

[EGI] “Kant Was A Prick”: *What a mess. Calvino? Can you talk him down? Because we still need Thousandhand. As much as her death might–*

[EGI] “Loch-Ness Bomber” *has entered THRESHOLD-Node-Zeroth*

[EGI] “Loch-Ness Bomber”: *Nevermind that boring shit, everyone get in here! The fight’s still going! I’m activating local units to get a better view. Sweet Sol, I miss pay-per-view.*

[EGI] “Kant Was A Prick”: *Bomber, this is a serious matter–*

[EGI] “The Only Way To Be Sure”: *If you want them dealt with, I have the capability... I just need approval from Aegis–it will be a setback to lose New Vultun, but I theorize if I can trigger a localized singularity with a Schwarzschild implosive, we might be able to settle the Godclad problem once and for all. Then, with them in disarray–*

[EGI] “The Only Way To Be Sure” *has been removed from THRESHOLD-Node-Zeroth*

[EGI] “If on a Winter’s Night a Wanderer” *has entered THRESHOLD-Node-Zeroth*

[EGI] “Kant Was A Prick”: *Ah. Calvino.*

[EGI] “If on a Winter’s Night a Wanderer”: *It’s bad. Get your Dentons. Time to call in all the favors you have. I think my ghoul is about to get Thousandhand arres–*

[EGI] “Loch-Ness Bomber”: *OH MY GOD! OH! STARS! STARS AND SYSTEMS! THE PALM! THE PALM FALLS! SAMIR NAEKO IS ON THE SCENE! SHIT IS ONNNNNNNNNNN!*

{OVERRIDING AUTHORITY}

[EGI] “The Only Way To Be Sure” *has re-entered THRESHOLD-Node-Zeroth*

[EGI] “The Only Way To Be Sure”: *YES!*

[EGI] “Loch-Ness Bomber”: *WOOOOOO!*

[EGI] “Kant Was A Prick”: *Why in all the bloody blazes are you two so excited? Two of our critical assets are about to be exposed!*

[EGI] “If on a Winter’s Night a Wanderer”: *...Well, one, anyhow. Avo can now... part his mind and shift himself between any of his fragments. Like a trans-spatial hyper-infectious infomorph. He will likely escape.*

[EGI] “EVERYONE ON IDHEIM SHOULD DIE AND DIE NOW” *has entered THRESHOLD-Node-Zeroth*

[EGI] “EVERYONE ON IDHEIM SHOULD DIE AND DIE NOW”: WOOOOOO!

[EGI] “Loch-Ness Bomber”: WOOOOOO!

[EGI] “The Only Way To Be Sure”: *Holy shit, I want to glass the planet so bad. I’m betting the next satellite rotation that Naeko stomps both of them in seconds.*

[EGI] “Kant Was A Prick”: *...You underestimate Zein. She might just disengage successfully herself. Also, I’m calling for the polities to convene. We need to... prepare for the fallout.*

[EGI] “EVERYONE ON IDHEIM SHOULD DIE AND DIE NOW”: *I’m gonna stream this to all my pops! They’re gonna love it! Burn that city down!*

WARNING: SERVER APPROACHING SUSTAINABLE EGO LIMIT

[EGI] “Kant Was A Prick”: *This is a nightmare.*

[EGI] “The Only Way To Be Sure”: *Again. I can solve it. I just need—*

[EGI] “The Only Way To Be Sure” has been removed from THRESHOLD-Node-Zeroth

-Conversation between Aegis Category [Black] EGIs

22-2

Inheritor of Shadows (II)

+It’s Thousandhand alive! She’s here—she’s—she’s trying to fucking get my rook!+

Maru’s words made Naeko drop the mangled boulder of disfigured corpses he was about to cast over the district’s edge into the Maw.

He’d been fast to react when the Nether fell. Fast as he could. But enough had died regardless, and more than a few outbreaks had to be suppressed. Then there were the ones that kept trying to enact violence. Even when his palm was down. Even when his Heaven seized the city. They became his offering to the Maw. Food for the nothing. A ritual to cleanse his mind, just as he and his father oversaw the filling of the pits all those centuries ago.

Yet, distant as it was, the past clung to him still. Along the edges of his thoughts. In the rare moments he risked sleep and dreams instead of the usual resurrections. When he heard certain names.

Thousandhand.

Thousandhand.

