission.+** The Chief Paladin looked down at the ground as he thought. The silence following silence was then filled by Kae, her mind recoiling at the thought of them harming Jakuta in any way. **+Don't worry. Not planning on burning or nulling him. Yet. Not until there is a proper reason.+**

Instead of just conversing with Kae's template, he directed these memories over to her actual self, spiking her mind with alarm. **+What? What! No. Avo don't—oh, okay, but still don't! Agnos Ajayi... I... He—+**

**+Calm. Not doing anything. Just going to pull some memories from him.+** Her protests faded, but her worries remained no less severe. She was wary about something else now. Truths she didn't want to discover. **+Don't want to find out why he abandoned you? Why he never did anything to help you? Just let you be banished? Buried?+**

Back in the enclave, Kae frowned and folded her arms. **+Yes? No? I don't know. I want to. I want to.+**

**+But you want there to be a good reason. Something you can forgive. You don't want to hate him.+**

**+... Yes.+**

A humorless laugh escaped Avo. So much of a child was built by their parent. But so much of them was broken as well. He. Naeko. Kae. Dice. Chambers. Veylis. Everyone. Those before seek to create their idealizations in those after, and always disfigure them in some way.

Avo doubted even the Sleeper would escape such a fate if it was ever completed.

**+He won't know?+** Naeko asked. Avo met the man's blatant stare. He was more concerned about deniability and danger — there was little love between the two, but no one could afford the scandal of outright harming an Agnos, let alone the High Agnos before the trial of the century.

**+Not even if you warned him I was coming,+** Avo stated. Such words were truly; what boasts were left to him now that he was the Embodiment of Conceptualization itself.

**[Clamp that ego-shit down,** Draus and her template growled.

He did so without hesitation. The climbing excitement inside him flatted to professional focus as he mantled the cognitive architecture of Regulars and Incubi upon the roots of his consciousness. The frivolities of pride disintegrated — all that remained of him was objective, action, and outcome.

+*Alright*,+ Naeko consented reluctantly. +*Alright. But keep them alive. No nulling.*+

The Chief Paladin's concern was unneeded. This was just a scouting dive. Nothing more.

Four splinters came free from Avo's mind, splashing down across four different accretions like droplets of rain vanishing in a pond. In seconds, he melted into their thoughts and swam backward along their streaming consciousness.

Two of the supporting Agnosi had paltry wards and sophisticated cognitive augmentations. No surprise with them. Avo sailed through their sequences, flicked through memories for any anomalous details. Nothing unexpected greeted him. These were high performers honored with the distinction of personal tutelage. All of them were distinguished Agnosi in their own right, each a master of their own field of thaumaturgy.

Of course, neither of them were Kae.

Jakuta, however, flooded Avo's cog-feed with questionable mem-data. The first was the sophistication of his wards — *Quicksand*. Extremely modified Quicksand at that. Even at a glance, Avo could tell it was well-sequenced. Ori-Thaum craftsmanship.

Nausea was beginning to build inside Kae. She put a hand over her mouth—used the desk to steady herself. +*No.*+

Agnosi weren't supposed to receive gifts or services from the Guilds. Not directly. Not without having things cleared first. Diving along the High Agnos' protections, Avo noted it was modified to resemble that of an Osarai Mem-Guard instead. Outdated. The kind you would find running on an old drone in a Crucible.

Following the discovery, he filtered for specific details. Entire branches came alight when Elder Mwaba D'Rongo was mentioned. Ori-Thaum occupied even more headspace. Imbibing the High Agnos' past, Avo quickly discovered why.

A patch of memories lay barren within Jakuta's mind. Removed with precision. Replaced with an *extremely* convincing falsehood—something not even Avo could have detected without his evolution to being a thoughtform. The only flaws were in minute details — a door frame being a few inches off, the nose of a former lover having the wrong number of pores, the sadness Jakuta felt with the passing of a friend being a bit too heavy in his chest instead of thick in his throat...

A human mind was limited. Even if one was a master. To go further required more than just intellect and processing power, it also required a mutability of perspective and the rapid adaptation thought-habits.

Linearity was insufficient. You needed to *encompass*.

