

+No! No! Not now, godsdammit! Not fucking now!+

-Mirror of the Inner Council Upon Receiving News of a Potential Forthcoming Godhunt During the Trial

28-6

All the Ways to Scale (II)

Avo regarded the vast statue placed at the epicenter of the Court of Truth. Twin interconnected hands clawed out at the world. One bore a feather, the other a blade, and enshadowed beneath its pedestal, stood Naeko alone. The Chief Paladin was clad in his ancient combat skin, and the hound-like helmet enclosed around his skull painted his face in a dreadful visage.

For a long time, Naeko didn't speak, instead choosing to take in his Paladins. The ones Avo filtered out to be the most loyal, anyhow. Of the true believers, there numbered only **[6,355]**—far too few to fill in the five kilometer long chamber. They arrived equipped for combat and at attention. The rest of their fellows continued on with assignments, or remained blissfully ignorant of what was taking place behind the scenes.

The *unreliables* all had portions of Avo's **Synchronicity** infused within them. They would come to support the others if and when the hostilities began. With a little *encouragement* from Avo, their responses would be a near certainty. The existing traitors, meanwhile, had been stationed in places across Scale away from the Court of Truth itself. Some were to greet the arriving Guilders beyond the threshold of the tessellating walls. Some were to watch over the Sovereignities and resolve any potential skirmishes before a war was sparked prematurely.

All of those in the category of traitor would likely shift allegiances and act alongside their associated Guilds — if not for the fact that Avo already had plans to see them subsumed and unmade.

They were already subsumed. They just didn't know it yet. When the fighting was done and Avo was finished with their use, over fourteen thousand former Paladins find themselves offered to the gestalt in mind, Soul, ontologies, and death. Thus was allowed by Naeko; and thus was the fate of the disloyal, damned by a greater deceiver.

+We stick to standard protocol with the trial,+ Naeko said. *+Try to keep things calm on the first day. Twist some arms and make some threats if you need to—don't start fights. End them. Main goal here is to keep this clown show from turning into a full godsdamned circus immediately.+*

+Hard to do when all the colors start mixing, chief,+ came a response from Naggat Cleaver, a Scaarthian Paladin. A chorus of muted laughter followed. Naeko actually grinned in response.

+Shit, I know that. Why do you think I managed to play Stormjumpers for so long. After two centuries of dealing with Guilder shit, I think I internalized the Domain of being a dumbfuck automatically.+

The laughter was louder now. A little over a month ago, most of these Paladins thought nothing of Naeko. Assumed he was just broken. Now, they feared him—and because of that feared, yearned to like him so they felt aligned with a true power of New Vultun. Human hearts were feeble, fickle things, and even the noblest among Godclads exhibited these traits.

+That being said, we want them to finish arguing, voting, and settling on their proposals before we bring out the Heaven of Truth. It'll get us a timeframe for how we have for discovery, questioning, and judgment. During this time, you might see some routine changes. Scale will go into planar lockdown—just like if we're anticipating a siege.+

A faint atmosphere of discomfort came from most of the Paladins. A few of them were survivors leftover from the Second Guild War; those were the more relaxed of the bunch. They had something to expect and had lived through the darkest outcomes. Their juniors, however, only had vicarities and anecdotes to go off of. Ignorance fanned the flames of their worries.

But Avo would see them spared soon enough.

The Chief Paladin's talk had been going for a while. Most over it was review over procedures—more for Naeko than his Paladins. The entire process of the trial was far looser than Avo expected. Drafted in the Articles of the Spiral, every megacity had their own division of Paladins or “non-partials” to enforce general order and settle disputes between the Guilds.

With the arrival of the trial, the first day would be an exercise in structured chaos. Over twenty thousand Guild representatives—a substantial amount of them Godclads—would arrive, occupy their own sections along the split chamber. Behind the legion of gathered Paladins, a vast vertical slit lined with shimmering oscillations. Scanners and thaumaturgic detectors were at play there, and all Guilders who passed its threshold would be identified and logged by the Heaven of Truth.