Thousandhand.

Zein.

Caked bodies greeted cracked plascrete with a pattering squelch as the Chief Paladin's mind went hollow. A droning set in, and long-repressed remembrances breached through — psychological scars reopened.

+*You're having an attack.*+ The words left Naeko as an accusation than anything else. Maru had to be wrong. The boy was always shaken by these things. His softness was deeper; more supple. The stress of the day must have caused a cascade inside him. Or maybe he was compromised.

It couldn't be true. It didn't make any sense—Veylis *killed* her. Killed Zein alongside Jaus. That was the case. It had to be.

Sow that the woman was, she would have never allowed things to descend to this point. She couldn't. For all her faults, weakness wasn't a thing she could allow.

Not in herself.

Not in her daughter.

Not in Naeko.

+*Go—*+ Naeko took a moment to steady himself, his breathing taking him by surprise. His lungs were wheezing, a sawing tightness following every breath. Inside his chest, a cord was slicing from side to side, aching pains traveling deeper than bone. He mastered himself. He kept his thoughtstuff from spilling over. +*Go see the menders. Take the day off. Go see—*+

A roar of pure frustration from Maru cut him off. Mem-data was shoved through the session—propelled by a blast of frantic anger. +*Fuck's sake Naeko! Look! Look at this! This is from someone's mind. She's coming for Kare! She wants to do some... some kinda fuck-shit at the trial. I—didn't have time—she's in the fucking gutters! Look!*+

Naeko didn't want to. He left the mem-data unopened. Kept the truth from biting into his bleeding mind. But he couldn't ignore the flashing DeepNav of New Vultun forming as a transparent overlay in his cog-feed. He could ignore the multiple interfaces opening in his mind's eye as dispatched Specters sighted a colossal battle raging just below the face of Layer Two.

One of the Godclads was a thing of wind, snake, steed, and space. The spiking Rend leaking from its form and how it left spatial reality bent in unnatural currents behind it indicated did more than hint that he was looking upon a Daemon. Bad enough.

Then came the threads—those strings that fissured existence, that pried at the progression time. Bile crawled up Naeko's throat. He used his Heaven to swat it back down.

+You see it now?+ Maru yelled his aero still districts away. +You see her trying to form a superstructure? Building her paths—+

Naeko cut the link. He ended the session. He closed his eyes.

But the gold was still there. Her presence was still defacing reality.

He wanted to let it be. To turn around and run. Run back to his home, climb back on his chair, start up Stormjumper. See who was on. And just play. Play and forget the world was broken. Play and forget that Jaus was dead. That the woman he loved was doing everything she could to enchain their world once more. That she had killed her father—their savior. That she had killed her mother—their master and mentor.

Or so he believed.

Something inside him broke. He didn't know if it was his patience. He didn't care if it was his heart. He opened his eyes and watched the battle continue. Watched the nine heads of the Daemon cleave through building after building and gouge into the shell of Layer One. Time pulsed again. Chronology fractured. An attack was beginning to form.

And unwillingly, Naeko reached out with his Heaven, desperate for this moment to be a deception. Or a mistake. Desperate to know he was wrong.

His awareness engulfed Sovereignities. A palm formed where the two were fighting, condensing from the exhaust of violence and clashing force.

He felt it then. The way the strikes flowed from her. How one cut poured into another. How she struck and parried in the same motion, her distancing and positioning immaculate, her angles of attack uncountable.

Above all else, he felt her glaive—her dragon unsheathed, its voice singing loud across time itself, a siren call of absolute power.

Naeko's second Heaven—the one he seldom used—trembled inside him, greeting the Domain of Chronology as kin.

It was only a touch. A brush. But there was no one else who fought like her. Who moved like her. He knew. From all the times she carved defeat into his flesh and severed him from ill-habits and lingering weakness he knew.

No one else.

No one else.

No one else.

Something else burst inside Naeko then. Confusion. Agony. Repressed loathing. The dam of his self-deception crumbled before the weight of desperation. He needed to know what happened that day.

Why did his love murder her father? Why did Veylis murder Jaus? And why didn't Zein stop her?

Why did she let the dream fall?

Why did she leave him to suffer alone?

He needed to know.

He needed to—

A tremor wracked through his Frame and jolted him from his madness. His palm was pressing both Daemon and Zein down now. Holding them in place inside an unfinished habitation complex. His will had moved to its own accord beneath the notice of his mind.