Piecing together connected memories related to Elder D'Rongo, the High Agnos' compromise grew clear: he did something in the past. Something that Ori-Thaum wiped away in exchange for future services. There were multiple Auto-Seances hidden in his mind. All of them were sequenced to other triggers as well. Jakuta's exo-cortex—a device made by Omnitech but approved by Voidwatch—had been penetrated by the Ori.

At any moment, they could trigger an implant failure. Render him a vegetable. His phylactery might preserve his body, but it still needed to retain his mind.

He packaged the information that he learned and fed them to Kae and Naeko. The former's loathing for her ancestral Overclan combusted with greater bitterness. The latter simply gave a silent sigh, at once considering how useful this intelligence was for the trial, and realizing just what instability his negligence had wrought.

The Paladins were meant to ward against this. They were meant to keep the Guilds in check. Be Jaus' hounds against straying intentions and unjust actors.

+*Now look at us,*+ Naeko thought absently. His eyes turned upon the Gatekeeper—the last legacy of his once-master, left to fester for so long. +*Now look at me.*+

And then came a response from Ignorance. The Definement crawled out from a place deep within Avo, and whispered to him impossible realizations.

***Someone used a warmind on him. Someone unmade a portion of his past utterly. But it wasn't the Famines. I don't think it can be. Only a few likelihoods remain...***

Veylis. The Infacer. Or Ori-Thaum. Whatever the case, there were truths hidden from the man himself.

And he wasn't the only surprise. Agnos Uren was a broad shouldered Scaarthian matriarch. A long stripe of pseudo-technology vivianite was fused along her spine, and cords extended from the back of her skull, connecting her to what amounted to a grafted jack station. It was a convenient design, but ultimately impractical for most humans.

Descending beneath consciousness left one vulnerable and parted from the actual world, and jack stations mostly provided stabilization and biomonitors features. A downsized version of the installation came with reductions of capability. This implant was suited for enthusiasts or traveling practitioners.

As Avo entered her mind, however, Ignorance spoke again, this time with a voice of savage delight.

***Ah. This one is a forgery. Her memories are copies. We are drifting through the mind of an Ori-Thaum Sleeper. She is not the original. I can feel it. And something deep inside her knows this too.***

Turning these discoveries over to the Paladin, Avo considered his next steps. The High Agnos was compromised. Practically owned by Ori-Thaum. It would be convenient just to subsume him, but he owed Kae an explanation, and the Ethics Committee would likely not appreciate such a casual act of murder.

*{No, they would not,}* Calvino concurred. *{Perhaps it is time for you to consider adding a bit more humanity in your structure again.}*

He applied just a droplet of empathy. Not enough to dull his edge. Not enough to stop him from ending this farce.

***{True...}*** the Gatekeeper groaned. It's voice sang forth in a clatter of chimes. Somehow, Avo knew it was talking to him. Only him. ***{Truth... }*** Some of the chains gestured toward Uren and Jakuta.

The gesture cemented Avo's will.

***"Jakuta,"*** Avo said.

The High Agnos turned, breathing a low sigh of annoyance. "We are not so friendly that we should be using our first names, Paladin. I am—"

***"Want to talk with you about Agnos Kusanade. Why did you abandon her? And how long have you been a slave to Clan D'Rongo."***

The Gatekeeper's chains began to curl around the High Agnos' feet, and the weight of truth pressed down on Avo's Frame, resting against him like a blade waiting to fall.

+*Avo! What are you doing?*+ Kae's sudden squeal of mortification came with the Paladin's shocked stares.

But the Overheaven wasn't done. ***"And how long have you been a Sleeper,"*** he said, speaking to Urens."

The High Agnos mouth opened and closed several times, but it was Uren that spoke first, Ursens that protested. "I—*what* are you talking about? This is—this is absurd? Sleeper? I am not—"

***{LIES!}***

The proclamation detonated out from the Gatekeeper. Chains punched out through the thinness between worlds and claimed Uren—tore her into the Gatekeeper itself—into an open wound through which the Deep Nether loomed. Reality molted. Existence became nothing but links and connections. All that was matter faded. All beside **Truth, Conceptualization**, and the baser patterns that burned besides.

**WARNING: ARK DETECTED**  
**THE GATEKEEPER, WARDEN OF DREAMS AND JUDGEMENT**

**EMBODIMENT OF (TRUTH)**

**THAUMIC MASS - 999,000,000**