Usually, this meant that anyone who desired to make trouble could be “resolved,” but the Guilds would be gathering assets beyond these walls as well, and there were other means of subterfuge beyond outright violence.

Both sides of the room resembled hives in a sense. They were dotted with jutting podiums and alcoves, allowing representatives places to stand and address each other. The Paladins would occupy the middle, and the opposition would the other side. With how much power most the participants possessed over reality, the distance was mostly a formality, but positioning still mattered in terms of symbology.

The Paladins were the arms of Scale, after all, and they balanced Guilder interests. Or such was the hope.

Regardless, they would spend much of the first few days facing Naeko's announcement of the crimes, greeting those charged, opening the room to evidence gathered by the Guilds, votes for a mutually agreed duration for the Discovery Phase—an odd case as both Massist and Saintist factions were being charged here—before concluding with Judgement and Questioning.

From Naeko's experience, the entire affair would likely last the span of a month at most, judging from diplomatic squabbles he presided over.

By Avo simulated pre-cognition, things would likely devolve into utter chaos before the midnight rains fell on the third day.

The Chief Paladin spent a few hours longer going over things—and being corrected about proper protocol by Maru. It didn't take much for Avo to realize the man was well out of practice for matters of leadership—for most matters regardless. But that was fine. He needed Naeko the warrior soon. Maru and the others would be enough here.

Finishing with the general details, Naeko let out a slight sigh and activated a session. Avo's **Hysteria** locked onto a wavelength of thoughtstuff that emanated downward into very guts of Scale.

+Bring it up.+

At once, Avo felt a crushing pressure arrive. At the far end of the room, directly opposite to the slit from which the Guilders were set to arrive, the Gatekeeper manifested from a single pinprick, spilling into stable reality as unfurling links of ringing chains. Naeko had pushed for this, wanted Veylis to see that they were planning something; notice the loyalists. Though Avo found it unwise to give the High Seraph any more usable information, Naeko rebuffed him with experience.

"Every little bit counts with her," Naeko had said. "She considers everything. Everything. That's the best thing about her. And the worst. She can't stop thinking. And this will weigh on her two. That's what gets her the most: phantom variables."

Though the Gatekeeper remained grand in the sheer amount of metaphysical displacement its arrival brought, Avo felt himself more capable of enduring it. Passing over to Sphere Seven had granted him ground of his own. His Heaven was more stable than it was before—harder to affect.

And if all went according to Avo's plan, he might just find himself past the threshold for Sphere Eight before this entire affair was over.

Might. There were a lot of *ifs, maybes, potentiallys, and should-bes*.

“Alright,” Naeko said, sounding more exhausted than he was after fighting Zein. Being a leader weighed upon him like an awkward burden. Looking upward reflexively, he bade Avo to materialize with a thought. *+Come out and show them what they got to know. Just—+*

That was all Avo needed. That was all he was waiting for. The form of his Strix erupted from the statue behind Naeko, and the substance of the void bled over into baseline reality. A stream of curses and lesser Heavens manifested around the gathered Paladins, but his mind drowned theirs before they could commit to any potential mistakes.

Hungering tendrils of fluid ebony lined phantasmal sequences speared out from the Overheaven and through all who were present. Some of them had thaumic protections layered over their minds, but they had a new session activated at the start of Naeko’s talk, connecting their squad leaders to unit heads and unit heads to Naeko’s lieutenants. That, and Avo had already planted splinters in them earlier. Avo waterfalled through their links and infused their minds with mem-data, granting them all the necessary insight they needed for what he was, and fake schemes to be uncovered when they were inevitably compromised by the Famines or the Infacer.

Curses and gasps of surprise burst forth from the minds and lips of the gathered loyalists like a dam.

“What the fuck! That was you? You’re the one that gave me the rash at Veng’s Stand.”