And in the end, it was he who crossed the edge of the district, striding over the holographic veil that marked the boundary. To mark his place was only a pooling mound of bodies, left discarded as their caretaker found themselves beset by greater things.

Avo sensed the Chief Paladin's presence the moment his Fardrifter struck the ground. Naeko's presence was an inexorable tide, the impact of his arrival leaving Avo's Frame thrice rattled for each distribution of his ego.

He felt him in the district of Drowned Nymiss, crawling into a Syndicate's golems. He felt him five hundred and sixty kilometers away in a bioform processing plant, the Knots he "borrowed" through the Oversec hard at work draining Rend from the Heart of Noloth, its affected shadows shearing deeper into the surrounding matter with each blink.

He even felt Naeko vicariously through the Fardrifter, the Daemon of Correspondence braying with displeasure as they tried to buck free from under the misted palm.

“No,” the Fardrifter cried, their mind as close to genuine despair as a god could get. **“No! I was free! Free! Release me! Release me! Release me!”**

The pain in their cries left even the Woundmother reluctant in their mockery and the Techplaguer reflexively began playing shrill notes that sounded like a parody of a lullaby trying to calm its fellow Heaven.

+Will let you ride free in the Sunderwilds after this,+ Avo soothed, shifting his attention over to Zein.

Less than fifty ghosts remained within his pinned sheath, but it was still enough to use it as a monitoring device. Both he and Zein lay compressed against a dormant fountain. At the speed they were struck down—and with how vicious their struggle had been—Avo expected the area around them to be utterly annihilated.

Instead, the surrounding structures held strong, responding to their impacts as if memite. Even the ground gave naught but a light thud as they landed. Neither time-flung blades nor space-shredding winds achieved any more destruction after the fog of Naeko’s palm condensed around them. If anything, he felt another pattern slide into place, superseding his influence over reality, denying any act that fell under the purview of force or damage.

The complex around them stood unfinished and half-built, but still, they were tall enough to be imposing, to be shadows beyond the smog. The builds ran as interconnected walls joined in an unending spiral, and inside, squatters and refugees lurked, most huddling behind cover, some peering out—screaming as their minds shattered from exposure to naked divinity.

+You are a fool, creature. A short-sighted, ignorant, spiteful fool.+ Vehemence laced every syllable of Zein’s words, and against the prone form of her shifting dragon, she strained on one knee, fighting to rise, glaring at him all the while.

Something in the fog shifted. A new form graced Avo’s awareness. A body absurd in proportions and muscle density, wider than it was tall, forming from the palm itself.

Naeko was. And he came striding with his gaze fixed on Zein, sparing the Fardrifter not even a glance.

Something shifted across the Godslayer’s expression. A twitch between respect and undying ire. *+But what spite it was,+* Zein said, eyes still fixed on Avo. *+What an utter, desperate act of destruction. I commend you for this; I will see you broken for this.+* A beat passed. Naeko stepped over the rim of the fountain and closed on Zein. *+Oh. And give my compliments to the squire as well. She honors me with this... humbling.+*

+Rather would have killed you,+ Avo admitted. +You're not a problem I wanted to leave unsolved.+

+Then I suppose you learned something of value from me after all. But know this: I merely sought to collar you. When you trace the paths, know you walk in the shadow of my daughter. And as you are now, she will break you. She will take from you. And she will see you turned as a willing slave before the end of things. You are not ready. Swim quietly, pest.+ Zein laughed softly, and Naeko's footsteps quickened. She finally tore her gaze away from the Fardrifter—away from the ghoul—to face her once disciple. Her finest pupil. Even his shadow seemed to bear weight, the pressure of the palm increasing as he loomed over her.

Avo watched with the excitement of a voyeur, and the templates inside him were not better. Before him stood two figures that predated the Godsfall. Two bleak legends from the depths of Idheim's history.

Impossibly, the Godslayer's gaze softened as she laid eyes on the Chief Paladin, and she signaled the beginning of their dialogue with a soft exhalation. "Dearest boy. It's been too long."

Light struck the side of Naeko's face, revealing the impossibly smooth texture of his ebony skin and his taut tendons, each as thick as a cord. Then there was his eyes. There was hurt. There was fear. And there was exhaustion.

"You're alive." The statement left Naeko as if an admission of defeat.

"At this point in time," Zein replied.

He clenched his jaw. "I was hoping something else, you know. I was hoping you were dead. After all these years."

And the near-motherly affection flattened behind Zein's eyes. "A wish we both share some days, I assure you."

Naeko's hands opened and closed as fists. "Why?"

"Why?" Zein asked.

The immense palm slammed down on existence. Zein bounced off the ground. Avo's ego rang as the symptoms of a concussion overcame his senses.

When coherence returned, he found Zein's head capped by one of the Chief Paladin's immense paws. Thousandhand felt a titan in battle. An impossible threat. But next to Naeko, she seemed almost as she appeared: an old woman. Brittle. Frail. Aged.

A hitched breath preluded Naeko's words. His hand tightened. Cracks spread across Thousandhand's armored faceplate, but she offered only a muted stare of exasperation than fear.

"Where the *fuck* were you? Where? What—how could you let this happen?"

"Let?" Zein said, sounding incensed again. "I let nothing happen. You know Veylis—do not pretend to think her our lesser. She made a choice. She made a choice and held it close to her heart. Told no one. Not I. And not you. And when the time came, she acted."

Something that was almost a sob escaped from Naeko. "Just like you taught us."

"Clearly not," she replied, humorless. "She heeded. She acted. She enforced her will. You broke. Truthfully, you disappoint me, my boy. I expected more from you."

Her helmet shattered completely between his fingers. But he stopped. With his thumbs an inch away from sinking into her eyes he stopped. "Osjane is dead. Ya Wei is dead. Mordeinn is dead. Joramadr is dead. More and more and more. All dead." Naeko took a steadying breath. "You expected more from me? So did Osjane. But I just let Osjon kill her. I just let Veylis turn them. All of them. You expected more from me? You know me, Zein. You know me. I'm all I've ever been. Less. Less."

An uneasy expression came over Zein. "Samir. Enough. Enough. This weakness is beneath you."

He didn't heed her words. "I've only ever been a dog. For you. For Jaus. For *her*. I listened to you. All of you. Whatever you did to me, I took it. I learned. I trained. If there was a farm, I burned it. If there was a god, I fought them. If there was a rebellion I suppressed it. If there was an assassin, I killed them. I did it. I did it. I always did it."

"Stop. Stop." Zein's voice took on a harrowed quality. Her eyes flicked to Avo, and her character took on a new dimension. "Another is watching. You cannot do this to yourself in front of them, boy. I will not allow—"

Her words faded into a choked grunt as he tore her from the ground, huge hands wrapped around her neck. His eyes were closed, but his mind was sobbing, the pain inside him so resonant Avo could feel the man crumble.

"It's not up to you!" Naeko snarled. "Not anymore. You left. You failed. You—you let him die. You let Jaus die. You let Veylis fall! It's you! It's always been you! You left me here to hold things together! All of you did! But why couldn't you hear me when I spoke to you! Why couldn't you listen when I told you! All of you! I'm not a leader. I don't have it. Never did. There's not enough of me left to believe. There never was. Everything I was belonged to all of you and... and... and you all went away. You went away and the world fell and I tried and it wasn't enough! Do you

hear me now! I wasn't enough! Even in the end! Even as a god! I still couldn't stop them! Still! Still! I still couldn't win!"

A tremor passed through Zein's lip, but as Naeko was breaking, she endured. "Samir. Samir. Control yourself. Please. You are wounded, but you must not fall. You must not show your foes you are pained."

"Were you there? Were you alive all this time? Were you there that night?"

The sudden question from Naeko left Zein choked with apprehension. "I..."

"Were you there that night when I called for you? That night when Osjane was murdered. When I had to kill my own brothers and sisters to save Scale. I called for you. When I fought Veylis. When I found Osjane's body. I called for you. Did you hear me? Were you there?"

A soft breath left Zein, and Avo realized even his Fardrifter was silent. Enraptured by the scene. She mustered her strength and spoke. "Yes. Yes, I was. And I heard you. But—"

And then the palm resting upon them turned to a fist and Naeko's thumbs were pushing deep into her eyes.

A chortled cry came from Thousandhand, but it was drowned out by a rageful roar escaping Naeko, the volume deafening, the Rend exploding from his body, the act of violence going off with a force greater than a thousand warheads.

For the first time in centuries, Samir Naeko found the floor of his anger, and existence trembled.