“The butchered Syndicate... the interrupted Crucible...”

“The three-hundred thousand nulled...”

The responses coming from the Paladins pleased Avo. There was horror staining their minds, but they remained investigators still. Guardians of the city. It took them little effort to put together all he had done in the Warrens.

+Yeah,+ Maru growled, speaking to the gathered Paladins with folded arms. *+I nearly shit myself the first time too. A godsdamned ghoul. An eater of flesh that now finds minds and Souls its preferred fucking vintage.*” He eyed Avo with a shudder. *“But it—he’s all we got. He’s the reason you’ve all been sorted away from the rest. You’re the loyalists. The good ones. Take pride in that! But understand that you’re in the shit! There’s no getting away from the coming war. There’s no backing out. Ignorance is bliss, but the choice for peace is out of our hands. Only questions what now.+*

Mumbles and stunned expressions swept through the few thousand Paladins. They were still trying to process everything Avo was, the Ladder, the Gatekeeper’s compromise, and the sheer amount of threats that will be in play when the trail commences.

+*The hells didn't you tell us this sooner,*+ Naggat said.

+**No prematurely leaks,**+ Avo replied. He fought an amused chuckle as the Scaarthian Paladin shuddered at the sudden emergence of his voice. His ability to unnerve the ephemerals remained one of his greatest pleasures. **+There are other powers lurking in the Nether. There are others that may lurk in your minds. Need to give them as little time—+**

A vaporous hand formed around Avo and slowly dragged him backward. The Overheaven grunted awkwardly as he was pulled before the Naeko, who was glaring at him throughout.

Slight dissatisfaction filled Avo. He wanted to flourish his newest apotheosis before the gathered crowd longer. To impress upon them the immensity of his power and form. Instead, their attentions were divided by Naeko, and rather than awe or fear, **Hysteria** drank in mostly confusion.

[**Listen, I get it,**] template-Shotin sighed. [**Kare did this to me a few years back. I met this incredible lady, and I was close—so close to charming her—but sweet, innocent Kare started pushing through the halls of the academy loudly proclaiming that the grafters had my genital-transplant ready, and that surgery for my warg-rot could begin soon.**] The Seeker sighed. [**Killed my prospects dead.**]

Kare's template replied sweetly: [**I was not going to let you sleep with my ethics professor, Uncle Sho. She just lost her son and was getting close to a bad place.**]

[**What? Dammit, Kare, I could have comforted her.**]

[**You are the bad place I am talking about, uncle.**]

"Avo," Naeko finally sighed after a good few seconds of glaring. "What's this shit, now?"

"What?"

"Where'd the godsdamned bird come from. 'Strix Upon the Empty'? Heaven of Continuum? What'd you do to yourself now? Sphere Seven? When did you become Sphere Seven?" The Chief Paladin's face blanched. "Did you kill a over million people?"

Avo turned his attention on the inactive Heaven of Truth leaning slanted against the wall in the background. Doubtless, Veylis was watching. Good. **"Doing. Still in the process of changing. Becoming. Existence is to be understood—"**

A massive palm bloomed out from Naeko. "Okay. I'm too tired for your Jaus impression, half-strand. Just please tell me you didn't start the war early."

“Didn’t start the war early. Guilds are locked down. Defensive measures.” Avo paused.
“Would have gotten closer if now for Veylis.”

Naeko sneered. “Cut you from across time, did she?”

“Something like that.”

As the Paladins chattered to each other, as the rains outside began to die down, Naeko walked around the statue occupying the center of the room and faced the Gatekeeper once more. Their body jingled and rang with the slightest movement, and spatial reality warped around them like a crumpled parchment—the space they occupied in the guts of Scale overlapping with the Court of Truth—a demiplane within a demiplane.

“Alright,” Naeko muttered. “I think that’s a good enough show for her.”

“Still think we should have gone for the quieter approach.”

“Nothing stays unknown to her long. Not with that creepy EGI fuck tucked away in her mind. Paranoia’s the best we got.” Naeko’s lip curled. *+Paranoia. And misdirection. You put your fake intelligence in my Paladins.+*

+Yes. Kept them consistent. Generated potential angles of attack on Highflame at the trial using my Pre-Cog. Veylis and Emotion will probably be able to see through some. But they will need to devote resources to ensure others aren’t actually in play.+

+Right. Let’s hope that works.+

+Doing a bit more than hoping right now, Naeko. Getting you and your Paladins more help as well.+

+For where?+

+Certain Massists. I’ll update you and the others once things are certain.+

Naeko nodded as Maru continued to speak to the others. Unlike Naeko, the younger Godclad spoke more like a senior authority to the Paladins. Because that was what he was. An ancient survivor. One of the first Paladins. In war, he was nothing before Naeko, and his intellect and behavior weren’t that extraordinary, but his ability to stay true to his path even after almost everyone he loved was something Naeko could only envy.

Everyone broke in different ways.

Taking a few minutes to walk up to the Heaven of Truth, Naeko regarded the chain-made angel with a tired look and Avo followed close behind. Within, Avo felt the temporal wound pulsating.

There was *movement* from somewhere. He could feel it better this time. Clearer than before. His newest apotheosis had made his metaphysical senses sharper as well.

“Are you watching us?” Naeko asked. “Hm, Veylis? You there? You see this? You see me?” If she was, the High Seraph didn’t intend to reveal herself. “Well, if you are, I just want you to know something: We both owe a debt. To the city. To each other. To Jaus. And bill’s come due. I should have—we should have finished this years ago. I was a coward. I was broken. But now I’m just tired. And I think I’m just about done with all of this.” He paused again. “Are you the same way?”

He almost sounded like he was beginning. It was almost pathetic. Almost. But Avo understood. He knew now. And he kept silent.

With each passing second of silence, Naeko wilted further, lowered, his head, and prepared to turn away.

“I will not stray from my path. Whatever the pain. The whatever the strain.”

The voice came soft and somber. The power in Veylis’ voice was ever present, reverberating across time, but this was as soft as Avo ever heard her. And more surprisingly, she responded. Unexpected. Something Naeko clearly hadn’t anticipated either, judging from how startled he looked.

Gazing up into the Gatekeeper—scrunching inward as if in an attempt to hug itself—Naeko took another step forward and swallowed. “I know that. You wouldn’t be you otherwise.”

“And you are more yourself again,” Veylis said, sounding somewhat proud. ***“I see you wearing the armor I helped make for you. It still fits well?”***

“Nothing fits me well anymore. But that’s what happens when you keep getting older and never die.”

“...I understand. I visit places. See people. They change. But I do not. Not truly.”

Another silence followed.

“I’m never gonna forgive you,” Naeko said, finally. His hand opened and closed, and he was too tired and sad to rage. “I’m never going to forgive you for what you did.”

“Forgiveness is for those that seek it. I am not sorry. My task is not done. You do not see—”

“See what? Hm? See what? See the *hellpit* we made of the world? See the point to all this? Yeah, I don’t. I don’t see. And I don’t think you do either. What do you think happens if you win? Tell me that. Tell me.”

“When I win, I will face my father’s judgement. By his will, I will meet my fate.”

Naeko scoffed. “He’s not a *god*, Veylis. And if there’s anything left of him, he’ll just... just let you go. He won’t do anything to you. You were the world to him. More than the world. You know that.”

“Then he should have listened to my warning. But he did not see then either.”

“Fucking hells.” Naeko rubbed at his face. “Have you only been speaking to the Infacer all these years? Is that it? Do not see—Veylis, I don’t know what you saw, but I sure as shit hope doubt it was worse than all this.”

A beat. ***“Yes. Because in some of the paths, I lost you as well.”***